

## GROUND REALITIES

## Sonia Gandhi's visit to Dhaka

*An opportunity to tackle critical issues*

PRIME Minister Sheikh Hasina and India's ruling Congress leader Sonia Gandhi believe --- and we agree with them --- that concerted efforts need to be expended in tackling terrorism and militancy in the interest of a stable and secure future for South Asia. Such unanimity of views must clearly be supported by concrete measures. For Bangladesh and India, indeed for all other member-nations of SAARC, it is of utmost importance that a well-defined strategy be shaped to combat the forces which have of late sought to destabilise the course of life in the region. There are two underlying principles that can underpin such a strategy. Firstly, all nations but especially India and Bangladesh must agree to share intelligence on a regular basis if militancy and terrorism are to be nipped in the bud. Secondly, each country must ensure that its territory is not used by militants to plan attacks anywhere in the region or elsewhere. Inter-state coordination of intelligence sharing is thus crucial.

Mrs. Sonia Gandhi's visit has been an opportunity for Dhaka and Delhi to reassert their traditional political and historical links. That being the reality, it is vital that such irritants as the shootings by India's Border Security Force on the Indo-Bangladesh frontier be put on a leash. The latest Human Rights Watch report on the indiscriminate manner in which BSF continues to shoot Bangladeshis despite earlier Indian assurances of action in this regard casts a shadow on bilateral ties. We think that India must follow up on its professions of friendship with Bangladesh through some needed gestures, the most important being a bringing of the BSF to heel. As the leading figure in India's UPA coalition, Mrs. Gandhi is eminently placed to use her good offices in defusing the situation on the border.

The Congress leader's visit to Dhaka should be seen as a fresh opportunity for a reinforcing of the links between India and Bangladesh. It is a spur to the regional connectivity, in terms of trade, tackling terrorism and promoting people-to-people links, that can be brought to bear on the politics of the region.

The warm feelings towards Bangladesh that Sonia Gandhi has exuded instilled a greater expectation in us that they would find reflection in the practical negotiations over trade, connectivity and transit issues between the two countries. We would like to see a win-win outcome from the current phase of bilateral contacts.

## Dhaka Declaration on autism

*Powerful commitment to the cause*

BANGLADESH feels fortunate to have been the host to an international conference on autism on the last two days. The high-water mark of the meet was the presence of regional dignitaries including chairperson of the Indian Ruling Alliance, Sonia Gandhi, first lady of Sri Lanka Shiranthi Wickramasingha Rajapaksa, wife of Maldives Vice-President Ilham Hussain, health ministers from Indonesia and Bhutan and officials from various countries working in autism health sector.

The substantive result of the moot was of course the Dhaka Declaration.

The importance of meeting the challenges faced by autistic children and adults has been greatly emphasized at the deliberations. This has served to raise the level of awareness of the issues of autism, with concrete suggestions emerging to address them. It is believed that one out of every 110 children is afflicted with autism. It is indeed a matter of serious concern that autistic population is increasing at a rate of 10 to 17 percent. The members expressed their determination to sensitise people to autism and in providing quality care and services to those affected.

The seven-point Dhaka declaration adopted at the conference is a ray of hope for all who has been born with physical and mental development disorders. The declaration calls for promoting stronger coordinated action in the region and globally to improve access to and obtain quality health care services for these mentally and physically challenged individuals.

We hope that this conference and the resolve expressed by the participants will go a long way in formulating more pragmatic policies by individual countries in the region to bring collective inputs to bear on the fight

# All those Bangabhaban men...



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

WITH all the firestorm raging around President Zillur Rahman's grant of clemency to an individual convicted of murder -- and

for all the right reasons -- it is perhaps time for a brief observation of the many pitfalls the nation's presidency has been up against in these past four decades.

Begin with Justice Abu Sayeed Chowdhury, for he brought to the office of president of the republic the dignity one normally associates with it. And yet Chowdhury also turned out to be a president who clearly felt uncomfortable in a situation where things were clearly going awry. It needed a man of courage and principle to inform Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman that he wanted out. But Justice Chowdhury did it. He left Bangabhaban in late 1973.

The next president, Mohammadullah, simply could not measure up to the intellectual brilliance or clout of his predecessor. That clearly had to do with the fact that he was beholden to Bangabandhu. And naturally too, for with the Father of the Nation occupying so large a part of the nation's political canvas, any politician would feel overwhelmed. Which is why when the Fourth Amendment to the constitution came to pass in January 1975, Mohammadullah quietly made way for Bangabandhu and cheerfully agreed to take up a ministerial position in the government.

