

## A realistic approach to solving regional issues

*The South Asian forum's recommendations merit consideration*

THE consensus of view among the members of the South Asian countries reached at a discussion meeting held recently in Dhaka involving participants from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, on the indispensability of common approach to solving apparently intractable problems between the countries of the region, is very welcome indeed. The meeting was organised by the local chapter of Bangladesh-Bharat-Pakistan People's Forum.

The discussants put their finger on the crux of the matter - the need for cooperation in the region because of commonality of the problems that emerge from shared history, geography and culture of the three countries.

In the context of the region it will serve us well to keep in mind that problems do not occur in isolation or affect only one country, but are dictated by inescapable factors that affect all the countries in equal measure, impinging on the issues in a manner that sometimes lend them an intractable character. It therefore becomes imperative for the countries to look at the matters objectively and relate to them as 'ours' rather than 'theirs alone.'

It needs hardly to be mentioned that the three fundamental issues that affect the people of the three countries in particular, and the region in general, that of sharing of water of the common rivers, trafficking in the border areas, and trade deficit, have assumed such a proportion that can only be addressed through adoption of common strategy at the multi-lateral and region levels. And it is even more so when it comes to the question of extremism and terrorism, a phenomenon that straddles regional borders and festers, allegedly, on support from across the borders.

We are for involving all the mechanisms for enhancing mutual cooperation for problem resolution, and in this regard one cannot agree more that apart from contact and cooperation at the government level there is a need to enhance people to people contact. That is necessary for two reasons. First, there can be no better way than to create awareness among the peoples of the region regarding the mutuality of a problem, and the suffering being caused by it, than by the track two, three and even track four levels of contact. But even more importantly, through such contacts, which often involve frank exchanges of opinions, can emerge realistic solutions that may not occur readily to the bureaucrats. Such groups can even bring to bear pressure on the respective governments to come to an agreement to resolve an outstanding matter urgently.

## Closing down the BDR shops

*Let the force return to doing its professional work*

THE Director General of Bangladesh Rifles has informed the country that the border force will soon wind up the commercial outlets it has been operating in the capital for the last two years or more. We tend to think that, given the nature of the duties and responsibilities the BDR as a force is expected to carry out, the decision to do away with the eleven BDR shops is a judicious one as it will enable the force to return to the basics upon which it was established originally. One need hardly point out that such business activities on the part of the BDR, ever since they commenced in 2007, have raised eyebrows if not exactly questions, with large numbers of people seeing little reason why a disciplinary force should be engaging itself in business activities like any other commercial venture. Major General Mainul Islam has pretty aptly pointed to the vicious business cycle (his own words) the BDR has become trapped in over the BDR shops scattered across Dhaka.

There will, of course, be quite a few complications about the way in which the BDR can ease itself out of such a business venture. Apparently, an agreement was signed by its late director general with Nirmal Udyog that commits the BDR to a ten-year deal in such commercial activities. It should now be for the BDR authorities to work out the legal ways and means by which the force can opt out of the agreement and at the same time see to it that the eleven shops in question are taken over by organisations that can manage them to the satisfaction of the public. We understand that the shops are on LGED land. That being the case, the possibility of whether the LGED or the city corporation can take charge of the shops under new arrangements can be looked into. Besides, the future of the employees at these shops merits serious concern. There is another matter that needs careful looking into. It appears that the BDR authorities seem to think the venture has not resulted in any economic benefits to the force and that it has never known whether any profits accrued to it through the operation of the shops. The matter calls for a thorough inquiry in the greater public interest.

Overall, we believe it is time, after the all-engulfing tragedy that occurred in February last year, for a purposeful reorganisation of the BDR. The shops it has operated have raised questions. Likewise, its involvement in a 'daal-bhaat' programme has also led to queries aroused by curiosity. The task now, for the government, is to ensure that all disciplinary and disciplined forces of the republic do what they are constitutionally required to do, nothing more and nothing less. The BDR chief's sentiments should now be matched by action.

