

## Bangladesh-India relations

Why has it dipped so low?

**W**E must frankly admit that the recent political and media attacks on Bangladesh by the Indian leadership and some newspapers have caught us by surprise. Set off by Deputy Prime Minister L.K. Advani's speech and followed by that of the Defense and Foreign Ministers, and finally by the BSF chief, all have accused us of harbouring Al-Qaida agents, allowing ISI to operate freely from our soil and aiding the rebels in the Northeast. The high pitched nature of the outcry and the coincidental follow-up in some well-known Indian newspapers spoke of a concerted move to denigrate Bangladesh and picture us as a den of Islamic extremism in the eye of the world. We find it particularly amusing that the accusation of us becoming fundamentalist comes from a government whose partners are RSS, VHP and the like who are literally wreak havoc on the liberal and secular India that we and the world respect.

We have generally complained that Indian media does not pay much attention. They are doing it now with a vengeance but for completely wrong reasons. The Hindustan Times (HT) story that more than 300 Al-Qaida operatives have come to Bangladesh and that Bin Laden's second in command had taken shelter here clearly smacked of a story originating in the intelligence agencies as part of a serious dis-information campaign. A paper like HT should have asked itself why is the US not making any noise about Al-Qaida's second in command being in Bangladesh. Is it credible that if such was the case, the US, which had taken a strong stand against Al-Qaida, would have chosen to ignore it. When some criminals hiding from our army operation to nab them took shelter in Kolkata and got caught, the local press dubbed them as ISI trained Al-Qaida agents. It is extremely regrettable that a section of the Indian press, as the freest and the oldest in the region and from which we expect maturity and professionalism, should opt to toe the propaganda line instead of doing some homework of their own to get to the truth.

We are disturbed, to say the least, at the recent deterioration of the bilateral relations between our two countries. We want to say it as clearly as is possible that we want the best of relations with our giant neighbour. However we say it in the same breath that whatever may have triggered the recent Indian political and media offensive against us, it will not work. We will not allow Islamic fundamentalism to hold sway here and we will not allow others to brand us as doing so either.

It appears that we have failed to convince India of two things -- one, how seriously we want our relationship to improve; and two, how stubborn we can be when things are pushed upon us. However, it is the first thing we want to lay emphasis on today. Here we would like to suggest that the Indian propaganda notwithstanding we must make every effort to improve bilateral relations between us. In this regard we recall the visit of Brajesh Mishra immediately following the election of Khaleda Zia which was an indication of the Indian government's desire to improve ties with the present government. It appears that between then and now some communication gap has developed between our two countries, which should be addressed immediately.

Yes, Bangladesh may have taken and will take in the future different views and positions compared to that of India but that should not make India think that we are opposed to them. These should not be seen in isolation but with our greater and overarching commitment to peace and co-operation in South Asia, to SAARC and to our bilateral relations. All said and done, we are neighbours and there will always be some bone of contention between us. But what we should always remember is that everything can and should be solved through discussion. Bitter propaganda attack can only lead to bitter feelings which neither side, we believe, want.

## Besides SAARC



HASNAT ABDUL HYE

**P**REDICTABLY, the SAARC summit, scheduled to be held in Islamabad, has been postponed sine die. The host country, Pakistan, has reportedly been forced to do this as participation by India was not confirmed. Earlier, India had indicated that the summit could be attended by its foreign minister which was considered by Pakistan as inappropriate.

Well before the summit, India made her participation conditional on the cessation of cross-border terrorism which, she alleges, is sponsored by Pakistan. India was also apprehensive that the summit would be turned into a forum to discuss 'Kashmir', an issue she considers as strictly bilateral and therefore, beyond the ambit of SAARC.

