

What Bangladesh should ask of India

Trade is something that Bangladesh can do with other nations too. But, for undiminished river flow, Bangladesh has only India to turn to. Undiminished river flow is therefore the most important thing that Bangladesh can ask from India in return for her goodwill gestures and steps.

NAZRUL ISLAM

PRIME Minister Sheikh Hasina's recent India visit has generated considerable discussion. The main outcome of the visit has been the expression of Bangladesh's unequivocal commitment to stop insurgency abetting activities carried out using her land against India. Broadly, this stand applies to all types of terrorist and criminal activities. The commitment has been reciprocated by India, resulting in the agreements signed during the visit. This step has established goodwill and a level of trust that can now influence positively other spheres of Indo-Bangladesh relationship.

Another important development during the visit has been expression of Bangladesh's willingness to allow her ports for use by neighbouring countries, not only India, but Bhutan and Nepal as well. By doing so, Bangladesh has responded to another important Indian need, namely alleviation of the semi-land locked situation of her north-eastern states.

The question many have asked is what Bangladesh has gained in return to these steps. On the issue of security, the commitment is mutual, so that the question of additional gain to be had by

Bangladesh in a sense may not apply. However, many have seen the Indian offer of \$1 billion credit, the opportunity to buy electricity from her, etc as indirect reciprocal steps.

Regarding ports, allowing ports for use by other countries of the region can be a mutually advantageous step for Bangladesh too. From being *national sea* ports of Bangladesh, Chittagong and Mongla can now become *regional* ports, enjoying many benefits of entrepot trade, as do Hong Kong, Singapore, and other such regional ports.

The regional status can be particularly helpful for Mongla, which is generally regarded as underutilised. Of course, Bangladesh has to carefully negotiate the modalities of use of her ports by neighboring countries, so that her legitimate interests are protected and due economic gains are maximised.

However, many think that Bangladesh should get more from India in return for her cooperation in meeting India's security and economic needs and have put forward many additional demands, such as:

- removal of tariff and non-tariff barriers to Bangladesh export to India,
- halt to killing of Bangladeshis by Border Security Force (BSF) of India,



We want our share of river waters.

transit facility to Nepal and Bhutan, etc. Many of these are justifiable demands that Bangladesh should indeed put forward to India and press upon. The joint communique suggests that Bangladesh is indeed doing so.

However, the most important thing that Bangladesh should ask from India is "undiminished river flow." The communique indicates that Bangladesh did raise this issue. In fact, press reports suggest that Bangladesh tried to reach an agreement during the visit on sharing of the Teesta river. However, it did not materialise, and the communique mentions the intention of both nations of continuing the negotiation on this issue.

Actually, Bangladesh needs to adopt a completely different position on the

issue of rivers. Now that Bangladesh has secured the goodwill of India, Bangladesh can make this position more prominent and ask India to accept it. Instead of asking for a part of the river flow, which negotiations on "sharing of the rivers" imply, Bangladesh should ask for "undiminished river flow."

Bangladesh can justify this position on the ground of her right to "prior and customary use" of river flows. The international norms and conventions with regard to trans-boundary rivers support this right. India knows that the entire economy, society, and culture of Bangladesh have developed over thousands of years based on flows of the rivers that pass through her. Any diminution of these flows violates Bangladesh's inalienable rights on her rivers.

India has already done a gross injustice to Bangladesh by constructing the Farakka barrage that has done irreparable damage to the rivers and ecology of southeastern Bangladesh. India has done similar injustice by diverting Teesta flow through its Gazaldoba barrage. It is of utmost concern that India has similar diversionary plans with respect to other common rivers. Just as the security threat was poisoning Indo-Bangladesh relationship from Bangladesh side, so is water diversion poisoning this relationship from India's side.

