

PLEASURE IS ALL MINE



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INCURABLE cynics and their audience have had enough doom and gloom predictions. It maybe difficult for them to see beyond the hovering clouds or a gathering storm. But as a sage said: "What cannot be seen is present." This is true about a whole lot of things happening beyond our horizon of knowledge, or shall we say, a sum-total of news and views coming our way.

There's another facet to human perception. If you are intensely involved in something you are unlikely to form a dispassionate judgment on it. You need a certain detachment in space and time to take an objective view on any developing situation.

A magazine like The Economist from its vantage point of distance topped up by its network of contacts takes an overview that may look as great as an astronaut from outer space marveling at the beauty and tranquility of the Earth. The devil is in details -- on the ground.

The British weekly's The World in 2013 issue has done some crystal ball-gazing about Pakistan and Bangladesh. Adam Roberts, the influential magazine's New Delhi correspondent wrote under the title Pakistan and Bangladesh make history: "No civilian, elected leader in Pakistan history has ever completed a full term in office and then passed power to an elected successor. The shameful record is about to end."

About Bangladesh the article observes: "The government of Sheikh Hasina will complete its full

term, and the army there is unlikely to step in. She then expects to make history as the first Bangladeshi leader to be voted in for a second successive term."

But the caveat is in the coming months being predictably "tense."

Pakistan in a sense is slightly better placed than Bangladesh because President Asif Ali Zardari is an unpopular contender; Muslim League's Nawaz Sharif no darling of the army; and Imran Khan as a third party has fired up the imagination of the youth. The scene looks set.

That said, since The Economist's vibes are cheery for Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, can we expect her to be flexible and magnanimous to reach out to the opposition? It's high time she took a meaningful tangible step towards arriving at a middle ground with the opposition.

When pull and counter-pull exert equal pressure on a matter, the only scientific, and also a commonsensical, answer is either both loosen up a bit or just one does it to attract reciprocity from the other. It won't be a climb-down, rather a wise, sagacious gesture for Awami League.

This would also have a bridge-building impact in a sequel where Hasina government has had a "rift" with

the USA, and to a certain extent, distanced itself from the European Union as well. All because of some impulsive, ill-advised and injudicious acts of the government.

Internally, a change in the Representation of People's Order (RPO) is likely to be introduced to shut off any avenue for rebels in political parties or independent groups to emerge as any separate entity. This does not sit in with democratic pluralism, to say nothing of a critical deficit in intra-party democracy.

Politics is the art and science of compromise.

Whenever a government needs to talk with the opposition, it simply has to do it, out of obligations to the state and its people. Its mandate is a social contract with the people to serve, and not disserve them.

Our sights are set so low because of our political bankruptcy that we cannot look beyond the partisan confines. People are just a statistic like the crimes committed in their name.

In British India roundtable conferences would be held with all representative political parties in India participating. British prime minister, secretary of state for India and Viceroy of India would be on the same page as far as engaging their political opponents or friends went.

This would go along in spite of Indian National Congress' non-cooperation, salt marches to the sea and

quit India and Swaraj movements that severely tested the British will. Non-violence scored an ethical victory over the British and morality in the end prevailed.

Muslim League and Congress, implacable political foes as they were, did sit down to talks at the highest levels whenever their interests required.

All-party conferences in times of stress have been pretty much a regular feature in independent India.

In Pakistan, even a dictator like Ayub Khan would convene a roundtable conference with leaders from major political parties joining in.

Nelson Mandela leaves a rich and abiding heritage of reconciliation and coexistence between divergent views. Aged 94, and back in hospital again, some people think that after him whites might feel less protected. With his vast influence even from out of power, no longer to lean on, it is a bit concerning for South Africa.

We are on a learning curve as far as institutionalising democracy goes. The process got snapped until 1991. We have had for a greater part of the following 21 years, a virtually election-only democracy.

