

They had a Dream ... and a Belief ...

There is a growing demand for purposive and principled politics. But the high priests of political parties have a set formula: the results are important not how you get them.

What if Talks Fail?

We do not accept the opposition's position that there is nothing new in the BNP offer. We, in the same breath, would readily agree that what BNP has offered falls far short of what would make it acceptable to the opposition.

We need a change of position from both sides. BNP should not consider their offer as the last one, but instead, as the first one. The Opposition should also take the BNP position as the first one.

A critical issue is that of the position and role of the present PM during the election period. The Opposition stance seems to be that 'anything but her' and the ruling party's stance is 'everything but her'.

POLITICAL parties are often caught napping. It is no different in India. How removed from realities are the country's two leading political formations, the Congress (I) and the Bharatiya Janata Party, was apparent from their annual sessions held earlier in June.

The common man is afflicted with hardships of daily living. He has no reliable income, no worthwhile shelter, no dependable water, no assured electricity and no trustworthy protector.

Talking to the people about nuclear option, political mobilisation and the 1996 election strategy, the clichés the two parties mouthed at their sessions, was evading the real issue. They are a deprived lot.

Take the Congress session. In the past, there was at least some talk of what tormented the people, about their basic necessities. A Congress president would admit that the millions, who demanded food, shelter and jobs, were pressing for

action. Instead, PV Narasimha Rao, who is happy to have consolidated his position at the expense of the party, gave a sermon on economic liberalisation at the expense of the party, gave a sermon on economic liberalisation and foreign investment, arguing that the two would eradicate poverty. If he could have only spent out how.

Strangely, none in the Congress refers to values any more. How could they do it when nearly all Congress leaders — the central or the state — live beyond their means? Increasingly, there are allegations how a minister or his relation has amassed wealth by playing havoc with the administration. Even the highest in the land is not considered above board.

That the sugar scandal, which swelled some coffers by nearly Rs. 400 crores, did not even come up for an indirect mention at the party session was understandable. The Congress has lost sensitivity on such matters. It can be seen from the ease with which it has taken in stride the Rs. 9,000 crore bank scam, the Bofors gun kickbacks and the allegation on oath by Harshad Mehta, a broker, that he gave the prime minister Rs. 1 crore in a suitcase.

The Congress is entirely different from the days gone by. Now opulence is its trait. For

instance, there was not even a pretence of austerity, neither in decoration nor in the array of food served at the session. Electricity was diverted from many parts of Delhi, which sizzled in heat, to make Talkatora Stadium, the venue of the session, comfortably cool. A party, which underwent sacrifices and sufferings in the struggle for independence, was at the stadium a sad spectacle with members jostling one another for eatables

and free gifts. The Bhartiya Janata Party session was also well provided, but it was a listless show. The demolition of the Babri masjid had epitomized its programme. With the job done, the party is at a loss to say or do anything. It realises that the mandir issue does not sell any more; the by-elections re-emphasised it. But it is yet to discover what it should peddle to attract attention.

Party chief L K Advani said that the Hindutva was a matter of faith with the BJP, not a mere poll plank. He explained that the concept was nothing more than the essence of Indian

identity. Then why not say 'Hindutva', deleting the letter 'u'. Hind means India. The party knows that its entire structure is built on Hindu chauvinism. Were it to eschew the appeal in the name of religion, it would probably collapse.

The party's stand on swadeshi is comical. When the speakers at the session were extolling its virtues, the delegates were delighting themselves with Coca-Cola. other backward classes" (per Mandal Commission's recommendations). The party seems to have lost its raison d'être. V P Singh, its leader, is both an asset and a liability.

Chandrasekhar's Samajwadi (Janata) Party was born in sin and hence it never had any future. The government he ran for four months was so corrupt that all the earlier administrations put together did not make that much money. The communists, with decades of knee-jerk reaction to Marxists' slogans, have not come yet to terms with the post-cold war world. They never had a wide following; their ideological confusion has depleted their ranks still further.

