

Dissecting Khaleda's ToI interview

ASHFAQUR RAHMAN

YESTERDAY, *The Daily Star* printed an interview of Khaleda Zia taken by Jaideep Mazumdar of the *Times of India* on October 23 in her office in Dhaka. It was a short exchange but it did highlight how the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) looked at Indo-Bangladesh relations after the change-over of the government in New Delhi with Prime Minister Narendra Modi in the driving seat. The interviewer probed deeply to find out whether she felt that the Modi government was shifting parameters that determined the matrix of bilateral relations traditionally.

The *Times of India* is one of the largest circulated English language newspapers in the world. Its present readership is estimated at 7.6 million. It was, therefore, evident that Khaleda Zia was careful in conveying the right tone while expressing her views. Her answers to the questions were diplomatic so as to avoid any controversy. She did not in any way want to embarrass the new government.

Two things came out clear from the interview. First she intended to give Modi time to change India's policies towards its neighbours, especially

Bangladesh. In a way she indicated that Modi was yet to formulate these policies and therefore she was willing to wait a little longer. But she expects that the new policies would differ in some ways from the policies pursued by the previous Congress government and would help in bringing the two countries closer. The second aspect that was clear was that the BNP is willing to keep in touch with BJP top leadership in order to enable both sides to address all issues that will impact on bilateral relations.

On specifics such as sharing the waters of the Teesta River and the conclusion of the Land Boundary Agreement she blamed the AL government of having failed to "pursue this vital national interest of Bangladesh." She took this opportunity to point out that the AL was not a legitimate government (as most of the AL members in the Jatiya Sangshad were not elected) and hence the Modi government does not take it seriously. That is why it is not able to engage in serious negotiations on these issues. Khaleda Zia knows that this is not correct. The sharing of the Teesta waters is stuck in the quagmire of the politics of Paschimanga. The central government in New Delhi cannot do much until the state government agrees to the pro-

posal, and this is not expected in the near future as the Chief Minister of Paschimanga Mamata Banerjee is jockeying for her party, Trinamool Congress, so that it does not lose the vote bank she has created by denying water to Bangladesh.

The Land Boundary Agreement is also delayed because it awaits clearance by the Indian parliament since this will call for amendment to the Indian constitution. It would have been prudent if Khaleda Zia had pointed out India's failure on both the counts and the need for PM Modi to take steps to expedite the resolution of the two issues with his political acumen and support of his party in the parliament. She could have reminded the government of India that their resolution would have made qualitative improvement in bilateral relations.

Khaleda Zia, however, mentioned the sharing of the waters of all the common rivers between Bangladesh and India and the killing of innocent Bangladeshis in border areas, which are two other urgent matters that need to be addressed in order to improve bilateral relations. The issue of security and threats of terrorism from each country was also mentioned. She felt that close cooperation between the two countries was the key to improved bilateral relations.

On the matter of the Indian perception that AL was friendlier to India while BNP was not, Khaleda Zia reiterated that BNP viewed relations with India as based on principles of mutual benefit and respect. But how much of this is true in crafting bilateral relations with India is debatable. There is no doubt that leaders of Awami League were personally known to the Congress leaders and it was natural that these two parties understood each other better. How this impacted on bilateral relations remains to be seen.

The interview avoided discussing other special issues such as removing non-tariff barriers to promote trade with India. Also, the matter of Bangladesh investment in India was not mentioned. Bangladesh's relations with China and India's adversarial relations with the giant neighbour were not touched upon. The strategic changes taking place in the Indian Ocean with the US fraternising with India were not touched upon.

The interview, however, gave no picture to Indian readers about Bangladesh's emerging role in South Asia and in the region.

