

GROUND REALITIES

Non-lethal approach at the border

Latest BSF-BGB understanding must work

EVERY time chiefs of India and Bangladesh border guards sit for talks in an ambience of professed good neighbourliness, somewhat mismatched by untoward border incidents, a fresh resolve to come to grips with border killings has been in evidence. Efforts for an improved border management are there, yet one wonders why the issue of border killings still keeps figuring between the two governments. Given the level of friendly political will manifest at the highest levels between the two countries and repeated assurances of non-lethal approach at the border by India this issue should have been squarely left behind by now.

Set against this backdrop, the just-concluded Indo-Bangladesh border talks in New Delhi has adopted some concrete steps. It is a three-pronged strategy including deployment of additional security forces by both sides at several 'vulnerable patches'; sensitisation of people against illegal cross border movement and sharing information real-time by BSF and BGB on movement of smugglers and other criminals during 'hours of darkness'.

Miscommunication or absence of communication can create distrust and foster knee-jerk reaction and unilateral approach at the ground level. Thus, the decision to put in place a communication mechanism at operational level to promptly inform the counterpart of any abnormal incidents is a step in the right direction.

At all costs, use of lethal force against unarmed people should be scrupulously avoided. Let's not forget, ironically, Indo-Bangla border is labelled as recording the highest number of one-sided killings. This is unacceptable, viewed in the context of multi-layered cooperation built into and envisaged between the India and Bangladesh in times to come.

It is an anachronism despite assurances from the highest political level in India that border killings would stop, the security personnel at the field level have lacked sensibilities as to how killings of our citizens at the border are affecting the bilateral relations adversely. It, therefore, devolves on the top brass in India to ensure that the right message and spirit permeate lower down the order much as Bangladesh for its part takes necessary precautionary measures.

Boost in food production hailed

Enhance people's purchasing capacity

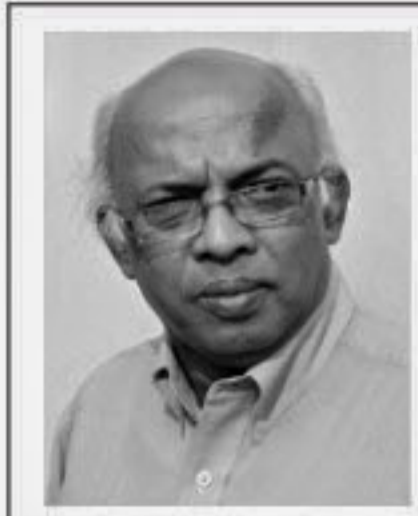
IT is good news that Jose Graziano da Silva, Director General Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO), has expressed satisfaction with the growth in our food production in a press conference on Monday in the capital. He, however, noted that a large number of people still suffer from malnutrition. He stressed the necessity of diversification of people's diet.

Rice production has almost doubled in the past two decades, rising up to 3.36 crore tonnes from 1.78 crore in 1990-91. Production of other crops, livestock and fish has also seen laudable increase. But while all these are good augury for us, the FAO DG has rightly noted that people's purchasing capacity has not proportionately increased. It brings us to the crux of the matter because if people, especially those in the lower tiers of the society, do not have enough money to buy food the growth in productivity will have little meaning for them. The government must pay proper attention to this by creating more employment for the poor and also by initiating more "food for work" programmes.

In the face of declining arable land, increasing population and salinity threats, the FAO DG suggested seeking regional cooperation in enhancing technical know-how to face up to these challenges.

In matters of further increasing production, we think that the huge gap between the price of rice at the grower's level and that at the retailer's should be bridged. Being induced by the high price of a crop, farmers go for production, but because of the intervention of the middlemen they are denied fair price for their produce. The farmers need all kinds of incentives including remunerative prices for their produce to be able to boost production

Between misfortune and calamity



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

NOT so long ago, two women lawmakers of the ruling party took intense delight in baring shamefully into the life of the leader of

the opposition. It was a scene that was as bizarre as it was incredible. Here was the deputy speaker of the Jatiyo Sangsad not only not doing anything to discipline those foul-mouthed lawmakers, but seeming to be indulging them as they went on with their nonsense.

And only the other day, it was again a woman lawmaker, this one from the opposition, who threw decency to the winds when she pounced on the prime minister with all the uncouthness at her command. It happened again on Monday, with another woman legislator letting us know how vulgar she could be in her use of expletives, in her behaviour.

