# The Baily Star

Dhaka, Wednesday, June 23, 1993

## When Blessings of Water Turn into a Curse

Yesterday was only the eighth of Ashadh. And yet 90 per cent land in the districts of the Sylhet region and most areas in at least eight other districts are already under water. Almost all of Sylhet's important urban and trading points are now without a link with the rest of the country. So much so that these spots have become completely unconnected with even neighbouring administrative centres. Only yesterday 26 unions of Cox's Bazar was enveloped in the latest rush of water. In such a situation, news travels to Dhaka of a tally of 60-plus deaths in greater Sylhet alone. This figure can reasonably be taken as only a hint to the actual death and suffering of the people there and the other affected areas.

As familiar as the engulfed landmass is the state of unpreparedness on the part of the government. The flood situation is apparently not yet being treated on the national emergency basis. Is the government playing it cool with an idea of conserving its mitigating powers for some bleaker state of things? How can things be any worse for people in the Sylhet region? Or is the government weighed down by its own idea of inefficacy faced with such a gigantic challenge?

The only plausible answer to such disquieting query is that the government is letting the people take all such floods and related problems in their stride - exactly it had done in the offshore islands in the wake of the Monday April 29 elemental strike. It has so far done by way of devising a long-term scheme of management of floods and mitigation of resulting sufferings, a Flood Action Plan, - currently the most suspect thing in the land giving off in droves premonitions and misgivings.

As King Canute so convincingly demonstrated, no monarch or state power can stop the elements. A weak and poor state of the order of Bangladesh cannot, it seems, even lessen the suffering through prior knowledge and planning. And whatever the government wills to do is undermined by inefficiency and corruption at all levels of administration.

The nation takes it all. And gets the poorer for it. With each flood of this scale the river beds further silt up making subsequent visitations more frequent and inevitable. The nation keeps on sinking while the governments come and go talking of a blooming El Dorado.

Honest commitment to the cause of the nation and people could certainly yield a bunch of visionaries equipped with the scientific and economic wherewithals needed for fighting the floods and making again a friend and provider of the waters. Political tomfoolery is barring the way to the growth of such commitment and the coming of such visionaries.

If this sounds a little harsh let us remind the politicians that the biggest contributor to the floods is the drying up of our myriad rivers. Only a national consensus and united platform can scoop up something that will have the persuasive power to make India come and join us in actions giving fresh life to our rivers. A truly patriotic act can open the door to the visionaries to come from all over the subcontinent and initiate projects aimed at physically saving the sub-Himalayan Ganges-Brahmaputra basin comprising mostly but not only Bangladesh. That necessity of the most urgent priority is being so mindlessly ignored by practising politicians of the land.

The draughts and the growing desertification of Bangladesh is but the signs of this nation in high fever. And the waters of the floods the tears of a helpless state in a situation of continual decimation. Will the politicians heed?

## The Budget Debate

This is not a commentary on the budget, but on the debate that is going on in the Parliament on it. To start with, it is so boringly predictable. One side hails it, and the other says it is worth nothing. And we all know the reasons why. They all parrot the partyline. If every honourable member of the House finds it necessary or unavoidable not by the dictates of his conscience but more so by that of his party directives - to repeat the same things, then we might as well have party position paper, and not waste the valuable time of the parliament, not to mention the cost, in having a sham of a debate. Are we to understand that the ruling party finds nothing to criticize the budget for, and the opposition no point worthy of praise? How can we take what is being said by the MPs seriously, if we know that each and every one of them is saying what has been laid down for them.

Serious efforts need to be made both by the individual members, and the parties they represent, to make their parliamentary 'debates' more credible and meaningful. For this to happen, each member must first decide as to whether they will speak what they themselves think, or merely reflect the partyline. If the choice is the latter, then the solution is very simple—they should incorporate all comments into a collective party position and present to the House, as we had suggested earlier. If the choice is the former, as indeed the prestige of their elected office demands that it be, then our honourable MPs must do far more homework before speaking in the parliament than they are currently in the habit of doing. Budget is simultaneously a very important national document and a complicated one. Outside the parliament, each sector, each party, and each vested interest group will see and judge the budget from their own specific angle. But a Member of the Parliament must reflect the overall view. For them the sole criterion of speaking on any issue should be whether or not it serves the national interest. We will be naive to think that the debate will be completely free of the partyline, yet it can be made far more creative and indepth \*than it is now.