Just imagine how electrifying the effect on Bangladesh people's attitude toward India and thereby on Indo-Bangladesh relationship would be if India announced that it would decommission Farakka! Such a proposition is not unreasonable at all. Long thirty-six years of its operation has shown that Farakka has not brought much benefit to India (West Bengal). It has not qualitatively changed the situation of Kolkata port. On the other hand, Farakka has become a source of flooding in many parts of Bihar and West Bengal. More importantly, Farakka has led the Ganges to change its course so that in future the river is likely to bypass the barrage making this huge structure redundant. That being the case, is it not advantageous for India to do what nature seems to be already set to do, and yet derive the dividends in terms of further warming her relationship with Bangladesh? The same may be said with regard to the Gazaldoba barrage.

Letting the flow of rivers undiminished is also in India's interest from another long term, strategic point of

view. This is related to climate change. India knows very well that submergence of a significant part of Bangladesh may render millions of people as climate refugees. Where will these people go? Obviously, India is at risk. No barbed wire is going to withstand the thrust of millions of people. Hence it is in India's interest to help Bangladesh counter the submergence effect of climate change.

Land accretion through sedimentation caused by river flow is the most important protection that Bangladesh has against rising sea level. About 2 billion tons of sediment used to be carried by rivers into Bangladesh. Unfortunately, this sediment volume is decreasing due to India's diversion of river flows. By stopping this diversion, India can help Bangladesh counter the sea level rise.

Thus, there are many reasons why India should agree to the demand for undiminished river flow. However, Bangladesh has to raise this demand, make the arguments clear, and win over both the Indian public and the Indian government. Other things, such as trade opportunities, are important, but not as important as river flow. Trade is something that Bangladesh can do with other nations too. But, for undiminished river flow, Bangladesh has only India to turn to. Undiminished river flow is therefore the most important thing that Bangladesh can ask from India in return for her goodwill gestures and steps.

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The Indian Left's Yasser Arafat

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PRAFUL BIDWAI

WITH Jyoti Basu's death, India has lost the last leader who embodied a personal link between the many phases of national politics since the early 1940s.

Basu wasn't just a major Left leader in a country with the world's biggest Communist party outside China. He participated in numerous processes that shaped politics, including trade union and peasant movements, radicalisation of the intelligentsia, contestations between social-group identities, and crystallisation of the party system.

Unlike S.A. Dange or E.M.S. Namboodiripad, Basu was neither a theoretician nor a mass leader. Nor was he an organisation man such as Harkishan Singh Surjeet or Pramod Dasgupta. Basu was a managerial-style party pragmatist whose greatest strengths were electoral politics, admin-

istration and governance.

Basu worked on the public side of the CPM and built successful social coalitions. He was Chief Minister of West Bengal -- a state with 80 million people -- continuously for 23 years. This is a world record.

Basu was a maverick in many ways. When the undivided Communist Party split in 1964, he was the only individual from a group of privileged European-educated young Communists who went with the CPM. Most party intellectuals stayed with the CPI.

Basu unquestioningly accepted the CPM's organisational hegemony. An unbending party loyalist, he believed in orthodox forms of discipline and "democratic centralism" -- based on concentric circles of authority within the party, and the norm that party members must unquestioningly follow a decision taken after internal debate.

In 1996, Basu famously became "the

best Prime Minister India never had." The United Front unanimously offered the position to him. But the CPM Central Committee rejected the offer.

The decision was driven by a narrow control-based consideration -- with its 51 MPs, the Left wouldn't be able to dominate the Front. This meant forfeiting great advantages, including prestige and mainstream acceptance for the Left. Basu's leadership might even have delayed or prevented the BJP's rise to national power in 1998.

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The CPM-led Left Front implemented a diluted version of land reform in West Bengal in relation to Kerala. Operation Barga only registered tenants and gave them a 75% harvest share.

In his first term as Chief Minister, Basu said: "Let [the] capitalists understand us. We shall also try to understand their point of view." He even befriended industrial magnates, including Messrs Dhirubhai Ambani, Ratan Tata and RP Goenka. He even favoured multinational takers of some of Bengal's sick industrial units.

