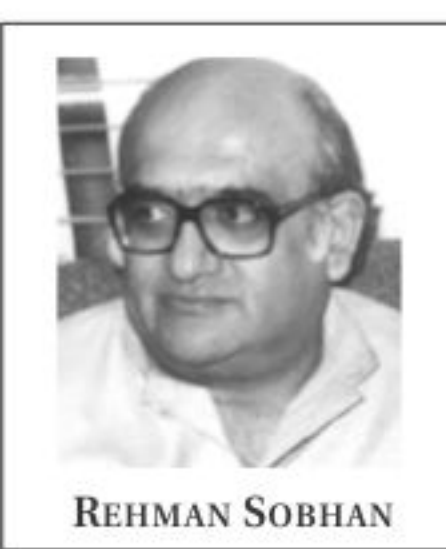


# I.K. Gujral: A tribute from Bangladesh



REHMAN SOBHAN

**I**NDER Kumar Gujral, a former prime minister and foreign minister of India is no more. In his passing Bangladesh has lost a true friend whose support remained steadfast whether he was holding public office, sitting on the opposition benches in

Parliament or just a private citizen. It has been my privilege to know Inder Kumar Gujral, IK to all those who knew him well, for close to 40 years. I first met him when I was a member of the Bangladesh delegation led by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, to the Indo-Bangladesh summit meeting in New Delhi in May 1974. IK was then a state minister for information in the government of Indira Gandhi and we happened to meet at the state banquet hosted by the Indian prime minister.

**Engagement with civil society**  
Opportunities for more substantive exchanges with Gujral did not, however, emerge till the 1990s, when Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), Dhaka, initiated a series of Indo-Bangladesh dialogues in 1995, in partnership with the Centre for Policy Research (CPR) one of India's premier think tanks. The dialogues were designed to bring civil society members from both countries together to address outstanding problems constraining Indo-Bangladesh relations. These dialogues sought to involve both civil society as well as parliamentarians with policymakers so that relevant stakeholders could, together, search for sustainable solutions to our problems. Gujral, was then a member of the opposition in the Lok Sabha, during the tenure of the Congress government in which P.V. Narasimha Rao was the prime minister and Manmohon Singh was the finance minister. Since Gujral was chair of the influential Foreign Relation Committee in the Parliament and known for his commitment to strengthening relations within South Asia, we were keen to involve him in the dialogue process.

The very first dialogue was hosted by CPR in New Delhi on February 1-2, 1995, where we focused on the problems and prospects for strengthening economic relations between India and Bangladesh. We took a high-powered Bangladeshi team to Delhi for the dialogue, which included the late S.A.M.S. Kibria who was then a member of the Advisory Council of the Awami League, Morshed Khan, then special envoy of the then prime minister, Amir Khosru Mahmud Chowdhury then a BNP MP, M. Syeduzzaman, former finance minister and Syed Manzur Elahi, president of MCCI. Gujral was the sole politician who, along with other distinguished Indians, spent a substantial time at our deliberations even though he had important responsibilities in Parliament.

In the second round of these dialogue, also on the theme of economic relation, hosted by CPD in Dhaka, Gujral accompanied a high-powered team of Indian politicians, which included Somnath Chatterjee then leader of the CPM's parliamentary party in the Lok Sabha and later its Speaker and Prof. Madhu Dandavate a former finance minister who later became deputy chairman of the Indian Planning Commission. In the Dhaka dialogue held on May 20-22, 1995, Gujral and his colleagues could discuss the issue of Indo-Bangladesh relations with a broad spectrum of prominent Bangladeshis which included meetings with Sheikh Hasina then leader of the opposition, along with a number of her senior Awami League colleagues. At the official level he and his team held discussions with M. Saifur Rahman then finance minister and M. Morshed Khan along with many of our top business leaders, civil society figures and media personalities. Furthermore, he spent two full days at the dialogue discussing, in depth, various aspects of our economic relations, with a high-powered group of political, business and professional figures from Bangladesh. Exposure over successive dialogues provided Gujral with valuable insights not just to the various problems faced by Bangladesh in its economic relations with a larger neighbour but also sensitised him on the political dimensions to our concerns.