By now our MPs must have become aware that people do want a repetition, inside the House, of the rhetorics of public meetings. They want serious, well throughout and insightful views and opinions. One necessary pre-condition for such a debate to take place is the loosening the party nose around each MPs neck. An atmosphere of creative thinking and freedom to speak, what one feels, must be permitted by the political parties that now pull the controlling strings.

Is it too much for us to expect that political parties will give such freedom to their MPs? There is still enough time left in this budget session to make the debate meaningful and substantive, adding to the enhancement of the prestige and stature of both the parliament and its honourable members.

T is looking the stable af er the horse has bolted. I The government's proposed bill to separate religion from politics is rather late in the day. The communal virus has already spread into the body politics. Some parties have adopted religion as their politics. Even if they are debarred from contesting the

way out to circumvent the law. For a long time the government has been stuck with the name of parties. The Home Ministry examined the question in the past and found it difficult to define communalism. The Law Ministry came to the same conclusion; hence

elections they will find some

the matter was left at that It was agreed that the functioning mattered and not the nomenclature because an innocuous name of a party did not ensure that it would eschew communalism. However, after the demolition at Ayodhya on December 6, the Narasimha Rao government became so panicky that it rejected the earlier advice. If the courts have gone against the government, it is because legal caution has been discarded.

When the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) was banned, many rightly felt that merely banning an organisation would serve no purpose. Its frontal organisations like the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), which operates in the political field, would go about unencumbered. That is the case.

am not advocating a ban on the BJP because I feel that political parties should be fought politically, not legally or otherwise. But to believe that religion will be separated from politics or the state by banning a particular activity of a party or the party as such is naive. There are already several laws to punish those who promote feelings of hatred on religious grounds, why to clog the

Fundamentalist Parties should be Fought Politically, Not by Banning

The alternative to the politics of secularism is the politics of fear which lives at the heart of the conflict and violence provoked by religious and ethnic divisions. People of different religions, different ethnicities, different cultures, different languages must learn to live together in peace.

statute book further? In any case, those who are wanting to delink religion and politics should have clean credentials. They cannot denounce religion on one hand and use it in a round about manner on the other to gain support. Indeed, this has been the tragedy of the Congress party and its leaders for some

The constitutional amendment to extinguish the author ity of courts for fixing maintenance for a Muslim divorcee a la Shah Bano case - was meant to win over the Muslim electorate. And the opening of locks at the Babri Masjid-Ram Janmabhomi was a subsequent attempt to retrieve Hindu optnion, which had got alien ated over the constitutional amendment. It was a strange logic but that was how Rajiv Gandhi and his wizkids would decide things. He even went to the extent of having shilanyas. the foundation stone laid near the Babri Masjid, through his Man Friday Buta Singh. It was sowing wind, the result could not have been except the

whirlwind. Take the recent Soma Yagna by Chandra Swamy at Ayodhya. It was a religious card played for political advantage. His close proximity to Narasimha Rao is no secret. If there were any doubts, they were cleared from the way the UP administration, under the Centre, went about making lav ish arrangements for the yagna

and transporting sadhus of dubious reputation to Ayodhya According to official sources one state adviser P N Behal of the emergency fame was "only pre-occupied with making the yagna a success." That it flopped has only proved that the sadhus have swallowed the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP)

One may argue that Narasimha Rao had to arrange a rival show in Ayodhya because the VHP had been toding about its hold over the sadhus. But he cannot ride two horses his participation in the cente nary celebrations of the Kanchi Shankaracharya with all their denominational overtones and swearing by secularism at the same time. Nobody will object to his visits to saints, sadhus or shrines as long as they stay private. But he even uses official media - journalists are hauled free of charge in a government plane - to publicise his faith. And how is public expenditure justified on such

#### President Shankar Daya Sharma takes the cake. He is a

# Kuldip Nayar writes from New Deihi

BETWEEN THE LINES

at the same time, employing religion for fighting political battles. By stoking the fires of Hindu fundamentalism, as witnessed in the efforts of Chandra Swamy, the government cannot ensure that it will escape heat. Had Narasimha Rao collected secular forces at Ayodhya before the demolition on December 6, he would not

have fallen on his face. The fallacy in his working is that he does not see any con tradiction in using one set of religious forces to thwart an other. Even his personal tenor suffers from the same draw back. He feels no compunction in projecting on Doordarshan

devotee of the temple at Tisrupati That he offers his hair to the delty to fulfil his vow is his business. Should he take an air force plane for this purpose? And should official media, Doordarshan and AIR,

This dichotomy is reflected in the government policy. It is against the RSS, not because it has mixed religion with politics but because it has forced the Congress to come out in the open, to let the public see how the party keeps one step in the field of religion and the other in secularism. The Congress has to pick up, the gauntlet which the RSS

thrown; it is a political chall lenge which it has to fight like the national movement, going to homes, hearths and hamlets and ejecting the poison of communalism which funda mentalists among the Hindus, Muslims and the Sikhs have injected.

