

The view from Chiang Mai

ZAFAR SOBHAN

ILL say this for the government. I don't know about the efficiency of its execution, but it has the right idea with its Look East policy. Look East is a smart idea and a smart slogan. Smarter, perhaps, than the government itself even realizes.

What makes it attractive is that as a policy it can be understood both literally and metaphorically, and is equally compelling as a vision either way.

One of the problems Bangladesh has always had -- along with all other post-colonial nations -- is that we have been grudgingly focused on the West as a model for our development, and this focus has proved a distraction in a number of ways.

In the first place, the differences between our society and those of the West in terms of state of development as well as cultural identity are extremely pronounced, and thus make the West an unrealistic model on which to base ourselves.

More importantly, with our colonial history, there is something psychologically unappealing about looking towards the West, against whose domination we struggled so hard for so long, as a model for the future and the direction we wish to go.

This unease we have had with respect to the West is one thing that has made modernization so problematic, as we have tried hard to advance and develop without turning ourselves into pale (or rather, dark) carbon copies of our erstwhile rulers.

Set against this historical backdrop, looking East for lessons in development makes a great deal of sense.

In the first place, there are far greater cultural and societal similarities between Bangladesh and the Asean nations, and in the second place, they have had to overcome many of the developmental difficul-

ties that we are struggling with today, all of which makes them a more realistic model to look towards for ideas of how to develop.

And, of course, looking East comes with none of the psychic baggage that looking West entails. In fact, I do not think that it would be too much of an overstatement of third world solidarity to state that Bangladeshis are in some small way quite proud of the advances made by our neighbours to the East, and consider them very worthy of emulation.

I have been in Thailand for the past few days as part of a delegation of journalists invited by the Thai Foreign Ministry to educate us a little about their country, in the hope

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that this kind of initiative will further strengthen ties between our two countries.

It has been an eye-opening and gratifying experience in more ways than one.

To start with, I cannot help but be impressed by the state of development of the country, and furthermore it has been a pleasure to see first hand the interest that the Thais have in better relations between our two countries.

To be sure, they are interested in strengthening ties in their own self-interest.

They are keen to expand exports to Bangladesh, and feel that Chiang Mai, in particular, can serve as a regional hub for a trans-national area, that includes Chittagong, for things such as medical services and graduate study, to which end there are now three flights a week

between the two cities.

But beyond this, the desire to play a part in the advancement and development of Bangladesh that I have seen evidence of since I got here strikes me as pretty genuine (if for no other reason than it is in everyone's interest that everyone in the region advances and develops).

So, what have I learned on my trip to Thailand that has so far encompassed Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, the Golden Triangle area bordering Laos and Myanmar, and Bangkok, in terms of lessons for our development?

The first thing that I have noticed is that the idea we have of attributing our lack of development to our poor command of the English language



(compared to, say, India) is something of a red herring. The English of even very senior Thai officials can be quite spotty, and no language other than Thai is spoken widely or well by the majority of the common people, with no apparent detriment to their development as a nation as far as I can see.

The difference between their level of development and ours is nothing to do with their command over the language of international commerce, but it may well have plenty to do with the fact that their literacy rate is in the nineties, and that they have placed such a great emphasis on quality and accessible education for all.

Our problem is not that we don't speak English better, but the fact that, frankly, we don't speak Bangla that well either, and that our system of education is dilapidated and out of date.

In short, one can graduate from high school and even university in Bangladesh without learning much of use, and if we wish to do something to advance ourselves, it is this problem to which we need to apply ourselves, more than the question of levels of aptitude in English (although in the absence of any initiative to improve our academic curricula, a good grasp of English is probably the most useful tool one could have in one's educational arsenal).

The fact is that to this day we do not emphasize or reward creativity or critical thinking in education, and the result is a work-force that, even when educated, has not been trained to be sufficiently competitive in the modern world.

The other pronounced difference between Bangladesh and Thailand is the difference in the planning and vision that has been demonstrated by successive governments in the two countries.

Simply put, the Thai governments have demonstrated far greater aptitude for forward thinking than any of the governments we in Bangladesh have had the misfortune to labour under, and the consequence is the difference in the states of development in the two countries.

Of course, Thailand has been benefited by the fact that it was able to side-step the West's colonial embrace, and that it has barely more than half the population of Bangladesh in three times the space, but the point remains the same.

The question now is how can looking East help us get to where we want to go?

Expanded trade and the availability of Chiang Mai as a regional hub that can benefit the people of Chittagong is fine as far as it goes.

But the real benefit to Bangladesh from better relations with Thailand lies in letting Thailand further into the country. This means more Thai direct investment and availing ourselves of their superior technological and managerial expertise when it comes to developing infrastructure.

