

PM's interview with BBC

She shines no light out of the political impasse

IT is after a long time that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has given an interview to the BBC. As usual, true to the trait of our national leaders, she chose the international media to dwell at length on burning issues of pressing national concern. In most democracies the national media would get priority or at least be included.

That said, we wholeheartedly congratulate the prime minister on her emphatic 'no' to any suggestion of anti-blasphemy law being made by a radical Islamic organisation. We regard this as a strong defence of secularist pluralistic ethos that Bangladesh stands for.

However, we have to say that her speech gave no direction nor provided any new thought about how to solve the ongoing serious political impasse primarily triggered by her arbitrary and one-sided annulment of caretaker system.

She insists on elections to be held with the ruling party in power, as in the established democracies. But she is expediently oblivious of the distrust between the major political parties with the result that the opposition fears the prospect of tampering with the elections if held under a ruling party.

Even though the original judgement of the court suggested continuation of an interim arrangement to hold national elections for two consecutive terms, she dispensed with the option unilaterally.

Her patent argument against caretaker system is that some 554 elections including 15 by-elections were held under this government leading to victories of BNP candidates at many places. But the issue is that such elections did not alter power balance as a national election does.

We remember that the prime minister in pressing her demand for caretaker government when in the opposition did mention that elections held under the then-government were not of a type that could alter power balance. Now if the leader of the opposition uses the same argument to demand restoration of interim caretaker arrangement what answer does the PM have to it.

What we had was a mere reiteration of all positions -- except on anti-blasphemy -- and no direction as to how to solve the immediate problems besetting the country.

Iron Lady is no more

Her profound influence on British affairs remembered

MARGARET Thatcher who died of a brain stroke on April 08 was British Prime Minister for eleven years from 1979 to '90. She was Britain's first woman prime minister and led her party to victory in successive parliamentary elections in 1979, '83 and '87. Her rule evoked strong emotions on both sides of the political aisle.

Lady Thatcher will be best remembered for taming of the powerful British labour movement, i.e. the trade unions of the coal mines. She transformed the economy by shutting down coal mines and embarking on privatisation and encouraging entrepreneurship a stark departure from the left-of-centre Labour party policies that had dominated British politics for decades prior to her arrival. In matters of foreign policy, she rekindled the spirit of "Britannia rules the waves" when she despatched a naval flotilla to fight a war with Argentina over the Falklands islands situated 12,000km away in '82. Britain won the war and Argentina's strongman General Galtierie ultimately lost power over the humiliating defeat.

Her iron will in dealing with matters, both domestic and foreign earned her the title "Iron lady" from Mikhail Gorbachev, the reformist-minded President of the erstwhile Soviet Union. US President Ronald Reagan found in her an ideological compatriot. The special relationship that developed between these two allied countries manifested in the resurgence of neo-conservatism that culminated in the demise of the Soviet Union.

Yet, her rule was not without caveats. While she broke new grounds in engaging the provisional Irish Republican Army in talks over a lasting peace in Northern Ireland, she shied away from tougher sanctions on the apartheid regime of South Africa. All said and done, Margaret Thatcher will be remembered as one of the most decisive political figures in her day one who never shied away from

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

April 10

1809
Napoleonic Wars: The War of the Fifth Coalition begins when Austria invades Bavaria.

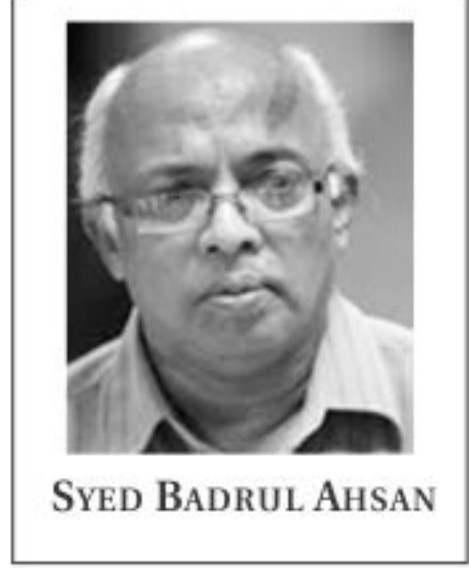
1912
The Titanic leaves port in Southampton, England for her first and only voyage.

1971
Ping Pong Diplomacy: In an attempt to thaw relations with the United States, the People's Republic of China hosts the U.S. table tennis team for a weeklong visit.

1972
Seventy-four nations sign the Biological Weapons Convention, the first multilateral disarmament treaty banning the production of biological weapons.