The Congress has lost its purpose; it has neither convic tion nor commitment to do so. Other political parties, forums and individuals should take up the cause since the very ethos of India is dependent on how we fare in this battle. Mahatma Gandhi would often say that he did not separate religion from politics but his religion was not that of rituals, temples or sadhus; it was that of values, which are common to all religions. He said : "Faith does not admit of telling. It has to be lived and then it become selfpropagation.

When a Kerala minister refused to light the lamp at a function, he was justified in saying that the custom did not go well with the norms of secularism. But when he did not object to Muslim schools observing Friday instead of Sunday as the closed day, he was guilty of following double standards, a charge which the BJP has often made. The Congress too is not unequivocal in its stand. It compromises. Its statements are con trary to its actions. Therefore, whatever it says or does in the name of secularism is suspect.

The concept of a nationstate based on a common reli gion and a common ethnicity, propagated by the RSS and its ideologues, is unrealistic. Religion and ethnicity can both be divided and sub-divided ad infinitum; numerous examples can be cited from both the Muslim and Christian worlds,

Secularism is a solution; a political system which transcends religious and ethnic divides. Secularism has suffered in India or, for that matter, in Pakistan and Bangladesh because it has been equated with irreligion and materialism. The solution is not to abandon secularism, but to persist in making tolerance and accommodation work.

The alternative to the politics of secularism is the politics of fear which lives at the heart of the conflict and violence provoked by religious and ethnic divisions. People of different religions, different ethnicities, different cultures, different languages must learn to live together in peace.

There is no alternative because terrorism, as seen in Bombay and certain other parts of India, only spreads fear, hatred and retaliation.

One way out is to develop a cooperative politics on economic development. The Marxist-Communist system attempted to do so but it degenerated into totalitarian intolerance of religion and ethnicity. But people can be encouraged by political leaders to pursue their material and spiritual development in cooperation with that of other religions and ethnicities. The RSS partwar does not seem to appreciate it because its Hindutva is exclusive and sectarian. The Congress does not have a perspective; whatever wins its election is its commitment.

## **HUMAN RIGHTS**

# Violations also Result from Western Global Domination ple proof that there is no real

HE United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), in its Human Development Report for 1992 observes that 'for the first time in human history the world is close to creating a single, unified global system'. In the last two decades or so, nations and communities all over the world have been drawn, willy-nilly, into a single web spanning a whole variety of relationships.

What has been the impact of this global system upon nations and communities, especially those which are less powerful and less prosperous? What has been its impact upon human beings and human rights everywhere?

The existing — still evolving global system has been unfair and unjust to the vast majority of the human race. Its inequities and its injustices are evident in almost every facet of international affairs.

#### The Global Economy and **Human Rights**

The global economy, for instance, is controlled and managed by a handful of elites, corporations and states located in the North. They have done everything to ensure that their interests would be protected and enhanced even if it is to the detriment of the rest of humanity. Any analysis, however cursory, of the workings of the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) which are all under the effective control of the Group of 7 (Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan and the USA) will reveal this.

This is one of the reasons why income disparities in the global economy have been growing wider and wider. These disparities are reflected in the distribution of the world's Gross National Product (GNP) over the last 30 years. Between 1960 and 1989,

As the World Conference on Human Rights is being held in Vienna, it is important to realise that human rights violations are not just perpetrated by Third World regimes. Human rights violations also result from the inequities and injustices of the present world system, evident in almost every facet of international affairs, writes Dr Chandra Muzaffar of Third World Network Features. This is his first article of a two-part series. The second part will appear tomorrow.

the countries with the richest 20% of the world population increased their share of global wealth from 70.2% to 82.7%. The countries with the poorest 20% of the world population saw their share fall from 2.3% to 1.4%. The consequences for income inequalities have been dramatic. In 1960, the top 20% received 30 times more than the bottom 20%, but by 1989 they were receiving 60 times more.

These disparities become even starker when one examines real consumption levels. 'The North, with about one fourth of the world's population, consumes 70% of the world's energy, 75% of its metals, 85% of its wood and 60% of its food.

Contrast this with the situa tion in the South. Over one bil lion people are mired in abso lute poverty. One and a half bil lion people are deprived of primary health care. About a billion adults are illiterate.

