

Bilateral ties must go beyond reciprocity

Former Indian High Commissioner to Bangladesh Deb Mukherjee tells M Anwarul Haq

DEB Mukherjee was the Indian High Commissioner to Bangladesh for more than five years. His tenure saw two governments in Dhaka and three in New Delhi. His association with Bangladesh, however, began way back in the early-1970s as an official in his country's mission.

Just before he left Dhaka, Mukherjee discussed at length various issues with The Daily Star. We received replies to the question we had earlier sent him and later he gave answers to several supplementary questions. (Supplementary questions are denoted as SQ and supplementary answers as SA)

The Daily Star (DS): You are the longest serving Indian High Commissioner to Bangladesh. Give us an overview of your tenure here.

Deb Mukherjee (DM): I have been extremely fortunate in representing India in Bangladesh during an eventful period in our bilateral relations. The major irritant in our relations was resolved and progress has been made in different areas of interaction. There has been a surge in people-to-people relationship and interaction, which, of course, is one of the main pillars in constructing a durable relationship.

DS: You served in Bangladesh during the mid-1970s and then in the mid-1990s. What were the major changes you found in Bangladesh-India relations during the intervening two decades?

DM: Bangladesh was a very young country when I was last here. She is now an important member of the international community. Our bilateral relations during the fifteen years separating my two assignments in Dhaka, for part of which I was also on the Bangladesh desk in Delhi, were proper and friendly. We were not able however to move forward adequately in developing the kind of linkages which might have been of greater benefit to our peoples. Meanwhile, of course Bangladesh had initiated the SAARC process and that itself subsumed some elements of bilateral relations.

DS: What is the state of our bilateral relations compared with the situation when you arrived? What are some of the major stumbling blocks in Bangladesh-India relations today?

DM: With regard to the first part of the question, I think I have already answered this in response to your first question. I am very clear in my mind that there are no major stumbling

blocks in Bangladesh-India relations. What needs to be understood is that when two neighbours densely populated on either side share more than 4,000 kilometres of land and river border, where interactions take place at various levels in a variety of ways, there will be problems from time to time. This is inevitable. Such problems should be anticipated where possible and handled with understanding in a spirit of mutual co-operation. These must not be blown out of proportion. I think at least responsible sections of the media have an important role to play in this regard.

DS: The water issue had been a long-standing problem between the two countries. How did things begin to change? What factors led to the Water Treaty between India and Bangladesh? How did the two sides converge towards an agreement?

DM: Informal discussions had been going on between Dhaka and New Delhi in trying to find a solution to the vexed problem for a number of years. The major areas of concerns to both sides were, I think, identified. There was a realisation in both the capitals for quite some time that it was necessary to set this issue at rest. What we saw in December 1996 was therefore the culmination of a process. It goes without saying that appropriate political direction was required from both sides in coming to a conclusion.

SQ: Were there any other factors that contributed to the signing of the water accord?

SA: The visit of the Chief Minister of West Bengal at that time was extremely important. It must be remembered that India is also an aggregate of small states. So when we look into relations between India and Bangladesh, this matter should also be looked into. I think the Ganges Water Treaty would have been very difficult without the co-operation that was received from the West Bengal government.

DS: Similarly, what were some of the key developments that led to the CHT Accord?

DM: This was, of course, essentially an internal problem

of Bangladesh. India's involvement was to the extent of the 50,000 refugees who had taken shelter there.

I think it was a matter of winning the confidence of the people in the Chittagong Hill Tracts and the refugees in India. I personally visited several refugee camps in Tripura immediately after taking up my assignment in Dhaka and met with some of their leaders. I did so because the Bangladesh government had impressed upon me the importance they attached to the resolution of the problem and the return of the refugees. On our part, we always tried to persuade the leadership among the refugees that they should co-operate with the Bangladesh government in working out a reasonable formula for their return. Things seem to have fallen in place in the agreement reached in the latter part of 1997.