Some other formation should come into the field. Probably it will one day. Till then the Indian sky is going to be cast with so many uncertainties and imponderables that some anti-people arrangement may come to be considered an alternative. Already in the name of 'security' and 'foreign elements' such repressive laws have been accepted as has made the government tamper authoritarian. On the other hand, there is no end to manipulation of public discontent for personal or party's following.

mand for purposive and principled politics. But the high priests of political parties have a set formula: the results are important not how you get them.

The prevailing political system has got into a rut and has ceased to perform and to elicit public support. The people go over the exercise of elections and even experiment with different parties. But they have very little hope. They are exasperated; they see no change coming. Every time they fall a rung below, they try to stabilise themselves at that level. But it has been a futile effort.

They had a dream — the dream that independence meant not only political freedom but freedom from hunger and want. They had a naive belief that the problem of underdevelopment and poverty would find an easy solution. It was a strange mixture of exuberance, self-confidence and over-expectation. But over the years that dream has got shattered. The Congress is to blame the most because it has ruled for more than four decades. But others, who came to the helm of affairs either at the Centre or in the states, were no better. When it came to the common man, he was pushed, pulled and punished in the same manner.

Who and what will revive the drooping spirits is difficult to say. How long will this distance between the people and political parties last is hard to guess. However, one thing is certain: that no amount of paid advertisements in newspapers can bring back the old dream. The disillusionment is too deep.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

Neither the Congress nor the BJP has anything new to offer. That may be the reason why the Congress is reportedly falling back on the dynasty. Sonia Gandhi was a special invitee and Priyanka Gandhi, great grand daughter of Nehru, may sometime be given a key position in the party. As for the BJP, it is trying to rope in as many former bureaucrats, military top brass and sportspersons. These sickening tactics cannot rekindle faith. But then whom do the people turn to?

The Janata Dal could have been a third force. But it has been on the death-bed after giving birth to 'reservations for

international symposium and protest was held in the Italian town of Brescia, home of mines-exporter Valsella. Valsella, 50 per cent owned by Italian car giant FIAT, recently sold manufacturing licences to Singapore, thus limiting its losses in the event of either an Italian or international export ban.

The question now is whether governments have the political will to enact measures that will prevent the continued circumvention of the anti-mines Protocol.

Change of Tactics against 'Mankind's Most Toxic Pollution'

Peter Moszynski writes from Brescia, Italy

As officials prepare for an international conference to review curbs on the use of anti-personnel mines, campaigners are emphasising street-level protest rather than behind-the-scenes lobbying. They fear that without outside pressure, governments will not stand up to the power of vested interests.

DESPITE increasing international concern over the use of anti-personnel mines — "perhaps the most toxic and widespread pollution facing mankind" — campaigners are worried that United Nations action will not be tough enough to tackle the problem.

Rae McGrath, director of The London-based Mine Advisory Group, says that "the campaign against landmines is going increasingly to focus its attention on people in the street" because he believes that official-level negotiations are unlikely to yield results.

Next year's conference to review the 1980 Mines Convention, he warns, might end up making the laws weaker rather than stronger: "As usual, everyone is guarding their own interests. The process doesn't really deserve to be taken seriously."

The flaw in the process, he argues, is that some governments are claiming that only a partial ban is needed and that certain types of mines should be allowed.

Britain, for example, advocates a ban only on "dumb" mines, which can neither disarm themselves or self-destruct after a given lapse of time. That would enable Britain to continue using and exporting more high-tech models.

Supporters of a total ban point out that most self-disarming types have a failure rate of 10-25 per cent, and that Laotians are still being killed by United States air-dropped mines that were supposed to have disarmed themselves some 25 years earlier.

Furthermore, developing

Major mine-makers



countries are likely to object to measures preventing the use of their existing technology yet permitting industrialised countries to continue developing, deploying and exporting devices of more exotic manufacture.

But McGrath and other campaigners believe the situation is too serious for half-measures. US President Bill Clinton has pointed out that

there are 85 million anti-personnel landmines in the world — one for every 50 people on the face of the earth.