And this applies to not just Thailand. It applies to our other regional neighbours such as Malaysia and South Korea and China, and yes, India, too.

Looking East cannot be a substitute for a coherent India policy on the part of the Bangladesh government.

Indeed, there can be little doubt that one reason that China and the Asean countries are so keen to expand ties to Bangladesh is that we lie on the road to India and in many ways are the gateway to South Asia. Our future lies in the fact that we are fortuitously located more or less at the cross-roads of South Asia, South-East Asia, and southern China.

If this was a reality that our government recognized and was willing to act upon, I would be more impressed with its Look East policy. But for now, I fear that the government only half understands the true magnitude of what could and should be the basis for a regional foreign policy that would put Bangladesh squarely in our rightful place at the centre of Asia -- both literally and metaphorically -- and be of tremendous long-term advantage to the nation.

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IN MEMORIAM

An epitome of tradition and modernity

M.M.REZAUL KARIM

WITH the passage of time one gradually loses all those who belonged to the old times. It is an axiomatic truth and none can dispute that. Yet, people have to endure the loss of their kith and kin, friends and neighbours, and those whom they love and admire. Abdus Samad Azad belongs to that small and distinct strata of the society for whom love and adulation of people, irrespective of age, sex, religion and political affiliation, abound. His loss is thus perceived by all, especially those who had the opportunity of coming in close contact with him.

I had that privilege. I came to know him quite well as the first Foreign Minister of an independent Bangladesh. I joined him in the Ministry as a Director General a few months after liberation, coming from London. Foreign Office then had only a few senior officers, as others had still been held back in Pakistan awaiting repatriation. As the Ministry had to be built almost from the scratch, those working there had to work hard, long and close. We had to burn much midnight oils, especially before a state visit either to or from the country. This made us work like a well-knit family. The task was accomplished under the able guidance of Foreign Minister Abdus Samad Azad and a top bureaucrat like Foreign Secretary Enayet Karim both of whom were not only easily accessible to all but encouraged consultation and relied on collective wisdom.

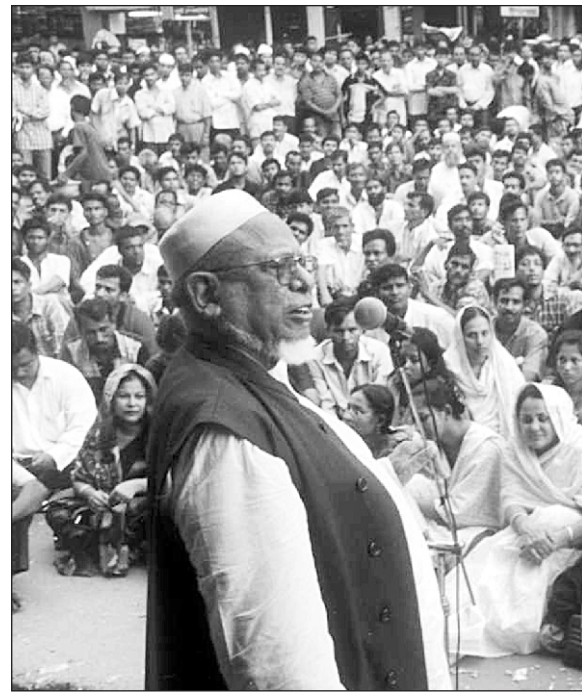
One of the pleasant duties of the Foreign Office was to secure recognition of the infant state of Bangladesh as a sovereign nation by various countries, some of which procrastinated, for various reasons. Soon after recognition by India and Bhutan, the East European states, including the Soviet Union, followed suit. Several of them promptly started rendering material help to the war-torn country, besides continuing to extend diplomatic support on international forums. Foreign Minister Azad was serious in his work and enjoyed it thoroughly. Prime Minister Shaikh Mujib wanted a high-level delegation to visit all these countries to convey to them grateful thanks from the government and people of Bangladesh. Foreign Minister Azad led the delegation and took Mr. Rahman Sobhan, Member of the Planning Commission, myself and Shafi Sami, Director of Foreign Minister's Office and later Ambassador and Foreign Secretary, in his entourage. It took 4 weeks to travel to the 7 countries, namely the

Soviet Union, East Germany, Bulgaria, Rumania, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and, last but not least, Yugoslavia. It was during this long tour we really came to know well the simple, unassuming, affectionate and down-to-earth politician, diplomat and, above all, the man, Abdus Samad Azad.