This is the second time that a SAARC summit has been postponed. The last summit held in Kathmandu in January, 2002, was delayed by two years as India refused to attend on the same ground of Pakistan's involvement in Kargil. The dramatic handshake by the Pakistani president with the Indian prime minister did little to normalise the tense relation. Rather the bellicosity went from bad to worse threatening to break out into an all out war. With Pakistan's pledge to continue support to the "freedom struggle" in Kashmir and India's insistence on terming it a "cross border terrorism" abetted by Pakistan there is very little likelihood of any easing of the stalemate. Prospects of immediate war may have ebbed but war of words is

continuing unabated.

The greatest casualty of the interminable diplomatic and intermittent military stand-off between the two has been regional co-operation in South Asia. Though SAARC was established in 1985 with seven member countries having nearly one and a half billion people, there has been very little by way of tangible progress. Besides summits, meetings of experts and seminars nothing substantive has been achieved. Even the commission on poverty alleviation formed at the initiative of Bangladesh in 1991

diverse as it was in the beginning. India's politics, though rooted into democratic institutions has lost some of its concomitant values, having regressed into a blatant form of nationalism. In Pakistan democracy has been buffeted by army takeovers and rise of religious fundamentalism. In Bangladesh, where democracy has been the order of the day for over a decade, it has been kept on tenterhooks by confrontational politics. In Nepal, the Maoist insurgency, besides destabilising the state, has compromised democracy with declaration of emergency by the government. In

ment). The summit that has been postponed was to discuss these two important subjects, firstly to review progress under SAPTA and decide on a timetable for negotiation on SAFTA. So far progress in opening up markets of member countries has been unsatisfactory because of over-riding national interests in the case of some countries. Delay in reviewing actions already taken and planning for the future can only exacerbate the situation. This does not augur well for the future of SAARC because economic co-operation through trade is the fulcrum for regional co-operation

resources for common service. This will turn loss making enterprises into profitable ones and also enable them to expand strategically. Such mergers across the whole economy are taking place regularly in developed countries and even within ASEAN. Collective investment for the establishment of institutions of higher education and research is also another avenue fit for enhanced regional co-operation. Regrettably, no thought has been given to this aspect so far.

Given its present state and status SAARC has not been able to negoti-

meaningful regional co-operation in every conceivable area. The concerns and interests perceived to be common by the member countries have been overwhelmed and overshadowed by Kashmir since its inception. It would be no exaggeration to say that progress of SAARC has been seriously hindered by Kashmir. It shows no prospect of disappearing or attenuating anytime soon.

Judged by the original intentions and the traditional goals of regional grouping, SAARC has not been even reasonably successful. But South Asia is such a compact bloc, like continental Europe, that it is a natural candidate for regional grouping. Not only geography but also history and common economic interests almost dictate a shared vision for peace and prosperity. As long as Kashmir remains an intractable problem, no spectacular headway can be hoped, given the tangled relationships that it engenders. But this should be no reason to slow down the process. Even in the midst of deepest despair there should be perseverance with patience.

Meanwhile, Bangladesh should give serious thought to opening negotiations on bilateral basis with neighbours and other countries. This is the recent trend. Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore and Sri Lanka have started bilateral negotiation with America and other countries. ASEAN has concluded negotiations with China and Japan. Ever India has recently negotiated with ASEAN. Bangladesh should not lag behind these new initiatives. While remaining committed to SAARC we should look beyond it for partnerships and co-operation with other countries. Such overtures need not be at the cost of regional co-operation, as other countries have demonstrated. The point is, we cannot stand and stare while others are marching ahead. This is particularly imperative when SAARC is almost in a limbo.

Hasnat Abdul Hye is a former secretary, novelist and economist.

## IN MY VIEW

**Bangladesh should give serious thought to opening negotiations on bilateral basis with neighbours and other countries. This is the recent trend. Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore and Sri Lanka have started bilateral negotiation with America and other countries. ASEAN has concluded negotiations with China and Japan. Even India has recently negotiated with ASEAN. Bangladesh should not lag behind these new initiatives.**

had to be rejuvenated recently, again under the leadership of Bangladesh. This is symptomatic of progress in other areas, more or less.

