

## Why this claim game?

*No visit can be a hundred percent success or a hundred percent failure*

WE are rather surprised by the extreme positions the two political parties have taken in assessing the outcome of the recently concluded visit of the Bangladesh PM to India. We find such a stance reflective of lack of maturity and not up to the intellect and wisdom that one expects of political leadership at the top. It is certainly not the way to look at sensitive issues, particularly when that has to do with as complex a relationship as that of India and Bangladesh.

The BNP, in its characteristic manner, chose to describe the outcome of Hasina's India visit as a hundred percent failure. That is perhaps understandable, given the opposition's tradition of irresponsible utterances and disapproval and condemnation of every action of the ruling party. But for the PM to claim a cent percent triumph, by way of her party's response, was something that is not expected of a party with longstanding traditions.

It is as much inane to think that a visit is a hundred percent failure as it is to claim its hundred percent success. Both are extreme positions that often tend to dilute the gravity of important issues. We expect more maturity from both the political parties in this regard and urge upon them to refrain from making sweeping statements.

One must look at things objectively in assessing issues. And the visit must be viewed dispassionately to estimate achievements and deficiencies. It would be right to think that the bilateral visit, coming after a long gap, has been a major breakthrough that has laid the basis of a mutually productive relationship between Bangladesh and India.

The essential question that we must address is whether we choose to foster a mutually beneficial relationship between the two countries or allow the near adversarial relationship that had existed between the two, during the BNP alliance tenure, to continue. India, we must understand, is far too important a country to be subjected to extreme assessments. And no doubt, harmonious relationship, notwithstanding thorny issues, between neighbours, will bring gains for both the countries.

We suggest that instead of decrying the gains or exulting in the success alone, it would be appropriate to take an objective look at what has been gained and what remains to be done in respect of issues that need follow up actions, like the water and trade issues.

As for the opposition, we had in our earlier comments welcomed the hint given by the BNP to attend the JS. We suggest that the time is now for the opposition to make substantive contributions on the issue, something that we are sure would benefit the nation. We urge the opposition not to fail the people.

## With Jyoti Basu, an era ends

*The politics of conviction and sacrifice is his legacy*

THE death of Jyoti Basu at ninety six brings to an end an illustrious career in West Bengal and Indian politics. There was always something intrinsically substantive about Basu. His long journey in politics, his primacy in its growth and expansion, indeed the way he stamped his authority and influence on it turned him, long before his death, into a household name not just in India but around the globe. There was the larger than life individual in him, a man dedicated fully and unequivocally to a cause.

There was pragmatism about Jyoti Basu's politics in a very unique sense. Holding steadfastly on to the tenets of communism, he and his party made a stunning example of taking to the election path forsaking armed struggle and winning power for a record number of terms in the Indian state of West Bengal through the sheer means of democracy. His blend of communism with democracy is a great contribution to the evolution of polity in these parts.

He eschewed the demagoguery which generally characterises politics based on ideology. For him, ideology was pointless if it did not come with conviction. Beginning with his days as a student in Britain, he refined his politics as time went along. His identification with the politics of workers paid off when in 1946 he was elected to the Bengal Legislative Assembly. From then on, it was a constant struggle Basu and his comrades in the Left waged in defence of the underprivileged and the deprived. When India's communists split in 1964, Basu opted to identify with the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and to the end of his life he kept his belief in the ability of the CPI(M) to bring about positive change in the lives of the people of West Bengal and, perhaps someday, in those of the rest of India. The degree to which Basu would become a pivotal figure in India was first manifested in 1967 when he became deputy chief minister in a coalition ministry in West Bengal. A decade later, he led his party and the Left Front it was part of to a convincing victory at the state elections. As chief minister, it fell to Jyoti Basu to put in place the reforms, of which land was an important component, that would leave West Bengal transformed. Empowerment of the marginalised and the poor was his singular achievement. It is a testimony to Basu's deep understanding of politics that he served as chief minister for twenty three years before handing over the reins to his deputy Buddhadev Bhattacharya.

