

Framework deal on Teesta waters

Opportunity for wider Indo-Bangla river cooperation

A good deal of hope will certainly be generated by the deal on a framework of agreement on the Teesta waters reached by Bangladesh and India on Monday. The secretary-level talks of the Joint Rivers Commission stipulate an agreement that will cover a fifteen-year period in which the two countries will share the waters of the river. The significance of the deal, which will be followed by ministerial level talks in order to fine tune the details of the eventual agreement to be initiated by the prime ministers of India and Bangladesh, cannot be lost on anyone. Although this breakthrough comes after more than two decades of negotiations between Dhaka and Delhi, it must be pointed out that the Teesta waters have been high on the agenda since 1952, when the governments of India and the then Pakistan first tried hammering out a deal on them. In the post-1971 period, with the emergence of Bangladesh as an independent state, the Teesta took on a seriousness that was as critical as, if not more critical than, the need for a sharing of the waters of the Ganges.

It was in 1982 that talks were revived on the modalities by which Bangladesh and India could share the waters of the Teesta. The mid-1980s were largely characterized by ad hoc deals on the river and since then, despite an Indo-Bangla deal on the Ganges in 1996, not much has happened about the Teesta. Now that a framework has been given shape on an eventual agreement to be arrived at, the question of what details have been covered in the framework and how the two nations will share the waters of the Teesta will naturally arise. It is particularly in the dry season, especially beginning in September and going up to March, that Bangladesh requires the Teesta waters to help organize its agriculture-related activities. Alongside Bangladesh's demand, there is the matter of how much water India needs in the same period. Interestingly, although during the dry season flow of the Teesta goes down to anywhere between 5,000 and 6,000 cusecs, the demand for water by Bangladesh and India are 8,000 cusecs and 21,000 cusecs respectively. It is an issue that needs careful handling. The expectation is that the ministerial level talks as well as the meeting of the two prime ministers will be able to tide over such problems.

The fifteen-year deal is obviously intended to be an interim one, given its time frame. Nevertheless, it is an optimistic beginning that should lead to wider openings in river cooperation between the two countries. For India and Bangladesh, in the interest of their future relations as well as the future of their peoples, it is important that at some point the matter of sharing river waters translate into the larger matter of development and joint management of common rivers. The Teesta deal is definitely a foundation on which further cooperation can be forged, especially on a sharing of the waters of the Dharla, Dudhkumar, Manu, Khowai, Gumti and Muhuri rivers.

We welcome the results of the talks in Dhaka and look forward to a substantive follow-up.

The begging malady

Remedial steps welcome

THE High Court directives upon the government to bring to a halt incidence of abduction and maiming of children and forcing them into begging in the streets are welcome. It is manifestly barbaric, not to speak of being a social menace.

Street begging has also stained the image of the country particularly when the waiting vehicles at the traffic signals are approached by physically challenged in full glare of the public, and even tourists. Many with ailing, deformed and disabled children in their laps risk their lives and limbs keeping wafer thin distance from the vehicles screeching to a halt or rushing out as green light blinks.

Most of these people trace their origin from villages. They have been driven by poverty and landlessness from river erosion, pauperization and scarcity of employment to land on the cities.

In this context, it is good augury that the cabinet has approved a draft Vagrant and Shelterless People (Rehabilitation) Act 2010, to rehabilitate street people, with provisions for lifetime imprisonment or death sentence for forcing anyone into begging. The decision to rehabilitate them through various measures is certainly a good move. According to a government survey, there are about 12 lac vagrants in the country and the number of beggars and their dependants adds up to nearly a crore, of them 80 per cent live in urban areas and the rest in rural areas. Dhaka and other cities are drowning under the pressure.

The government plan to build vagrant homes in the entire 64 districts for rehabilitation will have to be backed up by sustainable programs that could bring this large number of vagrants into the mainstream population enabling them to contribute to national development.

