

'Gandhi was short-listed for the Nobel Prize five times'

On a visit to Bangladesh, Ole Danbolt Mjos, chairman of the Norwegian Nobel Committee, spoke to Syed Badrul Ahsan, Editor, Current Affairs, *The Daily Star*, on the history of the Nobel Prize and the possibilities before Bangladesh.

DOES the Nobel Prize matter any more? That was the question put to Ole Danbolt Mjos. The chairman of the Norwegian Nobel Committee lost little time in coming forth with a response. Yes, it does matter, said he. Not because the Nobel, or the Nobel Peace Prize in particular, necessarily leads to peace among nations, but because it gives a spur to the need for peace. The bottom-line was obvious: the Nobel has a sobering effect on people.

And do not forget, he appeared to be reminding everyone, that the old prestige that came with the Nobel is yet there. It has had a decent record, to a point where individuals and organisations envisaging new peace-related award programs of their own often travel to Norway in order to under-

stand the framework that under-scores such programs.

But Mjos does agree that controversy about the Nobel exists. There have been questions about the prize going to what many see as the wrong kind of people. All said and done, though, the Nobel Peace Prize has kept its image rather intact, specifically because it happens to be a legacy of Alfred Nobel and his family. You get the drift of the conversation: because a family is involved, there is little or no chance that the prize will ever come under a cloud or be subjected to arbitrary treatment.

Mjos makes it a point to recall the reason why Alfred Nobel left the peace prize to be handled by Norway rather than Sweden. The founder of the prize, says Mjos, profoundly respected the Norwegian parliament because of



Ole Danbolt Mjos.

its image as a people's body. And the Swedish legislature? For Nobel, there was that unmistakable sense of elitism about it. Besides, Nobel respected the right of Norway to be free of Sweden, respected its struggle for independence. In so many words, therefore, letting Norway handle the peace prize was an acknowledgement of its basic decency and

its democratic political foundations.

That is all very well. But then you steer the conversation back to that small matter of controversy. Why was Mahatma Gandhi, the man from whom Martin Luther King, Jr. and Nelson Mandela learnt a thing or two about non-violence, never deemed qualified to be a Nobel laureate? Mjos' response is as revealing as it is spontaneous. Gandhi, he tells you in measured tone, was short-listed for the Nobel Peace Prize five times. For the first four, majority opinion made sure he did not come by the prize. But then, at the end of 1947, the Nobel Committee finally reached a unanimous decision that, come 1948, the Indian nationalist leader would be the recipient of the prize.

As events were to turn out, though, it was too late. Gandhi was assassinated in January 1948. But could he not have been honoured posthumously, in the way Dag Hammarskjöld was in 1961 when he was killed in a plane crash while

on a peace mission to Congo? Professor Mjos does not have an unequivocal response to that, save only to wonder why such a move could not be taken at the time. But he adds that the posthumous honour for Hammarskjöld was a one-time affair and is not likely to be repeated. He then goes on to heap deserved praise on the late United Nations secretary general. Hammarskjöld, he notes, was a man of absolute integrity and enjoyed a unique position.

But controversy, he notes, will always be there. In 1936, the Nobel for a German caused fury in Hitler; and in 1975, Andrei Sakharov's coming by the prize pushed the Soviet leadership into apologetic mode. And then you remember that much similar a reaction came from Nikita Khrushchev when in 1960 Boris Pasternak won the Nobel for Literature. In the end, Pasternak declined to accept the award and died heart-broken not much later.

Mjos accepts the terrible reality of the state sometimes coming down

hard on the individual whom the Nobel Committee honours. He cites the case of Aung San Suu Kyi, who has not travelled to Oslo to receive the prize and so has never delivered an acceptance speech. Perhaps the junta in Myanmar would have permitted her to leave the country and go to Norway? Perhaps. Mjos nods, but unless she was to have a guarantee that she would be allowed back into the country after receiving the Nobel, Suu Kyi would not leave her homeland.

