

Set Up an IT Ministry

THE soul of the IT revolution is speed and that is one thing that is in serious short supply here. First, we do not act in areas where we should. And second, when we do, we do so at a snail's pace, which nullifies whatever impact there was of the act itself. This is most dramatically illustrated in the IT sector. About ten years ago we pleaded with the government to take steps to benefit from the global data-entry business and pointed out that with proper infrastructure in place we could earn billions, and provide huge employment for our educated youth. The result we all know. Now, we are telling our policy makers about the prospect of Bangladesh's entry into e-commerce. Will our policy makers listen? Perhaps more than they did the last time. But will they act? We are less sure of that.

One reason why nothing much happens in the IT sector is because it is nobody's baby. Some parts of it belong to the ministry of industry, some to commerce, and still some others to science and technology. Like the proverbial broth that is spoilt by too many cooks, nothing much is happening because no one minister or ministry feels sufficiently responsible or, more importantly, sufficiently motivated to push forward the case for necessary policy reforms for the IT sector.

It is our considered view that we need a separate ministry to address all the needs for a thriving IT sector. We need a whole range of coordinated policy reforms, such as in copyright laws, in banking laws, in commercial laws. We need to deregulate the BTTB and break its monopoly to create the window of opportunity for our entrepreneurs. There is no way we will have any chance in the future world of IT without a massive broadening of our telecommunication network. Not only telephone coverage, but also its cost must be looked into. Today telephone rates here are among the highest in the world. The cost is totally unjustified, and it exists only because of the monopoly that is enjoyed by the BTTB.

We believe that the aforementioned ministries that deal with the IT issues have all failed to make any significant dent simply because they have other primary functions and more important constituencies to address and appease. IT remains buried under other files unless it is brought into the immediate agenda through special efforts. That cannot continue as a normal practice.

Therefore, we request the Prime Minister to set up a task force immediately to examine the most expeditious way to set up a separate ministry to push forward plans to make Bangladesh the next IT hub in this region. As has been pointed out the most significant constraint in the IT sector is not the paucity of resources, or that of knowledge and skilled human professionals — they are all important. But the biggest impediment is outdated mindset, which includes the belief that we are not advanced enough to have our own IT revolution.

We must shun this type of thinking and learn how other developing countries, especially India, more specifically Bangalore, made itself the second Silicon Valley in the world. More recently Hyderabad has started a keen competition to take over Bangalore as the IT centre in India. All of this is happening right in front of our eyes. We know the lessons to be learnt. What remains is our desire to learn them. The IT revolution can be ours, only if we chose to make it ours. Will we?

Important Meeting at Delhi

AFTER a gap of two years the Home Secretary level meeting between Bangladesh and India is scheduled for next Wednesday at Delhi. This important meeting between the two neighbours to discuss and decide on issues that normally cause concern and most of the time work as irritants in the path of good neighbourliness and establishing mutual trust, is normally held every year. But the last meeting could not be held in February this year as the post of Home Secretary in Bangladesh was vacant. However, this important meeting is likely to take up issues for discussion some of which are as old as twenty-six years like the famous Mujib-Indira accord of 1974 signed in Delhi on a number of pressing issues viz the transfer of Berubari to India and Dahagram and Angarpota enclaves to Bangladesh, issues regarding push-in, cross-border smuggling, demarcation of certain portion of common borders etc.

In the last joint working committee meeting of the two countries held at Dhaka both sides signed a memorandum of understanding in which it was stipulated that a 6.5 km disputed border will be marked by May-June this year, but the work still remains to be done. Both sides also agreed to simplify the process for Indian visa, but no steps have been taken in this regard so far. The Mujib-Indira treaty remains to be ratified by the Indian parliament even after 26 years of signing. India may have obvious reasons for not taking the matter seriously during all these years but it was hoped that they would do so in the best interest of both the countries. Diplomatic and high commission sources were optimistic of ratifying the treaty once the border demarcation is complete which then will make it easier for the exchange of enclaves and transfer of disputed lands.

Another important point for discussion will be the excesses of the Border Security Force (BSF) which has increased to a great extent in recent times. The BSF has made inroads into the territory of Bangladesh, killed a number of innocent people and plundered agricultural produce, cattle and poultry. Bangladesh delegation must raise all these issues in the meeting and ask their Indian counterpart to consider these points in a positive frame of mind and take proper steps to solve these problems.

Bangladesh is a small peace-loving country and she has no intention or the strength to intimidate a large neighbour like India. We expect that our good neighbourly behaviour will be reciprocated by the leaders at Delhi. Greatness is not a matter of size alone.

The Military Balance of a "Limited War"

A number of intelligence agencies including the CIA as well as the security analysts are fearful of a 'limited war' snowballing into a nuclear war. Even if the nukes are not rattled in the routine exchange of threats between the two 'enemies' they are not far from their minds. If at all the button is pushed that will only be a "collective death wish" fulfilled.

