

South Asianness vs border fencing

EKRAM KABIR

THE lofty car rally, carrying SAARC's masthead, has recently started its regional tour and would complete it in mid-April. The encouraging aspect of the rally is that it is the brainchild of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, who had suggested that such an event be conducted in the lead-up to the 14th summit of the regional body in New Delhi. Done. We went gaga over its success thinking, "What can be more encouraging than this?"

So, there goes the rally, with a motto "Connecting People, Strengthening Ties". One of the main objectives, among others, of this rally was to enhance people-to-people contact within the region and increase trade initiatives among constituent countries. We might have a lot to be critical about the rally, but it's true that a good number of professionals and businessmen from South Asian countries had an opportunity to meet and be introduced to each-other on this occasion.

It is understandable that the purpose of the rally was to bring South Asian people (as well as the governments) a bit closer to each other. Closeness is certainly needed for the people of this region.

However, beneath this fanfare lie a few deep-seated problems and those problems are in stark contrast with the rally. We do a lot of

things to promote South Asianness but act the opposite when it comes to giving this identity a reality. Looking at South Asia, we see too many anti-SAARC initiatives are continuing in the region. Mistrust among neighbours, separatism, religious militancy, terrorism, human trafficking etc. have made the region's eagerness to integrate as an economic bloc look very bleak. More so, the hegemonic attitude by certain member-countries makes the feeling of South Asianness a distant dream. We are saying one thing for the regional cooperation and doing exactly the opposite.

One such example of contradiction is border fencing by India along its borders with Bangladesh and Pakistan.

True, Bangladesh and India face many border-related problems. The Bangladesh border is the longest land border that India shares with any of its neighbours. It covers a length of 4,095 kilometres abutting the states of West Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Tripura.

There are too many problems along the Indo-Bangla border. Inadequate demarcation has created the problems of enclaves. Though the number of authorised transit points for goods and people are limited along the border, for all practical purposes it has remained open. People continue to cross the borders with consummate ease, and this has also encouraged large

volumes of irregular or unofficial trade along the border. The ethno-cultural proximity of populations on both sides of the borders, and the absence of physical barriers and vigilance by security forces have facilitated such illegal border trade. The total volume of unofficial exports to Bangladesh is estimated at Rupees 11.65 billion annually, of which West Bengal accounts for as much as 96 per cent, Assam three per cent and Tripura one per cent. An elaborate network of border agents and other stakeholders has come up along this border.

Borders in this region do not only symbolize territorial integrity of a country, they are also life-blood of the people living on both the sides.

Let's have a look what The Financial Express of India said on 4 April 2007: "It is worthwhile to note that despite the South Asian Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA), the bulk of Indo-Pak trade continues to be routed through Dubai. Also, India's free trade agreement with Sri Lanka, though not dogged by the sort of political mistrust that sometimes tends to spoil India's relationship with its western neighbour, has been thwarted by various provisions which allow India to curtail imports of 15 of the 20 top Sri Lankan export products. Then, there are infrastructural constraints that have to be addressed. Today, a truck takes four days to cross the Indo-Bangla border, with more than a thousand trucks awaiting clearance. India has its own set of secu-

rity concerns, too. The vision of a more integrated South Asia calls for an approach that takes into account ground realities."

Interesting! A car rally is able to travel across South Asia in a fortnight but truck has to wait for four days to cross the Indo-Bangla border!

This is where, to me, the real problem lies. A car rally is a "show" and the truck crossing Indo-Bangla border is a "ground reality". The SAARC car rally and India's border-fencing implicate that we care more about "shows" than the "ground realities". A cross-country car march would certainly raise the awareness of the people across the region, but would it raise the awareness of the governments? Isn't India's border-fencing a contradictory action of what is talked about at SAARC summits and at the launching of the much-hyped car rally?

Now, it's time to cater more for ground reality than for shows.

