

## Sick bridge over the Jamuna

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MOHAMMED NAWAZISH

It was indeed a long cherished dream of millions that materialised in 1998 when the 4.8 kilometer long Jamuna multipurpose bridge was opened to traffic after a long, tortuous course of studies, discourses, financial implications, engineering calculations and, finally, the grueling phase of implementation. The two parts of the country were united through a direct road and railway link, and the transmission of gas, electricity and tele-communication facilities between the parts became easier.

About 4,53,000 vehicles plied over the bridge during 2006-07; every day 18 trains roll over its rail tracks. Revenue worth Tk. 180 crore was added to the gov-

ernment exchequer in 2004-05. Both traffic and revenue are on the increase. The dream bridge has really generated a revolution in our social and economic sectors.

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and painful end. We'll not be surprised if closure of the bridge is declared in greater public interest.

As it happens in all such cases, the blame is being tossed from end to end. Our experts argue that it is design fault that lies at the bottom of the crisis, and the Korean construction firm Hyundai was held responsible. The firm reacted sharply, saying there was no fault in design or construction. Was not the design approved by our experts and policy makers? It was a massive project with a number of prominent donors involved. Was there no national body of experts to oversee and supervise how the contractor was carrying out his assigned duty? Had there been any glitch in design detected during the implementation process, which could not be corrected and modified on the

spot? I'm afraid, the beneficiary's end can't escape responsibility on the feeble excuse of contractual agreement.

Some hold that the cracks developed due to the vibration caused by trains. The speed has since been restricted to 20km per hour for trains crossing the bridge. Heavily overloaded trucks cause the same harm to the bridge structure. Weight restriction has been imposed, but how far that is complied with is a matter of investigation. It has also been stated that the absence of some special chemical coating on the surface played a negative role in temperature tolerance, which helped the development of the cracks.

We do not know much about the engineering complexities involved in such super-bridges but there must be countless in-built factors based on mathematical accuracy, hydrology, perfection of piling and RCC structures, auxiliary imperatives, updated river training technology, and the like. A team of highly competent experts from home and abroad may immediately be deployed to determine the causes that led to the present situation, and suggest measures to stem further deterioration that is continuing apace. The government has to act quickly on the recommenda-

tions to save the major artery of our national economy.

Punitive measures against the offenders are necessary, but the wrong has already been committed and we've been made helpless onlookers. Our dream of turning the JMB into a key segment of the Asian Highway and the Trans-Asian Railway seems to be wavering in uncertainty; the proposed Dhaka-Kolkata direct rail link may also stumble to a halt. People at all levels contributed to Jamuna levy and tax funds to raise the national quota for constructing the bridge. It was a day of pride and triumph for the people when the long cherished dream finally came true. Now, the days of reversal have arrived too early, much to the consternation of all.

Bureaucratic torpor caused an unpardonable delay in adopting firm measures immediately on detection of the cracks in 2006, and that, unquestionably, hastened the rate of deterioration. The bridge has to be saved by all means. Prompt and decisive measures have to be taken without loss of time in order to avoid an irreparable and irreplaceable loss to the nation. Aristotle said: "We cannot learn without pain." For us, it is time to learn.

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## Looking for a legacy

But the administration's dovishness is causing splits in the conservative Washington firmament, leading some hawks to attack the president's policies. Hard-liners think it is a mistake to deal with North Korea till there's proof Pyongyang is nuke-free and ready to reform its authoritarian ways.

STEPHEN GLAIN

THERE was a time when President George W. Bush couldn't pass up an opportunity to blast North Korea. After 9/11 he labeled it a member of the "Axis of Evil," and later said he "loathed" Kim Jong Il. Yet, in last month's State of the Union, he didn't even mention the renegade state. True, North Korea has modified its behaviour somewhat of late, engaging South Korea in symbolic gestures of reconciliation like opening a rail link. But the real reason for Bush's shift probably lies elsewhere; time is running out on his presidency, and with quagmires in Iraq and Afghanistan and the failure to

deliver an Arab-Israeli peace deal, his administration is desperate for a foreign-policy triumph. Thus, it is scrambling for a deal with Pyongyang that would dismantle North Korea's nuclear program in exchange for its removal from the State Departments' list of terrorist states.

To keep things on track, the United States has rewarded even the smallest baby steps by North Korea, most recently by sending the New York Philharmonic to visit. Washington even overlooked instances of backsliding, such as Kim's alleged transfer of nuclear technology to Syria. The administration hopes a breakthrough will lead to a regional

accord, including a peace treaty between North and South Korea. To sweeten the pot, Washington offered Pyongyang normalised relations if it cooperates in verifiably abandoning its nukes.

Supporters of the administration say the approach has already borne fruit. Last fall, Pyongyang began the process of disabling its main reactor at Yongbyon, going far beyond the commitment it made in 1994 merely to freeze the program. Bush backers also point out that getting the world's most secretive state to admit to possessing 30 kilograms of fissile material -- as it also did last fall -- represents progress and is reason enough to keep talking, even though U.S. intelligence officials

suspect North Korea actually has nearly twice that much.

