

BANGLADESH-INDIA

Positive development is in the offing

With the Bangladesh foreign secretary announcing that his Indian counterpart had stressed the need for resolving the outstanding border problems, including killings in border areas, some positive changes must be in the offing.

MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

WITH the AL-led government installed in power, there is anticipation of people-oriented actions. But there is also resignation and concern that the ferment in different sectors makes for an inherently unstable mix in which old demons, paranoid nationalism, partisan feelings, and demagogic populism could win out against democratic governance and ideals.

The first euphoria is seemingly fast diminishing and the next few months, it appears, will be a period of disenchantment and the discovery of pain and difficulties. One of the most serious problems, perhaps, is the paranoid nationalism that turned the country into a symbol of fractious politics. The main peril is populism, the politics of playing with the discontent of the people -- gathering strength by rallying support for fighting non-existent foes.

Like the attack on Ganges Water Sharing Treaty signed in 1996, the proposed accord on transit facilities and other outstanding disputes with India, to be signed in December during the prime minister's visit to India, has come under attack by the BNP and its cohorts. Destabilising and disruptive forces are at work to undo the process of reconciliation that is in progress at the state level between the two governments.

People feel that the water sharing issue and transit facility are two distinct issues and they must not be tagged together. Shockingly, to the peril of the country, no water treaty has been signed with India since 1988. The opposition leader's call at the time of signing the treaty for allowing Bangladesh 38,000 cusecs of water and not a drop less than that was hailed by all.

But people also remember that the then government's failure to get one cusec of water through talks, negotiations or treaty was a diplomatic failure. It is unfortunate that partisan politics can overshadow national interests at such a heavy cost. If the present government can sign accord it would definitely benefit the whole country, and not only the Awami League or the BNP or any other party.

As regards transit facility through Bangladesh, albeit a section of the political parties prefer to call it a corridor for India, most people in the country would like to take up this issue most dispassionately. The people will never approve an accord that poses a threat to the sovereignty and security of Bangladesh. A section of the disgruntled and disillusioned political parties should not unnecessarily be stoking the fires of parochial nationalism.

If nationalism and patriotism in the country are defined by the rejection of openness, keeping the nation a prisoner of the past that stifles growth and improvement of the living standard, then the country must be heading towards gloom. Stripped of militant ultra-religious fervour, Bangladeshi nationalism could be a positive force. It helped our national leaders maintain and safeguard the sovereignty of the country against the aggressive designs and brutality unleashed by Pakistani rulers in 1971.

It is argued that India wants transit facilities on three primary considerations, namely (i) promotion of inter-regional trade, (ii) strategic militaristic maneuver, and (iii) political ambition. It was argued in 1996 that the transit facility would help India save about Tk.8,000 crore a year while Bangladesh would be earn Tk.700-800 crore (according to an estimate some 13 years ago) a year in the

form of tariff.

Another argument is that, to contain the separatist movement in the north-eastern region of India where ethnic, divisive and cultural antagonism have been simmering for a long time, India would be sending its troops through Bangladesh.

Against the backdrop of a cloud of incredulity and mistrust that has overshadowed or even soured relations between the two countries the just-concluded talks between the foreign secretaries, it appears, have removed the cobwebs on different issues, triggering positive signals in the improvement of ties between the two countries.

Indications available from the talks stipulate that issues relating to Bangladesh's connectivity to Bhutan through India, sharing of power, resolution of outstanding issues relating to Dahagram and Angorpota enclaves and the Tin Bigha corridor, cooperation in river dredging to restore navigability, and upgrading of Bangladesh Railway would be on the agenda of the Bangladesh prime minister's visit to India in December.

With the Bangladesh foreign secretary announcing that his Indian counterpart had stressed the need for resolving the outstanding border problems, including killings in border areas, some positive changes must be in the offing. As it appears from the secretary level talks, confidence building work has started with India agreeing to allow railway transit to Nepal through three bordering points between the two countries and providing Nepal-Bangladesh and Bhutan-Bangladesh connectivity.

