

Saarc spirit enlivened

Time to move from resolutions to results

THE South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation has concluded yet one more of its summits, this time in Colombo, through adopting a 41-point declaration. Obviously, the Colombo Declaration, as it is known, means to reinforce the spirit of cooperation that has been the underlying principle of Saarc since it was founded in 1985. The heads of state and government have reached four agreements, which focus on such key areas as food and security, trade, combating terrorism and dealing with climate change. The agreements reflect the perspective plan the Saarc leaders have set for themselves. It is an acknowledgement of the practical realities that must be taken care of the conclusions of the summit are to be translated into actual results.

The more important need now is for it to follow through on the intentions and produce concrete results in the time between now and the next summit. There are all the compulsion before Saarc, those that challenge it to come level with the rest of world in terms of making life better for the people of the region. Saarc can indeed do a great deal in the area of trade. The decision to have the SAFTA experts committee resolve expeditiously issues related to non-tariff and para-tariff measures is a positive one and should clear the path toward expanded regional cooperation. But such impediments as the sensitive list threaten to slow the cooperative process, which is why it is important that the list be whittled down or done away with altogether.

Then comes the matter of people-to-people cooperation in the region. The reality is that at present ties between and among governments are hobbled and unless that knot is untied, such steps as a free movement of people across borders, easier visa procedures and free flow of information will be hindered. Every crisis is an opportunity. With the world reeling from a number of problems at present, it is natural for Saarc to be affected by them. That is good reason for the body to energise itself and go into making decisions that ensure a better future for the region.

It is in the larger interest of the peoples of the region that Saarc needs to become a viable and dynamic regional body able to keep pace with the times and formulate answers to the many questions that may be buffeting it. We note that on the sidelines of the summit, the Indian and Pakistani prime ministers have met to defuse the current level of tension between them. That ought to have a salutary impact on the future course of events in the Saarc region. As for the fight against terrorism, the atmosphere of recrimination must yield place to one of trust and mutual cooperation.

Easing Dhaka's traffic jam

Proposed steps laudable

THE capital's traffic congestion has become so unbearable that the commuters cannot wait for anything that would deliver them from their horrendous daily suffering. And to that end one must welcome the DMP's plans to reduce traffic jam on the city streets as well as to address the issue of traffic harassment by the cops through a new traffic management system.

Wider roads are not the only solution to road snarl-ups. And in any event we have very little scope of doing anything to extend the existing roads in the capital except to construct flyovers, an expensive proposition - but there are many cities around our country with narrower roads than ours that are known to organise their traffic better.

That the DMP commissioner has also squashed the report that filing of a certain number of cases daily was 'mandatory' for every traffic sergeant will come as a relief to the vehicle owners. But more than that, the instructions to end haywire stopping of vehicles by the police for checking documents, that is done without any regard to the woes of the travellers, will help ease road congestion to a great degree. As it is, the situation is compounded by buses stopping at will on the main roads, sometimes right under the eyes of the law enforcers.

We are glad to see that the aspect of training of traffic policemen, which had been a neglected matter so far, is being given due emphasis -- and the DMP's efforts to address the traffic bottlenecks in the capital through laying down certain essential laws for the traffic police to follow are very welcome.

Having said that, those who use the roads have a lot to do with traffic congestion. While there must be no laxity in punishing traffic rule violators, the harassment of the road users is due partly also to the poor quality of the drivers of private cars as well as buses and heavy duty vehicles, whose lack of traffic sense is deplorable. And here the licensing authority will have to play its part by ensuring that one is issued with a driving license only after the strictest scrutiny.

We understand that the traffic department has identified 17 types, and equal number of causes, of traffic harassments and 30 ways to protect the city commuters from them. All we want is action to remove the causes -- sooner rather than later.

Globalisation: Challenges for China

Though Hu was duly confirmed for a second term last October, he faces a wider and deep array of challenges than his predecessor had known. The stakes are heightened by the globalisation process behind China's emergence, which, at the same time, makes the evolution of the mainland of central and direct concern to the world.

