

## Redress this National Wound

The destruction of the Babri Mosque at Ayodhya angered not only Muslims, but also enlightened people of all religions, not only in Bangladesh but right across the world, particularly India.

The question in Bangladesh was whether we would be able to rise above the feelings of anger, and see the incident as a direct challenge by a barbaric brand of communalism, to democratic, progressive and secular values that are the lynchpin of modern civilised societies. By and large, Bangladesh can feel satisfied at the absence of bloodshed here in the wake of the Ayodhya incident. Unfortunately however, that is far from the full story.

In many districts, particularly in the south of the country, hundreds of Hindu temples and smaller places of worship have been burnt or demolished by crowds as criminally-intent as communalists everywhere. Thousands of homes in villages where most inhabitants happened to be followers of the Hindu religion, were destroyed, creating a sense of terror not seen here since 1971.

What is most unfortunate is that not only were laws of the land, including the anti-terror Act, not applied to prevent this transparently communal violence, the incidences of such barbaric acts have gone virtually unacknowledged by the government. In her Victory Day speech over state-owned television and radio, Prime Minister Khaleda Zia rightly reiterated the demand to have the Babri Mosque rebuilt by the Indian government. Yet she failed to mention the acts of desecration committed in Bangladesh against Hindu temples by our own fanatics. Following on from that, she failed to express any sympathy for those thousands of citizens of her country who were made homeless for no other reason than that they adhered to a different religion. The men and women victimised were Bangladeshis, the temples and homes destroyed were prayed at and lived in by people of this country, and yet there was nothing or no one to protect them. These events of the past two weeks have been a national shame of unprecedented magnitude. A concerted national effort, led by the government is, therefore, needed to restore confidence of non-Muslim citizens and reestablish rule of law.

The government should now come forward to acknowledge and publish fully the extent of the mayhem caused, and order a judicial inquiry into the events to identify the failures that allowed such things to happen and bring the culprits to book. To begin with, however, there should be a clear-cut announcement from the government that all temples destroyed or damaged would be rebuilt, and that families who have lost homes would be adequately compensated. There has to be a recognition of the fact that communal forces, lurking just beneath the surface of our democratic veneer, have thrown a challenge to the existence of people belonging to other religions. It is the duty of the state, including political parties and socio-cultural organisations across the spectrum, to stand by them. Society has to be seen to be doing so, and not merely heard at public rallies or seminars. By the same token, prominent personalities such as Maj. Gen. C R Dutta BU should take greater care when making public utterances and not throw wild accusations. They should understand that such accusations only provide further ammunition in the hands of the communal forces and help to create divisions along confessional lines. The effort to make Bangladesh a harmonious, democratic and progressive society has to come from all.

## Bus Hold-up at Malibagh

Armed dacoity on long-haul night coaches are a commonplace. Its frequency has, however, gone up recently warranting serious concern. As late as on Saturday dacoits killed the helper and stabbed three others including the driver in a Barisal-bound night bus. Not a day passes without buses being attacked, their passengers beaten up, stabbed and killed, or buses themselves meeting up with accidents resulting in multiple deaths. We have time and again pointed out that on the roads lay a true test of governance — a test more reliable than the polls. But the government continues with its impervious ways. No one has, on behalf of the government and from whatever level, has so far as much as recognised these two problems that ride in tandem on our highways — dacoity and death caused by 'accident'.

On Saturday there was a lesson for the government — if only they care to take it and learn. A lesson in how far such neglect and indifference can go. In Dhaka City, a minibus was held up by a gang of young men and the passengers waylaid. It was mid-day — exactly 12-45 and the place was the road in front of a supermarket in Malibagh. The culprits stabbed a passenger and damaged the bus. This is far more difficult to take than the mugging that occurred in the crowded Science Laboratory area in early evening. The Malibagh hold-up has hit the limits. What more will the police and their bosses will need to jolt them out of inertia?

The police have a strange way about crimes. They are helpless in cases where the culprits allegedly do not come to them for working out some arrangement. The highway gangs evidently do not need the police to protect them. And if police indeed want to show some initiative, ludicrous results can follow. From Chakoria to Cox's Bazar via Ramu police arranged a regular patrol to curb the bus-dacoity rampant on that stretch. Well-done. But after dusk no buses ply there even for short distances. Why? Because there is no patrolling after dusk and police have advised the bus operators not to try that length of Chittagong-Cox's Bazar road after dusk.

We have been crying hoarse demanding regular patrolling of the highways. If the logistics for such is not exactly within the capacity of the police at the moment, they should say it and brief the press as to how they propose to come to grips with the double-edged road problem of dacoity and accident.

If the administration hasn't been scandalised by the Malibagh bus hold-up and shocked into effective action — one will justifiably be expecting more of such crimes to be on the card for the entertainment of the city's bus riders.

The authority's utter failure to exile the smoking vehicles from city roads has already made an unflattering measure of their capability to rule. Must they opt for damaging additions to that through inviting attacks on city buses — by sheer inaction?

# Two Asian Leaders Debate over Prerequisites for Economic Development

If democracies in Asia, old and new, take too long in showing results in the field of economic development, someone somewhere will start talking about the need for a strong, disciplined and even a mildly authoritarian system to stimulate progress in Third World nations.

Herein lies a challenge facing Bangladesh and, indeed, several other countries like the Philippines, Pakistan, Nepal and even a giant like India.

In this respect, one signal came last month from a conference of the Philippine Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Manila, which was addressed, among others, by Singapore's Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew and the Philippine President Fidel Ramos.

In fact, the discussion at the meeting turned out to be debate in which a lone voice in favour of 'more discipline than democracy' as the prerequisite for development was raised by the visiting Singapore leader. As expected, the position taken by Lee came under sharp attack from local participants, including Ramos, who cannot but easily forget the devastating years of the Marcos dictatorship, notwithstanding their disappointment with the six-year democratic rule by President Corason Aquino.

It was certainly an interesting line-up, with the Cambridge educated, highly sophisticated and articulate Lee Kuan Yew taking up the case, with vigour and conviction, for his oft-repeated theory that what a country needs is more discipline than democracy. As the *Far Eastern Economic Review* puts it, quoting the Singapore leader, 'the exuberance of democracy leads to disorderly conditions which are inimical to development.'

In a remarkable reversal of positions, it is the West Point-trained Filipino General, Fidel Ramos who emerges as a strong advocate of democracy in the Philippines. I am tempted to quote him extensively, again from a report of the *Review*, because what he says applies to Bangladesh, word for word, on the challenges facing both his country and ours.

Says Ramos: 'Surely, what he (Lee) means in the Philippine context is greater discipline for all Filipinos. Surely what he means is greater discipline in politics and less of the politics of patronage. Surely what he means is greater discipline in business, greater discipline in paying our taxes, greater discipline in the use of public funds, greater discipline in government itself, which means less — is not negligible — graft and

corruption, greater discipline in our relations with each other as members of Filipino society. Which means less bickering, less factionalism... and more of the great and treasured Filipino values that carried this nation to independence.'

I, for one, find this statement both inspiring and thought-provoking without being rhetorical, which is aimed at the President's own administration as much as the people at large. I cannot help wondering when we might hear something like this — honest, down-to-earth and non-partisan — from one of our own national leaders.

AT HOME AND ABROAD  
S. M. ALI



Lee Kuan Yew



Fidel Ramos

Courtesy: FEER

Finally, the defence of democracy by Ramos, a man with a strong military background, is much stronger than anything we have heard from any of our veteran politicians in Bangladesh. Says the Philippine President: 'Our hard-earned political achievements are in every way part and parcel of the national promise that we enjoy today. Because, without them, without democracy, we cannot truly win development. And we should not rush to substitute for our democratic processes the discipline of command. Democracy evokes from citizens a discipline of its own — the better for being voluntary and not imposed from above.'

By the way Ramos has defended the demo-

cratic system, but with due emphasis on discipline, he has certainly narrowed the gap between his position and that of the Singapore leader. No matter how Lee has run his city republic where, as everyone knows, phenomenal economic progress has been achieved at considerable cost in the field of political liberties and press freedom he does not use the forum in Manila to make a case for authoritarianism. It is not that he is too clever to take such an unpopular line at the birth place of the People's Power. He probably knows that authoritarianism that we

had seen in the Philippines, South Korea, Pakistan (which the Singapore leader recently visited) and Bangladesh only produced massive discontent which, at the start, was driven underground, instead of stimulating lasting economic well-being for the common people.

Apart from pleading for discipline, Lee has advised Filipinos how they should make their system work in order to stimulate development. On a number of points, the Singapore leader deserves to be quoted, again from the report in the *Review*. After all, much of what Lee says applies to Bangladesh as well.

Says Lee: 'The ultimate test of the value of a political system is whether it helps that society to establish conditions which improve the standard of living for the majority of its people, plus enabling maximum personal freedoms compatible with the freedom of others in the society...'

'I knew Filipino politics in the (pre-martial law) Marcos era as rumbustious. Politicians revolved in democracy and its freedoms — (the) freedom of speech, freedom of the press and for those in office, the freedom to wheel and deal. It was politics enjoyed for its own sake...'

'If the Ramos administration can make ordinary Filipinos understand that politics is not simply elections with singing, but it is about their lives, jobs and wages, homes, schools and hospitals, the situation can change dramatically...'

'When ordinary Filipinos know that the country's stagnation and their joblessness is because

of vested interests, corrupt politics, general disorder and lack of confidence, they will then agitate in support of those who want to establish law and order and discipline, cut high tariffs and other restrictive practices in order to get investments to give them jobs.'

Finally, Lee says: 'At the end of the day, after discussion and debate, the legislature must allow the executive to take the hard decisions. And people must be prepared to work to make these hard decisions stick. Then, the world will soon change its views of prospects for the Philippines.'

Right through the whole speech, Singapore leader's overriding concern is to see that the democratic system works in the Philippines, not to run it down. However, I suspect, behind this concern lies a fear that if the Ramos presidency is unable to 'take hard decisions' and people and the government are not prepared to work to make these hard decisions stick, then the Philippines will remain what a newspaper recently called the stretcher case for a long time to come.

There is little doubt that most of the suggestions — some rather blunt and perhaps unsofltened — offered by Lee would apply to Bangladesh. But certainly not all his advice would work well in this country. For one thing, we would need a strong parliament, not necessarily a strong executive as suggested for the Philippines by the Singapore leader. However, what we would certainly find essential is an effective administration that, within its mandate, is ready to take firm, hard decisions, even unpopular ones.

Finally, as Ramos would say, no matter how many things go wrong with democracy, we must never lose faith in its inherent ability to generate popular participation in the economic agenda. If it fails to stimulate development and lets us down in other areas, the fault would lie not with the people who, in the Bangladesh or the Philippines, shed blood for the restoration of a popular accountable system, but with political parties which have virtually become the custodians of our destiny.

Unfortunately, when disillusionment sets in over the failure of political parties or of the government, it is the system as a whole which becomes the target of attack, even for demolition.

Perhaps Lee could have ended his speech in Manila with this warning. Through this column, I would have passed it on to our leaders in Bangladesh.

# Russians Won't be Bothered with Share Vouchers

Mikhail Pasternak writes from Moscow

By the narrowest of margins President Boris Yeltsin has managed to retain his powers against fierce opposition from the latest session of the Russian Congress of Peoples Deputies. His reform programme will go ahead. Just how dramatic are the changes for the Russian people as they enter another winter is described by Gemini News Service's correspondent in Russia.

PRESIDENT BORIS YELTSIN  
Scorped through

bles. By the beginning of December it was about 460 roubles.

The average salary of teachers and municipal doctors is 3-4,000 roubles, industrial workers about 8-12,000 roubles. A modest pair of shoes costs 5-6,000 roubles, popular Chinese winter suits on the street markets about 15-20,000 roubles, and one bottle of champagne 1,000 roubles.

Russians have quickly forgotten about the empty shops and endless queues of the old

days. They say that in Brezhnev's time 'there were queues but cheap bread.' Now they blame Yeltsin because 'there are goods but no money.' Only the colossal, historical inertia of the Russians saves Yeltsin from a wave of strikes.

Acting Prime Minister Yegor Gaidar, who is leading the economic reforms, launched his mass privatisation campaign on October 1 in great haste and without having worked out many important details. Privatisation cheques — vouchers with a face value of 10,000 roubles at 1989 prices — were issued. The idea was to make each Russian citizen the owner of a part of privatised plants, factories or small ventures.

But the Russians showed indifference to the scheme and only 25-35 per cent of these vouchers have been picked, although they are free (one voucher per citizen).

Many people sell their vouchers on the street markets for 4-5,000 roubles, which makes them about five per cent of their face value at 1989 prices. Neo-communists joke that this five per cent shows just how much trust people really put in the market reforms and in the Russian President.

Nevertheless 36-year-old Gaidar forged ahead and started the creation of regional state property funds and encouraged stock exchange trade in vouchers. It looked as if he felt that his young liberal government was doomed and that he was trying to push through as many reforms as possible regardless of the quality of the performance.

Some 15-20 per cent of Yeltsin supporters among the people's deputies moved over to the opposition, which explains some of the steps the President has taken in recent weeks. He accepted headline demands and suspended the withdrawal of the Russian army from the Baltic states, even using their language that he was 'defending the interests of the suffering Russian minority' in the states.

He accorded only formal Russian support for UN actions against the Serbs in the former Yugoslavia because the communists and nationalist opposition, who have formed a united organisation — the National Salvation Front (NSF) — demanded 'support for our Slavic brothers in Serbia.'

All the main NSF figures have visited Serbia to show support for President Slobodan Milosevic. In territorial disputes with the other republics

Yeltsin has begun, to take a tougher line.

Yeltsin suffered another blow when Ukraine introduced its own currency. It declared the rouble invalid and a wave of paper roubles pouring into Russia increased inflation. All attempts by Yeltsin and Gaidar to preserve a rouble zone failed.

Bodyguards in black uniform have become one of symbols of the NSF. Its main purpose is to fight the 'pro-western market betrayers,' to 'restore strong order and prices of food of 1985,' to start 'the people's trial against Gorbachev and Yeltsin, who both broke the greatest union of republics in the world.'

The NSF is not very original, simply repeating some

ideas of Lenin from 1917, like starting to form parallel structures of power. Soon after the NSF was created one of the most aggressive neo-communist organisations called Labour Moscow called for the creation of 'Interbrigade' — units to be ready to fight on the streets.

Yeltsin was forced to issue a decree prohibiting the NSF and lawyers have started to build a case against Labour Moscow leaders. Such measures are seen, however, as simply good publicity for the NSF. Russians do not much respect authority.

One of the most famous Russian proverbs, which goes back to the 14th Century, says: 'Laws are created for the common people to break.'

— GEMINI NEWS

About the Author: MIKHAIL PASTERNAK is a Russian journalist based in Moscow. He is winner of 1990 Moscow Union of Journalists award and has reported from Mongolia, Bulgaria, Croatia and the Baltic states.

## OPINION

### Housing and Settlement

To build a house and to own one is the life-time dream of a man or a woman. Housing and settlement of the people is the primary responsibility of the government. In our country, however, we always celebrate world habitation day with great enthusiasm but in the practical field our performances have been very painful. There are hundreds of thousands of people who are shelterless in our country.

From time to time, our government acquires huge plots of public land, establishes housing estates under the supervision of the District Deputy Commissioner or Executive Engineer (Building) or under the control of some development authority and allots/leases out plots of land to the members of the public with a view to encouraging them to construct their houses in a planned way and thus help solve the acute housing problem in the country.

Unfortunately, after the allotment/lease out of the land the lessee faces tremendous problems one after another. On the one hand arrangement of several lakhs of Taka for the construction of the house, the inordinate delay on the part of relevant different government authorities to provide basic civic facilities and amenities at the housing site like construction of public road, electricity, gas, water, sewerage and telephone lines and passing of building plan etc and on the other hand the term and condition of the lease agreement that the construction work of the house would have to be completed within a specified period of 2-3 years failing which the allotment/lease agreement of the land would be cancelled, make the situation worse. These give growth to large scale irregularities and

corruption and the sufferings and the agonies of the lessee know no bound.