Prime Minister had initially wanted me to lead the first Hajj delegation of Bangladesh, apparently, owing to political reasons, since Saudi Arabia had not yet recognized Bangladesh. Even our communication for arranging travel, accommodation and other related matters in respect of the pilgrims had to be routed through a third country, Egypt, whose President Anwar Saadat was friendly and helpful to Bangladesh. However, the Foreign Minister prevailed upon the Prime Minister to send a man regarded as more religious than me as Leader of the first Hajj Delegation. He was happy and took me, another happy person, along with him on the more relaxing but a less rewarding (for the next world) tour.

His role as an important leader of the Bangladesh government-in-exile was no less significant. He traveled far and wide explaining rationale of the creation of Bangladesh and beseeching nations for help and, later, recognition of the new-born state. He also went to the United Nations in late 1971, pleading with the UNGA delegates for the same purpose.

Among the many qualities attributed to the deceased was his keen sense of humour. Once, while I was in his office a telephone call came. He talked to someone and I could not help overhearing a part of the conversation. He was telling in jest to the man at the other end, "You are the Home Minister, who can take care of all matters inside the country and I am the Foreign Minister, who should be responsible for all affairs in foreign countries. What is the need for other Ministers and a large cabinet?" Again, he called the then American Consul General to his office and asked him how he was flying the star spangled banner (American national flag) on his car, since his government had not yet recognized Bangladesh. The Consul General demonstrated ready wit but



Veteran politician Abdus Samad Azad speaks at one of his last rallies.

in a non-chalant manner replied, "Your Excellency, it was because of your kindness." We all laughed and a potentially serious situation was averted in a lighter vein.

Given the present political culture in the country, it was extra-ordinary but heartening to witness that people of diverse background and belonging to opposing political parties buried their hatchet in paying homage to a man, whom they respected, loved and admired, though may be for different reasons. The passing away of Abdus Samad Azad is thus a grievous moment for us all and represents a reminder of the stark reality that the society becomes poorer with the loss of a noble soul of his stature.

The author is a former Ambassador and a member of BNPS Advisory Council.

Some questions on May Day

KAZI LIAKAT HOSSAIN

THE historic May Day is being observed today throughout the country and elsewhere in the World as a mark of respect to the workers, who shed their blood for the establishment of the rights of the working class in 1886. On this day 119 years ago, the workers of the Hay Market of Chicago City, USA sacrificed their lives for ensuring eight hour working day for them. Since then, the day is observed all over the world as the day of solidarity with working people.

Three years later, the Second Socialist International in Paris decided to designate May 1 as the day for expressing solidarity of working people in memory of Hay Market martyrs.

The new major steps in the labour front was the establishment of International Labour Organisation (ILO) (three decades after the decision to observe May Day Internationally). The ILO was established in 1919 to promote social justice for working class everywhere. It formulates international policies and programmes to help improve working and living conditions, creates international labour standards to serve as guidelines for national authorities in putting those policies into action. The problems of labour and consciousness about labour rights did not come over night. In fact, the history is as old as civilisation. At the beginning, everyone worked with one's own hands. The society came to be divided

between the rich and poor representing the exploiter and the exploited.

The labour movement has a proud heritage in Bangladesh. The country is a signatory to the ILO convention and has a number of legislations for labour welfare.

Self styled labour leaders particularly after the emergence of Bangladesh have sprung up only for the lip service of the labour force. On this great day, some searching questions haunt the minds of those who really feel for the just cause of the working class. Why extraneous elements have found place as representatives of the labour class? Why and how they seized opportunity to create a place of their own outstripping the leaders from their own work place? Why did Bargaining Agents failed to occupy their rightful position and are not representing the workers? Why the government in the past and even the present one fiddling with fate of the helpless lot by creating more than one Union? The answers to all these questions will be in the negative.

Having closed down the biggest Adamjee Jute Mills, their workers have been made totally jobless. This decision was unwise and criticised by the conscious people of the country.

Labour management relations are at its lowest ebb. Let the workers, their representatives emerge from the same workplace instead of borrowed leadership. This concept must be changed for the restoration of congenial environ-

ment conducive to uninterrupted operation of all industrial establishments.

The labour unions in most of the cases have become unreasonable and come up with demands only to help in the closure of the units.

It must be understood that better employer-employee relations can only ensure productivity and welfare of the workers. They cannot always think in terms of agitation, strikes and Gherao-Jalao tactics ingrained into their minds by a section of labour representatives who are acting at the behest of vested quarters only to cause industrial breakdown in our country. The wages invariably have to be linked with productivity and the demand for higher wages cannot reasonably be pressed without increasing output.

The efforts to remove economic and social causes for swelling number of child labour have to be intensified. The celebration of May Day this year under democratic dispensation should inspire all those connected with labour movements, to have and act in a manner that does not jeopardise production at any cost.

The so called champions of labour welfare must also realise the gravity of the situation and help in resurrecting the fragile economy of Bangladesh at a time when the foreign aid and investment climate is not so favourable.