

Police Need Reform

One month has passed since the death of Yasmin in Dinajpur. But there has been hardly any progress in the administrative proceedings to mete out appropriate punishment to all those responsible for the rape and killing of the teen-aged girl and the subsequent tragedy involving seven more deaths. The Dinajpur incidents, let us not forget, were an eruption of no-confidence — to say broadly — in the law enforcing agencies and a general public antipathy towards the police. Particularly, people have a growing feeling that women in police custody are often subjected to harassment, even abuse.

The expression of people's anger at the police brutality brings us face to face with a serious problem concerning our society's values and outlook. The police were offenders in the first place in the Dinajpur incident, they were wrong in supporting their culprit colleagues and the way they tried to brush off the whole episode through issuing press notes and public statements was naive and unacceptable. We do not want to apportion blame on all members of the police because the majority, we believe, are free from such perversions.

But here surely is an opportunity for the police to do some house-cleaning job by bringing in the necessary reforms. To restore people's confidence in the police such reforms are unavoidable. So, without wasting time, the police should enter into serious dialogues with women's groups and legal experts to bring about reforms within the system so that women are never subjected to maltreatment and humiliation at the hands of the police who are the custodians of law and order. Unless the police utilise this opportunity to come out clean, police-public relationship will take a further dip with the possibility of a break-down of law and order any time anywhere.

Commendable Show

The Dhaka Stock Exchange has bounced back after the general strike. It has done so with an unmistakable flourish. The three days' loss of business during hartal was more than made up by useful transactions on the following three days of last week, between 19 and 21 September, that is.

The DSE never had it so good during the past six months. The number of shares was up at 5,32,840, the all price share index notched up 815 points and market capitalisation stood at a new high of Tk 5066 crore.

The buoyant trading has no doubt been indicative of the Dhaka bourse's growing maturity, resilience and attractiveness as a stock market in this region. More to the point though is the indefatigable spirit with which the small local and foreign investors as well as the institutions came forward to invest immediately upon the conclusion of the strike. Imagine that the political clouds are far from being removed, and yet, they were just raring to have a go. One hartal has thrown up that message of investment starvation but too many will simply spoil the appetite.

The seeds for a debacle in this highly sensitive area remains intact. Unless politics is normalised and its course made predictable through an early start of a dialogue between the ruling party and the opposition, the prospects for market capitalisation which seem so bright at the moment will be lost in political wilderness.

While everyone in the country is anxious for an immediate end to the political impasse, we do not see why things on another plane which can and must be done now should be unnecessarily put off. The practice of declaring dividends and portraying the health of various industries through AGMs should be followed by those units on the list of the DSE which not presently doing this — at least on a regular basis. Secondly, we shall have to raise the number of primary issues to sustain the interest of investors.

A Regional Concern

The waiver to the Pressler amendment granted to Pakistan whereby the five-year-long US freeze on arms supply and non-military aid to her goes, has triggered predictable reactions in India.

Looking at this development through Bangladeshi eyes what concerns us most is a potent possibility that this could further fuel the arms race between India and Pakistan. This will be to the detriment of regional peace and security. We pin our hope though on India's realistic perception of balance of power in the region which is tilted towards her anyway, and cannot quite be upset by a limited easing of arms ban on Pakistan.

Given the existing levels of tension between the two countries, a spurt in the arms race between India and Pakistan is the most retrograde thing we can imagine — both as a SAARC partner of the two countries and a co-traveller in the pursuit of poverty alleviation in South Asia.

The US says that it is a one-time waiver and that the Pressler sanctions otherwise remain. What has drawn flak from India is the prospective supply of military equipment to Pakistan by the US and her non-insistence on 'a verifiable cap on Pakistan's nuclear programme.' The US made clear that the equipment supply will be of 'restrictive nature', and involve weapons, "on the edge of obsolescence", in the words of one Senator.

It may appear somewhat simplistic to military strategists, but our belief is that, since the US is keen on good relations with both India and Pakistan she will make sure not to disturb the balance of power in the region.

