

Asian political unity

How promising is the initiative?



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.

This year representatives from four political parties from Bangladesh, namely BNP, the Awami League, the Jatiya Party and the Samyabadi Dal participated.

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.

From Bangladesh Awami League chief Shaikh Hasina, Secretary General of the BNP Abdul Mannan Bhuiya, former Secretary General of the Awami League Zillur Rahman and Foreign Minister Morshed Khan attended one or more of these conferences. Bangladesh partici-

pated in the last conference at a relatively low key, since the Secretary Generals of the two major political parties were unable to attend it due, obviously, to existing political turmoil at home. The BNP delegation was led by the Joint-Secretary General of the party, Minister Abdullah Al-Noman. I happened to be present in all the three conferences.

The theme of the conference was "exchange, co-operation and devel-

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 homogeneous land.

The other objective was to provide

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-Aroya 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.

M.M.Rezaul Karim, a former Ambassador, is a member of BNP's Advisory Council.

CURRENTS AND CROSSCURRENTS

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opment". This was evidently appropriate, topical and well-chosen so much so that part of it or even the entire theme has been subject-matters of innumerable conferences and seminars all over the globe, in the developing world in particular. The difference lay in the fact that in this conference a large number of important participants came from a wide spectrum of the societies from the largest continent, representing people of different religion, ethnic origin, social and cultural background, level of economic development and, above all, political affiliation. The second characteristic of this moot was that the speakers displayed a high sense of pragmatism and were almost down to earth on their approach. The other ones, specially the first conference was marked more by expressions of lofty ideals and even a vision of establishing an Asian parliament in the style of the European parliament.

The organisers left no doubt that

a platform where leaders of political parties of the same country may meet without fanfare or at least the glare of publicity and, if seek to resolve their differences. There was no grandiose plan as yet to put up an Asia group against any other continental group(s), but the propensity to voice in unison on some major issues, like security, trade, investment, environment and energy, was definitely perceptible. The quest for an Asian identity matched with the increasing growth rate of Asia, more than that of other continents, brought in a measure of encouragement and some degree of hope for participants. A good deal of discussion took place about the benefits accruing out of the regional and sub-regional groups in Asia.

That ideological differences should not be a barrier to establish contacts, hold dialogues and foster cooperation among Asian political parties was embodied in the Beijing Declaration. They should also strive

Census figures and BJP's anti-minorityism

ASGHAR ALI ENGINEER

THE 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. Banthya 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.

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 several of the communities like Kabirpanthis, 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%), Pondichery (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 Pondichery 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 percent 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, Pondichery and Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Muslims are doing better than Hindus. In Chattisgarh, the Muslims are ahead by 17 percentage points.

All these fact 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 confrontational 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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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 academicians 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

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.

these are developed through the learning experiences.

Alumni: Not every alumnus would be able to make donations to universities; however, they do make some real contributions to society in general. Consider their contributions to commercial, social, and charitable engagements.

Entrepreneurial management: Both private and public sector institutions should be creating value for money. This needs to be seen in terms of return on investment from a student's point of view.

Faculty: Educational background of faculty members. Their vocational or professional experiences and faculty's links with other educational institutions and industry should be considered.

Research output: How many faculty members are active researchers, both in terms of academics and pedagogically.

Resources: Learning environment and resources should include library facility and other research tools. For example, a good science faculty should have relevant and recent textbooks, quality journals in the library, and online access to journals and periodicals. Investment in learning resources should be priority of the criteria.

Quality assurance: The quality of management, its mission, objectives and strategy to maintain and enhance the overall teaching, learning, and research environment.

Instrumentation and equipment for laboratories: Allocation of funds on a yearly basis for the

regulations have a discouraging effect on Muslim students in America. However, transfer of technology through well trained and skilled personnel has had an effective impact on the socio-economic health of China, Korea, Singapore, and Japan. These countries benefited from the aggressive exchange programs. I was part of the training schemes at universities in Canada and the US. I personally approved these exchange programmes for training of scientists from Southeast and East Asian countries at the Banting Institute (seat of the discovery of insulin in 1923) at the University of Toronto in Canada and the Nuclear Sciences Institute at San Jose State University in the US. Thirty-some years later, you see the obvious results of these exchanges -- transfer of technology through human resources -- on their economies.

Institutional assessment and analysis report (IAAR): Each university should develop a mechanism for internal audit of programmes, management, service, quality assurance, and quality control. There are specific guidelines to develop equitable IAAR. This programme is universally used by the accrediting agencies in the West, in our case it should be adopted by UGC. It eliminates the bureaucracy and determines the equitable quality assurance of the institution. It works both ways -- as an instrument for internal audit by the university and also as an external audit by UGC. I am available to offer the training to UGC represen-

tatives or executives for external audit and assessment of a university should from 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 extraordinary activities beyond the regular duties and the contractual obligations of the employee of the university. This will eliminate promotions based on seniority basis and create a positive competition among the employees. 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 quote 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. After all, we are talking about steering and operating the ship of academia and research for the bright future of Bangladesh. 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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Law suit challenges Bush administration's 'Back Door Draft'

RON CHEPESIUK

A National Guardsman, identified as "John Doe" for privacy reasons, has filed the first court challenge to a presidential order mandating military service members remain on active duty beyond their discharge dates. Filed in San Francisco federal court last August 17, the law suit could affect Bush administration war policies, as well as the lives of an estimated 40,000 service members forced to serve beyond their enlistment terms since the Iraq War began.

