

War on Corruption

More and more people in this country, especially among the educated elite, the business sector, parliamentarians and the media, have started talking of the spread of corruption at various levels of the administration. This is a general perception which many supporters of the government tend to dismiss for what they say lack of solid evidence. Herein lies the first hurdle in the fight against corruption in Bangladesh — for that matter, in any country — when a government assumes that its very admission of the existence of corruption makes the administration itself a guilty party. True, its inability or unwillingness to deal with the situation effectively reflects its failure in governance and erosion of its accountability. In such a situation, the government would be well-advised to admit that corruption exists in the country although it may well claim, in its defence, that it is, by and large, a problem inherited from the past. Whether the administration would be also honest enough to admit that the corruption has worsened during the past one year, eating into different levels of the decision-making system, is another matter.

There are of course a few redeeming features. There is the parliamentary probe committee, set up by the Speaker of the Jatiya Sangsad (JS), Shaikh Razzak Ali to investigate into the opposition allegations of irregularities in the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation, Water Development and Flood Control. This precedent-making move opens the way for the involvement of the country's legislature in a vital area of national interest. What happens when the allegations against the ministry are either proved or disproved — a clear-cut outcome would be most welcome — remains unclear. What's important, the JS should indeed start playing a role of a watchdog in the fight against corruption, perhaps by setting up a mechanism that, in one form or another, works closely with the judiciary. The JS move closely followed the unceremonious "dismissal" from office of State Minister Nurul Huda, which immediately raised hopes for a crackdown on "irregularities", perhaps through the setting up of a high-level enquiry committee. These hopes have now been dashed. It is just possible that the so-called irregularities that Huda has been found guilty of by Prime Minister Khaleda Zia have not provided the basis for a prima facie case of corruption against the former State Minister. On the other hand, the administration may not like to open the Pandora's Box but, instead, handle the situation with its characteristic — some would say, indecisive — low-key approach. Finally, there are senior government leaders, such as Finance Minister Saifur Rahman and Planning Minister Zahiruddin Khan, who have spoken openly about corruption in the administration, without, we regret to say, offering a plan of action to fight it.

Notwithstanding these redeeming features, we are far from sure that the government of Begum Zia has launched a battle against malpractices, to use the broadest possible term that covers anything between outright kickbacks and wrong-doing in trade. If we do not hear about a plan of action to fight corruption — the ideal place to reveal such a plan would be the parliament — we are yet to be convinced that the government has developed a strong political will to deal with this evil.

Unless the government makes this political commitment, it would not know how it should proceed in fighting corruption, through what mechanism and laws. There may be a whole range of options which have been tried in this country and elsewhere, more often than not, with limited success. We can go to extremes in creating the "fear complex" among corrupt officials as has been done by the administration in Singapore, set up a Hongkong-type Independent Commission against Corruption vested with extra-judicial powers, introduce capital punishment for the worst offenders as done in China or frame new laws, within the existing judicial system, as some experts are asking for in India. It is for the government of Begum Zia to decide on any of these options — or to create its own. What is important, the administration cannot sit on the problem too long as if it does not exist. On this issue, as on so many others, it should be a race against time.

A Costly Social Lapse

Mugging — wrongly called hijacking — has become so rampant in the city that reports on such incidents hardly create any ripples on the apparently calm surface of life here, no matter how deeply disturbed it may be. The awesome ferocity and ubiquitous presence of the criminals have forced people to live in a world fraught with a fear psychosis. A report published in this newspaper the day before yesterday was no exception to the usual rule of containing all such ingredients but it can be credited with at least one more such element.

The fact that resisting a snatching bid by the mafias of Dhaka is a risk to one's own life needs no elaboration. Most people have therefore resigned to the idea of parting with whatever valuables they may have in their possession when attacked. But when the target of a gang is human being, the responses from either the victims or the people around are bound to be different. In this particular incident the gangsters were after one of the women who were going to Kamalapur Rail Station by a rickshaw to catch a train. When the criminals swooped on the rickshaw and tried to snatch away one of the women, a young man who followed them in another rickshaw risked his life and caught hold of the mafian. The attacker's accomplices then stabbed Md Badruddoza alias Liton, the young man, indiscriminately and left him prostrated with multiple injuries.