"Fencing" actually goes against the value of good-neighbourliness. In the backdrop of the construction of the Berlin Wall and the traumatic experience of East Europe, including the Soviet Union, it is often said that those who are engaged in the business of fencing suffer from a siege mentality. There is a genuine reason to feel threatened and panicky. One aspect of the panicky state, at least from India's side, has been well described by M.J. Akbar in India: The Siege Within (1985). But concern here is the fencing of



the Indo-Bangladesh border, countries that not only are unmatched in size, population and resources but, more importantly, are also friendly states with a solid record of their friendship track. Apart from very localised border shootouts, and that again, without them having even been properly

sanctioned by their respective governments, there has never been a war-like conflict between these two countries. Why then fence Bangladesh and more interestingly, why the entire length of Indo-Bangladesh borders?

India, they say, is about to go for a paradigm shift as far as ties with its

neighbours. The 14th SAARC head of state indicates that relations between India and Bangladesh appear to be headed for better times with the new interim regime in Dhaka planning to start a cross-border train in three months and New Delhi stressing on a possible new beginning in bilateral ties. Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh met Chief Advisor Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed and discussed an entire range of bilateral issues. The train link between Joydebpur near Dhaka and Sealdah will be launched in three months from now, he said. A three-year agreement regarding the service, which was first signed on July 12, 2001 and extended again in 2004, expires in July this year. The two countries will have to renew this treaty.

These are gratifying news and quite impressive for the two countries that they are heading for better days of ties. But at the same time, as The Telegraph of Kolkata reports on 4 April, Meghalaya police on 3 April picked up 54 members of Coordination Committee on International Border (CCIB) - a conglomerate of several NGOs - who were attempting to stage a demonstration near the state secretariat in Shillong. The members were protesting against the National Building Construction Corporation move to restart fencing work along some of the "disputed areas" on the Indo-Bangladesh border near Umkiang in the Jaintia hills.

The towering words at the 14th regional summit and the arrests in Shillong seem quite contradictory. This also shows that no matter how much you talk about cooperation and unification, India is not going to withdraw from fencing its borders any time soon. Interestingly, leaders from Bangladesh and Pakistan were not heard saying anything about this at the summit as well as in bilateral meetings with the Indian counterpart.

I'm led to recall a quote from my Nepali friend, C.K. Lal, just before the 12th South Asian summit. He wrote: "Cultural identity goes to the very soul of a person, an identity that national boundaries cannot erase. It is this identity that the leaders of the region must re-emphasise while reconceptualising South Asia. Without that, SAARC will continue to remain periodic jamborees."

Lal realized that our leaders would take an unusually long time to understand what a whole lot of people who are Pashtuns, Awadhis, Bengalis, Tamils, Nepalis, Assamese and Kashmiris want South Asia to be. We hope they now understand that time for the old-era diplomacy is over the South Asians are looking for building a new South Asia. We would urge India to reassess its strategy for fencing along the border and find out an alternative to it.

The writer, a Dhaka-based journalist, has a published study titled "Bangladesh-India Relations: The Case of Border-fencing".

Rise of political Islam in Bangladesh

WALI-UR RAHMAN

ISLAM as preached by Prophet Mohammad (peace be upon him) has a rich history in the pursuit of the principles of law and jurisprudence, support of democratic values, fairness and social justice. Those principles have also the potential for limiting autocratic regimes. The principles of Geneva Conventions, 1949, and the Additional Protocols, 1973-74, protecting the POWs were in effect practiced by the Prophet Mohammad in many treaties including that of Hudaibiya.

The Ottoman Empire had employed the Christian janissaries as the top generals in the army including the commander in chief. They conquered Europe including Spain, and came up to La Tour. The Caliphate disintegrated when the Islamic fundamentalists took over the control from the moderates; the Christians and the Jews were removed from the army. They lost their secular spirit and the Empire. Ibn Khaldun, known as the father of the empirical study of history (13th Century) through his PROLEGOMENA, enunciated the principles of history writing, history of homo sapiens, history of civilization, Ranke or Sorel and later, much later Gibbon and Toynbee derived inspiration from Ibn Khaldun. These historians, chroniclers of the progress of civilization, submitted to the idea of moderation as the vehicle of statecraft.