The Bush administration contends that Executive Order 13223 of September 14, 2001, gives it the authority to implement what is known as the "Stop Loss" programme. President George Bush, Jr. used the order to declare a national emergency and to give the Defense Department the authority to keep military personnel on active duty involuntarily for not more than 24 consecutive months.

The law suit charges that Executive Order 13223 "does not support the involuntary extension of the enlistment of non commissioned soldiers for service in Iraq."

"Many U.S. troops are frustrated with the Stop Loss policy," explained Joshua Sontheimer, an attorney with the San Francisco based law firm of Michael S. Sorgen, who is representing John Doe. "Their enlistment has ended and they have done their duty. Now they want to go back to their families and get on with their lives. Is it fair that they bear the burden for a country that doesn't have a non volunteer army?" Marti Hiken, a spokesperson for the National Law Task Force (MLTF) of the National Lawyer's Guild, which is assisting with the suit, said that the U.S. military is trying to create a new type of "indentured servitude." She added, "We're asking the court to protect the rights of an individual American against the arbitrary action of his government." John Doe is described as a "decorated combat veteran" currently living in the San Francisco Bay Area and serving in the Army Reserve. In the past 12 years, he has completed more than nine years of active service in the Marine Corps and army, including a tour of combat duty in Iraq in 2003. According to a legal memorandum filed by Doe's lawyers, "his com-

manders all have praised his commitment to military service, and he has received numerous awards and decorations, including three Army commendations." Sontheimer described his client as "a soldier who has seen heavy combat work with special operations forces and is not afraid to jump out of airplanes with live explosives strapped to him." Doe, who has wife and two daughters, age 6 and 3, has been under treatment for post traumatic stress syndrome resulting from his service in Iraq. "A service man with my client's type of military record

active army is way too short of troops to keep up with its active occupations and still meet its other military commitments." The Bush administration didn't plan for an extended deployment in Iraq, but it also has active occupations in Afghanistan, Korea and the Balkans," Korb explained. "The U.S. military can't have enough active forces without calling up the National Guard and Reserve more often than it had anticipated."

So what should the Bush administration do? "To make up for the shortage of 40,000 troops (two



Executive Order 13223 states that the Secretary of Defense can order the Ready Reserve of the armed forces to active duty if it's necessary to "respond to the continuing and immediate threat of further terrorist attacks against the United States." But the suit challenges that assertion, arguing that "Iraq no longer poses any threat of terrorism against the United States, if it ever did."

should be allowed to return to his family once he completes his service obligation," Sontheimer said. "Instead, the military Stop Loss programme is putting undue hardship on him."

Doe is currently serving a one-year enlistment in the California National Guard as a reservist, but his time could be extended to two years, and possibly longer. "All he wants now is to be with his family," Hiken said. "He is facing hardship because the Bush administration doesn't have enough troops in Iraq." Both Sontheimer and Hiken said the Stop Loss programme is nothing more than a "back door draft."

Lawrence Korb, Senior Fellow for the Center for American Progress and Senior Advisor for the Center for Defense Information, agreed. "You sign up with the National Guard for four years, but when you are about to get out, your unit gets notified that it's going to Iraq. The military is essentially forcing you to stay beyond the time you've agreed to." Korb said the military is relying on the Back Door Draft because the

divisions), the Bush administration should move some of the troops in General Reserve to the active force, Korb advised. But he added, "It won't do that because that will cost money. Doing that means giving up something like missile defense or the F-22." The lawsuit charges that the Stop Loss programme is invalid because "it is authorised by, unrelated to and exceeds the scope and purpose of the executive order under which the Stop Loss order has been promulgated." "Stop Loss is in violation of the protections John Doe has under the U.S.

Constitution," Sontheimer said. Involuntary extensions of enlistments are barred by law except during a war of national emergency declared by Congress, the suit contends. In making its case, Doe's lawyers cite the Selective Service Act of 1948, the Uniform Military and Training and Service Act of 1951, and the Armed Services Act of 1968, which, in the plaintiffs view, Congress passed to "limit authority being asserted by certain branches of the armed services to involun-

tarily extend enlistments during periods of national emergency." "Congress said it's only going to let the military keep people in the service if war is declared," Sontheimer explained. "Congress hasn't declared war since 9-11 happened."

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The MLTF helps operate a GI Rights Hotline, which, in 2003, received nearly 30,000 telephone calls. "The overwhelming number of calls had to do with Stop Loss, and they don't include the calls about Stop Loss that come directly to the Task Force," Hiken revealed.

Meanwhile, Joe Doe faces an uncertain future. "His status is in limbo," Sontheimer said. "The military has given him an informal waiver from having to go off to training before his unit gets shipped to Iraq. But they haven't responded to his request for a formal waiver from the Stop Loss programme. He added, "we will seek a restraining order if the military tries to send our client to Iraq."

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