The courage Liton showed is exceptional but not quite rare. After all, the woman is supposed to be a near relation of his. In a similar incident a few years back a young man died after successfully rescuing from criminals' grips a girl, no relation of his. But one must not undermine Liton's effort to resist the criminal gang in his own limited power. What is notable however is that the incident took place on a busy road and in broad daylight when thousands of vehicles were passing by without caring to stop and help the young man in his most helpless and desperate condition.

This appears to epitomise the social psyche of our time. True, unprepared people run the risk of being wounded, even seriously, in the resistance effort. But no man can be safe when the foundation of society has crumbled under the weight of criminality. It is this mentality that should be considered the greatest of all enemies. The government and law enforcing agency can keep their jobs after the abysmal failures in their duty to ensure security only because we all have failed to collectively respond to the call of duty.

HAVE the VHP (Vishwa Hindu Parishad), RSS (Rashtriya Sevak Sangha) and the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) succeeded in derailing the secular thrust of Indian politics? Is it time to say that the secular ideology, for which India deservedly received so much praise during the past four decades, has come to an end? Have these communal forces sufficiently captured the imagination of the majority Hindu community, for us to conclude that the Indian nation, as we knew it, will never be the same again? Along with Muslim Pakistan, are we now to have a Hindu India? These, and similar questions were uppermost in my mind, as I arrived in New Delhi to participate in the global launching of UNDP's Human Development Report, 1993.

A common answer to the above question is, it is still too early to tell. In my opinion, it is also too dangerous a prospect to speculate on. We are often glib, and a bit too quick in making sweeping statements about India becoming Hindu, without sufficiently thinking as to what will become of Muslims — nearly 150 millions of them — if India really becomes a communal country.

There is of course a gale of Hindu communalism sweeping across northern India and there is no doubt in anybody's mind that India today faces the most serious and perhaps the most critical challenge to its fundamental character. What is at stake here is not only India's future but also that of the whole South Asian region. To that extent what is happening in India today is of extreme importance to both Pakistan and Bangladesh.

I have followed developments in India very carefully, and what I read and saw on the television made me sad. So it was with a heavy heart that I revisited the Indian capital almost six months after what is now popularly termed in the mainstream Indian press as "Black Sunday" (referring to 6 December '92 destruction of the 400 year old Babri mosque). It was my intention to use the visit to get a sense of the mood in Delhi, six months after the "event". My interest was a little more than usual as I was perhaps (and I am guessing here) the only journalist from Bangladesh who was present on that fateful "Black Sunday" in New Delhi (attending a Non-Aligned media conference on Right to Communicate). I was a personal witness to the shock, the anguish and the deep disappointment of many editors, journalists, intellectuals and professionals that I had met immediately after the destruction of the Babri mosque — an event, that has turned out to be the most serious challenge to the survival of modern India.

Gathering Cloud of Communalism Darkening the Indian Political Sky

by Mahfuz Anam

As we can recall, the immediate reaction to the Babri mosque destruction was Hindu-Muslim riots all over India, which resulted in more than 2,000 dead. But what came afterwards was a shock to the Indian Muslims was the way the Narasimha Rao government handled the event. It came out subsequently that the Kar Sevaks (volunteers who tore the masjid down) were specifically trained, and that expert masons were hired for the purpose. It also came out that intelligence report had it that Hindu militants had planned to tear the mosque down on 6 December. All this information was available to the government. These revelations have greatly eroded the credibility of the government, and especially of Narasimha Rao, in the public eye.

The Muslims particularly felt betrayed, generally by the Congress, and especially by the Prime Minister. His initial commitment of rebuilding the mosque at the very spot where it stood, is no longer repeated in public. In fact what appears to be of the highest priority now is maintaining the sanctity of the make-shift temple erected by the mosque demolishers. The political advice that is now reportedly being accepted by the Indian Premier, is that it would

struggle, and convinced that India's future lay in forging unity and not in inciting divisiveness, the secular forces — political, social, economic and professional — would mount a nationwide struggle to defeat the Hindu communal forces. There was a widespread belief that the India of Gandhi, Nehru, Maulana Azad and Ambedkar would definitely win over that of Thackeray, Joshi and Advani. As Khushwant Singh, perhaps the most venerated of all journalists in India today, wrote in the Hindustan Times (19 December '92) that the destruction of the