The question of moral character comes in here, the same that once demonstrated resolve in the French intellectual Jean-Paul Sartre. The Frenchman, learning in 1964 that he had been awarded the Nobel for Literature, with alacrity declared his inability to accept it. Does such rejection disturb the Nobel Committee? In 1973, Vietnam's Le Duc Tho, sharing the prize with Henry Kissinger, refused to take it because, in his view, peace had not come to Vietnam. Mjos is not perturbed at the question.

His belief remains that those who sit in judgment over the award simply do their job. Yes, there will always be criticism and controversy. Beyond all that, though, there is, he reiterates, the prestige associated with the Nobel Prize. The Nobel Committee -- and he is unambiguous about it -- has only one mission: to honour individuals it thinks are deserving of such honour.

Ole Mjos speaks movingly of the issues the world is confronted with these days. His appreciation for Muhammad Yunus is without ambivalence. The Bengali winner of the Nobel Prize, says Mjos, has drawn attention to poverty and its reduction through his Grameen efforts. Obviously, the Nobel has expanded the canvas on which he has worked, has given him a bigger platform as it were. And Yunus can build on the environment theme, which has brought Al Gore his own Nobel for peace. Poverty and the environment, he says, with good emphasis, are the issues that matter. It is clear they matter

hugely to the Nobel Committee. Why else would Kenya's Wangari Maathai be honoured with the Nobel?

Professor Mjos moves from the Nobel to his impressions of Bangladesh. Clearly enthused by all he has seen on his brief trip, he knows -- and he makes it a point to let you know -- that alliances need to be built in Bangladesh if saying farewell to poverty is the goal.

He is frank enough to admit that before seeing the country firsthand, his impressions of it were similar to those of many others abroad: it was a land infested with poverty and demeaned by famine, floods, and assorted other disasters.

The visit has, however, clearly changed his perceptions. "I see the resources that you have, the hard-working people, the human resources you can build on," he says cheerfully. He finishes by expressing approval of the younger generation he has interacted with, whose sights are set on "education, education, education."

Transit to India

India may assist in promoting trade between Bangladesh-Nepal and Bangladesh-Bhutan through allowing small corridors. In extending transit facility to India, we must be careful about the interest of our traders and industrialists.

A.B.M.S. ZAHUR

SECRETARY level talks on various Indo-Bangladesh issues have just concluded in New Delhi recently. Both sides put forward their agenda of interests. The Bangladesh foreign secretary was hopeful of positive results relating to economy and border. He said that Bangladesh would not give any concession regarding transit but would be willing to discuss strengthening security to tackle the terrorists on both sides of the border. He also took up issues of reducing trade gap (removal of non-tariff barriers,

duty-free access, exporting more products from Bangladesh) border demarcation in remaining 6.5kms, unfettered access through Tin Bigha corridor, exchange of enclaves, and unsettled territories.

There are many other issues for Bangladesh to discuss with India such as Talpatti, land transit with Nepal, stoppage of push-in, indiscriminate killings of Bangladeshi by Indian BSF, etc. But by keeping the agenda small, Bangladesh has done well. Meetings with limited agenda are more effective. The issue of transit to India is highly sensitive as

we may have to go even to referendum and parliamentary discussion to determine the acceptability by the people. Moreover, the CTG is not competent to take any final decision on such an issue.

It is true that Bangladesh could make adequate progress in transit issue after signing of the Indo-Bangladesh Trade Agreement on March 28, 1972 which provided for "mutually beneficial arrangements, for the use of their waterways, railways and roadways for commerce between the two countries and for passage of goods between two places in one country, through the territory of the other."

The then Indian trade minister's observation in this regard is significant. His observation was: "Excellency, we would be too happy to provide the necessary transit facilities to Nepal and our

friends in Bangladesh." With the passage of time the question of transit facilities to Nepal appears to have been forgotten by India. Bangladesh does not appreciate this kind of attitude of India.

