

GROUND REALITIES

The writer, the reader and history



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

THE best part of writing about politics and history is the degree of reactions and responses you get as feedback. There are many people

who agree with you and some who don't, which is fair enough. The difficulty arises when some readers, their indignation aroused by what you write, sometimes hurl words and phrases at you that leave you rather surprised. But, as I have learned over the years, it is always the decent thing to listen to the other point of view, no matter how much you tend to disagree with it. Of course, Charles de Gaulle would say something different. Asked once what he thought of people who disagreed with him, he deadpanned: 'I respect people who disagree with me, but I cannot tolerate them.'

We are certainly no De Gaulle, which is when we feel, at times, the need to answer queries flung our way by readers upset by our expressions of opinion on given subjects of collective national interest. Over the years, I have had my fair share of criticism, even exhortation, from readers. They have simply decided that they will not touch me with a barge pole, which is fine. Some have advised me to go into what they have called the intricate details of history before delving into serious themes. Some others have simply misread me, have indeed not grasped the point I have been trying to make. There are some readers who miss out on the criticism I sometimes make of those in power. But when I appreciate, for some very credible reasons, a positive move by those very ruling

circles, a group of readers is perfectly willing to send me to the guillotine for the sin of being 'partisan'.

But that, I guess, happens to nearly everyone --- here in Bangladesh and elsewhere --- who writes or talks about such serious subjects as politics and history. Among my friends are people who keep reminding me that back in 1971 Bangladesh's leftists would have liberated the country from Pakistani control had the Awami League not stepped in and commandeered the whole struggle. These leftists belong, to be sure, to what was once known as the pro-Chinese camp. They believed in a leader named Abdul Haq. You draw their attention to what Haq did in 1974 --- he wrote to Pakistan's Zulfikar Ali Bhutto solic-

because Pakistan was established in 1947, but it had to come into being because the necessity arose for us to push Pakistan out of our lives. Let's not miss the point here, which is that secular Bangladesh was a revolt against a communal Pakistan. As for the question of what would have happened had Pakistan not been there, the answer is easy: if India had not been partitioned, the Bangladesh question would not be there at all. Our problems began with Pakistan. In a united India, there would be little need for Bengalis to go their separate way.

A reader wants to know why, in his opinion, I hate Jinnah. Now, a study of history is never about hating individuals, even those who may have

those who have long argued that the whole of Bengal should have gone to Pakistan ignore the reality of its very large Hindu population which could not be expected to fall under the dominance of a Muslim Pakistan. Don't forget that Bengal's Hindus were only a few percentage points fewer in number (46 per cent) than Bengal's Muslims (54 per cent).

Some readers, both here and in Kolkata, have often posed the pretty untenable question of why Bangladesh, being a secular polity, cannot merge with secular India. Well, why doesn't a democratic United States return to a union with an equally democratic United Kingdom? Why don't the various Arab states, home to a common language and a common faith, unify in a great political enterprise? Why doesn't east Punjab link up again with west Punjab? You don't need anyone to give you the answers to these questions. They bubble their way to the top when you plumb the depths of history.

A final question from a reader: without the partition of India, would Sheikh Mujibur Rahman be the father of a free Bangladesh? No one has ever said he would be. On a larger canvas of thought, in a united India, men like Jinnah, Suhrawardy and Fazlul Huq would be level with Nehru and Patel and Ambedkar. A second generation of united India's leadership would have included Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Charlatans like ZA Bhutto would be absent. Soldiers in both Pakistan and Bangladesh would not have meddled in politics. In a united, federal and democratic Pakistan devoid of its omnivorous army, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman would be a powerful politician redefining a land born of Mohammad Ali Jinnah's desires.

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iting financial and arms aid from Islamabad for the cause of removing the 'autocratic' Mujib government in Bangladesh. It's all there in Stanley Wolpert's life of Pakistan's first elected leader (by default), Zulfikar Ali Bhutto of Pakistan. But try as you may with all your might, these leftists will not have you enlighten them. Ideology, you see, can sometimes be a huge impediment to academic deliberations.

Be that as it may, I have often been assailed by a question thrown at me repeatedly by people whose dissenting opinion I have always respected. Would there be a Bangladesh had there been no partition and no Pakistan? My answer is simple: Bangladesh did not come into being

caused some of the biggest calamities in the lives of people. Here the question is not, will never be, about hating Jinnah. He deserves our respect and he has it. It is only his policies, based on his erroneous belief that religious communities can call themselves nations, that we disagree with. The so-called two-nation theory has been responsible for much of the turmoil people in India, Bangladesh and Pakistan have gone through. We do not hate Jinnah. We differ with him over his politics.