Agreement to reduce the number and availability of mines, he said, would help save the lives of "tens of thousands of men and women and innocent children in the years to come."

Yet landmines are being laid at an increasing rate, and

international symposium and protest was held in the Italian town of Brescia, home of mines-exporter Valsella. Valsella, 50 per cent owned by Italian car giant FIAT, recently sold manufacturing licences to Singapore, thus limiting its losses in the event of either an Italian or international export ban.

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The US, for example, is

pressing for action. It was the State Department which described mines as the most toxic pollution facing the world, and McGrath welcomes Clinton's UN statement in favour of eventual elimination. But he adds: "I'd like to see Clinton follow that up with a definitive statement as to whether or not the US is considering a complete ban."

"Is the United States going to support Sweden's call for a total ban on anti-personnel mines at next year's review of the Protocol?" Industrialised countries have also yet to find the will to provide funds for de-mining operations in the worst-affected areas, such as Angola, Cambodia and Afghanistan.

— GEMINI NEWS PETER MOSZYNSKI is a London-based freelance journalist.

A Communication Big Leap

When the foundation was laid in '91 by Khaleda Zia it was called the Meghna-Gumti Bridge. Then some Daudkandi zealots wanted us to call it after their district's name. Then it was government that had a flash that it should best be named the Japan-Bangladesh Friendship Bridge. This morning, however, the plaque that will be opened by the Prime Minister inaugurating the link is going to proclaim it — going back to square one — the Meghna-Gumti Bridge. What's in a name — the new bridge — the costliest and longest among the nation's road bridges so far — is going to bring down travel time between our city number 1 and number 2 to about 4 hours — something undreamt of by many still living. One only hopes the spirit and capability and efficiency that made the bridge available 16 months before schedule would have a lasting influence on our national bridge building activity where Japanese or other foreign investment would not be a permanent fixture. And that the antic surrounding the naming of the bridge wouldn't hopefully anymore represent our ways about big nation-sized things — pertinently in the maintenance of this and the other big bridges.

The 1410-metre long 313 crore-taka bridge is indeed a great testament to the friendship between our two nations. Japan has long been involved in our development efforts and there is every sign that her participation will grow significantly in our national economic enterprise. If we are friends indeed, when shall we start thinking in terms of matching the Japanese gestures of friendship although very much in ways we only can afford?

The Meghna-Gumti Bridge is going to prove a great economic boon from the minute it is commissioned. A radical increase will result in both-way traffic of goods and passenger and in at least 20 per cent time — which in money terms could mean billion taka over a year.

Congratulations to all involved in the building of this big leap in our nation's communication.

Minis, the Menace

What constitutes a civilised society? There can be many tests for a society to achieve that status. Perhaps there is none more important among these than the phenomenon of predictability.

Is ours a civilised society? Judging by the present state of affairs of our principal and perhaps only city, — it is not. If one is in doubt and thinks we are being hasty and sweeping, one is free to step into Mr Azhar Sarkar's shoes. Mr Sarkar is from Shahzadpur of the Tagore Kutcheri-fame and Shilpi, the fourth of his five daughters is particularly bright. On Sunday morning she went out on a rickshaw to settle some payment requirements at her college in Lalmatia. She had just been promoted to second year with flying colours. She couldn't make it to college. An autorickshaw rammed her vehicle from behind throwing Shilpi and her co-travelling friend on to the road. A minibus speeding from opposite direction ran over her. Her body lay there for hours before being taken to morgue. Life, itself the most important thing for all that lives, is the most unpredictable thing in Dhaka.

We do not make much of such supremely avoidable, absurd and uncivilised deaths. We try to take these in our stride. Well, that is the measure of our lack of civilisation. We have, in these columns, been naggingly protesting for a check on minis, for three years. These are not fit things for a modern city's roads. If people at top cared for life and predictability, city streets would long have been rid of these unfurling vendors of death. For the umpteenth time, then, let us say the minis must be brought under control and their reckless presence restrained.