Jyoti Basu comprehended full well the new realities that needed to be embraced following the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe. His belief in communism was never shattered, though; but he did note the changes needing to be brought in. Under his stewardship, West Bengal opened its doors to investment without abandoning the leftist philosophy underpinning the state's politics. The communist that he was, Basu nevertheless refused to acquiesce to regimentation. When the CPI(M) vetoed the possibility of his taking over as India's prime minister in 1996, he called it a historic blunder.

The people of Bangladesh will fondly recall Jyoti Basu for some very special reasons. He hailed from Barodi in the old Dhaka district, which made him a native son who made good on the broad Indian stage. And his support for and cooperation with the Bangladesh political leadership on the Ganges waters treaty in the late 1990s were gestures that strengthened further the terms of endearment which bound him and the people of Bangladesh in warm camaraderie.

We mourn his passing. His was a soul the likes of which we will perhaps never experience again.

## A great Bengali bids farewell

In the passing of Jyoti Basu passes an era into history. He was a great Indian and a Bengali to the core. Beyond all that, he was a politician who made us believe, constantly and without question, in the edifying calling that politics was and always will be.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

HERE was the leonine about him. Jyoti Basu was precisely what his name epitomised. He was light unto millions of Bengalis on the other side of the historical divide. He was a politician the likes of whom will never be again, for it was a grand combination of ideology and conviction which worked as the underpinning of his politics in all the decades that saw him transformed from student to lawmaker to chief minister to elder statesman.

You cannot say, at any point, that Basu stumbled anywhere. Of course, he did not make it to power at the national level when in 1996 a distinct possibility arose of his taking charge as India's prime minister. How that might have worked out is something we cannot configure in the recesses of our imagination. But there can be no gainsaying here that a communist prime minister for India would indeed shake up the world and especially at a time when the reputation of socialism was in bad shape, if not exactly in tatters.

Basu did not stumble in 1996. It was his party, the CPI(M), which shot down the idea that he should be prime minister. The party would, in the tenuous state of Indian coalition politics of the time, have vetoed anyone else in any case. Its argument was simple: it was not ready to govern in Delhi. Irritated, Basu agreed to go along with the decision anyway. And he went along out of the conviction that for politicians who mean business, it is always the party to be deferred to.

And for communists especially, defying the party was tantamount to upsetting the norms of morality on which political behaviour rests. In later times, Somnath Chatterjee defied the party and refused to walk away from the speaker's chair in the Lok Sabha. The CPI(M) quickly disowned him and threw him out.

Jyoti Basu was different. He was not willing to turn his back on a party he had in large measure shaped in modern times. He turned his back on the prime minister's office. His subsequent characterisation

of the CPI(M)'s position on the probability of his rise to the highest political office in the land as a historic blunder will always be a matter of opinion.

Jyoti Basu's moment in the sun was fundamentally the twenty three years in which he presided over the fortunes of West Bengal as its chief minister. That is a record not to be beaten easily. And he was there, at the heights, precisely because of the diverse ways in which he put his politics of socialist conviction into implementation mode.

He focused on the village, on a development of its infrastructure, for communist philosophy upholds the principle that roots are what matter. The petit bourgeoisie, Basu knew, had always had its priorities skewed.

He had observed it in the days before he took charge of West Bengal in 1977. Urbanisation was doing no good and parties like the Congress, with their focus on industrial development in and around the cities, were conveniently letting go of the truth that a bypassing of the rural interior was in effect an advocacy of progress at the level of the ridiculous.

In Ashim Dasgupta, Basu had a finance minister who could plumb the depths of rural misery. Together the two men, along with the others in the Left Front government, went for an empowerment of the villages. The reasoning was simple: it was the natural thing to do. An enlightened and grateful electorate went on returning Jyoti Basu and his team to power.

Basu was the consummate politician, hardened to the core through years of dedication to the cause of public welfare. Free of the middle class temptations that often lead politicians to their doom, Basu and his fellow communists made it a point to follow through on their pledges of social reforms. And they did it with firmness tempered by finesse.

