

Waiting for the Dawn

By Mansoor Mamoon



THE road to democracy in what now comprises South Asia has not been smooth. It was largely uneven and full of rude jolts and upheavals. There had not been steady and consistent culture and tradition of real democracy or liberal democracy as is now prevalent in the west as most of South Asia was under long colonial subjugation and prior to that feudal monarchy. Under colonialism there is naturally no scope of nurturing or practice of democratic norms and values. Feudal monarchy, on its part, does not encourage democracy. The east system which is still in vogue in many parts of South Asia. Against this backdrop, democracy could not gain ground and strong moorings in South Asia as a whole.

During the last half a century or so only two South Asian countries - namely India and Sri Lanka - had the singular credit of uninterrupted democratic rule and peaceful transfer of power reflecting popular will or mandate. The rest of South Asia - Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal - could not sustain democratic norms and had to undergo long spell of autocratic rules. Bhutan is a monarchy where the King is supreme and the Moldavians cannot till now exert themselves into organised political groups.

When in August 1947 the British decided to partition the subcontinent in line with religious divide and give them independence, the two newly born South Asian countries initially decided to chart a democratic course for their peoples. Their option was parliamentary democracy in imitation to the United Kingdom - the former colonial

overlords - due to the influence of western education on the English educated section of the populace. India was largely successful despite its diversity of culture, race, creed and language. It adopted a constitution which is democratic and secular in character. There were regular elections. Except for a brief period of emergency rule enforced by the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1975 the Indians more or less enjoyed democratic rule. Despite assassinations of India's founding father M K Gandhi and two Prime Ministers Indira Gandhi and her son Rajiv Gandhi, the death in quick succession of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and his successor Lal Bahadur Shastri, series of serious insurrections at different places, wars with neighbouring China and Pakistan, the fall of minority coalition governments like nine pins in recent days and other turbulence, democracy in India sustained because of its inherent strength and resilience. There were, however, overt and covert attempts for changing the country's basic laws and switching over to presidential system. But in the face of stiff opposition from the civil society and democracy loving general masses these were nipped in the bud. The island republic of Sri Lanka, despite its long ethnic insurgency, continued with its democratic norms and practices, albeit the fact that to have strong central government it switched over to presidential form of government in the late 70s. One of the facts for the sustenance of democracy is high rate of literacy and high degree of political consciousness among the populace. There is, however, a long spell of emergency rules curbing press freedom and human rights necessitated by exigencies fuelled by on-going bitter Tamil insurrections and the aborted Marxist (JVP) uprisings

in the seventies. But despite turmoils, elections are regularly held and there is no interruption in the democratic process.

But Pakistan had a different experience. M A Jinnah, Pakistan's founding Governor General, had a different mental make up. He was basically an autocrat and was averse to the demand of the people of the eastern wing as regards their cultural entity. He was also feeble in health and passed away shortly after the creation of Pakistan. Liaquat Ali Khan, the first prime minister, was a democrat and a staunch believer in parliamentary democracy. But he too could not live long and was gunned down in a mysterious way. Then started palace intrigues and civil and military bureaucrats engaged themselves in hatching conspiracies. The constitution adopted in 1956 was abrogated at gunpoint when the Army Chief Ayub Khan usurped power in 1958. He tried to subdue the Bengalees and after 10 years had to make an ignominious exit at the crest of public discontent. He brought Pakistan to the brink of disaster. Then came Yahya Khan. He gave elections - the last and first in united Pakistan. But when Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's Awami League won a landslide victory bagging only two but all seats in erstwhile East Pakistan the army in connivance with Z A Bhutto, the then majority leader in Pakistan, refused to hand over power to the majority ruler and party contrary to universal democratic rule. The Bengalees revolted and the Pak army Junta perpetrated one of the worst genocides in 1971. Finally Pakistan lost its eastern wing which became Bangladesh. Negation of democracy thus resulted in the slicing down of Pakistan. The price was rather too heavy. Then followed about five years of civilian rule with Z A Bhutto as Prime

Minister. Subsequently, Ziaul Haque appeared in the scene. He removed Bhutto, put him to the gallows and ruled Pakistan for an iron hand for about ten long years. Ziaul Haque was killed in a mysterious air crash. Then there followed some semblances of civilian rule. The army however continued to pull the strings.

In 1999 General Pervez Musharraf ousted the civilian government of Nawaz Sharif and usurped power. Nawaz is now serving long jail sentences and Benazir Bhutto is forced to live in exile. Politics has literally been made out of bounds for politicians in Pakistan. It is indeed a tragedy that the people of Pakistan have been deprived of their democratic rights with one army ruler after another routinely usurping power.