Justice and fairness have been the principal theme of the Quran; whenever Muslims deviated from those principles, they lost their roots and lost their way. It was at such a moment that a man called Wahab appeared in the desert of



Saudi Arabia. The Saudis, the tribal chiefs, were in great difficulty in controlling the tribal leaders in parts of the desert land. Wahab approached the Saud, the tribal chief and offered his new doctrine. He misinterpreted the Quranic principles and convinced the house of Saud that "this was real Islam, real Quranic injunction". The Saudi chief accepted this; through coercion and persecution, they established some control, not entirely though. When Wahab died, he left behind his deputy by the name of Ikhwatun who said that killing any non-Muslim is Jihad and it meant the killer of a non-Muslim will go to heaven! An interpretation,

totally against the jurisprudence of Islam left behind by Prophet Mohammad. Ikhwatun denounced Bible and the Scripture of Moses, although belief in both Jesus Christ and Moses as prophets is an article of faith for all Muslims.

Article 28 of the Constitution of Bangladesh states "The state shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth. Women shall have equal rights with men in all spheres of the state and of public life." But the post 1975 events all but pulverized the constitutional process. Amendments were effected and Islam was declared the state religion. The spiritual

leader of Jamat-e-Islami (JI) in Bangladesh was allowed to return to Bangladesh in 1991, his ideological home and with that the non-communal secular spirit in Bangladesh took a heavy beating. Added to that was the tunnel-vision of some Bangladesh leaders, the heroes of the glorious war of liberation, who underestimated the incipient strength of those like JI, who never accepted the reality of Bangladesh. Cases after cases of anti-Bangladesh criminals were being set aside. The lawyers and Honourable Judges and the law-makers really did not understand what the spirit of the war of liberation was; the liberation spirit, the

mantra that galvanized the entire people of Bengal was taking a severe beating about that time from these happenings, perhaps unwittingly. But that is the history of the initial years of Bangladesh.

On January 23, 2005, Eliza Griswold reported in the New York Times raising the possibility of "Bangladesh giving birth to the next Islamist revolution." She wrote about the alleged attempts by Bangla Bhai to bring about Talibanisation in some parts of the country bordering India through violent means; travelling through Bangladesh she concluded, "the global war on terror is aimed at making the regimes like that of the Taliban impossible: in Bangladesh, the trend could be going the other way." It was of course an extreme statement but footprint of something happening was all too apparent.

Brookings Institution research scholar Prof. Stephen Cohen, who called Pakistan a failed state before 9/11, stated (about Pakistan) that the largest Islamic sects with the greatest control over the religious schools (Madrasa) are the Deobands as opposed to the Barlevis, who were most militant in their demand for Pakistan to become truly Islamic. These Deobandis influenced by Wahabi-Maududi ideology took the lead in declaring Pakistani Ahmediyas as non-Muslims in Pakistan. Their Bangladesh counterpart, who opposed the very creation of Bangladesh are also the vanguards of the anti-Ahmediyas and anti-minority movement in Bangladesh.

Besides, the Afghani Jihadi ideology was a galvanizing force for many Bangladeshi Islamists. The American Taliban John Walker

Lindh suggested that the Al-Qaeda led brigades in Afghanistan were divided among linguistic lines, of which Bengali was one. This indicates that Bangladeshi and Rohyngia presence may have been significant. Many Bangladeshis joined the Pakistani Jihadis in Kashmir. Aiman Al-Zawahiri, Osama Bin Laden's right hand man was reported to have fled, according to the Time Magazine report, to our area. Harakatul Jihad-ul-Islam Bangladesh (HUJI-B), an offshoot of the Pakistani group, is reported to have received support from Osama Bin Laden to the tune of \$4 million at its inception. According to US State Department, the HUJI-B has at least 6 camps in Bangladesh [http://dixi.redstate]. Hambali caught in Singapore in 2003, and Khaled Sheikh Muhammad, nabbed in Pakistan, now in the US custody, are reported to have referred to Bangladesh a safe haven for their compatriots.