Private and non-government organizations can play a huge part in lending support to the government programs in this virtually unattended sphere of our national concerns. It is inspiring that many voluntary organizations have shown their eagerness to work on this ground.

While alms-giving is piety and has been a part of our religious conviction and culture, the recalcitrant have been feasting on the sympathy of the people for the poor. By now we all know that street begging is a lucrative trade suspected to be run by an organized band of people, who may also have been indulging in larceny, mugging, child and women trafficking and drug trading.

We would like to see the den of racketeers tracked down and put out of action right away, or they will undermine the progressive character of the society.

A scholar, Agartala and history

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

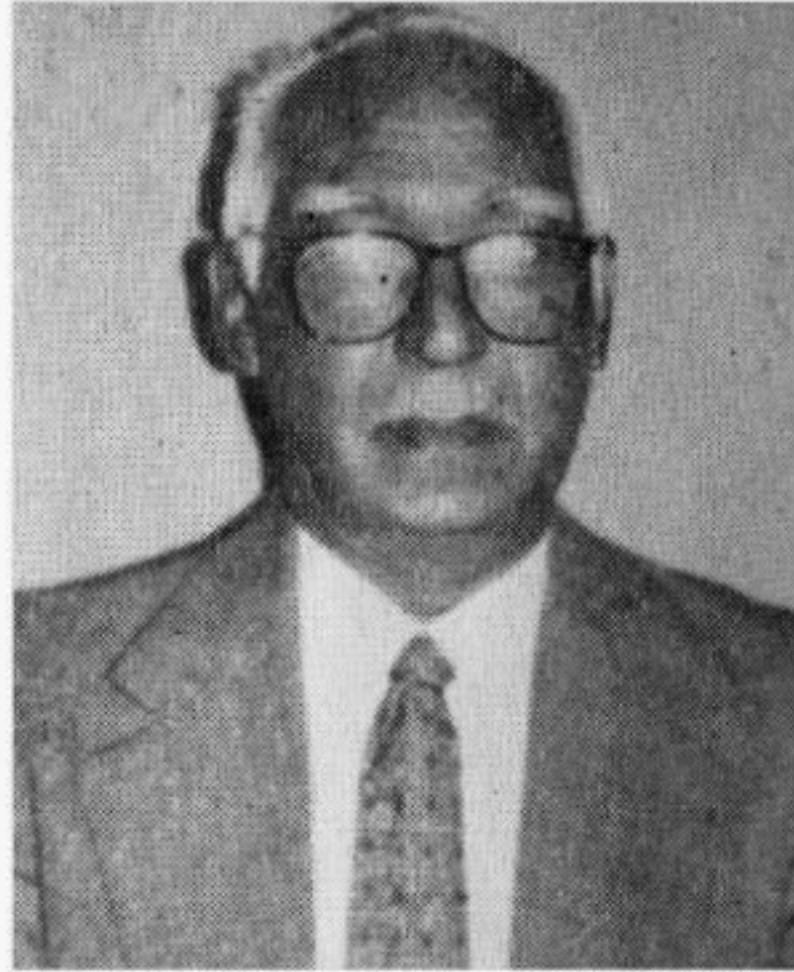
KHAN Shamsur Rahman, or call him Shamsur Rahman Khan, died close to three months ago at the age of eighty four. There ought to have been all the reminiscences on his life and times in the media. Those who have kept watch on Bangladesh's history as it unfolded in the 1960s and 1970s should have found time to reflect on the man whose contributions to the creation of Bangladesh were based on pure conviction and undiluted courage. The Agartala conspiracy case instituted by the Ayub Khan regime in late 1967 and pursued with vigour bordering on vengeance all the way to early 1969 made Khan Shamsur Rahman a household word inasmuch as it helped turn the tide for the people of a soon to be born Bangladesh. It was Khan's suffering, as accused number nineteen in the case, along with that of thirty four other Bengalis that sealed our collective belief in our future being well outside the parameters of the state of Pakistan.