**Gujral in office**  
This level of understanding, acquired through the dialogue process, proved invaluable to Gujral when he graduated beyond the world of civil society dialogues, to assume public office. Following the defeat of the Congress Party in the 1996 elections, Gujral, as part of a coalition government led by the Janata Dal, was elevated to the position of foreign minister of India. By a happy coincidence, his ascendance coincided with the election to office, after a gap of 21 years in the opposition, of an Awami League government, headed by Sheikh Hasina. Two new governments, holding office concurrently, could apply fresh minds to address long-standing problems without carrying over excess political baggage from the past.

CPD and CPR responded to this window of opportunity by convening a third round of dialogues in New Delhi, which focused on the divisive issue of sharing common water resources. The dialogues were held on August 27-29, 1996, a little over a month after Sheikh Hasina's government was sworn into office. Our goal was to initiate a dialogue which

could, principally though not exclusively, explore constructive solutions to the long-standing problems of sharing of the Ganges waters, which could then be of service to the newly elected governments in their search for a possible agreement.

The timing of our dialogue was made more propitious through the presence of one of our most recent dialogue alumni, I.K. Gujral, in the position of foreign minister. Since the then prime minister of the coalition government, H.D. Deve Gowda, had little interest in external affairs, the entire conduct of India's relations with its South Asian neighbours, and particularly Bangladesh, devolved on Gujral. To have a knowledgeable and sympathetic figure in such a critical position was a god send for Bangladesh. Gujral was more than happy to revive his contacts with his colleagues from civil society and invited the Bangladeshi participants to the water dialogue, which included Khondkar Asaduzzaman an AL MP, Barrister Ziaur Rahman Khan, a BNP MP, Rashed Khan Menon and Barrister Anisul Islam Mahmood who, as foreign and water resources minister under Ershad, had been involved in extensive negotiations over Farakka, to an exclusive dialogue

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with him at Hyderabad House, after which he hosted a dinner for us.

In our dialogue with Gujral, we exposed him to the festering concerns of Bangladesh over the deprivation of a fair share of the Ganges waters and discussed with him the various technical and political problems involved in reaching an agreement. Gujral gave us a sympathetic hearing and expressed his own commitment to seeking a mutually beneficial solution.

At the end of the dialogue, whilst other participants moved to the dining room, Gujral asked me to stay back for a private conversation. Here he suggested to me that the government of West Bengal, then ruled by the CPM, with Jyoti Basu as chief minister, needed to be taken on board, since their state was likely to be directly affected by any agreement which reduced, as it must, their share of the Ganges waters. Since the CPM government was not an active partner in the Janata Dal coalition government, Gujral indicated that there were political sensitivities involved in his persuading them to become party to such an agreement. He accordingly made the quite extraordinary suggestion to me, off the record, that I should advise the Awami League government to open its own channel of communications with Jyoti Basu's government, drawing on our shared geography and cultural heritage, to encourage them to participate in the realisation of this historic settlement.

