

Why are some Bangladeshis anti-Indian?

Neighbouring countries are likely to have contentious issues but they need to be resolved not through megaphone diplomacy but by engaging in reasoned dialogue through quiet diplomacy. Anti-Indianism which has become the "first principle" -- almost a default position -- for many in Bangladesh stands in the way of trust-building between the two neighbours.

HABIBUL HAQUE KHONDKER

EVER if one likes the Indian cricket team, he or she would be afraid to express that aloud in the presence of a room full of Bangladeshis because there will be several for whom it would be too much to take. However admiring individual Indians like Vidya Balan or A.R. Rahman is okay. But collectively anything Indian is bad in the opinion of a considerable section of Bangladeshis. My recollections are drawn from the days long before the Tipaimukh controversy. How can we account for the widespread anti-Indian sentiment in Bangladesh?

Are neighbouring countries always suspicious of one another? As one wise man said: a solid fence is a precondition for friendly neighbours.

As a student in Canada long ago I noticed that Canadians were not very fond of their neighbour to the south. Some fellow students complained of

their airwaves being dominated by the US media while others made fun of US ignorance of Canada. As I went to study in an American university later I was appalled to find out how little they knew about their northern neighbour. But never did I meet a Canadian who said that she or he is anti-American.

In Mexico, there is a saying: "God is so far and America so near." This is understandable because Mexico lost a good portion of her territory (California, Texas and parts of New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada, etc) to its powerful neighbour.

Several years ago, while on a visit to New Zealand I had a friendly conversation with a gentleman serving juicy veal steak at a party at Massey University, Palmerston North. We discussed the quality of New Zealand veal and lamb and gradually moved to cricket. At some point, I dropped the question, if there is a cricket match between New Zealand and Australia which team would he support. His response was that it was a political

question. He avoided an answer.

Once at the famed teachers' lounge of Dhaka University, I found only one colleague who like me was offended by the fact that everyone we knew supported the Pakistani cricket team. It took me quite some time to understand that supporting the Pakistan team is not the same as supporting the state of Pakistan.

Professor Amartya Sen admitted in one of his essays that he is a big fan of the Pakistani team and that does not make him anti-Indian. Professor Sen gave the example of his admiration of the Pakistan cricket team by way of criticising right-wing Hindu nationalists in India who often question the loyalty of the Indian Muslims for their alleged support for the Pakistani cricket team.

While in Singapore I noticed that many Singaporeans would go to Johor Bahru, across the border into Malaysia for seafood dinner, which was considerably cheaper with Ringgit values hovering at half of the Singapore dollar. The pragmatic Singaporean while filling their stomachs with delicacies would also fill their automobiles with cheaper gasoline in Malaysia.

At some point, however, the Singapore government imposed a new law to discourage this practice by making sure that the departing cars' gas tanks are at least half-filled. And yes, randomly, cars were checked at the border and violators were fined. Singapore and Malaysia had their

share of disputed issues ranging from water sharing to a Malaysian railway station in Singapore to the ownership of some islands.

The leaders sat across the tables and talked it over in a bid to resolve these issues. Malaysia and Singapore even went to international arbitration over the claim of a disputed island but never did such frictions impact the cordiality of the citizens of these two countries.

Never had I met a Singaporean who called himself anti-Malaysian. I had Malaysian Chinese friends and students who having finished their studies in Singapore returned to Malaysia while others chose to stay on and took up Singapore's residency while keeping their Malaysian citizenship.

Social scientists from these two neighboring countries as well as from other Asean countries meet routinely in conferences and seminars. Sporting events and educational exchanges are common yet there is a sense that more can be done. Disagreements between governments do not translate into disagreements between people. It is the people to people relationship, the public diplomacy par excellence, that provide the basis for building sustainable good-neighbourly relationships.

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Nationalism and anti-Indianism often go hand in hand.

dialogue through quiet diplomacy. Anti-Indianism which has become the "first principle" -- almost a default position -- for many in Bangladesh stands in the way of trust-building between the two neighbours.

It is this sentiment that is both nurtured and exploited by self-seeking, opportunistic politicians to score points. Politics of hegemony, trade-imbalance, and other outstanding border issues play an important role in the prevailing skepticism about India in

Bangladesh.

