

An American secularist in Bangladesh

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ON my second day in Bangladesh, I was being driven through the rice fields and banana groves outside of Keshabpur when our car passed some graffiti on a wall in a small village. My guide, Shahriar Kabir, explained that it was an Islamist slogan proclaiming that the Koran holds the solution to every problem. We were on our way to address a gathering of citizens who are fighting the rising tide of fundamentalism in Bangladesh. Just before we arrived, we passed on long line outside a fertilizer shop. The country was in the midst of severe shortages of fertilizer, water, and electricity. Yet despite the hopes of the Islamist sloganeer, average Bengalis were not trying to squeeze rice or water out of the Koran. They knew to bring their problems to the government and to leave their souls to religion.

The response of the government, however, provided only comic relief, as the prime minister denied the existence of the shortages in an address to parliament. Later that day, February 28, in the middle of my speech to a group of journalists and community leaders in Khulna, the lights went out. Indeed, these are dark times for secular democracy in Bangladesh.

With nearly 100 known militant organizations and perhaps as many as 64,000 Wahibist madrassas (only 20 percent are overseen by the government), for the last 20 years the country has been undergoing Talibanization.

The previous day, in a meeting at the Bangladesh Institute of Law and International Affairs in Dhaka, I had appeared alongside Kabir, Professor Ajoy Roy, Professor Kabir Chowdhury, Dr. Hamida Hussain, Justice K.M. Sobhan and Ambassador Waliur Rahman. Ambassador Rahman, the author of one of the amendments to the constitution, read aloud from his personal copy of the original 1972 version -- which he described as poetry -- and said it brought tears to his eyes when he thought of what had become of it. As an American, I praised the 1972 founding document as even more secular than our own. While the US Constitution made no mention of God and forbade establishment of a state religion, the Bangladeshi Constitution went further to expressly ban religion-based parties. The recent history of the Jamaat-e-Islami party makes all too clear the wisdom of this provision. The secular heritage of Bangladesh makes all the more heinous the campaign by a militant minority to turn the country into a

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theocracy.

The title of the meeting in Dhaka was "A call for global unity of secular humanists to resist fundamentalism." I had come to deliver a message from secularists in the US and everywhere, that the plight of Bangladesh would not go unnoticed. There is a worldwide network of people who are committed to the freedom of conscience and the separation of religion from government, and who stand in solidarity with Bangladeshis against theocracy.

This network has proven its effectiveness in the past. In August 2001, Dr. Younis Shaikh, an instructor at a medical collage in Islamabad, was convicted under Pakistan's blasphemy laws and sentenced to death. Dr. Shaikh was known in international humanist circles as the leader of a Pakistan-

based organization called "Enlightenment," a member of the International Humanist and Ethical Union, an umbrella organization comprising nearly 100 groups around the world. Upon his arrest, the International Humanist and Ethical Union initiated a campaign that eventually saved him from execution.

My organization, Center for Inquiry-Transnational, had sent me to South Asia to attend the inauguration of the Center's new branch in Hyderabad and to establish contacts in Bangladesh. For the last twenty-five years, the Center for Inquiry has been a leading advocate for scientific reason, freedom of inquiry, and secular values in public affairs, with its magazines Free Inquiry and Skeptical Inquirer read around the world. An early critic of contemporary

Islamic fundamentalism, the Center has brought together activists and intellectuals from Pakistan, India, Nepal, Iran, Egypt, Nigeria, Russia, Europe, the United States, and elsewhere. The black rivers of oil that flow from the Gulf states and turn to poison in the ears of young Bengali madrasa students do not observe national borders. So too must secular ideals cross national, religious, and ethnic boundaries to resist intolerance wherever it appears.

The question I was asked most often was why the US persists in regarding Bangladesh as a "moderate" Muslim government, in the words -- now infamous among liberal-minded Bangladeshis -- used by State Department official Christina Rocca. No doubt some in the Bush administration were

moved by the short-term strategic interest in being able to claim at least one member of the Organization of Islamic Countries as a backer of the war in Iraq.

I also couldn't help but wonder whether America's own ambivalence about secularism at home is confounding its relationship with secularists abroad. Thanks in part to the propaganda of the Christian Right, secularism has become a dirty word in America, conjuring up godlessness and amorality. As the journalist-historian Susan Jacoby showed in her recent book, "Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism," religious conservatives have constructed a revisionist history of "Christian America" that excludes the tradition of people like the founding father Thomas Paine, the cele-

brated 19th century orator Robert G. Ingersoll, the feminist Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and the civil rights activist A. Philip Randolph, all of whom reached outside of traditional Christianity for sources of American democratic values. Today, it would be political suicide for an elected official to self-describe as a secularist. It is in the context of this political culture that we have to view the US failure to push for strictly non-religious governments in Afghanistan and Iraq. Could it be that like so many of our problems, America's religion problems are being outsourced?