Basu's upper-class, upper-caste *Bhadralok* identity endeared him greatly to Bengal's elite. But Basu's politics largely excluded Dalits, Adivasis and OBCs -- and even Muslims, who form one-fourth of the state's population -- from governance and political representation.

In this respect, and in social development indicators, West Bengal lags behind many other states. The rate of decline in its rural poverty has halved since 1994. According to National Sample Survey, "the percentage of rural households not getting enough food every day in some months of the year" is highest in West Bengal (10.6%), worse than in Orissa (4.8%).

West Bengal has 9.61 lakh school dropouts in the 6-14 age group, higher than Bihar's 6.96 lakhs. Of India's 24 districts that has more than 50,000 out-of-school children, nine are in West Bengal.

The state's official *Human Development Report* (2004) admits that spending on and access to health services have stagnated. Some indicators -- immunisation, antenatal care, women's nutrition, and doctors and hospital beds per one-lakh people -- are below national average. West Bengal has not opened a single new primary health centre in a decade.

West Bengal only generates 14 person-days of work per poor family under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act. The national average is 43.

India's worst recent food riots have occurred in West Bengal -- especially in poor tribal districts like Purulia -- when starving people raided the godowns of dishonest ration-shop owners, all CPM members. In Purulia, 78% of the people live in poverty.

Over two-fifths of Bengal's poor don't have ration cards. Meanwhile, some of the gains of Operation Barga are eroding. Seventeen percent of registered tenants have lost their land and another 27% are in insecure possession.

Clearly, the Left Front has failed the poor in numerous ways during its 32 years in power. Basu bears a good share of responsibility for this.

Basu, then, is akin to Yasser Arafat, the tallest leader of the movement for an independent Palestinian state, who died in 2004. Arafat put Palestine on the world agenda -- a historic contribution. But he signed the hideously unjust Oslo peace accords.

Arafat's once-secular and progressive Fatah has lost credibility. The Islamicist Hamas won plurality a free and fair election. The CPM might similarly lose West Bengal to the

Trinamool Congress.

Basu leaves a mixed legacy. The Left Front's "industrialisation-at-any-cost" philosophy continues to cost it poor people's support. Neoliberal corporate led industrialisation has proved extremely predatory and destructive of livelihoods.

If the Trinamool wins the 2011 West Bengal Assembly elections, it will unleash unspeakable violence on the CPM to settle old scores and capture new areas. In Kerala, the Left faces an uphill battle. It was routed in the 2009 Lok Sabha elections.

A nationally weakened Left could go into serious long-term decline. The Left has grown in India even while Communism went into a tailspin globally after the collapse of the USSR. This was a great achievement. Its reversal would be an equally great pity.

Luckily, Basu won't live to see the unravelling and humiliation of the Left. Finally, Jyoti Basu must be admired for standing by his atheist convictions and donating his body for medical research.

Not many show such courage at a time when it's most needed -- amidst the explosion of blind faith, superstition and worship of so-called godmen and every conceivable irrationality in India.

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'There is no room for dogmatism in politics'

Mirza Fakhru Islam Alamgir was recently elected as a senior joint secretary general of BNP in its fifth national council in December 2009. He had earlier served as state minister for agriculture and played an important role in our country's liberation as part of a student union. Rakib Hasnet Suman recently spoke to him.

DS: What do you feel about the Awami League led grand alliance's first year in power?

MFA: The people expected a democratic atmosphere where they would be able to give their opinions freely along with the media, but unfortunately that was not the case. We the opposition, faced obstacles at every step, false cases were filed against our members and even their houses were grabbed by ruling party activists. Not even the courts could help us.

BNP claims the government has failed miserably, but opinion polls show that government is generally on the right track. Your thoughts on the issue.

I did not say that the government was a total failure. I think there were a few good initiatives such as the introduction of the farmers' card.

Has the opposition been as successful? We, the BNP, faced unbelievable challenges as the opposition, where our biggest achievement was being able to

turn around from the disastrous situation over the last one year. Our grassroots are strong and we held our council.