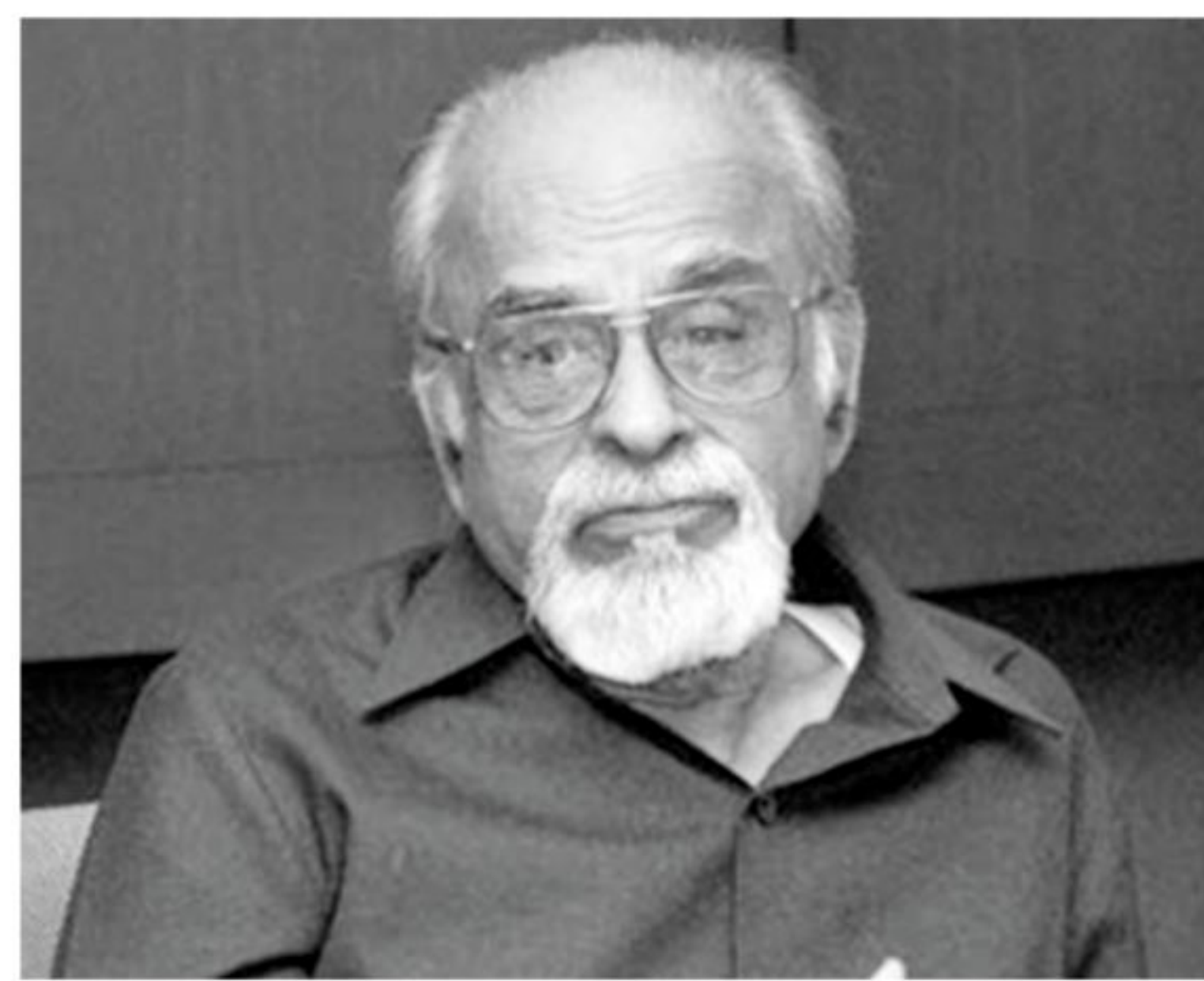
I immediately responded to Gujral's advice and instead of accompanying the Bangladesh team back to Dhaka, I routed myself to return via Kolkata where I had set up a meeting with my old friend, Asim Dasgupta, a well known economist, who was then the finance minister of West Bengal. Asim invited me to call on him at his office in Writers Building late in the evening when we would not be disturbed or exposed to curious media scrutiny. Here I suggested that, given the politically propitious opportunities which had just emerged, he should persuade his leader, Chief Minister Jyoti Basu, to engage himself in playing a role in realising this settlement with Bangladesh and that he had Gujral's blessings to do so. Asim responded very positively to my suggestions and indicated that his leader was not unaware of the mutually beneficial opportunities on offer.