However, for many, anti-Indianness emanates from an attitude of bigotry, which is impervious to reason. Once I pressed a senior Bangladeshi professional in UAE to give me a reason for India's alleged role against the interests of Bangladesh (again before Tipaimukh), in a low voice he confided: "You can't trust the Hindus." The gentleman's honest answer was very revealing.

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Dams turn the Mekong into a river of discord

Beijing is intent on forging closer economic integration with mainland Southeast Asia through trade, investment, communication, transport and energy cooperation with its neighbors in the Greater Mekong Subregion. But this strategy may backfire if the region concludes that Chinese dams are having an adverse impact on their future development prospects.

MICHAEL RICHARDSON

BACK in 1986, when China began building the first of a series of dams on the Mekong River, hardly anyone in the downstream countries of Southeast Asia paid attention. But today, as China races to finish the fourth dam for generating electricity on the upper reaches of Southeast Asia's biggest river, concerns about possible environmental impacts in the region are rising fast. Moreover, fear about antagonising China and Southeast Asia's internecine dispute might make any concerted move unlikely.

The sheer scale of China's engineering to harness the power of the Mekong and change its natural flow is setting off alarm bells, especially in Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand and Laos, the four countries of the lower Mekong basin where more than 60 million people depend on the river for food, water and transportation.

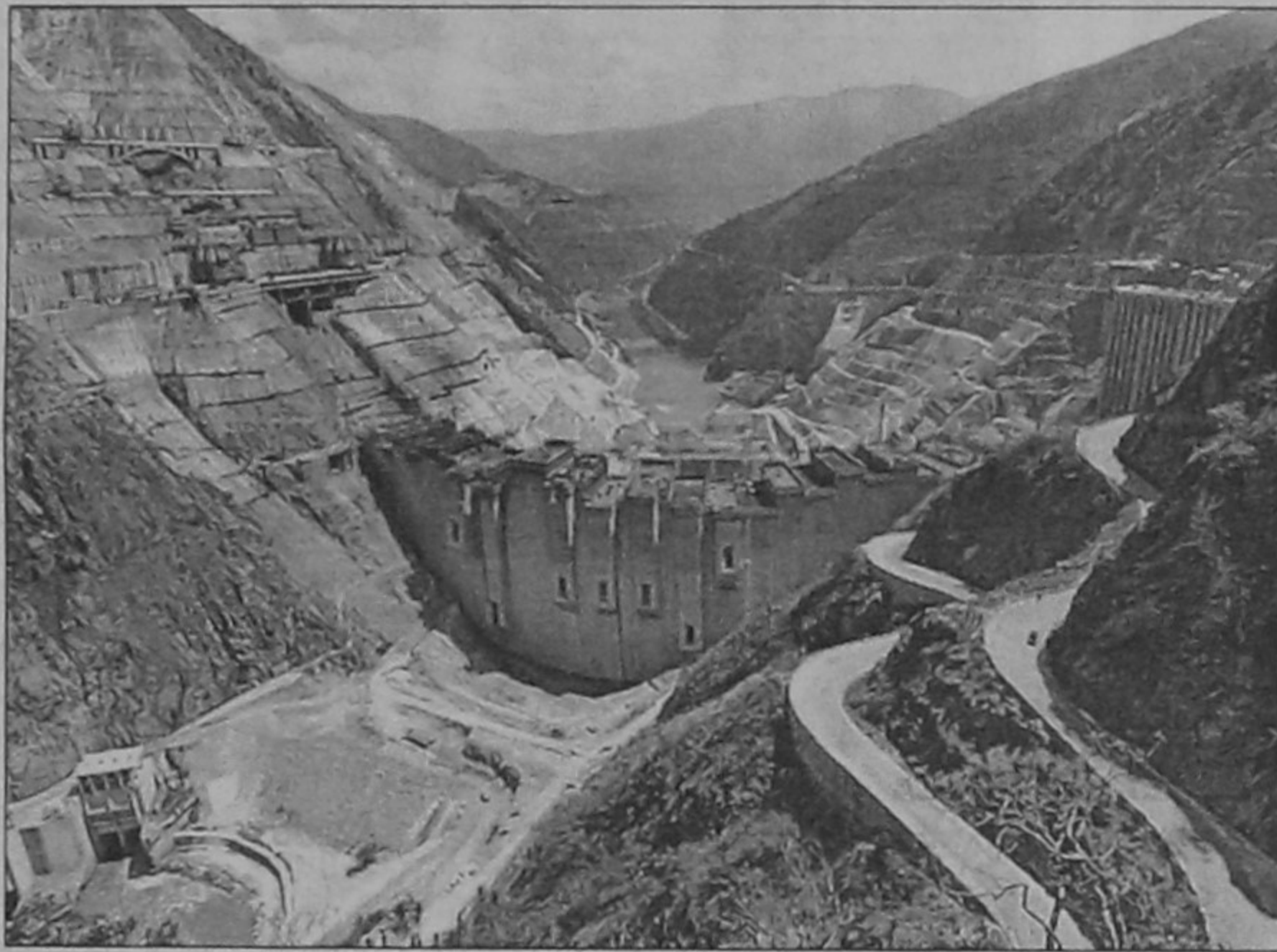
A report in May by the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) and the Asian Institute of Technology (AIT) warned that China's plan for a cascade of eight dams on the Mekong, which it calls the Lancang Jiang, might pose "a considerable threat" to the river and its natural riches. In June, Thailand's prime minister was handed a petition calling for a