DS: It has been said that India waited for the AL to come to power to make the Water Treaty and the CHT Accord, otherwise these problems could have been solved earlier. How far is this true?

DM: This is of course entirely and absolutely untrue. It seems to be forgotten that the first agreement on sharing Ganges waters, though of a short duration, was signed between India and a non-AL government. This line of thinking also implies that these agreements were only of benefit to Bangladesh. This again is not true. If a long-term water sharing agreement was important for Bangladesh so was it important for India to get a major irritant out of the way. Also, as I have already said, discussions on Ganges waters had been going on for some time. May I say that within days of my arrival in Dhaka in March 1995, I was discussing possible sharing formulae with your government.

As regards CHT, India provided every facility to Bangladesh leaders to visit the refugee camps and discuss the matter of their return. We were anxious for their return.

DS: With these two major accords, one may think that Indo-Bangladesh relations

should have advanced much further than these actually have. What do you think prevented our relationship from advancing further? Why is our relationship not progressing fast enough at the moment?

DM: Given the sensitivity of our relations, I do not know if I would recommend very rapid movements. It is important to demonstrate the mutuality of benefits. At the same time, time lost is opportunity lost and it is perhaps arguable that we could have moved forward at a somewhat greater pace. Having said that we must not also lose sight of many forward movements that have taken place and a certain positive ambience that has been built up. But we must construct further on this, particularly in issues relating to the economy.

I believe that at a recent discussion organised by a leading Bengali paper where the participants were former Bangladeshi Foreign Secretaries, it was felt that Bangladesh needed to have a consensus on the kind of relationship that it wishes to develop with India.

SQ: What is the major stumbling block in Indo-Bangladesh relations?

SA: I do not know that there is any stumbling block. I think there is no issue with a capital 'T'. When there is such a border, there would be things (incidents) at times. But it can be sorted out through goodwill.

I believe that Bangladesh needs to have a consensus on the issues. It is you that have to reach it. I will leave it at that. As for India, we would like to move on.

SQ: What about the 25 categories of duty-free items that you were supposed to allow from Bangladesh to go into India?

SA: As for the 25 items, there is a joint committee which is supposed to look into several issues. And those issues have been identified. Please, check your records of Mr. Tofail's visit. So the joint committee has to meet and discuss those issues. Unless it does so, we are not getting anywhere.

SQ: If Bangladesh does not export gas would India look elsewhere?

SA: Of course, we will. In fact, we already are. Whether from Iran, Qatar or Myanmar is not of importance. Importing from you makes it easier. That there is something next door, which is good for both of us. But if you feel you do not have enough gas that is your sovereign decision. We will fulfil our energy needs from wherever possible.

DS: There is often talk about "reciprocity" or the lack of it from Bangladesh side. What is actually meant by it from the Indian perspective? How, in your view, could Bangladesh show "reciprocity"?

DM: I have a problem with the indiscriminate use of the word "reciprocity". Certainly, you can have reciprocity in matters like civil aviation or some specific arrangement or package. But the development of relationships has to go beyond reciprocity at every step. India should have a stake in the well being and prosperity of Bangladesh. The same should apply to Bangladesh. I believe that it should follow from this that neither country would do anything that would be inimical to the interests of the other and should also take positive steps which are beneficial to both or even only to the other if it causes no harm to itself. International relations is a matter of identifying win-win situations. I am sure neither India nor Bangladesh would only seek unilateral advantages when addressing the interests and concerns of the other. It is of course true the relations between nations, as between individuals, cannot be entirely one-sided. What is important is to proceed on the basis of mutual benefit in the totality of relations.

SQ: To what do you attribute the recent rise in border incidents that cost several lives? What can be done to ensure that such incidents do not recur?

SA: Border incidents have unfortunately become a fact of life. Given the length of our border and the cross-border movement of goods and people, this does tend to happen. Often cross-border dacoities and cattle thefts assume the proportion of international incidents. I think there should be consistent interaction between the border forces to see that such incidents are greatly minimised.

