

# The Daily Star

Founder-Editor: Late S. M. Ali  
 Dhaka, Friday, April 21, 2000

## Expecting the EC to be Reactivated

**S**INCE the absence of the Chief Election Commissioner from November last year on health grounds, the Election Commission, the most important organ in a democratic setup, has virtually been rendered inactive. And with the next election under a caretaker government due in June next year, some important business remains to be attended and completed in time. In the absence of the CEC the most pressing job of preparing the voters' list has not made any significant progress and this is one area which needs all attention and focus of the Chief Election Commissioner as he joins his duties.

As the time frame is very tight and there is hardly any scope for liberties, the EC must employ all its energies to accomplish the job in due course. Then there is the vexing problem of voters' identity card, a project which has been in an untidy condition for a long period of time. A lot of energy and money have been spent on this important project but nothing tangible has been achieved so far. In fact a lot of questions have been asked and doubts expressed by the people about the whole exercise. And there is the question of hearing and deciding on the reference made by the Speaker on the membership in the parliament of the Jatiya Party Chief Hussain Mohammed Ershad. The EC must give its decision on the issue within 120 days of receipt of the letter from the Speaker. In the meantime both the parties, H M Ershad and Jatiya Party (Mizan-Manju) faction, have sent their papers to the EC.

There are some of the immediate issues the CEC will have to attend to on his resuming the office on return from abroad. Despite sanctions of funds, appointment of field-level staff and printing of required forms for enlisting voters, work has not started yet though it was supposed to have started in January this year. All these indicate a sort of inaction and indecision on the part of EC during the long absence of the CEC and it will now take a lot of hard work and positive leadership to galvanize the EC into moving at full throttle to complete the important but yet unfinished jobs on schedule to avoid any dislocation in holding and conducting a free and fair general election on time. An onerous task no doubt, but we hope the EC will be up to it.

# Microsoft's Future

So if Bill Gates of the Microsoft can succeed in delaying the final decision making process till next year, and if George Bush wins the White House, it is possible that the next Republican administration may go as far as dropping the entire case against Microsoft.



Connecting the Dots  
 Dr. A. R. Choudhury

icrosoft originally developed its Explorer Web browser as a separate consumer item, but then it decided to include the browser in Windows 95. The end result was that users of Windows got a free browser when they bought their personal computers.

This made it awfully hard for the competitors, such as Netscape, to sell its competitive programme - Netscape Navigator. Having found Microsoft guilty, the Judge said that he will move quickly to impose remedies. Possible measures against Microsoft may fall under either of two categories - structural or conduct. Some

haws in the US Justice Department may demand a structural remedy such as a break up of Microsoft into smaller companies. A less punitive punishment would be a conduct remedy which would restrict the business practices of Microsoft. For the conduct remedy, the court has to lay down some rules for Microsoft to follow. One thing the court can do is to force Microsoft to share the Windows source codes. But the problem with this remedy is that almost everybody thinks that it will not work.

For this to work, Microsoft has to change its policy of using Windows for leverage. But it would be hard to force the company to disclose its software codes or stop discriminating between rivals and allies in the market. Moreover, it may be hard for any court to anticipate how Microsoft may conduct its business in the future or whether it would obey the new rules.

If the more controversial structural remedy is approved, it is very likely that Microsoft's Windows would be split from its application business. An advantage to this approach is that it would help to stimulate competition by supporting the creation of rival operating system companies. The break up option is attractive to the US Justice Department because it would avoid the need for constant

policing. Moreover, with a new President to be sworn in next year, the government prosecutors may prefer this solution. Microsoft is planning to appeal against the court ruling. It is contending several legal issues. First, it will question the procedures laid down by the Judge and also the summary of evidence. Second, on the legal front, it will pursue the Judge's ruling that Microsoft cannot integrate new features into established products without violating the anti-trust regulations.

The political calculations of the Microsoft case runs much deeper. As the case goes through the appeals process this summer, the US presidential election would be heating up. George Bush, the presumed nominee of the Republican Party, has already voiced his opposition to the litigation. Al Gore, the pre-



This 25 June 1998 file photo shows Microsoft Chairman and CEO Bill Gates during the launch of Windows 98 in San Francisco, California. Federal Judge Thomas Penfield Jackson has ruled 3 April 2000 in Washington, DC, that Microsoft had violated US antitrust law.

sumed nominee of the Democratic Party, on the other hand, appears to think that the case against Microsoft is justified. So if Bill Gates of the Microsoft can succeed in delaying the final decision making process till next year, and if George Bush wins the White House, it is possible that the next Republican administration may go as far as dropping the entire case against Microsoft.

