

Vitriol points to dark tunnel

We have had enough of this for the last ten years

THE prime minister and the leader of the opposition find themselves locked in a battle of words. This is being carried a bit too far into an outright exchange of vitriol heating up the political atmosphere almost irreversibly, so it seems at this stage.

AL president Sheikh Hasina has for quite some time been holding the prime minister responsible for all that is going wrong for her party or the country. And Prime Minister Khaleda Zia has made it known that her government would be tough on all elements given to politics of violence. She has warned the opposition of serious consequences should it indulge in what she called anarchy and terrorism. Suddenly, the language of the two leading political figures has acquired an element of belligerence. This has surprised the citizenry who became rather accustomed to a lull in confrontational politics they experienced in the recent months. It admittedly revives the memories of nightmare in the past when politics was strained and stretched beyond the permissible limits of adversarial relations between the two major parties. As a result, people suffered and so did the economy.

The political weather is turning murky with the hardliners and hawks on either side of the divide raring to do their part in carrying forward the vitriol.

There has been a spate of political killing in the recent past, and opposition pickets are coming under tough police action during hartals. The government blames the opposition for adopting agitational programmes, and the opposition says it is being repressed, which the news photos albeit bear testimony to. The latter needs to be given the political space to operate. It is expected of the ruling party in a democracy to go more than half-way to create conditions for effective coexistence with the opposition.

We would like to earnestly urge the two parties not to lead the nation to a point of no return by doggedly pursuing politics of confrontation and discord. Despite the alternating currents of aggressive opposition politics experienced by both parties, the elected governments were able to complete their full terms since 1991. So, the political parties should try to keep the system together taking to the positive aspects of their experiences.

We hope the leaders and their parties will exercise self-restraint in order to foster a tolerant political culture where the rules of the game will be followed as a matter of principle.

Water offence in the city

Think globally

IT is learnt on good authority, perhaps the best one conceivable, that the systems loss through the water supply network of Dhaka Water and Sewerage Authority (DWASA) has reached a horrific 49 per cent mark. LGRD and Cooperatives Minister Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan informed the parliament in reply to a question on Monday that a high level committee constituted by the government put the volume of water wasted through the system at nearly half of the potential water supply capacity.

This conjures up an inherently thought-provoking equation. The water requirement in the capital being twice the level of actual supply, if the systems loss to the extent of 49 per cent were substantially reduced, obviously then the deficit would have been to that extent narrowed down.

The systems loss is both in cash and kind. Unmetered water connections are a whopping 61,000 with a huge monetary loss being evidently incurred to the exchequer as water bills cannot be claimed officially. For understandable reasons, the LGRD minister proposes to involve the private sector in installing meters on them. What about penalising those responsible for the clandestine connections, the illegal beneficiaries and the colluding employees? How far the passing of the responsibility of bill collection into the hands of WASA Employees' Welfare Cooperatives will be successful in minimising revenue evasion in zones 4 and 5, one has to wait and see.

The loss in kind or outright waste of water is taking place via the 90-kilometre dilapidated water supply pipes and through the nozzleless water hydrants that can be seen in the old part of Dhaka in particular.

The above could very well provide the grist to the mill of global water and environment-related concerns. The huge waste of water we are incurring on a daily basis is unforgivable in an increasingly water-starving world. Added to the huge ordeal is the land subsidence threatened by the declining water table in the subterranean caused by extraction of water through large-scale tubewell operations.

Political confrontation on the rise

Vengeance and harassment of the opponent still rule our politics

M. SHAHIDUL ISLAM

OUR political culture is submerged in the trading of diatribes, spewing of venom, and in the extraction of vengeance by the two major parties. In this hatred-greased political culture, the ruling party seldom misses an opportunity to corner the opposition because today's opposition treated the yesterday's opposition with similar disdain, spite, opprobrium and disrespect. The opposition is no less bellicose against the ruling party either, especially in the demonstration of muscle power. The political air is thick with such poisonous pollutants, as is the nation's environment.

Mahatma Gandhi once said in the wake of widespread communal riots in India that 'an eye for an eye leaves the world blind'. One also knows that two wrongs don't make anything right. Tolerance and mutual respect being the bedrock of any democracy, and the democratic governance being a collaborative effort of the treasury and the opposition, the legitimised existence of the treasury largely depends on the compliant survival of the opposition. If one does manage to survive without the other, it can't be termed as a democracy. We did pass through such a vacuous 'autocratic political ambience' for a good part of our history.