The appearance of Jamatul Mujahideen Bangladesh (www. the daily star) is a new phenomenon. On February 20, 2005, 12 suspected extremists were caught by the Bangladesh security forces. Jagrata Muslim Janata, Bangladesh is another organization supporting and promoting religious extremists in Bangladesh. Dr. Muhammad Asadullah Khan Galib, university lecturer in Arabia and a JMB leader, was arrested on February 23, 2005. He is implicated in 5 cases relating to bombing, explosives and murder. But the leader of JMB, Siddiqi Islam, also known as Bangla Bhai, notorious for his violent vigilantism was arrested along with the spiritual leader Sheikh Abdur Rahman and have been hanged on March 30,

2007. Much to the embarrassment of the former government, Bangla Bhai, the country's top-most wanted criminal was actually photographed leaving the police station after a meeting with the former Police Superintendent. The arithmetic of elections has kept the Islamist parties, demanding creation of an Islamic state based on Sharia Law together. JI and Islami Oikya Jote were with the coalition government. These two parties are known to have intimate links with the Maudoodi ideology and Jamah-Islamia's Abu Bakar al-Bashir of Indonesia and other Jihadi organizations around the world.

The Republic of Bangladesh got another jolt on August 17, 2005 when within a span of 29 minutes and 29 seconds, 500 low-powered bombs went off around the country in 63 of the 64 districts of Bangladesh. Government offices, courts and press clubs were chosen as targets and the explosives killed seven and injured about 100, according to a research paper of BILIA. This unprecedented simultaneous series of bomb blasts was a further indication of the growing strength of the religious extremism in the country. The message was very clear. With the August 17 bombings and subsequent murders of two judges and bombing of the Court in Gazipur, a suburb of Dhaka, the secular space in the country seemed to have been shrinking!

The people of Bangladesh are syncretic. Sufis and preachers converted them, not swords. But the adventurers will commit a blunder if they consider Bangladesh a happy hunting ground for their narrow, sectarian ideologies. Hudson Institute

scholar Husain Haqqani, former Pakistani politician-turned researcher, has been warning us about the exogenous efforts towards 'Pakistanisation' of Bangladeshi body politic. His warning is well understood. Extremists' sleeping cells that has been referred to cannot be taken lightly. Trained and indoctrinated Jihadis are all around. Foreign funding continues to come through clandestine means, money-laundering being one of them as recently advised by the US Treasury department. The anti-money laundering law, now in the making, has been approved by the Cabinet. The religious extremists don't like it; the terrorists abhor it. The Madrassa education curricula should be reviewed to bring it in line with modern education with Science, Mathematics, English and the history of war of liberation should be made an integral part of it. Husain Haqqani is skeptical about President Musharraf's tentative efforts to modernize Pakistani Madrassa education. Musharraf faces stiff resistance from the Mullahs. It is not the same story in Bangladesh. With a relatively homogeneous culture and ethno-religious backdrop, it should not be difficult to control the political Islamists in Bangladesh; particularly so because many of these young converts are home-grown. The caretaker government, with a clear mandate to reclaim our religious-cultural heritage and politico-moral high ground can do it.

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No alternatives except nuclear energy

NAZMUL HASAN AZAM

ONE of the major failures of the former government of Bangladesh is resolving the crisis of electricity. Now it is a common speculation as to how long the demand of electricity would remain unmet; no government can retain public support unless they succeed in resolving this crisis. All governmental and non-governmental institutions are ordered by the present caretaker government to reduce the usage of electricity. The energy secretary also suggested stopping supply of electricity, at least one day per week, to industrial areas by rotation. This would certainly be a suicidal measure for our economy, as our production would largely be hampered. We have already witnessed the events of Kansat, Demra, and Mirpur. Therefore it is high time to think about a long-term solution of the energy crisis.