## Whose Ekushey?

Later, the media tells us they fired on Paharis fighting with Bengalis. How odd then, that all the dead and wounded are Pahari. Why aren't there any Bengali settlers who were hurt?

NAEEM MOHAIEEMEN

I was getting myself into the spirit of Amar Ekushey. Bangalis of the neo-consumerist age, our best stories are coming from colourful ads on TV. I whirled through all the channels, to catch the cream, the best ones on constant repeat.

Oh look, a white girl in a sari, standing in front of Shahid Minar. The camera pans back and it's a pseudo-UN congregation on the steps. We are the World. I switch over and there's a gorgeous restaging of all the classics of Bangla literature: Satyajit, Rabindranath, and ...cut to Shahid Minar. Ekushey in the era of "Brand Bangladesh." Phenomenon of cultural marketing and ad agencies.

I'm getting myself ready for Boi Mela, Probhat Feri, or at least the obligatory kurta pajama. But my SMS and email accounts are rudely interrupting with some reality doses. The news comes in drips, pushing through a rigid media blackout. Bengali settlers attacking Jumma (Pahari) homes in Sajek.

The same Sajek that was the scene of anti-Pahari arson rampages in 2008. Now the damage was even more widespread. Two hundred homes burnt in one day. A Buddhist temple allegedly burnt as well.

And then, sometime during the day, security forces fire on demonstrators. Later, the media tells us they fired on Paharis fighting with Bengalis. How odd then, that all the dead and wounded are Pahari. Why aren't there any Bengali settlers who were hurt?

The narrative keeps changing, as the media spin cycle begins. But none of the spin is on the side of the Paharis. ATN Bangla's first report says: "One killed in Pahari-Bangali feud. 15 injured including 4 army officers. Homes burnt." RTV says: "Pahari-Bangali clash. 1 killed." The language is clever, a feud and a clash is between two equal parties. If you read these reports only, and never visit CHT, you would never have any idea how much muscle is on the side of the Bengalis.

Only later, the next day, do the newspapers begin to admit that the dead are all Pahari, and most of the wounded as well. I kept scanning the media, thinking that someone somewhere would say at least



CHT: Not as peaceful as it looks.

one word about the fact that, we Bengalis may have been the aggressors in this and other cases.

Perhaps there was some extra caution on this day. It's Ekushey. There are four names to remember, and a red letter year. Salam, Barkat, Rafiq, Jabbar. 1952. How inconvenient to have to add Buddhobati, Laxmi, Liton, Bana Shanti, and Nutunjoy Chakma.

2010. Bengalis killing non-Bengalis. On Ekushey February. It won't match with that beautiful national narrative. There's sponsorship money at stake, get your priorities right.

Watching some senior journalists has been very instructive. They seem to be bending over backwards to see things only from the Bengali settlers eyes: "Things were not clear," Pahari "miscreants" attacked us, state forces had been "forced" to fire, etc. Aggressors paint themselves as Victims.

must have started it. There could be no other version of this story.

I remember veteran journalists who had always been critics of the abuse of state power in the recent past. Why was it so difficult for them to believe, now, that the Paharis could be the victims of decades of marginalisation and racism? That Bengali racism has repeatedly created flash point and nightmares like Sajek. And in the absence of implementation of the 1997 Accord (still waiting after 13 years), the

Paharis will continue to face onslaughts of Bengali muscle power.

But hey, maybe all this myopia was temporary, just for Ekushey. Maybe tomorrow, we'll start looking in the mirror again.

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## Method in the madness

With an unequivocal mandate, Awami League has every right to chart a different course for the nation than that set by Zia. Implementing a secular education policy or trying the war criminals who lead the major Islamist party would be good ways to ensure an ideological reorientation. It's sad to see that the government is instead relying on cheap, divisive, reactionary tactics.



JYOTI RAHMAN

THIS is madness -- that's been the refrain on the government's decision to rename the country's major international airport. As the Daily Star editor asks: For God's sake why? Possible answers to Mr. Anam's questions can be found in an earlier article, All in, by Zafar Sobhan, one of his colleagues. Though this be madness, yet there is method in it. It's just that this method could derail Bangladesh for a long time to come.