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REMEMBERING Sher-e-Bangla

SYED BADRUL HAQUE

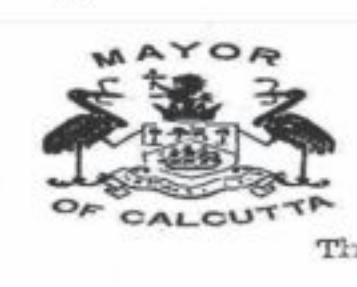


OCTOBER 26 was the 141st birth anniversary of Sher-e-Bangla A.K. Fazlul Huq, a red letter day in the chronicle of our nation's calendar. He was born in 1873 at his grandparents' village home at Satoria in Jhalakathi district. A unique figure in the political firmament, Sher-e-Bangla realised early in public life the urgency of ridding the rural people of the age-old debt-trap of the money lenders, and the all-pervasive curse of illiteracy -- pre-requisites for an inclusive society which he envisioned. The enactment of the debt settlement bill in 1938 and measures that he initiated to promote education in the country were the high-water marks of his eventful public life.

What was most outstanding about him was his all-encompassing popularity among the people -- from the tillers of the land to the urban gentry -- a rare quality for any politician anywhere. Despite his comment "in my stormy and chequered life, chance has played more than her fair part," he always remained unwaveringly focused on his commitment to public welfare. His profound compassion for the hapless humanity is legendary. He would never deny charity to anyone who sought it, even if it entailed a grave personal risk. What defined him most was that he belonged to his people, he was their sovereign.

The distinguished bearing of Sher-e-Bangla was rooted in the pedigree of his illustrious family. The polished manners which are so difficult to attain and so strictly personal do not come by so easily, and when attained are acclaimed in the society. When the carriage, gait, voice, talent of not offending, the candor and expression are bound up in one individual character we are in the company of a true gentleman. Sher-e-Bangla, by all counts, fitted the bill eminently as his life spanning more than 8 decades would convince us of that beyond any doubt. Many unknown small facts as they unfold, unveil his image in a new and vivid way. The following anecdotal nuggets of his life filled the social fabric so touchingly.

In 1935, when Sher-e-Bangla was elected Mayor of Calcutta -- incidentally the first Muslim mayor -- he was virtually deluged with congratulatory letters. Normally, replies to such letters are couched in usual clichés. One such letter written by Sher-e-Bangla to his friend, my father, however, was different from that style. An image of the letter is given below.



The 20th May, 1935.

Dear Ashraf Ali,
Many thanks for your kind congratulations on my election as Mayor of Calcutta. Your good wishes will be a source of strength and encouragement to me in the discharge of my new duties.
Again thanking you,
Yours sincerely,
A.K. Fazlul Huq
Please excuse this delay in replying.
Syed Ashraf Ali, Esq.,
A-20, C-2,
Kalinpong, Darjeeling.

Sher-e-Bangla's addition to the original typed letter in his own handwriting to extend courtesies -- which was well beyond formality -- lent a human face to the dreary typed letter, a superb assertion in the realm of interpersonal relationship. It was not an impulsive or chance happening, rather a positive statement of our traditional elite culture. Today, such niceties, more often than not, are seen as 'old world' courtesies under the shadowy impact of the e-mail culture. One may even perceive a 'fashionable' tendency to ignore the virtues of yesteryears. Our fascination with the so-called 'old world' culture intertwined with ardent family values are still alive and rooted deep in our social psyche. Sher-e-Bangla's letter to his friend is a fine example of our cultural heritage.

In 1954, Sher-e-Bangla along with two other political stalwarts, Hussein Shaheed Suhrawardy and Moulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani, led the United Front to victory in the electoral battle against the powerful Muslim League. In his pre-election campaign to mobilise public opinion in favour of the United Front, he embarked on a tour outside Dhaka. At Bhairab, Sher-e-Bangla along with four student leaders who accompanied him from Dhaka, stayed overnight at the local dak bungalow. After dinner, Sher-e-Bangla wanted to know from the caretaker if each of the student leaders was provided with mosquito-net. Apologetically, the caretaker replied he had only one mosquito net which was meant for him (Sher-e-Bangla). Sher-e-Bangla was shocked, and opted to spend the night without mosquito-net and endure night-long mosquito bites along with his student comrades. He was obviously moved by his sense of fairness and equity.

