

Mamata paves way for warmer ties

We take her on her words, results keenly awaited

WEST Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's three-day trip to Dhaka has been eventful, reassuring and heart-warming. It proved extensive in terms of grounds covered -- diplomatic, business, cross-border terrorism, dimensions to the relations. Also, the shared experience turned out to be intensive through a renewal of cultural and emotional contacts.

The long-awaited visit was to clear the air on certain outstanding issues, enhance cultural ties and facilitate business between the two sides. In practical terms, as the chief minister of the most important Indian neighbouring state to Bangladesh, she has had a say on two vital issues with us, viz. Teesta water sharing and LBA. She has held out assurances that these issues will be resolved in the foreseeable future. She rang positive urging that we repose confidence in her on Teesta water sharing issue. We take her for her words and believe that Bangladesh's interest in an equitable share of the Teesta waters will be duly protected.

The visit brought to the table some new thoughts. The West Bengal chief minister's proposal to form a joint business council for quick resolution of disputes in bilateral trade and investment merits consideration. In view of Bangladesh business community's pointers to tariff, non-tariff and para-tariff hurdles to increasing exports to India, the idea of a coordinating body between the private sectors sound s good. A synergic committee for cultural exchanges is welcome, too. Moreover, a Bangabandhu Bhaban and a university chair in his honours augur well.

Number of deaths mounting

Who will put an end to it?

THE statistics are staggering. And we cannot feel proud at what we are witnessing in the form of political movement that has seen lethal violence of an unprecedented scale.

Just to put the matter in perspective as regards human casualties, in the eleven years between the 2002 and 2013, 850 people were killed in political violence, while only in the seven weeks since January 5, 2015, more than a hundred people have been killed, not to speak of the many hundred more injured, of whom many have been maimed for life, and all ostensibly for the sake of democracy. And a large number of the killed and injured are non-political individuals. The matter has been compounded by crossfire deaths at the hands of law enforcing agencies, again a large percentage of which are ordinary citizens not linked to any political party.

We want the BNP to tell us what political mileage it has acquired since calling oborodh and hartal since 5 January? Has the killings reinforced its demand for a dialogue and an all inclusive election? It is a tragic tale when a political party targets civilians to ventilate its grievance.

We also wonder whether the AL's policy to hold on to its position of not relenting on the issue of dialogue has not aggravated the situation further.

We want to tell the BNP -- no more deaths. To the government we say put an end to the violence and provide safety to our lives, and it is the government's bounden duty to ensure both any way it can.

LETTERS
TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Govt. shouldn't drive away dialogue heralds

Newspaper reports say that BNP wants a dialogue with the government but it is understood from the approach of the ruling party leaders that they are not for a dialogue with BNP. This is really unfortunate for us at this crucial time. We, the common people want peace. We are troubled by the present vengeful talks and attitudes of our political leaders. We urge the government to come forward to solve the impasse without wasting anymore time.

Mobarak Ali
Gopibagh, Dhaka

Energy & power- our vital resources

I fully agree with the piece "Energy is not a service" published in your daily on 10th February. In fact, one can say that after air and water, electricity is the only resource that is essentially needed to sustain a normal life on earth. However, to produce electricity, except for hydro and solar power, we are totally dependent on fossil fuel. We are now so used to relatively cheap natural gas that the people in the power generation sector take it for granted, possibly till eternity without realising that in a couple of decades, this too will become a scarce resource for power generation. Have we any long term plan to overcome it? Sadly, NO.

Time is rushing by, we must maximise all possible options available, and the sooner the better for us. How about wind power? We also have abundant human solid waste, the use of which we consider a taboo; this can also be a potential resource for power generation. If mixed with kitchen and animal waste, this can be used as fuel for generating electricity. Government must go all out for having essential fuel to meet our expanding need for electric power.


Engr. S. A. Mansoor
Dhaka

CONTRASTING POLITICS IN

Dhaka and Delhi

Our story of regressing democracy

THE THIRD
VIEW



MAHFUZ ANAM

HAVE any of our politicians been listening to Arvind Kejriwal's speeches, especially the one after he took oath as the chief minister of the Indian capital? I suppose not. To be fair, neither did the Indian politicians before his magnificent victory in the latest Delhi Assembly polls. If they had, they may not have met the debacle that they did.

There was one word that kept appearing in Kejriwal's speeches. The word was "Aahankar" (English translation would be a mixer of arrogance, excessive self pride, trivialisation of others). He said that it was *aahankar* that led the BJP and the Congress to their defeat. However, far more significantly, he said it was his own *aahankar* and of his Aam Admi Party (AAP), after last year's stunning victory in Delhi Assembly polls, that led to his own debacle in the Lok Sabha polls 8 months ago in which BJP won all 7 seats in Delhi.

