

GROUND REALITIES

We have been let down

However, we remain hopeful

BANGLADESH-India relations are far too important and goodwill between us far too precious for us to judge our ties on the basis of just one trip.

Even so, the critical importance attached to the Manmohan Singh visit cannot be lost on anyone. In the first place, it was the first bilateral visit by an Indian head of government to Bangladesh in twelve years. In the second, it followed a major initiative by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina as manifested by a number of significant new openings she made during her trip to Delhi in early 2010. The initiative, as we recall, was hailed as historic by the Indian political leadership and various sections of Indian society and the media. In the third, the Indian leader's visit, coming twenty months after the summit in Delhi, was not a sudden happening and the two sides had ample opportunities to work on the issues involved. For its part, Bangladesh spontaneously addressed some major Indian concerns, especially security. These were bold steps which the Indian government cannot undervalue in any manner.

It is against this background that we in Bangladesh had expected an equally major reciprocity from India on its prime minister's visit. Obviously, one of the key issues where ground-breaking progress had been expected was a sharing of the Teesta waters. It was a crucial subject, seeing that serious, long-drawn talks on water-sharing had been going on. Despite Ms. Mamata Banerjee's reservations on the issue (and she had been consulted thrice by the Indian government on the details of the draft deal), we had reasons to expect a bold step from Delhi's side.

We welcome India's decision to have 46 Bangladeshi items removed from its negative list. While this zero tariff situation cheers us, we must reiterate Bangladesh's fundamental position, which is that India, being a large, economically powerful country, should go for sweeping steps towards allowing all our items into its markets rather than take a piecemeal approach to the issue. Why such a bold move has not been made yet remains a mystery for us.

The protocol on land boundary is welcome as it will greatly remove some of our sore points. The framework agreement will have to be more seriously examined by us before we comment.

We trust that the Teesta waters will be back on the agenda soon and that Delhi will be able to offer us a fair deal, remembering that anything else will not be acceptable to us.

The expectation of a historic breakthrough has not materialised. It will definitely cast a negative shadow on our ties. But we remain hopeful that India will reciprocate the vision and boldness that Bangladesh showed in January 2010.

Mamata let-down most unfortunate

Trust in negotiation process diluted

TO say that Mamata Banerjee's absence has disappointed us is to greatly understate our feelings. The frustration runs far deeper. The hopes we had nurtured about her participation in Indo-Bangla talks have been dashed.

The welcome with which her electoral victory was greeted in Bangladesh and the friendly feelings that she exuded to Bangladesh on her triumph is now more than equally matched by our disappointment at her impetuous behaviour. We are taken aback by the turn of events and feel wronged.

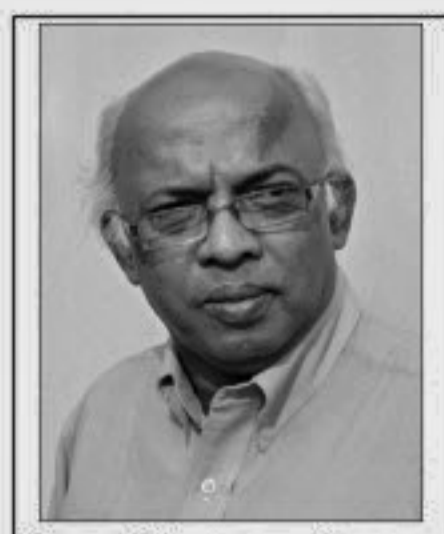
It has been repeatedly articulated by New Delhi that the Paschimanga Chief Minister has been regularly consulted on the Teesta water sharing treaty. At least three meetings were held between her and Shiv Shanker Menon alone, leaving aside consultation at lower levels.

For the Trinamool Congress leader then to say that she was left out of the negotiations does not cut much ice with policymakers in Bangladesh. What really was irksome was her timing of deciding to drop out of the trip. Her last moment action has cast a dark shadow over the whole trip. It has had dramatic negative impact on a trip that was so eagerly being looked forward to by both the government and the people of Bangladesh.

Mamata Banerjee's action amounts to a big let-down for Bangladesh and an insult to the Indian Prime Minister. If a neighbouring country cannot depend on the negotiation it undertakes with New Delhi, and then sees it being scuttled by a state government, then what value will future negotiations have? We would like our apprehensions for the future to be proved wrong there.

In all, Mamata's action is most unfortunate, and will leave, we are afraid, a serious negative impact on Bangladesh-India relations.

Mamata Banerjee and our disappointment



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

THERE is little question of the pre-eminence Mamata Banerjee holds in Indian national politics, a place she has earned over

the years through, first, her active role in the Indian National Congress and then in her own Trinamul Congress. She was a leading voice of dissent in West Bengal (recently renamed Paschimanga) until she ran the Left Front out of power in the state in May this year. Equally significant has been her role in two union governments, in which she has served as minister for railways both times. Her present role as a crucial coalition partner in the UPA government in Delhi is a reality the powers that be in India do not ignore, for reasons which are only too obvious.