Sher-e-Bangla was wedded to the soil, certain of his belief, antithesis to anything anti-Bengali. He was as much a part of our history as we are of the land of our mother tongue.

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ROHINGYA People who belong nowhere



PHOTO: ANURUP KANTI DAS

M. MIZANUR RAHMAN and TASFI SAL-SABIL

REFERRING to statements by some residents and an expert, Aljazeera reported on October 25 that a growing sense of despair had caused a mass migration of at least 8,000 Rohingya Muslims from western Myanmar in the last two weeks. The number of people who have fled since communal violence broke out two years ago is more than 1,00,000. Usually, the popular destinations of these Rohingya people are Bangladesh, Nepal, Thailand, Pakistan and India. In the last few decades, thousands of Rohingyas migrated to Bangladesh from Myanmar.

The Rohingya are one of the most down-trodden ethnic minorities in modern history, having been denied citizenship and basic human rights by the Myanmar government. For the Rohingyas, security of life, food, accommodation, arbitrary arrest, detention, sexual harassment and means of earning have been major problems even after their migration.

Many of the displaced and helpless Rohingyas have been living in overcrowded camps that lack adequate food, shelter, water and sanitation, and medical care. Currently, there are two refugee camps in Bangladesh sheltering a total population of 2,900, and a further 2,00,000 are living in unofficial camps and Bangladeshi villages located in the southeastern part of Bangladesh along the Myanmar border.

Almost all the international legal instruments provide protection to the ethnic minorities in their home country and the refugees in the countries they migrated to. The United Nation Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948, the convention relating to the status of refugees

1951 and its protocol 1967, the Geneva conventions, etc. ensure the rights of the ethnic minorities and refugees. Though Myanmar has not ratified 73 important conventions, it has ratified a number of treaties and conventions which define almost all the human rights issues. The most important treaty that Burma is a party to is the UN Charter, which is considered a 'super-treaty' because Article 103 of the Charter mandates that "any conflict between Charter obligations and those under any other international agreement be resolved in favour of the Charter" (Global Justice Centre, 2012). Other treaties that the country endorsed include the Genocide Convention, the four Geneva Conventions, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), and the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT).

But no international legal instrument could protect these people who are actually not recognised as citizens by any state in the world. The Myanmar government does not want to recognise them as citizens and terms them as 'unwanted Bengalis,' and forces them to flee from the country. These people move to the neighbouring countries, especially to Bangladesh which is not in a position to accommodate them for various reasons.

They are also considered a 'burden' for Bangladesh. Support from Bangladesh government to the refugees is inadequate due to limited capacity and resources. Change in the demographic composition in the south-eastern zone, a very strategic one for the country, is always very crucial for Bangladesh. Being downtrodden from their very birth, the Rohingyas are usually unskilled, which is why there is hardly any scope for them to become an asset for any society. They cannot contribute to the

human resource pool of Bangladesh, rather they are kept aside from the mainstream socio-economic activities basically for two reasons: Bangladesh has surplus human resources even in the rural labour markets and the Rohingyas do not have minimum skill and education for work. Their inability to achieve economic and social development and failure to have legitimacy often make them feel inferior and dejected. The situation in the other countries they migrate to is almost the same. So their struggle never ends.

In Bangladesh, the Rohingyas are not legally entitled to work and that is why those who are not supported by UNHCR become desperate for work even with low pay and poor work environment and condition, while some take to criminal activities. According to Rahman (2010), the Rohingya labourers are willing to work for far less than the Bangladeshi people, as a result of which a clash of interests causes conflicts. This situation between the native Bengalis and the Rohingyas creates the scope for social exclusion of the latter group, which breeds more severe social problems for both parties.