DS: There has hardly been any progress on trade talks. The imbalance in our trade is on the rise and there appears no prospect of any significant change in the near future. Why is this stalemate?



Given the sensitivity of our relations, I do not know if I would recommend very rapid movements. It is important to demonstrate the mutuality of benefits. At the same time, time lost is opportunity lost and it is perhaps arguable that we could have moved forward at a somewhat greater pace. Having said that we must not also lose sight of many forward movements that have taken place and a certain positive ambience that has been built up.

DM: I find the reiteration of trade imbalance unrelated to the realities of international trade and commerce today. Unlike 30 or 40 years ago, no country is in the business of balanced or barter trade. Bangladesh has substantial deficits with other countries as indeed positive trade balances with others. The same applies to India.

It is a fact that Bangladesh liberalised its import policy before India. However this was not meant for India alone. Today, the tariff structures in the two countries are comparable. As you know, Bangladesh enjoys a minimum tariff preference of 50 per cent on 2003 tariff lines (nearly half of the items in HTS) covering nearly 72 per cent of current exports to India. India also lifted quantitative restrictions preferentially for SAARC countries. These measures have started showing results. Bangladesh exports are now showing a rising trend of

around 25 per cent annually. There can be a quantum jump in the exports, if Bangladesh is able to diversify export basket, provide goods and services which Indian market requires, and increase production capacities for goods which already have a ready market e.g. export of ceramics is now limited only because of constraints of production capacities. The Indian market is one billion strong and if any product like ceramics is competitive, the potential for export immediately becomes huge. India has also suggested that import of energy and provision of services which could certainly give Bangladesh a considerable surplus in her trade with India. But these are decisions you have to take.

SQ: Do you think the sort of issues that are pending between two countries like transit, transshipment and export of gas would be much easier to deal with the Opposition?

SA: Opposition, you mean

BNP. As a friend of your country who has spent eight years in your country, I should like to hope that any economic or any other decision concerning India would be taken by any government in Dhaka in the light of your national interest.

SQ: Final question, where are we in our bilateral relationship?

SA: I think we are very happy about the movement of a large number of people. We are having interactions in the cultural fields. We are issuing around 2000 visas a day which is very very substantial. This interaction among people, particularly in the cultural field, is something that is going to be a natural pillar. A lot of subjects are under discussion. But everything is moving.

DS: Thank you for speaking to us. We wish you the best in your next assignment.

DM: Thank you for interviewing me and thank you for your good wishes.

Terrorism on cyber avenue

By ABM Ziaur Rahman

NO innovation comes with unalloyed blessing. Information technology is no exception. It has changed the nature of relations among nations and within them. Technology has brought up more sophisticated, silent and deadly weapons. Technological innovations have evolved newer kinds of threat to security emanating from the non-traditional, namely non-state and transnational actors.

Although designed to preserve privacy of the user, Internet has opened up the way for penetrating into one's personal information. Sensitive database of companies, classified information of various agencies and spread of virus threat. A few days ago, a friend of mine, received an e-mail saying that he can buy a software that would reveal the passwords of the Net users to view their emails.

Internet's cheap but effective tool of advertisement through web pages has turned it into an easy tool for spreading destructive and illicit messages, circulating obscene materials, terrorists recruitment and fanatics from all over the world. Possession of unauthorised information, cyber fraudulence, pilferage of money through electronic transactions has made the Net lucrative for the "digitally corrupt" people.

Encyclopaedia Britannica has defined terrorism as a means of forcing some political objective. When used by the government, it may signal efforts to stifle dissent; by insurgents or guerrillas, it may be part of an overall effort to effect desired political change. Terrorism has been defined by the FBI as the unlawful use of force or violence against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social objectives. Cyber-terrorism could thus be defined as the use of computing

power to intimidate or coerce other. It includes offences ranging from credit card fraud to spreading child pornography. About a decade ago Barry Collin, a computer whiz, first used this terminology.