JONATHAN FENBY

IN the 30 years since Deng Xiaoping launched China on the path to the market, no country has benefited more from globalisation. While the United States and the European Union have profited from the breaking down of trade barriers and the spread of investment, people and knowledge, it's been the People's Republic that has made the greatest strides.

Now, as their country enters the second generation of economic reform, Deng's heirs face the challenges that come with globalisation. How the Chinese handle the challenges will be crucial not only for China but, given its role in the global economy, for the rest of the world.

China's growth has been so spectacular, its self-confidence so great, that it's easy to forget just how enormous a change the last 30 years represent. For much of the 25 years before Deng changed course in 1978, the

country's history had been one of mounting political and economic weakness accompanied by social fragmentation.

The fall of the Qing Empire in 1912 was followed by warlordism on a massive scale, and then the weak Nationalist government in Nanjing. Japanese intrusion stretched from the takeover of Manchuria in 1931 through full-scale warfare from 1937 to 1945, and then the often brutal and increasingly erratic rule of Mao Zedong, ending with the 10 years of the Cultural Revolution.

Against that background, the process launched by Deng after he won the power struggle that followed Mao's 1976 death could only be welcome change for hundreds of millions of Chinese.

Economic progress has not, of course, been accompanied by political liberalisation. Nor does China enjoy the rule of law or effective accountability -- both of which would require the Communist Party to be subject to

external review.

The party talks of encouraging internal democracy, and Prime Minister Wen Jiabao busily displayed the regime's human face when visiting the scene of the earthquake in Sichuan, and Hu Jintao unbent last week to the extent of answering a couple of chat-room questions during a visit to a newspaper website. Think-tanks debate between "new left" and "new right" prescriptions for the country, spinning theories that seek to reconcile greater democracy with continuing Communist rule.

For the reality is that no questioning of the fundamentals of the party's continuing control is permitted. Internal democracy is designed to strengthen the party, not to bring its monopoly into question. The strange combination of Marxism, Leninism, Mao and Deng thought, capitalism within a state framework, has assumed the status of the imperial Mandate of Heaven.

Dissidence is taken to equate with subversion. The common western assumption of the 1990s that economic progress would usher in democracy -- one of the underlying political arguments employed by proponents of globalisation -- has been resoundingly disproved in the world's most heavily populated nation.

The clampdown in advance of the Olympics, ranging from the arrest of human-rights activists and eviction from the city of ethnic minority workers to a curfew on bars and closure of music venues, bears further evidence of the micro-managing control the regime seeks to achieve.

That has been no obstacle to trade and foreign economic involvement in the People's Republic; indeed, it's none too difficult to draw a graph which shows that, with some lags, foreign investment in the mainland rose after each act of political repression following the 1989 Beijing massacre.

Under the post-Tiananmen Square party chief, Jiang Zemin, the equation worked robustly, particularly once inflation had been dampened in the mid-1990s. Hu took over in 2002,

intent on continuing growth but also including pursuit of a "harmonious society" to lessen disparities spawned by headlong expansion which threatens social stability.

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China's ecological disaster threatens neighbours. The Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency, which reported last year that the People's Republic had become the biggest source of carbon-dioxide emissions, now says the nation accounts for a quarter of the global total and two-thirds of the 3 percent international increase in 2007.

China's changing labour and social patterns are linked to developments stemming from its global entanglement. The era of China as the overwhelming source of cheap products may ebb as workers' expectations and demand for

skills push up wages. Shoemakers in the original manufacturing base of Guangdong in southern China are loud in their complaints about the threat from Vietnam and South Asia.

A middle class that may number 80 million is boosting demand for everything from milk and meat to cars and furniture made of fine imported timber. Input costs in industry soar as China must compete in world markets for oil, iron ore and metals.

Inflation has more than doubled in a year, and there are signs that productivity no longer fully absorbs costs -- Chinese exports to the US moved from being deflationary to inflationary last summer.