What this shows is that a huge portion of the population in the South do not enjoy the most basic economic and social rights. The global economy, with its 'capital markets transmitting more than 300 billion a day through international data networks', has meant nothing for these poor, powerless human beings who are barely able to survive. Indeed, it is this very lopsided character of the global economy which is one of the main causes of the plight of the poor not only in the South but also in the North where 'over 100 million people live below the poverty line in the

industrial market economies' - a fact that is often conveniently forgotten by the high priests of the 'free market'.

Poverty is also directly linked to the question of political rights. Poor nations are in no position to exercise their right of free expression in international fora especially if they are heavily indebted to international banks and lending agencies from the North.

The debt that nations in the South owed the IMF, a case in point, leaped from \$9.5 billion in 1980 to \$42.4 billion in 1986! This was only a part of the \$1.2 trillion that the South owed the North in 1986. Indeed, the servicing of external debts alone swallows up a huge chunk of the budget of countless countries in the South. It has been estimated that in 1988 '132 billion was bled out of these countries (in the South) in debt service."

The UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) points out that 'as many as 650,000 children die across the Third World each vear because of the debt.' And in the Philippines 'one Filipino child dies each hour as a result of the Philippines government's failure to limit debt

payment. How can one expect countries which are neck-deep in debt to articulate independent positions on global issues that impinge upon the interests of powerful nations in the North - nations which, needless to say, possess immense political and economic clout over international lending agencies and lending policies.

It is not just the debt trap that nations in the South have got into which limits their political rights and their political sovereignty. The South expects investments from the North. It wants access to markets in the North. It depends on technology transfers from the North. It employs consultants and socalled 'experts' from the

The South, in other words, has established a relationship of dependence upon the North. This, in one way or another, also impedes most countries in the South from speaking up, from dissenting - if it is going to incur the displeasure of some powerful state in the North.

### Global Politics and

#### **Human Rights**

That the South as a whole has very little political freedom at the global level is underscored by the mechanics of decision-making in the most powerful international political organ in existence today — the United Nations Security Council. Apart from the fact that only one of the five vetocarrying members is from the South (which incidentally has three-quarters of the world's population), the Security Council has, in the last two years in particular, totally sidelined the South and the interests it represents.

Of course, South members in the Council speak but their speeches count for little. It is the United States and its allies who dominate, and dictate to, the Security Council.

The recent Gulf crisis demonstrated US power over the Council — so much so that it was nicknamed the US Security Council. That power has continued unabated, as reflected in the continued imposition of Security Council sanctions upon Iraq even after it had been forced out of Kuwait. The Council's stand against Libya — the abstention of most South members on Resolution 748 notwithstanding - was yet another illustration of how subservient it had become to US and Western

Even the General Assembly which in the 1960s and 1970s was that one organ in the UN system where the South exerted some political influence, has degenerated into yet another arena for the US to flex its muscles. The overwhelming endorsement by the Assembly (most of whose members are from the South) in December 1991 of a US-sponsored motion to revoke an earlier resolution equating Zionism with racism was proof of this. A large number of Assembly members, it is alleged, were bribed and blackmailed into supporting the US motion.

If the ability of a person to vote without fear or favour is one of the most important criteria by which one judges the authenticity of the democratic process within a country, then the UN General Assembly stands condemned as an institution where there is no genuine freedom of choice. The Assembly, at this point in time, together with the Security Council, provides amdemocracy in the global system. Only the political rights of the US and its allies carry any weight or value.

#### Global Military Power and **Human Rights**

In any case, what do political rights mean - how much scope is there for autonomous political action — in a situation where devastating fire power is concentrated in the hands of one military 'super state'? The US Defence Department itself, in a document called Defence Planning Guidance, leaked to the Press by some officials in March this year, makes it abundantly clear that 'it sees a world dominated by a single superpower whose military might would deter any chal-

A high US military official has gone even further. He wants the world to be 'scared to death' of US power. If any demonstration of that power was needed, it came in the form of the Gulf war. Indeed, there are analysts who argue that this was one of the motives of the war: to show countries of the South in particular what the US could do to them if any one of them tried to challenge its dominant power in the post-Cold War period.

In a world where nations and peoples-live in fear of a military superpower, they cannot be expected to pursue their aspirations, however legitimate they may be, beyond a certain point. This must deter small nations of the South, and perhaps the North too, from seeking to develop political or economic initiatives independent of the US. How can one talk of freedom, of independence in such a world?