The present caretaker government is contemplating importing electricity from India and Bhutan to meet the current deficit of electricity. But there is no doubt that these deals will not be able to meet the demand of electricity for a long period. The ultimate solution for this crisis can only be provided by one thing: nuclear energy. Though nuclear energy is a controversial solution, there is no other convenient alternative.

Most of the world's electricity is generated in steam plants driven

by coal, oil, nuclear energy, or gas, with lesser percentages generated by hydroelectric process. Nuclear energy is a controversial energy source. It is inexpensive and creates no air pollution, but accidents at nuclear power plants have caused deaths and environmental damage. The main stumbling block to attain nuclear energy is the uranium enrichment program through which a country can develop nuclear weapons. That is why quest for nuclear energy is considered an ambition to attain nuclear weapons. But from the perspective of Bangladesh it would be absurd to consider that it would pursue the acquisition of nuclear weapons. It is highly inconsistent with its socio-economic condition.

There is a worldwide attempt to rapidly convert the world's electricity generating systems from reliance on fossil fuels to reliance on nuclear energy. By 1970, 90 nuclear power plants were operating in 15 countries. In 1980, 253 nuclear power plants were operating in 22 countries, and by 2001 there were 435 nuclear plants operating in 33 countries. Moreover, at present, eighteen countries generate at least 20 percent of their electricity from nuclear power. The largest nuclear power industries are located in the United States (104 reactors), France (59), Japan (52), Britain (35), Russia (29), and Germany (19).

In France, 75 percent of electric-

ity comes from nuclear energy. 20 percent of the electricity is produced by nuclear power in the United States. For the past ten years, the people of Sidney and Melbourne did not undergo load shedding for a single hour. But what is the situation in our country? We have to close our markets immediately after sunset; irrigation is being hindered due to lack of electricity; industrial production is being hampered; domestic life has become difficult due to shortage of electricity. The fact is we are lagging far behind from many developed and developing countries, which have access to nuclear energy.

If 33 countries have access to nuclear energy then, being the ninth largest populous country in the world, why can't we have the right to go for nuclear energy to tide over the electricity crisis? Last year, India concluded an agreement with United States to develop nuclear power plant to generate electricity. It is widely accepted that the people of Bangladesh suffer more than Indian people do due to lack of electricity.

If we can appraise our sufferings that appear due to lack of electricity to world community, powerful states, which have safe access to nuclear technology, might consider our situation and may take effective measures. United States may assist us as it already has concluded a deal with India; it would be feasible for the US to provide

assistance to Bangladesh in acquiring nuclear energy if it realizes the necessity of it. China, Japan, Russia can also help us with their technology and experience.

China, our tested friend, is a nuclear power recognized by the NPT and is also a permanent member of the Security Council. Therefore, it can play a vital role to help us acquire nuclear energy. The government of Bangladesh has already urged the technical and logistic support to build nuclear reactors in our country to produce electricity. China also showed a positive approach on this issue. Now we have to move forward and take effective measures.

Bangladesh has not defied any international law; it does not pose a threat to other countries or communities either. Then what is the problem in seeking nuclear energy? The world community can rest assured that our nuclear program would be totally peaceful. We are for peace, as it is well proved from our participation and proactive role in UN peacekeeping missions; Bangladesh is the largest and the most respected contributor to UN peacekeeping efforts.