A reader seems to think that it was Jinnah's two-nation theory which the Hindus of West Bengal followed when they decided to be part of India rather than stick to a united Bengal. That argument is flawed. And here's why:

BETWEEN THE LINES

We could have gone farther



KULDEEP NAYYAR

WHEN Pakistan Foreign Minister Hina Rabbani Khar suggests that they are willing to view Kashmir from "another angle"

to tackle the thorniest problem and Indian Foreign Minister S.M. Krishna changes the subject, it means that Islamabad has overcome pressures from within. Of course, Foreign Minister Khar's remark is primarily meant to reopen the problem which remains frozen. Yet the mere suggestion of "another angle" indicates a new confidence that the tottering Asif Ali Zardari government has assumed.

Therefore, the relaxation in visa facilities, limited no doubt, may be a small step in the long haul to a visa-less environment but it is, indeed, a positive development. "I promise you a borderless regime," the late Benazir Bhutto told me a few days before she left London for Pakistan. I am sure she would have tried her best if she had lived but ultimately she would have been defeated by the intelligence agencies which still rule the roost.

The intelligence agencies on both sides have seen to it that the visa possessors follow the same old humiliating process of reporting at a police station in the midst of jibes and threatening postures. It is apparent that there is no change in their attitude of suspicion and hostility. Several visitors may still be happy because the choice before them has either been a visa or no visa. I believe that senior citizens above the age of 65, who will get visa on arrival, will be exempt from police report. And so will be the children below the age of 12.

Yet the most important point that

Indian foreign minister and his counterpart have missed is how to deal with terrorism which is on the rise in both the countries. Who is more to blame or who started it first does not help at this time because the Frankenstein of a monster is on the prowl. Instead of reviving the joint commission for cooperation in various fields, the two countries would have done better to underline the serious proportions which terrorism has assumed. For this, a joint commission on terrorism alone -- pooling of intelligence and fighting against terrorists together -- would have given a stern message to the trouble makers.

That no such machinery was ever proposed is enough of a proof to the yawning differences over the 26/11 attacks in Mumbai. Krishna wanted the perpetrators to be brought to book quickly to soothe the hurt of people in Maharashtra and elsewhere in India. Hina apparently had her own compulsions and merely said: "We will not brood over divergences." My feeling is that the punishment of the culprits, especially Hafeez Sayed, the LeT chief, is a litmus test for India to judge Pakistan's earnestness.

Once the Pakistan judicial commission revisits Mumbai to cross-examine witnesses of 26/11 attacks, the cases should move quickly. Islamabad should be seen to be keen to punish the guilty because the visit of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to Pakistan, rightly or wrongly, has got linked to the outcome of the 26/11 cases in the Pakistani courts. Krishna, more or less,

said so when he was asked by even President Zardari how soon would the Indian prime minister come to his village near Jhelum in Pakistan.

The positive side of the meeting far excels the negative. Things would have proceeded faster but for the lack of preparations on the part of New Delhi. My information is that India's foreign office did not know how far Islamabad was willing to accommodate us. Pakistan Army chief Ashfaq Parvez Kayani had given the Zardari government, more or less, a cart blanche because Kayani wants to fight against the Taliban single-mindedly. He has even withdrawn troops from the Indian border to put them on the Waziristan front. India realises that it indicates Kayani's confidence in normalising relations with New Delhi. This was the best opportunity which we should have grabbed with both hands to reach an agreement on Sir Creek which

Islamabad was ready to sign. One thing would have led to another.

Foreign Minister Krishna considers that India has achieved a lot. "Two years ago, Pakistan rejected the step-by-step approach when we suggested it. Now that is being adopted by both countries," said Krishna in a separate briefing for the large Indian media contingent travelling with him. In contrast, Pakistan Foreign Minister Khar did not contradict him but said the two countries were now seeking to build on convergences through the dialogue process. She did not want to go into history because she said she was born after 1971 war. Khar really

wanted to shed the historical baggage that the two countries have been carrying for the last six decades.

The real achievement of the meeting between the two foreign ministers is to introduce a new category of a visa -- Business. This was long overdue. Had businessmen been allowed to trade from day one, the relations between India and Pakistan would have got normalised by this time. India's huge market is looking for customers to sell the products. Pakistan, on its part, more or less bottled up so far, is keen to break the shackles of steep tariff walls to reach India.

