

Premature electioneering Irresponsible political behaviour yet again

ARTICLE 44B (3) of the Representation of People's Order, 1972, prohibits any form of electioneering before three weeks of the polling date and provides for two to seven years' imprisonment should any candidate violate the law. Unfortunately, the ruling as well as opposition party leaders, at least some of them, feel they are above the law, any law for that matter. Let alone announcement of a polls schedule, the incumbent government has more than two months of its tenure left. However, a good number of aspiring candidates, of both ruling and opposition parties, have already begun canvassing for votes through graffiti and posters on the walls. The Election Commission having a host of problems related to legal and infrastructural reforms to attend to within the limited time at its disposal, could certainly have done without the latest irritant prior to elections. As it usually does under such circumstances, the EC has decided to urge the political parties to refrain from the devious practice. In all likelihood, the commission's assertion of authority might end right there; for hardly does it seem that the political parties would pay heed to whatever it has to say. The reason, as we have said so many times through our reports and editorial comments, is quite simple: law for these people are texts that apply for all but them.

In the first place, there is no scope for any request to be made to those people to refrain from the malpractice; because they have violated and are still violating a particular law of the land, one that has to do with a fundamental pre-election norm. It is a cognisable offence and must be dealt with accordingly. Ideally, the process should have been this simple. Unfortunately, in our context, it seldom happens the way the law of the land prescribes. Admit it or not, people in politics do consider themselves being well and truly above the law. The pity is, they do not even mind playing football with a basic law of elections!

Let the Election Commission go ahead with its plan to urge all political parties not to embark on election campaign before the announcement of polls schedule. At the same time, we expect the government and its law enforcement agencies to track down the people who are violating the Representation of People's Order, 1972, and, if necessary, file cases against them, so that law takes its course. Strict enforcement of law would work as a deterrent there.

Crisis in children's drugs

Resume sale of bottles

A SERIOUS threat to children's health has been allowed to hit this country. Medicine for children, particularly in liquid form, are disappearing from the market. Adults are also threatened by this crisis, as many life saving products, antibiotics and even the simple pain killer, paracetamol, are in short supply. The cause of this crisis is a shutdown at the country's only bottle factory, Bengal Glass. For the last two months, Bengal Glass has been forced to halt sale of bottles because of a dispute over payment of Value Added Tax to the National Board of Revenue.

While not in any way supporting the evasion of VAT, we must ask why the NBR forced the company to stop sales of such a critical product? As we understand it, the NBR and Bengal Glass are in dispute over the applicability of a VAT credit claimed by the company against renovation expenses. The disagreement should be resolved according to procedure, but this does not justify placing citizens' health at risk.

The halt in bottle production is forcing many pharmaceutical companies to stop manufacture of many, including children's drugs, while others are being tempted to use recycled bottles, thus exposing both young and adult consumers to unknown and even fatal hazards. The crisis will become worse as demand is bound to outpace stocks, if any. Are we to accept the onset of a critical shortage of medicine for the sole reason that the NBR and the local bottle manufacturer are disputing a VAT concession?

Steps need to be taken at the appropriate inter-ministerial level to resolve the conflict in view of the serious repercussions the bottle crisis is having on critical supply of medicines to the children in particular.

MAHFUZ ANAM

(This article was submitted to the Outlook magazine of India, which published an edited version in its issue of 29th April 2001. Below we publish the full text of the article.)

"EXPLODE a nuclear bomb or invite Bin Laden to Bangladesh" was the reply to my complain to a US journalist friend as to why Bangladesh received so little international media attention. The same could apply to the Indian media which had no time for us except to implicate us with the insurgency in the northeast, imply that we are becoming an ISI base or suggest that religious fundamentalism was taking us over. Well the border incident, however sad and reprehensible, appears to have caused an avalanche of Indian interest in us. Sadly most of it is reflective of the same stereotype as suggested above. YES, something is seriously wrong with India-Bangladesh relations. And NO, we are not anti-Indian. We are just pro-Bangladeshi just as all Indians are pro-Indian.

