

Saarc summitry on an auspicious note

No looking back now

THE prelude to the 12th Saarc summit has been redolent with a kind of positivism we had sorely missed in the past runs-up to the on-going, off-going regional summitry exercises. This should go down as a break-through for the Saarc process hitherto stalemated at the highest political level owing basically to sudden spurts in the differences between India and Pakistan. That the Saarc summit is being held for the first time in two years is itself an achievement.

But the ambience for the better has not come about in a day. The processive outcome should guarantee its sustenance. The signs of thawing relations between Islamabad and New Delhi have been widely visible through the restorative process encompassing their diplomatic, communication and trade links snapped since the bombing of Indian parliament some two years ago. Auspiciously, just a few days ago, air flights have been resumed between Lahore and New Delhi raising the prospect for the surface communication links to be fully restored.

Fundamentally, the sea-change in the outlook of the two major players in the Saarc forum viz. India and Pakistan has been the most heartening development insofar as carrying forward the regional cooperation process goes. We have always said that the right kind of political will needs to be mustered between India and Pakistan to impact positively on the future of Saarc. And with them gone nuclear, it's very much a composite question of arms race, intra-regional security and siphoning off of huge potential resources that could go into developing starving social sectors in the poverty-stricken South Asian countries. Ideally, however, the Saarc would attain maturity when the summit will be held at regular intervals without being held ransom to the vagaries of relations between India and Pakistan.

So, the summit begins on a historic note in a material, rather than a rhetoric sense of the phrase. And what rhymes with this tenor is the fact that agreements on free trade, terrorism and a social charter reached at the foreign ministers' level are on the summit agenda for adoption in Islamabad Declaration. There better not be any looking back.

Countrywide shutdown

We condemn it, but the opposition must be given due respect and space

THE main opposition Awami League enforced a dawn-to-dusk hartal across the country yesterday, amid fears that negative politics might once again begin to debilitate the country's wobbly economy which comes under tremendous pressure when a full day is lost. Another concomitant ill of such shutdown is disruption of life in every possible way.

It is indeed a sad truth that the AL could find no alternative to hartal to draw public attention to its grievances, which range from killing of its activists to suppression of its democratic rights. The points raised by the party are serious enough to send worrying signals. But the AL is not paying due attention to the democratic rights of the people who are totally disinterested in any negative move like hartal. Hartal is a punishment that is inflicted upon citizens by political parties pursuing their own agenda and spontaneous response to such calls is clearly a thing of the past.

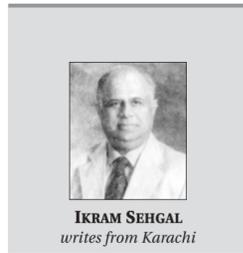
But the parties show no signs of being affected by what people are thinking; nor are they concerned about the economy which takes a lethal blow with a day lost for no good reason.

So a hartal has very little in it that could arouse any sympathy for its purveyors. It does put some kind of psychological pressure on the ruling party eager not to give the opposition any space anywhere. But the opposition should carefully weigh whether this pressure is worth exerting when the nation suffers huge losses.

While we condemn the opposition for imposing hartal, at the same time we condemn government's attitude towards the opposition which is both oppressive and exclusionary. The ruling party must also go for some serious introspection. For example, the AL is blamed for boycotting parliament -- an accusation that is hard to refute. But as and when it did, it was neither given due respect nor opportunity to actively participate in its workings. We don't yet know why the leader of the opposition was not given permission to pay her due respects in the state mourning for the dead peacekeepers, despite her willingness to be present there. We consider the move as BNP's using the armed forces for its partisan politics. The army should not have been used in this manner.

The move was ill-advised and indicative of a highly rigid position that the ruling party has adopted vis-à-vis the opposition. A sensible opposition pre-supposes a sensible government.

Whither South Asia?



IKRAM SEHGAL
writes from Karachi

ALL roads did not lead to Rome! For nearly three centuries till Portuguese Vasco de Gama rounded the Cape Horn to fulfil the dream of the European monarchies there was a mad rush by Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, English, French sailors, etc to somehow discover a sea-route to the riches of India and China. Christopher Columbus did not set out to discover America, that was an accident of history as he vainly explored an alternative route. "Indians" were discovered in North and South America in the 16th century because the seafarers generally believed that they had reached South Asia.