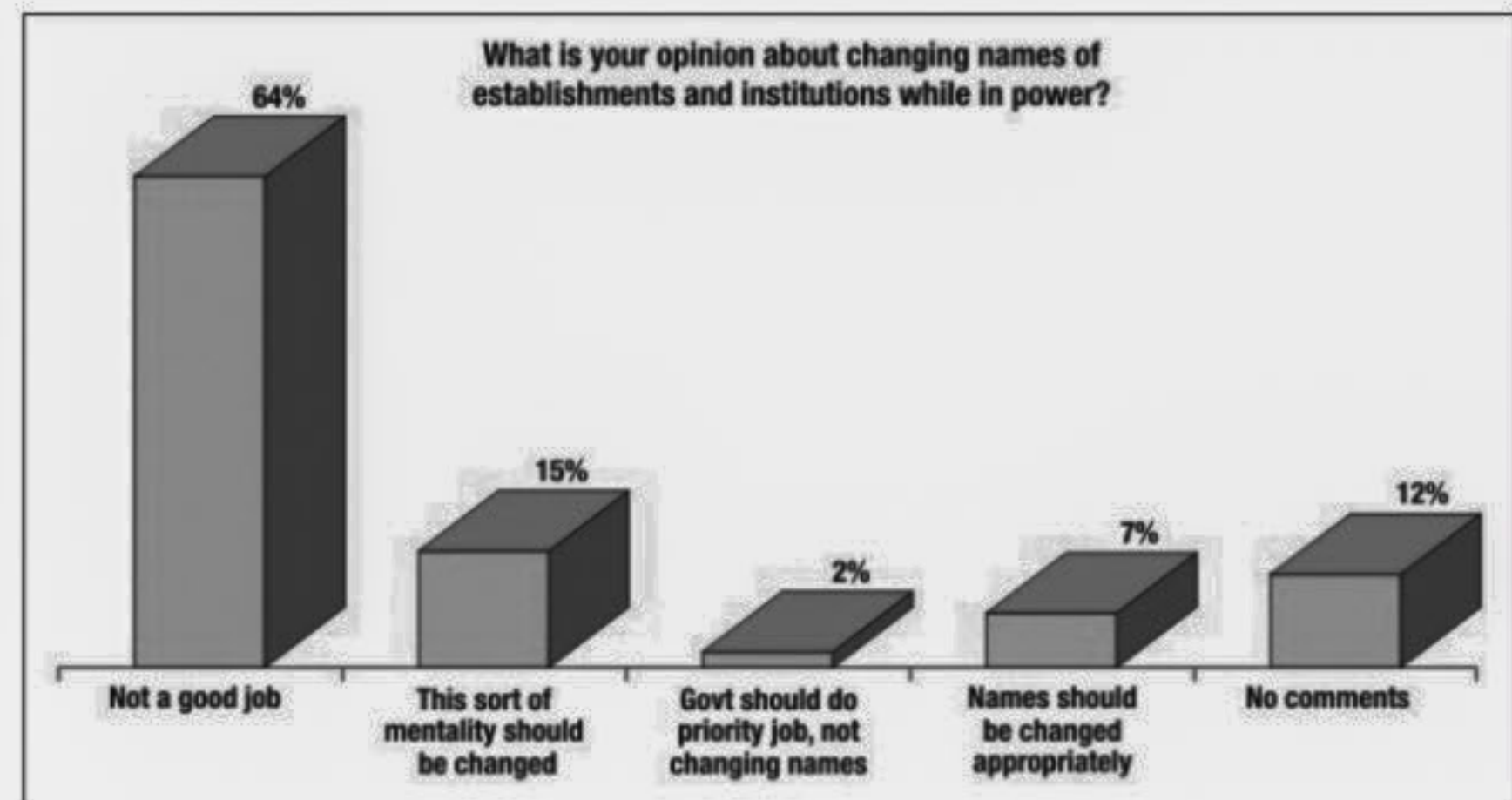
The official reason for the name-change -- that following the 5th Amendment verdict, there should be nothing named after Ziaur Rahman, whose rise to power is now deemed illegal -- doesn't hold water as the cabinet discussed this weeks before the verdict was upheld.