Barring the extreme right religious fringe and the near-extinct extreme left, there is no substantive anti-Indianism in Bangladesh. What exists is a fierce urge to be independent and a serious concern to safeguard our interest against a big, powerful and myopic neighbour who has no time for the small countries which surround it, and does not have the imagination to think of its self-interest in an inclusive sense but views it to the exclusion of its neighbours. Nothing illustrates the failure of India's tunnel vision than the case of its relations with Bangladesh whose independence it helped

to attain and whose people continue to remain grateful, with an enormous store of goodwill for the Indian people.

India's problems with Bangladesh, including the recent border clash, are the direct result of its callous disinterest and continued neglect of relations with the latter and its incapacity to understand Bangladesh's legitimate concerns and aspirations. The irony is that there exists no fundamental problem between our two countries like there is with Pakistan and China. On the contrary, there are many areas of mutual interest. And yet over the

Bangladesh was repeatedly assured that an equitable and fair water-sharing treaty would be signed before the dam was made operational. The dam become operational in 1974 but the treaty came about in 1996. Meanwhile Ganges water continued to be withdrawn by India as it saw fit. There were some interim accords which Bangladesh accepted under pressure and in which our share as the lower riparian got smaller and smaller each time it was renewed.

The irony was that the Indian goal of reviving the Kolkata port was never served as the additional water

our deep suspicion about India's attitude towards us. Nothing exemplified more substantively and on a day-to-day basis India's 'big brother' attitude, the callousness, the utter neglect and a fundamental disrespect for the concerns of Bangladesh than the Farakka dam episode.

The second example directly relates to the recent border clash. A good start to resolving border issues was made when Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and her Bangladeshi counterpart Sheikh Mujibur Rahman signed an accord back in 1974 clearly setting out the

cent of India's total export trade. We are the biggest single market for India outside the developed world. In education and health along Bangladesh spends \$100 million a year in India.

Nearly eight years ago we lowered our tariff to a weighted average of 17 per cent, which for particular goods coming from India amount to only 12 per cent. Compared to that, India's weighted tariff rate has recently come done to 25 per cent. This much lower Indian rate is twice that of Bangladesh.

The situation is that far from

India is the growth engine of the region. But that growth engine must include the smaller countries of the area region. Weaker regional economies will drag India backwards and negatively impact on its potential for growth. India must learn from Europe and see how stronger economies assist the weaker ones to ensure sustained growth of the region as a whole. India's position in the globalised economy will be far stronger if it enters it as a region rather than as a country. Will India have the wisdom to acquire that vision, or will it continue on its myopic course?

last three decades distance between our two countries has grown wider, suspicions deeper, acrimony louder and the resolve to solve them weaker.

Three examples will prove my point. First the story of the Farakka Dam and second that of the Indira-Mujib Accord of 1974 and finally that of our economic cooperation.

For nearly two decades India wrought havoc on Bangladesh's economy and ecology by unilaterally withdrawing the Ganges water and diverting it into the Hoogly river through a dam it built at a place called Farakka in the state of West Bengal. The rationale was greater flow through Hoogly river to flush accumulated silt to increase draft at Kolkata port.

flowing through Hoogly did not produce the desired result, forcing India to construct the Haldia port further down stream. For more than a decade it was known to the Indian experts that Farakka was not having the desired impact on Kolkata port and yet they refused to change their policy of unilateral withdrawal of Ganges water.

Because by then what may have been conceived as a technical project became a political weapon in the Indian hands.

It is our view that India's Farakka policy, spread over nearly two decades of Bangladesh's 30 year existence, wrought havoc to our bilateral relations, greatly eroded the goodwill built during our Liberation War and laid the foundation of

course to follow. Bangladesh immediately ratified the accord and brought into effect all the necessary constitutional amendments to start implementing it. One of its most important provisions was the return of Berubari enclave to India in return for the Bangladeshi enclave of Angorpota and Dehagram and a corridor to access them. We returned Berubari to India within months of the accord while India took more than 25 years to give us a limited access corridor.