There has been enough discussion about the talks, and, broadly speaking, there were a few observations from the leading economists, eminent politicians, and prominent citizens. They were: (a) CTG is not competent to handle a highly sensitive issue like transit to India, (b) the issue is also political, (c) we cannot extend concession to India sacrificing our own interest, and (d) our experience of agreements with India in past is not happy.

Secretary level discussion is expert level meeting. As such there is no scope for dictation by any emotion or sentiment. It has to be confined strictly to economic cost and benefit. However, Bangladesh

should be straight in expressing its attitude that solution of the issue of transit depends on solution of some other critical issues. However, serious discussion on the issue of transit is not appropriate at this stage.

Though agreement of October 4, 1980 had similar proviso for surface connectivity as included in 1972 agreement, successive governments of Bangladesh could provide the facility due to: (a) very sensitive nature of the matter, (b) taking a decision on an issue that might be seen as providing special dispensation to India, (c) depriving Bangladesh of the benefit of access to enclaves like Dahagram and Angorpota on permanent basis, (d) non-fulfillment of promised sale of half a million tons of rice to Bangladesh, and (e) permanent settlement of sharing Ganges water.

We do understand that transit facility to India is of great importance for India because it enables India to control and develop its states of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, Nagaland, Mizoram, Manipur, and Arunachal.

However, easy access to these states through Bangladesh means too much pressure on our weak infrastructure (particularly on roads and culverts), the possibility of entry of narcotics, possible complications vis-à-vis anti-insurgent activities across the border, etc. The railroads may have to be brought up to international standard, the rivers to be used by Indians should be dredged to increase their navigability. The government of India should bear the entire cost of improving river transport, roads, and railways.

India may assist in promoting trade between Bangladesh-Nepal and Bangladesh-Bhutan through

allowing small corridors. In extending transit facility to India, we must be careful about the interest of our traders and industrialists.

Right from the independence of Bangladesh its people were eager to extend concessions to Indians. But for certain acts of India they have become suspicious. The worst act was the Farakka barrage. Bangabandhu's trust in India was not honored properly. We are suffering from less supply of Ganges water than committed. BSF are killing Bangladeshis without adequate reasons. Maritime boundaries need to be finalised, issues like Talpatti, demarcation of 6.5kms borders, stoppage of push-in, and Bangladesh-Nepal and Bangladesh-Bhutan corridors can be solved without much difficulty. But so long as the Bangladeshis are skeptical of

Indian motives, no Bangladesh government will dare to solve the transit issue. Thus it is up to India whether it settles the issue the quickly or allows it to continue to drag on for an indefinite period.

In improving the image of India in Bangladesh it appears to be relevant to point out the role of media in India. It has been observed that the Indian media is not very friendly toward Bangladesh. Before concluding this analysis, it would be appropriate to say that the governments of Bangladesh did not pay due attention in drafting earlier international agreements. This caused loss to the nation. In future the government may seek the assistance of eminent lawyers of the country in this matter.

The writer is a former joint secretary.

Anwar arrest a black eye for Malaysia

When he was incarcerated back in 1998, he was beaten by a police chief. The photo of him with eyes bruised was seen around the world. The injustice has haunted Malaysia's dynamic image ever since.

THE arrest of opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim was a black eye for Malaysia. It showed how paranoid the leaders are about the former deputy prime minister's political potential in the weeks and months to come.

That paranoia was heightened when Anwar appeared on a televised debate on the current oil prices. He did well, and declared that he would stand for election and intended to form a new government by mid-September. This kind of confidence does not augur well with the political uncertainties after the March 8 political tsunami, especially for the ruling National Front or Barisan Nasional.

The arrest has once again raised questions of the credibility of the Malaysian police force, who arrested Anwar before he was due to report on the same afternoon.