Time is also a major source of complication in this case. The rapid development in technology and the markets may leave this issue redundant after a while. While Microsoft has continued to thrive, their product development focus has shifted from personal computer operating systems to Internet services, based on Windows. Moving well beyond combining an Internet browser with an operating system, Microsoft has plans of creating a new technology platform for Internet services. It plans to replace the bulk of its software with a collection of dynamic services that would make it easier for customers to access and manipulate information spread over the Web.

Whatever the final outcome, a protracted legal battle will be a drain on the company's resources and a distraction for the management. It may also damage the company image in the marketplace. So whatever future decisions the company takes, it has to take all the future consequences into account.

# Rajmohan Gandhi and the Equation of History

by Mohammad Badrul Ahsan

In this subcontinent, history continues to overshadow politics as the past and present hold the future in a suspended animation. What Rajmohan Gandhi and his wife didn't tell us is where do we start to build the equation of history in our textbooks? Do we start with past, present or future? If I were asked, I would say let us start with present politics, which will soon become history for the future generations.

**R**AJMCHAN Gandhi, the grandson of Mahatma Gandhi, and the wife Usha Gandhi were in town early this month on a visit sponsored by Friedrich-Numann-Stiftung Foundation of Germany. They came to talk about regional harmony in the subcontinent and offered ideas. According to Rajmohan, many problems in the region could be solved if people were tolerant and understanding. His wife Usha was more specific when she said that compilation of a common history textbook by the historians from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh would teach the future generations to understand their respective history from a common perspective and dispel disbelief, mistrust and confusion amongst them. Siegfried Herzog of the same Foundation supported the idea and added that such a textbook had helped build friendly relations between Germany and France.

The Gandhis have been right about one thing that history is a mental question. It is mostly perceived the way it is conceived, and vice versa. In the

nineteenth century, German philosopher Hegel propounded the theory of dialectic process to show that history was nothing but an ever-repeating triangle of thesis, antithesis and synthesis. He believed that the kinetic energy of history was rooted in this triadic process where thought was the structure of nature and history. The Hegelian interpretation of this was that since all human behaviour is rooted in a prior state of consciousness, there is a propensity of this consciousness to "create the material world in its own image." This prior state of consciousness is then again the residual outcome of the previous synthesis of contradicting thoughts.

What the Gandhis meant when they talked about the writing of common history is to address the prior state of consciousness, which has created a different material world for the people of each country of the subcontinent in its own different image. Perhaps the scenario can be explained by iteration or the Method of Successive Approximation, which is a numerical procedure repeatedly applied for the evaluation of a certain numerical. The results of one stage are used as the starting point for the succeeding stage. An example is the evaluation of  $N$  by Newton's formula  $X_{n+1} = (X_n + N/X_n)$ . For the

evaluation of  $V_{10}$ , we might have  $X_0 = 3$ ,  $X_1 = 3.17$ ,  $X_2 = 3.1623$ , and  $X_3 = 3.162278$ . The process is terminated when succeeding values of  $X$  agree to the precision required. Similarly, the process of history is also an iterative method in which the development of events of one period of time is the starting point of the succeeding period. In the history of this subcontinent, the starting point of divisive politics was the development of a preceding era, which saw the resurgence of Indian nationalism led by Surendranath Banerjee who organised the Indian National Conference in 1883 during the agitation over the Partition of Bengal. In the same year Allan Octavian Hume, a retired civil servant, sent out a letter to the graduates of Calcutta University urging them to form an association for the mental, moral and political regeneration of India. The first meeting of these graduates came to be known as the Indian National Congress, which was attended by seventy delegates, out of which only two were Muslims.

As a matter of fact, the communal hatred that we know today was not the part of the Indian consciousness until the Hindu Renaissance in the early twentieth century, which was a manifestation of nationalism suffused with religion founded

by Swami Dayananda Saraswati. It marked a watershed in the Indian history when the political roots of the Hindus and Muslims, riven by mutual animosity, took on separate moral and political grounds to flourish. The Mutiny of 1857 had already enlivened the Hindu community, while enervating the Muslims who had to shoulder most of the responsibility for its outbreak.

Thus the alienation seeded in that rift widened over the years and by the third decade of the twentieth century it seemed unbridgeable. In 1926, Swami Shuddhianand, an activist in a movement to reconvert Hindus who had embraced Islam, was assassinated by a Muslim fanatic. The publishing of *Rangila Rasul* (The Debauched Prophet) by a Hindu bookseller in 1924 had already started an uproar, which ended in the murder of the bookseller in his shop. The creation of the Hindu Mahasabha also worsened the communal relations. The appearance of the Nehru Report further aggravated racial harmony when it called the Muslims to give up separate electorates. The All-India Muslim League would be born under the leadership of Mohammad Ali Jinnah, who was once praised by Nehru as "the ambassador of Hindu-Muslim unity."

