

Pranab Mukherjee's productive visit

New doors open for Bangladesh-India cooperation

A good degree of significance was attached to the just-concluded visit to Dhaka by Indian External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee. It has been lived up to by the fact that two agreements were signed by India and Bangladesh during the minister's visit. Of course, one of the two deals is basically a renewal of an old one. It is, however, the new agreement, the Bilateral Investment Promotion and Protection Agreement (Bipa), which can be considered as a distinctly forward-looking move in relations between the two countries. The benefits that will accrue from the deal will be of a mutual nature. But what is certainly important from Bangladesh's perspective is that Bipa allows Dhaka to invest in the Indian market, particularly in the northeast of that country. For a nation that has for years been endeavouring to have its goods gain a market in India, Bipa should make a difference. Besides, Bangladesh's need to have India cutback on the negative list involving Dhaka's exportable goods to Delhi may finally be met, hopefully a good part of the way. The reality is that from here on, India and Bangladesh will enjoy Most Favoured Nation relations with each other. That is surely a good augury.

Add to that the fact that the Indian minister's visit has now made it possible for the two countries to have their goods pass through each other's territory to their ultimate destinations. For Bangladesh, its trade dealings with Nepal and Bhutan will now be facilitated through Indian territory. Having said that, there are the other substantive issues that Mr. Mukherjee touched upon with the Bangladesh government. The deliberations on security are reflective of the common approach that Dhaka and Delhi could adopt, in their mutual interest, in the coming days. With security concerns being a matter of common concern, the two countries will need to follow through on the talks the Indian minister has had here with his Bangladesh counterpart and others. And with security comes the question of border management. The various incidents involving India's BSF and Bangladesh's BDR in recent times are a hint of the distance the two countries yet need to bridge in order to build confidence between themselves. In this regard, it may be pointed out that a few kilometers of the undemarcated Indo-Bangladesh border should be delimited sooner rather than later.

Overall, Pranab Mukherjee's visit opens up new areas of cooperation between India and Bangladesh. The cordiality with which he was received as well as the seriousness with which the two agreements were penned is indicative of other avenues of cooperation between the two countries in the times ahead.

Water supply hiccups

Wasa needs to pull up its socks

A PART from falling far short of the demand, water supply is often erratic, and over the past two weeks, residents of Dhaka are finding Wasa water to be smelly and dirty.

The Wasa authorities have put the blame on pollution of rivers, the sources of surface water which, they argue, make their task of supplying clean water extremely difficult. The point is easy to grasp, but it is unclear why the indiscriminate dumping of industrial and other wastes into the rivers around the cities is still going on unabated. Did Wasa take the issue up with the government to make the industries abide by anti-river pollution laws?

The Wasa authorities have tried to explain why the water supplied in the city is found to be unfit for use. But there are many other problems which are not so easy to explain. For example, over 75 per cent of Wasa customers in divisional headquarters have said that the Wasa authorities did not respond to their complaints. Obviously, sending accumulated bills for several months together, which put pressure on the consumers, is another example of bureaucratic malfunctioning of the utility body. Yet, the customers are regularly paying for Wasa water. So, lack of accountability and gross insensitivity to the needs of the customers are evident.

Wasa's supply system is plagued by other problems too which have never been addressed in right earnest. The old and worn-out supply lines are responsible for wastage and mixing of filthy substances with water. Moreover, there is pilferage and mismanagement which could never be stopped. True, the task is huge, but the Wasa authorities have to begin somewhere to set things right.

The issue of reducing the huge and ever increasing gap between demand and supply cannot be dealt with unless Wasa goes for enhancing its capacity. Here resource constraints and the depleting sources of water stand in the way of achieving the targets. But Wasa can, with all its constraints, still perform better by showing a greater degree of commitment to its tasks.

Of books, of proximity to power

The point should not be missed, which is that it is always a healthy idea for an individual to write a book once he has taken himself out of a position of influence and has spent a reasonably good length of time reflecting on the events and incidents that once shaped his place in the scheme of things.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

It is often a good thing when someone in the corridors of power, or one who has enjoyed being in power, comes forth with a book. The general feeling, though, is that when men who no more happen to be in power or around it get down to the business of writing books, they arouse our genuine pleasure in reading what they have to tell us. By that measure, so the consensus goes, General Moeen U. Ahmed should have appeared before us with his new book quite sometime, or a long time, after he had departed from the position he happens to occupy at this time. His new book has generated quite a good deal of talk, especially in the drawing rooms of the urban elite. For obvious reasons.

Books generally generate a good deal of controversy, especially if they deal with politics. The controversy is incredibly intense if those who produce such books do so without first having relinquished the power they have exercised for a rather long period of time. The point should not be missed, which is that it is always a healthy idea for an individual to write a book once he has taken himself out of a position of influence and has spent a reasonably good length of time reflecting on the events and incidents that once shaped his place in the scheme of things.