'SECURITY' is highly contentious as a political vocabulary. When mentioned in the South Asian context, it immediately injects further controversies and debates. What may seem beyond controversy is that in South Asia security has always been state-oriented or regime-centric i.e. it has been a political tool of the contending states or may perhaps be seen as a bogey into the hands of the regime in power. As a result, there has all along been a confusion in the region as to what constitutes 'security'. There has also been a concern whether the people or the interests of the ruling elite is at stake.

One perhaps needs to have a fresh look into the issues involved in security matters in the light of the sweeping changes taking place across the globe in the post-Cold War era. How the regional actors tend to perceive their security? How extra-regional security concerns intrude into regional security? How the political under-currents or intra-state security behaviour exacerbate security perceptions and make their way into external security policies? And finally, is there any antidote to contain the security misperceptions or a framework incorporating converging elements to reactivate security harmony in South Asia?

Obviously, it needs little re-emphasising that India is the region's leading power and its politico-security concerns continue to govern regional security environment. India's security concerns range from its threat perceptions emanating from the north to its relationship with its South Asian neighbours. Related to the above, there has been an unfortunate security legacy in South Asia: traditionally in security matters it has been India versus the rest of South Asia. Both asymmetry and history combine to create a persistent perceptual divergence or gap between India and its neighbours, with India claiming the British legacy of regional dominance, while the neighbouring countries expect India to honour their inherent symmetrical aspirations as sovereign entities.

India, too, has its perception of insecurity vis-a-vis smaller neighbours. India's threat perception vis-a-vis its neighbours remains dominant because of the sharing of common borders with all its neighbours, that of emergence of territorial nationalism as well as of resurgence of ethno-communal forces, both within and without. In New Delhi, there is also an 'encirclement' consciousness among Indian policy makers which affect their strategic undertakings vis-a-vis India's neighbours. This combined with the ethno-religious divide, multi-ethnic politics in the country itself, with its cross-border implications, bilateral problems, socio-economic and environmental problem, etc. tend to accentuate a sense of insecurity in the whole of South Asia.

SECURITY

Rethinking South Asian Reality

by Dr Abul Kalam

South Asia has its multifaceted nature of security problems. They include almost an absolute lack of development, education, environment, food, health, shelter, water, etc. The absence of all these basic amenities, together with the continuing political crisis of governance, tend to make South Asia as one of the most insecure regions for living

Looked at the contextual aspect of security, one may visualise a normative perspective, with a traditional emphasis being placed upon strategic superiority, arms procurement, military preponderance, weaponry system, etc.

On South Asian security predicament, it is suggested that community, ideology and territory continue to impinge upon South Asian security. In matters of security perception, policies and empirical reality there may still be visible differences. For security is midset of the policy makers that continue to affect both strategic undertakings and have regional ramifications. In most security matters in South Asia extra-regional links in the post-independence period have been provided by the three major global powers, viz. the US, the former USSR and China. The Cold war contentions of the US and the former USSR are now a matter of history, so too is the Sino-Soviet rift and cleavages in which India and its South Asian neighbours found themselves drawn in. Currently all the three major global powers have reversed their earlier contentious positions and are present in the region as relatively peaceful players. There is an entry of an additional power, Japan, an essentially economic player, which has no colonial past in the region and has little hegemonic aspirations.

However, the changes that occurred at the global level in the post-Cold War era some implicit reflection for South Asia, especially in the area of nuclear proliferation, democracy, human rights, economic liberalisation and the signing of South Asian Preferential Trade Arrangement (SAFTA). On security of South Asia of tomorrow, one may suggest that the base for a future secure order in South Asia, to a large extent, depends on India-Pakistan relations, covering both arms proliferation as well as Kashmir, on water accord between India and Bangladesh, on Indo-Lanka understanding over the Tamils as well as on extensive economic cooperation among all the countries of the region. Unless the South Asian actors decide to close their ranks in a cooperative frame, they are most likely to face again the spill-over effects of a possible extra-regional rivalry involving any pair of the major powers. For in any Asia-Pacific power

rivalry in the future South Asia, being in close proximity of China and the booming global trade routes, would feature more importantly than ever before. A cooperative frame, however, does not seem on the South Asian horizon, as the political relations between India and Pakistan remain very strained over Kashmir, the absence of a water accord between India and Bangladesh as much as due to the competitive nature of India-Pakistan nuclear aspirations. Moreover, the prevailing regime perception in each of these countries continue to vitiate the region's security environment, with an apparent loss of transparency of the people's perception in each case.