For cyber-terrorists, the inherent vulnerability of information systems creates an opportunity which can be exploited with surprising ease. This opportunity is the result of a market in which 'information brokers' play an essential role in almost every aspect of business, politics and science. For such operations, data is a commodity whose value is based on the traditional assumption that knowledge is power, information warfare may become another important category of low intensity

Experts have hinted that the recent incident of the BRAC BDMail service was the prelude to greater criminal activities perpetrated on the Cyber Avenue. Although at present cyber crime in the country is mainly focused on hacking, it may soon corrupt the entire system of e-commerce that is coming in a big way.

society conflict which must be considered as an important international security factor. The many linkages between military and the less secure civilian information systems give this development a special relevance for national security.

National security, if seen from a broader perspective, encompasses the security of the individual. In that manner, cyber crimes through primarily directed towards individual bear implications for national security as well. These days cyber-terrorism is gaining much popularity, since conventional means of terrorism seem to be losing their importance because blowing up people do not cause a government to change its policy. Use of computer technology in affecting tens of thousands of people can create widespread actual panic. Use of computer technology in wiping out subscriber's accounts or disrupting power supply can be used to create effective panic among the mass.

Cyber-terrorist's encroachment into national security organs can be more direct. For example, some remotely placed hacker can steal, disrupt or even erase sensitive information from the government computer. Hacking of the Pentagon computers having sensitive information is one manifestation of such possibility. The combination of electricity, communications and computers are vital components for any state, all of which can be threatened by cyber warfare. Since these days, computers run most of the sophisticated machines so there are all the possibilities of numbing them by some how placing a virus.

Because cyber-terrorism would be an increasing problem in society, everyone needs to be

though in an embryonic stage, there is always the possibility of creating complex viruses, capable of creating huge damage. According to observers, this threat would increase, as the country's computer literate population would tend more and more to test their efficiency in computer programming by creating viruses or by hacking various sites. The recent hacking incident at BRAC BDMail and email virus found with the BTTE's letter is one instance of the budding menace. However, this instance, though not encouraging, has silver lining in it. As according to some observers, it is developing the country's capability to create and at the same time combat viral attacks. A Bangladesh programmer's credit in creating a

programme to recover lost data after the CIH virus attack can cited as a good example.

The technology should not be blamed for its misuse. The user has to shoulder the responsibility. At this point in time this seems to be an impossible task to check since the Internet is regarded as a free platform for communication and the system being free from a central administration/supervision system. So currently there is no foolproof ways to protect a system. Given the country's technical expertise it will be very hard to detect or to deter a cyber criminal from carrying out obnoxious activities at the safety of remote location. However, some experts have suggested that critical systems should be isolated from outside connection or protected by adequate firewalls, use best practices for password control and protection, and use protected action logs. Moreover, the government should form

some type of group to deal with cyber-terrorists.

Lack of adequate knowledge about the gravity of such attacks and the absence of an effective and dynamic cyber law has hampered the process of containing such crimes. Another problem is that the cyber criminals are regarded to be more intelligent than the ordinary criminals since most of them are highly educated, innovative and are in most cases, world's best computer or internet programmers. The government recently has decided to enact new laws during the next session of the parliament to put brakes on cyber crimes.

One might argue that cyber crime is not a serious issue today. Such types of crimes might

be in their embryonic stage but with the advent of technology they would be of a major threat to the country, starting from the individual. The world is tending to go for automation, a process to which Bangladesh must comply in order to stay alive in the competition. And in this age when we are talking about global village Bangladesh cannot afford to remain isolated. Experts have hinted that the recent incident of the BRAC BDMail service was the prelude to greater criminal activities perpetrated on the Cyber Avenue. Although at present cyber crime in the country is mainly focused on hacking, it may soon corrupt the entire system of e-commerce that is coming in a big way. If nothing is done soon to put a break to such sorts of crimes then it would be too late and we might find ourselves slowing down from the race in automation.