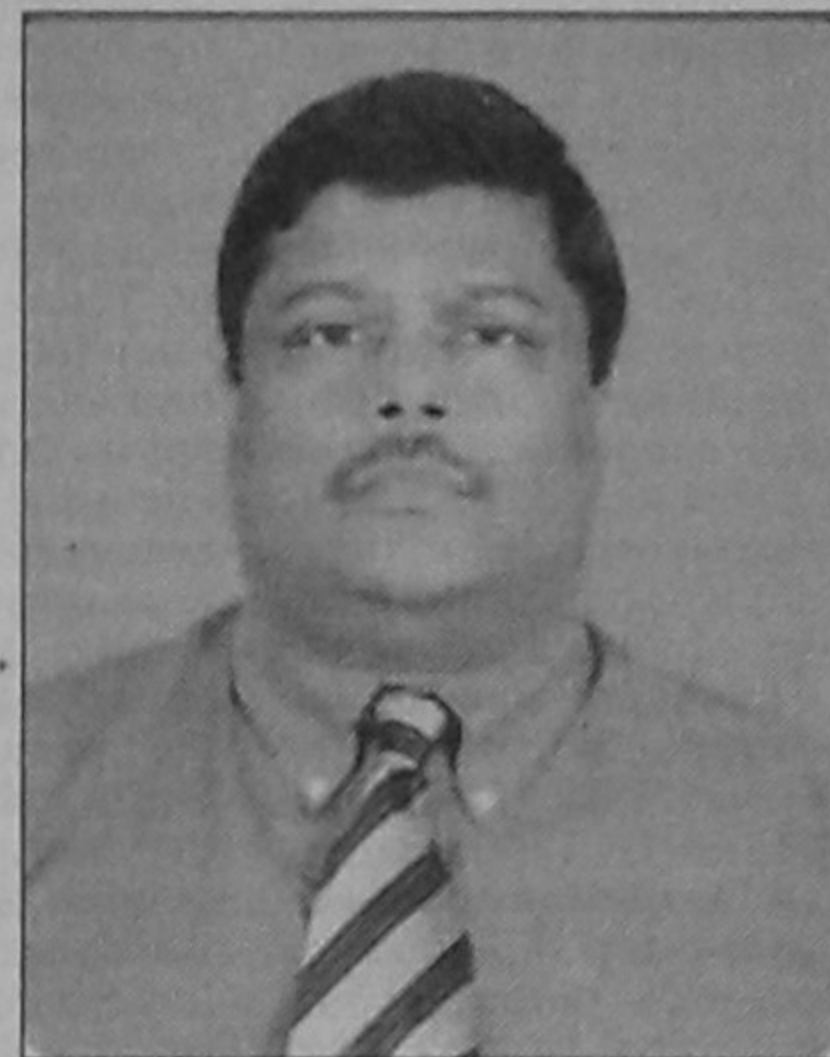
Most importantly, with both sides agreeing to finalise the Teesta water-sharing agreement and to conduct joint hydrological observations on the rivers, Bangladesh will hand over a draft accord on the sharing of Teesta water before the prime minister's visit. As per the joint statement, Bangladesh will allow India to carry machinery to set up a power plant in its north-eastern part and India will sell 250 megawatts of electricity produced in the power plant at Palatana.

Even a sceptic would say that these developments definitely demonstrate a keenness in tackling the outstanding issues souring relations between the two countries.

In a borderless world, transit facilities cannot pose a threat to the sovereignty and security of any country. By allowing transit facilities through Suez Canal the sovereignty and security of Egypt have not been liquidated, nor did Panama have to suffer in any way by allowing transit to the U.S. Stripped of false values and regional antagonism, Bangladeshi nationalism could be a vibrant force. With caution, pragmatism and commitment to national goal and prosperity brought into play, nationalism's darker side, such as extremist movement, and militant and ultra-religious feelings seem unlikely to emerge. Happily, the past is no longer a guide to the future in that the country has changed so much during the last three decades.

Democracy had been under assault throughout the last three decades and has often succumbed. Today, democracy is gaining strength in this region and regional alliances like Saarc can provide mutual political and economic support. People in this country remember that the previous government had agreed to allow transit facilities to Nepal but Nepal could not avail that because of the rupture in its relations with India. If we could have agreed to allow that facility to Nepal earlier, how can we go back from that stand when it concerns our own interest? We have to study the whole gamut of our relations in a spirit of neighbourly feelings and mutual understanding, however, never at the cost of our national interest.

Any political party, whether in the government or in the opposition, must have as its first prerogative the improvement of the living standard of the people. Ominous signals are already there. Prices of commodities are soaring everyday. Reports gleaned from newspapers in recent time indicate that several thousand Bangladeshi workers declared as illegal workers are being repatriated from



Ushering in a new era.

Saudi Arabia, Malaysia and the UAE.

Finding a place to live and to have a living are more difficult than five years ago because of the climatic disruption that continues to wreak havoc in the coastal districts of Bangladesh through coastal inundation, destruction of homes and hearths and loss of lives. Such hardships could provide a platform for populist politicians to indulge in rhetoric of imaginary solutions that might keep people happy for some time but often at the expense of national interest.

Since populism is often suffused with nationalism, any leader appealing to the constituency of discontent attaches himself to as many national symbols as possible. Shockingly, some leaders belonging to opposition political parties have been crying hoarse about the government's move to restructure bilateral relations and tackle trade deficit with India as being one out of touch with "Bangladeshi values" and national yearnings.