South Asia was rich, so rich that as far back as 325 BC even Alexander the Great reached the Punjab plains before sickness, casualties and a simmering revolt by his men at the prospect of "black magic" of India made him abandon his plans. Invaders came in waves on the land route, some to simply raid and spirit the riches away, some stayed to rule and exploit the regional wealth. The last great sea incursion was a creeping invasion, the British came as traders, stayed to become absolute rulers and left only when the Second World War depleted their strength and will to continue their rule. South Asia was a net exporter of foodgrains, textiles,

spices, timber, etc, never importing foodgrains or textiles.

The British departed in 1947 leaving us enough reason to keep fighting for over the last 50 years, South Asia was well on the way to becoming a basket-case in place of the bread-basket it once was. The Sultan of Constantinople would get the bulk of his warships made from Chittagong teak on the islands of Hatiya and Sandwip. Until the British cut off their hands to prevent market competition to Manchester, the weavers of Bengal were

rivers course through the most fertile delta lands in the world but the rivers do not bind the people together as is a must. The only shortcut to prosperity in South Asia runs through the domain of peace. We are South Asians not only in the geographical context, cultural heritages bind us together. When we are together as individuals and groups, religion does not keep us apart. While keeping our identities and beliefs sacrosanct, why can't we imbibe the same toleration that was the hallmark of the great Moghul Emperor Akbar, who

prosperity that our people deserve. Whatever our station in life and each one of us is a leader in his and her own right, it is the leadership we give to our various constituencies that will decide the future of our people. The destiny of South Asia lies in the minds of those who not only foster this vision but continue to believe in it, if there is a will there is a way.

South Asia has the most complementary economy for any region in the world, it has been historically so and has continued with the

a tremendous lead, can the other South Asian countries with similar academic bent be far behind?

The core dispute of Kashmir has to be resolved, done in such a way that satisfies all the claimants. Even before engaging in an exercise of a final solution, an interim arrangement can convert this dispute from a negative factor to a positive exercise in searching for lasting amity in South Asia. For those who desire South Asia as an economic entity let the model be Kashmir as one economic unit. While main-

travel passes to all Kashmiris living in Azad Kashmir and orange passes to all Kashmiris living in Indian-held Kashmir to visit any area within Kashmir, (6) free movement of goods and commodities meant for Kashmir only without any tariff across the LOC, (9) commerce to be fuelled by a common South Asian Rupiah, valid for the moment only in Kashmir, if this works in Kashmir it can be extended in all South Asia.

If peace in Kashmir persists, the vision of one South Asia as an economic unit can become a reality. My father was a Punjabi, a soldier from Sialkot and my mother a Bengali from a family of feudals (and politicians) in what is now Bangladesh. I was born in Bihar in 1946 when my father was posted there. I hate discrimination of any kind, especially on the basis of race and religion. Can I forget that my (late) sister and I were Punjabis in East Pakistan and Bengalis in the west? And that my "Bihari" birthplace also got the negative attention it did not deserve even much later? And that even while loving Pakistan it was (and is still) considered treason to love both?

Rising above ethnicity and sect, one can think "South Asian" rather than pursue only nationalistic objectives, one can extend a hand in lasting friendship, but one's caution in apprehending that this hand could be cut off should be excused. The question is simple, shall we proceed to destroy each other many times over with nuclear bombs or do we have the courage to harness and combine the potential that created these devices in the first place to usher in an era of lasting peace and prosperity for our people? Whither South Asia?

Ikrām Sehgal, a former Major of Pakistan Army, is a political analyst and columnist.

AS I SEE IT

Rising above ethnicity and sect, one can think "South Asian" rather than pursue only nationalistic objectives, one can extend a hand in lasting friendship, but one's caution in apprehending that this hand could be cut off should be excused. The question is simple, shall we proceed to destroy each other many times over with nuclear bombs or do we have the courage to harness and combine the potential that created these devices in the first place to usher in an era of lasting peace and prosperity for our people?

major exporters of fine quality hand-woven textiles, mainly Muslim.