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Green vehicle

The race for green cars have begun to heat up with giants such as General Motors, Ford of the US, Japan's Toyota and Honda and South Korean Daewoo and Hyundai bringing in latest technology to meet the court's stipulations. A spanking new range of Euro-II compliant cars has started to roll down India's streets. Most of them are equipped with multi-point fuel injection system to cut down pollution.

By Biman Mukherji, AFP New Delhi

MARUTI UDYOG LIMITED, Bajaj Auto, Mahindra and Mahindra and Ashok Leyland are jostling for a slice of the "green" segment with their low-pollution vehicles in the wake of tough emission laws enforced in New Delhi, a city of 12 million people.

The sales growth will be strong because the base is quite small. There is a growing awareness about the environment," said Rohitash Mal, general manager of Maruti Udyog Limited, India's largest car manufacturer.

Maruti, which the Indian government and Japan's Suzuki Motor Corp hold equal stakes, hopes to sell hundreds of its Omni vans with Compressed Natural Gas (CNG) kits to replace an ageing fleet of cabs in New Delhi.

"We have already replaced more than 800 old taxi cabs with our vans on the Delhi roads. The potential is still for much more," Mal said, adding that the city's taxi fleet would be about 2,500.

The Indian capital, with two million plus vehicles on its choked roads, was adjudged the world's fourth most polluted city by the World Health Organisation in 1997.

A recent study by Italy's Centre for Theoretical Physics says one person dies every hour because of air pollution in Delhi, which has a car population that equals the number of vehicles in Bombay, Madras and Calcutta combined.

Maruti chief Mal said the joint venture was also looking at the market in Bombay, India's financial hub, which has a fleet of 5,000 ageing taxicabs.

Some of the world's top automobile companies such as General Motors, Ford of the US, Honda and Toyota of Japan, Hyundai and Daewoo of Korea have entered India to jostle for space in the crowded, but potentially vast market.

The Supreme Court last year ordered the industry to meet European emission standards in cars sold in New Delhi, where more than 3,000 pollutants are injected into atmosphere daily.

The court has also banned commercial vehicles, including taxicabs, three-wheeler scooters and buses of more than eight years vintage on the roads of the Indian capital.

The country's burgeoning car industry, jolted by the twin orders, has now set about fine-tuning into the new green standards with global and domestic firms falling into step.

The race for green cars have begun to heat up with giants such as General Motors, Ford of the US, Japan's Toyota and Honda and South Korean Daewoo and Hyundai bringing in latest technology to meet the court's stipulations.

A spanking new range of Euro-II compliant cars has started to roll down India's streets. Most of them are equipped with multi-point fuel injection system to cut down pollution. The carmakers are now gearing up for launch of CNG versions of various models.

Domestic firms such as Bajaj Auto and Mahindra and

Mahindra are revving up to launch environment-friendly vehicles like CNG-fired scooters as well as two-wheelers with electric battery.

Mahindra and Mahindra, set to launch a battery-run nine-wheeler scooter rickshaw here, said it was eyeing a significant market as 17,000 battered old rickshaw cabs would be sent to the grave-yard soon.

"We want to first launch in New Delhi and then go to other (Indian) cities," said Khutubul Hai, Mahindra and Mahindra's director, adding that the only stumbling block was a recent increase in excise duty.

He said battery-run vehicles would cut running costs even though the initial expenses would be slightly higher.

Similarly, Bajaj Auto, the world's largest two-wheeler manufacturer, has flagged off a CNG- and three-wheeler exclusively for New Delhi.

"We have already sold more than 200 of these vehicles," said Bajaj Auto services manager AJ Agarkar.

He said there was a sales potential of up to 50 three-wheeler scooters every day, adding that the firm would concentrate on New Delhi in the short term.