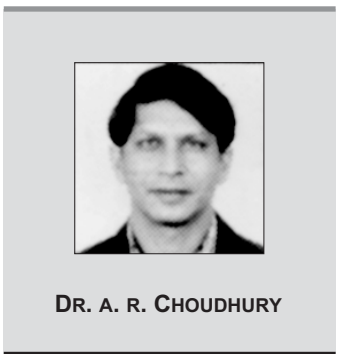
What is perhaps not known to the people of India is that Bangladesh is a nearly \$3 billion market for Indian goods, taking the formal and informal (euphemism for smuggling) trade together. At the moment Bangladesh accounts for 6.5 per

giving us any privileged treatment India is not even giving us the same facilities that we - a far weaker economy - are giving it. In addition we have removed practically all non-tariff barriers. Even after all reforms India imposes six types of non-tariff barriers on Bangladeshi goods.

So what we see is that India does not give Bangladesh the respect that a major trading partner deserves. Instead we are constantly depicted as a problem country sending illegal migrants and an ungrateful people who have forgotten India's help in our Liberation War.

A small and simple thing like Nepal's access to Bangladesh's

The new Europe



DR. A. R. CHOUDHURY

IF the European Union (EU) were country, it would be a superpower. It would have a population of 375 million people, cover 1.2 million square miles and boast the second-highest gross domestic product in the world, after the United States. The 15 nations of the EU are not a single nation now, of course. Rather, the EU is sometimes an unwieldy conglomerate of different languages, cultures, currencies, national interests and histories; and the pages of history are littered with examples of conflict between these contending nations and peoples. Just now, the rising tide of nationalism is energizing devolution movements in Britain, France, Spain and elsewhere within the EU. In Yugoslavia, outside the alliance, nationalism combined with bitter memories of past injustices has produced rebellion and war. Another non-EU nation, Russia, is grappling with a dogged insurrection in Chechnya.

But the over-arching force of history, at least in Western Europe, seems to be pushing nations together, not apart. The EU already speaks with a combined voice in the World Trade Organisation and the Group of Eight industrialised nations, and there have been discussions of a European seat in the United Nations Security Council.

With the introduction of the euro

and the establishment of the European Central Bank, monetary union is fast becoming a reality, and Europe is in the early stage of producing a common defense policy and a military force designed to complement NATO, which itself is reaching out to Eastern Europe with a view to bringing nations there into the fold.

The expansion of NATO toward the frontiers of Russia evokes painful memories and strong opposition in Moscow. Even within the NATO alliance, the expansion has raised questions. In its own way, the enlargement of the EU beyond its current 15 members has become difficult and sometimes controversial. No fewer than 13 nations have applied to join the EU. Some of these applicants, such as, Poland, Hungary, and Slovenia, are fairly close to meeting the conditions for membership that the EU has written for itself.

But some of the other applicants have very different political and economic interests from the current member-states. Politically, many have weak party systems, unreliable and unprofessional legal systems, unstable governments and inefficient or corrupt bureaucracies. Their ability to function efficiently within the institutional framework of the EU is untested and dubious. Moreover, there are important differences within some of these new applicants, such as, Latvia, Lithuania, and Malta.

The EU's current 15 member-

states are a diverse lot, but they also have a great deal in common. Even so, it is often difficult for the EU to reach unanimity, especially on important and controversial issues, just as it was difficult for NATO to act quickly and collectively to halt the ethnic cleansing of Bosnia. The introduction of 13 new members would vastly increase the EU's size and, at least potentially, its wealth and influence. It would help break down national barriers that have fostered not only discord and ignorance, but hatred and war. If done right, EU enlargement would preserve those cultural features that enrich the lives of its citizens.

But the very diversity of an expanded EU could make it more fractious. The result could be stagnation, paralysis and death of an alliance. Just now, the ability of the EU to cooperate in the face of a common threat is being tested by the outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease, which has already moved from Britain to France and which threatens to spread elsewhere on the continent. The problem is not just containing the disease, which (since it is extraordinarily contagious), is difficult enough; it is also minimising the damage the malady threatens to cause to the agricultural and tourist industries of Europe.