halt to dam building. It was signed by over 11,000 people, many of them subsistence farmers and fishermen who live along the river's mainstream and its many tributaries.

Some analysts say if the worst fears of critics are realised, relations between China and its neighbors in mainland Southeast Asia will be severely damaged. But mindful of growing power and influence of China, Southeast Asian governments have muffled their concern. Meanwhile, Laos, Cambodia and Thailand have put forward plans to dam their sections of the Mekong mainstream, prompting Vietnam to object and undermining the local environmentalists' case against China.

Although the Mekong is widely regarded as a Southeast Asian river, its source is in the glaciers high in Tibet. Nearly half of the 4,880 kilometer river flows through China's Yunnan province before it reaches Southeast Asia. Since there is no international treaty governing use of trans-boundary rivers, China is in a dominant position, controlling the Mekong's headwater. It has the right to develop its section of the river as it sees fit, and has done so without consulting its neighbors, let alone seeking their approval.

The Mekong River basin drains water from an area of 795,000 square kilomet-



Life's better upstream.

ters. The Mekong River Commission (MRC), an inter-governmental agency formed in 1995 by the four lower basin countries estimates that the sustainable hydropower potential of the lower basin alone is a massive 30,000 megawatts. But it also says that there are major challenges in balancing the benefits of clean electricity, water storage and flood control from the dams against negative impacts. These include population displacement, obstruction to fish movements up and down the river, and changes in water and sediment flow.

The cascade of dams being constructed in Yunnan will generate over 15,500 megawatts of electricity for cities and industries, helping to replace polluting fossil fuels, particularly coal and oil. The eight Yunnan dams will produce about the same amount of electricity as 30 big coal-burning plants.

China's fourth Mekong dams, at

Xiaowan, is due to be completed by 2012 at a cost of nearly US\$4 billion. Rising 292 meters, the dam wall will be the world's tallest. Its reservoir will hold 15 billion cubic meters of water, more than five times the combined capacity of the first three Chinese dams.

Since the end of 2008, when the river diversion channel of the Xiaowan hydropower dam was closed by Chinese engineers, the reservoir has been filling with water, paving the way to start the first electricity generating turbine in September. When full, the reservoir will cover an area of over 190 square kilometers. With a capacity to generate 4,200 megawatts of electricity, Xiaowan will be the largest dam so far on the Mekong.

However, by 2014, China plans to finish another dam below the Xiaowan at Nuozhadu. It will not be quite as high but will impound even more water, nearly 23 billion cubic meters, and generate 5,000

megawatts of power.

Chinese officials have assured Southeast Asia that the Yunnan dams will have a positive environmental impact. They say that by holding some water back in the wet season, the dams will help control flooding and river bank erosion downstream. Conversely, releases from the hydropower reservoirs to generate power in the summer will help ease water shortages in the lower Mekong during the dry season.

However, the UNEP-AIT report said that Cambodia's great central lake Tonle Sap, the nursery of the lower Mekong's fish stocks, and Vietnam's Mekong Delta, its rice bowl, were particularly at risk from changes to the river's unique cycle of flood and drought.

The Cambodian lake is linked to the Mekong by the Tonle Sap River. Scientists are concerned that reductions in the Mekong's natural floodwater flow will cause falls in the lake's water level and fish stocks, already under pressure from over-harvesting and pollution.

Vietnam worries that dwindling water volumes will aggravate the problem of sea water intrusion and salination in the low-lying Mekong Delta, where climate change and sea level rise threaten to inundate large areas of productive farmland and displace millions of people by the end of this century.