You could argue that all of this is something we ought not to be surprised by. There is no reason to feel scandalised at all, given that the leading political figures whom these women emulate have over the years given a dash of ugly refinement to crude behaviour. So what has been happening will happen again. Begum Khaleda Zia was observed applauding the obscene behaviour of her party legislator. For her part, Sheikh Hasina has had little reason to caution her own parliamentarians, meaning the two women who tried tearing the opposition leader apart in the Jatiyo Sangsad, on the need for good, impeccable behaviour on a lawmaker's part.

You feel sad. You wonder about the miserable depths to which politics has sunk in Bangladesh. And judging by the way things are shaping up or going down, as the case may be, there is hardly any reason to feel that we will bask in cultural and political enlightenment any time soon. And yet it was not always like this. Time

was when politics was a respectable profession, when political leaders, for all their public disagreements over policies, took care not to heap humiliation on those who disagreed with them. If you go through the records of the Pakistan constituent assembly in the 1950s and then of the national assembly in the Ayub Khan era, you will run into politicians ready to engage themselves in a battle of wit even as they waged wars for a preservation of a distinctive turf. Respect was all.

And respect is often an underlying theme carried on the back of wit and humour. You think back on Benjamin Disraeli's explanation of the difference between "misfor-

for the political classes. The Indian politician Piloo Mody, noted for his girth as well as his sense of humour, once showed his back to a fellow legislator in exasperation even as the latter spoke in the House. Obviously, the offended lawmaker drew the attention of the House to such behaviour, whereupon the speaker asked Mody for an explanation. Mody stood up and deadpanned: "Mr. Speaker, sir, I have no back, no front and no flanks. How then could I have shown the honourable MP my

back?" He brought the house down.

And that is the sort of battle, resting on a rapier-like use of wit, which keeps injecting energy into politics. Bangabandhu, despite the serious

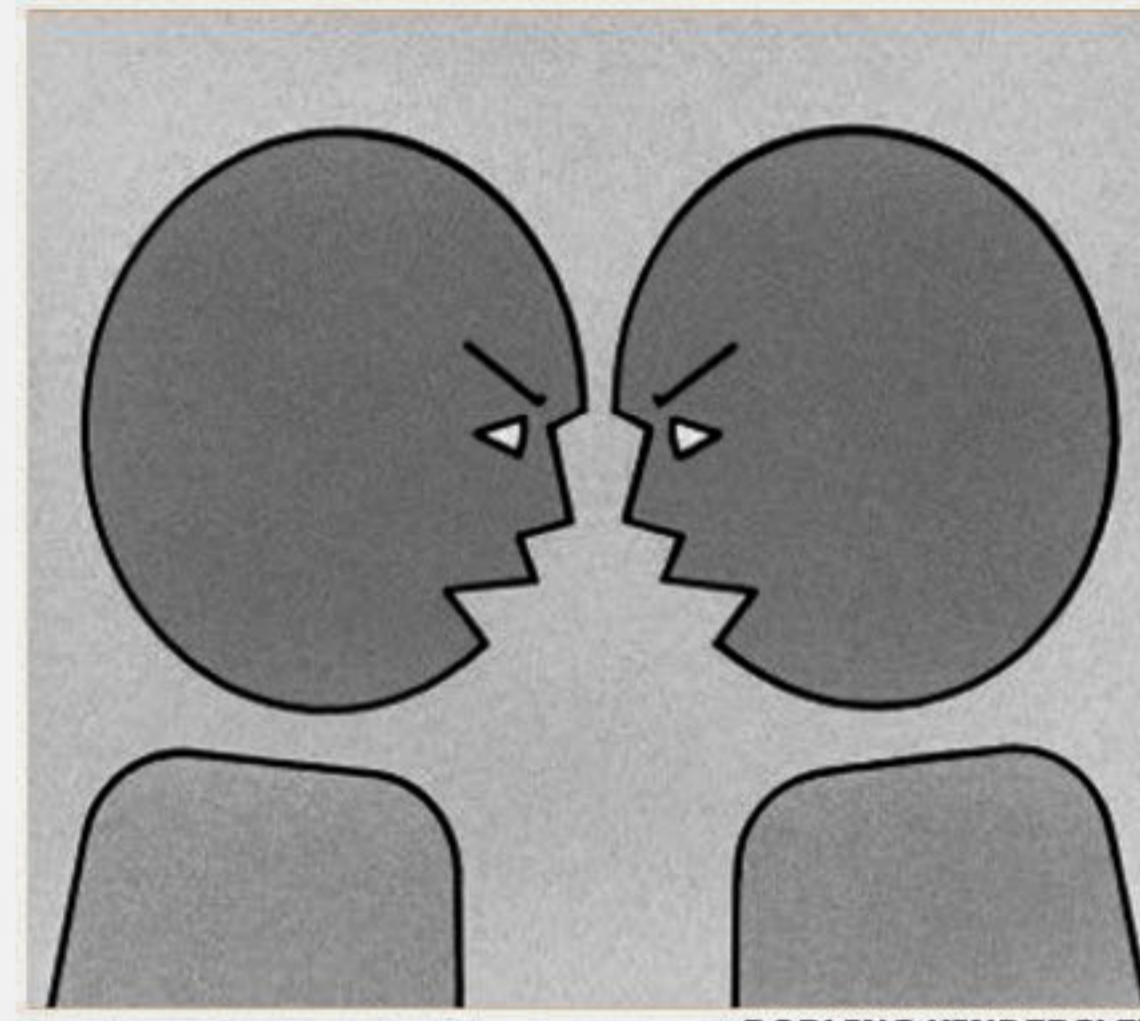
wit, unwittingly of course. Informed by Aziz Ahmed, Pakistan's foreign secretary, in the middle of a cold Tashkent night in January 1966 that "the bastard is dead," Bhutto asked him: "Which one?" You see, Bhutto had no respect at all for either Lal Bahadur Shastri or Field Marshal Ayub Khan.