Now, the difficulty with the Moeen book is two-fold. In the first place, his narration of events is perilously close to the events he

had a huge hand in shaping over the last two years and, so, is one side of the story. In the second (and this is where the questions pour in), as he is still in active government service, one could and does naturally wonder if he is empowered to produce a work where he can give free rein to his thoughts on politics and statecraft.

These reflections take us back to the 1960s, when Field Marshal Ayub Khan foisted on the people of Pakistan an autobiographical work he called *Friends Not Masters*. The cynics will of course tell you it was a ghostwritten work, the handiwork of the influential bureaucrat Altaf Gauhar. Let that be.

The point here is that *Friends Not Masters* ought not to have appeared before Ayub Khan left office. He was still in power and so was not expected to write on the events that had shaped his life and career in a dispassionate manner. He was close to everything of significant note in his times. And so when the book came to us, it did not exactly inspire in us that zeal you need in order to plunge into a reading of published material.

Remember, though, that Ayub Khan and Moeen U. Ahmed are not the only individuals we know who have, being in power or being powerful, have given us thoughts to mull over. There is General Pervez Musharraf as well. His *In The Line of Fire* was a panegyric to himself. It made good reading, only because we were all interested in plumbing the depths of his ego.



Naturally, we came away unimpressed, if not exactly appalled.

For men of power or historical influence, it is therefore crucial that they opt for the intellectual once they have walked away into the twilight. No one is about to suggest that, at a remove from the events they have been part of, they will exude wisdom. No, they will not.

You only have to study the horrendous book which General Amir Abdullah Khan Niazi wrote years ago to explain away his role in the Bangladesh war of 1971. He was positively asinine during the war. His book only re-emphasised the buffoonery that had always been part of his character. But, yes, there are people who help to shape events, even cause tragedy, before moving off into the shadows and then waiting for years to tell their version of the tale.

Robert McNamara, he of the so-called club of the best and the brightest in 1960s' America, remains known as one man who

made a mess of things in Vietnam. He left the Johnson administration in 1968 and went over to the World Bank, where he served as president for thirteen years. And then he decided, from a pure sense of conscience, to reflect on Vietnam. The result was his mea culpa, *In Retrospect*. It is more than a book. It is a confession. McNamara admits he and his colleagues in government were wrong about Vietnam. You can be certain he would have caused moral outrage had he written his book in his days as secretary of defence under Kennedy or Johnson.

Ah, let us pause. And let us wonder if, now that General Moeen has spoken, other men -- Iajuddin Ahmed, Fakhruddin Ahmed, General Masududdin, General M.A. Matin -- will one of these days, arise to let us in on what they have known and done in our emergency times.

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Transit issue with India

Transit or transshipment through Bangladesh is not a simple issue. But before providing it to India, a detailed study must be undertaken on the advantages and disadvantages that would accrue to people of Bangladesh.

HARUN UR RASHID

A debate has been raging in the country on whether transit facilities should or shouldn't be given to India. Some argue that it shouldn't be given unless some core bilateral issues with India are resolved, while some have advanced the view that transit is an economic issue for trade facilitation and should not be politicised. Some have argued that what India wants is not transit but a corridor.

Whichever view one holds, the fact of the matter is that the transit issue is a complex one. It is a multi-faceted issue. I shall discuss it in the following paragraphs:

Corridor/Transit/Transshipment
The connotation of transit is to be distinguished from that of corridor. In a corridor, a country gives some kind of rights on the land either under lease or within a legal framework to the other country, while in transit there is no question of rights involved in the land territory allowed for transit.

For example, under the Bangladesh-India 1974 Land Boundary Agreement, Bangladesh wanted a lease in perpetuity for a 178 metres x 85 metres area of India's

territory near Tin Bigha to connect enclave Dahagram with the mainland of Bangladesh. But, eventually, Bangladesh did not get the corridor from India.

India wants to dispatch goods from western parts of India to its seven landlocked northeastern states through Bangladesh, and no kind of rights exists on the land territory of Bangladesh. This is transit, an inter-country passage, like waterway-transit already provided to India since 1972.

Transshipment is distinct from transit. Transshipment refers to the same inter-country passage using Bangladeshi-owned transportation, whereas in transit Indian-owned surface transport will move through from one end to the other.

In Europe, Germany or Austria send goods to Italy through Switzerland. Another instance of transit -- Alaska dispatches goods to mainland US through Canada.

Is transit an economic issue?

Some argue that transit is an economic issue. It facilitates trade, therefore it may be perceived as such. I would argue that this is conceivable, but for most of the cases political relations define economic rela-

tions. History is replete with examples of friendly political relations providing the climate and the incentive for forging closer economic relations. For example, why does Bangladesh not have economic relations with Israel? It is because there is no political relationship with that country.

In that context, for creating a congenial political climate, India has to come up with fair and just proposals to resolve the aforesaid bilateral "bread and butter issues."

Is transit consistent with sealing the border?

Another prickly issue is fencing by India along the Bangladesh-India border. Does sealing-off Bangladesh make India a trusted neighbour?

