

Asian political unity

How promising is the initiative?



M. M. REZAUL KARIM

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their noble but high ambition must give way to pragmatism so that their march to the desired goal may be slow but must be steady. The Beijing Declaration laid emphasis on the need for integration of the political goals and discerning the common elements of a community of nations of great diversity. The prime purpose was to achieve common good of a heterogeneous people of a homogenous land.

The other objective was to provide

CURRENTS AND CROSSCURRENTS

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The conference was the brain-child of the Speaker of the Philippines parliament, Jose Valencia. It has been attended so far by a large number of Heads of State, Heads of Government and senior politicians from Asia. Notables were Presidents of the Philippines, Indonesia, Cambodia and China; Prime Ministers of Thailand, Malaysia and Laos; former Prime Ministers of Pakistan and Bangladesh; heads of political parties; numerous ministers and a host of other politicians from all corners of the Asian continent. Some parties from Australia and a few other European countries were represented as observers. Arab countries, except for a few, were conspicuous by their absence.

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to promote stable development of state to state relations through positive contacts and cooperation. President Valencia of the 15-member Steering Committee of which Bangladesh became a need for removing the scourge of poverty, illiteracy and disease. He lauded the micro-credit programmes pursued by many Asian nations. President of the Philippines Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo spoke of the upcoming economic revolution of Asia and suggested government subsidies to political parties in order to reduce corruption in many countries. It may be recalled that political parties of Australia, Japan, Thailand and many countries of Europe and America enjoy these facilities.

The most ambitious Asian leader present, Prime Minister Thaksin Sinawatra, dwelt on the benefits of Globalisation and underlined the importance of the ACD as an economic adjunct to ICAPP, which aims mainly to promote the political objectives of the people of Asia. But none could ignore the awakening of the sleeping tiger of Asia, the host country, which is, according to political pundits, would rival the superpower before the end of the century. Almost all speakers commended the phenomenal two-digit growth of China which is worthy of emulation by others as a model of economic success. The hosts, despite characteristic humility, are not quite oblivious of that scenario. It was, therefore, no wonder that Secretary General of the CPC and President of China, Hu Jintao, and all the members of the Steering Committee of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the host Communist Party of China were present at the main function of the conference. It was a rare display of the totality of the Chinese leadership assembled on one occasion and an unprecedented honour for the conference participants.

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REPRESENTATIVES of 81 political parties from 35 Asian countries attended a 3-day well-organised and colourful conference in Beijing from 3 to 5 September last. This was the third such conference held for the same purpose since the inaugural conference took place in September 2000 in Manila. The second conference was held in Bangkok in 2002.

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Census figures and BJP's anti-minorityism

ASGHAR ALI ENGINEER

HE Government of India has at last made public the population figures of 2001 census after delay of several years. Now we know that this was delayed by the BJP-led government on account of Lok Sabha elections. Whatever the reason the population figures and particularly the growth of Muslim population has caused great deal of controversy as expected.

The census commissioner Mr. Banthia either deliberately or otherwise caused sensation by not disclosing that the Muslim population figures do not take into account the fact that there was no census in Assam in 1981 and in Kashmir in 1991 due to ethnic turmoil. Had this been disclosed the Sangh Parivar would not have had another chance at Muslim bashing. Since the BJP does not want to miss any chance to bash Indian Muslims and moreover there are elections in Maharashtra, it jumped at this 'opportunity' to create anti-Muslim feelings. The BJP has yet to overcome the shock of its defeat in Lok Sabha elections.

Mr. Venkaiah Naidu, the BJP president immediately issued a statement condemning an usual growth of Muslim population. He said that differential growth rates for Hindu and Muslim populations in India are a matter of grave concern for those bothered about India's unity and integrity. The "imbalance", he suggested, raises "serious questions of a long term nature" when seen in connection with the phenomenon of Bangladeshi infiltrators. The fact was that both the growth of Hindu and Muslim population has slowed down which is a welcome sign. Apart from other reasons the reason for differential rate of growth is that of several of the communities like Karpurathis, Prannathis, Ramkrishna Mission followers etc. who refuse to enlist themselves as Hindus in the census report but otherwise perceived as Hindus. This can make quite a difference as far as differential growth of population is concerned.

BJP's anti-Muslim feelings are so strong that they had no patience even to wait for a day to find out the truth of population figures and the goof up by the census commissioner. Also without any verification whatsoever, he invoked their another pet issue of Bangladeshi infiltrators. The fact was that both the growth of Hindu and Muslim population has slowed down which is a welcome sign. Apart from other reasons the reason for differential rate of growth is that of several of the communities like Karpurathis, Prannathis, Ramkrishna Mission followers etc. who refuse to enlist themselves as Hindus in the census report but otherwise perceived as Hindus. This can make quite a difference as far as differential growth of population is concerned.

It is also not generally known that in some states, according to 1988 data the family planning rate among Muslims is higher than that of Hindus as the literacy rate among Muslim women and their economic status is better than their Hindu counterpart. Thus in 15 states the family planning among Muslims is higher than that of Hindus in U.P. In U.P. the family planning figures among Hindus was, according to statistics compiled in 1988, lesser than those of Muslims in 15 states.