Given such a reality of security consciousness, a pertinent question may be raised: what could help peace and stability in South Asia — through balance or preponderance? There is also a related question, if peace is to be established through balance, is it to be achieved through market forces?

There is, however, feeling that the post-Cold War frame of peace is preponderance as inherent in the notion of 'unipolarity'. A study of structural factors of power may suggest that 'military power' is the most important strategic factor in the context of current South Asian reality. To this end, the maintenance of military imbalance, namely, India's preponderance may be seen by some as one of highest priority.

There is, then, the notion of comprehensive security, a notion which is also being emphasised globally, because, as well as security of people or ensuring their basic human rights, South Asia has its multifaceted nature of security problems. They include almost an absolute lack of development, education, environment, food, health, shelter, water, etc. The absence of all these basic amenities, together with the continuing political crisis of governance, tend to make South Asia as one of the most insecure regions for living. However, in all these fields one may suggest some order of preferences, avoiding conflictual course of a structural problem of class nature, as long as the minimum aspects of human aspirations are taken care of. A strengthening of democratic institutions may prevail over others and may help change the existing perceptual divergence. What seems equally im-

portant is a multi-level interaction in security, both at the non-government and people-to-people levels. This is important if the state itself is to be rescued from the grip of the self-seeking elite and the problems of governance have to be overcome. But each South Asian country needs a self-critical approach for any kind of security appraisal involving the elite, the state and the people at large.

Ethno-nationalistic problems such as those in Assam, Kashmir, Punjab, Sindh, the Jaffna Peninsula or in the Chittagong Hill Tracts do offer persistent security problems for the concerned states. But each has also a solution to these problems of insecurity lies not in offering protective sanctuaries or lending a helping hand to known terrorists and unscrupulous elements of insurgents. That would only accentuate the problems at hand, may have reverse-mirror effects and hence would be mutually suicidal.

What is needed, above all, an objective appraisal of the realities on the part of the strategic analysts and planners. Perceptive and thoughtful scholars, free from elitist mechanism of control, may also contribute to this objective appraisal of self as well as of others. Consistent with the pattern of changes of the post-Cold War era, an emphasis must be placed on an economic approach in order to understand the South Asian reality where poverty, instead of being alleviated, is gaining further ground and consequently people feel more and more insecure, threatening the very base of the state itself.

The very notion of peace through military preponderance is inherently Clausewitzian (if you want peace, prepare for war) and is guided by a zero-sum strategy i.e. by a 'winner-takes-it-all' approach. It is obsolete and outdated. The overall duty of the armed forces is to ensure security of the state as well as promote welfare of the people. But both are interchangeable; because the primary task of the defence forces is to prevent war or to avert defeat in case of an outbreak of war threatening the security of the state. If the people remain poverty-stricken who is going to pay for the defence forces? Therefore, the welfare of the people has to be ensured through a sustained development effort; that, in

essence, requires a transfer of limited resources available from the wasteful sector of weapons development, both conventional and nuclear, to the more fruitful areas of pro-people development projects. The idea of attaining nuclear deterrence or force expansion in South Asia, especially involving the two major contending powers in the sub-continent, would seem a futile exercise in the current context of global change and may be viewed in that light.

South Asia needs a re-definition or re-conceptualisation of security in the light of commonality of experience and interests. The obvious option is a 'win-win' approach, based on a positive-sum game, ensuring some benefit for all. Save for the question mark over the future of Kashmir, one may safely suggest that all South Asian countries are currently non-revisionist and status quo-oriented. All being members of the developing bloc of G77 desire an improvement of the lot of their people, assuring them what is inherent in the notion of 'comprehensive security' i.e. guaranteeing better access to education, food, cloth, house, energy, environment, water, etc. than what they are currently afforded. They have plenty of water, which often are sources of misery, but can be converted into wealth, given necessary political commitment and goodwill. All are currently free of the previous asymmetric linkages and hegemonic alignment of the Cold War days. All being members of the non-aligned group have the same commitment to peaceful ideals and share the same experience of international peace-keeping. All that initially they require is to get away from their more recent misperception or perceptual divergence, allow greater communication and interaction to take place and permit a free flow of ideas across the borders so that people-to-people contacts may gain ground and be strengthened.