EVER SINCE George Fernandes, India's Defence Minister talked of a 'limited war' as one of the means to de-escalate tension in the LoC (Line of Control) after the first serious Indo-Pakistan clash of Chhamb sector in the late January it has become almost a buzz word in South Asia's strategic circles. The ever-worsening situation along the LoC and constant sabre-rattling between the two countries are pointers to its prospects. The attention being paid to the 'most dangerous place in the world' by sub-continent's two arch rivals has given further credence to such conflict the symptoms of which abound all around. Although track II diplomacy is at work to diffuse it 'medium intensity' war is certainly on the cards. Recently in a national seminar on 'The challenges of limited war' General VP Malhi, India's chief of Army staff sufficiently hinted at a military build up along LoC and categorically said: "We should be prepared for a limited war".

In one of rare engagements as prime minister Mr Atal Behari Vajpayee visited late last month the Operation Room in the South block where some vital decisions were taken with regards to LoC. Moreover the urgency with which the army has been positioning itself can be gauged from the fact that units from the formation in farflung Sikkim were detached and moved to Kashmir.

Many on either side of the divide believe that the endgame to Kargil conflict is yet to be enacted. Because the ceasefire in Kargil did not bring about a total disengagement and the conflict continued in some form or other somewhere else. But the Kargil crisis did explode some basic assumptions on both sides. Up until the Kargil war India was willing to accept the

idea of recognising LoC as international boundary between the two countries. Those ideas became irrelevant after the coup in Pakistan by its Army which was in the view of Indian policy makers the architect of Kargil. While the negotiations, under present circumstances are also ruled out India might like to seek a military solution to the problem of Pakistan's 'proxy war' in Kashmir. As regards timings, it could not be more opportune when the Pakistan's military is involved neck-deep in running the country which is in shambles. If New Delhi's calibrated attempt to taint the image of Pakistan as a country sponsoring terrorism and religious fundamentalism is successful it would face the least international censure for her military action.

Like in 1965, the war may be initiated in Kashmir, but India will not risk a major thrust in Kashmir's inhospitable terrain which is now infested with daredevil Mujahideens. Thirty-five years later the situation is not much dissimilar to what it was during Pakistan's operation Gibraltar. It will therefore be India's objective to strike, instead, at Pakistan's soft underbelly in the south. The recent joint exercise of Indian Army and IAF in Rajasthan desert may be a signal that they would fight a 'limited war' in this sector because a dress rehearsal in the same area prior to the launch of an attack is always beneficial.

However the success is contingent upon many factors including military capabilities. India's superiority in quantita-

tive term as well as its technological advancement is an accepted fact. Also added to this is her strategic depth which affords India to take such bold initiative. But then a number of tangible and intangible factors like the state of training, the troops' morale and the military personnel's quality and attitude and the state of maintenance also play a vital role in the overall impact of the performance of military hardware and outcome of war. It is when all these factors are equal, only

are T-72s. As experienced in Kargil the integral artillery component of two mountain divisions engaged in the war could not meet the total requirement of fire power. Pakistan Army's artillery, especially the shoulder fired missiles proved to be a good match for Indian artillery in the mountains. But in the plain Indian artillery comprising 4,175 pieces enjoys almost 3:1 superiority to Pakistan's total of 1,580 pieces. Indians will gain added advantage in fire power

resistance it encountered from the local population leading to heavy casualties seriously affected the forces' morale. This low morale is likely to figure prominently also in future conflict. On the balance the Indian land forces do not enjoy the kind of qualitative edge to allow it a decisive victory — nothing short of which would help her in Kashmir's military solution. Pakistan can perhaps manage to repulse an Indian attack through a spider-net type formation attack. However Pakistan's greater challenges lies in her political problems. The domestic unrest and political fragmentation in Sindh can be suitably exploited by India.

The Indian Air Force has a large array of aircraft ranging from newly acquired SU-30s and the older Russian-built MIG series to French Mirage and British Jaguars totalling 772 combat aircraft. Eight SU-30 so far acquired are the IAF's only deep penetration aircraft. The IAF has, however, a string of forward operating bases all along its western borders from Ahmedabad in the South to Pathankot and Udhampur in the North. As against this, the PAF's bulk of aircraft are comprised of 208 short endurance Chinese interceptors (F5 and F7) and 172 French Mirages. But the PAF's real punch is 32 American F-16 which for the first time gave PAF its qualitative edge. Although IAF is numerically superior a number of factors make it comparatively less competitive. The selection process of PAF pilots and their training are far more rigorous

as compared to those in IAF. The annual training hours put in by a PAF pilot are 250 against 130-150 of an IAF pilot. Also, the IAF's technological edge is often undermined due to serious maintenance problem as a result there is high rate of accidents which in turn affects the pilots' morale. During three years from 1997 to 1999 there were 80 cases of accidents. The morale problems are so severe that there was instance of pilots going on strike. Yet IAF can take advantage of its quantitative edge through better planning and coordination.