looking for the "fire" in good Indians to fight fanaticism, that Khushwant Singh wrote about. What I found was not the "offensive" but pockets of protest, desperate, fragmented and mostly ineffective. I found my journalist friends confused, despondent and disturbed, almost desperate. The past six months have brought the Hindu-Muslim question into the centre-stage of Indian politics as never before. The secular forces, instead of converging and gathering strength to tackle the fundamentalist threat, have instead become dispersed and

strength and is it they who, in all sense of the term, are on the offensive? The Indian President in his Republic Day message (26 January '93) talked about India standing at the "crossroads" of history. One path, he said, was of "understanding and mutual accommodation" leading to dignity, prosperity and happiness for all. The other was of "endless strife". From what I could see during my very short visit, and what I could gather from my talks with a cross section of people, the direction that India was taking at the "crossroads" was ominous. A hysteria of yet unfathomable magnitude appears to have gripped the minds of the majority community.

As one journalist put it to me, the Hindus of India today are "a majority community with the emotional and behavioural characteristics of a minority." It took me a while to understand the meaning of this statement. A great sense of deprivation and of being somehow sidetracked have permeated the middle class Hindu mind, the same middle class that usually acted as the bastion of democratic and modern values. Totally unfounded slogans of stopping "Muslim appeasement"; "all Muslims are Pakistani sympathizers"; "Muslims always want special status"; "Muslims are foreign invaders"; "Muslims have forcibly converted and oppressed the Hindus" and slogans to that effect have come into the common parlance in everyday conversation.

Several book stores that I visited in Caunnaught Place (a very centrally located shopping area) and in the Khan Market area (located very close to the UN offices and the Indian International Centre) are now stocked with books on how Muslims had invaded, oppressed and exploited India. The more disturbing ones among them "chronicle" how many temples and places of worship Muslims had destroyed and turned into mosques. From the display, and number of titles, it was obvious that these books are now in great demand.

The changing social and intellectual climate has also had its impact on the daily lives of the Muslims. I don't easily tell my name in a crowd if I can help it" said a Muslim student from West Bengal who has been studying music in Delhi for the last 10 years. "This I have started doing after the blasts in Bombay and Calcutta." Do you not feel a part of the local scene, having been here for ten years? "I did, and still do, in many sense, things have



Stretch the hand and the salute would become frighteningly familiar. The incoming BJP president, L K Advani (third from right), joins senior Sangh Parivar colleagues in saluting the RSS flag.

cost Congress the total Hindu vote if that temple is touched. So much so that reference to the Babri mosque is being gradually replaced by the innocuous term such as "Ayodhya structure" the "structure at Ayodhya" etc in sections of the Indian press, and in the lexicon of politicians. There was one overriding sentiment among the people I had met then, that the rise of

Babri mosque did not mean the end of India's secular pretensions, it only strengthened the resolve further. The murder of Mahatma Gandhi did not kill secularism. On the contrary it infused his spirit of religious tolerance into the whole nation. The murder of the masjid will do the same." In a statement that reflected the underlying spirit and faith of secular India, the doyen of Indian journalism

fragmented. The leadership they expected from the traditional bastion of secularism — the left parties and the Congress — have totally failed to rise up to the challenge. In fact there is widespread doubt as to whether Narasimha Rao is really as committed to the secular principle as Congress leadership traditionally was. On the contrary it is Hindu communal forces that have gathered

Bureaucracy

Beijing Changes its Tune on Rock-and-Roll

Although largely ignored by the state-controlled media, famous Chinese rock stars like Cui Jian have carved a niche in a fledgling music genre that has growing following in China today.

Cultural specialists here say Beijing is also hoping that the "new music" will soon acquire Chinese characteristics.

"Officially, rock music and rock singers are still viewed as innovative, rebellious and threatening," says Chinese cultural history specialist Geremie Barne. "But now rock music and the Chinese government live in the gray zone of cultural tolerance."

Rock performances often still go unpublicised, and their excessive promotion is frowned upon by authorities. But Chinese officials now allow rock concerts to be held quite openly, although they have a final say on the venue and audience number.

Rajiv Chandra of IPS reports from Beijing

Some bands disguise their concerts as benefit shows or private parties. There are also hotels authorised to hold musical performances in their restaurants.

Large-scale stadium performances are still banned, and most of the shows are strictly out-of-bounds to foreigners.

By permitting rock performances, Barne says the officials hope "this most feral and commercial form of Western culture will be safely assimilated in the Chinese soy sauce vat".