While the US government is often no friend to secular democracy around the world, I believe the American people are and will be friends to the Bengali people, as they demonstrated in 1971. As the Islamists' power swells, it is now more important than ever for Americans to support the resistance in Bangladesh. This is not only a prudent step to avoiding a new generation of terrorists, but also a recognition of common moral principles. For while secular government may have come first to North America, secular values of pluralism and toleration go much further back in South Asia, from the world's most venerable materialistic philosophical tradi-

tion, to the liberalism of the Shah kings, and the humanism of Persian literature and music. Thomas Jefferson could have learned a lot about secular democracy from Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

Back at the press club in Khulna, on the eve of the 35th anniversary of the liberation war, was listening to former freedom fighters who were prepared to lay down their lives for secular democracy. I'll never forget how after the lights went out, we were led down the darkened stairs and outside by a young organizer with a single candle. If the great promise of America's ideals is to be fulfilled, Americans must walk with the Bengali people as they take their proud country towards a bright, secular future.

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Indo-US nuclear deal: Disturbing fallout

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PRESIDENT Bush during his recent visit to India signed a landmark civilian nuclear agreement ostensibly to augment energy supply in India. Under the agreement, India out of its 22 nuclear reactors has designated 14 reactors as civilian which will be entitled to receive supply of nuclear technology and fuel from the United states and other 45 countries that trade in nuclear technology, subject to international safeguards of inspection. The rest of the eight military reactors described as fast breeder reactors which are capable of producing plutonium and highly enriched uranium and reprocessing of fuel for developing nuclear weapons will be outside the scope of the agreement and beyond the reach of international scrutiny.

The agreement legitimises India's nuclear status and effectively embraces India as what Prime Minister Manmohan Singh calls 'a full member of the new nuclear world order'. It ends India's status as a nuclear pariah for over 30 years for having tested a nuclear device in 1974 and

exploding tests at Pokhran in 1998 in contravention of rules of NPT, a treaty adopted in 1968 --endorsed by 188 countries and rejected by four countries, including India, Pakistan, North Korea and Israel. The agreement marks a transition of India from being a regional power to a global leader implementing the US offer last year to 'help India become a great power in the 21st century'.

The agreement needs to be studied, warts and all. The warts are bound to embrace weapons development. What is important to note is the leeway in the agreement, if any, without adequate safeguards or guarantee against transfer of nuclear technology and fuel from the civilian to military nuclear facilities. The agreement undeniably gives India strategic weight and potential. The supply of nuclear fuel, could free up India's existing fission material production capacity, enabling it to be used to expand nuclear weapons arsenal. According to experts, India will enhance its capability to produce close to 50 atom bombs a year from its present capacity to produce 6-10 bombs a year. The agreement, as it seems, will not reduce

By embracing America India has enhanced its military prowess. India's infatuation with neo liberal market economy since 1991 has gained so called high economic growth which has bred vulgar consumerism. But India has lost its glorious past of moral high purpose and soaring idealism of Gandhi and Nehru who refused to trade political allegiance for economic benefits

proliferation of nuclear weapons but exacerbate the dreadful march of nuclear arms race towards inevitable holocaust.

The deal blows a hole in the NPT and bends its rules which explicitly prohibits supply of nuclear technology to any nation which is not a signatory to NPT. It harms efforts to curb spread of nuclear weapons. Bush has pushed over a nuclear domino effect on signatories to NPT to review why they should honour a document which a superpower no longer respects. Morocco, Egypt, Venezuela and Japan are known to have nuclear ambitions. But Bush's double standard denying Iran and North Korea of nuclear programmes for stated peaceful purpose of energy supply is well known. Israel whose interests are locked in impassioned coitus with US interests is believed to possess 200 nuclear warheads. The

agreement is about breaking rules and expecting others to abide by them. It sends a message that United States will withhold nuclear technology from countries it dislikes.

Bush has sullied everything noble about America by walking out of International Criminal Court and Kyoto Protocol on global warming, abrogating Anti Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty, refusing to ratify Nuclear Test Ban (CTBT) Treaty and land mines ban convention. Even during the cold war period America sustained a core of nuclear arms principles for several decades. But now it has explored a range of nuclear weapons concepts including Star War Missile Defense. Nuclear disarmament has quietly disappeared from the vocabulary of Bush Administration. A recent statement by Linton Brooks, the head of National Nuclear Security

and Administration signalled an apparent abandonment of the goal of nuclear disarmament when he said 'the US will for the foreseeable future need to retain both nuclear forces and the capability to sustain and modernize those forces'.