In all the foregoing tasks of promotion positive ideals of peace and development, public opinion makers and mobilisers, in particular, the media and publicists, intellectuals and scholars, the universities and similar centres of learning, the NGOs and other organised enlightened pressure groups, have a great role to play. They all should direct their effort to avoid playing the tune of the state-centric propaganda machinery and avoid also distortion of history; wherever possible they should come forward in a firm but subtle manner to extend patronage to the muted sections, such as the hapless minorities in their respective polities — as noble souls like C R Das and Subhas Chandra Bose had professed and sought to do during the most adverse circumstances of their time — as well as endeavour to attract the masses to positive ideals and objectives.

What seems equally important is a multi-level interaction in security, both at the non-government and people-to-people levels. This is important if the state itself is to be rescued from the grip of the self-seeking elite and the problems of governance have to be overcome. But each South Asian country needs a self-critical approach for any kind of security appraisal involving the elite, the state and the people at large.

"... For a Democratic Political Culture"

The great merits of the concept of a neutral, non-partisan caretaker government are recognized by the broad masses of the people, even across party lines. A BNP minister was sacked by Begum Zia for publicly supporting the proposal. In fact, it has now become the national demand. Apart from the Chief Justice, a group of distinguished persons, not belonging to any party, will be nominated by both sides to run the routine business of the government for three months. The members of the neutral caretaker government will not be eligible to contest the election. Thus they will have no interest in tilting in favour of any side or rigging the result. General elections held under a neutral caretaker government for three terms should help establish a democratic political culture. — Sheikh Hasina

Silence Must be Broken at Many Levels

by Neeman A Sobhan

CONSIDER me the village idiot. I have absolutely no understanding of politics. I do not know the difference between democracy and the rule of the mob. I don't have the sense to appreciate the thin line that divides bravado from foolhardiness, political passion from criminal frenzy, the politically correct position from the morally incorrect position from the morally incorrect position or hartal combat from mortal combat.

My only hobby is reading newspapers, and my one concession to spectator sports is keeping scores on the activities of anti-versus pro-hartalists teams. The only way I ever exercise my political options and rights is to click my tongue or shake my head, or sometimes though rarely, to grunt in approval. You see, I really don't know where the non-committal attitude ends and the apathetic begins, and at what point silence turns to assent then ours to complicity. After all, I am your everyday, educated enough, middle-of-the-road citizen, one of the silent majority who does not want to rock the boat of his comfortable, complacent existence. Cowed down by the herd instinct for survival, tethered to my passive situation in life, I merely chew the cud of every political issue and news item that comes by and, surprisingly enough, merrily digest it too. Isn't there a native saying that goes: "Chhagoley ki na

khaye..." So I was a bit taken aback by myself when on looking at a news item in a national daily about the forced stripping of a government official by a street goonda or "picket" on a hartal day, I felt the need to regurgitate what felt like a lump of indigestible news matter, and actually comment on it. Of course, I still reserve my comment till the next paragraph. This is a convenient habit developing from a continued withholding of all my reactions — anger, shame, indignation, irritation, what have you, in fact, from keeping my very life on hold, particularly during the suspended animation of the hartal-induced stupor with which our self-imposed political spokespersons drug us at regular intervals. Actually, more than the bad habit of indolence is the fact that I haven't yet found the voice with which to air my views and grievances, make my own demands and just speak for myself.

I am so used to maintaining the polite silence of the non-agitative, "bhodro" middle-class, against any issue, however inconvenient, that my political vocal chords don't work on cue. Since I never shout slogans or protest vociferously as the man in the street does, my silence is misunderstood and misused as acquiescence and support by any political party, for any issue and any action. So, everytime a hartal is ordered and there is no pip squeak from me, it is taken

as a "clear verdict" of spontaneous support, specially by a political party which has no legal status as an official Opposition ever since it abandoned the parliament. And by keeping quiet I also seem to approve of another party which, in spite of an almost empty, non-functional parliament, continues on blatantly like a house-guest that has overstayed its welcome but refuses to announce its date of departure. Thus, in this undemocratic and primitive political village of ours, is it any wonder that the village idiot is dumb in every sense of the word?