The bitterness amongst the

Muslims was further aroused when Congress members barred Muslims from joining the provincial ministry formed in 1937 unless they renounced their League membership and joined Congress. The Muslims were further irritated and alarmed when the Congress tricolour was raised over the public buildings and when the legislatures convened were opened by the singing of the Hindu nationalist song *Bande Mataram*. Most of the appointments in public offices went to Congress nominees and in the realm of education Congress governments in the provinces were determined to make Hindi the legal language of the educated.

The reason behind touching on these events is to retrace the history of communal tension, which got deeper and longer in the succeeding years as mistrust, hatred and anger hardened in the minds of Hindus and Muslims settled in three countries of the sub-continent. Rajmohan Gandhi and his wife Usha have proposed to bring the varying levels of barometric pressure of history in these countries to an equation. They have talked about creating a state of consciousness that will uphold the events of history in the minds of the citizens of these countries to equally offset the inhibitions lurking in their prior state of consciousness. Who is to blame for the current ugly state of consciousness? Hindus, or Mus-

lims? That contention remains its own vicious cycle, which has perpetuated a visceral resentment amongst the Hindus and Muslims of the subcontinent. Will the historians of Bangladesh, India and Pakistan be able to erase that resentment and take us to a new synthesis of history? The fact that people like Rajmohan and Usha Gandhi have tried to open a dialogue on the current thesis of history is a sign of hope. If historians of three countries lend them a hand, perhaps soon they will be able to start an antithesis to challenge the communal disharmony.

But history proceeds by repeating itself. Many years ago, Mahatma Gandhi sacrificed his life on the altar of communal conflict as an assassin pumped seven bullets into his body on his way from a prayer meeting in Delhi. In a recent interview with *Time* magazine, Gopal Godse, the brother of Nathuram Godse, who spent 18 years in jail for his part in the conspiracy to assassinate Gandhi, called Gandhi a hypocrite. According to him, the more the Muslims massacred the Hindus the taller Gandhi raised his flag of secularism.

"History is past politics and politics is present history", writes English historian E. A. Feeman. Unfortunately, history and politics run the course of hypocrisy because truth is often the victim in both. In this subcontinent, history continues to overshadow politics as the past and present hold the future in a suspended animation. What Rajmohan Gandhi and his wife didn't tell us is where do we start to build the equation of history in our textbooks? Do we start with past, present or future? If I were asked, I would say let us start with present politics, which will soon become history for the future generations.

## Friday Mailbox

### MIG menace

**S**ir, A lot has been said against the purchase of MIG 29s. Questions were raised about the very necessity of it and whether it was at all a priority: could this money be better utilised elsewhere. There was also the question of transparency in the purchase of these white elephants. However, the government would not listen.

The MIG-29s are now here and flying over the skies of Bangladesh. But nobody seems to care about the environmental menace it is creating through sound pollution. People, living in Uttara and other places close to ZIA are the direct victims of this sound pollution. The sound (the normal sound, not the sonic boom) it generates is intolerable and affecting the health and healthy growth of the population, particularly the young and the elderly. There are many hospitals and clinics in and around Uttara. Who will look after their interest? We realise that the airforce needs to keep these aircrafts flying but could they do it over the Bay of Bengal? And if they continue to fly these aircrafts over such thickly populated areas, could we take some judicial steps? There are several environmental and human rights organisations in the country including the Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association (BELA) and coalition of Environmental NGOs (CEN), and I wonder whether they can come forward to save us from this environmental hazard.

A M R Chowdhury  
 Uttara, Dhaka

### The export processing zones

**S**ir, Despite frequent protests, exploitative practices continue to exist in EPZ establishments particularly due to the absence of the right to collective bargaining. According to the existing law, BEPZA is to ensure payment of standard rates of wages and salaries, overtime allowances, leave, holidays and other benefits to the employees and executives employed in different establishments functioning within EPZ. But recent happenings as reported indicate that legitimate benefits are being denied to the employees working in different establishments operating within EPZ. They are even compelled to work on national holidays like Independence Day, Shaheed Day without having any substitute and compensatory holiday stipulated in the Factories Act of Bangladesh. As a result, simmering discontentment prevail amongst the workers. To pacify the employees, the formation of the Welfare Committees under the supervision of the BEPZA has however, failed to meet the expectations of the employees since they have no say in such committees.