Though inflation means that real interest rates are negative, they are still higher than those now practiced by the US Federal Reserve. Combined with expectations of a continued rise in the yuan, that has attracted a flood of hot money which creates a lake of liquidity that adds to monetary instability.

Committed to ensuring continuing growth and creating 10 million jobs a year but also wanting to establish control and let air

jail. They are not going to let go of the first such opportunity. They will come out one day with the help of their lawyers and become hero from zero, as said popularly in this country.

Overnight they will enjoy the celebrity status amongst their own kind, whether they are a politician, or a bureaucrat or a thief, or a mixture of all three. Move aside sensibility for insensibility will begin in full gusto once again.

Therefore, you have to think twice before you send someone to jail. There are so many steps in between arrests and sentencing, and you miss one, you will bungle up the whole thing. The wounded men will come out soon.

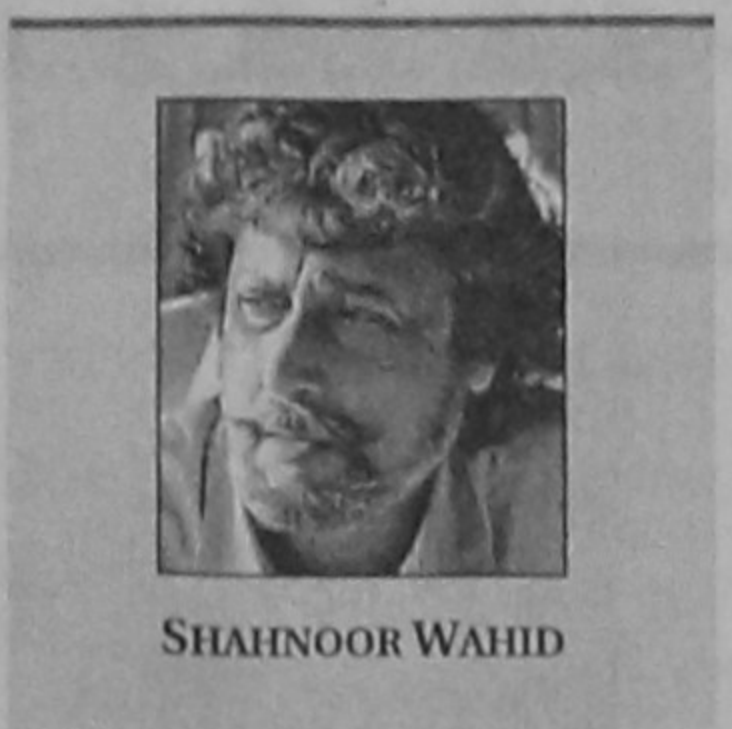
Oh, yes, the time to come out of the jail is already here, so from here on, we, the janata, shall stand by the side of the roads with flower garlands to welcome the jail returnees. No, the freed VIPs (!) would not be crying like those deportees from Kuwait because they will not come out losing anything. They would rather laugh and guffaw at their captors, as they would oust them from the mountain-top soon. The new chapter of the drama would begin with the role of the hunter and the hunted reversing quite dramatically.

I am sure, the jail returnees would profusely bless those mediocre men in the helm of affairs for their short-sightedness, for their "missed rule," which elevated them to the position of great leaders who "suffered illegal imprisonment" only for loving (!) the people of the land. Many of those jailed people would not have been elected a second time but now they have attained the status of a VIP, so no one will dare to dream of beating them in the general elections. And we shall get leaders we deserve - the Faltoos, Maltoos, Puntoos and Boltoos.

Dear readers, this could be the script of a good movie if only we could find a good director who has lived through the strange but real-life drama for the last sixteen years. No one can do justice to the film unless he has witnessed each episode of the serial and felt the pang deep inside; someone who has seen the shameful game of deception, falsehood, scam, treachery, pretence and trickery demonstrated before the common people, will be able to make a film worth preserving in our national archives for the posterity.

Shahnur Wahid is a Senior Assistant Editor of The Daily Star.