When he was incarcerated back in 1998, he was beaten by a police chief. The photo of him with eyes bruised was seen around the world. The injustice has haunted Malaysia's dynamic image ever since.

Friends of Anwar were outraged when he faced the same charge in

1988. US Senator Joseph Biden Jr. has called on Kuala Lumpur not to repeat past mistakes in prosecuting Anwar, urging Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi to drop this attack on an opposition member.

He said that the spectacle of Anwar's mistreatment and imprisonment on transparently political grounds greatly discredited Malaysia in the eyes of the world.

Anwar has said that as prime minister, he would improve relations with neighbouring countries, especially Singapore. Anwar also has lots of friends in Thailand, which he has visited frequently. He understands the southern situation very well and has offered to help. He said the Thailand-Malaysian friendship could be strengthened through confidence-building and other measures to resolve the violence in the south.

Because of his conviction, Anwar was banned from holding political office. The five-year ban expired two months ago. He was behind the victory of the opposition in the last polls, which has given rise to expectations of a new government that will be more transparent and open. So he



is planning to run for office soon.

The timing of the allegation was apparently aimed at disrupting the opposition coalition, Pakatan Rakyat, and its ascension to power. Anwar said that he would become Malaysia's next prime minister by mid-September through a by-election.

Malaysian politics is full of intrigue, especially among leading Malay politicians. Several critics have already said that Anwar's chances of realising his dream of becoming prime minister are slipping away quickly.

The ruling parties are not giving up their fight. Pro-government newspapers have ridiculed Anwar and his actions throughout.

Now that Deputy Prime Minister Najib is the prime minister-in-

waiting, he still has a lot to prove because he has lots of baggage. Prime Minister Abdullah, who was recently under siege, has now regained his composure and moved on.

More debates focusing on Anwar's case and Najib's suitability would allow Abdullah extra time to run the government and manage the growing economic crisis at home. The decisive factor will continue to be Malaysian voters, who still dictate the future political direction of the country.

The National Front is trying harder these days to woo them back. But with myriad issues yying for public attention, Malaysian politics will never be the same.

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Deal or no deal?

Deal or no deal, the government will go to the polls without delay to get a trust vote from the people. However, it can safely be said that the landscape of coalition politics in India has changed for some time to come.