The first ever famine in the history of the sub-continent only came (in Bengal) in the late 1760s, not many years after Clive defeated Sirajuddaulah at Plassey. It also brought the first real seeds of Hindu-Muslim friction, the money-lenders of Calcutta were encouraged by the British to give loans at exorbitant rates to Muslim traders and land owners impoverished by the famine, when these could not be repaid the grounds for sustained conflict were set. The two communities had lived together, barring the aberrations of some obstinate rulers, in some harmony for over a thousand years.

The Himalayan-fed magnificent

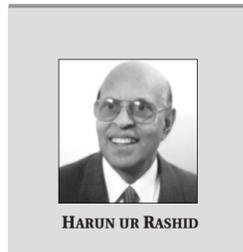
bound the races and ethnicities together in one giant cauldron of humanity? Only trust and mutual respect can foster lasting understanding. Look at the individuals and groups of Indians coming to Pakistan and reciprocally the Pakistanis traveling to India, both are overwhelmed with the warmth and hospitality, and yet the guns do keep on blazing frequently because that affinity and friendship is lost in hostility and repression that is the province of a myopic minority with a vested interest to sustain their reign by keeping conflict going.

Without solving the festering problems exacerbating the relationships between the communities, there is no hope for amity and peace, and unless we have peace there is even less hope for the economic emancipation and

advent of modern machinery and equipment. Historically South Asia has exported both ideas and material. This is one of the few regions in the world that can, both as individual nations and as a community of nations, feed and clothe itself and still have surpluses leftover for export. This third world region is self-sufficient in medicine, we export doctors and engineers, even teachers and professors, etc. to the developed world. Two of our countries are nuclear powers, we have enough oil and gas to run our industries, transportation and have enough energy left over for our homes. Our peoples have boundless energy and the human skill inherent is confirmed by the numbers of our migrant workers successfully resident abroad. In IT skills (the south of) India has taken

taining the legal status quo of our respective claims, the following steps can be taken for an interim period of time, say three years, viz (1) the laws of India and Pakistan to continue apply respectively on either side of the LOC, (2) a joint commission be established to meet periodically to discuss outstanding issues and function as a super-government over the two State entities, (3) extend the ceasefire by pulling back the artillery to peacetime locations (4) stage withdrawal of troops in direct army-to-army contact, (5) militant activity to be curbed ruthlessly, a joint operations centre established for this purpose to work under the joint commission, (6) local bodies elections to be held with district governments answerable directly to the joint commission, (7) green

Democracy and governance



HARUN UR RASHID

WHATEVER successes Bangladesh has achieved in the economic sector, are not evenly spread among the entire community. Land reforms were not seriously addressed as was done in West Bengal in the late 70s. There are millions of landless peasants in the country and each year the number has been growing. They are helpless, weak and vulnerable to whims of landlords.

Furthermore, over the years a gross inequality between the rich and poor within the country has characterised the community. It is reported that the richest 10% per cent of the population controls, according to the latest Bangladesh Economic Survey (2003), 40.72% per cent of national income while the poorest 10% per cent of the population has access only to 1.84% per cent of national income. I am tempted to quote what the 19th century French political writer Alexis De Tocqueville said: "In the US, nothing struck me more forcibly than the general equality of condition of people...this quality of condition is the fundamental fact from which all others seem to be derived."

Inequality of income is an outcome of the prevailing economic system where disproportionate national wealth is being allotted to concentrate in a few, through "market-economy" based on unbridled capitalism. It seems that poor people have been regarded as a separate entity and not a part of an inter-connected community and policies have overlooked suffering and misery of majority of the population. Placing too much confidence in the "trickle-down-effect" of economic growth, the planners appear to ignore in implementing a fairer distribution of national income among people. The dynamics in moving towards inequality in society appear to be steadily becoming stronger.

Inequality within the country has severely impacted on

Bangladeshi society. The land and order situation coupled with increasing deprivation in the poorer section of the community has produced alarming signs of social stress. For other sections of the community despite the attempts of the law-enforcing agencies to curb violence in society, there appears to be no relief. The level of insecurity in the community is amply demonstrated by the headlines of daily newspapers.