Mohammadullah's career remains one of the more curious of studies in political character in Bangladesh's history. After August 1975 he went on to serve General Ziaur Rahman and then, for a few hours, he became President Sattar's vice president in 1982. Both men were suddenly made jobless when General H.M. Ershad decided to commandeer the country in March of that year.

A most bizarre moment in the history of the presidency was surely Commerce Minister Khondokar Moshtaque Ahmed's seizure of power

once Bangabandhu and his family had been gunned down in August 1975. Vice President Syed Nazrul Islam simply did not have a chance, for the wrath of the assassins would fall on him too.

Mercifully for the country, General Khaled Musharraf did the necessary thing of ejecting Moshtaque from power on November 6, 1975 and replacing him with Justice Abu Sadat Mohammad Sayem. The irony, a deeply painful one, is that when Musharraf was murdered by muti-

than commit that blunder.

When the moment of reckoning came, Justice Sayem did not and would not listen to his conscience. It was then fairly easy for Zia to ease Sayem out of the presidency and take the job for himself as the nation's first military dictator. Stories of how many hundreds of soldiers and air force men died at the hands of the Zia regime are legion. That was the point where Bangladesh's history first came under systematic assault, a scandal we are yet engaged in trying to put

tary a role in politics through the national security council and then being shown the door altogether through the coup d'etat of March 24, 1982.

If Justice Sattar's presidency was a missed opportunity, that of Justice Ahsanuddin Chowdhury was sheer pointlessness. Raised to the office by the military, Ahsanuddin Chowdhury was then lifted off it, again by the military. It was the judge's reputation that took a mauling.

When you reflect on the rise and fall of the presidency, you might have reason to believe that despite all the odds presidents are often confronted with, there are men who sometimes do uphold the dignity and integrity of Bangabhaban. Abdur Rahman Biswas' decisive action against General Nasim only days before the general elections of June 1996 was a sign of a president ready and willing to assert his authority in moments of crisis. It was authority that Justice Sayem and Justice Sattar should have exercised in their times, but did not.

Biswas' successor Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed was a refreshing change. He brought gravitas to the presidency. He demonstrated, both in his tenure as acting president following General Ershad's fall in 1990 and after his election to the office in 1996, the intellectual sagacity which presidents operating in a parliamentary form of government could bring into a moral powering of the office.

Professor Iajuddin Ahmed's occupancy of Bangabhaban was, in the end, a tale of deep embarrassment for the country. Suffice it to say that he was stopped, to the nation's immense relief, from doing what he set out to do, at the eleventh hour -- in January 2007. We breathe a lot easier today because the elections scheduled for later that month were shelved; because proper, credible elections were organised in December 2008.

But that does not quite obscure the new, patently dark truth before us, which is that with Zillur Rahman in charge the presidency is once more under a cloud. Things should not have happened this way.

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nous soldiers early the next morning, Sayem kept his hold on the presidency thanks to Zia's willingness to have him stay on.

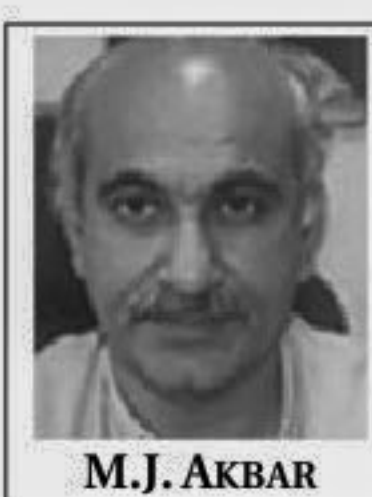
And yet when he eventually said farewell to Bangabhaban in April 1977, Justice Sayem did not leave in a blaze of glory. It was on his watch that Colonel Abu Taher was hanged after a sham trial in July 1976. The president could have stayed his hand, could have refused to cave in to Zia's pressure to send Taher to the gallows, could indeed have resigned rather

behind us.

In more ways than one, Justice Abdus Sattar remains the first properly elected president of Bangladesh. General Zia's election in June 1978 against General Osmany was very much a managed affair; and General Ershad's in the 1980s clearly lacked the stamp of legitimacy. President Sattar might have turned out to be a good, elderly leader, the father figure the nation was in need of at that point, had he not been ambushed by General Ershad into giving the mili-

## BYLINE

# Dream come true, or perhaps not



M.J. AKBAR

THE little patch of London I encounter is watching cricket and talking Rupert Murdoch. The colour of language matches the

English sky; grey, rather than black and white. Media is not devil-black, and cricket is not virgin-white.