There were limited naval engagements in past wars between India and Pakistan. But the kind of 'limited war' is envisaged in this discussion does not really call for a naval balance of power although India enjoys overwhelming superiority — both quantitative and qualitative — in this regard. What is important to be brought out here is that presently there is no arm of the military where one country — either India or Pakistan — has a clear advantage over the other. Whereas India appears to enjoy numerical advantage it also loses its edge due to poor quality and intangible factors. So, she cannot hope to overwhelm the adversary entirely; neither can she ever muster 3:1 superiority — a conventional requirement for offensive action.

A number of intelligence agencies including the CIA as well as the security analysts are fearful of a 'limited war' snowballing into a nuclear war. Even if the nukes are not rattled in the routine exchange of threats between the two 'enemies' they are not far from their minds. If at all the button is pushed that will only be a "collective death wish". And if the history is any judge, that too will not resolve Kashmir issue.

PERSPECTIVES

by Brig (Rtd) M Abdul Hafiz

then the superiority of size and number provide an additional advantage. There are also other factors. For example, the superiority of 1-million strong Indian Army over Pakistan Army's strength of 5,20,000 troops is greatly offset by its multiple orientations. While Pakistan Army's posture is mostly India-specific Indian Army has 3,414 tanks bulk of which

by flitting conventional hardware with Prithvi missile. But Half II (Pakistani equivalent of Chinese M-11 missiles) and Half III would provide balance to Pakistan. Among other major equipment, Pakistan with its 2,000 defence guns closely trails behind India's total of 2,400.

The India Army is known to be critically short of officers and the deficiency can be made up only by curtailing training time. The quality of training was questionable during Kargil and the new method would further compromise the quality. But the Indian Army's biggest disadvantage is that of troops' morale. The Army's continuous deployment in Kashmir and North Eastern states and the

Freedom is Invaluable

Praful Bidwai writes from New Delhi

Even when free artistic expression hurts sentiments, we must defend it to the point of permitting what may appear apostasy to some. Of course, we must also defend their right to protest. True, it is hard to draw the line between artistic expression and outright calumny. But in any discriminating judgment, we must give primacy to freedom, and restrict it in exceptional circumstances.

ALMAN Rushdie's visit to India, after a long, tense, 12 years, was a landmark. It signifies a change in our intellectual climate despite the BJP's rise to power. There is today greater acceptance within the intelligentsia of the importance of freedom. There is also appreciation that Rushdie can't be reduced to just two chapters in *The Satanic Verses*.

This might seem to sit ill with the recent spate of attacks on secular films, paintings and books. But these have rarely received institutional endorsement or legitimacy from the intelligentsia.

At minimum, there is growing polarisation between the communal tub-thumping nationalism of book-burning philistines, on the one hand, and the liberal book-reading public, on the other. A large number of journalists, commentators and politicians, who demanded a ban on the *Verses* in 1988, now want it lifted.

No less important is growing secularisation of India's Muslim community, and the decline of its "traditional" leadership which emphasises separateness rather than secularism. This is related to the spread of education and secular practices, the rise of a professional middle class, and a growing liberal constituency among Muslims.

There has been serious soul-searching and introspection within the Muslim intelligentsia. Of course, there were bound to be strong protests against Rushdie. Those who felt enraged at his "heresy" in the *Verses* had every right to vent their anger. But that was a relatively minor phenomenon.

Rushdie's return to India marks a change in the world of Islam, captured above all in Iran. Once the site of the world's most militant, anti-modern, anti-Western religious movement, Iran is making a transition to modernist, plural, liberal society. The *fatwa* to kill Rushdie could not have been issued in isolation from the Iranian Revolution, in which apostates could have no place. Under an Anglo-Iranian agreement the *fatwa* stands effectively nullified.

Fundamentalist Islam is increasingly isolated today. For instance, Afghanistan's Taliban regime is recognised by just three of the world's 180-

plus states.

When the BJP-led government granted a visa to Rushdie last year and publicised it, it had dishonourable motives. This column commented on them. But if the BJP could not demonise Islam via Rushdie, he did not oblige it.

Rushdie did not come on a high-profile, explicitly "political" visit. His trip was personal and tied to a literary event. The BJP, wisely, didn't try to appropriate him.

One can now hope to see serious, sustained engagement between Rushdie and our literary community. Rushdie should gradually fade out from the news pages. It is time we viewed him as a highly gifted writer and extraordinary novelist, not the embodiment of controversy, nor even as someone over whom hangs the sword of death.