On my return to Dhaka the next day I alerted my brother Farooq Sobhan, who was then the foreign secretary, of these two encounters, first with Gujral and then with Asim Dasgupta. Farooq immediately conveyed Gujral's message to our prime minister. The rest, as they say, is history. In an act of exceptional statesmanship and courage for a regime which had just assumed office after spending 21 years in the opposition, Sheikh Hasina invested her accumulated political capital in reaching an early settlement over the sharing of the Ganges waters. Jyoti Basu displayed similar statesmanship. He delegated responsibility to Asim Dasgupta who, as finance minister, had little exposure to water issues but enjoyed the full confidence of his chief minister, to directly participate in the negotiations with Bangladesh. Sheikh Hasina similarly delegated responsibilities to Dr. Mohiddin Khan Alamgir, then her principal secretary, to work with the foreign and

water resources ministries, to negotiate a solution.

Gujral's own statesmanship was then demonstrated by building a consensus for such an agreement with the principal opposition parties in the Lok Sabha, led by the BJP. With similar political vision he formally invited the government of West Bengal to be a party to the negotiations and to permit Asim Dasgupta to lead the Indian team in the negotiations with Alamgir and his colleagues. I am not aware of too many instances in Indian history where a state government, not even a coalition partner at the Centre, was made party to an international negotiation which traditionally remains the preserve of the Central government. This statesmanship by Gujral and Jyoti Basu may be contrasted with the uncooperative conduct of Mamata Banerjee, the current chief minister of West Bengal, and the political incapacity of the prevailing Congress government to engage her in the dialogue process, which has frustrated the realisation of an agreement over the sharing of the Teesta waters.

The wisdom and statesmanship of Hasina and Gujral culminated in the signing of the Ganges Water Sharing Agreement in Dhaka in December 1996, on



Inder Kumar Gujral

the occasion of the state visit by Deve Gowda to Dhaka. The agreement involved compromises on both sides, which took much political courage, and was inevitably criticised by the BNP opposition in Bangladesh as also by Mamata Banerjee today. However, the true measure of the political wisdom of these two leaders is to be found in the fact that it put to rest a deeply divisive issue compromising Indo-Bangladesh relations over two decades. This agreement has not been reversed by successive regimes in Delhi or Dhaka, particularly during the tenure of the BNP in office in Dhaka between 2001 and 2006, in spite of their criticism of the agreement after it was signed.

Gujral's move to solve outstanding problems extended beyond the Ganges to seek a settlement to the lingering crisis over the Chittagong Hill Tracts where insurgents from the Chakma community, over the past 15 years, were being sheltered across the border by India. Here, once again, Hasina found a willing partner in Gujral. Their courage in reaching an agreement needs to be recognised. The agreement between the Hasina government and the Chakma insurgents was facilitated by Gujral's intervention and presumably some pressure on the insurgents, so that they agreed to lay down their arms and eventually returned to Bangladesh with their families. There are today legitimate and deeply disturbing grievances which permeate the Chaka community over the implementation of the accord. But, thanks to Gujral, India has removed itself from what remains a domestic political problem for Bangladesh.

I have always believed that Sheikh Hasina's determination to take a calculated risk in reaching an agreement over the Ganges and the CHT, within her first year in office, demonstrated some understanding of Indian politics as well as an appreciation of the sincerity of I.K. Gujral's desire to promote friendship with Bangladesh. She deduced that the prevailing coalition government of Deve Gowda in Delhi was living on borrowed time and could be toppled at any moment. No prospective government, which may subsequently be elected to office, would have a person as sympathetic to Bangladesh as Gujral, as its foreign let alone its prime minister. She then decided that in the short time Gujral may remain a key decision maker in Delhi, it was important for Bangladesh to negotiate the best possible deal likely to be offered by India to Bangladesh on these two outstanding issues. History has proved Hasina right in investing in the political wisdom and friendship of I.K. Gujral towards Bangladesh.

Gujral's friendship towards Bangladesh did not end with the conclusion of these two settlements. On the trade front, he demonstrated that he had learned much from the Indo-Bangladesh dialogues where he had participated. He had raised Bangladesh's concerns over trade speaking from the opposition benches in the Lok Sabha. As foreign minister, he initiated the process of enhancing market access for Bangladeshi exports to India. In our dialogues he was exposed to an intensive education, not least by the deeply informed papers and arguments of Muchkund Dubey, an active participant in our dia-

logues, on the mutual economic as well as political gains to be realised from providing such trade enhancing concessions to Bangladesh.