United States views India, the largest democratic and rising economic power with a huge 300 million middle class vibrant market, as an evolving US ally to serve its geo-strategic and economic interests and the nuclear deal is central to that vision. Indo-US strategic relationship is being forged increasingly by deepening defense ties between the two countries, reflected in the 10-year defence cooperation agreement signed last June when defence minister Pranab Mukherjee visited Washington. Joint military exercises are now a routine matter involving growing sophistication, complemented by defence

procurements. Major India US defense deal involving advanced war planes and other high tech arms in the area of combat aircraft, helicopters, maritime patrol aircraft and naval vessels are in the offing. A Pentagon statement issued on the eve of Bush visit said that United States was prepared to sell Lockheed Martin F16 and Boeing F18 jet fighters to India.

The nuclear deal which is motivated by American global agenda of the war on terror, a new balance of power in Asia by counterbalancing growing economic and military might of China and isolating Iran, reflects profound indifference to security concerns of Pakistan. When asked by journalists if the United States would respond positively to similar request for nuclear technology by Pakistan, Bush dismissed the question by saying that the two countries had 'different needs and

different histories'. The secretary of state Condoleezza Rice was more candid and blunt when she said that United States had 'concerns' about non-proliferation record of Pakistan perhaps meaning Pakistan nuclear scientist AQ Khan's alleged sale of nuclear technology to Iran, North Korea and Libya. Bush brushed aside suggestion of US mediation on Kashmir and expressed unhappiness about Pakistan's performance in not doing enough to nab Osama bin Laden and his deputy, Jawahiri.

China voiced a note of caution about the deal when it said New Delhi and Washington must follow global nuclear non-proliferation regime and the obligation undertaken by all countries.

India has compromised with independence of its foreign policy when its reaction to US aggression in Iraq was mute. Prodded by America, India voted twice against Iran in IAEA Board meeting in Vienna. Moni Sankar Ayer, the most dynamic petroleum minister of India, was stripped of his portfolio apparently under US pressure as he was pursuing energy cooperation in Asia including Iran-Pakistan-India gas

pipeline, Myanmar-Bangladesh-India gas pipeline and a hydrocarbon grid stretching all the way from Ukraine to Japan. By embracing America India has enhanced its military prowess. India's infatuation with neo liberal market economy since 1991 has gained so called high economic growth which has bred vulgar consumerism. But India has lost its glorious past of moral high purpose and soaring idealism of Gandhi and Nehru who refused to trade political allegiance for economic benefits and espoused the virtues of non-violence and non-alignment, simplicity, love and compassion. There was courage and honour in rags but now there is timidity and acquiescence in riches. Mahatma Gandhi truly said 'How heavy is the toll of sins and wrongs that wealth, power and prestige exact from a man'

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How about dismantling the embankment?

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INTER-decadal variability of major flood disasters during the last 50 years has considerably increased world-wide: six cases in the 1950s, seven in the 1960s, eight in the 1970s, eighteen in the 1980s and, twenty-six in the 1990s. Such flood disaster in Bangladesh while compared with and scaled over that of the global frequency and intensity, appears fairly consistent in terms of at least shrinking its intervals. An analysis of shrinking incidence of every past major flood disaster indicates that the probability of one such flood in 2006 is not less. The embankment is the lone infrastructure upon which is dependent the protection of people and property from devastation.

During the flood every year water experts bring in issues making this embankment a debatable structural intervention and then quickly disappear with the recession of floods leaving engraved the basic question in the minds of the common people on the justifiability of the embankment. It will as such be worthwhile to pre-discuss the issue of embanking more widely and interactively to decide upon addressing the future status of the embankment for the purpose of protection.

The concept of embanking germinated from within the social science of raising 'alle' for land separating, terracing, salt cultivating, fishing and other farming practices. The living geometry of this 'alle' with the changing dimensions of rural poverty over time

Embankments are no more the individual jigsaw units. The built-in composite embankment system is very much an integral part of the country's hydrological features. The system may therefore be mathematically modeled to carry out study for managing floods with respect to detention, drainage and diversion of upland flow locally and regionally in more comprehensive manner for immediate future planning.

triggered embanking. The modern embankments are the dynamic version of social engineering. The composite system of the embankment is designed for protection of flood, removal of drainage congestion and making provision for irrigation including prevention of salt water intrusion and storm generated surges.