A regional grouping's *raison d'être* lies in a few well identified and selected areas. Firstly, it is expected to promote political stability within the region through the sharing of core values and harmonisation of policy. Secondly, it addresses security concerns of member countries, arising both from internal and external sources. Thirdly, a regional alliance promotes trade through reduction/removal of tariff and non-tariff barriers. Fourthly, it helps accelerate socio-economic development through joint venture projects and cross-border investments. Last but not the least, it provides common frame-work to negotiate with other countries over trade and investment. Sadly none of these goals has been achieved under SAARC so far, though a few tentative beginnings have been made in a few areas like preferential trade. Politically, the region is as

Sri Lanka, after about two decades of bloody civil war, ceasefire has been agreed on only recently which may lead to negotiated settlement. Based on these it has to be concluded that the member countries are yet to converge on a common political system based on democratic values. It is assumed that such a political ideal was at the core of the regional project. If SAARC has not been successful in acting as a spur for the institutionalisation of liberal democracy among member countries, it has also been stymied by the political divergences that have prevailed.

In the area of trade very little progress has been made, except the tentative beginning on preferential trade among member countries. SAPTA (South Asian Preferential Trade Agreement), which was initiated in 1991, is yet to be implemented fully on the basis of items identified. On its completion depends the beginning of negotiation over free trade in the region under the framework of SAFTA (South Asian Free Trade Agree-

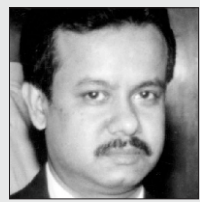
and strengthens relation between and among countries more than anything else. Yet there appears to be lingering doubts and apprehensions in the minds of some countries who are, ironically, better poised to make temporary sacrifices in the greater interest. These countries, too, will stand to gain from a common market at the end. The experience of ASEAN next door should be an eye-opener, not to speak of European Union.

If trade within a multi-lateral framework is limping along, joint ventures in industries and infrastructures have been conspicuous by their absence. The economies of the member countries of SAARC are complementary in some areas and competitive in others. While direct cross border investment independently or jointly in the former case should attract investors, in the case of industries that are competitive portfolio investment is always feasible, provided there are enabling arrangements. In some areas, like airlines and shipping there can be region-wide pooling of

ate with other regional blocs, though others are very actively pursuing this matter. In trade negotiations, unlike other areas, there is no advantage in being late. Rather, the odds against have an attendant to build up quickly when left alone. SAARC members are neither benefiting from extended trade within the region, nor are about to reap benefit from negotiated facilities with other regional blocs.

In the area of security the failure of SAARC has been most palpable and worryingly, more serious. It failed to have any role in resolving the civil war in Sri Lanka through mediation, a task that has now been accomplished by an outside country. In respect of the biggest and the gravest of the security threat, that arising from the dispute over Kashmir, it has been barred even to discuss this informally. Under the ever-present threat of an all-out war between two nuclear-armed members the security of all the member countries is at stake. The shadow cast by 'Kashmir problem' goes beyond security, it undermines

## Three cheers for bigotry



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

**T**HREE stalwarts of the spiritual USA have opened their mouths, and attacked Islam. They are the doyens of the American clergy, who counsel the likes of US presidents on spiritual matters, besides preaching the Lord's words amongst ordinary citizens. But the irony is that the same bigotry, which they wished to attack, was hissing right through their remarks.

In October the Rev. Jerry Falwell, the leader of the once popular Moral Majority, called Muhammad, the founder prophet of Islam, a terrorist. The Rev. Pat Robertson, the founder of the Christian Coalition, said "Adolf Hitler was bad, but what the Muslims want to do to the Jews is worse." Compared to these two, what the Rev. Franklin Graham, son of the Rev. Billy Graham, said was cheeseecake. He only called Islam "evil". Hallelujah.

Amongst the three, Jerry Falwell was quick to retract his comment two weeks after he made it. But Pat Robertson, the oldest of the three, had no qualms. He went ahead and

said it a second time on ABC's "This Week". Franklin Graham has neither repeated nor retracted his statement. So, praise the Lord.