It is relevant to mention that multinational companies operating outside EPZ are providing much higher compensation packages to their employees than the EPZ ones. Investor companies in EPZ enjoy many liberal tariff incentives such as tax-holiday, duty free import and export, infrastructure facilities etc. But because of the exemption from the provisions of the Industrial Relations Ordinance of 1969 and Standing Order Act of 1965, the EPZ employees are deprived of their proper benefits.

Faiz Ahmed  
 Malibagh, Dhaka

### "Massive fraud by Mark Bangladesh"

**S**ir, The above was the lead news-item of the DS on 12th April, 2000. Indeed, the Security and Exchange Commission has done its duty by taking initiative to unmask '90 per cent overvaluation of assets' which had the consequent effect of crores of taka having been siphoned off deceiving the general shareholders.

Mark Bangladesh is but one of many publicly listed companies who deceived the public shareholders by presenting distorted accounts. Most of these companies are not paying any dividend to the shareholders for years together. These companies did not utilise the money raised from IPO to procure capital assets worth the value shown in their respective balance sheets. There would be cases where the promoters shamelessly pocketed most of the IPO money, instead of procuring productive capital assets. In absence of productive assets, there is no hope of these companies ever generating any income in the future.

SEC will do well by instituting similar investigation - as has been done in case of Mark Bangladesh - for other listed companies. The Commission may begin this task by selecting those companies who never paid any dividend and whose quoted price of share is far less than its par value. This will be an expensive and lengthy proposition, but certainly a desirable one under the circumstances prevailing in the country.

In order to revamp the capital market of this country, the SEC has to play the role of a responsible guardian. We wish SEC best of luck in its endeavour to bring back the public confidence in the capital market.

Mainuddin Ahmed  
 10, Karwan Bazar  
 Dhaka

### Air pollution

**S**ir, Air pollution in Dhaka city has reached the most dangerous level and other cities of Bangladesh are not far behind. Dhaka has been identified as the most polluted city in the world. It is observed that children are the worst victims of this malady, their mental and physical growth are being hampered and they are also being affected by many other serious diseases. It is learnt that diseases related to air pollution costs the people of Bangladesh between 60 and 240 million US dollars per year. According to a report published in newspapers, there were 50 lakh asthma patients in Bangladesh in 1998, it soared to 70 lakh in 1999. If it goes on like this, in no time we will become a crippled nation and already it has started taking its toll. It was disclosed that 30 per cent of the traffic personnel suffer from jaundice, allergic reaction, renal, cardiac and respiratory diseases.

But nothing is being done about this life threatening problem, occasionally the government holds seminars on environment and rallies are arranged carrying colourful banners, but that is all to it.

We urge the government not to waste time any more and act swiftly otherwise the nation will be in a very sorry state. Necessary steps to combat air pollution must be taken immediately.

Nur Jahan  
 Chittagong

Views expressed in this column are the writers' own. The Editor may or may not subscribe to those views. The Editor reserves the right to decide which letters should be published.

## A Peacemaker's Blind Spot

by Mary McGrory

**T**HE prime minister of Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina, came to Washington to open her country's new embassy. Several hundred of her countrymen had come from as far away as California to greet her. She has green eyes, a beaming smile, a fragile family history and a dream for her dirt-poor nation. She hopes that in the next 50 years it will become a developed country. Right now, the per capita income is \$300 a year.

She has taken on the major problems, poverty, child labor, illiteracy - she has raised the literacy rate from 40 per cent to 60 per cent. She has instituted flood control measures. And she has displayed the mediating skills that are so desperately needed in South Asia, where her two large, fierce neighbors, India and Pakistan, are at daggers drawn - daggers that are now nuclear-tipped on both sides.

In 1998, she brought about a peaceful solution to a nasty tribal war that had made the Chittagong Hill Tracts a battleground for years. She appointed a commission, which interviewed hundreds in the area and came up with a plan. She explained it to the rebellious tribesmen, told them they could not have political autonomy, but "cultural autonomy" that would preserve their way of life and give them a semblance of self-government. Hasina sat in the town square and received the guns of hundreds of rebels. She promised economic aid in return. She thinks it is a formula that could be applied to Kashmir, the scenic mountainous area over which India and Pakistan have waged a bloody war ever since partition.

When India and Pakistan within a two-week period tested nuclear weapons and blew up the world of arms control, Hasina traveled to the capitals

of both countries to urge restraint and caution on the part of the leaders. Indian's Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Pakistan's Nawaz Sharif, who was subsequently deposed in a military coup and was jailed by the generals.