For Jyoti Basu, the ease with which he placed his reforms in place was in effect a result of the long years he had spent studying, besides the law, theories of politics and the targets politics sought to meet. As a student in distant England in the late



Jyoti Basu (1914-2010)

1930s, it fell upon the very involved Basu to arrange a meeting of Indian students with a visiting Jawaharlal Nehru. He was to repeat the exercise with Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose.

In England, it was Harold Laski in whose thoughts Jyoti Basu spotted light onto the future. And then there was Rajani Palme Dutt, the suave political icon of Indian origin in whom the young discerned brilliance of political thought and its exposition, to whom the youthful Basu was drawn.

Basu's infatuation with politics turned into a full-blown love affair when in 1946 he was elected, as a communist, to the West Bengal Legislative Assembly. Of course, he had little way of knowing that within a year Bengal and with it India would stand partitioned as a consequence of the irreconcilable differences between the Congress and the Muslim League. There is not much of evidence to show, though, that at that point Basu was overly concerned with the future of what still was an undivided India.

Marxism was clearly his preoccupation, devotion to which would increasingly be part of his thought pattern as India embarked on independent statehood. Nehruvian socialism did not make much of an impression on Basu, for he thought, in the manner of communists everywhere, that equality could not come in incremental form through typical political tools but

through bold initiatives across the spectrum.

Jyoti Basu's future beckoned in 1967. Having served as leader of the opposition in the West Bengal Assembly for the preceding ten years, he joined the Ajoy Mukherjee-led United Front state government as deputy chief minister. The future came in 1977. It would lengthen itself to 2000, when he stepped down for health reasons.

There was the consummate politician in Jyoti Basu. Bidhan Chandra Roy recognised early on the creative fire in him. Basu was a voracious reader and an indefatigable exponent of political theory.

In the nineties, with communism crumbling everywhere but West Bengal, he went pragmatic. Keeping the ideology of the CPI(M) intact, he toured the West to ask that businesses invest in his state. There was no end to his detractors. They could not bring him down, for they had little in terms of an alternative to offer the people of West Bengal.

In the passing of Jyoti Basu passes an era into history. He was a great Indian and a Bengali to the core. Beyond all that, he was a politician who made us believe, constantly and without question, in the edifying calling that politics was and always will be.

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## Time to think outside the box

Visits by prime ministers of the two neighbouring countries should be more of a routine matter, rather than one for creating unnecessary euphoria.



ABDUL MANNAN

WHAT should have been a regular visit to India by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina suddenly became a much-hyped and talked about trip. Though, before the visit actually took place, it was the media that to some extent kicked up a lot of dust on the upcoming visit, and political parties, especially the opposition BNP, joined the bandwagon later and began raising the usual cries against the ruling party, going to the extent that Begum Zia threatened to lay thorns along Sheikh Hasina's path if she returned "empty handed" from India.

The last state visit by any Bangladesh prime minister to India was by Begum Khaleda Zia when she went on a three-day visit to New Delhi on March 20, 2006. Though that was more of a goodwill visit, there were some discussions between her and Dr. Manmohan Singh, the Indian prime minister, on trade and security issues.

Two pacts were signed: The Revised Trade Agreement and the Agreement for Mutual Cooperation for Preventing Illicit Trafficking in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances and related matters.

Under the revised trade agreement, both countries agreed to make "mutually beneficial arrangements" to permit their territories to be used for transportation of goods. This meant the two countries had reached accord on allowing transit facilities to each other through land, railway and waterway.

Bangladeshian trucks and boats could transport Indian goods through Bangladesh to another point on the Indo-Bangla border. Although the success in transit and investment issues did not figure in the joint declaration signed by the two premiers, it was described as an unexpected breakthrough.

A senior Indian official reportedly observed: "The granting of the Bangla corridor we had been hankering after for years is bound to transform frosty relations embittered by charges of abetting terrorism and illegal immigration. The visit should remove the misgiving of the ruling alliance in Bangladesh that India has a preference for Awami League."