Having returned to the Parliament after a long hiatus, the opposition chief whip Abdus Shaheed (AL) informed during a post-budget discussion on June 23 that, of the Taka one crore allotted for development works in his area, nothing was channelled through his party. Money was slated to be spent by MPs from BNP and Jamaat only', he bemoaned in anguish.

The almost constant boycott of the parliament by the opposition is another manifestation of this 'they did the same syndrome'. So is the issue of hartal, which both the parties despise while in power, but resort to using as a potent political

weapon once their status gets relegated to the opposition. The AL leader, Sheikh Hasina, even made a promise to the nation not to use hartal as a means to press ahead political demands while in opposition. Yet, like the proverbial 'promises are made to break', her party did not hesitate to call for a day of hartal that coincided with the arrival of two important foreign dignitaries - Indonesian President and US

Secretary of State -- to the nation's capital. The treatment of the opposition by the ruling party has a similarly familiar ring, which need not be elaborated. What, however, must not bypass our scrutiny relates to the important issue of the formation of various parliamentary committees. The committees for the 7th parliament were formed belatedly, but no opposition lawmakers chair any of those committees.

The AL too followed the similar trend. Given that the AL broke a decade old tradition by not giving the committee chairmanship to any cabinet minister, the BNP should have improved upon that by allowing some of the opposition lawmakers to chair a few of the committees-- as a beginning-- to break away from the taboo.

At some point in the past, there also emerged a consensus among the leadership that the post of the deputy speaker of the house would be given, as a standard procedure, to the opposition. This too did not happen because 'they did not do it'. Then again, look at the remarks gushed out of the opposition's mouths about the performance of the government. These spiteful and 'unbecoming' comments reflect a

distorted reality, implying that nothing that the government did or does deserves commendation. At times, the venom of such intolerant mud-slinging spills over our national boundary as leaders from the opposition try to complain to foreign governments of the faults and flaws of the regime in power, often at the cost of truncating the image of the nation.

One also observes that constant

accusations of vote rigging by the winning party turned Bangladesh as the only country in the world to have inscribed a constitutional provision for holding general elections under a neutral caretaker government-- to be headed by an ex-member of the judiciary. The measure was applauded at home and abroad, but this sense of bravado did not pre-

clude the reality that the electoral system of the nation remains as yet a flawed one, hence prone to more dangers. As well, the scramble and politicking to choose a chief justice to fit the election requirements have since become an obsessive mission for both the parties.

The readers may also be reminded of the removal of Sheikh Mujib's pictures from all government installations upon BNP's assump-

tion of political power, as well as the same treatment meted out to Zia's pictures upon AL's coming to power in 1996. The change of government in this 'land of make believe' ushers in an era of uncertainties that smacks of sweeping revolutionary upheavals. For, one is not sure of what might change all and sundry upon the change of a political

regime. Nor can one gauge the proclivity of the regime with respect to its chosen policy directions in domestic and international issues. This is a scaring (and perplexing too) spectacle for investors and innocent observers alike.

The situation can be summed up as one utterly unstable and downright confusing. It shows little respect to fundamental national interests and ethos; to the mores and ideologies, upon which was built the very foundation of our nation. Historically, we have forgotten that of the 30 or so distinct nationalities of this subcontinent, we are the most fortunate one to have carved out a sovereign existence for ourselves. We're also oblivious to the facts that we own a chunk of geography that we proudly call our home; a flag that we can salute and venerate with unbridled patriotic fervour; and a map that encompasses in it the race and ethnicity of the same linguistic stock. Aren't our politicians culpable of dishonouring such 'givens' that came through shedding of blood and sweat by our national heroes?

Interestingly, like the wild fire that engulfs everything around, this culture of intolerance is also a pervasive phenomenon within the parties themselves. The parties thus are deprived of democratic practices within, and the politicians are viewed by the mass with dread, not deference. The tool of politics is wrapped in a peculiar and dangerous package comprising money and muscle, not merit and motivation.