"They could not deny me when I asked to come," Hasina said. "I am a neighbor. I told them that our people are poor, so we should give them a better life than armed conflict." Her interest was plain: Bangladesh would be vaporized by the fallout of nuclear exchange.

Sheikh Hasina recounted this during an interview in the new embassy, in an interval between the speechmaking and the party that was to follow. A teenage niece named Tulip occasionally helped with translation. Hasina's personal history is horrific. Her survival is as remarkable as her country's.

Bangladesh has been battered by natural disasters, floods and cyclones that have killed thousands. She weathered a devastating experience that would have crushed a less lion-hearted woman. Her father, Bangabandhu, was the father of the nation. He was president of the Bangladesh Awami League, an organization devoted to democracy. He and other family members were murdered on Aug. 15, 1975. Hasina and a younger sister alone escaped - they were abroad.

After six years in exile, she bravely went back home and into politics. She took over the leadership of her father's party. "The people were my safety," she explained. In 1996, she was elected prime minister. Among her fans is Energy Secretary Bill Richardson, who visits a lot because of the country's natural gas deposits. "She's passionate, committed and one of the toughest and most effective leaders in Asia."

"If she has a fault," he adds, "it's that she has to learn to be a little less vindictive."

Sheikh Hasina has absorbed everything about democracy but the importance of tolerating opposition. She is obsessed with her rival and predecessor, Begum Khaleda Zia, leader of the rival party. On issues they are sisters, and they are both moderate Muslims, but they are waging a kind of cosmic cat fight that threatens their fragile democracy. President Clinton, who spent a day in Bangladesh on his way to India, tried to intervene. He met privately and separately with them, telling them that compromise is honorable and that an opponent is not a mortal enemy.

Zia's life was also shattered by violence - her husband was assassinated. But this is not a bond and the ladies play awfully rough. When Zia was prime minister, Hasina bonded her with strikes, boycotts and demands for her resignation. Hasina says Zia has said in public that she must be given "another August 15" - the day of the Hasina family wipeout.

Hasina bristles at the mention of her rival's name. "She hates me," she says.

Onlookers are hoping that somehow the women will find a way to swallow their suspicions about each other and collaborate again as they once did to oust a fascist regime. Otherwise, Hasina may not reach her full potential as a peacemaker. That would be a pity in a neighborhood like hers at a time when gifted mediators are in short supply.

This piece was published in April 13 issue of the Washington Post. We are reproducing it for our readers.

**Gassing about Gas**

**T**HE gang had gathered in the Great Nostalgia Bar, and the subject of discussion was the price of gasoline.

Stephen Rohde claimed he remembered when the price of gasoline was 75 cents a gallon. Thomas said it was never 75 cents a gallon - maybe 80 cents and a free coffee mug.

Rohde said, "It was 75 cents if you wanted to serve yourself and clean your own windshield."

Bloomfield blew the suds off his beer. "They gave you free lead in your gas in those days - all the lead you wanted."

"I didn't want to be left out of the conversation. I used to buy gasoline to start a fire for dead leaves," Johnson said. "Where did we go wrong?"

Rohde answered. "It wasn't us. It was the OPEC countries. The cartel hated us for getting 20 miles to the gallon when their sons could hardly get 10 to Monte Carlo on their yachts."

"I said, 'If OPEC doesn't treat us right, we should boycott their fuel.'"

Rich Harvey suggested, "We could buy gasoline by the cup. That would make them think twice about keeping their oil in the ground."

Eskohoff complained, "What I hate more than paying for it is to see the prices posted up on the stations. You would think they'd keep the prices to themselves."

Harvey said, "The companies are driving up the prices by refusing to pump the oil out of the ground so they can buy more Rolls-Royces for themselves. This calls for another Desert Storm."

"Kuwait owes us," Rohde said.

"So do Arco and Standard Oil."

"I said, 'Our generation deserves inexpensive fuel. It is our automobiles that make the world go round.'"

Harvey agreed, "We never said anything to Algeria as long as fuel remained under a dollar a gallon."

"What I resent," Rohde said, "is that Mexico is raising its prices during our election year."

"And so is Nigeria."

Harvey added, "The people in Texas are happy, too."

"I said, 'I don't want to live in a country where petroleum costs as much as aspirin.'"

Eskohoff ordered another drink. "Maybe when the OPEC countries start biting each other's ankles, the price will go down."

Rohde had the last word. "Do you know what I think? guns don't kill people, gasoline prices do."

By arrangement with Los Angeles Times Syndicate and UNB