Did BNP play a constructive role as the opposition in the last one year?

The opposition didn't do anything negative: we didn't go to the streets, no *hartals* were called, and we didn't embarrass the government. Our leader often said that she wanted to cooperate with the government, but unfortunately the prime minister did not respond. They didn't even keep their promise in choosing the deputy speaker from the opposition.

The prime minister could have met with the leader of the opposition before leaving the country for India. We had hoped that the Awami League would start this culture, but they failed to do so. Is the small size of the opposition the main reason for not going to Parliament?

Never. There is no relation between the small number of seats and our absence

from parliament. The government must stop all steps regarding the house of the opposition leader and all false cases filed against her must be withdrawn. The government withdrew all of their own cases but did not withdraw cases filed against the opposition leaders. Such a contradictory attitude must be removed. Your party has a slogan: "The country is more important than party and the



party is more important than individuals. But the reason for boycotting parliament is related to Khaleida Zia, her family, and BNP leaders. Your comments? The leader of the opposition is not just a person; she is a part of parliament and the democratic process of the country. Parliamentary functions cannot proceed without the opposition and that is why

the government has to ensure that the opposition leader can work comfortably.

We are going to the people and trying to understand their problems. The BNP played an important role against the Tipaimukh Dam, so we are not avoiding our responsibility. We are attending parliamentary committee meetings; we will even attend the house right now if the government creates a congenial atmosphere.

The office of the leader of the opposition in parliament seems to be inactive, even the party lawmakers are allegedly not getting proper assistance from that office. Do you agree?

Active office does not mean that the leader of the opposition has to be there all the time. The office is active since all the officials are working there in accordance with her. With the help of the office, our lawmakers are regularly submitting questions and other notices. So the opposition leader is playing her role properly.

In the election manifesto, BNP pledged to induct a provision that membership of the parliament would be scrapped if any MP remained absent from the House for 30 consecutive working days. BNP lawmakers have already crossed this number, right?

Perspective changes frequently. There is no room for dogmatism in politics. One need not stick to what one has said for-

ever. Positions can change due to new perspectives. But we hope that the government will take an initiative to help us return to parliament.

On December 8, the party leaders told the press that the BNP's central committee would include 251 members, but surprisingly the chairperson announced a 386-member committee. What was the real decision?

I think the real decision was what the party has announced. The chairperson approved a 251-member committee according to the council's decision. Some people's actions embarrassed the BNP when they were in power, and the prime minister promised to rein them in. However, they have been inducted into the central committee. Why?

It's true such allegations have been raised. But we cannot give anyone punishment before getting a verdict from the courts. We cannot say anyone is guilty before proving the allegations. You know at least 18 cases have been filed against Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. But we are not calling her a corrupt prime minister because of these reasons. Certain controversial people got posts but many dedicated leaders failed to get a position in the new committee. Your thoughts?

I think almost all were included in the committee. If any dedicated and qualified leaders were dropped out, then they

would be accommodated in the party's front and associate bodies committees. According to the RPO a political party should not have direct links with student and labour organisations. But on January 1 the BNP chairperson approved Jatiyatabadi Chatra Dal's committee. Isn't it a violation of law? I don't know whether she approved the Chatra Dal committee. But it would not be a violation of RPO as Chatra Dal is our associate body. It's not our front organisation.

Tarique Rahman is now senior vice-chairman. So why does the post of senior joint secretary general continue? BNP is a big political party. It's tough for the secretary general to do all the things. We all know that the Indian Congress Party has at least six general secretaries. The secretary general, senior joint secretary general, and other joint secretaries general will give our main organisation leadership. The party introduced this system to smoothly coordinate all organisational activities.

What would be your party's position regarding the trial of war criminals? We want the trial of the war criminals but it should not be politicised. The quality of the trial must be up to an international level, but we are losing our confidence due to the activities of the government and certain comments made by some of the ministers.