It was therefore only natural for everyone in Bangladesh to have been enthused by the thought that Mamata Banerjee would be on the team Prime Minister Manmohan Singh would lead to the talks with the Bangladesh government in Dhaka. As chief minister of a state with which Bengalis on this side of the political frontier have shared culture, indeed heritage and for a long time a state of unified politics (until the vivisection of the subcontinent in 1947), she certainly could have looked forward to a warm welcome from us. Now that she has decided not to be in Bangladesh with her nation's prime minister, we are truly saddened and genuinely surprised.

Our surprise is there because her refusal to be in Dhaka has given a sudden battering to our expectations. Where we had expected that Ms. Banerjee would play a major role in ensuring that the people of Bangladesh and the people of Paschimanga shared the waters of the Teesta, as they have shared so many things throughout their long association in history, we

are now left handling a situation where we must scramble to undo some of the damage she may have done to the future of India-Bangladesh relations. Clearly, the chief minister is unhappy at the way the Manmohan Singh government has been conducting negotiations with the Bangladesh government, with the probable terms of the deals Delhi and Dhaka mean to reach on key issues of common interest. By opting out of the trip to Dhaka, she has likely pushed back an opportunity for Bangladesh and India to inaugurate a

her government. The extent to which Ms. Banerjee's feelings may have been misplaced is borne out by the fact that the union government kept her fully apprised of what it meant to do in Dhaka. Senior government functionaries were in touch with her three times and kept her posted on the details of the draft agreements to be discussed with the Bangladesh authorities. That only upholds the collegial attitude the Manmohan Singh administration has adopted in govern-

ance. Where the domestic or international nature, is a truth that does not come into question. And yet Mamata Banerjee, clearly for reasons that she has not spelt out, reasons we suspect have to do with domestic Trinamul politics in her state, has now pushed the entire gamut of Delhi-Dhaka negotiations into a bad state of uncertainty. We cannot but reflect on whether Jyoti Basu or Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee would do what Mamata Banerjee has done. Basu

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new, more mutually beneficial relationship between each other.

We understand that Mamata Banerjee is miffed at the union government's failure to take her on board as it has sought to hammer out a deal with the Bangladesh government. The government, she has reasons to feel, would not have dealt with a Left Front administration (had it been in office) the way it has dealt with hers. She puts it across to people that the Indian prime minister has kept her in the dark about the negotiations in Dhaka. That, again, is rather a far-fetched idea, seeing that it would be politically naïve, even suicidal, on the part of the Delhi authorities to ignore a critical state, one with which Bangladesh shares much more than rivers and a border, as they go into hammering out a deal with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and

Trinamul is concerned, the prime minister has been particularly careful, especially since he needs the Banerjee government's support on any deal with Bangladesh over the Teesta waters and especially again because the Trinamul Congress happens to be a key element in the ruling coalition in Delhi.

The question, ours, is then simple: given the facts, why did the Paschimanga chief minister pour cold water, in that clichéd manner that looked about to open up a shining new dawn for the people of Bangladesh and India? That matters had been discussed with her, that the political system India is governed by affords little room for the centre to bypass state governments on anything of either a

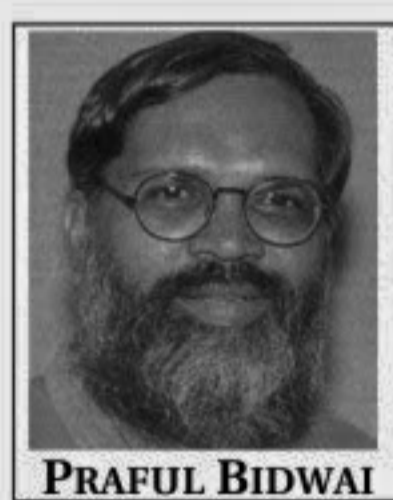
remains a hugely loved figure in Bangladesh. Bhattacharjee has always been aware of the historicity of the links which have consistently kept the two Bengals in a state of firm bonding.

Our disappointment at Mamata Banerjee's withdrawal from the negotiations in Dhaka is deep. Even so, we keep hope going -- that Manmohan Singh and Sheikh Hasina will yet strike a deal which will reinforce the links between their countries, that they will give a new meaning to history through injecting new substance and impetus into its various and varied contours.

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PRAFUL BIDWAI COLUMN

Anna's problematic agenda



PRAFUL BIDWAI

INDIA has just emerged from a major crisis, which could have become a disaster. At its centre was an attempt by Anna Hazare and his core-supporters to set up a confrontation

between Parliament and the people on the Lokpal Bill.

Had Parliament not come into the picture just in time, and had violence broken out, there would have been horrific disorder. This would have spurred calls for draconian measures, inflaming the situation further.

Eventually, Team Anna retreated. But it shrewdly pretended this was a "half-victory." The staunchly pro-Anna Times of India group reports that just before the August 27 Parliament debate, the core-group decided that Anna would call off his fast because of his precarious health.

That would have meant blinking in the game of poker being played with the government. But the government didn't know of the decision, and gave the campaign a face-saver.