It seems that there has been a perceptible gap between election promises and actual performance

line of democracy lies in the political institutions being "the representative of the entire people" as an English philosopher and economist John Stuart Mill (1806-73) viewed it. Democracy is a set of values determined with the consensus of the community. Tolerance and compromise are two essential attributes of democracy.

Democracy is the rule of the majority where the minority has the right to criticize the ruling party or coalition of parties. However, tyrannical majority and recalcitrant minority, according to an

several factional parties. For instance, there are three Jatiya Parties (JP) in the country.

Second, party stalwarts do not encourage criticisms, even positive. In the absence of any meaningful internal democracy within the party, the so-called "survival" politics seems to have become the end game of many of the Members of Parliament. It is relevant to this day what Edmund Burke said in 1774 to his Bristol constituency: "What sort of reason is that in which, the determination precedes the discussion; in which one set of

patory in character. Mere holding of periodic elections is not democracy.

One fact that merits special attention is that free media is a sine qua non for democracy. Media plays a pivotal role in appraising the electorate with dispassionate views on important national issues and exposes abuse or misuse of power of authority. Media is like a "mirror" where the government of the day can see its performance. Appropriate legislation such as Freedom of Information Act will energise media to undertake inves-

security of a person in all situations was one of the crucial tests of good governance.

Another criterion for good governance is that poorest of the poor enjoy the barest acceptable standard of education, shelter, primary health care and nutrition. Furthermore sound economic policy is a part of good governance. It means the maximum utilization of material and human resources in the country so as to ensure a fairer distribution of national income among all sections of people. The wealth of the nation is distributed in such a way that social justice is met through wide and equitable taxation base.

It is reported that some 325 persons from the richest 10% per cent have defaulted bank loans in the amount of Tk.10,126 crore that constitute one fifth of our national budget for the 2003-04 financial year and if it is true, it reflects badly on corporate governance that in turn passes the "buck" to government of the day. Bad governance is to be viewed as an aberration of standard norms and unethical conduct of agencies and authorities of governments.

Democracy and good governance are two sides of the same coin. To achieve the goal leaders and people of the country need self-discipline, political ethics and strong will. It is no use blaming only the government of the day. Government is not something that is imposed on us by an external power and it reflects by and large choice of the population.

To strengthen democracy is not only the responsibility of the State, but also of all citizens. Article 21.1 of the Bangladesh Constitution stipulates: "It is the duty of every citizen to observe the Constitution and the laws, to maintain discipline, to perform public duties and protect public property." We must ask ourselves: Do we abide by this constitutional obligation in our everyday life?

All powers belong to people and governments exercise powers on behalf of people (Article 7 of the Constitution). People have the power to elect or reject a government after every five years. People of all sections must be conscious of their responsibility to ensure that democratic traditions are promoted and evils of endemic corruption, patronisation, and nepotism are eliminated. Only then we will be able to be on the path of progress and prosperity.

The author is former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

BOTTOM LINE

Democracy is the rule of the majority where the minority has the right to criticize the ruling party or coalition of parties. However, tyrannical majority and recalcitrant minority, according to an eminent constitutional expert Sir Ivor Jennings, are the enemies of democracy.

among political parties while they are in power. This appears to have created a credibility gap between the existing major political parties and the electorate. A large section of community is disenfranchised with political slogans and manifestos.

On October 7, 2003, Germany-based Transparency International ranked Bangladesh as the "most corrupt country" out of 133 countries in 2003 and the country maintained this position in 2001 and 2002. Many may differ on the criteria in assessing corruption in the country. However, corruption and abuse of power hit hard common people when they seek assistance from governmental service providers for basic services. It is again the perception that counts in international arena including among the international institutions that provide aid/loans to Bangladesh.

For the last 12 years, we have been fortunate enough to have had democratically elected governments and we witnessed peaceful transfer of power in 1996 and 2001 through elections conducted by non-party Care-Taker governments. However policies of elected governments have not led to greater equity and social cohesion including removal of gender equality in society.