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ing if he had faltered anywhere

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.

#### Constitution in Communal Harmony

Sir, I refer to the article captioned "The role of the constitution in communal harmony" authored by Mr Mostafa Ameen published in your post editorial columns on 19.5.93.

His legal and constitutional approach to the correlation between political equality and secularism, though presented from a reverse angle, is understandable. But some of his views are based on lack of knowledge, if not wilful distortion, of the political history of the sub-continent. While making out a case for Hindus having a moral right to live in Pakistan and Bangladesh for their alleged role in favour of

The Role of the undivided India and Muslims having lost such right to live in Bharat due to their opting for Pakistan, he has conveniently or ignorantly forgotten to take into consideration such historical records as : (1) the Lucknow Pact signed between the Congress and the Muslim League in 1919; (2) the Bengal Pact signed between Bengal Congress represented by C R Das and the Muslim leaders of Bengal in 1923; (3) the unity proposal presented by the Muslim League in March 1927 and accepted by the All India Congress Committee in May 1927, but later rejected by it in December that year; (4) Jinnah's 14 Points presented in 1929 and its rejection by Gandhi; and (5) lastly, the Cabinet Mission plan of 1946, its acceptance by Jinnah and Muslim League in good faith and its rejection by the

Congress after making a volteface with Gandhi ultimately siding with Nehru and Patel.

An impartial analysis of the above historical-political record of the events that ultimately led to the partition of India will show that the Hindu leadership of the Congress which was also unmistakably a caste Hindu leadership, is no less responsible for opting in favour of a divided India. To present the scene as Hindus having been all for undivided India and Muslims all for Pakistan does not conform to what actually happened in history. Such distorted view of history does not also take into account the fact that eminent Congressite Muslims like Maulana Abul Kalam Azad and Khan Abdul Gaffar Khan were extremely critical of Nehru and Patel for their acceptance of the partition of India and expressed serious disappoint ment at Gandhi's having sided

with them It should also be pointed out that the 1940 Pakistan resolution did not envisage the partition of either Punjab or Bengal. Even at the very last moment on May 20, 1947, a pact was signed between Sarat Bose and Abdul Hashem to

keep Bengal undivided. The pact was torpedoed by no one else but Gandhi himself.

Historically speaking, failure to recognise that India is a multi-national, multi-lingual, multi-religion and not onecountry but multi-country subcontinent like Europe led to partition of the subcontinent. The role of the religion of the majority in state politics in all the three successor states, including so called secular Bharat, should be studied in the context of this great failure in history.

N H Mirza Uttara Model Town, Dhaka

Sir. The article captioned "The role of the constitution in communal harmony", was published in your esteemed daily on May 20 of the current year. I, as a suffering citizen of Bangladesh by birth, thank the writer Mr Mostafa Ameen, a prominent lawyer, very much and congratulate him for his justified views. After changing of the constitution by the late President Ziaur Rahman and then by autocratic President

Hussain Mohammad Ershad, no person had come forward from the majority community of this country to write an article in favour of secularism in such way. What Mr Ameen had written was very true. The Hindus of Bangladesh are still leaving their motherland for India or elsewhere because of their insecure status as citizens due to wrong policy of the previous two governments. I therefore, request the present democratically elected government to re-introduce secularism by amending the constitution, so that the minorities feel secured and live here with equal rights. Otherwise, the trend of leaving Bangladesh by the Hindus may never be stopped. And that is neither good for them nor the country itself.

M K Chaudhury Narayanganj

#### 'Eid-ul-Azha and Thoughts on Sacrifice'

Sir, It's not just that Syed Ashraf Ali (teller 13-6-93) should tend to be so arrogant when Mujibul Haque himself had asked for graceful forgiv

in his article on Eid-ul-Azha (1st June 1993). Maybe the letter writer has forgotten that even Allah refuses to be merciful unless He is called upon and people bow down to Him in praise and seek His forgiveness. We also need the blessings of other human beings in order to have peace or mercy or kindness or forgiveness if He has been angered to such an extent when one's own prayer will not help. Why else should human beings live in a society? Anyway, Syed Ashraf Ali may

please read the article of Mujibul Haque on Eld-ul-Azha again. I feel certain then he will realise it does no good trying to hurt others in order to show one's own faith or belief or honesty or sincerity or doctrine or whatever. Was not the article all about this kind of attitude? Incidentally, Mujibul Haque

is a writer whose articles and stories often are interesting and helpful when it comes to solving a family problem or a social disorder.

Dhaka

Nahtasha Kamal