Thus, our political parties should stop wasting time and energy on how best to confront each other, take control of the street, and punish the people. This is lose-lose situation that a country and its talented people of proven capability cannot deserve. We want to see a win-win shift in politics. Although it sounds a mouthful, it isn't a difficult task if you discover the answer that remains encaged by default. It is just a phone call away to flag off a discussion across the table.

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Cop18 Another charade of active inaction?

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THE answer to the question above is both "yes" and "no" for a diabolical problem like climate change. This time also, the Eighteenth Conference of Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP18) continued into an extra day. The decreased number of participants shows that COPs are losing the luster and excitement they once enjoyed. The "Doha Climate Gateway," as proudly dubbed at the closing by the Qatari President of the COP, does not seem to befit the pompous structure of the National Convention Center. Four items were key deliverables in Doha -- operationalising the second commitment period (SCP) of the Kyoto Protocol (KP), climate finance, the means to address loss and damage from climate change, and operationalising institutional arrangements like the Standing Committee on Finance and the Green Climate Fund.

The EU agreed last year in Durban to extend the KP into the SCP, but they and a few other non-big emitter KP Parties, with weak mitigation targets, cover only about 15% of global GHG emissions. Canada, Japan, New Zealand and Russia have opted out of the KP commitments, and the US remained out. So the value of KP commitments up to 2020 lies not in its impact on emissions, but in its iconic value as the lone legally-binding treaty.

Meanwhile, the Durban platform has initiated work to negotiate a universal regime by 2015, to be implemented from 2020. If the past is any indicator, reaching the agreement itself by 2020 would be rather realistic! The most intractable issue is how to establish different layers of differentiation among the 195 countries, instead of the dichotomous distinction of Annex1 (developed)/Non-Annex1 (developing) countries in the current regime. However, the deciding players for the universal regime are the US and China.

The outcome of the second deliverable was more frustrating. Funding stands at the core, both for adaptation and mitigation. This financing has three aspectssupply, demand and governance of these two processes. At the end of the fast-start finance period (FSF 2010-2012), though the contributor nations claimed in Doha of delivering \$33 billion, exceeding the pledged amount of \$30 billion since Copenhagen, analyses suggest that less than a third of this amount has been actually disbursed.

Allocation for adaptation stands at barely 20%, against an agreed balance with mitigation. Even this FSF, as reports attest, is mostly re-labeled official development assistance (ODA). Numbers of either side may not be wrong, but the gap in mutual readings originates from climate finance not having an agreed definition. Bangladesh delegation has pressed for reaching an understanding of what climate finance is and for a periodic review of allocation between adaptation and mitigation.

Second, reports show that grant funding is less than half the FSF. This goes against the agreed principles of the UNFCCC, particularly for adaptation (Article 4.4). Third, actual disbursement remains smaller by two orders of magnitude relative to the needs estimated by UN bodies and the World Bank. Worse yet, there is no agreement on incremental scaling of funding from 2013 against the pledged \$100 billion a year by 2020. The G77 demanded a roadmap, along with \$60 billion a year to reach by 2015, but the Doha Outcome cites no number at all. With exception of a few EU members coming up with some figures, rich countries have promised just to maintain the yearly average of FSF during 2013-2015. Even efforts of two ministers from Switzerland and the Maldives to negotiate at political level were to no avail. A real climate fiscal cliff looms large for mid-and long-term finance.

What is more nuanced is that Doha witnessed efforts by some to dilute the accepted difference between climate finance and ODA. In reality, the rote invocation of principles such as "new and additional," "adequate" and "predictable" funding has become a kind of ritual. Can trust be built on such rhetoric, without operationalising these long-agreed principles? How can we measure "new and additional" funding without a baseline? New and additional is broadly understood as above the agreed ODA level of 0.7% of GNI of industrial countries. Ironically, its current level averages at less than half! How can funding, which is desperately needed for adaptation planning, be predictable without agreement on some auto-generation mecha-

nisms, such as the assessed scale, levy on air passengers and bunker fuel, Tobin tax, a tax on carbon, or on arms trade? Though Convention Articles 3.1, 4.3 and 4.4 obligate industrial countries to finance climate change-related activities in developing countries, climate finance remains voluntary. The mocking irony is, with continued global financial crisis and no interstate war, world military spending (close to \$2 trillion/year) keeps growing!