But the administration's dovishness is causing splits in the conservative Washington firmament, leading some hawks to attack the president's policies. Hard-liners think it is a mistake to deal with North Korea till there's proof Pyongyang is nuke-free and ready to reform its authoritarian ways. Last month, at a speech to the conservative American Enterprise Institute, Bush's own special envoy for human rights in North Korea, Jay Lefkowitz, cast doubt on the administration's approach, condemning North Korea for continuing to counterfeit dollars, smuggle drugs and sell nuclear technology to hostile countries. Though Lefkowitz stopped short of criticising Bush directly, his inference was clear; the White House doesn't take Pyongyang's human-rights abuses seriously enough and is naive to think it can do business with Kim.

Lefkowitz was stiffly rebuked by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, but the North Koreans haven't made things any easier. They partially disabled the reactor at Yongbyon, but recently missed deadlines for dismantling it altogether, providing a detailed report of refining activity and for declaring whether North Korea had shared technology with others. A meeting in Beijing last week between senior U.S. diplomat Christopher Hill and Kim Gwan, Hill's opposite number from Pyongyang, produced little more than commitments for more talks. The December election of South Korean President Lee Myung-Bak, a conservative ally of Pyongyang, may have put North Korea in an even less conciliatory mood.

Still, the Bush administration hasn't given up. In a scheduled visit to Asia this week, Rice plans to smooth things over. The administration is also hoping China will convince North Korea

it will be easier to cooperate with Bush than wait for his successor -- possibly a hawkish John McCain. But Beijing, angered by a U.S. attempt to shoot down a defunct spy satellite last week, may not be inclined to do any favours, and might even prefer to perpetuate the dialogue than resolve it. After all, an embargoed North Korea dependent on China for basic goods and services is easier to control than one with open relations with the world. John Park, a Korea expert at the United States Institute of Peace, argues that even short of a deal, it's crucial that negotiations continue. "The North Koreans are being asked to give up their (nuclear) capabilities, and they can't take them back later on. That's a lot to ask, and it's important to keep the momentum going." Even if it means ignoring eight years of angry rhetoric.

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## African language movement

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BADRUL HASSAN

SOUTH Africa and Bangladesh are two countries in two continents, having hardly anything in common other than the history of language movement and struggle for independence against the minority ruling class.

We all are aware of the glorious history of February 21, which Unesco declared as International Mother Language Day in 1999. However, we do not know much about the costs, toll and achievements of the language struggle of black Africans that took place in 1976.

The day was February 21, 1952 in

Bangladesh, and June 16, 1976 in South Africa. In Dhaka, the agitating university students took to the streets and broke section 144, demanding Bangla as the state language, which resulted in opening fire and the loss of many lives.

In Soweto, high school black students protested against compulsory education in Afrikaans language, and many children lost their lives when police fired without any provocation. South Africa declared June 16 as "National Youth Day" to recognise the contribution of the youths in the independence movement.

Language had been a medium of oppression all through the history of

the world and of civilisation. Linguistic imperialism proved to be much more durable than political imperialism. Therefore, the ruling colonialists always wanted to impose their language and culture so that they could continue to enjoy the local resources as long as possible.

Afrikaans is an Indo-European language, derived from Dutch and classified as Low Franconian Germanic, mainly spoken by ruling whites in South Africa and Namibia. The Afrikaans Medium Decree of 1974 intended to forcibly reverse the decline of Afrikaans among black Africans of South Africa.

In 1976, the government introduced the compulsory use of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction from Grade VII -- then Standard V. It had been decided that for the sake of uniformity English and Afrikaans would be used as the media of instruction in schools on a 50-50 basis. Mathematics and social studies were to be taught in Afrikaans, while general science and practical subjects such as housecraft and woodwork would be taught in English.

African parents, journalists, school principals and teachers opposed the imposition of Afrikaans in African schools. They were unhappy -- some applied for an exemption from teaching Afrikaans.

Tensions over Afrikaans were simmering by the mid-year exams of 1976. Students were getting restless. One

student wrote to The World newspaper: "Our parents are prepared to suffer under the white man's rule. They have been living for years under these laws and they have become immune to them. But we strongly refuse to swallow an education that is designed to make us slaves in the country of our birth."

The government thought that black school children were becoming too assertive and "forcing them to learn in Afrikaans would be a useful form of discipline." Besides, the government argued, it paid for their education, so it could determine the language of instruction. This was not strictly true. White children had free schooling, but black parents had to pay about half a month's salary a year for each child, in addition to buying textbooks and stationery and contributing to the cost of buildings schools.

At a meeting called by students under the ambit of Black Consciousness Movement on June 13, 1976, 19-year-old Tsietso Mashinini, an extremely powerful speaker, suggested that the following Wednesday -- June 16 -- students gather in a mass demonstration against Afrikaans. They decided not to tell their parents, for fear of upsetting the plan.

It was cold and overcast as pupils gathered at schools across Soweto on June 16. At an agreed time, they set off for Orlando West Secondary School in Vilakazi Street, with thousands streaming in from all directions. They planned to march from the school to the Orlando Stadium. Witnesses later said that there were between 15,000 and 20,000 students in school uniform.