Which tells us that there has been a terrible spin of things in the world. Falwell, Robertson and Graham are no numblers. They belong to the upper echelon of the American clergy, men who define the spiritual discourse of the most civilized nation on earth. You would want to believe they are profound and patient, contrary to their counter-

the course of time. The descendants of men who put human qualities in the forces of nature, and worshipped them as deities (according to German scholar Muller), started putting deity-like qualities in some of their own. The course of religion deflected over the centuries as it turned into an attitude worshipped by men. Religion, which was a shelter for men haunted by spirits, itself started to haunt.

An evolutionist named Chester R. Crisler argues that religion per-

world. Religions like Judaism and Zoroastrianism still survive although they don't have as much influence in the cultural spheres.

So if anyone wishes to write off any of these religions with rude comments, whether he is a Muslim or a Christian mullah, it is reckless, a historical and simply insulting. To judge Islam by the acts of its radical followers would be like judging Christianity by the acts of Hitler or Mussolini. It is unfortunate that religion like everything else is often

what they said, that the words they uttered could spread like a fire in the wind and destroy the shelters of humanity in many corners of the world.

Perhaps Falwell was quick to realize that unbridled tongue wasn't going to get anything, but make things worse. Perhaps he was quick to understand that there was nothing right and wrong about religion, that religion was a state of mind when submission to a supernatural force through an attitude of worship

an Indian town, if I am not wrong. But if we look around the world, that havoc is possible unless we know how and when to hold our tongues. Unless we realize, as Rabindranath Tagore said, that bigotry tries to keep truth safe in its hand with a grip that kills it. Every time a crackpot religious leader believes that his religion is not safe unless he slanders the religion of others, truth dies slowly in the stranglehold of that arrogance.

And religion is not about arrogance. It is about patience and tolerance, when the finite tries to ingest the infinite, and the ephemeral is sustained by the eternal. It is more than braggadocio of the blind faith, haughtiness of the holy, and fury of the fundamentalist. In Benjamin Disraeli's *Endymion*, Waldershare says that sensible men are all of the same religion and they never tell. A religious man is supposed to have the fear of God in his heart, be a Christian, Muslim or Hindu God, and the humility to respect that fear in another man.

Fundamentalism, or call it extremism, is fundamentally wrong because it doesn't have consideration for others. Falwell, Robertson and Graham are wrong in that consideration. One can be sure that they have hurt the sentiments of sensible Christians in the manner the bomb blast in Bali has hurt the sentiments of sensible Muslims. Lest nobody told these evangelists what is the religion of sensible men, they should know it is nothing but their conscience. And conscientious men will never tell what will hurt others.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

## CROSS TALK

**Religion is not about arrogance. It is about patience and tolerance, when the finite tries to ingest the infinite, and the ephemeral is sustained by the eternal. It is more than braggadocio of the blind faith, haughtiness of the holy, and fury of the fundamentalist.**

parts in faraway Islamic nations, where religious sentiments heat up the illiterate mass faster than a cooking pot on the stove.

Unfortunately that still holds good nearly two million years after men came to earth, when religion had started because they wanted to understand the spirits, which haunted them. The windstorm, the change of night into day, the lightning bolts, light and darkness, the fear of the unknown and inscrutable, created in them an attitude of worship, which is called religion (roughly that is what is claimed by a scholar named Edward Burnett Tylor as origin of religion).

But then something happened in

sists because it is favourable to survival. It holds the family, the tribe and eventually the nation together and enables them to defend themselves against animal and human predators. In his conclusion he said that in future, religion would be replaced by something even more favourable to survival under a different world order.

May be so. May be not. Who knows? Not even the three evangelists from America. But then all we know is that each religion has been around for thousands of years, followed by billions of people all over the world. Islam like Christianity or Buddhism is one of the five great religio-cultural traditions in the

followed with extreme prejudice. There are zealots who wish to take their faith to its logical conclusion, and ignore the fact that even God in whose name they imprecate their madness, didn't wish to destroy other religions in favour of a particular one.

It is hard to believe that Falwell, Robertson and Graham are anyone enlightened than the murderous mullahs who are said to have ordered the killings in New York and Bali. Bigotry starts with utterance of reckless words, which spark contention in the psyche of ominous souls where dark impulses beseech ignition of hatred and horror. May be they didn't realize the full impact of

could allay the fear and concern of an unfathomed life. To say the least, religion is a matter of comfort for those who believe, and others have no business to disturb them.

Robertson and Graham are yet to catch up with that wisdom. Unless they claim themselves to be prophets and messiahs, they know the words of the Christian God so much as the Muslim clergy claims to know the words of Allah. And their arrogance only proves that people can take extreme views of sensitive matters and create havoc.

This is not to say that Falwell, Robertson and Graham have created havoc, although Falwell's comment was followed by a riot in

## The tricky business of gas exploration

NURUDDIN MAHMUD KAMAL

**F**OR the first time, we had two reasonably detailed desk appraisal works on gas reserves and resource potentials of Bangladesh. We can expect to scrutinize them, analyse them and develop them, if we go about the right way. However, the people deplored the drastic decline in exploratory and production well drilling, especially onshore, which had been the trend of the past two decades. "To the extent that policies of industry and government militate against accelerated exploration, particularly drilling, a high percentage of the gas resources of the country is immobilized," they warned.

The geologists are concerned particularly about what is happening because they know better than anyone how difficult it is to find gas. There is no direct method. The risks are immense. Only a constant, vigorous exploration programme can keep supplies of gas flowing and develop new ideas of where to look for within favourable areas. The gas you and I use today, someone had to start looking for decades ago.

Finding a favourable area is just a starter in this world's most expensive gambling game. It is generally accepted that gas comes from the decomposition of marine animals and plants buried under successive layers of mud and silt over the floors of former seas for as long as four to five hundred million years ago. Heat

and pressure changed this organic material to a complex mixture of hydrogen and carbon-oil and gas. Geologists study earth history in search of areas where buried marine, or source, rocks occur. However, oil and gas in the earth migrate. When compaction squeezes them out of source rocks, they travel -- sometimes long distances -- upward, sideward and downward through porous rock beds. Their travel stops when they run into a trap -- a layer of impervious rock, shaped in such a way that it forms a seal, or cap, over the porous rocks. Unable to move further, the oil and gas are imprisoned in porous rocks between the cap rock above and the heavier brines, or fossil seawater, which permeates the rocks below. The tricky business of exploration is how to locate these traps.

In early days, men first found oil traps by drilling where liquid hydrocarbon had migrated to the surface through cracks or fractures. Then they followed oil trends or hunches, used divining rods and consulted fortune-tellers. By the end of First World War in 1945 the infant science of petroleum geology determined that some underground traps, called anticlines, could be detected on the earth's surface where rock strata arched, or inclined in opposite directions firm a ridge, like the roof of a house. By such techniques, almost all of the world's relatively easy-to-find oil was found in the 1930s and the 1940s (in Bangladesh even now). Since then

the most important oil-finding tool is geophysics -- the application of certain physical principles such as magnetic attraction, the pull of gravity, the speed of sound waves, the behaviour of electric currents -- to try to determine the shape of buried rock layers.

Locating a potential trap doesn't mean there is any oil or gas in it. YOU HAVE TO DRILL A HOLE TO FIND OUT. Worldwide, the chances are about one out of seven of finding

by internationally reputed independent professional company. Moulvibazar gas field has been discovered about two years ago but has not yet been formally declared nor has been appraised and certified.

Gas-discovery results in Bangladesh, mainly by the IOCs, in the 1990s, typically demonstrated a hide and seek game. However, there is no denying the fact that the game of exploration remained risky and expensive, reportedly much

more expensive (four to seven time higher in case of the IOCs compared to Petrobangla/BAPEX exploration hunt). Nevertheless, the recent IOC finds are considered significant discoveries. However, what is really alarming is that while consumption is zooming upward, our efforts to find new gas field(s) are declining precipitously.

How did it happen that a nation so much dependent on gas cut its gas exploration efforts in a little over a decade? And also, how could the country's policy makers be so dependent on the IOCs and the PSCs? Perhaps much too much emphasis is being given to foreign oil companies exploration programme while the domestic effort almost withdrawn mysteriously. On the contrary, domestic

expenditure on energy import has been controlled through expanded use of indigenous natural gas. The ratio of gas use and oil import is almost 1:3.1, against an import of 3.3 million tons of oil and oil products gas use is over 9.5 million tons of oil equivalent (toe). That means almost about US\$1.8 billion worth of energy import is saved or the country earns the same amount of foreign exchange through the process of import substitution. The estimated

expenditure or investment over the decade through the IOCs would not exceed US\$ 200 to \$250 million. However, through gold-plating the IOCs investment figure would show a higher number. There is no rationale to believe those IOC figures and most of it is reportedly fall in disputed category. However, dollars don't tell the story -- it is what the dollars find and who is investing them -- that is the heart of the Bangladesh gas exploration effort.

The recent Gas Utilisation Committee (which submitted its report to the Government on 27 August 2002) stated that over a period of 30 years since 1972, around Taka 6000 crore, under various arrangements, has been funded in the gas sector of which approximately Taka 900 crore (i.e., 16 per cent) is equivalent to not

more than US\$ 300 million in today's terms. The bulk of this funding has been on transmission and distribution. The funding for exploration activities has therefore been inadequate for any major breakthrough on the part of Petro-bangla/BAPEX. Despite these constraints, Petrobangla discovered 10 gas fields out of a total discovery of 22 gas fields and one oil well (Ref. Page 4, Committee Report on Utilisation of Natural Gas). The

Gas is being discovered in small and medium accumulations under a bewildering variety of geological conditions, rather than in a relatively few vast deposits such as those in the Middle East, Netherlands, Algeria, Malaysia or Indonesia. Our exploration results illustrate the difference and the necessity for intensive multiple gas search in Bangladesh. The nation's 67 exploration wells since 1908 are insignificant by any world standard. The number wise discovery of one in three exploration wells is promising but the total reserve is again very insignificant. The present status is that the country has only 6.2 trillion cubic feet (TCF) of proved reserve and 5.8 TCF of probable reserve (Ref. Nagorik Committee Report, page 4, 18 November, 2002). Only two IOCs are now operating (who signed PSCs in mid 1990s) in greater Sylhet and off-shore Chittagong, with about 16 per cent participation in gas production and supply in the domestic market. The other ten companies who signed exploration contracts in the 1990s are carefully watching the tug of war between the people and the government regarding export of gas. Some very strange things are happening after submission of the National Gas Committee Reports. First, the government has not yet examined these reports including the Nagorik Committee Report. Second, the state minister for energy continued to admonish the people in respect of export of gas to India for the past

thirteen months. How long such an indecision will continue to overshadow the exploration effort of the nation?

Mr AKM Musharaf Hossain seems to have already created a constipated situation in the energy sector. He only prides himself by making unsolicited statements. He makes no assiduous attempts in reaching the grassroots, especially after facing some vital questions in a recent seminar held on 24<sup>th</sup> November, 2002. The questions are: Whether the government has vetted the Gas Utilisation Report? If yes, the export proposal is out. If no, whether the report should be scrapped and a new committee be set up to review the matter? A friend of mine told me that he would like to write a pamphlet entitled "The Rain Feeling" which may read: "You know how you feel when skies open up and let a couple of inches of good rain come pattering down. It makes you feel good inside -- secure, and happy in the knowledge that the rain means the promise of good things to come. That is how the people in Bangladesh have been made to feel -- welcome as rain -- through the Nagorik Committee Report on 18 November 2002. We like your warm friendliness and willingness to cooperate, and would be happy to be a part of Bangladesh."

Nuruddin Mahmud Kamal is a former government official and a geologist.