In U.P. the acceptors of family planning among Hindus in Bihar and Rajasthan are 29.4, 32.6 and 30.9 percent respectively. Among Muslims, on the other hand, acceptors of

family planning were Kerala (64.4%), Andhra Pradesh (51.1%), Chandigarh (35.8%), Delhi (53.8%), Goa (46.1%), Gujarat (49%), Jammu and Kashmir (35%), Karnataka (34.4%), Madhya Pradesh (39.6%), Maharashtra (45.8%), N. E. States (33%), Orissa (44%), Pondicherry (77%), Tamil Nadu (56.6%) and West Bengal (42.2%). Of course in U.P. and Bihar the family planning acceptance among Muslims is as low as 18.1 and 14. percent respectively.

Thus it can be seen that religion is not the only criterion as the Sangh Parivar thinks. There are several other factors which impinge on acceptance or otherwise of family planning. Had religion been the only factor than Muslims in the 15 states as mentioned above, would not have accepted family planning in larger proportion than that of Hindus.

Also Bangladesh and Iran which are Muslim countries would not

Board has declared its intention to promote family planning among Muslims on the pattern of Iran which has reached the goal of zero growth in population.

In view of all this evidence it is difficult to maintain that Islam categorically opposes family planning. It is true that there are different opinions and some 'ulama oppose family planning' particularly those rooted in old tradition and closer to poorer and illiterate Muslims. This should also be noted that religious teaching, even if opposed to family planning, is not the only consideration in human behaviour. Human behaviour is too complex to be reduced only to religious teachings.

In fact religious teaching may be only one among many other considerations, particularly of socio-economic nature. Economic and educational factors play an important role in fertility behaviour, among others. That is why in states like Pondicherry and Kerala where

standing the dynamics of population growth in any community and for devising remedial measures. Communalists, more often than not, always bring religion into focus ignoring very vital factors as their primary obsession is with denunciation of a religious community. The BJP better take these factors into account if they really care for the country rather than the narrow interests of a section of the majority community.

The literacy rate among the Muslims according to the census figures is lowest on all India level i.e. around 59.1 per cent whereas among Hindus it is 65.1 per cent for those above 7 years of age. The gap of course is only of 6 per cent, not too wide. In fact matter is more complex than it appears. As in case of family planning the rate of literacy among Muslims in 15 states and Union Territories is more than 70 per cent. It is also to be noted that in Jharkhand, Orissa, Chandigarh, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Daman and Diu, Dadra and Nagar Haveli, Tamil Nadu, Pondicherry and Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Muslims are doing better than Hindus. In Chattisgarh, the Muslims are ahead by 17 percentage points.

All these facts have to be taken into account. Like that of family planning this myth also needs to be shattered that Muslims do not take to modern secular education per se. There is increasing trend among Muslims both for family planning and for modern secular education. One should not take static view of situation as many scholars do and particularly those who are inclined to the Sangh Parivar. In secular India Muslims, despite many difficulties, also have greater opportunities as there are lesser constraints and more freedom from orthodox point of view.

Post-Babri demolition riots Muslim outlook has changed greatly and they have realised that emotional issues and confrontation politics will take them nowhere and it is only modern education and economic progress which will ensure better future for them. Whatever figures are available point to the fact that trend for modern education is progressively increasing. What lacks are economic means rather than any traditional obstacle for modern education. One has to work hard to provide such opportunities to poor Muslims. Partly it is for the government and partly for Muslim leadership to create opportunities for education and economic uplift of Muslims.

And the RSS propaganda that Muslims will overtake Hindus by 2050 should be dismissed with the contempt it deserves. No serious demographer will buy it.

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standing the dynamics of population growth in any community and for devising remedial measures. Communalists, more often than not, always bring religion into focus ignoring very vital factors as their primary obsession is with denunciation of a religious community. The BJP better take these factors into account if they really care for the country rather than the narrow interests of a section of the majority community.

have taken lead in making family planning much greater success than that of India. In Bangla Desh the rate of growth of population has come down from 6.1 in 1980 to 2.9 percent. India's fertility rate declines in the same period from 5.0 to 2.9 percent. Thus Bangladesh Muslims have reduced fertility much faster than that of Hindus in India. In Iran the fertility rate is just two per woman amounting to zero population growth.

It is not correct to say that Islam comes in the way of family planning. There is no clear injunction in the Qur'an against family planning. The Holy Prophet himself permitted what is called 'azl' i.e. coitus interruptus which was the only method then known for prevention of conception. Imam Ghazzali, a great Islamic thinker of 12th century has even permitted abortion up to third month (before life begins in the foetus according to the Qur'an) in case if mother's health or life is in danger.

Similarly Maulana Abdulaziz, an Islamic scholar of 18th century India and son of celebrated Islamic thinker Shah Waliullah also permitted 'azl and abortion on similar grounds. The grand Mufti of al-Azhar in Egypt Shaltut bin Shaltut also approved of family planning. Imam Shafii while commenting on the verse 4:3 of the Qur'an recommends small family as large family is likely to become burden on man. And now even Muslim Personal Law

female literacy rate among Muslims is higher and women are more independent, family planning acceptance is much higher compared to other states where female literacy rate is comparatively low among Muslims.