A police squad was sent in to form a line in front of the marchers. They ordered the crowd to disperse. When

they refused, police released dogs and threw teargas.

Students responded by throwing stones and bottles at the police. Journalists later reported seeing a policeman draw his revolver and shoot without warning into the crowd. Other policemen also started shooting, which cost the lives of 23 children and injured more than 200.

Twelve-year-old Hector Pieterse fell to the ground, fatally wounded. Mbuyisa Makhubo, a fellow student, who ran with him towards the Pheleni Clinic, with Pieterse's crying sister Antoinette running alongside, picked him up.

The World photographer Sam Nzima was there to record Pieterse's last moment under a shower of bullets. The photo went around the world and Pieterse came to symbolise the uprising, giving the world an in-your-face view of the brutality of apartheid.

The rioting soon spread from Soweto to other towns on the Witwatersrand, Pretoria, to Durban and Cape Town, and developed into the largest outbreak of violence South Africa had experienced in 1976. Coloured and Indian students joined their black comrades. By the end of the year, about 575 people had died across the country, and 3907 were injured.

The Soweto Uprising was a turning point in the liberation struggle and the fight against apartheid in South Africa. Prior to this, the liberation struggle was being fought outside of South Africa. The African National Congress came to the forefront after the Soweto uprising, and led to the independence of South Africa and overthrow of apartheid in 1994.

The major victory for the students

was that they were almost immediately allowed to choose their own medium of instruction. More schools and a teacher training college were built in Soweto. Teachers were given in-service training, and encouraged to upgrade their qualifications by being given study grants.

The most significant change, however, was that urban blacks were given permanent status as city dwellers. The law banning blacks from owning businesses in the townships was abolished. Doctors, lawyers and other professionals were now also allowed to practice in the townships.

30 years after the Soweto uprising, South African President Thabo Mbeki inaugurated the Hector Pieterse Memorial and Museum on June 16, 2006. The city renamed four streets after the leaders of the movement on the same day.

The Museum follows the chronology of the build-up to June 16, 1976, starting with the way tension was building among Soweto's school children, with one school after another going on strike. At the entrance, the famous photo taken by Sam Nzima was placed with a caption: "To honour the youths who gave their lives in the struggle for freedom and democracy."

South Africa had the memorial after having independence, while, in Bangladesh, the historic Shahid Minar remains as a source of inspiration for citizens, in spite of facing demolition several times. However, Bangladesh does not have a state patronised museum to commemorate the history of the language movement even 56 years after the movement.

Badrul Hassan is a Development activist and translator.

## The truth about Asian men



NINETY-ONE YEARS ago yesterday, a woman was elected to Congress in the US, starting an avalanche of assertiveness among members of what we now wouldn't dare call the gentler sex. To mark this important date, I asked my female friends to ask some blunt questions for my male friends to answer truthfully.

1. Why don't Asian men talk about their feelings?

We don't have any.

2. No seriously, why don't guys in Asia share what they feel?

We only know how we feel about some things (money, cars, sports, computers and Pamela Anderson's vital statistics), but you probably don't want to hear about those.

3. How come Asian guys grow up to be women, but Asian boys just grow up to be bigger boys?

Hey, at least we're consistent.

4. How come Asian men are incapable of showing emotion to women, but are affectionate to cars and computers?

Cars and computers we understand.

5. Why is it that sometimes you ask an Asian guy a question and he just totally ignores it?

[...]

6. Why don't Asian men like animals?

We love animals. Boiled, cooked, fried, fricasseed, curried...

7. Why do Asian men look down on women?

You're five foot four inches and we're five foot nine inches. D'oh!

8. Why won't Asian men change the baby's diapers?

Clothes are your department. We thought the old diapers looked just fine.

9. How come Asian men never do their share of kitchen work?

This is true of men in all over the world. As Erma Bombeck

said, the only cooking men do is barbecues because it involves danger.

10. Why do Asian men add so much chilli to their food that it blows their heads off?

See reference to danger in previous question.

11. Why do Asian guys only like movies which climax with a huge explosion?

Ask Sigmund Freud.

12. If you give a baby to an Asian male, why does he hold her at arm's length as if she is an unexploded biological weapon?

Babies are unexploded biological weapons. Have you seen the stuff that comes out of them?

13. Why are Asian men so macho?

Somebody has to be now western men have gone metrosexual.

14. Why don't Asian men ever do pillow talk after a romantic interlude?

After an enjoyable nighttime activity, we do the other: sleeping.

15. Why don't you have an opinion on whether we look better in this dress or that dress?

Our taste sensors are not sensitive enough to differentiate between fabrics. Negligees may have an opinion on.

16. Does my bottom look big in this?

We refuse to answer this question because whatever we say may be used against us.

17. Why don't Asian men do any housework?

We define working to pay for the house as housework.

18. Why are Asian men such jerks?

Look, if both sexes were sensitive and self-aware, who would mend the cars and computers?

Tomorrow: Why this new column is being inflicted on you.

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