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Bangladesh Diary



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M.S. Gill

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Buzz on the Field

After many years, I was in Dhaka again, at the opening ceremony of the South Asian Games. India is a major participant with about 400 sportspersons and a dominating sporting presence. The Banga Bandhu Stadium in the heart of the city reminded me of Mumbai's Brabourne Stadium. It's an elegant, intimate setting in the heart of the capital. The late afternoon opening

ceremony in the cool winter was an enjoyable experience. The Bangladesh Olympic Committee had organised an inexpensive and near-perfect event. Almost 10,000 young people along with men from the forces in colourful costumes held an impressive display of dances and calisthenics accompanied by Tagore, Nazrul Islam and other songs of the land. This was followed by a water display with laser lights. Finally, there was a burst of fireworks, complex and pleasing.

The games were an occasion for the subcontinent to meet in friendship and healthy competition. While the athletes nervously got ready for their events, I had the opportunity to meet ministers and managers from our neighbourhood. The Nepalese sports minister and his officials remembered me as the former chief election commissioner of India. We happily discussed the woes of all election commissions and the constant struggle for fair elections in a democracy. The Pakistan sports minister and his colleagues were warm and friendly. Neighbours we always will be, so it is best to work out the means to a friendly and harmonious coexistence. We talked of the recent ipl controversy and the Hockey World Cup in Delhi, where the gods have decided the opening match will be between India and Pakistan. I am excited the world cup will take place at the new Dhyan Chand National Hockey Stadium.

Wheels of Justice

I landed in Dhaka on a highly emotional day. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the founder of Bangladesh, had been assassinated in 1975 along with his family (barring two daughters who were abroad) in a brutal military coup. Thirty-five years later, after a tedious 13-year trial, five of the 12 guilty officers had been hanged just past midnight. The speaker made solemn references in Parliament and citizens said prayers all across the land. The

rule of law had prevailed after all due process and a historic wrong undone.

It was a landmark event for us in Asia and people everywhere. Military coups have occurred around us many times, but justice has seldom been done. Some coups were justified by the doctrine of necessity. Augusto Pinochet's coup in Chile in 1973 never led to any punishment. Pinochet, in spite of the murder of president Salvador Allende and many citizens, never faced retribution. The Bangladesh trial and punishment of the guilty colonels is a warning to Napoleons everywhere. The wheels of justice grind slowly, but surely. These five men—in recent years surrounded by grandchildren, and perhaps comfortable in the thought that they had escaped all chances of justice—were led to the noose hours before I touched the country.

Me Tee Tiger

Early one morning I went to the Karmitola Golf Club to play a round and look over the course. It's an elegant golf course in the heart of the city. The greens, fairways and tree plantations are extremely well-maintained. The Delhi Golf Course, meanwhile, is what I call a hockey course. It has no water features, nor any challenges of hill and valley. Not so in Dhaka. There are numerous ponds, lakes and constant possibilities of going into the drink. I did once, but generally my meagre reputation remained intact. The army officers in charge of the Dhaka club were most generous and kind and gave me lovely tiger-embossed T-shirts to show off in Delhi. I amused them with a story of my own. Coming from an army background and knowing the British Indian army as a schoolboy, I suggested our armies remain lethargic and uninspired if given routine military objectives to guard towns and cities. To make them perform at top gear, the objectives set must be from golf course to golf course. Then every general worth his salt will be a tiger. I also took pride in the fact that I must be the only Indian minister ever to play on the Dhaka course and, earlier, also the Islamabad course built for General Zia-ul-Haq.

Learning to Grow

Bangladesh's development story surprised me. The figures given by our embassy were impressive; a growth rate of 6.9 per cent and, what is more, a population replacement of only 1.2. Even if it was a little more, it still indicates a vital stabilisation of

population growth. It raises pertinent questions about population growth figures in all Indian states to the west of Bangladesh. I expected a better figure for literacy—after all, a good Bengali cannot do without books, tea and spirited debate.

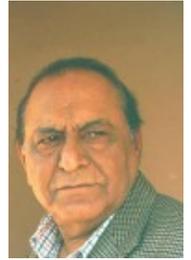
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