As Salman Rushdie's acquaintance for two decades, I am struck by the ease with which he today carries that threat. He is a mellowed, re-

laxed, cool, man, at equilibrium with himself. Rushdie remains as intense as ever. And just as passionate as in the early 1980s when we spoke together at peace conferences in Britain.

When I last met Rushdie in the US eight years ago, he was a famous but hunted man, tense and anxious. There was Salman, the private individual, and Rushdie, the public person. Today, he is no longer tense. He has resolved the private-public dichotomy. Rushdie exudes conciliation and reason. He relaxes you as he persuades you.

Rushdie is important for us. He represents in a pioneering way the contemporary interface between Western and South Asian realities, experiences, sensibilities. There was such interaction in the past too — from Tagore to R.K. Narayan. Modern literature in Indian languages owes much to this interaction.

But there is a specific contemporary about Rushdie's genre, which represents a new,

intense, direct, involvement between South Asia and the West, through migration and shared experiences.

Rushdie is the best known in the line of writers which runs from Adil Jussawalla and Vikram Seth, through Amitava Ghosh, A.K. Ramanujan and Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, to Arundhati Roy and Jhumpa Lahiri. One can add to this list of names to this list.

Rushdie has explored a wide range of themes. His infinite style is a tribute to a new composite Anglophone culture now evolving in South Asia.

It won't do to pooh-pooh South Asian writing in English as derivative, as "Indo-American", "alien", "inauthentic", unworthy of comparison with the no-doubt-remarkable work being done in other Indian languages.

There is a lesson in this for us. Even when free artistic expression hurts sentiments, we must defend it to the point of permitting what may appear apostasy to some. Of course, we must also defend their right to protest.

South Asian writing in English is solidly original and creative. English is one of our languages, which we have adopted and transformed — just as we adapted cricket or shirts

Rushdie also deals with what might be called world-historical issues. For instance, migration — one of the greatest processes of our times. The migrant's experience of loss of place, language, community and culture is unique. This is a continuing theme in *Midnight's Children* and the *Verses*.

Then there is Rushdie the iconoclast, who poses wrenching dilemmas about freedom and its limits. The result is devastating for some. But that's largely in the imagination. Few of those who want *The Satanic Verses* banned have read it. They go by mere hearsay.

The world had to choose between banning the book and allowing it to be open to criticism, it largely taken the second option... Even Muslim-majority Syria teaches courses based upon the *Verses*.

There is a lesson in this for us. Even when free artistic expression hurts sentiments, we must defend it to the point of permitting what may appear apostasy to some. Of course, we must also defend their right to protest.

True, it is hard to draw the line between artistic expression and outright calumny. But in any discriminating judgment, we must give primacy to freedom, and restrict it in exceptional circumstances. Ultimately, freedom is invaluable.

OPINION

132 Girl Students: Why not Follow Instances?

Md. Nazrul Islam

It appears from the latest development that the 132 unfortunate girl-students of Motijheel Model School and College are not going to get the chance to appear at the ensuing HSC Exam. These girls are going to lose one year of their life for no fault of their own. But the question here is not one-year time only. These girls have prepared themselves in all respect to appear at the exam. They have attended classes regularly, passed through test exams and submitted required fees to their respective proper authority. They should be punished? The fault occurred somewhere within the system or interaction between the school authority and related personnel of the Board.

It appears that our respected Education Minister has failed to understand the essence of the problem that here lies the risk of great psychological implication for the rest of the life of these 132 students. This impediment too their normal and smooth progress of education will demoralise them and will adversely affect their future performance. Moreover, break of the public services has severely damaged the public services, and it will take a long time to clean up this political garbage, even by the successive regimes. Who can be held responsible for this state of affairs in the administrative sector?

Abul M Ahmad

Match-fixing

Sir, The recent match-fixing episode has emerged as a great shock to the cricketing world. Nothing rocked this game like this tragedy after the bodyline cricket. As an ardent follower of the game for last 35 years, I enjoyed it most and it became almost a passion for me. But now I feel myself cheated. What is more painful is the linking of Bangladesh world cup game with Pakistan. This disclosure came from none other than Dr. Ali Bacher, chief of South African Cricket Board.

I would therefore like to appeal to our sports ministry and BCB to come out with a clarification after full-scale inquiry into the allegation. It would be imprudent if we try to sweep it under the carpet like India and Pakistan did during last 4/5 years. We are almost at the infant stage in the international cricket arena. Therefore, any wrongdoing from any level be it from the BCB or the players should be severely dealt with for smooth sailing of this popular game in our country.

MKM Khan

Banani, Dhaka

To the Editor ...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

What is their fault?

Sir. One hundred and thirty-two girl students of Motijheel Model High School and College have begun to