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GROUND REALITIES



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

LET us begin at the beginning. The state of Bangladesh was given formal shape through the War of Liberation by the people who constituted it. And those who constituted it were Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and Christians, in necessary union as a comprehensive Bengali nation. The state of Bangladesh, therefore, is based on the concept of Bengali nationalism. No room for compromise exists here. The fundamental principles of the state, among which are democracy and secularism, will not be trifled with.

In this state of Bengalis, there must be no room for anyone to malign a religion or its founder or its precepts. Those who seek to undermine Islam are only making life pointless for themselves. Those who torch the temples of Hindus only bring themselves into disrepute. Those who go on a rampage against the Buddhist community are men who are morally bankrupt. And those who intimidate Christians only send out the message that not religion but hooliganism is what guides them in life.

A secular state must ensure security of life, property and belief for every citizen. Modernity calls for a renaissance in life and within such modernity come scholars of all religious denominations. A scholar of religion is different from a not so informed preacher of selective faith. Men of faith do not threaten citizens.

Men believing in Allah or God or Bhagwan do not assault women on the streets. But when they do, they do not speak for faith any more. It is the Almighty who turns away from them.

It is not the preserve of a group of men swearing fealty to religious orthodoxy to decree that men and women must not mingle, must not converse, must not enlighten society with a dissemination of their intellect. A secular, modern democracy has no room for individuals and

In this country of political freedom and intellectual eloquence, parochial arrogance must not get the upper hand. In this landscape sketched by history and time, we have prayed, each to our distinctive God, each in our particular place of worship. That prayer must not be disturbed.

groups taking it upon themselves to suggest that women must stay indoors, that they must therefore be officially relegated to being meaningless symptoms of pulsating life. To suggest, in Bangladesh, that its women go silent and submissive is to advocate anarchy. It is not the place of a man, any man, to determine the role the Bengali woman will play in Bangladesh. And thus it is that the policy on women and, with that, the policy on education must not be tampered with.

The beauty of this people's republic as it was conceived in 1971 and as its constitution so forcefully proclaimed in 1972 was the inclusiveness it enshrined within it. Of course, a big hole, or call it a festering wound, has been the failure of the state to record and register the autonomous existence of Bangladesh's indigenous people.

That wound must be healed if the state is to gain extra substance. The wound can only widen and deepen if the opposite course is taken, that of pushing people outside the framework of secular society and rooting for a societal structure which is not willing to respect religious or political minorities.

The state of Bangladesh is what its cultural heritage has made it. It has been home to Muslim scholars and saints, to mystic bauls, to votaries of

Hinduism and Buddhism, to Christian missionaries. Hindu philanthropists and teachers and Muslim men of letters have enriched the story of this land. It has been a country defined by aesthetic charm and poetic grandeur. Its historical politics has been a long, often bitter twilight struggle for the triumph of liberalism in collective as well as individual life. These shaheed minars, those statues, those tombs are but a mark of Bengali gratitude to those who made it possible for this country to emerge into freedom and literary and spiritual delight. And those monuments will stay, despite the fulminations of extremists against them. This happens to be a land of spiritual and artistic grandeur. It will stay that way.

A candlelight vigil is light unto the dark, a message that enlightenment is under threat, that good, decent

men and women must come forward to warn their fellow citizens that the state is at risk from elements which have consistently waged a creeping war against it. It is a torch that has been passed to the younger generation of Bengalis from their ancestors -- poets, mystics, priests, politicians, peasants, workers -- for them to preserve the sanctity of the state, to keep watch on the gates and ramparts of freedom.

It is not the task of a Muslim or Hindu or Buddhist or Christian to pass judgement on the beliefs of another, to ask that a particular community be pushed out of a faith it calls its own. To call a Muslim a non-Muslim, to decide unilaterally that an individual is an atheist goes against the principles of divinity. It is the Creator who decides. Those who claim to speak for Him do not know that they are turning their backs on the very faith they putatively defend.

In this country of political freedom and intellectual eloquence, parochial arrogance must not get the upper hand. In this landscape sketched by history and time, we have prayed, each to our distinctive God, each in our particular place of worship. That prayer must not be disturbed. In this land of fierce secular tradition, we have recited poetry of the sublime kind and made music redolent of the transcendental; we have studied history and then made it; we have waged war against warmongers to put an end to all wars and we have won that war.

It is time to ensure that the lights do not go out. We will keep the home fire burning.

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Musharraf returns

SALMAN HAIDAR

IT is almost unheard of for a dictator who entered from the back door, ruled for years but eventually lost out, to try to get in again, this time from the front door. Yet this is what Gen. Musharraf seeks to achieve in Pakistan. More usual for a rejected despot is the gloomy ride in a tumbrel, taking him to obscurity or even to physical oblivion. But that is not for Gen. Musharraf. Some six years after losing power, he is ready to try again, making a bid through the general election that is shortly to be held in Pakistan.