For those of our readers who need to refresh their memory, here are some relevant facts. The election for the Delhi Legislative Assembly was held in December 2013, in which Kejriwal and AAP participated for the first time and won 28 seats. This was a stunning performance for a party that was put together only the previous November, hardly a year before. The BJP emerged as the biggest party with 32 seats and Congress got only 8. Needing 36 seats in a house of 70, AAP formed a coalition with Congress and formed the Delhi government. But within 49 days, in a fit of immaturity on the issue of Lokpal Bill, Kejriwal resigned accusing the central government of non-cooperation.

AAP and Kejriwal disappointed everybody -- its workers, supporters and sympathisers -- noting it to be a party of some novice do-gooders led by an impetuous person too impatient to be a good administrator. So AAP was written off as a one-off affair.

Kejriwal's action so angered his voters that they literally threw him out of Delhi. When the 16th Lok Sabha polls were held in April-May 2014, Delhi voters took their revenge on AAP and Kejriwal by voting him out of Lok Sabha seats from the capital. AAP lost in all the 7 seats allocated for Delhi. The 'wonder boy' and his party drew a total blank.

For AAP and Kejriwal to come back, within 8 months of their complete rout, and win 67 out of 70 seats of Delhi Legislative Assembly is a fairytale story of regaining popularity made in Heaven. Seldom in the history of elections can one find comparative narratives of comeback, in such a short time and against such formidable opponents. This victory came in the face of "Modi-Wave" and the national sweep of BJP.

It was his total defeat in the Lok Sabha polls that Kejriwal was referring to when he said that it was his own *aahankar* that brought him his defeat. Immediately after his swearing-in he said: "I begged forgiveness of the citizens of Delhi for letting them down the last time. They have forgiven me and now I will totally devote myself to their needs. I will work with everybody and also consult Kiren Bedi and Ajay Maken in running Delhi" -- the

two defeated chief ministerial rivals from BJP and Congress.

It was fundamentally the anti-corruption plank of the AAP that caught the imagination of the general public. Corruption in high places is well known but it is the petty corruption -- money paid for every service to be got from the government -- is what Delhi-wallahs got totally indignant about and they wanted it to stop.

To AAP's credit, they made their campaign

we heard a leader saying sorry to the people for their mistakes or for the trouble that they make us live through.

For 44 days now we have been subjected to the so-called *oborodh* and week-long continuous *hartal*. More than 100 people have died as a result of the so-called movement launched by Khaleda Zia, her party and her alliance. Did Khaleda Zia or anybody from her party say anything remotely close to "sorry" for the



contribution totally transparent making public -- on its website -- every significant contribution they got, refusing in some instances donation from sources they did not feel comfortable about. For a fund scarce party of the "common man" refusing donation impressed the voters to no end.

This writer happened to be in Delhi on the occasion of Kejriwal's oath taking and for a couple days after. As in any city the taxi drivers and scooter drivers are a very talkative lot and Delhi is far from being an exception. And the South Asian verbosity makes it all the more engaging. Not only that, they had many stories to tell -- about how he met Kejriwal, how many times he shook his hand, and that somebody he knew had lunch, dinner or *chaity* with the AAP leader -- but the tone in which they narrated them made an indelible impression in my mind. In every instance they seemed to own the event, the process and the outcome. "We have shown them," "we have thrown BJP and Congress into the dustbin with our *jhhaaru*" (broom, which is the electoral symbol of AAP). "We taught those upstart BJP leaders, who had already become arrogant after Modi's victory, that we are the makers and breakers of '*netas*' (leaders)." Modi for PM but Kejriwal for chief minister was what my interlocutors were telling me they wanted.

I was thoroughly taken by how common people owned the election. They felt empowered and strong and they were showing that strength through articulation and body language.

The word "*aahankar*" got stuck in my mind. What has happened to humility in Bangladesh's politics? When was the last time

devastations they are causing to their lives She could come to the very people who she expects to vote her into power and, in a humble and yet justifying tone, say that "I am sorry for causing so much trouble but I had to do so because.....". It would have at least given us some sort of satisfaction that the BNP chief cares for the people who are suffering from. Leave alone "sorry," there has never been even a word of sympathy.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina may take the moral high ground on the street level violence and the petrol bombing of the innocent for the moment. But how she would have behaved if she was in the opposition and if Khaleda Zia had abolished the caretaker system and if she had 153 uncontested MPs in her Sangsad, and if she had a cabinet that included ministers from the official opposition in the parliament and if she had a handpicked leader of the opposition, and... and... how Sheikh Hasina would have behaved is a question we don't feel very confident to answer. But we must add, she never used petrol bombs on the innocent.

I have admired India for its capacity to live with so much diversity and to do so in a democracy, however flawed. Watching Delhi voters exercise their voting rights with such majesty and seeing democracy function in such a dramatic fashion, for the first time in my life, I felt envious of my Indian friends. Here they were exercising their fundamental rights and we were denying the most basic of them to our people -- their right to live. We were burning them alive with petrol bombs.

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The writer is Editor and Publisher, *The Daily Star*.