The then Foreign Minister M. Morshed Khan reportedly said: "The leaders of the two countries have now got a better understanding and a clear picture of each other's positions. They (India) don't have any preference for any particular political party. They will be happy to work with any

political leadership in Bangladesh mandated by the people." He added that this indicated "a change in the mindset of politicians on both sides in a changed perspective."

It was a diplomatic comment coming from a mature foreign minister, sans the usual political rhetoric.

Hasina is no stranger to India -- as a person or a politician. Her father, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib, developed special family ties with late Indira Gandhi and her family, and admired her courageous leadership during our hour of crisis in 1971. After the brutal killing of Bangabandhu along with his family members, one of his surviving daughters, Hasina, spent about five years of her exiled life in Delhi, getting support from the Indian government and the Indira family.

As expected, her recent visit to India drew some extra attention from all quarters, more so as it came in the wake of a massive electoral victory by Awami League in the parliamentary election of 2008, followed by a similar victory of the UPA, led by Sonia Gandhi, in India.

Even after the 2006 visit to India by Begum Zia, the relationship between the two countries has continued to sour to a great extent, largely due to security issues involving the bordering states of India, the ever growing trade imbalance heavily tilted towards India and restriction of entry of Bangladeshi goods into the Indian market through tariff and para-tariff barriers.

It became customary for a section of the Indian media to point fingers towards Bangladesh when terrorists hit Indian installations. When terrorists went on a rampage in the Hotel Taj Mahal Palace of Mumbai in 2008, instantly a section of Indian electronic media "traced" the origin of a couple of terrorists to Bangladesh. Before anything meaningful can be achieved by the two countries, the rusty fences would first have to be mended and thawing of the frozen relationship take place.

That is exactly what Hasina did during her four-day visit, and things have to move from here, and move at a much faster pace. The three agreements and the two MoUs, as expected, just came along. The three agreements were on fighting against terrorism and organised crime, and on reciprocal extradition of convicted prisoners.

The two memorandums of understanding were on cooperation in the power sector and cultural exchange. India also announced a \$1 billion line of credit for infrastructure

development in Bangladesh.

Besides, it announced that it would export 250 megawatts of electricity from its central grid to Bangladesh. Bangladesh also agreed to open up the port facilities of Chittagong and Mongla to India and expected that India would reciprocate by allowing Nepal and Bhutan to have access to these Bangladeshi ports for their international trade.

If this happens, then the visit by the Bangladeshi prime minister will have facilitated in establishing connectivity amongst four Saarc countries simultaneously. By any standard this is a big achievement.

As usual BNP, its allies, some BNP leaning intellectuals and analysts, and a small section of the media are busy in discovering a "sell-off" of Bangladeshi interest and sovereignty to India by Hasina.

One former general even declared that he would raise an army of thirty million and wage war against India to reclaim West Bengal, Assam and Orissa! The usual comical rhetoric of BNP Secretary General Khondakar Delwar Hussain continues. BNP Standing Committee Member Salauddin Quader Chowdhury termed the opening of Chittagong port to India "a conspiracy to detach Chittagong from the rest of the country."

Bangladesh and India still have quite a few burning problems between them that need to be resolved without further delay. The killing of innocent Bangladeshi civilians by BSF, the denigration of maritime and land boundaries, the common rivers water sharing problem, the enclave issue, removal of all trade barriers, and minimising of visa issuance hassles must be given top priority.

Both countries must prepare to implement the accords agreed by the two prime ministers. Only through these actions can the necessary confidence be built, that will lead to ushering in a new era of friendship and cooperation not only amongst the two governments but also amongst the people of the two countries.

Everyone, the party in power and the party in the opposition, must learn to think outside the box. Visits by prime ministers of the two neighbouring countries should be more of a routine matter, rather than one for creating unnecessary euphoria. Co-operation between these two neighbours, built on mutual trust and confidence, can change the socio-economic condition of the people in the region to a great extent.

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