Heaven, for a cricket-fantasia like me, is a spectator seat in the committee room at Lord's on the opening day of the centenary Test between India and England. [A cricket-fantasia is someone who believes he should be captain of India because he scored 32 in a crucial school match.] The gentle murmur of nostalgia between a galaxy of greats is punctuated by acute observation on the prospects of the day's play ahead. Tea and coffee are the mildest libations available: opening time is 11 a.m. and I may have added my tiny bit to the cultural history of Lord's with a recipe called Coffee Mary.

Lunch after a forgettable first session is laid out in the third floor, within wafting distance of the players' dining room. To my right is Steve Waugh, the finest Australian batsman-captain in memory. To my left is the great South African opener Barry Richardson, who did not bat as much as explode, and who was cheated of truly-deserved world fame by the evil

of apartheid in his own country.

Across the table is John Edrich, the memorable English opener who did not know how to flash his bat, and did not know how to get out. I think he was a trifle upset to learn how often I, as an ardent schoolboy, wished he was ill and unable to play. I asked if he remembered the 19 maiden overs that the priceless Nadkarni bowled in a row, and Edrich smiled. He had a story of his own. He bowled a maiden once to Nadkarni; and shall we say that the thought of Edrich bowling was as astonishing as the sight of Dhoni running up in desperate determination?

The difference is that Dhoni took himself seriously as a bowler. Edrich modestly pointed out that he got a maiden because Nadkarni had no clue where the next ball was going to land. More proof for my unshakeable theory: the British conquered the world because they knew precisely when to be serious, and when to chuckle -- at themselves.

Barry nearly came to India as part of a World XI put together for a charity match in aid of victims of the Bihar famine, so this must have been in 1967. How far have we travelled in a single life-journey. Apartheid has

been destroyed in South Africa and famine is a cruel memory in India. The match was never played because Indira Gandhi denied Barry a visa.

Watching India play from the third floor Lord's balcony with Steve Waugh and the West Indian skyscraper Courtenay Walsh was straight from the fantasy books. Steve talks the way he used to bat, without wasting a flicker on sentiment. Facts matter to him, so he is matter-of-fact.

He picks up the elephant in the room and throws it up in the air, for us

to decide whether it exists or not. He merely suggests that cricketers should now be put through a lie-detector test.

Match-fixing, or cricket-laundering to be more accurate, has become a

proper ghost story. Everyone can sense it exists, but no one can nail the phantom. It has been photographed in the Pakistan team, but the negative is lost in the alibis. The coalition of colonials, ex-rulers and former subjects, who are the new monarchs of cricket, have convinced themselves that Pakistan's ills can be cauterised from the body politic of the sport. The elephant now comes from India, making it a particular apt metaphor.

No one is totally sure if one or two

players have not come to private deals with bookies. At least one big-ticket player has been photographed in the company of champion bookie, and private conversations, outside the reach of libel, hint at much more. The illegal cricket gambling market in India is staggering in size, and totally controlled by an unsavoury underworld.

But we are not at Lord's to worry about clouds, we are here to rejoice in the sunshine. We have come to carry away memories that will survive till death doth us part. It is Saturday morning as I write and, to be utterly selfish, I can barely wait for a couple of wickets to fall so that Sachin Tendulkar and Rahul Dravid can form one of the greatest partnerships in the long and cherished history of Lord's.

I want the sweet delirium of Sachin stroking his way to his 100th 100 where he scored his first by driving Angus Fraser for a boundary; and for the brilliant Rahul to get his first 100 at a venue where he reached 95. This is feast of instinct and intellect that makes cricket incomprehensible to those cursed by ignorance, and a passion for those blessed with some knowledge of its unique soul.

Play starts in two hours. These dreams may or may not come true. But it is enough to have dreamt, than never to have dreamt at all.

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## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

July 27

**1302**  
Battle of Bapheus: decisive Ottoman victory over the Byzantines opening up Bithynia for Turkish conquest.

**1919**  
The Chicago Race Riot erupts after a racial incident occurred on a South Side beach, leading to 38 fatalities and 537 injuries over a five-day period.

**1942**  
World War II: Allied forces successfully halt the final Axis advance into Egypt.

**1953**  
The Korean War ends when the United States, the People's Republic of China, and North Korea sign an armistice agreement.

**1964**  
Vietnam War: 5,000 more American military advisers are sent to South Vietnam bringing the total number of United States forces in Vietnam to 21,000.

**1974**  
Watergate Scandal: the House of Representatives Judiciary Committee votes 27 to 11 to recommend the first article of impeachment (for obstruction of justice) against President Richard Nixon.