Hail to the jail returnees ...



SHAHNUR WAHID

AS I said often in the past, there is more insensibility all around than sensibility. The matter of concern is that sensibility is being pushed to the wall and it is considered the refuge of the incompetent in this country. "Sir, you will not make it big in this country if you peddle sensibility, insensibility enjoys a better market here," is the buzzword in the dark alleyways. There seems to be more laws, by-laws, amendment of laws and "competent" lawyers around to bail out insensibility whenever it gets cornered. The paradox remains embedded in our minds, how can violators of law get rescued by law? Can such laws help us build a nation that will respect rule of law? If not, then that is bad news for us.

Insensibility gets a free hand to operate, like those village quacks,

SENSE & INSENSIBILITY

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when a mediocre group of people with no ability to envision the immediate future is placed in positions of prominence in every sector. Instead of creating specialists, they end up creating more quacks. Instead of removing a few dark spots they soil the entire linen.

It is, therefore, only natural that when the mediocre will be given the rudder of a ship, they will soon take it to uncharted waters to their peril. I find that they think and act no better than Kalimuddin, the day labourer in a remote village.

Those suited booted Kalimuddins living in the citadels on the mountain-top have been doing things on a daily-wage-earning-basis, just as their rural counterpart does every day. They have been doing everything without having enough faculty of

reasoning to analyse whether whatever they were doing would sustain in the long run.

For example, one fine morning they thought they would do a great service to the nation by sending some men and women to jail. But before doing that they were not equipped with strong evidences to frame a strong case against them.

They were not aware of the various clauses and sub-clauses in the laws of the land that could be used to bring those people out from the jail. In their exuberance, they acted more like the lynching parties in the Wild West, and hastily flung the rope over the tree branch. The cheering crowd waited with bated breath to see some hanging. But when the Sheriff came with the court order they backed off. The outlaw was taken under the

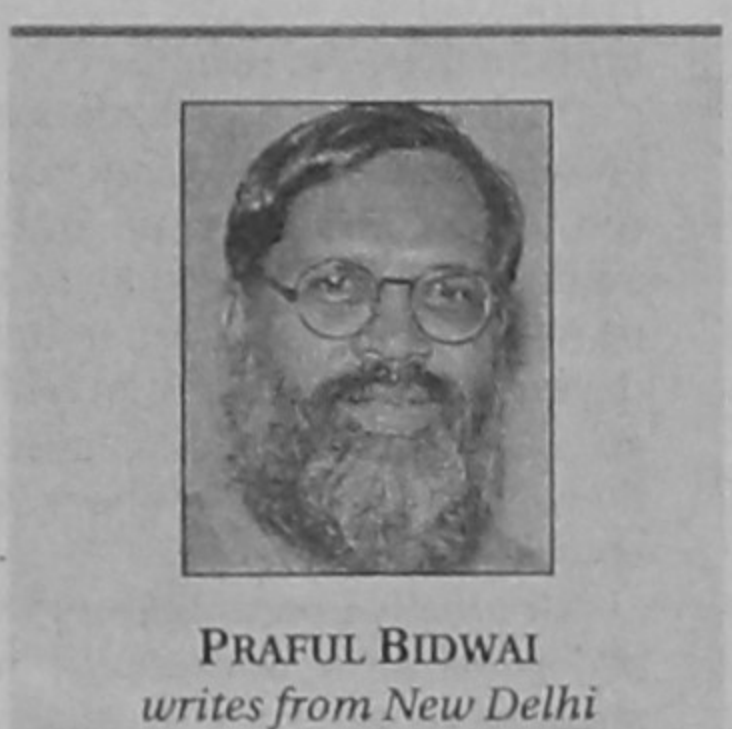
protection of law.

For some people of this country going to jail is not looked at the way many of us do. It is not considered a stigma. It brings no shame on them or their families. For them, going to jail and spending some time there is like going to an institution for training and obtaining a certificate.

