

Regional co-operation for international understanding

South Asian perspective



M. M. REZAUL KARIM

CURRENTS AND CROSSCURRENTS

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Rotary International Bangladesh Conference, 10 January, presided over by Chief Justice Mr Justice Moinur Reza Chowdhury. The writer is seated 4th on his right.

ROTARY International was set up by that great soul, Paul Harris, with three of his like-minded friends in 1905, almost a hundred years ago. It was originally contemplated to be a club, but it shortly grew into an institution, nay a movement. The motto of the Rotary, "Service Above Self," was adopted to further the noble cause and extol virtues of mankind – love, compassion and, above all, service to humanity. The seed of love that was sown by Paul Harris, the pioneer of this great movement, has now grown into a century-old giant tree, sheltering and nurturing 1.2 million people all over the world under its cool shady branches.

The theme of the subject that was chosen by the Rotary International this year "Regional Co-operation for International Understanding" is, therefore, so appropriate, both in substance and in timing, that it overwhelms us. Discussing it with reference to "The South Asian Perspective" is also but natural, as it evokes special interests and thoughts of the billion people that inhabit this part of the globe where we reside.

South Asia is a subcontinent. It is composed of diverse religion, caste, creed, language, culture and tradition. Yet, it is a homogeneous whole marked by a natural geographical boundary and a common, though checkered, history ranging back to the time long before the birth of Christ. The unity of its people, however loose may it have been, lies in its diversity. This is a product of history and is accepted as such. To discuss regional co-operation as an instrument of promoting understanding in South Asia has, therefore, to be perceived in that geo-political context.

The end of the two centuries-old British rule in what was called the Indian sub-continent left behind a lingering but deadly legacy of the British Raj. Some of the unresolved issues continue to pose a veritable

and dangerous problem. With

nuclearisation of the two most powerful states in South Asia rendered this danger to be real, closer and more devastating than ever before. Over and above that, their sustained policy to develop more powerful and sophisticated missiles system have been causing fear also to their neighbours by bringing this danger to their door-steps. A nuclear war, if it breaks out, will, therefore, not remain confined within the borders of the two countries, but has the potential of pervading the entire region, if not beyond. Under these circumstances, regional co-operation and promotion of understanding make the task not only difficult but almost a mission impossible.

But, fortunately, there is a silver lining around the dark cloud. Strangely enough, South Asia may be regarded as fortunate in so far as regional co-operation is concerned. A platform already exists for promoting the objective of forging co-

operation in undisputed fields designated from time to time among countries of the region to the mutual benefit of their people. This institution, SAARC or the South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation, was conceived and initiated by the late President Ziaur Rahman of Bangladesh as early as in the late seventies. It took a formal shape in an institutional framework with manifestation of great verve and enthusiasm by leaders of all the seven countries of South Asia in 1984. The deep apprehension of domination of one or more of its members over

others was allayed by incorporating a provision in the SAARC Charter to the effect that all decisions must be taken unanimously.

Yet, the journey of this forum has neither been smooth nor steady due largely to historic disputes leading to armed conflicts between two of its members. The principal obstacles in the way remains to be continued and deep-rooted suspicion and, real

or imaginary, a sense of insecurity. The result is a crisis of confidence, which warrants urgent resolution. The dreamer and the founding fathers had contemplated that the SAARC would ultimately grow in the same way as the neighbouring ASEAN, if not the distant Union of Europe. Both these institutions are shining examples of success stories of regional co-operation as an effective means of not only promoting understanding but also of furthering mutual co-operation and generating friendship. When the ASEAN's success has been confined mostly to economic spheres, Europe's endeavour has gone beyond it and almost succeeded in the creation of the ultimate, a United Europe. The credit finally goes to the people, who had goaded their governments to initiate and undertake measures to attain their cherished objective.

Though several empires covering vast tracts of land had been built throughout the history of Europe,

greater geographical cohesion was found to exist in the South Asian region since the ancient times. Then why have we failed to achieve the progress we had set before us? The purpose of this deliberation is not to assign responsibilities to or blame one country or the other for the slow progress. We should set our sight and aim at identifying the means and direction, which would help achieve our objective. Some quarters argue that governments of some member countries of the SAARC had deliberately thrown spanners in its wheels causing the retarded growth. But happily, on the other hand, they have witnessed vivid demonstration of the desire of the unsuspecting common people of forging not only co-operation but true friendship among peoples of the region.