Rohingyas are kept out of all the community affairs and in almost every aspect of life, they are facing challenges and living in an inferior condition. Lack of proper health service due to unavailability of medical staff, lack of proper sanitation and scarcity of pure drinking water make their life more miserable. According to the Human Rights Watch (2007), authorities do not allow building of permanent structures in the camps as a way of encouraging refugees to return home. Children are denied access to education. The provision of health services and access to medicines are also limited by the authorities, as are work and livelihood opportunities inside the camp. Moreover, support and assistance from UNHCR are insufficient to meet the demands of the large number of Rohingyas.

In this situation, the Rakhine State Action Plan has added a new dimension to worsen the situation. Human rights groups claim that this plan will force thousands of minority Rohingya Muslims into detention camps indefinitely if they do not qualify for citizenship. Some people see this plan as a new trap of the Myanmar government as it contains a section on a process to determine whether the Rohingyas are citizens. They will be required to register their identities as Bengali, but it will imply that they are illegal immigrants from Bangladesh despite having lived in the area for generations.

But when this agenda was announced by the foreign minister of Myanmar in the United Nation, the global community remained silent; there was no individual or collective protest though this initiative violates many of the international treaties and conventions which the country has ratified. Not even a Muslim country stood up to protest this heinous act. With this background, who will take the responsibility of these 1.5 to 2 million people?

The writers are, respectively, Development Researcher and post graduate student of NOHA Humanitarian Action at Uppsala University Sweden, and a Researcher on social issues.

QUOTABLE Quote

Thought is the wind, knowledge the sail, and mankind the vessel.

Augustus Hare

CROSSWORD by Thomas Joseph

ACROSS

1 Ref's decision

5 Let up

11 Bassoon's cousin

12 Take out

13 1920s art style

14 Stare angrily

15 Yellowstone grazer

16 Part of RSVP

17 Basketball Star Patrick

19 Young Fellow

22 Enticed

24 Tickle

26 Pop star

27 Aspirin target

28 Old tobacco choice

30 Chopper rider

31 Contrived

32 Ultraviolet filterer

34 N. Mex. neighbor

35 Some crime evidence

38 Wind tightly

41 Court ring

42 Freeway entrance

43 Trick

44 Minute

45 Underworld river

DOWN

1 Program lines

2 Cain's victim

3 Like strikers, sometimes

4 Summer sign

5 Light gas

6 Caspian Sea sturgeon

7 Novelist Oz

8 Planning time

10 German article

16 Cog au--

18 Pack member

19 Got a break

20 1975 Wimbledon champ

22 Woodland grazer

23 Daffy Duck has one

23 Writer Ferber

25 Primary

29 Discussion sites

30 Dickens nickname

33 Energetic

34 Shepard in space

36 Prone to prying

37 Pinnacle

38 Guest's bed

39 Low digit

40 Anger

41 Day pts

Yesterday's answer

11	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
13				12					
15				14					
		17	18			19	20	21	
22	23			24	25				
26					27				
28		29	30						
31			32	33					
		34			35	36	37		
38	39	40				41			
42					43				
44					45				

CRYPTOQUOTE 9-2

WM IVZ QOL TDDG IVZF NDOJ ENDL OKK OAVZY IVZ OFD KVBWLU YNDWFB, WY'B CZBY GVBWFKD IVZ NOXDL YFBOGDJ YND BWYZOYWVL. -- CDOL TDFD

Yesterday's Cryptoquote: YOU FIND OUT THE STRENGTH OF A WIND BY TRYING TO WALK AGAINST IT, NOT BY LYING DOWN. -- CS LEWIS

Yesterday's answer

S	A	I	L		G	E	N	E	S	
T	E	N	E	T		O	L	I	V	E
U	N	D	E	R		B	O	O	K	E
B	E	E		I	A	N		I	N	A
S	A	N	D	A	L		S	T	U	N
				S	T	I	L	L		C
				A	S	I	C	E		
C	A	L	L		S	A	N	T	E	
A	G	E	S		T	R	E	A	D	S
S	E	A		A	I	R		C	S	I
U	N	D	E	R		C	O	O	K	E
A	D	E	L	E		T	U	L	L	E
L	A	R	K	S		T	E	S	S	

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

HENRY by Don Trachte