Bangladesh was born in 1971 amidst a sanguinary war as a direct protest against Pak army rulers' refusal to honour their free choices - their democratic rights. Within three and half years Bengalees' long-cherished dream of democratic dispensation was rudely shattered and one-party monolithic rule was superimposed on them. This paved the way for long direct and quasi-military rule. Finally in December 1990 the long 21 years of autocratic rule was toppled by an unprecedented mass upsurge. During the last 10 years Bangladesh have had two free and fair elections. But it cannot be said that democracy has been established. There has not been an iota of cooperation between the ruling party and the opposition on any issue other than the passage of the 11th and 12th amendments to the constitution. Currently there is long standing stand off between the two sides and parliament has been tragically turned into a ruling party affair.

In the Kingdom of Nepal the

people also had to wage a relentless struggle for their democratic rights. The King was ruling the country with handpicked non-party Panchayet system. Finally at the peak of the mass uprising in 1990 the King had to retreat and bow down to popular will. Parliamentary democracy was established and the King was made a ceremonial figurehead. But the internecine feuds, greed, squabbles and corruption among politicos have largely frustrated the people about the future of democracy in Nepal. Maoist insurgency is the result of the popular despair and discontent.

In the introduction of this write up it was mentioned that democracy in South Asia could not gain ground due to various factors. What is now practised in the name of democracy may be termed as tribal democracy or supremacy of leaders and the party rather than the people. Dynastic rule in party hierarchy is still widely and assiduously practised. Black money is deciding the result of the elections. Delhi High Court's recent ruling in this regard about the play of black money and fear psychosis of the godfathers and mafias (called money and muscle power) is an eye-opener and is more or less not only in India, but also in South Asia as a whole. South Asia is in a vicious circle of corrupt politics and it is difficult for the peoples of the region to extricate themselves from it. This is why there is no peace in South Asia and the region is groping in abject poverty, in fact it is the largest poverty pocket in the world. This anomaly is due to the fact the rulers in South Asia are the new Brahmins who replaced the alien rulers without any change in their mindset. They are ruling their countries with the mindset of the colonial rulers. In such a deplorable situation democracy cannot take roots and flourish.

Interview

'US wants to act as a dada'

Asghar Ali Engineer, living in Mumbai, is involved in inculcating secularism and pluralism. Running two institutions - Institution of Islamic Studies and Centre for Study of Society and Secularism - he cares for South Asia, which he thinks is intensely diverse. Recently he spoke to *The Daily Star* correspondent Ekram Kabir in Colombo on South Asian affairs. Excerpts:

DS: *What really is South Asian entity? Is it a concept that has been imposed by the West or has it been there from the beginning?*

Asghar Ali Engineer (AAE): South Asian geographical entity was torn apart by the western colonials and later on by our own politicians. In that way even in Asia we have some commonalities, but these commonalities are much more when it comes to South Asia: our culture, our social ethos, our custom etc. Even now some languages share some commonalities. We would have been one nation had there been no colonial intervention in 18th and 19th centuries. And during the Mughal rule, South Asia extended up to Afghanistan and Burma. Every part of South Asia was one political entity at one time.

DS: *Recently, South Asia has been termed as the world's most dangerous flash points. Apart from the Indo-Pak factor, what do you think other reasons are?*

AAE: Basic reason is Kashmir. Even America has described South Asia as a flash point. There are two factors: one is Kashmir and the other is nuclear explosions. Both India and Pakistan have exploded nuclear devices, so they are worried that at some point a nuclear war might start. That's why they are calling South Asia as a flash point. Otherwise there are no hot spot other than Kashmir and strained relation between India and Pakistan.

DS: *But what about the internal factors like insurgency in Sri Lanka, Maoists' actions in Nepal etc?*

AAE: These cannot lead to war between two countries; for example in Sri Lanka it's a civil war and that's why they don't describe it as a flash point; and there are no nuclear devices that may have a chance to be used. The whole thing got aggravated after India and Pakistan went nuclear. Until the nuclear explosions, even Kashmir was not called a flash point.

DS: *What would be your opinion about the nuclearisation of the subcontinent?*

AAE: I am totally against it. Nuclearisation should not take place. Nuclearisation doesn't help any country; it even does not increase defence mechanism. But it certainly increases sense of insecurity. Since both India and Pakistan have nuclear devices, if one country increases its nuclear capability, the other will also go for more. So this competition will never end. Look at them: the same competition led Russia and America to disastrous pile of nuclear weapons which can destroy the world several times over. Therefore nuclear weapons do not help.

DS: *Since nuclearisation is a reality now, as a peace activist what do you think we can do to limit India and Pakistan?*

AAE: We can do that through popular agitations; we must build up pressure on both the states to de-nuclearise themselves. I would say not only they should not go for weaponisation, but I would say all nuclear devices should be destroyed. They should sign the international treaties not to increase their weapons pile. Some of us have been protesting against nuclear weapons in India. Earlier in November, we had a big conference participated by intellectuals and peace activists in New Delhi. These are the means through which you can put pressure. I know there have been anti-nuclear movement in Pakistan also and they are opposing nuclearisation of Pakistan.