Democracy and pitfall

Democratic traditions are created in the light of history, national character, state of economic development and the diversity or homogeneity of population. The bottom

eminent constitutional expert Sir Ivor Jennings, are the enemies of democracy.

Bengalis are proud of their independent spirit and even during the British colonial rule the first phase of independence movement started from Bengal in 1857. In Bangladesh there are no feudal lords and there is no bar to social mobility from one ladder to the other. History has shown that Bengalis in general do not tolerate authoritarianism and believe in equality of rights. All these attributes of Bengali character were assumed to be the right environment to promote democracy in the country.

However it appears that the above assumption has been misplaced. Parliamentary democracy has not been working well in the country. This form of government is nothing new and had been in vogue since 1947 in this land, which now constitutes Bangladesh. Where did it go wrong? It seems democratic traditions have failed because of the following reasons among others:

First, political parties are not democratic in their internal structure. There is hardly any genuine process for elections within the party by rank and file members. The role of many of the members of the party has been marginalised and as a result they feel disgruntled within the party. There is a view that political parties have converted into simply leader-based party. When the leader is discredited or disappears, the party is either dismantled or split into

men deliberate and another decide; and where those who form the conclusion are perhaps three hundred miles distant from those who hear arguments?"

Third, an unhealthy political environment and high election-costs appear to discourage many people, in particular, professional people, to get involved in politics. One needs to spend a few crores (millions) in elections and many people cannot afford it. It is reported that majority of MPs are drawn from business section because only they can afford to run elections with "big money". The lack of diversity of professions and callings among MPs appears to have a negative impact on parliamentary democracy.

Fourth, parliamentary system of government has been termed by the British MP Tony Benn in 1980 as a "Prime Ministerial" government. The vastly growing powers of the executive branch of the state have diminished the functions and stature of Parliament. In addition to it, it appears that most MPs do not seem to be empowered to take policy decisions. It is the party stalwarts who often make decisions and MPs routinely abide by them.

Finally, democracy cannot thrive in communities, majority of whom are poor. Poverty constitutes a great threat to democracy. Socio-economic conditions must be congenial to promotion of democracy. Economic and social policies are like breathing in and out and they go together. Democracy has to be inclusive and partici-

patory in character. Mere holding of periodic elections is not democracy.

One fact that merits special attention is that free media is a sine qua non for democracy. Media plays a pivotal role in appraising the electorate with dispassionate views on important national issues and exposes abuse or misuse of power of authority. Media is like a "mirror" where the government of the day can see its performance. Appropriate legislation such as Freedom of Information Act will energise media to undertake inves-

igative reports on lack of transparency and accountability of decisions or actions of the government of the day.

Good Governance: What does it mean?

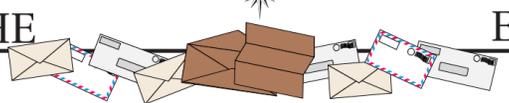
Democracy is inter-linked with good governance. It brings to mind what the 18th century English poet Alexander Pope wrote:

"About forms of government let fools contest; The government best administered is the best."

In the above couplet, I would argue that the poet captured the essence of good governance. Good governance is an umbrella concept. Good governance consists of certain well-known attributes, such as transparency, accountability, efficiency and prompt delivery of governmental basic services without being subject to corrupt means or abuse of power. As the Sun cannot be separated from sunshine, so also, the agencies of government or local authorities cannot be separated from good governance.

The next question arises: how do we judge good governance? Indian political leader Karan Singh (son of the former Maharaja of Kashmir) once said that one simple way to judge good governance in the country was whether a young woman would be able to walk or travel alone after dark from one end of the city/town to other without being harassed or insulted or molested. Although it may not be an accurate test, what he meant was that the existence of personal

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR



Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

Our gas export

It appears that our political leaders of both the ruling and opposition parties are in a state of vacillation as far as making any policy on our natural gas is concerned.

They hold conflicting views on domestic consumption and export of gas. When the Awami League is in power, the BNP opposes export and when the BNP is in power the Awami League does the same.