Then the demand side of finance: what are the criteria for prioritising countries for adaptation funding? The newsletter ECO sarcastically once dubbed vulnerability as a beauty contest! The Convention and other agreed documents, including in Doha, say that "particularly vulnerable" or "most vulnerable" countries would get priority in funding. But different funders, such as the Adaptation Fund, Pilot Program for Climate Resilience or the EU-led Global Climate Change Alliance, use different criteria for allocation. These countries differ greatly in size of population, territory and other socio-economic indicators. The Adaptation Fund Board, mandated to fix the criteria, seems to shy away from finalising them, perhaps because of political sensitivity.

The third deliverable in Doha relates mostly to these countries; the work programme on loss and damage saw the only silver lining, after extreme rancour and several cancellations of negotiations. Finally, in response to emotional urgings from leaders of the small island states, many of which will face "watery deaths" due to sea level rise, Doha Outcome agreed to establish institutional arrangements including an international mechanism to address issues of loss and damage. This again will take few years to operationalise, but it is the only outcome worth noting in Doha.

Finally, the governance of climate finance: its supply and demand management. The Green Climate Fund was initiated in Cancun as a democratically-operating entity (Convention Articles 11 and 12) to work under the guidance of and remaining accountable to the COP (Decision 3.3/COP17). However, Doha witnessed efforts to dilute the "accountability" clause, only to maintain the traditional donor-dominance. This engendered a heated debate. The flip side is that funds having somewhat democratic structures are largely empty-shells! Latest data show only 2-3% of climate finance is chan-

neled through the Adaptation Fund. What is the rationale then of investing so much time and resources in establishing democratically-governed institutions, such as the Green Climate Fund or the Standing Committee on Finance?

Actually, climate diplomacy tends to become a process of active inaction, some calling it "talk shop," erected upon a "deliberately constructed ambiguity" in language. Just one example: numerous efforts for the last few years by the UN Secretary General's advisory group, by G20 ministers, or by experts at UNFCCC workshops and beyond on long-term finance, called for specific new and innovative sources of climate finance. But the Doha Outcome, with negotiations repeatedly stalled, finally agreed to "identify the pathways for mobilising the scaling up of climate finance to \$100 billion a year by 2020." Notice the expression -- not to identify the pathways for scaling up, but ... for mobilising the scaling up...! The question is: how far can the most vulnerable communities, battered by increasing climate disasters, endure this endless procrastination?

Even normally staid institutions like the International Energy Agency and the World Bank, in their recent reports, warn of "cataclysmic changes." Will the big emission powers heed these repeated warnings? The quote below from a speech Churchill gave in the House of Commons on November 12, 1936, sounds as if it had been written for today's intractable climate negotiations:

"So they (the Government) go on in strange paradox, decided only to be undecided, resolved to be irresolute, adamant for drift, solid for fluidity, all-powerful to be impotent...Owing to past neglect, in the face of the plainest warnings, we have entered upon a period of danger... The era of procrastination, of half measures, of soothing and baffling expedience of delays, is coming to its close. In its place we are entering a period of consequences....We cannot avoid this period, we are in it now..."

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I.K. Gujral: An embodiment of the South Asian dream

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IT should perhaps come as no surprise given the skullduggery, brinkmanship, and distrust colouring relations between South Asia's three largest nations -- India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh -- that arguably the greatest proponent of peace and unity among its leaders -- former Indian premier Indrajit Kumar Gujral, who passed away in Haryana on Thursday -- lasted barely a year as prime minister of its most important nation. The end of his premiership in April 1998 was a precursor to the deadly Kargil conflict soon after, when India and Pakistan fought a brief war along the front in Kashmir that both sides claim to have won. In truth, neither side could point to enough tangible, or even intangible, gains that in their sum could be said to constitute a victory.

