

Countdown to catastrophe

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WITH potholed roads, noxious fumes, contaminated water and garbage littered all over the city, the picture of Dhaka is grim. Conscious citizens express their concern about the livability of the Dhaka city itself. Undeniably true, the city is now under assault on all fronts -- land, water and air.

Garbage has posed a major threat to health and sanitation of the people in and around the city limits. In many cases, garbage is not picked up in the teeming city suburbs. Filthy water and human excreta along with other wastes in choked drains stagnate throughout the year till the rainy season washes a part of it into the rivers Buriganga, Shitalakhya and adjoining city lakes and wetlands.

Dhaka City Corporation can, at best, pick up half of the 4000 tons of garbage generated daily but their disposal poses further threat to health and sanitation of the citizenry. Nearly one million tones of garbage every year is dumped into public land leading into the water we drink,

mingling with the air we breathe. The rest of the fifty percent of the solid waste generated daily is allowed to decompose and putrefy on the roadside. Quite a substantial part of it goes into the drains, choking them and creating slush and stink all around, besides becoming breeding grounds for diseases. The city dwellers have to live in an environment thick with foul smell coming out from the stinking and clogged underground drains.

The sewerage system is abysmal. It was learnt from Wasa sources that out of 13 lakh cubic metres of sewage generated daily only 50,000 cubic metres could be treated. Reports indicate that the river Buriganga, Shitalakhya, Turag, Balu and adjoining wetlands including the Gulshan, Banani and Uttara lakes receive an estimated 12 lakh metres of raw sewage and waste water everyday. The river Buriganga has turned into a narrow polluted canal due to illegal encroachments on both banks and indiscriminate disposal of raw sewage, waste and effluents from factories and industries all around

the river. Residents of the city are being slowly poisoned by lead, chromium, cadmium and other hazardous toxic materials leaking from dyeing, textile and iron-smelting factories including the Hazaribagh tannery.

Leaving aside the Buriganga and Shitalakhya that now symbolise not life but death, water in the Gulshan, Baridhara and Uttara lakes is now a lifeless receptacle of human wastes, raw sewage and toxic industrial effluents from various industrial units of Tejgaon, Tongi and Badda areas. According to a study conducted by DoE in the recent past these water bodies carry a bacteria count of about 1200 in place of 200 that is considered to be a tolerable count in water bodies.

As the capital city unfolds, population pressure increases, and industrial concerns expand and the society as a whole prospers, its trash -- mainly hazardous plastic materials and packaging -- including electronic and medical wastes -- is growing exponentially. With failure to reprocess waste, Dhaka city is running out of space to dump the growing mountains of garbage. The problem did not result from shortage of money and manpower, but something more -- an appalling lack of will to cleanse the rot in the system that has led to this sorry state. If only the Dhaka city Mayor would make a visit in person to these places he would perhaps understand the depth of the

problem.

People are being forced to buy, eat and consume disease-carrying food. It only speaks of the slothful city corporation activities unyielding to change outdated waste disposal practices that can no longer keep pace with population growth. The densely packed high-rise residential area of Dhanmondi is now bustling with schools, coaching centers, clinics. Shopping malls and community centers, the number of which are way beyond its holding capacity.

Fortunately the informal system of waste recycling works somewhat through rag pickers who are mostly destitute children. But only about 10 percent of the waste could be recycled in this way. With the failure to reprocess the waste, the capital city is running out of space to dump the growing mountains of garbage. Worse, the city's landfills are hotbeds of disease. Moreover medical wastes, mostly toxic from the clinics and pathological laboratories situated in the residential areas are leaking into the neighbourhood and spreading disease and infections.

With commitment and good intention, sometime an impossible task can be accomplished. While preparing to host the 13th SAARC Summit in 2005, this somewhat drab Dhaka turned ecstatic with roads cleared of debris, sidewalks and adjacent buildings decorated and illuminated from airport to Bangabhaban. The garbage heaped



Dhaka is slowly running out of space.

around the street corners were swept away as an army of city corporation workers and other agencies moved in for the beautification work. It was a rare spectacle.

But this intention did not continue after the SAARC leaders left. Our leaders do not work for people. Of late, Dhaka has attained the distinction of being the most polluted city in the world. Unfortunately our city has suffered at the hands of the policy makers. The present AL-led government must take note of the fact that there is a feeling of disgust and disen-

chantment about government policies because of the way the BNP-Jamaat alliance ruled the country during the last five years. The present ruling party must remember that if our cities looked like proper cities instead of slums, and water bodies like rivers and lakes were maintained properly, sewages drained out and villages provided with basic amenities, then there would be continuous support and public participation.

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Korea's leadership guides

South Korea believes in moving forward through technology innovation. One of the most wired countries in the world; it has recently been ranked second among 110 countries in 'innovation leadership', a report published by the Boston Consulting Group in April 2009.

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THE world -- and Asia -- has been watching with great care developments in the Korean peninsula. There is the unease associated with the irresponsible decisions adopted by North Korea and fascination about how South Korea is responding to these challenges and, at the same time, trying to expand its sphere of influence in the neighbouring region and also in the Middle East.

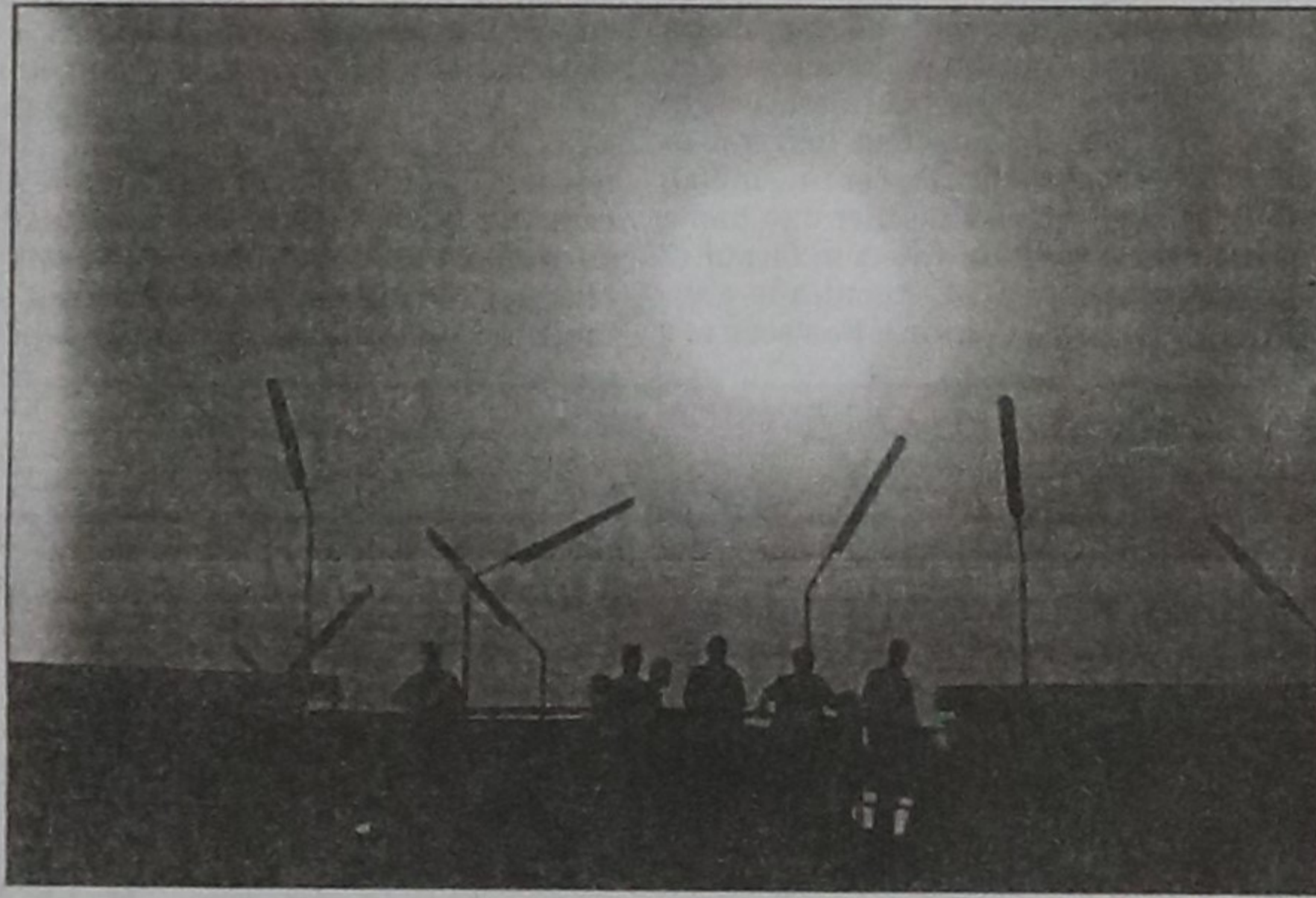
I have watched South Korea evolve over the last forty years -- from a developing country with a per capita income less than Pakistan to its present status of a developed country, which is a member of the OECD and G-20. We have seen how South Korea has associated itself as a development and business partner of Bangladesh over the last thirty years.

Entrepreneurs from that country have invested not only in our economic paradigm and created employment opportunities but have also urged other foreign units to participate and share in our efforts to achieve our latent potential. It is this positive attitude that has taken Korea

to where it is today and made possible their extended presence in many other countries in the Far East, in Southeast Asia and also in Australia.

South Korea believes in moving forward through technology innovation. One of the most wired countries in the world; it has recently been ranked second among 110 countries in 'innovation leadership', a report published by the Boston Consulting Group in April 2009. Singapore was first, Switzerland third and the USA eighth. The study measured innovation in two categories: inputs and outputs. Input factors included government policy and outputs included R&D efforts, advanced technology and the impact of innovation on the country's economic growth.

This use of innovation in its approach towards manufacturing, trade and economic activity has also found its way in recent times into its management of international relations. The last few months have seen several interesting and pragmatic initiatives that have not only expanded its political frontiers but also comprehensively facilitated the growth



Can Korea show Bangladesh a way forward?

and dimensions of its economic planning in the field of diplomacy.

Korean President Lee Myung-bak demonstrated this re-appraisal and shifts in the focus of Seoul's foreign policy by initiating, earlier this year in March, a decision to engage more actively with Asia-Pacific nations. Such a step was consistent with earlier steps taken with regard to Korea's involvement in Iraq and relationship with Japan and China.

It may be recalled that this approach of forward-planning started with Korea ending its four-year peacekeeping mission in Iraq and pulling out its troops from that country. It would be important to

note here that Korea managed to stay out of controversial waters in that country by not participating in military engagements but restricting itself to offering free medical assistance and vocational training courses to Iraqi residents living in and around the northern Iraqi city of Irbil.

This astute move and its past goodwill gestures have now evolved into a more pro-active engagement with that oil rich country. On February 24 this year, South Korea and Iraq agreed on a \$3.35 billion oil-for-development deal that will enable Korea to participate in the construction of power generation facilities in Iraq, in return for a stake in oil fields in Iraq's

southern region of Basra. The deal will also allow Korea eventually to access to 2 billion barrels of crude oil -- an amount enough to cover roughly three years of its oil demand.

Similarly, there was, late last year in December 2008, a realistic step to widen economic ties with Japan and China. An unprecedented trilateral summit was convened in Fukuoka, Japan between the leaders of these three countries. It concluded with the leadership agreeing to expanding areas of cooperation, in promoting free trade, fiscal expansion and currency swaps to weather the then emerging global economic crisis.

Another element that emerged from the meeting was the view that closer cooperation among the three would enhance the development of the 'entire world, as well as the region.' Such strategic planning was probably one step better than what was taking place at that time within the European Union.

I will now refer to the latest efforts introduced in March this year. I am taking special note of these initiatives because we talk so much about the need for economic diplomacy in Bangladesh. We have a lot to learn from the South Korean leadership and policy-planners in this regard.

Last year, Korean diplomacy was concentrated on the four global superpowers that affect Korea the most -- USA, China, Japan and Russia. A conscious effort has now been introduced to reach out to some of Korea's important neighbours -- New Zealand, Australia and Indonesia.

This has been an example of an attempt to establish tailored economic cooperation relationships. To this end, Korea has decided to effectively use its technology in information, telecommunications and defence (by meeting special needs in this sector in Indonesia) in return for energy and natural resources. The use of such a strategic approach was part of my learning experience during my recent visit to Korea on the invitation of the Korea Foundation.

I must admit that President Lee's innovative approach is an example that we could follow in South Asia in general and in Bangladesh in particular. Our policy planners also need to think of innovative steps. Our new leadership in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs should also consider using their visits to countries in different regions for convening regional meetings of our envoys and providing our diplomats with tailored tasks after receiving de-briefing from them on existing issues.

We must not forget that each diplomatic mission has its own special area of engagement and also strategic needs that need to be addressed. A more hands on approach, as exemplified by Korea, is what we need. Innovation should be the buzz word of the day for future strategic planning not only pertaining to our bilateral relationships but also in meeting of our commitments in the multilateral sphere.

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Can Pakistan say no?

That situation has lasted 62 years. This is now almost an article of faith for all conservative sections. To move away would be such a radical shift in Pakistan policy that it is hard to imagine it can be agreed to.

M.B. NAQVI

ONLY one newspaper has carried the story. It was about the four-hour in-camera briefing of the Parliament by Pakistan Army Chief on May 15. No one knows whether the account is accurate but it does look like

being based on that briefing.

Supposing the account is accurate, we do not definitely know whether the briefing was confined simply to informing the Parliament of either the Pakistan Army decisions that have been authoritatively taken or it was at least thinking of the Pakistan Army made known to the

Parliament that the Army cannot be withdrawn from its locations of covering the expected attack routes or alternatively to mount its own operations. The question is of very high significance. The background is well-known.

The Americans have been trying hard in their Afghan-Pak thinking to make Pakistan withdraw the bulk of its Army from positions of confronting India to its western borders where the Taliban trouble is still going strong. What is clear is that Pakistan Army is simply not willing to withdraw from positions of checkmating Indian military forces.

The next question arises whether Pakistan would continue to resist American pressures to relieve the bulk of its troops to serve on its northwestern frontier. The raison d'etre of Pakistan was that it could not live in a Hindu-dominated India. Pakistan in its first partial year of existence devoted some 43 per cent of its budget to defence. It was meant in Muslim League government's thinking that it would prevent Pakistan from being gobbled up by India.

That situation has lasted 62 years. This is now almost an article of faith for all conservative sections. To move away would be such a radical shift in Pakistan policy that it is hard to imagine it can be agreed to. The Americans are recommending such a radical departure from traditional Pakistani view that has congealed into an ideology. The conservative political class -- which is most of it -- does think that India is an existential and permanent threat to Pakistan. To move away from the original is now too hard an

exercise. No major request of Pakistan Army, to one's knowledge, has ever been rejected by Islamabad, whether democratic or a dictatorship at the time.

On the other hand, Pakistan agreed to join the west in lieu of military and some economic aid. The Americans were clear headed. They had made it plain from day one that their aid is not to be used against India. But General Ayub Khan, the first Commander-in-Chief, believed that what can America do if we do use its aided equipment? He did use it in 1965 war and the Americans were angry. They imposed sanctions on Pakistan; aid was suspended for some years.

But the Americans always knew that Pakistan would do such a thing when needed. They showed their anger more for the record than actual punishment of Pakistan. Later America relented and the aid was resumed. New sanctions were imposed on Pakistan and were fairly quickly lifted. There are contrary considerations on this subject.

Pakistan and its Army cannot possibly annoy Americans in any big way. Without American aid Pakistan Army cannot be sustained. It now requires anything from \$500 million to 1 billion a year in foreign exchange. This is one consideration. There are others: Can Pakistan say no to what Americans may insist on? Can Pakistan sustain a policy of defiance to America? It is easier said in a conference or in a briefing. Some political posturing is permissible by the donors but not in terms of fundamental choices.

The Americans today are demanding a different fundamental choice by Pakistan

that goes wholly against the thinking behind the Pakistan Movement and later politics of Pakistan. If a fundamental change has to come about it will not be because of someone else saying so. It is only up to India and Pakistan to compose their differences; no one else can do so.

Let us not forget the reasons why this great Hindu-Muslim problem of Indian Empire arose. One asserts that it did not exist before 1857 when Mangal Panday, the leader of the 1857 Mutiny, was demanding of the rebellion's aim as no more than the restoration of powers and privileges of the Mughal King Bahadur Shah Zafar. He was a devout Hindu. So were many other devout Hindus who were loyal citizens of Mughal Empire. If they could rebel against the rising British power and demanded the restitution of Mughal power, it simply means that the Hindu-Muslim problem did not really exist.

To come back to the particular debate, Pakistan is ruled by a political class that is largely absentee landlords of large sizes. Their present status owes their origin to the loyalty of their ancestors to the British who restored large estates to their trusted people. The British intention was clear: They were creating a new ruling class in the then India that would always support the British. The behaviour of this absentee landlords class of large landholdings could always be trusted by the British.

The question arises how did this Hindu-Muslim problem arise in a matter of say 80 or so years prior to the partition of India. What the British did was deliberate.

Their intention was to place one community against the other. For the purpose they made religion the main identity of a person for official purposes. Which is one reason why this Hindu-Muslim problem arose. Through slow stages the British played Muslims against the Hindus and delayed the freedom.

After 1906 the Hindus were grouped to vote for Hindu representatives in various bodies. Hindus voted for Hindus and Muslims voted for Muslims. What was the upshot? Muslims seemed to need more aid and support from the British. 'The Hindus are ahead of us in education and in economic activity; they have already some industries and would go on progressing leaving us behind'. This was inherently anti-Hindu. This became the raison d'etre for Pakistan after Jinnah took over the League in 1937.

The question now is: can America, Britain or any other power order India Pakistan to make up? It is simply not possible. If ever a reconciliation comes about, it will be through political forces of India and Pakistan coalescing together and reconciling with one another in realistic stages for their own reasons.

Then there is the sordid turf reasons. If Pakistan Army is not needed to deter India then what is it meant for. Pakistan Army's basic need was India and not Taliban or any other passing show. Other enemies cannot last like India. Army's longevity depends on a big permanent threat. That is way to save the job for the boys.

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Looking for peace in a troubled land.