The word "*aahankar*" got stuck in my mind. What has happened to humility in Bangladesh's politics? When was the last time we heard a leader saying sorry to the people for their mistakes or for the trouble that they make us live through.

An existential crisis

PRAFUL BIDWAI
COLUMN



PRAFUL BIDWAI

IT'S a telling comment on India's Congress party that a four-member committee it appointed in October to devise a strategy to rejuvenate it has turned out a non-starter because its members couldn't decide who should head it.

Even after the Congress's rout in Delhi and bye-lections elsewhere, few leaders are willing to blame its top leadership.

Former ministers Jairam Ramesh and Kishore Chandra Deo have voiced grave concern at the inner-party turbulence. Ramesh says the Congress's crisis isn't only electoral, but "existential": "We have lost huge ground. We are no longer a premium product. Congress is now a deep-discount bond..."

This acknowledgment would mark a big step forward if it ends the Congress's smugness. Its steep decline from 206 to 44 Lok Sabha seats doesn't reflect a tactical error or communication failure, but its disconnect from the people.

Ramesh wishfully thinks the Aam Aadmi Party won Delhi's stunning victory because it ran away with "Rahul Gandhi's platform": "The lessons to be learnt are door-to-door campaigning, bringing new faces and... empathy with the people...accessibility and visibility of leadership... We have to be less arrogant..."

Deo blames "rootless wonders and spineless creepers" and says things wouldn't have been so dismal had Gandhi fulfilled "half the promises made after he became vice-president." Deo too urges Rahul and Priyanka to "emancipate" the Congress.

This tactically-focused analysis misses a vital point. The Congress's crisis is multi-dimensional: a crisis of ideological identity, a programmatic crisis, a crisis of political strategy, an organisational crisis, and a leadership crisis. They together get reflected in poor alliance-making, incoherent campaigning, and electoral losses.

The Congress isn't what it was in its heyday: a multi-class and caste, broadly Left-leaning, umbrella-like party with roots in trade-unions and numerous associations. Many poor people could then identify with its "growth-with-equity" slogan.

In the 1970s, the party's base splintered. The Other Backward Classes and Dalits gravitated towards regional outfits like the Samajwadi Party, Janata Dal, Rashtriya Janata Dal and Bahujan Samaj Party. The Congress went into deep decline in the late 1980s. It returned to national power in 2004 on a thinner base, without a committed subaltern constituency.

The Congress has since refashioned itself as a party committed to growth without equity, which pursues neoliberal policies favourable to predatory private capital. The Manmohan Singh dispensation catered to a largely upper-middle class urban constituency and rural upper castes.

It tried, feebly, to cultivate some poor sections through rights-based programmes like the Public Distribution System for food, National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, Right to Education--meant to compensate them for the deprivations suffered under neoliberal policies.

Such "compensatory neoliberalism" was soon curtailed. The Congress-led United Progressive Alliance-II negated the programmes' positive effects by assaulting the rights of the poor to water, forests and land by handing over

natural resources to corporations.

This substantially lost the Congress the support of the poor. It turned to the middle class, competing with the Bharatiya Janata Party by diluting environmental regulations and making tax concessions to business. In December 2013, Rahul placated an apex chamber of commerce by boasting that he had sacked an environment minister who delayed clearances.

Cultivating business at the expense of vulnerable people won't help the Congress. To regain relevance, it must take up agendas of social and ecological

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justice and expanded civil, political and economic rights for the underprivileged.

AAP's Delhi sweep proves how compellingly attractive these agendas remain even for this relatively prosperous region, whose per capita income is seven times higher than Bihar's. Delhi's greatest lesson is the crucial importance of a poor-centred coalition and grassroots mobilisation.

The result demolishes the theory that India's poor have become so "aspirational"--and so convinced of the justness of existing social arrangements--that they don't want subsidies.

Indian society remains hideously unequal, hierarchical and prejudiced against the powerless, with extremely low social mobility. So affirmative action, affordable healthcare and education, and social security are absolutely imperative. The Congress has forgotten this.

Today's Congress has got its ideology and policy-thrust all wrong. Correcting this means cleansing the party of pro-corporate leaders like Manmohan Singh, P. Chidambaram and others, and embracing a Left-leaning perspective.

It also means democratising the Congress, and freeing it of one-family dependence--no matter how able and charismatic its leaders. As it happens, Rahul isn't astute or charismatic. He arrogantly presumes that the Congress can win elections without alliances in the Hindi heartland.

That's why he broke up the Congress alliance with the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha-RJD last year, and handed the state on a platter to the BJP. He did this earlier in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, without comprehending the prevalent social or political equations.

Earlier, Gandhi tried to rebuild the Congress organisation through the Youth Congress by holding elections. Most posts were captured by the children of Congress bandicoots using money power.

There's no easy way out of the Congress's crisis. But it can only be revived and made viable on a Left-of-Centre platform, the space for which has expanded thanks to the BJP's growth. It would be a historic blunder to squander this opportunity.

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The writer is an eminent Indian columnist.