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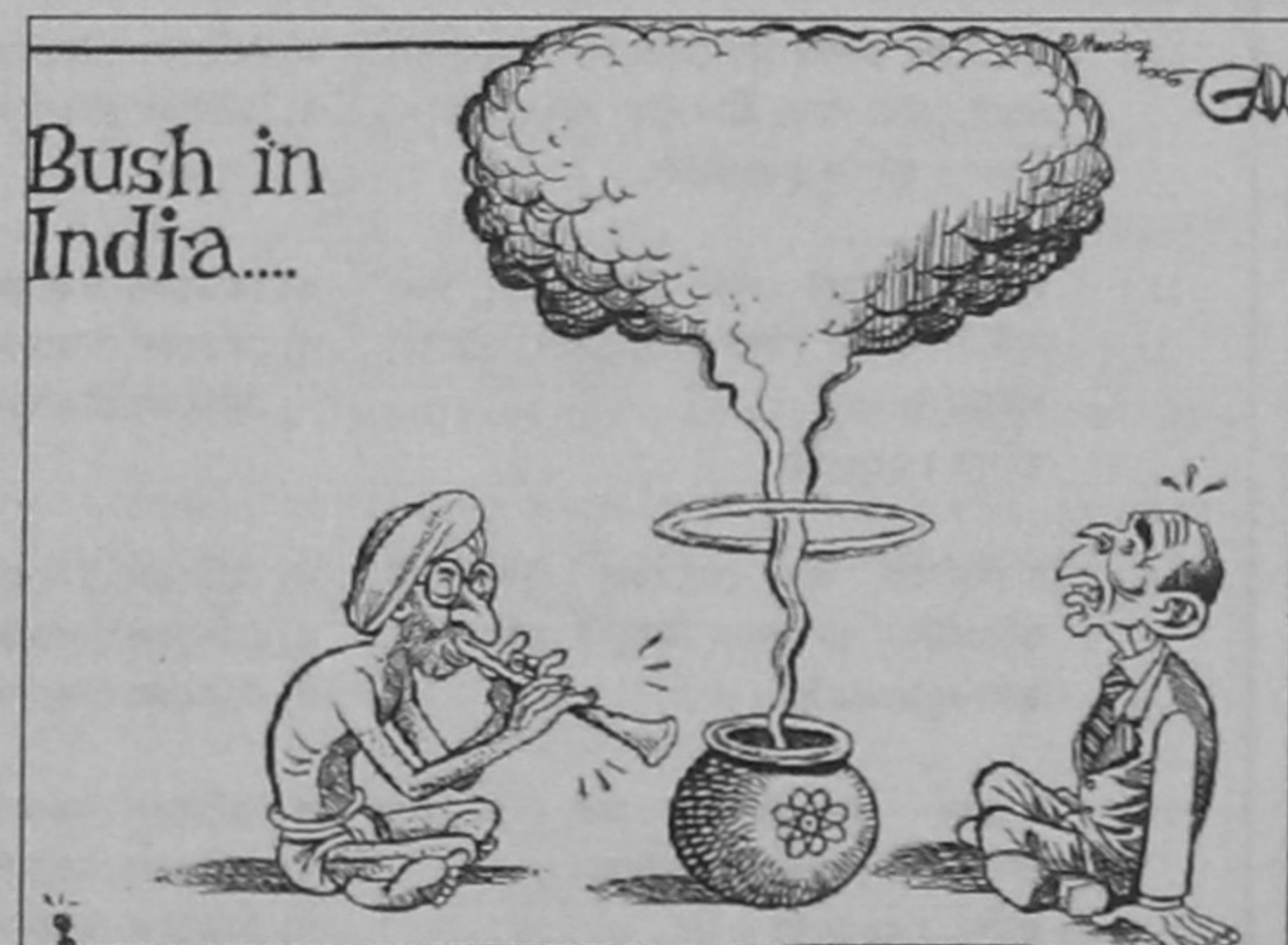
THIS piece was written during my flight from Delhi to Dhaka on July 20. While in Delhi for almost a week on a professional visit, it seemed that what happened to Indian politics since the G8 meeting in Japan was certainly quite extraordinary. Finally, the PM struck a deal with President Bush on the sideline of the G8 meeting on India's nuclear-deal with the US. At home, the nationalist right, BJP, and the communist left, CPI (M), had other ideas. They are determined to bring down the UPA government for the n-deal in a trust-vote in the Lok Sabha on July 22.

Since the last few weeks, both sides have been engaged in horse-trading. Deal or no deal, the government will go to the polls without delay to get a trust vote from the people. However, it can safely be said that the landscape of coalition politics in India has changed for some time to come. The whole trust-

vote saga on the nuclear deal has turned Indian politics upside down. Right going with the left, left going with the right, and the Congress throwing money right and left like monsoon rain, as if tax payers' money is their own.

Certainly, the CPI (M) has been spoiling the party for Congress. This is not the first time that CPI (M) has done this. Ten years back, they even spoiled their own party by not taking the opportunity to lead the government at the centre and making veteran communist leader Jyoti Basu prime minister of India. It seems like the communists are not comfortable with governing in a multi-party democracy since Marx gave little direction in this regard. I may be wrong. However, this is the message that one gets from the communist regimes now.