Those of us who remember the tumultuous times that were the late 1960s recall too the terrible pain Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Khan Shamsur Rahman and everyone else implicated in the Agartala case were subjected to by the Pakistani military and civilian establishment, the better to have them convicted and sentenced as traitors to the cause of Pakistan.

When Khan Shamsur Rahman died in October last year, it should have been for those among us who knew him well, and knew of him, to have dwelt at length on his career and his personality as a way of understanding our own place in the global scheme of things. He did not deserve our silence. In his death it was not an insignificant

soul that was passing into the Great Beyond, for Khan was one of those Bengalis whose superiority of character matched his greatness of humility. He did not speak of himself. He did not drop names. And yet he was, and will always be, part of the processes along

of the wisdom he brought into his defence of the cause of his fellow Bengalis. And then, of course, there was the honorific as well as the honour in which he was held by his friends, indeed by everyone who knew of the mettle he was made of. He was Dr.



Khan Shamsur Rahman

In the days of the Agartala case, Khan Shamsur Rahman's faith consisted in his belief that Bengalis would not let him down. As a free man, he repaid the debt: he did not let his fellow Bengalis down.

which Bangladesh's history has shaped itself.

There was brilliance in the man. It was not merely the fact of his topping the Central Superior Service examinations of Pakistan in 1951, which of course was a feat that will make every Bengali proud, that defined him. The brilliance went beyond the frontiers of the government career that he passed through and through which he rose to the heights. He served with distinction in different regions of East Pakistan, in a variety of responsible positions. He served a stint at the Pakistan embassy in Jakarta in the 1960s, which again was a pointer to the powerhouse that was his mind.

When you speak of Khan's brilliance, you tend to think of his intellect,

Johnson, for he was emblematic of the wisdom that knowledge could throw up. He knew history, he comprehended facts and in him came this amazing ability to relate knowledge to the pursuit of life. Men of wisdom are men of courage, which perhaps explains why Khan Shamsur Rahman did not flinch when the Ayub Khan regime brutalised him in all the darkness of the Agartala case. And that case, if you will recall, was a glowing instance of how men like Khan stood ready to sacrifice themselves in the defence of their land and heritage. As part of Pakistan's civil service, he was especially under pressure to confess, to inform the regime that he and his co-accused had all been party to a grand conspiracy to break Pakistan

into two and lead its eastern wing to independence. Khan did not break. Nobody broke. In the end, all the accused Bengalis but one emerged free of the case, not because Pakistan had relented but because the Bengali nation had prevailed in its determination to have these patriotic men come home. One did not come home. Sergeant Zahurul Haq was murdered by the military in the cantonment. Nearly two years down the road, one other brave one among the lot, Commander Moazzem Hossain, would be brutally cut down by the army of occupation from Pakistan in the early hours of the genocide on 26 March 1971.

Khan Shamsur Rahman's place in the pantheon of Bengali heroes became an assured reality long before Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman sent him off to Moscow as Bangladesh's first ambassador to the Soviet Union. And from there it was to Delhi that he went as high commissioner. In him was symbolised the Bengali cause, the essence of what Bangladesh stood for. In the early 1980s, he faded into silence. It was just as well. He was one of those few men who did not wear their heroism on their sleeves. It was enough for Khan Shamsur Rahman that he had served the country he had suffered for.

In the days of the Agartala case, Khan Shamsur Rahman's faith consisted in his belief that Bengalis would not let him down. As a free man, he repaid the debt: he did not let his fellow Bengalis down.

Where is the Boswell who will speak of this, our very own, Doctor Johnson?

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A new country may emerge in Africa

HARUN UR RASHID

JANUARY 9 was the day when a referendum was held to decide whether Southern Sudan became an independent country, separating from Northern Sudan under a comprehensive peace agreement in 2005 between the rebels of the south and the Khartoum government. The voters' registration ended on December 8, 2010.

According to officials, more than 2.8 million people, who are predominantly non-Arab Christians, live in Southern Sudan, whereas Northern Sudanese are Arabs and Muslims.

Sudan is the largest country in Africa, occupying 2,505,810 square kilometres (nearly 17 times larger than Bangladesh). For all but 11 of the 48 years since its independence in 1956, Sudan had been engulfed in civil conflict between northern Arab Muslims and southern non-Arab Christians.

The 21-year conflict devastated a significant part of Africa's largest country and deprived the rest of stability, growth and development. The Sudanese people have paid a terrible price. More than two million people died, four million were uprooted and some 600,000 sought shelter beyond Sudan's borders as refugees.

The conflict between the North and the South erupted one year before Sudan gained its independence in 1955. The civil war between the southern Sudanese and the government went on ceaselessly for decades. Sudanese People's Liberation Movement was led John Garang, who died in 2005 in a helicopter crash.

The war was sparked by a government effort to impose Islamic law on the mostly Christian south in 1983. It was fueled by the south's rich oil reserves, ethnicity and a desire for self-governance.

The nature and size of the country's problems have frequently overflowed into neighbouring countries and brought misery and insecurity to the region.

Over the long years of war, there was a plethora of attempts by various actors, including neighbouring states, concerned donors, as well as the parties themselves, to bring the conflict to an end. The immense complexities of the war and the lack of political will prevented a resolution.



If the vote turns out to be 60% or more, Southern Sudan will be another independent state in Africa. It will be the first time that an African country has split itself into two states by a peace agreement which was based on the recognition of separate ethnicity, language and religion.

In 1993, the heads of states of the Intergovernmental Authority on Drought and Development (IGADD) became involved in the latest initiative to bring the parties together. This was the beginning of a long process that led to the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2005.

The United Nations closely followed and supported the regional peace initiative under the auspices of the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD).

The secretary-general's Special Adviser Mohamed Sahnoun and other senior officials represented the UN at

summit meetings of the IGAD countries, and carried out consultations with regional governments and organisations in support of the peace process. They also took part in meetings of the IGAD-Partners' Forum, composed of donor countries and organisations.

Before John Garang died, in nearly three years of negotiations, Sudan's government and main rebel group had signed comprehensive peace accords to end the more than 21 year old civil war.

The ceremony in Nairobi, Kenya, was attended by the then U.S.

Secretary of State Colin Powell. The agreement was signed by Sudan's Vice-President Ali Osman Taha and Sudanese People's Liberation Movement (SPLA) leader John Garang.

Both the government and the rebel group would not disband their armies under the agreement, and could return to war if they hit a snag along the road to peace, according to Kenyan envoy Lazarus Sumbeiyu.

"A major guarantee (of the agreement) is the retention of the two armies through the interim period, which, in effect, is saying that if we don't agree along the road, then we go back to war because they've just come from war," he said. "But I don't think the people of Sudan, both North and South, would want to go back to war."

A Referendum Commission has been set up to hold the election. In December, 50,000 southern Sudanese living in the northern part of the country had travelled home to the south to vote in advance. Others have come from around the world to vote as well.

According to referendum laws, 60% of registered voters must vote in the referendum for it to be valid. A member of the Referendum Commission, Ms. Beatrice Wani, reportedly said that the voting in advance had been successful.

For the past few months, Juba, the capital city of Southern Sudan, has seen celebration and political rallies. Carrying posters and wearing campaign T-shirts a few hundred people march almost every day, backed by musical bands and waving miniature future flags of independent nation. Men and women drape themselves in the South Sudan flag.

It may be recalled that, in 1967, Ibo tribal people of east Nigeria under Lt. Col. Ojukwu announced the formal secession from the Nigerian Federation and named it "Biafra." The aim of the rebels collapsed by January 1970.

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BARRISTER HARUN UR RASHID IS A FORMER