Very often extremist ideas and fanatic philosophies and practices are being tabled as Bangladeshi nationalism. The nation recalls the traumatic experience of the Pakistani rule and the carnage unleashed by the Pakistani marauders on the innocent people of this country, before and during the liberation war of 1971, in the name of protecting Islam



and Pakistan. Most people believe in and envision a modern democratic state where Islam must be followed by the Muslims but not necessarily enforced "to the letter" as ultra-religionists might want it to be, overriding the spirit of democracy.

On the issue of extending transit facilities through Bangladesh, let it be repeated that the people will never allow the interest of the country to be mortgaged to anyone. But the people want the knotty problems with our neighbours to be resolved peacefully and amicably, allowing unabated growth for all to meet the expectations of the jobless and the hungry. At the same time the administration now must prove the sceptics wrong through prudent commitment and actions.

The present trend of unnecessarily creating panic among the people and chanting slogans when in doubt or in trouble or out of power will only aggravate the relations between the two countries and complicate solutions. In the age of globalisation, when a spirit of compromise based on competitiveness has spurred our country, the people can hardly remain isolated and out of touch with reality.

Md. Asadullah Khan is a former teacher of physics and Controller of Examinations, BUET. E-mail: aukhanbd@gmail.com

Wither idea of India

Yet, what keeps India together is its diversity. By dividing the country into linguistic spheres or by injuring the rights of those who are in a minority, the parochial elements are posing a danger to the very idea of India. It is better that organisations like the Shiv Sena understand this.

KULDIP NAYAR

IT is happening too often and it is too vicious. Parochialism is rearing its ugly head in Mumbai too frequently. The Shiv Sena is threatening to throw out "outsiders" from the city and the rest of Maharashtra. Self-centred party chief Bal Thackeray has created a ruckus once again, this time dragging into controversy Sachin Tendulkar, the world's best batsman, who said after the 20th year of playing cricket that he was proud to be a Maharashtrian but he was Indian first. How should this remark irritate anybody? Still the shrill voice is coming from Mumbai.

I think it is time that Mumbai be made a Union Territory. Industrially and commercially, it is the hub of India's financial activity. Delhi is a Union Territory because it is the centre of the country's political activity. Why should Mumbai, which is India's financial capital, have a different status from that of Delhi?

People from the various part of the country have settled in Mumbai, making large investments and contributing their labour and entrepreneurship for decades to make Mumbai what it is today. More money has come from others, not the Maharashtrians. Even population-wise, my impression is that the non-Maharashtrians are a bit up. (A claim for joint control by Andhra Pradesh of Madras was rejected because two-thirds of the latter's population was Tamil speaking.)

If nothing else, the contribution by "outsiders" should shut up the Shiv Sena and its ilk, Maharashtra Navnirman Sena, from saying that they are a burden on Mumbai or that the jobs in the state should be given to the Maharashtrians alone. This pernicious thesis, the son-of-the-soil articulation, was advanced by many states, including Maharashtra, before the Fazl Ali States Reorganisation Commission in 1955. It firmly rejected the various claims and held: "It is the

Union of India that is the basis of our nationality." In its report, the Commission said that "it (Bombay) has acquired its present commanding position by the joint endeavour of the different language groups."

The proposal that Bombay should be constituted as a separate unit was first mooted by the Dar Commission when the Constituent Assembly was debating in 1949 the formation of linguistic states. The then ruling Congress party accepted the proposal for the reorganisation of states.

Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru took fancy to the idea of keeping Bombay apart. He pushed it when Maharashtra and Gujarat were agitating against the Commission's recommendation to integrate them into one, bi-lingual state. Nehru presented before the cabinet a proposal to have three units: Maharashtra, Gujarat and the city of Bombay. The then finance minister, C.D. Deshmukh, agreed to the formula. But he changed his stand following the furore in Maharashtra and submitted his resignation from the government. Bombay was made part of Maharashtra.

Nevertheless, the linguistic states have not been of much help to the country. They are increasingly becoming "islands of chauvinism." The son-of-the-soil thesis is having precedence. This was the danger to which Nehru drew atten-

tion after new boundaries were drawn on the basis of language. The BJP-run Madhya Pradesh is the latest one to announce that it does not want the Bihari labour.

Unfortunately, the manner in which certain administrations have conducted their affairs has partly contributed to the growth of parochial sentiments. The rulers have an eye on elections, not realising that the idea of India gets defeated if people have the domicile considerations at the top.

After the formation of states, it was understood that the regional language could be learnt after the recruitment. But now its knowledge has been made compulsory before a person is eligible for a job. This is making the state services an exclusive preserve of the majority language group of the state.

The prosperity of some states like Maharashtra, Gujarat, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka has raised questions in UP, Bihar and Orissa, the economically backward areas, that they were not getting their due. Relations between the centre and the states have become strained on this count, and they get aggravated when the states are hit by flood or scarcity.