From today we publish three editorials a day instead of two. This is in response to our readers' wish that we accommodate more subjects for editorial comments. We thank our readers for this interest, and express our gratitude for all their support.

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.

Bank loans and entrepreneurs

Sir, Very often we come across news items, in the press, about a drive to find potential investors and industrialists. Banks are being told to disburse money now lying accumulated with them. Industrialists are also being advised to make the best use of the opportunity.

In fact it is not understood as to why the Government has to make any request to the potential businessmen or industrialists to approach the banks for drawing money for their business concerns? It is common knowledge that a person who needs money for his business will approach the banks, negotiate with project profiles and will be granted loans when the terms are acceptable to the banks. It does not as such require any pleading by others.

However, the bare fact is that many businessmen after taking loan from banks or financial institutions, faced such onslaughts that they failed not only to earn substantial profits which is so very necessary to make payment of ever increasing costs of production and bills of utility services besides paying the instalments of loan and interest, but also to survive in the acute competitive world

market. No loanee is expected to dispose of his personal property to repay the loan.

Accordingly, it is for the authorities to look into the causes of borrowers' difficulties and take pragmatic steps, including substantial reduction in the bank rates of interest, which might ensure survival of the loanees' enterprises and save them from running sick and unproductive.

H I Glas 80, Darius Salam, Dhaka.

A departing soul

Sir, I was deeply touched by the letter titled 'The last wishes' in your paper of 29-10-94.

I am not offering sympathy as the writer does not want it. I really admire the writer's love for his country, people and children. If everyone could feel that all the comforts and pleasures which money can buy are only temporary and the ultimate benefit lies in heaven, then perhaps all the dishonesty, corruption, cheating etc. would stop.

The writer's advice to the younger generation is extremely touching. Let us pray that Allah may help him. Dr M S Talukder 843, Ring Road Shamoli, Dhaka-7

For tips to function

Sir, I must congratulate Mr Ekram Belal of New York for his well thought-out plan to accelerate our torpid infrastructure. In his letter 'Dhaka Stock Exchange' dated 23 October '94. Nevertheless I also regret to allude to the fact that being a resident is one of world's strongest economy, he is not really cognizant of the apathetic way our country is proceeding, though he seemed to get a hint during his short stay in Dhaka.

In his letter he appeared to have disregarded the fundamental elements required to bring forth a transition in our socio-economic structure. These being — poverty alleviation; employment creation; stability in the political environment; obliteration of crime from society.

Once the Government works on the above criteria only then Mr Belal's tips can be made to function.

However, taking the present situation of the country into consideration my personal opinion will be that the country has little scope for improvement. There is indeed very little hope for development in a country where political leaders are not concerned about what their imprudence is doing to the country and its economy. The fact that the opposition leaders raised a great hue and cry for a caretaker government recently was so appalling to me that I failed to understand how can these people expect themselves to be accepted as distinguished leaders of a nation. Rather than solving graver problems such as

poverty and unemployment they waste their energy on insignificant sectors. It's high time the ruling party and the opposition put and end to their mud-slinging and work together to alleviate poverty and create employment and solve other related problems.

I also believe in mass awareness, every citizen should carry out his/her responsibility with sincerity and determination. One must learn to fight his way towards a better future. Vietnam would serve as a recent example.

Nusrat N Siddique Dhaka Cantonment

Pricing a product

Sir, For instance, the price of a Bangladeshi shaving cream in a container of 50 grams is Tk 20.00. A foreign one, in a tube containing 125 grams is available at Tk 30.00. So if we want to have 125 grams of the Bangladeshi shaving cream, we have to pay Tk 50.00. What a difference, price-wise! But charm and even service wise the foreign product may appear superior to the consumer.

Our entrepreneurs, if they believe in long term gains rather than short term kills, must keep in view the prevailing international prices of different products. A true entrepreneur can certainly look forward to gain a profit margin of 15% to 20%. This is the business norm. But when one aspires for 100% profit, this becomes something else.