India, as of June 2007, has been quietly sealing itself off from Bangladesh, fencing 2,500 kilometres in the past seven years. The fencing project will eventually reach across 3,300 kilometres, or 2050 miles, hundreds of rivers, and long stretches of forests and fields.

Of the total 3,300 kilometres fencing, 577 kilometres are in the Assam-Meghalaya border. Work on 91 kilometres has been completed and has been in progress along 129 kilometres. Gradually, India will seal off the 577 kilometres long border in this sector.

The US decision to fence 1,100 kilometres of the Mexican border triggered months of political debate, ranging across immigration policy to the environmental impact. When Israel announced it would build a 680-kilometre barrier around the West Bank, an international outcry

erupted.

There has been barely a ripple over India's far larger project begun in earnest in 2000. The Bangladesh parliament must now discuss and debate how and in what way the fencing has an impact on the environment and the people who live in border areas?

While India has been silently sealing off its border, it wants land transit through Bangladesh. Is it not contrary to the spirit behind the fencing of the India-Bangladesh border?

To sum up

Indian Prime Minister Dr. Singh, in a speech on April 3, 2007 at the Saarc New Delhi Summit, spoke of "full regional connectivity" among Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan. Has it been achieved?

Transit or transshipment through Bangladesh is not a simple issue. But before providing it to India, a detailed study must be undertaken on the advantages and disadvantages that would accrue to people of Bangladesh. The study may include the infrastructure, cost-benefit analysis, risk analysis, and management and security that involve health hazards and environmental impact of hundreds of vehicles moving through Bangladesh. And it would be subject to discussion in the parliament.

The transit issue should be viewed with a comprehensive approach together with other issues mentioned above, and cannot be treated separately.

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Worst job in the world

Pakistan's Prime Minister, Yousuf Raza Gilani, leads a fractious Parliament that is facing at once a major economic crisis, a spreading border insurgency and still-tense relations with his country's powerful military. He spoke to Newsweek's Lally Weymouth at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. Excerpts:

Weymouth: I had dinner with Benazir Bhutto before her death, talking about the penetration of al Qaeda and other terror groups into Pakistan, and she said: "I knew it was bad, but I didn't know how bad it was until I came back here." Do you share her fear?

Gilani: She had a concern about the country because she knew the government was not in safe hands and democracy is the real answer. On the February 18 last year, when the election took place, it was the pro-democratic forces that won the election in Pakistan.

What about al Qaeda's penetration of the tribal areas, North-West Frontier Province, Swat and Baluchistan?

In earlier days ... there was no real action-taking place in those areas. This time the government is taking serious action against the militants who are coming from Uzbekistan (and) Chechnya, and Arabs and the Taliban. We are fighting them and they

are feeling the heat. Even so, aren't you concerned about the lack of government control in certain areas of Pakistan, like Swat?

Certainly not.

I know US officials are concerned. We have the will and we have the ability. We don't have the capacity. The capacity I am talking about is the law-enforcement agencies like the Frontier Corps or the police because the army is not a permanent solution for anything. Therefore, we have appealed to the world and to the Americans that they should strengthen the capacity of our law-enforcement agencies.

How do you feel about President Obama's election?

We are positive about his election. We think that he will go for a change because military action is not the only solution to the problem. Some new strategy should be evolved. I agree with Obama and I support him nominating an envoy, Richard Holbrooke,

for this region because he realises it is a regional problem.

How do you feel about the US raids being conducted from Afghanistan into Pakistan?

My plea would be -- as we have a multi-dimensional cooperation with the United States and a strategic partnership -- that we should have more intelligence sharing between the two countries. So when actionable and credible information is shared with us, we would be allowed to hit [targets] ourselves instead of the Americans.

It appeared that former President Pervez Musharraf was riding a tiger with Pakistani-based terror groups Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jamaat-ul-Dawa. He would promise senior US officials that he would control such groups, but he did not do enough. Can your government do more?

Certainly, yes. We have already arrested the main leaders of Jamaat-ul-Dawa and Lashkar-e-Taiba. We have frozen their accounts and put them in jail, and are investigating their affairs.

But can the civilian government overcome the army's sympathy for these groups?

The military and the civilian government ... are totally in line with each other and there is no difference of opinion. They are one and the same.

You are having trouble with your economy, aren't you?

Certainly, yes. When the oil prices went up and the food commodities also went up, we had problems ... We are a frontline state fighting against terrorism and extremism, and we are paying a heavy price for that ... One suicide-bomb attack creates a flight of capital, and no investment.

The world should look after us, and the world should know that we are catering to the needs of 3.5 million Afghan refugees.

What do you need from America?

From the US, I can say that the Biden-Lugar bill should be expedited. It provides funds for development assistance to troubled areas of the world.

Is there anything you have to say about the attack on Mumbai?

We were having excellent relations with India. We were on good terms with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. But with this incident all of our confidence-building measures became futile. Now you can imagine who is the beneficiary of this -- the terrorists. Therefore, I assure you and I assure India and I assure the world that whatever information has been given to us, we will probe into it and whoever was involved we will try according to our laws, and we will not allow our territory to be used for terrorism.