This long standing problem, which continued to be discussed over the next 15 years in successive Indo-Bangladesh civil society and official dialogues, has finally been put to rest. The process initiated by Gujral, way back in 1996/97 during his days in office has culminated in the recent decision of Prime Minister Dr. Manmohon Singh to offer Bangladesh not only duty free access for all its exports to India but, more significantly, in largely eliminating the so-called sensitive list which had excluded some important Bangladeshi exports from entering the Indian market. Today, all our major exports, including ready made garments as well as an unlimited range of new exports, have access to India's market. Various non-trade barriers still remain as irritants but after all these years the seeds sown by Gujral can now begin to flower.

Gujral's commitment to Bangladesh continued long after he left office and remained firm until his final days. After he stepped down as prime minister, he agreed to return to Dhaka to participate in the 6<sup>th</sup> Indo-Bangladesh dialogue between June 29 and July 1, 2008, on the more controversial themes of politics and security. Notwithstanding his position as a former prime minister, with its full panoply of security protection by Black Cat commandos, he participated with an open mind in our dialogue, which was attended by a high-level contingent of Bangladeshis drawn from both political parties as also from civil society, and retired senior members of Bangladesh's armed services. He was, as may be expected, warmly, received along with his colleagues, by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who recognised him as a genuine and valued friend of Bangladesh.

**Building a South Asian community**  
Beyond Indo-Bangladesh relations Gujral remained totally committed to

the challenge of building a South Asia community. He specially came to Dhaka to participate in a tripartite summit involving India, Bangladesh and Pakistan, where he sat with Sheikh Hasina and Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif of Pakistan to explore the possibilities of further cooperation among the three largest countries of South Asia. Gujral was keen to resolve problems with Pakistan and established a good equation with Nawaz Sharif, with whom he could share jokes in Punjabi. But Gujral lacked the political support within his parliament to resolve the far more intractable problems which have frustrated Indo-Pakistani amity.

At the wider South Asian level Gujral had been an active advocate for building a South Asia community. Here too he engaged himself with a variety of civil society initiatives involving such groups as the South Asia Dialogue and the South Asian Centre for Policy Studies, which regularly drew upon his presence and his support for initiatives to resolve long standing problems. When in office, first as foreign minister and finally as prime minister, he proclaimed the much remembered *Gujral Doctrine*, which argued that India, because of its size, should be more generous in its dealings with other partners within South Asia without always seeking reciprocity. In office, he made modest efforts to substantiate his doctrine but, as a member of a minor political party, he lacked the political leverage to carry this forward. Furthermore, the entrenched resistance of India's all-powerful bureaucrats, particularly in the Ministry of External Affairs, located in its South Block base, made the *Gujral Doctrine* a wishful thought rather than a guiding principle in India's relations with its neighbours.

Gujral was much more than a far sighted politician. He was an enormously decent human being whose politics reflected his personality. It was this trait which sustained his personal ties to Bangladesh long after he ceased to be a political player. Over the years, as he became older and more infirm, Gujral maintained his interest in Bangladesh and continued to receive visiting Bangladeshis with the warmth of old at his residence on Janpath. As the years went by, and particularly in his last years, these occasions declined in frequency. In my most recent visits to Delhi he could not even meet me or any of his close friends from Dhaka. He has now left us but not without seeing parts of his legacy of strengthening India-Bangladesh relations being absorbed into the mainstream of our bilateral relations. These improvements may have emerged more out of the changing objective conditions governing our relations than through the individual entrepreneurship of any individual leader. But Gujral and his doctrine remain touchstones to inspire India's current leaders to set their sights on his nobler, more statesmanlike, vision which aspired to project his country's soft power rather than its might, in establishing a more harmonious and sustainable relationship with its neighbours.