During the Cold War, Western Europe relied on the United States to bolster its security. Europe, in effect, provided the battlefield for whatever war might have broken out with the Soviet Union, and the

United States provided the military hardware, backed by a large number of troops stationed in Europe. But the end of the Cold War has weakened that dependence and given new life to the desire by many Europeans to live in an environment less dominated by the United States.

For example, Europe sees itself as the natural leader of the effort to re-democratise Eastern Europe. In the absence of the Soviet threat, more Europeans have reason to doubt the need to develop a U.S.-backed ballistic missile shield that the Russians strongly oppose. Many of them oppose the U.S.-

backed economic sanctions against Iraq, and virtually all of them ignore the U.S. economic embargo on Cuba.

As the twenty-first century evolves, relations that different countries have with Europe, are bound to evolve, also. In shaping a policy that takes account of this evolution, different countries around the world should be aware that over time, Europe is likely to become more unified and self-confident, more willing to defend and assert its own identity and to seek its own role in the world. In the sense that it will pose new challenges for different countries around the world, Europe over the long haul is likely to become even more important than it is now.

CONNECTING THE DOTS

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Message of Buddha Purnima

UDAYAN BARUA

THE historical reference to Buddha Purnima is marked by Sidhartha's birth, his attainment of "Proganaya", i.e. wisdom and "Nirvana" i.e. passing on to a state, where the cycle of life full of lust, endless desire and unquenching thirst does not get on reeling for all time to come. The Buddha, as a great teacher dwelt upon mind and matter reflecting in our life-cycle, which attracted millions of admirers and devotees around the world. The Buddha simply spelled out what the cycle of life means and its integral attachment with the elements of mundane world or universe.

The Buddha never preached a new religion and in his first sermon to five disciples in Baranashi (in India) candidly reminded that the cycle of religion had been and shall be continuing. The simple and lay explanation is that man, animal, plants and any being appearing in

the scene or taking birth are subject to decay and death, what again means mundane body's absorption in natural phenomenon namely, air, fire earth, water and infinity. Man or animal, irrespective of any religion or any other affiliation perishes or vanishes into colourless, stateless and endless phenomena of nature. Virtually nature itself embraces all segments of mandate body. Again, man, animal, trees and any living king appear consecutively. Among these, fruit bearing tress and consumable plants grow up drawing juice from mandane remains of plants, trees, man, animal etc. Again, all these are consumed by us and we all live on these gift of nature.

If we silently or actively think over this cycle of nature, there is no scope to discriminate how the process of the energy or water or air or composition of earth continues. This is purely a composition or transmission of the succeeding demise or elimination of whatever

element we conceive of. This is what the propagator of an endless cycle of religion, the Buddha highlighted prominently, which belongs only to mind and matter.

He asked his deciples, "come and see". That means, one is required to achieve wisdom if he wants to discover himself and the universe. In popular parlance, "knowledge is power". Therefore, we need to know how we depend on nature as well as on the ruins of our beloved kith and kin throughout the ages.

The Buddha wished all for all time to come with words like, "let all beings be happy." So, the message of "Buddha Purnima" is loud, great and universal. If we think, eat and live together, the element of vice, which torments a nation, society or international peace shall vanish. Let love last long for the mankind. "Buddha Purnima" is a reminder of peace for all.

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE

PHOTORIAL

Readers are invited to send in exclusive pictures, colour or black and white, of editorial value, with all relevant information including date, place and significance of subject matter. Pictures received will not be returned.



STAR PHOTO: SK ENAMUL HAQ

Putrid water

The Gulshan Lake has become really polluted with its soiled water, giving out a rotten stench. Dirty water from sewerage lines finds its way to this lake and people use this dirty water for various purposes--to wash, clean and also for cooking food. Diarrhoea has broken out in almost an epidemic form and these polluted waterways are very much to blame. Still the authorities have remained impassive and have done nothing to purify these lakes and other waterways.

To the 'True Indian'

According to the 'True Indian' (April 23), Bangladesh has lost in four days, the goodwill of the people of India that was earned in the last 30 years. But so has India.

The 'True Indian' says to have read in the newspapers that India has occupied some 200 acres of Bangladeshi land. But he also says that India can accuse Bangladesh of such things as well. Well, this shows an absolute ignorance of history. Can he give any example of Bangladesh ever having made any attempt to occupy any Indian land?