There are other factors as well like widow re-marriage. This has been acknowledged by demographers. Also, male-female ratio among Muslims is comparatively higher i.e. there are 936 female per thousand compared to 931 female per thousand male among Hindus. And among children up to 6 this ratio is 950 girls per thousand boys among Muslims and only 925 for Hindus. Mr. Swaminathan S. Anklesaria Aiyar explains it thus: "Female infanticide and foeticide reduces population indirectly as well as directly. Even after contraception lowers the total fertility rate (lifetime births per woman), population growth can be rapid for two decades because of what demographers call population momentum: future mothers have already been born. But female infanticide and foeticide ensure that future mothers are not born, and so reduce population momentum." (See TOI of 12/9/04).

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Ranking of universities: Criteria for Bangladesh

PROF. M. S. ILYAS DHAMI

SINCE there are now so many private universities and colleges in Bangladesh, any efforts to determine the quality of teaching, learning, and research at the universities and colleges would be a worthwhile exercise. It would make a great deal of sense if criteria were developed in this context. The problem is that when it comes to devising a methodology to assess the merits of a system, we look for a quick-fix approach -- something taken from the shelves of the foreign systems. We should develop criteria that meet the needs, culture, and academic environment of Bangladesh.

Bangladesh's education and its institutions are not anywhere similar to American or British systems. It seems that most academics in Bangladesh's elite universities are educated in the US. Of course, they are well aware of the educational system abroad in their capacity as students and/or research fellows. It is easier to copy a system they know already. A majority of these academics merely experienced the foreign academic systems as graduate and/or postgraduate students or post-doctoral fellows. Hence, they were not part of its operation, execution, or management of curricula or academic research. You may copy the syllabus of a foreign university for training, but the quality assurance of the programme is another story. The quality of the academic and research management requires consistent monitoring and evaluation continuously for years.

The systems of the Ivy League (US) or the Russell group of elite universities and colleges (UK) are not the systems that we should be looking at to assess the quality standard of Bangladesh's higher education system. Although we would like to compare ourselves with these systems, it's not practical.

However, there is some generic set of standards such as faculty-student ratio, retention rate of students, entry qualifications, and passing rate which are useful measures of an institution's quality. But we should be creative and innovative in developing criteria which are capable of measuring the quality with equity.

The Parliament of Bangladesh should carefully rectify and/or modify the policy prepared by UGC for monitoring quality assurance and control for universities and colleges in Bangladesh. The UGC should invest some resources in studying the ranking criteria. Several studies should be conducted laterally and diagonally for collection of data for final outcome measure. Listed below are some of the issues which may be useful in understanding the key aspects for

ranking the universities based on quality and equity of training.

Reputation: Conduct a nationwide study on the students' perceptions and reality of higher education in Bangladesh.

Admissions policy: Some colleges may be offering places to students who are rejected by the elite colleges. This should not be seen as negative. What is important is that if these institutions have made any differences in students' lives, for example, in securing employment or engaging in self-employment.

Transferable skills: What transferable skills students gain and how

equipment in the laboratories should be a requirement of the charter of the universities and colleges. The faculty should be encouraged to develop joint collaborative research projects with local industry and foreign universities for acquisition of instrumentation in the laboratories.

Exchange: Does the university have a plan for exchange of faculty and students with foreign universities? The reality is that in the pre-9/11 the American universities were open to these exchanges for training of post-doctoral fellows and postgraduate training. The new Department of Homeland Security

oratives or executives for external audit and assessment of a university based on IAAR.

Professional development plan: Each faculty, executive, and employee of the university should be asked to write the professional development plan initially for one year and later for five years. There are specific guidelines to develop this professional plan. This should cover the extra-ordinary activities beyond the regular duties and the contractual obligations of the employee of the university. The peers will evaluate the progress mentioned in the PDP on a yearly basis and make recommendations to the administration for promotions. It certainly brings transparency in the system and pride to the employee for professional achievements. "Ask not what your university can do for you, ask what you can do for your university!" Does this sound familiar?

Student placement: It is one of the criteria that indicate the acceptance of trained graduates in the industry or foreign lands. Each university should develop and maintain the records of placements of graduates. The employers may be asked to assess the trained graduates for further improvement of the desired programme. Who should take the responsibility of judging standards? The UGC should assume this responsibility. The initial research findings should identify the key aspects on which a set of standards of ranking applicability would become more visible.

A pilot test is necessary in Bangladesh to evaluate the consistency and validity of the scheme. A team of trained assessors should undertake this assessment exercise both in the Ministry of Education and at the UGC. Universities and colleges should be invited for their input.

I propose a country-wide conference to review the criteria items. Feedback, comments, and concerns from the conference should be taken into account. We should take immediate steps to alleviate any obstacles to education in both private and public sector universities and colleges.

Let us roll up our sleeves and get this programme going to ensure a bright future for Bangladesh. Let us make our national educational system a model for other nations in the region.

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