Still, as I glanced at the newspaper photograph of a fellow Bangladeshi being humiliated by a compatriot — one of the many thugs who pass for political activists — my mind did not at first register the true depravity and brutality of the scene. Slowly my mind spelt RAPE, and in some cobwebbed corner of my soul that I call "conscience", a warning bell started to ring, as if saying, today a man's trousers, tomorrow a woman's sari? Already, quite recently my limited store of adrenalin has been freshly depleted by the recent national agonising over the dishonouring of our Yasmins at the hands of the country's prime protection agency, the police. Now, to see followers of the parties that pose as the country's saviours, indulge in acts almost as debasing,

dehumanising and despicable as rape, is a scary thought. Are these the people with whom we, the educated, respectable, rational middle-class, by our silent acceptance of hartals and their associated evils seem to be identifying? Imagine a pack of street goondas, plundering and pillaging the nation's own property, setting fire to ambulances, hindering and thwarting a poor country's economic survival, robbing the hard-working and downtrodden of their daily bread, destroying the educational processes and thereby harming the children and young students, the very backbones of this fledgling country. Is this the path to democracy? Is this the road to political assertion and freedom? Are we fighting an enemy or a cause?

To go back to the official disrobed and dishonoured in the line of duty, I have only one other thing to say: political activists must understand that officials are only cogs in the wheel of the machinery of the economy. They are not part of politics because the business of running the country must go on regardless of who is in power. The same officials the present opposition is humiliating will be required to serve with the same loyalty in the event it comes to power. It does not pay or behave potential makers of governments to alienate those on whom they will depend. Even I, the tradi-

tional idiot wouldn't cut off my nose to spite my face.

So much for the parts of the machinery of the economy, what about the sum of its parts, those shut up in their ivory towers of power? Don't they have any responsibility to their people? Isn't it time to stop this charade of being blind and deaf to the suffering of the masses? What good is literacy if one can't read the writing on the wall, what good is a show of power if all it wins is a pyrrhic victory of wills in which the entire country is laid waste? Wouldn't this be another form of pillage and plunder?

I think it's about time that silence is broken at many levels and voices heard, the voices of decision, of reason, the voice of democracy. And if silence continues, I think it's time for the middle-class to assert its vocal power in unison. Educationists, physicians, lawyers, other professional groups and businessmen and bankers, students and housewives, all citizens who are affected by the inhumanity of hartals but do want the government to take a decision to break this self-destructive political impasse, must organise ourselves and protest in our own coordinated, peaceful way against both hartals and the callous indifference of the government to address itself to the only issue on the people's agenda, date of the election and date of its stepping down. We, the middle ground citizens must lobby so that the government steps down.

not as a reaction to the agitation of the hartalists but to the demands of its peaceful and peace-loving citizens. The role of the middle-class must be exactly that, a mediating zone, where reason and not agitation must force the issue.

We have recently seen, in The Daily Star sponsored Clean Dhaka rally how right-minded citizens are capable of organising themselves for a good cause. Surely we can all get together again to create a larger, stronger forum and platform to ensure our country's welfare. I salute the spirit of self-help and enterprise behind the Save Dhaka drive. Can't we band together again, against hartals, but for the same goal: Save Bangladesh.

Perhaps I have overstepped the bounds even of a village idiot, but it was a passing fancy to voice a comment or two. But given the nature of our political village perhaps it would have been more prudent to have done at the outset what I once saw a goat doing — chewing to shreds and swallowing an entire newspaper. I my case, in frustration not hunger. Well, forgive me, after all wasn't the full saying: "Chagoley ki na khaye, paagoley ki na koye?" (There is no accounting for what a goat eats or a limatic babbles)

The author, an occasional contributor for the last several months, will now write regularly for this page