The UK does not have a written constitution, yet the 'politically correct' behaviour of her public personalities grant them more

authority to hold the other organs of the government (executive and judiciary) accountable than does the lawful mandate offered to them by the voters.

In the US, members of the Senate and the House of Representatives act in unison on all matters deemed as conducive to national interests. As a new democracy, we may not emulate the developed world as our role model -- given that the underlying fabrics are different in their cases -- but the rudimentary things that inspire hopes among people are very much existent in our neighbourhood too. The resilience of the Indian democracy stems from the broader commitments of her politicians to everything construed as 'common good for the nation'. In every democracy, opposition is challenged, not choked to death as we do.

Though not unbeknownst to happenings around us in the global village, we still choose to remain intolerant of, and opposed to, anything that doesn't fit our own psychological mould. That is why upon assuming office, the first thing we care most to do as a government is change every responsible official from their incumbency. We're scared lest their loyalty is glued to the past regime. This too is justified on the familiar rationale of 'they did the same to us'.

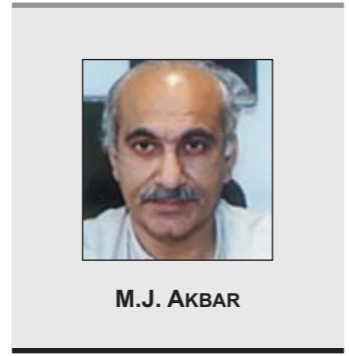
Can we not begin the process of doing things in the right way from today, so that no one dares to cite our political craftsmanship as a precedent to hurt us tomorrow? We surely can, provided we follow an old adage that says, 'distance is nothing; it is the first step that proves difficult'.

M. Shahidul Islam is an author and researcher.

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Take Heart



M.J. AKBAR

THE biggest weapon of mass destruction on the subcontinent is that double-edged sword called the tongue. Our leaders seem determined to be sentenced by their sentences. This is bad enough. It becomes worse when media becomes interventionist. Television searches for a story in between the blank spaces of a conversation. Text flutters at the top of a newspaper page, rudely divorced from context. Forget peace; this is a strange environment where even silence cannot deliver peace of mind. What did Musharraf say and why did he say or not say it is the favourite game of Delhi. Islamabad displays similar affection for Lal Krishna Advani. War and peace sway on the edge of a sound bite. If such analysis were merely puerile it might be left alone. But it does have its impact on atmospherics, and atmosphere is a critical indicator of the season through which we might be passing.

India-Pakistan relations are a forest in which everything can be found. Hares race in one place, hounds in another and it is only to be expected that their paths will cross. Lambs work their corner while lions growl nearby, waiting for the opportunity to pounce on those foolish enough to have left themselves unprotected. There are bees who will sting and disappear; and snakes who will wait in the grass for the moment when they can strike terror. Bears will growl, even those who mean no particular harm. You will

also find Pan strolling along playing the flute, dreaming of the beauty that is also an integral part of a forest. Within paradox and conflict we have to keep struggling to find peace, certain in the knowledge that the only alternative to peace is a debilitating and dangerous war.

There is one way out of the confusion. If you want to know what is really happening, or more accurately what might really happen if some saboteur does not turn up, then look through the thicket of statements that land up in newspa-

pers every day and search for the unusual rather than the usual. Political leaders will repeat the usual because they are bound to do so. Past positions will not change unless something significant happens, and to reach the point of significance you have to tread with care. President Pervez Musharraf was clearly dragged out of context when some journalists announced that he was launching another Kargil, but that is not really the point. It is usual for a general to dredge up the prospect of war. That is what he is trained to do. That comes instinctively to him, which is one reason why generals are generally poor peacemakers however strong their intentions might be. General Pervez Musharraf was an author of the Kargil operations, and he will always believe that it was useful in any case and could have turned out more positively for his country if but the politicians had listened to him. Otherwise he would have to deny his sole contribution to Pakistan's military history, and not a very glorious one at that. A general like

him is bound to argue that three full-scale wars have taken place because of Kashmir, and if something is not done, a fourth one cannot be ruled out. (Just for the record, one of the three wars was not over Kashmir; it was over Bangladesh.)

More depressing are the other "usuals" in his repertoire, which he pulled out in the course of his trip to Germany, Britain and the United States. The nuclear gambit, for instance. This is meant to frighten everyone. The United States should be frightened into selling its F-16s;

is any forward movement. We do not want another puncture, because poison gas leaks out of the tyres. The niggles that have come in the way of restoring transit relations prove that it is far better to sort them out before journeys restart. The debris of past experience must be cleared. The bus to Lahore will hopefully restart in July, but hawks have descended on the train and the aeroplane. All manner of excuses are being trotted out to stop the Samjhauta Express from resuming: a train becomes a vehicle for smug-

hearing? I suppose sentiments of piety are not taken seriously, and when President Musharraf says that he will take two steps towards peace for every one that India takes, it is greeted with a yawn. But within the thicket of statements look and you will find a suggestion that if both sides shed their rigidity, there could be the beginning of a solution to problems, including Kashmir.

The most specific unusual statement was made by Mr Advani during his visit to the United States and Britain. He clearly said that with a

tive was praised wherever he went - Berlin, St. Petersburg, Evian, Lausanne. George Bush made it a point to meet Mr Advani, and must have conveyed what he did to Mr Vajpayee at their famous dinner in Russia. President Musharraf will hear a similar international urge for peace. But India and Pakistan have often been brought to the water: can they be made to drink? The nub lies exactly where it did in Agra. India has to talk about Kashmir, and Pakistan has to end support for terrorism. We are in serious danger of succumbing to another cliché: which comes first, the chicken or the egg? There used to be confusion about the answer once, but these days matters should be clearer. Cross-border terrorism must be curbed to the satisfaction of the watching world. It is not only Delhi which says that this has not come down; the American ambassador in India says the same thing.

Equally, cross-border terrorism may have begun at someone's command; it will not end as easily as it started. (The biggest example of officially sponsored cross-border terrorism, if you come to think about it, was Kargil.) There has to be forward movement on people-to-people relations, and then a government-to-government dialogue. There is a bit of good news. See how easily hearts warm up even when governments meet. Emotions jumped out of the photographs when the Pakistani technical team came to Delhi to finalise details of the bus relationship.

India-Pakistan relations should be taken away from the tongue and returned to the heart.

MJ Akbar is Chief Editor of the Asian Age.

BYLINE

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gling, suggest some officials sombriely. As if smuggling between India and Pakistan was waiting for a train! Others find their hearts bleeding for the harassment by immigration at Wagah and Atari. The answer to that is surely to stop the harassment, rather than stop the train.

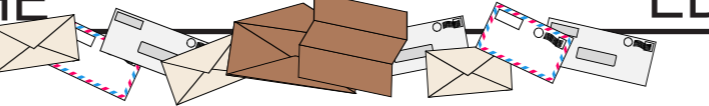
The current deadlock over flights is typical and instructive. Pakistan wants flights to resume between India and Pakistan but is hesitant about overflights across airspace. Why? Apparently someone in Islamabad believes that this would increase the level of contacts between India and Afghanistan. This is how silly a problem can become. The government of India may not have the wealth of the United States of America, but it still has enough money to buy tickets via Dubai for any number of persons it wants to send to Afghanistan. Others want to punish India for the mistake -- and it was a mistake -- in banning overflights after the attack on our Parliament.

All this is usual. Is there anything unusual in what we have been

little bit of give and take, the most difficult of problems could be resolved. Mr Advani also made the statements that are usually expected of him on this trip. He has a constituency, and he was going to address it. But the "give and take" phrase indicates that there is some flexible thinking going on. Mr Advani is doing something that may be happening in both countries. It seems to me, and it is difficult to be more definite than this, that an effort is being made to seed the mind of the people and prepare them for the start of some new turn in direction. I would be happy to be proved right, but I am prepared to be proved wrong. Experience tells me that pessimism runs longer in India-Pakistan relations than optimism.

By the end of June the leaders of India and Pakistan will have sounded out the world, and the new epicentre of the world, Washington, on what they think about their problems. They will also have heard what others think. Prime Minister Vajpayee cannot have forgotten the warmth with which his peace initia-

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR



Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

MAG-LEV train

The Communication Minister's press conference on the MAG-LEV train in Bangladesh is I think more a matter of public gimmick than anything else. I guess the Prime Minister keeps such a large Ministry so that someone like Mr. Huda could entertain her and the public with such gimmicks. Your reader Mr. Delwar has most appropriately informed your readers on the cost element with his reference to the MAG-LEV train in China. Would the Communications Minister like to enlighten on his assessment that it would cost our public one Taka per Km while it costs the Chinese US\$ for a 19 mile long journey? The Bangladesh Railway has the

potentials of being a major link in our transport system. It is sadly the most ill run of all the sectors being managed by the Government. The sight one sees when stopped at the rail crossing in Dhaka is pathetic. The railway compartments, devoid of any safety system, are not even fit for junkyards in other countries. At night, most of the compartments cannot even afford a lighting system. Given these conditions, I could not help being amused by the Minister's press conference on the issue. Either he must have found a magic wand to turn dust to gold to leap frog the railways in Bangladesh from its current primitive stage to the super-sonic one or he has chosen to gimmick to make the bored public smile. **Shahjahan Ahmed**
Dhanmandi, Dhaka

Hiala High School needs development

The Hiala High School is the only high school in the Bhati area of Habigonj. The school took off with the initiative of the local people and later during the previous government it received the necessary MPO enlistment. But still the school has no building and with the increasing number of students, they cannot be accommodated in the present tinshed schoolhouse. This was informed to the Additional Secretary of the Education Ministry and request was made for immediate sanction of fund for the construction of the school building but nothing has happened so far. We would like to request the Education Minister to arrange

necessary sanction for the construction of the school building and help thousands of students of the Bhati area continue their education. **Syed Rofiqul Hussain**
Hiala Shaheb bari, Habigonj

Eid-ul-Fitr and HSC

This is in response to Mr. Omar's letter (June 6). In our country, the authorities concerned often take some decisions that simply perplex me. Including a mandatory question on Eid-ul-Fitr in a public exam like HSC is one of them. And more frustratingly, there never seems to be any dearth people like Mr. Omar supporting these absurd decisions. In his letter Mr. Omar has raised some arguments that are nothing but fickle. According to him, majority of the citizens of our coun-

try are Muslim and the rest are of course familiar with Eid-ul-fitr. But I would like to ask him that whether he considers the rest, the 10 per cent non-Muslims as the citizens of Bangladesh. I do hereby beseech his attention on 'Madina Charter' which had been signed between our prophet (SM) and the representative of the non-Muslims. The right of non-Muslims had been preserved in that charter. But as a man of twenty-first century Omar is supporting a decision that has violated the right of the non-Muslims!

Mr. Omar also wrote that the Muslim and also Hindu, Buddhist, Christian celebrate Eid buying new dresses, visiting friends and relatives etc. But if the non-Muslims celebrate the Eid like a Muslim, then it is natural that the Muslims would

celebrate the festivals of other religion. Now if the students were asked in a public exam like SSC or HSC to write something (mandatory) on festival like Durga Puja or Christmas, how would it appear? Finally, I would request Mr. Omar not to support anything that hampers our communal harmony. **Mazedur Rahman**
Suryasen Hall, Dhaka University, Dhaka

Traffic jam and tree plantation

From the beginning of the year the city dwellers have noticed plantation of trees on different road dividers. For this plantation DCC (Dhaka City Corporation) has been spending money, labour and time.

To remove traffic jams DCC has taken many steps so far such as constructing flyovers, broadening roads and increasing awareness of people and the traffic police. But the decision to plant trees on road dividers will certainly create an obstacle in decreasing traffic jams. The City Corporation should think about the advantages and disadvantages of this venture. We do not want our roads without trees but it will be better to refrain planting trees in busy areas like Gulistan, Paltan, Motiuel, Sayadabad, Malibag, New Market and Mohakhali. And DCC can plant trees on both sides of the roads instead of on the road dividers. **Sadip Roy**
Bangladesh
Dhaka University

Library

We really do not know how to utilise a library. The students usually use the Dhaka University Central Library as a meeting place, where they can meet without many disturbances. They visit to the library, especially couples, without any intention of studying. A number student spends hours in the library simply doing nothing. So, the congenial atmosphere of the library becomes very much hampered. The University authority should look into the matter and do something about it. **Md A Mannan**
Dept. of Geography and Env.
University of Dhaka