There was the inimitable Charles de Gaulle with his abundance of seriously articulated humour. He was exasperated at having to rule a nation which produced as many as two hundred and forty six kinds of cheese. Asked once what he thought of those who disagreed with him, he said in cryptic fashion: "I respect those who disagree with me, but I cannot tolerate them." Which reminds you of the acerbic wit Lyndon B. Johnson often resorted to in his assessments of people. Irritated by William Fulbright's endless criticism of his policies in Vietnam, he began referring to him as Senator Halfbright. On one occasion, asked why he had befriended a man who had never given him peace, he had a good, albeit a trifle vulgar, riposte: It was far better to have that man in the tent inside pissing out than to have him outside the tent pissing in. What do you say to that?

While you think, here comes Edward Heath, who repeatedly said out loud the day Margaret Thatcher fell from power, "Rejoice, rejoice." Asked if he had actually said that, Heath, that naughty twinkle flashing in his eyes, told his interviewer: "Actually, I said it thrice: rejoice, rejoice, rejoice." Someone had this to say about Richard Nixon: "Richard Nixon promised to take crime off the streets. He did. He took it right into the White House."

Ah, if only wit were still a part of politics, in our part of the world, and beyond it! If only those women from the Awami League and the BNP realised how much more of a point they would make through reading up on the power of humour!

The writer is Executive Editor, *The Daily Star*. E-mail: bahsantareq@yahoo.co.uk



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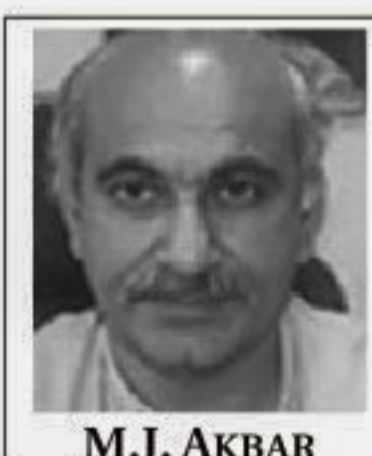
ture" and "calamity." To a parliamentarian's question about his use of the terms interchangeably, Disraeli responded thus: "See Mr. Gladstone on the opposition benches? If he fell into the Thames, it would be a misfortune. But if we picked him out of it, it would be a calamity."

The good bit about humour in politics is that it helps keeps nerves in check, helps make matters easier

approach he brought into his politics, was constantly engaging in intellectual battles in the provincial and national legislatures throughout the 1950s. In Ayub Khan's national assembly, men like Mizanur Rahman Chowdhury and Moulvi Farid Ahmed, to name only two politicians, were noted for the humour they brought into national politics. Even the wily Zulfikar Ali Bhutto sometimes engaged in a use of mordant

BYLINE

Three is a crowd



M.J. AKBAR

WHAT is the difference between the Third Front, that jaded name for an amoebic coalition that is never quite

sure which part has fallen off and what has joined up, and a Federal Front, currently being nourished at quickening pace from embryo to entity by Orissa's Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik, with silent help from present and future allies? As numbers go, 3 is a bit pathetic. It neither has the authority of 1 nor the wistful, almost romantic, regret of 2. Third can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Think of yourself as third and there is little chance of anyone else promoting you to anything higher, least of all a wary, sceptical electorate.