We strongly feel that with a view to streamlining, simplifying, encouraging and helping the people construct their houses in a government/public sector land — timely, smoothly and peacefully, our democratic government may kindly consider the following suggestions:

1) The lessor (government or public sector organization) in collaboration and coordination with relevant government authorities may ensure facilities and civic amenities like construction of public road, supply of electricity, gas, water and provision of sewerage and telephone connection at the housing site within one year of the allotment/lease out/registration of the plot of land to the lessee.

2) The term and condition of the lease agreement that the construction work of the house should be completed within 2-3 years may be extended to 8 (eight) years.

3) A Housing Committee consisted of lessor's representatives and the equal number of lessees may be formed to look after and to solve the different problems and difficulties of the construction work of the houses in the housing estate.

4) The Housing Committee may help the lessees to obtain loan from any nationalised bank when the amount of loan should not exceed Taka 8 (eight) lakh per lessee.

5) A uniform rule and regulation may be framed for allotment/lease out/ hand over transfer/ registration and cancellation of the plot of land which would be applicable to all members of the public equally.

O H Kabir  
Dhaka-1203

## To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

### Profit motive

Sir, One may seem shocked at the revelation that certain brands of paracetamol syrup have been responsible for children's near-epidemic kidney disease, but there is nothing actually in it to be astonished. Such act of playing with the lives of the citizens is not new in the country. A noted short story writer, Hasan Azizul Huq once said, 'In a capitalist or capital-oriented country all activities, labour or merit, art or literature wallow on the foot of an angel — capital.' In diarrhoea times, a village farmer, leaving ploughs and cows and learning a little any how, began to inject with a fat needle and earned a lot. Seeing his 'good luck', a small earning, helpless Homeopathic practitioner turned enthusiast and broke down the needle while pushing and made a patient's condition most critical.

It is alleged that some doctors do not prescribe for even very simple patients before sending them to pathologists of 'connection', without gen-

uine causes. For more and quick profit many entrepreneurs become ferocious in other fields too.

Any way, those who adopt unfair means must be dealt with according to the law of the land, as has already been suggested by your editorial on 18 November. Paracetamol scandals must not repeat.

Kamrul Islam  
Sirajganj

### Food for thought

Sir, In this age where saving our poor old planet is becoming more and more of an issue, I have a suggestion to make. Whether this idea has already been made before is not for me to say except that I haven't come to my notice. I'm talking about extending the Nobel Prizes to include one that covers the environment issue. Many people have fought and are still fighting, often at great risks to themselves, to save our environment and thereby our planet. These people deserve much more recognition and by giving them

the limelight that naturally follows the receipt of a Nobel Prize, their work may become easier in fighting the vested interests. After all, the Nobel Peace Prize is the most famous in the world, but if we don't save the planet, then we won't have anywhere to keep the peace that we are fighting for. So, my request is that this thought gets passed on to the proper channels.

Ms Lone Thorsdal Rahman  
Chorkomlapur, Faridpur

### Parliamentarians

Sir, The members of Bangladesh Parliament will be trained by Ford Foundation — an American donor agency — for a better legislature of this former British colony. The training may be an education-of-life for many Bangladesh Parliamentarians but is mind-boggling for many citizens.

Two-level congress, in contrast to single-house Bangladesh parliament, as well as characteristic legislative procedure of USA has a great deal for this aid-recipient country to learn from, regardless of doubts and queries over the compatibility of American democratic structure with Bangladesh.

Training improves skill and efficiency that better output. Since many Bangladeshis from almost all occupations and po-

sitions have been receiving trainings offered by foreign institutes and agencies owing to development efforts of this LDC, the necessity of similar training for the state's ministers may not be ruled out.

Yet, a voter can rightly wonder why must people's representatives to the National Assembly be trained by a foreign agency and the patriots will also find reasons to be concerned about the sovereignty of the state's parliament.

M Rahman  
Zila School Road, Mymensingh

### Beauty parlours

Sir, After publication of my write-up on the plight of the country's beauty parlours, certain readers made personal communication with me appreciating the content of my letter and suggesting authorities to take drastic measures against those who are operating massage parlours under the sign board of 'beauty parlour'. They also urged the concerned authority to issue licences only for running genuine beauty parlours under certain strict terms and conditions.

M Zahidul Haque  
Asst Prof, BAC, Dhaka