Shahabuddin Mahtab Siddheshwar Road, Dhaka

OPINION Refurbishing Central Dhaka

Does the metropolitan capital city of Dhaka look as majestic as the Nagar Bhaban (Dhaka City Corporation building) at Phulbari in the centre of Dhaka city?

After the construction of the mammoth Jatiya Sangsad Bhaban at Sher-e-Bangla Nagar perhaps Nagar Bhaban has come up as the most magnificent building in Dhaka. Although there are many skyscrapers at Motijheel Commercial Area, Mohakhali, Eskaton, and Gulshan, the architectural designs of both Jatiya Sangsad Bhaban and Nagar Bhaban offer us special attraction and appeal.

Dhaka is a city of contrasts — where majority of the people live in slums. Or virtual slum-like sub-human conditions having no water supply, electricity, sanitation, sewage system and drinking water. They live in most unhygienic houses made of bamboos or shanty tin shed quarters, old and dilapidated buildings in localities having only narrow lanes and by-lanes full of filth and garbage and drains always stinking and polluting.

But side by side, there are posh areas with attractive, and luxurious houses in Gulshan, Baridhara, Banani, Dhanmendi where all the modern civic amenities and facilities are available.

When we compare the old Dhaka with new Dhaka we find colossal differences and contrasts. The Rajuk, DCC, WASA, DESA, T&T, all take special care of new Dhaka and, as it appears, neglect old Dhaka.

Moreover, the centre of the city — the meeting place of old and new Dhaka — from Hatkhola to Motijheel Commercial Area and from former Hardeo Glass Factory/Folder Street point to Jai Kali Mandir Road-Toybee Circular Road-Captain Bazar Road-Old railway crossing at Nawabpur/Gulistan point is the worst affected area. There is simply no law and order in the area, no traffic regulations, discipline, only a complete chaos and confusion and disorderly situations prevail over the entire span. The roads are always full with hundreds of buses, rickshaws, cars and scooters, never in orderly movement. The hawkers and vendors encroach the roads and foot-paths. Old, dilapidated, out of order, accident stricken buses are parked

from Hardeo Glass Factory/Folder Street point along Jai Kali Mandir Road, Toybee Circular Road, Captain Bazar Road up Old railway crossing at Nawabpur/Gulistan point for hours, days, weeks, and months together for all types of repair works — welding, vulcanising, body building, painting, engine overhauling — blocking the traffic and movement of pedestrians at the cost of the sufferings of millions of people of old Dhaka day out and day in. But, unfortunately, neither the Dhaka City Corporation nor the Dhaka Traffic Police seems to take any notice of it. It appears that it is nobody's baby to look after, maintain, supervise and control the public thoroughfares like Hatkhola Road, Folder Street, Jai Kali Mandir Road, Toybee Circular Road, Captain Bazar, Gulistan and even Motijheel Commercial Area. The situation is getting from bad to worse day by day. The old Dhaka has become a land-locked area, suffocating the dwellers, while, perhaps, our authorities concerned are drowning in the comfort of air-conditioned rooms.

Over the past two decades, there have been constant demands for the transfer of Central Jail from Chowk Bazar-Nazimuddin Road because of huge traffic jam on the roads in the thickly populated south-west old Dhaka. The government has at last decided to shift the Central Jail to Ghazipur.

Now the situation in other side of old Dhaka — south-east side — has become more worst than Chowk Bazar-Nazimuddin Road.

We strongly feel that consistent with the requirement of time and situation, if necessary, Bangabhaban may be shifted from its present site to former Prime Minister's huge building at Sher-e-Bangla Nagar or a new building may be built for the President in Baridhara or Gulshan and the entire area of central and middle Dhaka refurbished and developed as much as feasible for welfare of the people, easing their decades old continuous constraints, as well as providing an environment and atmosphere to the facade of the magnificent Nagar Bhaban.

O H Kabir Dhaka-1203