Yet, the Sense-of-the-House motion passed by Parliament is a far cry from the group's original demand that the government pass by August 30 the Jan Lokpal Bill drafted by "India against Corruption" (IAC).

This was diluted to ask that Parliament resolve to enact the Bill in the current session, with Lokpal jurisdiction covering all civil servants, and "citizens' charters" to limit the time taken to provide public services like ration cards.

The Parliamentary motion doesn't meet the diluted demand. It only notes an "in-principle" agreement on "a) Citizens' charter b) Lower bureaucracy also to be under the Lokpal ... c) Establishment of a Lokayukta in States."

Parliament is under no deadline to pass the Bill. Of course, a moral obligation remains to enact an effective Lokpal law.

The task of lawmaking stands rightly restored to Parliament. This is reasonable by any yardstick --except Team Anna's. The Team must learn a vital lesson underlined by India's best campaigner for the Right to Information Act (RTI), Aruna Roy: those who demand the right to dissent have the obligation to listen to those who disagree.

RTI, one of India's best laws, was in preparation since 1992. It faced as many as 153 amendments in a Parliamentary Standing Committee. What emerged is a robust law, which empowers citizens.

Team Anna must show some humility

the government doesn't.

Arresting Anna on August 16 fast, and sending him to Tihar jail, was easily the most inept decision that could have been made, ignoring intelligence reports. The police imposed absurd conditions on his fast -- three days' duration, with a maximum gathering of 5,000 supporters. This grossly underestimated growing public sympathy for Anna's right to protest.

Once the Ramlila Maidan spectacle drew big crowds, the claim that Anna speaks for the people escalated to the arrogant asser-

Mr. Hazare now threatens to take up electoral reform, education, and land. One doesn't know whether he comprehends such complex issues. Going by his own village record, he doesn't seem very enlightened. He remains mired in casteist prejudice and authoritarian methods.

instead of imposing its will on society. It doesn't hold a monopoly on understanding how to make governance more responsible and clean. It must recognise that it's Parliament that finally prevailed on the Lokpal process, and that's how things should be.

The Congress party, which leads the government, committed multiple blunders on the Lokpal issue. To start with, it conferred legitimacy upon Anna. During his fast in April, the Congress didn't reckon with his strong upper-middle class support, or with IAC's well-funded, powerful, social networking-based campaign.

As support for Anna swelled, the Congress panicked and announced a joint drafting committee with five members from each side -- instead of a broad-based body with members from different political parties and NGOs. This helped Team Anna claim that it uniquely represents the people,

that he alone represents the people. Soon, Arvind Kejriwal said that Parliament may have supreme lawmaking powers, but the people come first; Parliament must listen to Us the People. Democracy thus degenerated into majoritarianism.

On the one hand, Congress spokespersons abused Team Anna as "arm-chair fascists, over-ground Maoists, closet anarchists" funded by shady donors. On the other hand, the party opened talks it. Instead of fielding skilled crisis-managers, it appointed lawyers (P. Chidambaram, Kapil Sibal and Salman Khurshid) as negotiators. They took a technical, not political, approach, and failed.

The Congress waited too long before appointing old warhorse Pranab Mukherjee chief negotiator. Equally incomprehensibly, it didn't depute former Maharashtra Chief Minister Vilasrao Deshmukh earlier to talk directly to Anna. It didn't even convene an

all-party meeting until August 24.

Holding it, and Mr. Deshmukh's mediation, shifted the balance of forces against Team Anna and clinched the compromise.

The Congress suffered because of Ms. Sonia Gandhi's absence. Team Anna treated her with far greater deference than Dr. Manmohan Singh. This exposes the Congress's leadership crisis and the limitations of Dr. Singh's bureaucratic approach. The Congress must encourage second- and third-rung leaders to emerge if it wants to avert similar crises.

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Mr. Hazare says it's in the order of nature that "every village should have one chamar (cobble), one sunar (goldsmith), one kumhar (potter), etc. They should all do their work according to their occupation." No wonder Dalits and OBCs distrust him. So should all democratically minded people.

Anna's philosophy is a naïve, crude and despotic form of low-minded Gandhianism. The fact that he has a good equation with Mr. Deshmukh, one of Maharashtra's most corrupt leaders, shows his naivety.

Anna now intends to focus on the rights to reject and recall legislators. These are extremely difficult to implement in a continent-sized country. How many rounds of election should there be if all candidates are rejected?

Given that three-fourths of Indian legislators are elected with less than 50 percent votes, what should be the threshold of signatures that triggers recall? It's far more relevant to take up election funding and the proportional representation system.

But will adamant Anna listen?

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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

September 7

- 1191** Battle of Arsurf Richard I of England defeats Saladin at Arsurf.
- 1942** Holocaust: 8,700 Jews of Kolomyia (western Ukraine) sent by German Gestapo to death camp in Belzec.
- 1953** Nikita Khrushchev is elected first secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.
- 1965** Vietnam War: In a follow-up to August's Operation Starlight, United States Marines and South Vietnamese forces initiate Operation Piranha on the Batangan Peninsula.