The training makes them bolder, cleverer, meaner, and more ferocious, like a wounded animal. They spend longer time there and they are likely to get a strong certificate. They will have the opportunity to cash in on that for the rest of their lives.

In jail, they lick the wounds of their busted egos and wait for the opportunity to leap on the neck of their adversary. That is the name of the game, therefore, it is sheer foolishness to turn your back on those people you sent to

The limits of the BSP's politics



PRAFUL BIDWAI
writes from New Delhi

AFTER the sordid drama over the confidence vote in the Mahimohan Singh government, three trends are visible. First, the United Progressive Alliance achieved only a tarnished triumph through horse-trading. Gone is the halo around Dr Singh as someone who wouldn't stoop low to conquer.

Second, the Bharatiya Janata Party has come a cropper despite its efforts to buy support. Its ploy to depict itself as a victim of the Rs one crore "cash-for-votes" scam hasn't worked. The sting/entrapment footage, meant to indict Mr Amar Singh, is apparently blurred and falls short of clinching evidence.

The BJP is utterly confused in its reaction to the committee set up by Speaker Somnath Chatterjee to investigate the scandal. Former Home Minister LK Advani knew he should have reported the scam to the police, but instead exploited it politically.

He repeatedly pressed CNN-

THE PRAFUL BIDWAI COLUMN

None of these holds true of the BSP. Its strongly Dalit-centred ideology, even coupled with "social engineering", cannot provide the glue to sustainably unite regionalist and ethnic sub-regionalist parties, leave alone the ideologically fired Left. The BSP lacks a wide-horizon ideology or vision with distinct positions on matters like the world order, economic policy, secularism, and human rights and security. It's also deeply compromised with communalism, having allied not once, but three times, with the BJP in UP.

IBN to air the sting footage. But when CNN-IBN didn't oblige, the BJP decided to boycott it, a form of pressure bordering on blackmail.

The BJP petulantly says it won't cooperate with the "illegitimate" UPA, even on shared economic agendas. Worse, Ms Sushma Swaraj has plumbed the depths by accusing the UPA of having stage-managed the Bangalore and Ahmedabad blasts to divert attention from the "cash-for-votes" scam!

Third, the Bahujan Samaj Party's Mayawati has been catapulted to the national forefront as a new magnet for the United National Progressive Alliance parties, despite having only 17 Lok Sabha seats. The number of parties supporting her has doubled.

Ms Mayawati's high-profile national entry has ended the near-isolation of the Left after Dr Singh deceitfully approached the International Atomic Energy Agency. It has also eclipsed BJP

Prime Minister-in-waiting Advani from the headlines.

The BSP is a rising star. In Uttar Pradesh, it relentlessly expanded its vote-share and seats from 9.4 percent and 11 seats in 1989, to 11.1 percent and 67 in 1993, to 19.6 percent and 67 in 1996, to 23.2 percent and 98 in 2002.

Last year, it bagged an even more impressive 30.5 percent vote and 206 of 403 seats to become UP's first party to win a majority in 17 years.

The key to this dazzling success lay in the BSP's garnering of non-Dalit, especially upper-caste, votes. It also broke into the SP's traditional Muslim base. Its 26 Muslim MLAs outnumber the SP's 21.

This is the first time that a Dalit-centred party has acquired such a broad base anywhere in India.

The BSP now has MLAs in Bihar, Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh, Haryana and Uttarakhand. It commands the fourth biggest

share (5.3 percent) of the national vote higher than the SP's 4.3 and slightly lower than the CPM's 5.7.

Ms Mayawati is a stellar media figure because she's a Dalit and a single woman, who has fought against heavy odds, including dire poverty and male prejudice. Suddenly, the battlefield for India's Prime Ministership has expanded to include her.

But can Ms Mayawati become the core of a new Third Front? The UNPA-Left has a respectable 20 percent of the national vote and 94 Lok Sabha MPs. Some UNPA constituents, like the Telugu Desam, are likely to grow in the next election. So hopefully, it's said, the Third Front may be in the reckoning.