The embanking is a simple building technology but highly complicated in terms of its performances in hydraulic functions. It provides increased flood-free secured land for agriculture, enhanced degree of safety to human lives, livestock, settlement, industry and infrastructure, wider accessibility, multiplicity of cropping intensity, higher crop yields, improved drainage, culture fisheries, and reduced hazards from floods and surges. On the contrary, impeded drainage, reduced soil moisture, degradation of soil-water quality, loss of flooded habitats, changes in hydrological regimes, increased agrochemical runoff, restricted navigation, increased siltation, severity of flooding, land erosion, enhanced incidence of water-borne diseases are few of the listed negative impacts.

Many of the control structures, chiefly embankments, proved to

be counterproductive. Side by side, much less consideration has been given by the water professionals to the sustainability of rivers or canals and their water quality in designing an embankment project for consumptive or non-consumptive use of water culminating in fatal disruption of stream's hydraulic equilibrium. Experts argue that embankment obstructing the flood pass is the main cause of flood related disasters and drainage hazards in the country and therefore stand in advocating for open channel flow; thereby managing foods by coping with floods. Observations also register that the embanking does not perform because of its failure during extreme hydraulic events, the time of its real need. Some experts, however, admit that yet the country has little option other than embankments to protect the backshores with mitigation plan drawn on environmental and social impact assessments.

Zooming in one such in-site embanking, an international expert named John Briscoe revisiting the village Fatehpur of Matlab under Comilla district embanked back in mid-70's under Meghna-Dhonagoda Irrigation Project after 25 years described

the changes brought in by the embankment as benefits in myriad of ways, in the obvious physical health of most people; in the rarity of a smallpox-scarred face; in the quality of people's clothes; in the quality of their houses, water supply and sanitation facilities; in the number of schools and attendance at these; in the emergence of women into the public domain; in the intensity of work both on the land and in the bustling markets which had sprung up everywhere; in the use of modern techniques for agriculture, aquaculture and transport. The changes were huge and almost all positive what pinpointed 'embankment' as the primary source that protects the people and the property.

The benefits in terms of economic returns of most of the embanking projects are shown close to zero because such assessment is singly based on the agricultural output, the known objective. The other positive impacts i.e. embankment serving as roads providing micro-trading facilities, bringing qualitative changes in ecology, supporting community mobilisation, linking with national level programmes and accelerating infrastructural growth of all other sectors such as health, education, and food are not



Embankments help lessen the suffering.

taken into account. The engineers, economists, social scientists and researchers have thus made embanking debatable. But the population ambient to embankment and their livelihood dependent on hydrological characteristics of the region and the hydraulic behaviours of its water fronts, to the contrary, count different from what the experts say. Embankments are never however accused by those people protected.

The low-lying deltaic Bangladesh's land surface is annually flooded by more than 20 percent. Severe flooding may

inundate 36 percent and in case of extreme hydraulic event the flooding exceeds 68 percent. In addition to regular astronomical high tides of 2 to 6 meter, there are cyclones and cyclone generated storm surges. The already experiencing climate change induced impacts within next 20 years are foreseen to permanently inundate 18 percent of the country's land mass. The impact of much talked about possible tsunami is little known. City seminars deliver these data often without any reference to the contribution of embanking.

The offset hydraulic parameters of streams are though responsible for devastating floods and erosion rendering rural people homeless, unsustainable interventions on rivers or canals, particularly earthen embankment for controlling flood, further worsen them. Truly, the nature with respect to time within the Universe is in a continuous state of equilibrium. Tsunamis, earthquakes, floods, cyclones, hurricanes, storm surges, droughts, wild fires, land slides, snowmelts whatever called the natural disasters are only few macroscopic balancing

efforts of the nature in support of life on earth. All these were there in the past, are in now and shall be in future. Disasters have all along been the life line for transformation and supply of food and fibre on earth. Embanking therefore may not be expected at ensuring safety from disasters of any magnitude.

The National Water Management Plan has an analytical finding that only 2 percent incremental food production per annum is enough to meet the future demand of 40 percent absolute increased national population over the next 20 years. This is achievable simply by ensuring the improved and adequate maintenance of the embanking projects. But the question now is even beyond -- protecting life and other sector infrastructure. Embankments are no more the individual jigsaw units. The built-in composite embankment system is very much an integral part of the country's hydrological features.

The system may therefore be mathematically modeled to carry out study for managing floods with respect to detention, drainage and diversion of upland flow locally and regionally in more comprehensive manner for immediate future planning. Perspiring with impacts of floods on nation's economy almost every year there is no point in pondering about dismantling the embankments.

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