Mr. Sobhan's piece points to a different reason: this is part of an ideological offensive. He says, rightly, that today's Bangladesh, warts and all, reflects ideas, priorities, and philosophical directions set by Ziaur Rahman over 30 years ago. Since Awami League's ideas and philosophies are different from those of Zia's,

following the landslide victory of 2008, it is only expected that they would want to reorient the course of the Republic. To quote Mr Sobhan:

It is also important to deligitimise Zia and to bring his wrongs to public attention, so that his carefully cultivated and sanitised public image, that remains a corner-stone of the BNP's electoral appeal, is called into question. It is this thinking that is behind the move to rename the airport.

However, one cannot imagine a more hypocritical method to launch this ideological offensive. Since both parties support parliamentary democracy and market economy, the ideological fault-line between the government's politics and that of Zia must revolve around secularism and the role of religion in politics. How is renaming the country's major airport after a 14<sup>th</sup> century religious leader a nod to secular values? What kind of secular Bangladesh are we heading to where the first thing anyone arriving to the country sees is an airport named after a religious figure?



Or perhaps this is not about ideology. Perhaps this is pure politics. Perhaps, this, along with the statements about Zia's dead body, or the lease on the opposition leader's house, is part of a political tactics to keep the opposition distracted?

If that is so, then could this be a serious overreach? Anecdotal, response of the urban educated class that the Awami League worked so hard to capture with positive politics in 2008 is one of extreme disappointment. The party leadership might think the government could do without these "bubble folks." Again, to quote Mr. Sobhan:

Those of us who would prefer a politics of inclusiveness and compromise might dismiss the move as counter-productive and suggest that it makes the AL look petty and small-minded. They know this, but are willing to take the hit. They figure that people don't really care that much about issues that do not hit them in their pocket-book, such as renaming of airports, and so it won't hurt them with the public.

But is it just the Anglophone elites that have a problem with this? According to the Daily Star-Nielsen poll from January, the public resoundingly rejects the politics of name-change.

At a time of worsening law and order, rising inflation, and stifling infrastructure bottlenecks, exactly how out-of-touch is the government to think that this won't hurt them?

Perhaps the government figures that, given the woeful organisational mess that is the BNP, any street agitation would be small scale affairs. But let's not forget, Dhaka is an urban jungle that is always tinder away from explosion.

And the new name for the airport could have dangerous blowbacks. If

this is a cynical move to thwart BNP from renaming the airport should it return to power some day, then has anyone considered the possibility of Bangabandhu Avenue being renamed Hazrat Muhammad Sharani?

When the prime minister warned the BDR rebels to not try her patience, there was an echo of dabaye rakhte parba na. When she comments about a dead body, there is an echo of her rival's birthday party. If the perception again develops that "all politicians are bad" -- who gains? Have we already forgotten 1/11? Does the government not realise that the next time there is an extraordinary intervention, it may well be against Awami League, with major players acting more decisively than the dithering duo of 2007?

With an unequivocal mandate, Awami League has every right to chart a different course for the nation than that set by Zia. Implementing a secular education policy or trying the war criminals who lead the major Islamist party would be good ways to ensure an ideological reorientation. It's sad to see that the government is instead relying on cheap, divisive, reactionary tactics.

The late Ahmed Safa reputedly said: When Awami League wins, it wins alone, but when it loses, the whole nation loses. The prime minister has a chance to prove him wrong. Her Digital Bangladesh agenda met the approval of the harshest donors only a few days ago. That vision will be endangered when the public sees the government acting as if it has no agenda and only wants to thrive on controversies and distractions.

Will the prime minister prove Mr. Safa wrong, or will she set the nation up for a loss?

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