Third Fronters may be realists, but are depressingly devoid of ambition, the one catalyst essential for a quantum leap forward in public life. Their past traps them in the present instead of preparing them for the future. Success demands a vision driven by horizons, and a mind that can plot a careful route map to destination. Care is compulsory, because such a journey is fraught with accidents. An idea is the vehicle. The Federal Front is driven by a powerful concept that anchors India's Constitution. It has not been cherry-picked from a foreign doctrine, or generated from a naïve computer. It has also been at the heart of an intense political debate for at least four decades.

Federalism was a fundamental tenet of Gandhian ideology, as the Mahatma moulded the Congress creed from a manifesto for revolution to a charter for evolution through the seminal 1930s. Congress needed to shift focus once it passed the independence resolution at Lahore in 1930; freedom had to mean something more than departure of the British. The party required a blueprint for a new, free India. Our Constitution, adopted in 1950, is the apotheosis of ideas debated by Congress between 1930 and 1947.

India became a federation of states, an umbrella under whose

that states needed their space in a federation, and gave what he considered necessary without releasing Delhi's grip.

His daughter, Indira Gandhi, watched the fires rise in Tamil Nadu, Punjab and Kashmir, and wrenched the balance away from parity. Perhaps with good intentions, she began to confuse the party with the nation, and the nation with herself. When regional parties displaced Congress, she equated state pride with secession. She accused N.T. Rama Rao, who upturned Congress in Andhra Pradesh, of weakening India. She dismissed elected non-

regional party. But its heart remained centripetal.

It was almost inevitable that reelection in 2009 would reinvigorate the Congress' leave-India-to-us approach. Regional parties believe that Congress is not only partisan in disbursement of financial resources, but also a bully. Whether the issue is a Lokpal or the National Counter Terrorism Centre, states have been repeatedly forced to defend their rights. Mamata Banerjee is a vocal part of this anger. The Federal Front may be a coalition of small parties searching for power, but power for a purpose: To govern India as a partnership rather than entitlement. It is an alternative vision of India. This is not a flippant Front.

The next General Election will test whether the voter has lost his mistrust of small parties. Small is a comparative term. It had one meaning when Congress was a giant; small has become much bigger now that both Congress and BJP are in the 100-150-seat band. In 1967, the towering (politically and physically) Biju Patnaik, a front-rank freedom fighter and friend of Nehru, became a founding father of regional assertion when he erased Congress rule in Orissa. Forty-five years later, his son Naveen Patnaik has seeded an idea that could capture Delhi. His battle will be an exhilarating episode in the advance of Indian democracy.

The writer is Editor of *The Sunday Guardian*, published from Delhi, *India on Sunday*, published from London and Editorial Director, *India Today* and *Headlines Today*.

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shade the people would find a post-Raj social cohesion and economic progress. Every spoke was equal, and the weight of governance rested with the states. The first generation of India's leaders did not abandon the principle after 1947, but could not be faulted for being wary of its consequences after the acrid experience of partition.

Jawaharlal Nehru had witnessed the horrific tragedies that centrifugal forces had visited upon the Indian people. He realised that the creation of Pakistan had not exhausted the strength of such pressures. But, schooled by Gandhi, he also knew

Congress governments with abandon. Some victims made her life easier by a wretched display of irresponsibility in governance.

The issue, however, was not performance but Constitutional principle. A rally and resolution of opposition parties in 1983 at Srinagar marked a turning point in the debate; the country began to appreciate what non-Congress parties were saying. This shift towards federalism was impeded by Mrs. Gandhi's assassination in 1984, but by the 1990s the momentum had become irreversible. An ironic consequence was that the Congress itself became a

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

March 21

1935 Shah Reza Pahlavi formally asks the international community to call Persia by its native name, Iran, which means 'Land of the Aryans.'

1965 Martin Luther King, Jr. leads 3,200 people on the start of the third and finally successful civil rights march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama.

1968 Battle of Karameh in Jordan between Israeli Defense Forces and Fatah.

1980 US President Jimmy Carter announces a United States boycott of the 1980 Summer Olympics in Moscow to protest the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan.

2002 In Pakistan, Ahmed Omar Saeed Sheikh along with three other suspects are charged with murder for their part in the kidnapping and killing of Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl.