

In Anger and Anguish

New Delhi's commitment to secularism suffered a shattering blow on Sunday when lakhs of militant Hindus razed to the ground the 430-year-old Babri Masjid at Ayodhya, an act of total madness whose impact would be felt on whole range of issues affecting India's internal stability and external relations. While one can only speculate on the future course of events, there is no need for any guessing game on how the stage was set over a period of weeks to demolish the historic mosque, with extremist Hindus openly vowing to build a temple in its place. The irony of it all is, this was happening right before the eyes of the state administration, the central government, the parliament, the media — indeed, the whole country.

So, the first question one must ask is, how did it happen or, as someone may put it cynically, why was it allowed to happen? Behind this question lies a set of suspicions which, at this stage, can neither be proved nor disproved, but which must indeed be probed by any high-level enquiry that is set up to look into the circumstances leading to the wanton demolition of a historic monument. Analysts in India who may come up with all the explanations one can do without since the damage cannot be undone would probably suggest that the disaster was brought about by a combination of a devious political game played by the BJP-led state administration, indecision of the Central Government and the poor intelligence system that failed to monitor what was going on among the hardliners of the BJP. The trouble with this theory is that it gives too much benefit of doubt to the Rao Government making it look merely an inefficient and indecisive administration, when it may have been playing a deliberate game to discredit BJP, even at the risk of seeing the mosque razed to the ground.

Now that the BJP chief, L K Advani has resigned as the Leader of the Opposition and the Hindu extremist party does stand discredited in the eyes of the world, Prime Minister Rao may just take credit for the success of his plan. Yes, indeed, what a "success" and at what cost!

If the political integrity of the Indian Prime Minister is in doubt, it is because it is hard to understand why the steps taken by the Central Government during the past 24 hours, such as the dismissal of the state administration and the dissolution of the UP assembly, were delayed until the demolition of the mosque. Why was it that the law and order in Ayodhya was left to the state police which, according to press reports, virtually left the scene when the mob climbed the domes and started destroying them? Wasn't the presence of nearly three lakh fanatics carrying sticks, shovels and stones a good enough reason to deploy troops, under a military command, making a cordon around a radius of five miles of the mosque? And now comes the unconfirmed but plausible news from none other than our columnist Kuldip Nayar in New Delhi that Rao had been warned five days earlier by his own intelligence agency that militant Hindus were bent on destroying the mosque. Yet, the Indian leader either ignored the warning and sat on it for his own reasons.

We look upon this scenario in anger and anguish. But we also have a plea for our people and the government. It is our sacred duty to maintain total communal harmony in Bangladesh, which, alas, was marred yesterday by some ugly incidents. We are living in a volatile region at a dangerous time. Let us all try to make Bangladesh an island of peace, in all respects, in a sea of turbulence.

Peace in Somalia

With the landing of 18,000 US marines on Somali soil and a batch of French force heading from Djibouti for joining them on a peace mission dubbed as 'Operation Restore Hope', the war-torn East African country can look forward to overcoming the long-drawn tragedy of famine. Indeed, the avoidable tragedy caused by drought in the first place and lack of timely international response to the challenge in the second place has been made further complicated by the factional feuds and lawlessness in the country. The fact that heavily armed brigands are resorting to looting food and other kinds of aid meant for the starving Somali people has necessitated a strong measure to be taken urgently to restore order in the country and ensure safe passage of international aid to the famine victims.

UN agencies engaged in relief works in that country have undergone harrowing experiences and even come under armed attacks. The plight of Somali refugees fleeing the country in desperation on board the ships only points to the jungle law prevailing there. The gun-toting highway gangs have so far had a field day in the absence of a strong government at the centre to hold the country together. But famine-stricken people are dying in hundreds and more are falling victims to hunger-related diseases daily.

If all this does not justify a UN intervention in the country, what else could do? But then there are other intriguing questions to consider. The UN has never undertaken a mercy mission unopposed. In Cambodia, the peace mission is UN-brokered no doubt. But it took years to bring the warring parties together to the negotiating table and work out the formula for a transitional authority before an election is held to elect a representative government to run the country. Here the UN has gone further to exercise its rights. The policing role of the UN is certainly going to be questioned because there are other candidates with no fewer troubles for similar UN action. The move will be doubly questioned because of the fact that this, like any other, has to be a US-led force. Strikingly, in Cambodia it has not been so. The UN itself, to be true, has not enough money, men and weapons to play a capable policing role.

It is exactly at this point that the US prominence comes and equally pertinently the same is questioned. After all, the US yardstick for such intervention has always varied without any plausible explanations. The problem is, that the UN cannot keep itself above criticism and its neutrality intact unless other Western powers share the responsibility in the task of maintaining peace through the UN. In Somalia it will not be easy to operate against the roaming armed gangs and bring order without co-operation from the local administration. Then there is virtually no administration. It is good to know that rival factions there have expressed their willingness to co-operate. Let us hope the mission will be successful and the UN role across the world will be equally efficient and impartial.

The Destruction of the Babri Mosque: A Threat to Secularism All Over the Region

by Shah A M S Kibria

ONCE again the whole sub-continent is in danger of getting engulfed in communal frenzy. This time it is India which has failed us; the Indian society will no doubt pay very dearly for this failure. We in Bangladesh are deeply disturbed and we must be resolute in resisting the pressures of the forces of fanaticism and reaction; we must not fall this acid test of our maturity and commitment to decent human values.

Let there be no doubt about my thoughts on this most senseless and vicious attack on the sentiments of the Muslims of the sub-continent. I cannot find words strong enough to condemn this wanton destruction of a historical mosque. This vandalism is the expression of a state of mind which cannot be characterized in any way as sane or normal. It poses a danger for India but what is even worse, it also threatens us — the neighbouring countries, especially Bangladesh — by reawakening and re-igniting the demon of communalism which we thought had been buried in 1971.

The Indian elite, including the major political parties will, no doubt, shake their wise heads and express their shock and then, in an attempt to ab-

solve themselves of any responsibility for this incident, point an accusing finger at the Bharatiya Janata Party and the irresponsible conduct of the Uttar Pradesh Government. This, I am afraid, will satisfy no one. Mere gestures are not going to be enough. Too much has happened to restore confidence simply because some one resigns or some ministers take the blame. The responsibility for this most blatant attack on the mosque rests with the entire Indian political system and certainly the Government of India must bear a lion's share of the blame for the event.

The problem was brewing for a long time. The Babri mosque was only the tip of the iceberg. It was certainly not unknown that the agitators planned to do what they have actually done. The lack of sincerity of the state government in protecting the mosque was not a secret. Apart from the legal requirement of honouring the order of the Supreme Court the political implications of the possible attack on the mosque was certainly known to the Government of India. How come, then, the mob was

permitted to demolish the mosque? One might say that the mob was absolutely determined and any attempt to stop them by force would have caused much bloodshed. My answer is: if India is under attack, will the Govt of India lower the guns in order to prevent bloodshed? In this case, the Constitution of India was under attack and yet it was not considered important enough to take the risk of bloodshed. We have been told, time and again, about the commitment of India to secularism. Despite communal tensions and periodical riots the belief that secularism remains a basic policy of the state was a hopeful factor in an otherwise bleak picture. Today this confidence stands shattered.

The Babri mosque incident can be viewed in different ways. One can look at it as an assault on the susceptibilities of the minority Muslim community of India. It can also be seen as an expression of fanaticism fuelled by political motives. To my mind, however, this is an attempt to change the character of the

state which was established under the Indian Constitution. It is clearly aimed at the destruction of secularism as a state policy which is enshrined in the Constitution. The far-sighted authors of the Constitution recognized that a pluralistic society such as India can maintain its internal peace and cohesion and a sense of nationhood only as a secular state. In the absence of such a philosophical foundation the minority communities will never feel that they are an integral part of the nation. Besides, under Pandit Nehru, the drive for modernization was an important national goal which could not be reached except in a secular state. Despite many failures the basic commitment seemed to have held until the Babri mosque episode shook the foundation.

It should surprise no one that the people of Bangladesh — a neighbouring country — are concerned and even agitated at the developments in Ayodhya. Their religious sentiments have been deeply hurt. But they are also concerned that there are many people in

the country who will not lose time in stoking the fire of communal frenzy. They have been given a chance. These elements have never accepted the concept of a secular Bangladesh. There were efforts in the past to placate them.

Have we forgotten the attempts, some blatant and some subtle, to revert to the communal politics of the past? Are we not witness to the efforts currently underway to use the religious sentiments of the people to promote the fortunes of political parties? Fortunately the Muslims of Bangladesh are basically a tolerant people and despite provocations they have resisted the temptation of embracing fanaticism and narrow communalism. Time and again it is the common people, the ordinary God-fearing people of this country who have asserted their basic human decency and secular values. We all know how the fallen dictator Ershad tried to deflect the popular movement against his autocratic regime by igniting communal friction. It is a matter of great pride for this nation that these nefarious at-

tempts have failed. This sad episode in India should be a lesson for all of us in Bangladesh. We must not rest on our laurels. We must make sure that the fine tradition that we have built up over the years as a tolerant and broad-minded people will not be compromised by the injection of communal virus in our society. No one really knows how the Government of India will proceed from now on. It has dismissed the state government. But this is no solution to the problem. The damage is done. Moreover, one may even draw a rather cynical conclusion that the Rao government has taken advantage of the crisis to remove a political thorn on its side. If it really wants to reassert India's image as a truly secular state it is likely to restore the confidence of the Muslims all over the South Asian region. It is just not a matter of destroying a mosque; it is the principle of secularism which is under attack. All those in India and other SAARC countries who value democracy and human rights and the principle of freedom of thought and expression must stand up and be firm against the forces of darkness which are trying to overwhelm us.

New Issues Dominate the Debate on Development in the Third World

THE all-embracing character of the subject matter "Economic Growth and Human Development with Equity, Security and Sustainability" of the seminar of the Society for International Development reflects the present state of mind among those who are engaged in the international development debate. The rapidly changing circumstances in the world in only the last three years have brought about new thinking on both the content and format of this debate.

Three years ago, new items with far-reaching dimensions were added to the agenda. International development issues were redefined by the end of the Cold War and the subsequent emerging new relationship between East and West, by the recognition of the need to address forcefully the degradation of the environment and by the globalization of markets. In addition, changing dimensions of world poverty required new approaches to traditional North-South issues, beyond those of development aid, commodity prices, debt relief and preferential treatment of developing countries. Since then, the already large international development agenda has broadened further.

In a very short time — indeed just three years — we have witnessed a major overhaul and indeed, the demise of economic systems in efforts turning them from command into market-oriented economies; at the same time, authoritarian political systems were turned towards democracy. The significance of these two processes — economic and political — has been far-reaching in terms of both their pace and their effects. Expectations as to their outcome had been raised and indeed were high. Yet, on the road to market-orientation and democracy in the former Soviet Union unexpected problems popped up, and the very existence of the states within which these new market systems had to function, was challenged. This process of weakening of nation states was not a result of the growing global interdependence of national economies that took place during the last decades. It was a new phenomenon and the result of developments related to the liberalization of markets and of political systems both from without and from within.

What will be our policy responses to address alleviation of poverty of almost half a billion men and women in the SAARC countries alone? The awareness of uncertainties should not hamper our perseverance.

Since these spectacular events almost three years have passed and these events have already had a profound influence on the shaping of the development agenda for the 1990s. While it seems too early to define the ultimate character of this last decade in the 20th century, already this decade — after the last decade of the 1980s — is being identified as a decade of transition. There is little doubt that in terms of development outlook we are in a transition from authoritarianism to economic and political democracy; that we are in a transition from ecological laissez-faire to the acceptance of sustainability; and that we are in a transition from a world order designed in the mid 1940s to a new international system that will have to be designed to address the problems of the 21st century. The transitional process brings with it uncertainties; it is likely that these uncertainties will govern our perspectives for some time to come.

Yet it would in my view be short-sighted to let them frustrate the need for vision, however clouded the international climate for development may be. We may and, as a matter of fact, will, have to adjust our thinking over time. But the fact remains that there is an urgent need for policy makers throughout the world — in the North and in the South — to adjust creatively their policies to these new parameters. We must not allow uncertainties to result in immobility of our policies. This holds true for policy making at the international level (e.g. the United Nations), at the regional level (e.g. SAARC, European Community, ASEAN, or NAFTA) and at our national levels as well. We should be actively seeking new opportunities for peaceful change to define new policies aiming at addressing coherently the problems related to worldwide poverty, trade and finance, environment, democratization, and human rights and to forge the instruments for their effective implementation. We should be actively engaged in setting out our path for development in the next ten years.

What will the world — or for that matter Bangladesh or the Netherlands — look like in the year 2002? What can we expect from the future and how do we get there, in terms of policies and means of effective implementation? These questions are put to policy makers in developing and developed countries. It is essential that they respond and indeed seek for answers to new questions, while realizing that we live in uncertain and transitional times.

New approaches to development centre on human development. UNDP has defined human development as the process of enlarging people's choices; to a long and healthy life, to education, to a decent standard of living, to political freedom, and to guaranteed human rights and self-respect. Development of the people, by the people and for the people. New approaches to development also require a balance between economic efficiency and social equity, between national economic development and human rights including the rights of peoples without a state. What will be our policy responses to address alleviation of poverty of almost half a billion men and women in the SAARC countries alone? The awareness of uncertainties should not hamper our perseverance.

The UN Conference on Environment and Development held in Rio de Janeiro agreed to substantial new and additional funding for sustainable development. The world was promised an augmentation of resources and the prompt and effective implementation of Agenda 21. Only six months later there is however considerable anxiety over the extent to which these commitments endorsed in Rio by Heads of State and Government will be effectively implemented. These relate to a substantial replenishment of IDA including the addition of an Earth Increment, the Global Environment Facility, and other additional resources for sustainable development. Principle 25 of the Rio Declaration reads: 'Peace, development and environmental protection are interdependent and indivisible.' This concept of comprehensive security expands the limited concept of protection from military threats to include the threats emanating from economic, social and ecological neglect. It reflects the radical global changes we have witnessed during the last decades. I have already touched upon the developments of the last three years in terms of the processes of political and economic change in the former Soviet Union; in addition, I should mention the Gulf War with its human suffering and environmental damage, the outrageous human tragedies in Somalia and former Yugoslavia. The threats of East-West confrontation and polarization seem to be disappearing, but we still seem unable to grasp the opportunities to act together in the spirit of global co-operation and harmonization. The predictability of superpower rivalry has been replaced by paralyzing processes of transition.

The Secretary General of the United Nations in his report to the Security Council following the Council's Summit Meeting stressed that in the pursuit of peace our aim must be to address the deepest causes of conflict: economic despair, social injustice and political oppression. To the concepts of 'preventive diplomacy', 'peace-making' and 'peace-keeping' he added the concept of post-conflict 'peace-building'. In 'peace-keeping' processes 'civilian political officers, human rights monitors, electoral officials, refugee and humanitarian aid specialists and police play as central a role as the military'. 'Peace-building' was added because 'construction of a new environment should be viewed as the counterpart of preventive diplomacy, which seeks to avoid the breakdown of peaceful conditions'. Preventive diplomacy is to avoid a crisis; post-conflict peace-building is to prevent a recurrence.

The concept of comprehensive security calls for enlarging the scope of activities of the Security Council, so as to include peace-keeping and peace-building. Peace is more than the absence of war, it forms a precondition for 'sustainable development'.

OPINION

CNN Coverage: Some Reflections

by A M A'abid

The CNN is for the Americans and of the Americans. When CNN sprouted into CNN International, the global coverage meant 90 percent USA, and 10 percent comprising the rest of the world (according to the philosophical American definition of the world). Hence this opportunity to get in a few words edgewise.

The CNN International is now experimentally being relayed in Bangladesh for a few hours daily for a limited period, obviously as a preview, so that the viewers could form some idea about the voice from space broadcast worldwide. Since feedback has not been invited, this space is being used to make some irrelevant observations — irrelevant because what is relevant is not clearly defined in the North-South dialogues, so many of which fail (we cannot relate, as the Americans say).

CNN is the pioneer is a new type of global service available to the television viewers in any country which is able to hitch a connection, not to a star, but to a communication satellite in the public domain. Very good, and all the credit to CNN for bringing the whole world to the humble drawing room.

Let us enter the woods, and examine the format of the programme. Is the 'International' format friendly to the viewers in the developing countries? No, according to this viewer.

Although the programmes have been planned for widely varying groups of viewers, in diverse countries, at different times of the 24 hours, the commercial aspect, namely the advertisements, play a dominant role, from the point of view of the service providers, namely, CNN. The reason is well understood, as it is not possible to provide top grade service without the financial viability; otherwise the service would be too prohibitive for the global village viewers.

The recent press report on the observations of the local CNN agent leaves many questions unanswered. What the CNN head office would do with feedbacks from the viewers?

Can it, or will it, bring about modifications in the format of the different presentations, to allow flexibility to the maximum number of viewers within the technical limitations under which the CNN has to work at present?

One of the nastiest aspects of modern news casting is the insertion of commercials within the news bulletin. This nuisance has become a universal practice, to earn more money. It is the bread and butter of the business (the ads, including the unwanted insertions at the wrong time, from the viewers' point of view).

Ads appearing prior to a bulletin also come thick and fast. Since this is anticipated, a viewer can get away from the screen to attend to some urgent or personal errand before settling down for the news bulletin. Dodging the ads (by the viewers) is becoming an art, and in this civil battle, the broadcasters are one step ahead, as they are not only more resourceful, but have more resources and expertise to convince the public that they were getting more than they were prepared to pay for the service.

How to get around this cat and mouse game? Some gadgets are available in the market which mute the commercials on the screen (as American motorists can have early warning signal to detect the radar traps before prosecution).

Millions view CNN in the developing countries (two-thirds of the world population), and the number is increasing by millions every year. By 1999 this figure might exceed that of the viewers in the developed countries. How far is CNN sincerely prepared for this new class of viewers? There is another important statistic which cannot be ignored: the world's fastest developing region is the Asia-Pacific. In the so-called 'International' service, what is the percentage of coverage from this region?

The problem is in the deli-

tion of news — the hot news and the soft news. 'Development' is soft news to the West, and 'hot' news is scarce in the DCs.

CNN policy makers have to establish a clear dialogue with the viewers outside the USA. Here are some areas:

— The 'International' service to be revamped — not the Domestic US stuff with added trimmings. Cut out the US details and change the core, with no preferential treatment for news from the USA. Compare with the BBC world service and compete. The test is: the foreign viewers would find it difficult to guess that the service originates from the USA or London. Insert some clips from the developing countries. Separate News from the USA may be made available for interested international viewers.

— Introduce a new bulletin, News from the developing countries, during local peak hours, which is GMT 1200-1700 for Asia, for example; and repeat it twice daily. Forget about hard and soft news. Give what the viewers want.

— Introduce a 10-minute 'Focus' slot, one DC per day, for the US domestic audience, as well as for the rest of the world. With about 150 developing countries, it would keep CNN busy for 5 months, as well as the super power citizens.

— Have an Asian born and bred advisor in the London office; to be followed by the African counterpart (S America is already covered).

— do not allow a vacuum in the coverage of the second largest block in the world, the Muslim block. Since the block covers half the world, the interest would be universal. The chances are one percent that these suggestions would be seriously considered. Why? Narcissism. It does not matter if all the suggestions are thrown away. Why this analysis? For a better image of the CNN outside the USA.

The writer is the former Technical Director of the Kuala Lumpur-based Asia Pacific Broadcasting Union (APBU).

To the Editor...

Trees and 'Aei Shob Din Ratri'

Sir, Playwright Humayun Ahmed certainly means well by exhorting tree planting and protection in his latest playlet on BTV. But he has got his facts all wrong! The portrayal of the small timber trader, (Sadik Ali) is derogatory while showing poor villagers cutting down and selling their trees indiscriminately is a stab-in-the-back to the lakhs of village foresters who have been contributing over 80% of the nation's timber and firewood. They out-produce on 6 1/2 lakhs acres (by over 10%) the productivity of State Forests spread over 54 lakh acres (i.e. by a ratio of 10:1). The Chief Conservator of Forests, himself, is the source of these astounding facts and figures! (BSAS Seminar).

The play could have depicted the true picture which is a common knowledge. The villagers are forced to sell their trees cheaply, because the Sadik Ali of our villages have to pay heavily down the

line at numerous 'check-posts' before they reach the urban market. The villagers, themselves, cannot do so because of the Forest Act 1927 and its dozens of laws, regulations etc. including total compliance of forms A, B, C, D, E & F which can take years to complete.

Moreover, our poor, illiterate villagers are much too canny to cut down healthy/producing trees; only those mature or the decrepit, damaged, diseased or uprooted are felled, but always they are replaced because they know how profitable they are.

It is true that trees provide food and fuel, shade, timber and oxygen; but, in Bangladesh, they also enable high-rise and palatial buildings to be owned by the very people whose sacred duty it is to plant and protect our forests. The desertification of North Bengal, the degeneration of the Sunderbans and the degradation of the barren hills of Chittagong Division and Madhupur are all silent witnesses to the depredations and

greed of our so-called 'forest protectors.'

A person who has never planted a tree does not have the right to cut one down. Correct. But does this restriction, for example apply also to one who has planted 70,000 and now finds himself barred from enjoying, legally, the fruits of over 12 years' hard work by the strict application of useless and outmoded laws, which do not in any way hinder the illegal activities of poachers, who can easily obtain an 'Open Sesame' by allegedly a lump-sum payment to the right people?

If we are to save our trees, we must think with our HEADS not our HEARTS. Profitability is the best motivation and it is this aspect of agro-forestry in the private sector, which is required to be popularised. Not the pointing of accusing fingers at the wrong people!

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