Another good development is the music competition among young singers of the two countries. Unfortunately, the Shiv Sena and its associate Raj Thackrey are so obsessed with the anti-Pakistan bitterness in which they have consumed themselves that they are threatening to stop the competition. The attitude of the Mumbaiwala should be that the dogs bark and the caravan passes on. The initiative taken by young singers on both sides is an example for politicians to emulate.

What still baffles me is why the two foreign ministers have failed to agree on the exchange of newspapers from both sides. Even the sale of books of one country to another has escaped a solution. These instances underline a trust deficit. Unless both countries try to narrow the gap of suspicion no liberalisation of visa would be of any help. To begin with, both sides should go through each other's text books and delete the portions which evoke hatred and suspicion. The meeting of the two foreign ministers may well be a missed opportunity. It could have achieved more.

The writer is an eminent Indian journalist.

Govt. inaction on Hall-Mark fraud

Restore badly shaken public confidence in NCBs

THE Hall-Mark scam involving various branches of state-owned Sonali Bank to the tune of Tk3,547 crore has been quite an eye-opener. First of its kind, it has rocked the state-owned banking system with reports of Tk100cr. to 200cr being siphoned off on the sides.

This gives rise to some fundamental issues. First of all, the missing cash should be recovered with due diligence and restored to the bank. Secondly, legal proceedings should be drawn on the corrupt and involved officials. The only fringe-touching thing we have heard in this connection is the finance minister's assertion that none would be allowed to flee.

A writ petition by a lawyer has sought High Court directive to take steps in recovery of embezzled funds. Is the individual only to initiate a process? It seems the government has washed its hands of responsibilities in taking appropriate measures to recover the money, if necessary, by freezing and seizure of assets and to punish the culprits through due process of law. The response strategy should also include streamlining lending procedures by plugging loopholes. By leaving the matter in the hands of the ACC, the government is perceived to be only strengthening the impression of dithering, which may help consign the matter on to a back burner.

The issue is that of public trust in an important government bank. Investigation till date reveals deficiencies in regulatory role of Bangladesh Bank (BB) over the NCBs. If BB is found lacking in authority in going after such cases of massive graft in state-owned banks, then it must be adequately empowered to do so. Furthermore, scrutiny has revealed that the central bank needs to strengthen its overall monitoring role. We have no inkling whatsoever that any such move has got underway. It cannot be stressed enough that continued government foot-dragging on the Hall-Mark case could put across a very negative signal about management of financial institutions in our country.

It was waiting to happen

Dismal planning failure

ANGERED by unanticipated flight delays, passengers stranded for days together went violent at Shah Amanat international airport at Chittagong and Shahjalal international airport in Dhaka on Sunday and Monday.

While we do not approve of any kind of violent manner of protests leading to damage of public property, we cannot either defend the way some Biman staff members had allegedly roughed up a protesting passenger leading to the melee.

Having messed up the flight schedules, it was only expected of the Biman staff to be apologetic, tolerant and persuasive towards those thousands of Hajj pilgrims and other passengers forced into such uncertainties.

Why didn't Biman administration inform the passengers of flight disruptions beforehand to spare them the sufferings in absence of any provision for food and accommodation?

What kind of customer service is it from an international airliner with surprising admission to the media that their flights will have to wait until 24th September?

Such lapses on Biman's part are inexcusable, since given the severe aircraft shortage, it should have chartered sufficient number of planes ahead of starting Hajj flight operations.

Hajj is an annual event and there cannot be any excuse for not planning ahead for the occasion.

Biman should stop this ad-hocism in carrying out its flight operations with few aging aircraft and running into one disaster after another. Either the carrier replaces the aging aircraft with new ones as well as add more planes to its present fleet before going into full operation, or stop this mockery in the name maintaining a national flag carrier.

For now, it must take urgent measures to ferry the long waiting Hajj pilgrims, wage earners in the Middle East

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

September 19

1870
Franco-Prussian War: the Siege of Paris begins, which will result on January 28, 1871 in the surrender of Paris and a decisive Prussian victory.

1944
Armistice between Finland and Soviet Union is signed. (End of the Continuation War).

1946
The Council of Europe is founded following a speech by Winston Churchill at the University of Zurich.

1959
Nikita Khrushchev is barred from visiting Disneyland due to security concerns.

1990
Delhi University student Rajiv Goswami attempts Self Immolation during Anti-Reservation agitation in India. Though he survived, his Self Immolation inspired nearly 150 self immolation bids and indirectly led to the Resignation of V.P. Singh Govt.

1997
Guelb El-Kebir massacre in Algeria; 53 killed.

2006
The Thai military stages a coup in Bangkok. The Constitution is revoked and martial law is declared.