What measures may, therefore, be taken to realise this popular aspiration? Governments of a few member states have taken some new steps or reinforced the old ones

through formation of sub-regional co-operation. They cite examples of BIMSTEC and the Kunming initiative on the east and the Economic Co-operation Organization on the western flanks of South Asia, incorporating some countries from outside the region. Progress in these spheres, according to political observers, would rejuvenate and reactivate the SAARC and help further its objectives. While sharing thoughts and taking actions in promoting sub-regional co-operation, we must also simultaneously act, slowly but steadily, for the promotion of all-round interests of the people of the region as a whole.

People will, no doubt, support continued dialogue to resolve bilateral disputes between nations and like to seek and exhaust all possible peaceful means to this end. Secondly, both the nuclear powers should, by agreement, stop production of missiles and begin to cut down their nuclear arsenal stage by stage. This will arrest escalation and promote peace, without which there will be no understanding or co-operation, not to speak of friendship among nations.

Finally, in addition to these measures, our objective can be largely accomplished, under the present circumstances, by fostering people to people contact. The enlightened groups of intellectuals, educationists, journalists, cultural groups, traders, industrialists and other interested milieus of the society have thus a significant role to play. They can mould public opinion and create adequate pressure on their governments to adopt the necessary policy and take appropriate measures towards realising their dream.

The civil society will thus form a catalyst for this purpose. Their efforts will help remove suspicion, create confidence and generate sincerity, especially among the relevant governments and political leaders. To conclude, I must say that failures we have endured, but success we will achieve, given goodwill and sincerity of purpose, through relentless efforts and dogged perseverance.

M.M.Rezaul Karim, a former Ambassador, is a member of BNP's Advisory Council. The article is based on his speech delivered at the Annual Conference of Rotary District 3280 Bangladesh on 10 January at Dhaka.

Lest we forget

Surya Sen: The hero of Chittagong uprising

PREM RANJAN DEV

JANUARY 12 was the 69th anniversary of Surya Sen's executions by the British. The history of Indian subcontinent's struggle for freedom will remain incomplete if it leaves unexamined an episode like the Chittagong uprising of 1930. Hence the searching question: what was behind this unique phenomenon? Mere existence of common objective factors of colonial oppression was not enough, had it been so, we would have witnessed similar resistances and similar instances of martyrdom all over India.

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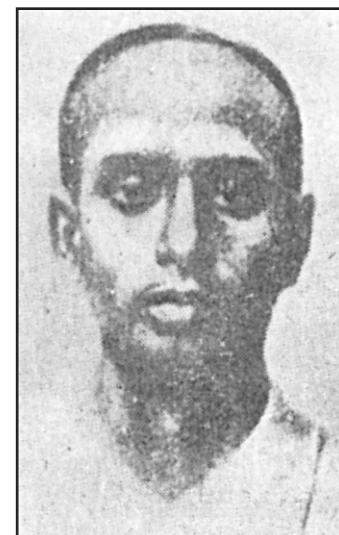
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'Master-da' Surya Sen 1894-1933

radical politics, the aim of which was to liberate motherland by all possible means. By then all his heart searchings were over and he was determined to dedicate his life for the cause of freedom.

To start with, he joined the Chittagong branch of the Indian National Congress and soon became the leading organiser of the local youth movement. His all out participation in the first non-cooperation movement left its mark on the people of Chittagong. He effectively led the movement for the boycott of the official schools and colleges and courts and took a leading part in organising Swadeshi schools known as "national schools" of which he was the most popular "master" hence the endearing name "Master-da". His involvement in the non-cooperation movement was extended to the field of mass movements. He and his lieutenants successfully led the seamen's strike against the Bullock Brothers Co. at the port of Chittagong. He also left mark in organising successfully the Assam Bengal Railway Strike in support of the national movement. These instances would show how misleading it was to brand patriots like Surya Sen and his colleagues as "terrorists" as if their political focus excluded the broader arena of mass action wherever situations were ripe for the same.

In due course, the inevitable difference cropped up between him and the leadership of the official Congress party to whom the constraints of non-violence were inviolable even after the events of Chouri Chora. Surya Sen and his radical colleagues insisted that any colonial movement for liberation to be successful must not be fettered by any inhibiting conditions. His next task was the formation of a radical wing inside the Congress with the help of the like minded patriots -- a highly disciplined and dedicated band of youths.

Surya Sen told in one of his interviews the following words: "Ours is not an easy life. Our primary emphasis is quality. The role of maximum sacrifice and dedication must not be underrated. You need not rush into any decision as to whether you want to join or not. If after serious self-searching there is least hesitation, then it is far better to part company. There will be no ill feeling on our side. It is not our aim to swell our numbers by indiscriminate recruiting. The party must be strong enough to match the challenge facing us: The fight for freedom is going to be a long and exacting struggle. There is only one way. A dedicated band of youths must show the path of all-out organised struggle in place of individual terrorism. Most of us, perhaps will have to die in the process but our sacrifice for such a noble cause will not go in vain. Whoever dreams of a push button revolution on one fine morning on a national scale in a vast country like ours, with varied cultures and languages, is a worthless dreamer."

Worldwide over three million people have been killed in different natural disasters in the last two decades. Among these 90 percent of natural disasters occurred in the developing countries, where vulnerability of communities is too high. Inadequate physical infrastructure, environmental degradation and mismanagement, inappropriate territorial occupation and land use and concentration of populations in disaster sensitive zones are the major causes of increased physical, social and economic vulnerability to disasters. Chronic poverty, social and economic exclusion, rapid urbanisation and population growth, inadequate planning, weak administrative control systems and situations of civil conflict and economic transition directly influence these problems. Disaster loss, therefore, is synonymous with unresolved development problems. In turn, these losses further weaken the development asset base and draw scarce human and financial resources from addressing underlying vulnerabilities to meet humanitarian relief needs. The government and other development organisations should take immediate actions before it is too late. If the present situation continues even for a week, many more people will die in the nearer future. This is humanitarian and sensitive issue and this is the right time when we should stand beside thousands and thousands of poor sufferers in their awful time of need.

Why the major opposition party or the other progressive leftist or democratic parties are also not conspicuous at present, who will answer the question today? But, the fact is, the answer is not very important to those thousands of poor people. At this moment, they badly need warm clothes, blankets and medicines. By their side they need to see the government, NGOs, donors or all the people who talk about the poor people everyday in all seminars, meetings, workshops

Md. Abdul Kader is Executive Director, Samata (an NGO)

Cold wave victims deserve warm response

Government, NGOs and civil society must act immediately

Md. ABDUL KADER AND MAZHARUL ISLAM

BANGLADESH is a poor country with a population of more than 120 million. Almost 50 per cent of the total population are very poor landless people. As a result of remaining under chronic poverty level most of them are not even capable to buy food. Moreover, the country is well known for its '3 D', i.e. death, disease and disaster. CDR of this country is high not only because of disease, malnutrition, lack of food, medical services or others reasons; it is also because of natural disaster which causes hundreds of deaths each year. Sufferings of the thousands of the poor vulnerable multiply during the period of disaster.

In our country, disasters are of two types, natural and social/man made. The poor people are always victims of both. Different types of natural disasters like flood, drought, cyclone, river erosion, cold wave, heat wave etc. hit Bangladesh each year and affect a huge number of people, especially those living in the charland and remote areas. At present, a severe cold wave since December 2002, is sweeping over northern India, Bangladesh and Nepal. This cold wave with cloudy sky and lowest temperature of this decade has almost paralysed the country; life has come to a standstill, cities and the countryside are enveloped by thick fog. The meteorological department says the cold wave may continue till the end of this month.

During the period, the temperature of the country oscillated between 6 to 10 degree Celsius. In Joypurhat, local Agricultural Extension Department (AED) recorded minimum temperature of 3 degree Celsius on 30 December 2002. National dailies reported 77 deaths in a single day. No official death toll has been released but through media we come to know that more than 400 deaths have occurred during the last two weeks. Those who died were mostly elderly, infant and ailing persons. Diseases like Pneumonia, Diarrhoea, Asthma and other winter complications are emerging; about fifty thousand poor patients with pneumonia, diarrhoea and respiratory complications got admitted to different hospitals. This has caused sudden scarcity of medicine and warm clothes. Price of warm clothes has risen 2 or 3 times than before. Price of rice has short up by 3 to 4 taka per kilogram. Communication by water and land routes has been disrupted. Poor people are desperately trying to protect themselves by rucksack and hessian. Those living by the river

side or in char lands are the most vulnerable. The situation is most painful for the landless and less homeless, marginal farmers, labourers, rickshaw pullers and others who cannot afford to buy any warm clothes. For warm clothes and other necessary support, the poor people of Rangpur surrounded the DC office last month. Due to thick fog and severe cold, potato and seedlings of Iri-Boro are being damaged in many places of the country.

Let's see what our government is doing during this disaster situation. With the assistance of UNDP and UNICEF, Bangladesh government has a disaster management plan, which has two major objectives, a) Increase awareness at all levels of society concerning the practical ways of reducing disaster risks and losses and b) Strengthen national institutional capacity for disaster management committees at District, Upazila and Union levels. Our government has taken a 'Disaster Management Strategy', which is operated through enhancing the national disaster management capacity to address the various aspects of planning which includes prevention/mitigation, preparedness, response, recovery and development (rehabilitation and recovery) activities. The GoB has taken the following significant steps during the last few years for building up institutional capacity from the national to the village level: