

SUNDAY POUCH

Manmohan's verbal bombshell

"Off-the-record" comments betray a lack of understanding of Bangladesh

THE Indian Prime Minister's comments on Bangladesh come as a huge shock and surprise. Even more astonishing is the silence of our government. Its closest ally -- at the level of the PM no less -- has made a damning indictment of the political health of this country, describing it as so volatile that it could change for the worse at any moment. The Indian PM has further said that 25% of Bangladesh's population supports Jamaat-I-Islami, is "anti-Indian" and "in the clutches" of the Pakistani ISI.

The Bangladesh government has neither demanded a clarification nor protested the evaluation, displaying an attitude quite inexplicable for a sovereign government.

Dr. Manmohan Singh's statement is weak on facts and way off the mark in understanding. Data from past elections have consistently shown that support for the Jamaat and other Islamic parties has never exceeded 5-6% of the electorate. Nor are there reports of any significant ISI presence in this country. That is why it is all the more amazing that a man of Dr. Singh's stature, known for his measured words and diplomatic skills, should make such comments.

It could hardly have been a slip of words, given that he was speaking in a planned meeting with news editors and that the Indian Foreign Minister is due to visit Dhaka this week. It forces us to question whether India's image of and attitude towards Bangladesh has changed, despite the many signs of every day improvement in our bilateral relations.

This paper always stood for good and mutually beneficial relations with India and celebrated the progress that has been achieved by the Awami League government in this respect. We value the commitment -- reiterated by the Indian PM once again -- to resolve water-sharing and other outstanding issues.

The Indian Prime Minister referred to the generosity of India in providing US\$1 billion credit line to Bangladesh. While this is an important contribution to our development, it must be mentioned that bulk of it is devoted to infrastructure building for transit purposes, and is tied to using Indian companies and materials.

Dr. Manmohan Singh's comments show a lack of understanding of Bangladesh. These also demonstrate a lack of confidence in the government and the stability of our political system. These have now been termed as off-the-record comments, and were not meant to be judgmental. Notwithstanding the deliberate damage control, we have to point out that there exists a serious lack of understanding on India's part about the reality in Bangladesh. There is a lot to learn from the Indian PM's remarks, even if it were off-the-record; perhaps more so because they were off-the-record.

Tragedy on Batali Hill

Have we learnt any lesson?

THE recovery of seventeen bodies in the aftermath of the landslide and protection wall collapse in Chittagong's Batali Hill area is a tragedy that could have been avoided. It is not that such calamities are new in this country.

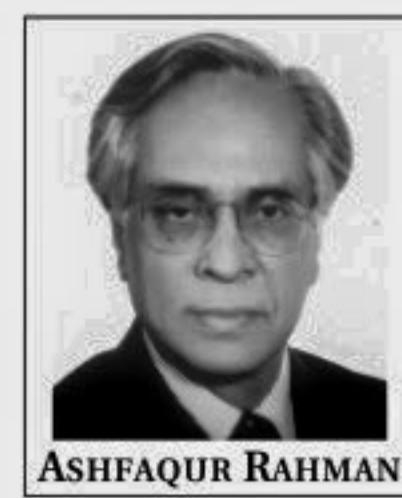
In the past too there have been torrential rains which have led to landslides in the hilly regions and consequent death of people living nearby. And every time such accidents have occurred, the authorities have been spurred into action more as a reaction than as a step toward preventing a recurrence of such accidents in future. Had the authorities been more assertive about citizens' safety in the face of natural disasters, we could perhaps have averted the disaster this time.

We have been told that people inhabiting areas close to the hills have repeatedly been warned to move to safer locations in the interest of their safety. That is appreciated, but such warnings should have been followed by strict action on the part of the authorities.

The mayor has spoken of the city corporation asking people in the Batali Hill region and elsewhere to relocate. That is not good enough. When lives are always at the mercy of nature, it becomes the duty of the administration to undertake two essential responsibilities. In the first place, residents of the vulnerable areas are asked to move to safer locations before disaster actually strikes. Secondly, once it becomes obvious that voluntary relocation is not taking place, it becomes important for the authorities to move in and take people to safety.

Some important lessons should have been learnt from the Batali Hill tragedy. Let such disaster not lead to deaths again. All-out action towards removing people and homes from below, and around the hills and relocating them to safer

Creeping changes in Saudi Arabia



ASHFAQUR RAHMAN

THE seismic political changes taking place in the Middle East today seem to have little effect on Saudi Arabia. There is no discernible opposition in that country. Nor is there any cry for political change or for economic reforms. So what is happening there?

Saudi Arabia is a kingdom at the centre of the Middle-East and occupies a strategic position in the global scheme of things. US is dependent on its oil resources so is Europe and some major Asian countries.

Yes, Saudi Arabia is a kingdom and a strong monarchy. Its legitimacy depends on governance based on a strict interpretation of Islam.

The present king, His Majesty King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz who is in his late eighties, leads a government which symbolises social, economic and educational reforms to the Saudi people. But how far is this true?

The first in the 7th century, when Prophet Mohammed (peace be upon him) made it the cradle of Islam. The second was in the mid 20th century when huge oil deposits were discovered. The country since then has rocketed into a key economic and geo-political position in the world.

But an alliance was between the tribal ruler Muhammed ibn Saud of the towns of Ad-Dir'iyah (near Riyadh) and the religious leader Muhammed ibn Abd-al Wahhab, the founder of the Wahabi Movement -- a radical form of Islam. This remains the basis of Saudi Arabian dynastic rule.

The alliance was struck with the clear understanding that the "Sauds have political control of the country and the descendants of Wahab exert social and religious control."

It is this alliance that still dictates the pace and contour of social and religious changes in Saudi Arabia.

King Abdullah has therefore not reacted to the transformational changes in the Middle East by putting in place a

wave of security measures. The government instead issued a series of royal decrees which provided a multi-billion dollar investment in stability.

A total of US\$30 billion was allocated recently for new housing, funds to bolster capital of the Saudi Credit Bank, social insurance, to expand social services, to help needy students and to increase the pay of government employees. Funds to charitable organisations and charitable funds have also been increased manifold.

But is this enough to stem any discontent that could surface in the kingdom? First, the Saudi population is relatively young in age. Of the total 27 million (2010 census) almost 38% are in the 0-14 years group. Boys are 5.5 million while girls are 5.3 million in this cohort. In the 15-64 year group there are 9.6 million males and 7.4 million females. The demographics itself is now

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a veritable tinder box.

Another aspect is the role of gender in Saudi society. Citizens there adhere to the Sharia (Islamic law) and tribal culture. Two factors: the Purdah (separation of men and women) and Namus (honour) are central. They determine social interaction inside the country.

Thus all women regardless of age are required to have a male guardian. Women are not allowed to vote or hold high elected positions. Saudi ladies are also not allowed to drive and therefore are not issued with driving licenses. They are also not allowed to mix openly with males other than family members.

Since tribal customs are important in Saudi society, many Saudi women themselves do not like any radical change in the present system. They say the "world fails to understand the uniqueness of Saudi society."

Recently however a few women who

have been educated abroad, have quietly started to lead a movement to be allowed to drive. They have used the mobile phone and the Twitter to gather ladies to drive and upload photos of their driving through YouTube for their viewers. It is reported that the King had said on one occasion that he wants women to drive, but only when the society is ready to accept it.

A recent development has been the controversy over women buying lingerie. There are no female shop assistants in Saudi Arabia. So the ladies go to the shops and seek the help of males to buy such products. This is embarrassing to them. The King personally intervened and ordered females to be recruited as shopping assistants to handle lingerie shops, where males are not allowed. This has defused discontent among the women

But such small interventions may not

ful and prosperous Saudi Arabia would be a great boon to the Muslim Ummah to counter the likes of Israel.

His Majesty, the King, has taken some steps to introduce better governance. The ultra conservative religious establishment was cut to size when he re-established the Grand Ulema Council. This is a body that offers consensus opinion and advice on law and regulations. Individual religious authority's power has been subsumed and representatives of all Sunni schools of law have been included in the Council.

The head of the ultra conservative Religious Police has also been replaced with a moderate individual. The Chief Justice of the Supreme Judicial Council has also been changed. Another step has been the replacement of a minister in the Ministry of Education with a person who has a long background in anti-extremist security operations.

One of the deputy minister in that ministry has also led the kings programme of national dialogue to get Saudis publicly talking about tolerance, dealing with difference in opinions, backgrounds and sex.

So even though Saudi Arabia is far from catching up with international or even regional standards in gender equality and politics, some of these royal steps augur well. It is important that the international community understand that positive changes are taking place there. His majesty is continuously working on more issues.

Yet economic problems are mounting. The gap between the rich and poor is widening. Personal incomes in many cases are stagnating. Not the least, population is growing fast. Underemployment for the highly educated is a gnawing development.

So Saudi Arabia needs to now conjure a vision that is non-violent and consistent with Islam, homegrown and respectful of the Ruling Family's unifying role, to bring in deeper political and social reforms.

The future is theirs to catch up with.

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SHIFTING IMAGES

Big fat South Asian weddings



MILIA ALI

AS I sat in a corner, observing the wedding festivities of a friend's daughter, two parallel emotions played on the canvas of my mind: nostalgia and horrified amazement.

Nostalgia, for the days of my youth, when a wedding was a solemn and modest affair focusing on the union of two people. And, horrified amazement at the contemporary wedding I was witnessing: an ostentatious ceremony with its gauche display of pomp and splendor.

I was reminded of the two high profile Indian weddings (Vanisha Mittal's \$60 million wedding and the more recent, \$55 million wedding of Yogita Jaunpuria), which have been much publicized for their extravaganza. The glitz and glamour of the celebrations prompted the Indian government to speak out against the "vulgar display of wealth," in a part of the world where the majority of the population still survives on less than a dollar a day. Despite regulatory efforts by governments and public criticisms, most South Asian weddings continue to exhibit a sharp contrast to the pervasive poverty in the societies.

Traditionally, a wedding is a pledge of love made by a man and a woman in front of family, friends and community, through a set of vows. Whether the vow consists of two simple words, "I do," or a Quranic verse, or a Sanskrit mantra, the fundamental message remains universal-two individuals make a promise to stand by each other "for better or for worse."

Unfortunately, today the focus of weddings in the Indian sub-continent has

shifted to the superficial aspects. Post-wedding conversations center on: the color and quality of the imported flowers, the cost of the bridal costume and jewelry, the number of items on the menu, the selection at the open bar, and the theme of the table and stage décor.

Usually, these discussions aim at making a comparative analysis of which wedding of the season wins the maximum points in each category! The families of the bride and the groom frequently

It might take a mini revolution to change the current trend of opulent and flamboyant weddings. But, at the least, can we, collectively, think of some innovative ways to share these joyous occasions with those who are less privileged?

contribute to this process by discussing details of the expenses in the public domain. However, the generosity showered on the guests often varies with the rank and strata of the invitees.

In this context, a recent incident comes to mind. I was at a dinner where a South Asian gentleman started trumpeting the magnificent wedding he had recently hosted for his daughter. After giving us a detailed account of how much the "one thousand guests enjoyed the celebrations," he recounted an appalling story: "The night of the Mehndi, I noticed a stranger drinking at the bar. I introduced myself and asked his name. It transpired that he was my wife's tailor! Can you believe it, MY WIFE'S TAILOR, leaning on the bar, holding a glass of scotch?" Somewhat puzzled, I asked, "So, had he gate crashed?" "Oh, no," the gentleman replied, "he was invited by my

wife, but he should have used his common sense -- the bar was not for the hoi polloi! After all, we live in a country of prohibition, and drinks are very expensive!"

I made a quick mental calculation: the cost of the 2-3 drinks that the "tailor" may have consumed must have been a minuscule of the total expenses! Alas, the gates of the kingdom of heaven may be open to the poor, but the doors of an affluent earthly wedding are shut on

them! Interestingly, South Asian weddings in the United States have also become grandiose affairs with some borrowed elements from American traditions. They have, thus, acquired quite an exotic flavor and are beginning to look like a curry mix ala western style!

For example, one is subjected to videos of the bride and the groom from their diaper stage to their graduation night party. Then parents, siblings and friends start heaping tribute on the couple through "supposedly" funny speeches. Given the South Asian penchant for long-windedness, this activity may take anything between 2-3 hours.

When the food arrives, one is already on the verge of indigestion from an overdose of sweet anecdotes about the couple!

Thankfully, the gift selection process in the US is much easier, since the practice

is to set up wedding registries in prominent stores. Guests may, if they wish, choose an item from a pre-sorted list. Many still prefer to buy a gift of their choice. In some cases, the selection is restricted by invitation cards boldly stating: "No boxed gifts, please." It's either cash or an item from the registry!

I understand the rationale: couples today want presents that they can use and not store away in some remote corner, to be accidentally discovered years later. However, for me, gifts are memorabilia, which help us remember our friends and family! Today, gifts are mostly valued either for their monetary worth, or their functional use.

It would be unfair to end a column on weddings -- one of the most joyful and sacred celebrations of our life -- on a negative note. Let me, therefore, share an inspiring story about a close friend's daughter's wedding, celebrated six years ago in Kolkata. The ceremony was beautifully and tastefully organised. As we sat down to a sumptuous breakfast the day after, the bride (a twenty-nine-year-old Indian-American girl) said to her parents, "Everyone has been so generous. I got many beautiful gifts and lots of cash. I have decided to donate 20% of the money to a charity." The father responded, "What a wonderful idea! You have been so blessed -- why not share your happiness with others, who have less?" I was not only touched, but learned a very valuable lesson about giving.

The writer is a renowned Rabindra Sangeet exponent and a former Employee of the World Bank.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

July 3

324 Battle of Adrianople Constantine I defeats Licinius, who flees to Byzantium.

1848 Slaves are freed in the Danish West Indies (now U.S. Virgin Islands) by Peter von Scholten in the culmination of a year-long plot by enslaved Africans.

1886 The New York Tribune becomes the first newspaper to use a linotype machine, eliminating typesetting by hand.

1962 The Algerian War of Independence against the French ends.

1979 U.S. President Jimmy Carter signs the first directive for secret aid to the opponents of the pro-Soviet regime in Kabul.

1988 The Fatih Sultan Mehmet Bridge in Istanbul, Turkey is completed, providing the second connection between the continents of Europe and Asia over the Bosphorus.