DS: *Do you think the US wants India and Pakistan to sign CTBT without signing it itself?*

AAE: It's because the US want monopoly of nuclear power; it wants to act as a *dada*; it wants to dictate terms over other nations. As I have dedicated myself in promoting peace and harmony, I am against nuclear weapons anywhere in the world; all nuclear weapons should be destroyed. And America should take the lead in doing so.

DS: *What does the recent interest of the US in South Asia imply? Is there is anything more than the market factor?*

AAE: Basically it is the 'market factor'. In fact, President Clinton came to visit India, but for political reasons, he went to Bangladesh and Pakistan. And especially his visit to Pakistan was extremely sensitive. It was nothing to do with business interest, but if he didn't go there, the US influence would decrease considerably. Moreover it also wants to mediate in Kashmir dispute. So, South Asia has acquired important strategic value for America. The US was very friendly to Pakistan when Russia was there; it wanted to use Pakistan against India, because India was so friendly to Communist block. But now that the Communist block has disintegrated, they are not worried about that any more. And in order to keep their influence in South Asia, friendship with Pakistan is not at all enough. So, they want to increase their influence in India both for economic and political reasons. And sometimes they may have to use India as a counter balance. But of course, India is not ready for sale in that way. But according to their strategic calculation, on some occasions, India could be used against China in various conflicts. So, there's this political reason as well.

DS: *Given the present Indo-Pak ties, what could be the next steps for conflict resolution?*

AAE: It is civil society which is more often taking roles in conflict resolution activities and confidence-

building measures. But it has not been seriously at the political level. Of course, India did show its gesture when Vaipavee went to Lahore last year and extended friendship, but Pakistani armed forces are not interested in peace with India, because peace with India would be their decrease their interest. Their importance in Pakistan, Nawaz Sharif was also interested to develop friendship with India because he is a businessman and with pressure from the business people of Pakistan he tried to use his business acumen in building peace. That's why he wanted to sell surplus sugar to India. But the military was not interested and they started Kargil and the whole process of peace was destroyed. **DS:** *Coming back to the core problem of South Asia - Kashmir - it's ultimately the people of Kashmir are suffering. What do you think regional leadership can do about it?*

AAE: It is true that people of

Kashmir are suffering. Since arms rebellion started, their suffering increased in many fold. That's why when some supporters of the rebels approached me, I told them 'I cannot take up your cause unless you lay down your weapons'. I also spoke to the people in Kashmir valley and they told that militancy has totally destroyed them. Pakistan definitely has a hand in this militancy. It is a very serious matter that Pakistan wishes good of the people of Kashmir. **DS:** *Do you think the peace process can again be revived with the SAARC initiative? What do you think is the future of SAARC? Can we hope anything from it?*

AAE: No, SAARC initiative would not be welcome by both the countries, because they particularly India - do not want any third party

intervention. As far as SAARC is concerned, the current stalemate is unfortunate, but we should not despair. I see a good future of SAARC, because European Union, which has now become a reality, started with very vague concepts. It has been a significant step towards a confederation in Europe. I am very hopeful about SAARC; it may not be in my lifetime, but SAARC unity will become more concrete and it may lead to confederation ultimately. I have a strong plea to make that 'visa should be abolished among our countries'. We are culturally so close to each other, therefore people should have freedom to move around in different countries in SAARC area. SAARC will economically benefit the countries, and other regions will give more importance to us if all of us are united. We'll have much more economic potential if this unity comes about. Look at how America now gives importance to Europe!

DS: *But presently, by observing the disinterest of India and Pakistan, the smaller nations of SAARC are thinking about sub-regional cooperation. Wouldn't there be negative impacts in terms of greater unity of the region?*

AAE: Yes, the idea should be to carry all the countries together. If India is excluded, SAARC unity will not have much of an impact. I am not saying that India should act as a big brother, no. There's a big population in India, therefore excluding India would not help. Then again when India comes in the picture, naturally the Pakistan factor becomes important. So, other SAARC countries should also use their influence in to bring about resolution of conflict between India and Pakistan. Well, of course that has to be without intervention, I mean in friendly manner, with nice negotiation.

DS: *You talk about economic cooperation, but at the same time there's a lot of military activities going on in the region.*

AAE: As far as my individual opinion is concerned, I feel that military should be disbanded in all South Asian countries. There should be voluntary services, if there's any threat all citizens should defend their countries. Military is a waste of our precious wealth. Be it in India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh - we are spending so much on military that sometimes it appears that we are keeping tensions alive because we want to favour military. Many have vested interest, as well in building powerful armed forces. This of course I am talking about an ideal world. In reality every country has military, and as far as India is concerned military had to be praised for Kargil operation but that does not mean that sometimes it appears that we are keeping tensions alive because we want to favour military. Many have vested interest, as well in building powerful armed forces. This of course I am talking about an ideal world. 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