Coming back to the trust-vote on the nuclear deal, the PM has made it clear that further development depended on nuclear energy. Why? India is not anymore a nation with a bullock-



cart economy. The Nehru-Mahalanobis approach of development does not exist anymore. Under the present global environment, it is impossible to turn the clock back. Since the economic reform initiatives by the then government of Rajiv Gandhi in early 1980s, the Indian economy has embraced well and truly the mantra of free-market and globalisation. It is incomprehensible that the circus led by CPI (M) may eventually pave the way (by default?) for the left to become a bed-fellow of the right anti-secular parties (BJP, RSS and Shiv Sena in mind).

There has been debate in Indian media about what the

CPI (M) will do, regardless of the outcome of the trust-vote, after the next general election, which is due next year? It is certain that the CPI (M) will not support the NDA led by BJP. It is possible that it will face the same music on the nuclear deal if NDA comes to power. Having said that, from a layman's perspective, the question is that if the n-deal with the US was not acceptable, would it be acceptable if a third country (for example Russia) came forward? At the end of the day, India's development stakeholders do not care whether the colour of power (energy) is red or blue.

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He-Man's name was really not her destiny



I once wrote an article about music copyright in China and the guy in charge was a Mr. Song. And another about a Hong Kong car mechanic called To Bar, pronounced "Tow Bar."

It's amazing how often you meet people with aponyms -- names which seem just right for them. Did you notice that the two US politicians who fought to delay taking action against global warming were Republicans named Doolittle and Delay?

One of the UK's top brain doctors is Lord Brain. A world-class hurdler is Maria Stepanova and a famous Israeli tennis player is Anna Smashanova.

Then there's the funeral company in Texas called Boxwell Brothers. Dentists called Payne are a dime a dozen and there's even one in the United States called Chip Silvertooth.

A common name from northwest India is Butt, and there are loads of Dr. Butts, some of whom must be proctologists. In the US there's a Chinese ophthalmologist called Dr. Look, a college professor scarily named Dr. Failor, and an insurance salesman with the wonderfully appropriate name of Justin Case.

Are these just chance? Some say not. Researcher Jen Hunt of the University of Manchester wrote in *The Psychologist* in 1994 that she

had noticed: "Authors gravitate to the area of research which fits their surname." She pointed to an article on incontinence in *The British Journal of Urology* by J.W. Splatt and D. Weedon.

Intrigued by this, New Scientist magazine coined the term Nominative Determinism, speculating that names may guide their holders into specific jobs.

It's all good fun, but a bit obvious from an Asian point of view. In this part of the world we've always assumed that one's name and destiny were indelibly connected.

South Asia is overflowing with drinks merchants named

Bottlewalla, car salesmen named Tyrewalla and umbrella salesmen named Brollywalla (walla is Urdu for "job"). Reader Noel Rands once told me about a girl he knew called Jasmine.

Sodabottlepopbottleopenerwalla. Her surname was all one word, and her grandparents were retailers of -- well, I don't have to tell you.

In East Asia, too, names are linked to destiny. For decades, it has been common in Chinese society to name a female first-born baby "Brotherwanter," to show fate that the female child's main job was to prepare the way for a male child.

In rural China, you'll find more

than 10 varieties of the name Brotherwanter from Ushering-in-a-Brother to Hoping-for-a-Brother to the rather subtle name It's-All-Right, which is short for (and I am not making this up): It's-All-Right-To-Have-A-Girl-First-Since-A-Brother-Is-Coming-Right?

I'm not sure what the girls think about this, and frankly do not wish to ask them, since this is a touchy subject and they would probably kick me to death.

But if names guide your fate, what about people who have names that one really wouldn't want as a destiny? I recall meeting Truly Man and He-Man in Hong Kong, and

both were rather delicate females (although in Chinese the meanings were less macho).

There's a girl in America named Tiny Bimbo. And a boy named Felon. Which proves what I have always said about parents: most should never be allowed to have children.

Anyway, I need to stop writing this column because it's time to go to school to fetch my three children.

Have you met them? Their names are Fetch-Dads-Drink, Earn-Big-Bucks-and-Help-Dad-Retire.

Add your name to our columnist's website at www.vittachi.com.