Bus-maker Ashok Leyland has also tapped into the latest trend, selling 1,000 CNG-operated vehicles to the Delhi Transport Corp.

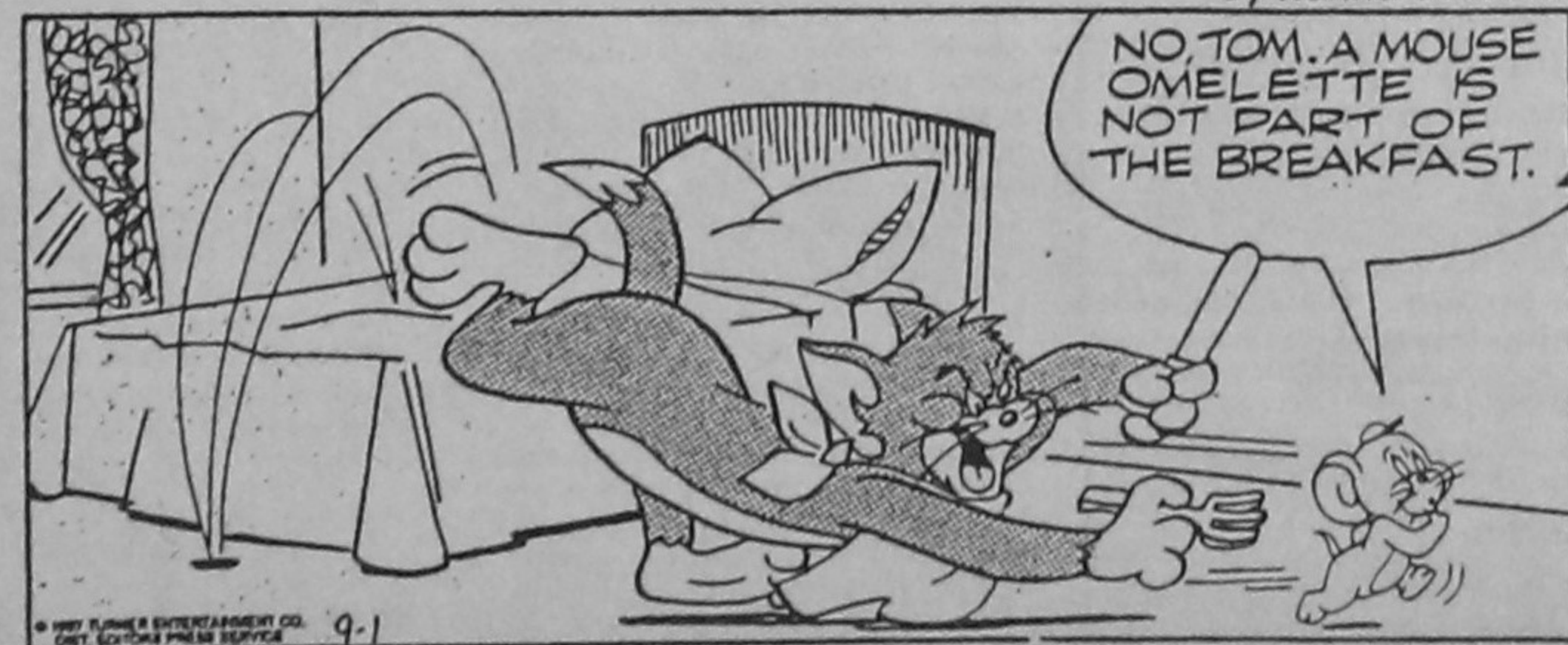
India's automobile industry has urged the government to move towards tougher emission laws in line with global standards, but to do so in phases.

Officials say the step would expand the market for a wider range of environment-friendly vehicles.

TOM & JERRY



By Hanna-Barbera



James Bond



AN EXCHANGE OF



WHAT DO THEY WANT?