The years of exile have not discouraged him or dampened his will. Approaching 70, he is fit and feisty, hardened by adversity and not lacking in self-belief. He has been a regular fixture on the lecture circuit in the USA and Europe and has retained a public profile through meetings with prestigious groups of experts like New York's Council for Foreign Relations. Some loyalists have remained close to him over the years, and have no doubt helped raise the necessary support to permit him to make a bid for power.

Some sort of political organisation has been set up to back the general -- not unusual in this part of the world, where a well-known public figure can readily draw in political aspirants hoping to rise with him. For his supporters, there would be some gratification in seeing that the return of Musharraf has been the biggest story of the election so far.

But it has not been an easy homecoming for the general. There are various legal cases to be negotiated before he can feel that his electoral bid will not be hobbled by judicial activism -- as it is, he has had to appear before the Bench and has been forbidden from leaving the country without judicial permission, a prohibition he has been candid enough to acknowledge as distress-

ing. He has also been subjected to death threats by extremist elements who regard him as dangerously unsound in belief and habit, and while such voices are isolated ones in Pakistan, it is not to be forgotten that persons of this type made more than one bid to assassinate Gen. Musharraf when he was in power, and may be emboldened to try again when the state's protective cover is less comprehensive.

Nevertheless, notwithstanding the obstacles, the general has been active in his political campaign, and this despite the widely-expressed scepticism about his chances of making any sort of impact on the election. The big battalions, that he

was once able to deploy to bolster his regime, now march to a different beat. The present chief of army has been at pains to project his backing for a fair election, and while Musharraf himself may claim that he seeks nothing more, he can scarcely shed the label of having been a dictator during his period of rule.

Pakistan congratulates itself for the unusual achievement of seeing a democratically elected government complete its full term, thus there may be few takers for the return of someone who had intervened against the elected prime minister -- as it happens, the same individual who was deposed at that time has now emerged as a front-runner in the upcoming political contest. Little wonder that few of his countrymen take the Musharraf bid at all seriously or consider the political supremacy he projects for himself as anything but delusory.

India has had a very mixed experi-

ence of the Musharraf years of rule. His military coup against the elected Nawaz Sharif raised many apprehensions about his readiness to deal with the democratic rulers of New Delhi who had already observed carefully as he kept his distance when Mr. Vajpayee made his historic bus *yatra* to Lahore. His role in instigating the Kargil hostilities was especially condemned for its aggressive intent and its damaging consequences -- this remains a blot on his record. Yet it became evident in time that Gen. Musharraf was capable of initiatives that could make a real difference in South Asia. He had a bold and confident style and felt capable of pressing on when other, more cautious

individuals might have hesitated.

By combining in himself the roles of head of army as well as head of government, especially the former, he felt fully in command and beyond any challenge at home. There was, of course, more than a touch of hubris in this, as events were to show, but in his prime he felt self-assured enough to look for "out-of-box" solutions to the intractable problems between his country and India. More than any other, he tried to address the "core issue" of Kashmir. He came to Agra to meet Mr. Vajpayee and believed progress was made even though there was no breakthrough.

Back-channel contacts were developed and when Dr. Manmohan Singh became PM, these were intensified. No formal account has been given by either side but enough has been said, especially by senior Pakistani leaders who would have been in the know, including Gen. Musharraf himself, to suggest that some critical points of

agreement had been achieved, well beyond anything accomplished in previous discussions.

The various public statements by former principals indicate that what was being shaped through the back channel was a settlement that, critically, would not involve territorial transfers to either side -- that is to say, the LOC would take on more of the features of an international boundary. Movement to and fro across the sun-drenched parts of J&K would be made easier, in accordance with the desire of the people of the state, and trade would be permitted -- some progress on these issues has in fact been made.

The delicate matter of demilitarisation also seemed to have figured in the discussions and some solutions envisaged that would meet the wishes of the local people without compromising the needs of security. Some provisions for statutory consultation between the authorities on the two sides were also visualised, especially on shared resources like water, forests and environment.

Though much about the back channel remains obscure, it seems to have created a genuine moment of expectation in bilateral affairs.

That it was not to be, scarcely needs mention. While the plan was still advancing, Gen. Musharraf lost power and was forced to leave his country. Those who succeeded him shunned his legacy in detail, for its non-democratic origins. The back channel sputtered on, perhaps does so still, without promising any breakthrough. Gen. Musharraf's last hurrah has him back in his country but not, it would seem, with any great prospects. Yet what the back channel yielded was pragmatic and sensible, serving the real interest of both sides. When the time finally comes, these concepts could be the bedrock of lasting agreement.

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The writer is India's former Foreign Secretary.