The mutilation of the BSF bodies is a matter that needs to be investigated and before that it is sheer audacity to accuse the BDR of such a crime.

As a true Bangladeshi, I must say that Bangladesh will remain Bangladesh and any suggestion as to changing the name of the country, particularly from a foreigner, has not been asked for.

About Bangladeshis infiltrating India, well, we know of no such agreement that India will give shelter to the Bangladeshi infiltrators in return for which Bangladesh will allow BSF to build roads in Bangladesh territory. Besides, the Bangladeshi infiltration into India

clearly shows the devotion with which BSF carry out their duties.

Md Naved Ferdous Iqbal
Dhaka

BBC and border dispute

I have watched the question and answer meeting organised by BBC telecast on the evening of 27th April. I was dismayed at the deliberation which unfortunately instead of a constructive one, turned out to be extremely biased and hostile to Bangladesh. It was really surprising that, BBC being an international organisation failed to project an independent and impartial view of the whole episode and even did not care to include representatives from Bangladesh to dispel any kind of misgivings on the issue.

The question-panel was composed of a group from the public and the answer-panel was composed of the facilitator, a lady columnist, an assistant editor, the ex-foreign secretary and an ex-BSF chief of India. While the ex-foreign secretary termed the actual happening as cloudy till a detailed enquiry being conducted by BSF was over, the ex-BSF chief admitted that, the whole operation conducted by BSF was ill

planned and, therefore, failed. But his contention that the BSF personnel might have been 'brutally' killed by the civilians was a big joke. Being an army personnel how could he conceive of an idea that, in the dead of night, a heavily armed platoon on war footing who sneaked into Bangladesh territory with ulterior motives could be surrounded suddenly by the villagers with 'Dao and Lathi' and be killed by them? There was clear evidence of an armed encounter between BDR who were defending their territory and the intruders killing at least three BDR jawans and a number of intruding BSF jawans. All the dead jawans of both sides bore bullet marks as confirmed by the post-mortem report.

The lady columnist and the assistant editor were particularly harsh on Bangladesh. At one stage, the columnist had the audacity to suggest an attack on Bangladesh with 'cruise' type missiles similar to US action against Libya and Iraq! May God help this columnist to come to her senses.

My suggestions to our Indian brethren would be not to be misled by misreportings from the Hindu fundamentalists and try to get answers for the following questions first, to arrive at a conclusion:

a) Why did the heavily armed BSF personnel in platoon strength enter Bangladesh territory at the dead of night?

b) Whether the bodies of the dead BSF personnel were found in Bangladesh or Indian territory.

c) If they were attacked by the civilians as claimed by the Indians, why did they not use their fire arms? A few guns might have been jammed as alleged, but not all of them.

Moreover there was no civilian casualty on the Bangladesh side to support the allegation.

d) Was it wrong on the part of BDR to defend its territory? If so, why did India fight in Khargil to drive out the intruders?

However, Bangladesh cannot afford to allow its border dispute with mighty India to escalate. It is in the interest of both the countries to diffuse the tension and live in harmony and peace for the betterment of their people. We gratefully acknowledge Indian assistance to our liberation war but at the same time expect them to show respect to our sovereignty and territorial integrity.

M Ataul Hoque
Dhaka

Bangladesh fails to

tame India

The failure of the current regime's foreign policy with India was well spotlighted in The Daily Star's report of April 17, dealing with the huge trade imbalance with India. India's big-brotherly and patronising attitude have not softened during the decade. In fact India's relations with its small neighbours is not enviable, not to speak of the traditional hatred against Pakistan on the Kashmir issue.

Now the New Delhi regime is tottering, but the offensive attitude of the civil service cannot be appreciated by the Bangladeshi masses. India is very keen to have market outlets in Bangladesh, but is not willing to open its markets in spite of international regulations which India has signed.

How long would India-Bangladesh relations remain sour and hostile when even the Awami League government could not make any dent in India's stiff and unfriendly stand? Political friendships are transient always!

A Bangladeshi
Dhaka.