Indeed, some say Chinese rock music is already distinguishable from that churned out by popular Hong Kong and Taiwan stars.

Hong Kong and Taiwanese singers like Andy Lou, Jacky

Chuang and Leon Li Ming are hot sellers in China. Their popularity, says a local cultural magazine editor, lies in their skill in presenting themselves as "dreamboats".

In contrast, the songs of local rock groups are about the realities and dilemmas faced by Chinese youth. Says the editor: "Pop songs from Hong Kong and Taiwan focus on love and feelings while mainland composers care more about social problems and human virtues."

Songs of Chinese rockers like Cui Jian, for instance, have titles like 'The Last Complaint' and 'Tolerance', and have hard-hitting lyrics laced with double entendres and political overtones.

Cui's song 'Nothing to My Name' became the signature tune of the Tiananmen Square

student demonstrations four years ago. Cui was able to secure formal official permission to hold a concert again only last year.

Beijing's approximately two dozen rock bands are not allowed to play their music on the radio or on television and most local recording companies still refuse to touch their songs. The bands and singers are also required to register themselves officially.

Without the proper papers, they are not allowed to perform.

"We are in a sense underground," says a rock impresario who helps the bands get permission to give public concerts.

Authorities prefer the safer pop stars. In an unprecedented move, the government even organised a recent benefit pop concert for flood victims last month. The venue

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.

Respect for democracy

Sir, I voted for BNP during the last election because I thought this party had great respect for democracy — certainly more than Awami League whose records on this score have been very poor during their rule between 1972 and 1975. The other reason for my support for BNP was that I believed that this party was more nationalistic than any other at present in the country. On both counts however I, and like myself many others, are now having serious misgivings about BNP's intentions and actions. While we see BNP leaders including their ministers behaving just as irresponsibly as their AL counterparts, the utterings of some of the ministers are astonishingly contradictory to their declared policies.

Before the election Begum Zia was widely known and acclaimed as a leader with firm principles and rigidly "uncompromising" on issues that she considered beneficial for the country. In practice, however, we find that she has been also compromising with unproductive elements of our society, even on very many unimportant issues, seemingly forgetting that she and her party had a clear mandate to rule this country for five years without submission to any threats, particularly the filigical ones. We also see the same ridiculous practices that we had been witnessing during the Ershad regime, such as the whole lot of ministers, apparently leaving all their ministerial work behind, travelling all the way to the airport using government transport and lining up there just to say 'goodbye' to the Prime

Minister when she goes abroad. Such scenes are witnessed only in countries with autocratic governments.

Just two days after the recent Eid holidays when hundreds and thousands of people were returning to Dhaka from their country homes, the ferries on the Dhaka-Mawa road were withheld for three long hours just because Prof. Badruddoza Chowdhury was going to use them before anyone else. The ferries were stopped at 7 am and he did not turn up to use them until well after 10 am, causing enormous public inconvenience and hardship in this hot climate. What kind of democracy is this where for a Deputy Leader of the House a whole mass of people — men, women and children — have to undergo such sufferings? We see that General Ershad and the erstwhile first lady have been sentenced to seven years imprisonment for "abuse of power". It is precisely due to this kind of things that people like me switched support from AL to BNP. If the government in power expects people to show respect for democracy, it should set an example first.

Coming now to the other aspect of the BNP performance

i.e. its nationalistic stance, the recent visit of the Communication Minister, Col Oll Ahmed, Bir Bikram, to our neighbouring country and the descriptions of his deliberations in India (including his astonishing disclosure about Narasimha Rao's "surprise" at non-solution of the Farakka problem) are creating a strong impression in the public mind that vis-a-vis India BNP Government's policy is failing the public expectation of this country. The comments about the Jamaat MPs and Jamaat are also anything but complimentary or respectful to democratic practices.

Ehsanur Rahman, Mohammadpur, Dhaka

Sewerage charge of WASA

Sir, Dhaka WASA has laid sewerage line in New DOHS Mohakhali. But this line has not been connected to the main sewerage line and, as a result, the new line has not been commissioned. In spite of this WASA has started billing the owners of the houses. This is simply unreasonable and unlawful.

While WASA is not in a position to collect its lawful dues like waterbill due to alleged crockery and corruption of its staff, officers and management and its system loss is as high as 50%, its attempt to charge unlawful sewerage tax from new DOHS area is clearly an act of atrocity and abuse of monopoly.

