

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...

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...

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...

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...

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...

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...

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...

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...

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...

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...

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 thought-out and insightful views and opinions. One necessary pre-condition for such a debate to take place is the loosening the party nose around each MP's neck...

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.

It is looking the stable after the horse has bolted. The government's proposed bill to separate religion from politics is rather late in the day...

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...

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...

When the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) was banned, many rightly felt that merely banning an organisation would serve no purpose...

I 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...

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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 clear credentials. They cannot denounce religion on one hand and use it in a roundabout manner on the other to gain support...

The constitutional amendment to extinguish the authority 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 Janmabhoomi was a subsequent attempt to retrieve Hindu opinion...

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...

The fallacy in his working is that he does not see any contradiction in using one set of religious forces to thwart another. Even his personal tenor suffers from the same drawback...

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...

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...

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...

The UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) points out that 'as many as 650,000 children die across the Third World each year 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.

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.

The Role of the 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.

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 the 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

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) line.

One may argue that Narasimha Rao had to arrange a rival show in Ayodhya because the VHP had been toying about its hold over the sadhus; But he cannot ride two horses

his participation in the centenary 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 visits?

President Shankar Dayal Sharma takes the shake. He is a

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

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 contradiction in using one set of religious forces to thwart another. Even his personal tenor suffers from the same drawback. He feels no compunction in projecting on Doordarshan

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

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 challenge which it has to fight like the national movement, going to homes, hearths and hamlets and ejecting the poison of communalism which fundamentalists among the Hindus, Muslims and the Sikhs have injected.

The Congress has lost its purpose: it has neither conviction 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 that 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 self-propagation.'

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 contrary to its actions. Therefore, whatever it says or does in the name of secularism is suspect.

The concept of a nation-state based on a common religion 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 paritwara does not seem to appreciate it because its Hinduva 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

THE 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. 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 situation in the South. Over one billion people are mired in absolute poverty. One and a half billion 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 globalised 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 year 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 so-called 'experts' from the North.

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 veto-carrying 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.

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.

Anyways, Syed Ashraf Ali may please read the article of Mujibul Haque on Eid-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.

Nahasha Kamal Dhaka

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 forgive-

M K Chaudhury Narayanganj

ing if he had faltered anywhere 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?

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