The MRC says it has been discussing technical cooperation with Chinese experts to assess downstream river changes caused by hydropower development. But China has refused to join the MRC or to agree to observe its resource management guidelines, preferring to remain a "dialogue partner." Full membership would intensify scrutiny of its dam plans by downstream Southeast Asian states and increase pressure on Beijing, which

controls 21% of the water, to take their interests into account.

While China's program to dam the Mekong is moving ahead on schedule, proposals to do the same on the Southeast Asian section of the river have been put on hold. Before the global credit crisis and economic slow-down hit Asia's export-oriented economies with full force this year, Cambodia, Laos and Thailand had abandoned plans to follow China's lead on the upper Mekong by building a series of dams on the mainstream of the river in the lower basin.

There are now over 3,200 megawatts of electricity being generated on Mekong tributaries in Laos. But that too is being hurt by the crisis as Thailand, the main consumer of electricity in the lower Mekong, has announced that because of the global economic downturn, it expects to cut substantially the amount of power it imports from Laos.

The slowdown, however, provides a breathing space for Southeast Asian countries to assess how the Mekong mainstream dam projects will affect the interests of people in the river basin. But without China's full participation, no Mekong management plan can be effective.

Beijing is intent on forging closer economic integration with mainland Southeast Asia through trade, investment, communication, transport and energy cooperation with its neighbors in the Greater Mekong Subregion. But this strategy may backfire if the region concludes that Chinese dams are having an adverse impact on their future development prospects.

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Weird car names



THE collapse of General Motors triggered an urgent call to my desk. "Can you help me write a song about an Asian car brand?" The caller was an amateur musician friend whose songs are totally brilliant, except for the words and the music.

He realised there was a massive gap in the market when numerous TV news reports about the US car firm bankruptcy said Cadillac and Chevy cars are mentioned in literally hundreds of pop songs.

Remember the chorus of American Pie? "Drove my Chevy to the levee but the levee was dry." Or that Billy Joel song Moving Out which goes: "Traded

in my Chevy for a Cadillac-ack-ack-ack."

My singer friend had a point. Why must all global pop culture be based on US cars? It was unfair.

I headed down to the street where the car showrooms are to do some research. I noticed that cars from GM had names associated with burning, like Pontiac Firebird and Trailblazer. That was kinda weird. GM also has the Avalanche, a car named after a type of disaster, and the Citation, seemingly named after a traffic offence. The American Motor Corp once launched a car called the Gremlin, a word which means "irritating problem."

European cars were worse. They have codes for names, so cannot be mentioned in songs: "Oh what fun it is to ride in my BMW E9 2800CS." See what I mean? A few European cars do have names. There's a car in Italy called the Volugrafo Bimbo (Italian for "Car with stupid name, mainly for

blondes").

Asian cars have names which are just daft, to put it kindly. From China comes a brand of pick-up truck called the Rural Nanny. Geely, a major car maker in China, makes a car called the King Kong. This might make sense if it was big and dangerous, but it's as tiny and meek as a Japanese Prime Minister. Indian car names are sleep-inducing: there's the Mahindra Classic and the Padmini. Those names won't get anyone excited.

From Japan we get weird names like the Honda Life Dunk and the Daihatsu Naked. Isuzu makes vehicles called the Mysterious Utility and the Light Dump (don't ask). Mazda makes a car called the Bongo. Toyota has the Deliboy. Nissan has the Prairie Joy. Mitsubishi makes a car called the Pistachio. Why would anyone name a car after something small, green and wrinkled? Is ET the target market?

I could not see how an Asian car

could fit into a song like American Pie. "Drove my Daihatsu Charade to the levy but the levy was dry." It just didn't have the right ring to it.

But there needs to be songs about eastern cars. The biggest market for motors is Asia, and the biggest selling global brand is Toyota. So I set to work. I found two problems. First, the top Asian cars, such as Toyota, are reliable, but ugly and boring. Second, not many words rhyme with Toyota. The best I could do is this:

My car is really dull, it's a Toyota
I had to pay a premium (there's an import quota)
I wash it every Sunday on a cleaning rota
I think I'll buy a Chevy, move to Dakota.
Somehow I don't think it's gonna be a hit.

For more on strange automobile names visit our columnist at www.vittachi.com.



Cars can't get any stranger.