The advent of General Pervez Musharraf as president of Pakistan followed from the fallout over Kargil, and raised hopes for peace owing to the urbane, forward-looking disposition that the former army general exhibited. It would all go up in smoke soon enough though, as the downing of the Twin Towers in 2001 ("9/11") changed the dynamics of geopolitics in the region beyond reason or measure.

That means, for a certain generation of South Asians, the Gujral premiership still remains the greatest opportunity for peace and cooperation in the region, that was snuffed out all too cynically by the complexities of domestic politics in India's federal system, and all too prematurely. Posterity will accord his time as prime minister a belated importance though, along with his two stints as foreign minister. The recent steps taken towards normalisation of relations between the nations of South Asia, in particular India and Pakistan, owe much to the Gujral doctrine, a set of principles espoused by the man from Punjab for the conduct of India's relations with its neighbours. No wonder Sri Lankan president Mahinda Rajapakse has said Gujral was "ahead of his time."

Broadly stated, the five principles stipulate that with its neighbours in Saarc, India does not ask for reciprocity, but gives and accommodates what it can in good faith; no South Asian country should allow its territory to be used against the interest of another country of the region; no country should interfere in the internal affairs of another; all South Asian countries must respect each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty; South Asian states should settle all their disputes through peaceful bilateral negotiations.

The potential gains from adhering to such a prescription are only now being realised and talked about, under the ambit of regional cooperation, connectivity, etc. In an age of global connectivity, South Asian nations have even failed to reap the full benefits of regionalism. That too in a region that is notable for the huge potential market presented by a

relatively homogeneous population of more than 2 billion people. The economic benefits alone should go far towards ameliorating any of the pitfalls, which would be mostly political.

Key to the doctrine is its recognition of India's rights as well as responsibilities that derive from its position as the regional behemoth. It can be easy, from such a position, to succumb to the temptation of acting the bully, throwing its weight around and trying to bend others to its will. But that will never be a policy that can help India take the position it seeks for itself in the comity of nations. India is forever enamoured by the sense of destiny that places it at the head table, and likes to think of itself as an almost inevitable superpower, matching the rise of China, even as the world quite rightly prepares itself to welcome what will most likely be a post-superpower century with the decline of American hegemony.

Whatever the merits of superpower theory, or their relevance in today's world, what is more or less assured is the truth underlying the belief that governed the formulation of the Gujral doctrine: that India's stature and strength cannot be divorced from the quality of its relations with the Saarc nations, its closest neighbours. Today, as its rising economic strength still fails to grant it the recognition and respect it seeks internationally (as demonstrated by the dithering over admitting it as a member of the UN Security Council), this is a realisation that is just starting to dawn upon Indian leaders at the Centre.

By placing the onus upon India itself, the Gujral doctrine in foreign policy called for a certain generosity of spirit, and a special sort of humility that is so hard-wired into the country's overall make-up that power fails to corrupt it. In fact, humility, grace, and a generosity of spirit are what I recall in the impression formed from my own personal interactions with Mr. Gujral as well. They stretch back to the New Delhi of the mid-eighties, when I was introduced to him by Bhabani Sengupta, a Bengali foreign policy analyst who later became a key figure in the Gujral administration, acting as his advisor. Even as prime minister, I can recall no perceptible change in his overall disposition, which was effortlessly urbane and decidedly learned. I was often struck by how he remained ready to impart any help that he could to an old acquaintance.

Even though Gujral's instincts may have been of the Left, the strengthening of economic ties between Bangladesh and India, especially the private sectors of both nations, was central to his governing philosophy. No wonder his death has been mourned so genuinely in Bangladesh apart from India, and even beyond, in Sri Lanka and Pakistan as well. Indeed, by everyone who hopes for a stronger, more united South Asia. With his passing, that is a dream that grows just a bit more distant.

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