Such dangers have beleaguered India since independence. The country's unity has been the uppermost in the mind of policy makers. There have been a few

movements here and there, raising the standard of autonomy. But the democratic system with a federal structure, established firmly after the introduction of the constitution in 1950, has taken the wind out of the separatists' sail in the country. Except for a few militants' organisations in the Northeast, the people's heart is in the country's unity.

In the late fifties, the southern states generally felt that they were not getting their share. There were agitations and public rallies. Nehru was quick to convene a National Integration Conference to discuss the different grievances and points of view. The conference appointed many committees to give their recommendations on how to bring about national integration.

Before they could submit the reports, China attacked India in 1962. All committees made just one comment: The Chinese invasion had united the entire country. Indeed, this was true because all dissenting voices died in no time. Even the Chinese were surprised because their assessment before hostilities was that India was disintegrating.

The country had a jolt in the eighties. The Akalis in Punjab revolted. The state was in the midst of militancy for about a decade. The Sikhs themselves turned against the militants who had made their life hell. Punjab is today one of the

peaceful states.

The odd voice of linguistic chauvinism, the fallout of the reorganisation of the states in 1955, has been heard in some areas off and on. The real purpose has been to gain votes in the name of the "step-motherly treatment" meted out to a particular community. It must be admitted that slogans in the name of language or caste have helped.

The only state where parochialism has been constantly fostered by Shiv Sena is Maharashtra. The group even once won an election with the support of the BJP, on the slogan: "Throw out outsiders from Maharashtra." The Bihari labourers were beaten up, something which Raj Thackeray, nephew of Bal Thackeray, repeated after breaking away from the Shiv Sena.

No doubt, the basis of nationality is the Union of India. The states are but the limbs of the Union. Yet the limbs must be healthy and strong. Some states have too many poor people concentrated in their territory. Yet, what keeps India together is its diversity. By dividing the country into linguistic spheres or by injuring the rights of those who are in a minority, the parochial elements are posing a danger to the very idea of India. It is better that organisations like the Shiv Sena understand this.

Kuldip Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.

The world's worst songs



SCHOOLS all over Asia have started teaching English poetry using pop song lyrics. This plan is excellent in every way, except for one small drawback: the average pop lyricist has as much poetry in his soul as a bag

of ready-mixed concrete with accountability qualifications.

David Bowie here's proof. Your humble narrator was hanging out in a radio station with a deejay friend recently playing Rebel Rebel by David Bowie. We noticed the lyrics were just random phrases: "You got your mother in a whirl, she's not sure if you're a boy or a girl, hey babe, your hair's all right."

So we faded that out and put on Champagne Supernova by Oasis, one of the top bands of recent years. It went: "Slowly walking down the hall, faster than a cannonball." Hey, Liam, can I give you a bit of info? Fast things are fast,

whereas slow things are slow.

We went to the cabinet for music from the 1960s, a time when they knew how to write lyrics. One of the biggest hits was Jimmy Webb's MacArthur Park: "Someone left the cake out in the rain/ I don't think I can take it/ It took so long to bake it/ And I'll never have that recipe again/ oh no, oh no, no, no, oh nooo."

We switched to Asian rock groups. From India, we found a song from a group called Top Hero with a chorus which goes, "Smoking is injurious to health, smoking is fashion today."

East Asians we found to be oddly

sentimental. Cantopop star Leslie Cheung sang: "You have left/ Now everything is falling apart/ From that day on/ I fall in love with my left hand." A hit by Japanese band Strawberry Path goes: "Every little thing you used to do makes my heart to cry."

Native English speakers were no better. Still You Turn Me On by Emerson Lake and Palmer has these lines: "Every day a little sadder/ A little madder/ Someone fetch me a ladder." To which we can only, reply, yes, someone give him a ladder and somewhere high to jump from.

The winner of a bad lyrics contest

held by the BBC was Des'ree, with a song called Life: "I don't want to see a ghost/ It's the sight I fear the most/ I'd rather have a piece of toast."

Logic problems are common in lyrics. Consider Jailbreak by Thin Lizzy: "Tonight there's going to be a jail break somewhere in this town," sings Phil Lynott. Okay, Phil, let's talk about this. Where in the town do you think the jailbreak might take place? How about - just to pick a location at random -- the jail?

Sometimes rock singers get ambitious and try to write lines that rhyme. So in Black Sabbath's War Pigs, we have

the couplet: "Generals gathered in their masses/ Just like witches at black masses." Hey, guys, "masses" doesn't rhyme with "masses." Look closely. Yes. They are the same word! Incredible.

But I think Asia can be proud of being the birthplace of the worst pop song in history. I refer, of course, to Haseena Maan Jayegi's What is Mobile Number? Which goes like this: "What is mobile number? What is your smile number?"

To which we reply, what is point of this song? Why it make us feel like jumping off ladder?