This linear calculus is based on wishful thinking like the inclusion of the Left's 59 seats, which may not happen. It also places abundant faith in the BSP's ability to poach on other parties.

But during the recent crisis, the BSP could only engineer a minus-

cule number of cross-votes despite its readiness to use foul means.

But let's analyse things clinically. Crucial to the success of any party in becoming the fulcrum of a broad front are three factors, besides its numerical strength: ability to provide political cohesion and ideological cement to alliances; forming a bridge between a strongly ideology-driven current like the Left, and disparate regional parties; and ability to build broad, mutually beneficial coalitions.

None of these holds true of the BSP. Its strongly Dalit-centred ideology, even coupled with "social engineering", cannot provide the glue to sustainably unite regionalist and ethnic sub-regionalist parties, leave alone the ideologically fired Left.

The BSP lacks a wide-horizon ideology or vision with distinct positions on matters like the world order, economic policy, secularism, and human rights and security. It's also deeply compromised with communalism, having allied not once, but three times, with the BJP in UP.

This is also true of most UNPA constituents, which had past alliances with the BJP. Their future desertion would reduce the UNPA to an empty shell.

The BSP cannot provide a bridge between the Left and UNPA allies. It has no special affinity with the Left, which has

always criticised it for its "non-ideological" approach and corruption.

It's hard to characterise the BSP as a Left-of-Centre force, with a compassionate, humane agenda. Its notion of inclusiveness has more in common with patronage than a shared collective destiny.

Finally, the BSP cannot easily provide alliances through which its partners gain without cutting into each other's vote-bases. Its strong base is confined to UP. It only has a 3 to 5 percent vote in other Northern states, barring Madhya Pradesh and Punjab, where it crossed 7 percent.

This makes it a formidable spoiler, not a winner. The BSP can of course transfer its votes to allies where it's strong. But the reverse isn't true.

The BSP is certain to improve its Lok Sabha tally, probably to 45, even 60 seats. But it'll find it hard to replicate the UP model. The conditions that made that possible politicisation of subaltern layers, a prolonged political impasse, and upper-caste alienation from major parties don't exist in other states. Outside UP, its gains will probably be small.

The UNPA will have a future only if the Left backs it. But the Left cannot ignore the unsavory past of many UNPA constituents, or Ms Mayawati's monumental opportunism, corruption and personality cult.

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.

out of the bubble, the authorities dither over policies.

Progress towards the "harmonious society" appears halting and tens of thousands of protests break out each year over causes ranging from land seized by officials to pollution and corruption.

In all this, China's globalised role and the path charted since 1978 mean that the mainland cannot retreat behind the walls of a command economy. The balance of exports is shifting, with the EU replacing the US as the main destination and sales to other emerging economies growing.

That could shelter the mainland somewhat against a global slowdown. But, until the day when domestic demand is strong enough to soak up production from an economy still forecast to grow at 9 to 10 percent this year, exports -- and thus, the world -- will stay at the heart of the expansion the leadership needs to retain support and keep the country on its dictated path.

As a result, China needs a peaceful world with open trading channels. Protectionist noises from the US campaign trail or from European politicians evoke scornful remarks from Chinese

officials about the West not embracing the globalisation it launched. But the political threat is not one Beijing can ignore; a trade war would be a disaster, one that the People's Republic would be ill-advised to encourage through its heavy-handed actions elsewhere.

Hu and Wen have an extraordinarily complex balancing act to perform, perhaps the most challenging management task on earth. While they cannot retreat, the way ahead is understandably unclear for a regime that took power after decades of national turmoil following the sweeping away of old imperial certainties, and then spent its first 27 years under a willful, murderous but charismatic potentate who increasingly became out of touch with reality, but still presented himself as the incarnation of a reborn nation.

The first generation of China's globalisation may prove, in retrospect, to have been the relatively easy part. The work in progress ahead will be the true test.

Jonathan Fenby is author of 'Modern China: The Fall and Rise of a Great Power, 1850 to the Present', just published by Ecco HarperCollins.

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