I therefore urge the relevant ministry to kindly inquire into the matter and restrain WASA from submitting unlawful sewerage bill to the property owners of new DOHS area.

Zaidi Ahmed Jafri, Dhaka Cantonment

Save our environment

Sir, It appears that there is lack of understanding and coordination of work among our Ministry of Commerce, Ministry of Industries, Ministry of Information and Ministry of Forest and Environment. BCIC under Ministry of Industries has proudly announced that it has exported 1339 MT newsprint and 2048 MT paper during eleven months of 1992-93 and during the corresponding period of 1991-92 it exported 1000 MT

changed a lot since the destruction of Babri mosque. There is a new and very uncomfortable sense of "us" and "them" between Hindus and Muslims. What about the friends you study with. Do you feel any change of attitude in them? Not at all. For my student friends, this is nothing but a game played by politicians to get to power. We are just as friends as we were before. But the outside environment has changed a lot. What I really miss is travelling, just getting up and going to any place at any time. I do not venture out of Delhi unless the destination is fixed and the travel is arranged by people well known to me or my friends.

Forty-five years into independence, the heart of ancient and medieval India that was Delhi, the stunningly beautiful capital of the Moghul Empire that was Delhi, the glittering colonial power centre that was Delhi, the very heart of independent and regenerative India that was Delhi, has, unfortunately, and within a very short time, also become a very divided and suspicious Delhi. Like every other Third World capital and megapolis, Delhi has always been divided. There was a tree-lined, wide boulevard, immaculately clean Delhi. Compared to it there was the historically rich, overcrowded, narrow and dirty and dangerous Delhi. There was the poor Delhi and the push. But now there are new and bitter divides. They are the Hindu Delhi, the Muslim Delhi, the Sikh Delhi and the Tamil Delhi. There is also the so called illegal immigrants' Delhi.

The Delhi of concerts and festivals is still there (though the season is winter and not the hot and dry summer), but the attendance is thin and they usually finish early. From late private parties, guests try to return in groups and single women request the hosts to give them a ride home. This is post-Babri Delhi.

As the cloud of communalism increasingly darkens the secular and democratic Indian sky, there is a lot of nostalgia for the bygone days of visionary and powerful leadership, of the days of independence struggle. There is particular attraction for Nehru who was the architect of modern India. Democratic government, secular Constitution and a socialist mooring to the economy, are among the many legacies of Nehru. The popular finance minister Monmohan Singh has dealt a death blow to the Nehruvian economy. The BJP is threatening India's secular character, and appears — at least at this stage — to be winning. If that be so, then how long before democracy falls by the wayside?

(Tomorrow: Interview with Janata Dal MP, M Shahabuddin)

was the Great Hall of the People, usually the site of meetings of the Communist Party.

Attended by senior party members, the show featured local pop singers and their counterparts from Hong Kong and Taiwan. It was even telecast for the Chinese public.

The only way Chinese rockers such as Cui and the popular group Tang Dynasty can get on television is through the music channel MTV Asia, beamed regionwide by Hong Kong-based STAR TV network.

The mainland rockers have even gained considerable following abroad. The debut album of Tang Dynasty, for example, has already sold some 70,000 copies in Taiwan.

But at home, the long-haired and often black leather-clad musicians still live an uneasy existence in a culture dictated by the unpredictable winds of Chinese politics.

Sung Cui to a screaming audience during a rare stage appearance in Beijing recently: "It's hard for me to live, it's hard for me to go on honestly,"

newsprint and 3039 MT paper. Well done? Are we not striking axe on our own legs?

On the one hand we are propagating and spending crores of Taka on afforestation and on the other hand we are engaged in deforestation. We would be grateful if our Ministry of Industries and Ministry of Forest and Environment kindly let us know as to how many trees are required to be cut down or how many tons of wood are needed to produce a ton of newsprint or paper.

Why and what for are we exporting newsprint and paper?

We may produce newsprint and paper to meet our domestic requirement only. If necessary, we may import these two items but should not export newsprint and paper at the cost of our environment.

Would our Ministry of Industries, Ministry of Commerce, Ministry of Information and Ministry of Forest and Environment kindly come out with a joint declaration to save our green trees and environment? Better late than never.

O H Kabir, Dhaka-1203