There is no clear-cut, definite and congenial policy on export of our gas. Let us set aside the question of gas export. Why don't we use our natural gas to meet our ever growing demand at home?

Why are we stagnated? In a roundtable organised by Rajshahi housewives, the partici-

pants said the Rajshahi region was not getting gas due to lack of sincerity of the politicians. They criticised the government for its "eagerness" to export gas, rather than taking initiative to supply gas to every corner of the country.

It may be recalled that existing reserves of gas in our country is only 15.4 TCF which would be exhausted within 12-14 years.

Why don't we fulfil our own requirements first and then think about export of gas after discovering more gas fields and more reserves which is estimated at 40 TCF?

Has not the 'to be or not to be policy' of our political leaders lured foreigners to poke their noses into our internal affairs?

We are surprised to learn the

Indian Prime Minister, AB Vajpayee, saying, "Bangladesh has promising reserves of natural gas and India is the only viable buyer. There is obvious scope for win-win arrangements." Why the US Ambassador to Bangladesh goes on saying, "Your government will take the decision on export of gas. Who am I to press the government?"

These edges of sarcasm are apt to lacerate the feelings of every Bangladeshi.

Instead of living in a hanging position, let us all take a bold and final decision to be duly endorsed by the ruling and opposition MPs not to export our natural gas for the next fifty years.

OH Kabir
6, Hare Street, Wari, Dhaka-1203

America's double standard

I would like to thank Dr Fakhruddin Ahmed for his brilliant analysis on "The New York Times editorial unfairly smears Bangladesh". At the same time, my thanks to Mr Mahfuz Anam for publishing this critique in the DS.

This piece of writing proved very clearly that we have been living under the hypocritical leadership of the lone superpower. In the post liberation era of Bangladesh, no American ambassador condemned the country in such a language, as American newspapers are doing these days. Administratively, we are termed 'a moderate Muslim country' by the American foreign office.

So, what are the reasons behind

the double standard manifestations? Well, that is not perhaps altogether unexpected from a country which can attack others without any valid ground. Our recent 'image crisis' is the trump card in the hands of the Americans, and elements of this card are 'Muslim extremism', 'corruption', 'risks of journalism' and so on. The people in this country know about these negatives, as we are true citizens. So, nobody should talk about these evils, rather they can suggest the way out.

As America will not suggest any remedy, it is to be seen as the true embodiment of perfect selfishness.

Mahfuz Masum
Dept. of English
University of Dhaka

No time like the past

Malcolm Beith's piece on the revisit to Burma (cannot be Myanmar, as there is no chance) was nostalgic, as I recalled my school days in Bhola (then in Bengal of British India, now in Bangladesh) where I was in the school during the early 1940s. My Rangoon-born cousin was in class ten. Later in life he married a British Indian Muslim lass also born in Rangoon. During the subsequent war years he was a railway guard in Chittagong sector when the Japanese had captured BURMA and were nosing near the eastern borders with India.

In those Empire days, India and Burma were close together as far as communication and transport were concerned and a large community of Indian citizens settled in

Burma for trade and business, this year (2003) in metropolis Dhaka, I purchased a "Burmese" lunge (loincloth) from a footpath hawk for Taka 60. Smooth as Burmese silk, but obviously synthetic.

Beith evokes the stoppage of time in the Burmese small town in 2003 in a way which is etched in memory. It reminds me that here in Bangladesh, time has sort of stopped since the war of liberation in 1971, as we are not moving forward, in three decades, towards development and progress in the way anticipated and expected by the millions who suffered the pangs of the struggle. Old style politics has no time clock; and the rich background of the leaders somehow cannot be channelled in a way which could symbolise national consensus. The new

nation's teething troubles never tend to cease. We are not growing up!

Here in a cramped, overcrowded metropolis Dhaka, we are grappling with time in micro units, year by year, or in five-year periods of general elections. The long-range vision is brushed aside for ad hoc consolidations. The coming years (2004-5) appear to be crucial, as the politicians face the suppressed wrath of the suffering masses, who have no security anywhere at any level.

That is the problem with Father Time--it has to move in a certain way at a certain rate, otherwise problems are created indefinitely.

AZ
Dhaka