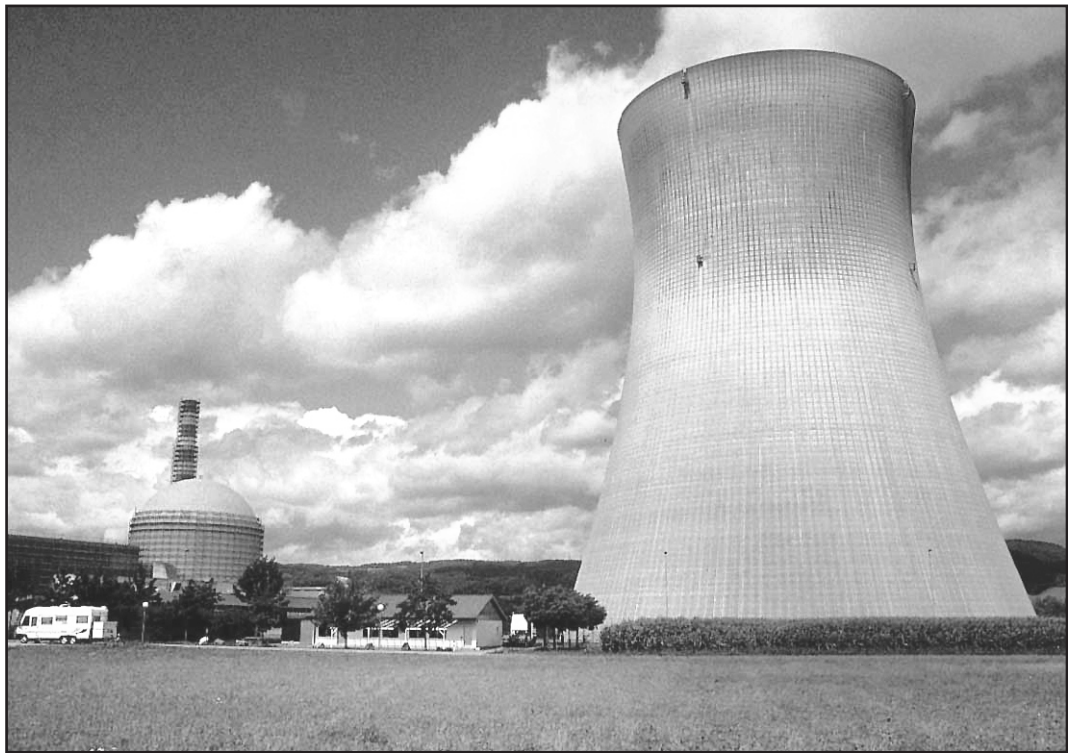
Throughout the past two decades, we have witnessed inconceivable development of technology. Therefore, handling of nuclear power plants have been made safer than at any time in the past. As no accident has happened since 1986, why will we not pursue nuclear energy to meet our

demand for electricity? Nonetheless, most of the equipment, which were installed 25 to 30 years ago, are backdated now. Generating electricity using these equipments often becomes expensive, and production cost per unit is increasing day by day.

The world is now more concerned about the deadly effect of nuclear weapons. We have not forgotten the disastrous consequence of the atom bombs dropped on Hiroshima & Nagasaki, and the aftermath of the accident of Three Mile Island and Chernobyl. We don't want to be Israel, India or Pakistan or follow the path of North Korea or Iran.

Since our emergence as an independent nation, we have been striving to maintain regional and global peace. Bangladesh is a peace loving democratic country. It has respect for the sovereignty of other countries. We have a strong commitment to maintain peace and stability throughout the world. We pursue peaceful resolution of international conflicts. Bangladesh is a signatory to the NPT. Therefore, it has a commitment not to pursue nuclear weapons. Nevertheless, we can say that our government will allow IAEA and UN inspectors to inspect the program uninterruptedly.

We can also seek few other alternatives as the source of electricity like solar energy, windmills, but these are too expensive and also not feasible for our country.



Bangladesh is one of the most populous countries in the world. Millions of educated and active citizens of our country are unemployed. If electricity is available, new industries will be developed in our country. Besides, the agricultural and Industrial production would increase tremendously. This may lead to an increase in the

annual GDP growth rate to 10% or above. Therefore, it is quite certain that we would emerge as a prosperous nation in the world within a short time if we can use nuclear energy to produce electricity.

The ministry of foreign affairs has to play a vital role in order to attain the technical and logistic support of other countries. The

government of Bangladesh can form an advisory body consisting of diplomats and experts to propagate our cause and the necessity of nuclear energy and draw international support. It is high time to take immediate effective measures.

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