

The Beacon

Twelfth Rabi-ul-Awal is eternalised in the continuum of mankind's history being the date of both advent and demise of the Prophet of Islam Hazrat Muhammad (SM), but for whose beacon world civilisation, as admitted on all hands, would have been poorer.

The very fact of bringing them up to a rational way of life together with his statecraft in relation to neighbouring communities and states wielded a transcending influence on human affairs undimmed by mankind's civilizational marches.

But whether the Muslim Ummah he so assiduously laid the foundation for, and in his life-time saw its scaffolding grow? The Ummah is riven today by internecine conflicts, ideological bi- and trifurcating and fundamentalist militancy, so much so that the creation of just and fair societies within several Muslim countries looks a far cry.

A fair just and tolerant society in its internal and external manifestation would be the most fitting tribute to the memories of Rasulullah. Looking at our own selves, we are appalled by the dehumanising tenor and texture becoming so much a part and parcel of Bangladesh society today.

Factory Tragedy Again

The tragic death of nine employees in a devastating fire at two garments factories housed in an underconstruction building on Mazar Road, Mirpur shows once again that no lesson was learnt from similar mishaps recorded in recent years.

In this connection the Bangladesh Garments Manufacturing and Exporting Association (BGMEA) must share the blame for not pressing for a minimum safety standard in all the factories enlisted with it.

That our nascent but thriving garments industry needed a few concessions to maintain its competitive edge in the international market initially may have precluded a harsh criticism of its safety drawbacks. But this should no longer hold good.

Fight Against Arsenic

A WHO-organised consultation meeting held in New Delhi has come up with a set of recommendations for tackling the problem of arsenic contamination. Apart from suggesting immediate treatment for people affected by arsenic poisoning, it calls for providing safe water or identifying sources of such water for people in the arsenic-prone areas.

What could, however, prove decisive in our fight against arsenic contamination is the setting up of a national reference laboratory for testing the quality of water through a comprehensive site investigation. Water samples have to be collected from all over the country for measuring their arsenic content.

So the government must move fast to tackle this problem. Hydrological surveys, as suggested, might help identify underground aquifers free from arsenic contamination. The government with help from UN agencies should take up such projects because they are beyond the capacity of private individuals.

PEACE prospects for our hills which add a refreshing contour to our plainland topography seem tantalisingly close yet afar. The fifth round of negotiations for striking a peace deal between the National Committee on CHT affairs and the Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti is headed for ending on an inconclusive note.

The much-touted outcome of the previous round of talks that a 'consensus' has been reached on 'all points' of discord and all that was left to be done was to put signatures on a draft accord has been somewhat belied. Perhaps, there was a signal for it in the smile that PCJSS leader Bodhipriya Larma wore in an apparently nodding gesture to what national committee chief Abul Hasnat Abdullah had to say by way of announcing the auspicious breakthrough to the press.

The agenda for the fifth round sounded complicated with new moot points thrown

CHT Peace Talks: Chips are Down

The fifth round of peace talks has seen the scaling down of the agenda from 'signing to discussing' the draft accord. And at the end of it what we see is a referral syndrome on the part of the PCJSS in its open wish to have the draft accord deliberated upon and vetted by its various affiliated groups.

in and fresh conditions attached to the signing of a deal by the PCJSS which has turned out to be indistinguishable from the Shantibahini. Constitutional guarantees have been sought for the regional council and the district councils with total authority vested in terms of levying taxes and administering law and order.

Proportionate representation of Bengali settlers on such councils was previously spurned by the tribal leadership and lately in a reformed package submitted to Bangladesh negotiator they have even rejected the idea that settlers could be elected vice-chairmen to these bodies.

challenged the reservation of the post of district council chairman for the tribals in the High Court. The progress on this case is also being closely watched by the tribal community, as reported in a leading Bangla daily. The government has gone further than merely

allowing the tribals to become chairmen of the hill district councils, it has, as a matter of fact, even agreed to reserve the chairmanship of the Regional Council for a tribal.

Tripara over the rehabilitation of refugees recently repatriated to Bangladesh. A refugee leaders delegation from Tripura of late went back after a trip to the CHT camps and made some adverse comments on how the Bangladesh authorities were looking after the tribal re-

turnees. They sent copies of their observations to foreign missions and international organisations seeking their help in having the rehabilitation process in the CHT supervised by the UNHCR or ICRC.



Time and Tide Shah Husain Imam

Regionalism Replaces Anti-Congressism

Apart from regionalism, one other development in Indian politics is that anti-Congressism is no more relevant. The United Front has stayed in power — first Prime Minister Deve Gowda and now Prime Minister Inder Gujral — because of Congress support. After forming his party, Laloo Prasad Yadav said what was wrong in seeking the Congress backing for retaining his government.

THE split of Janata Dal once again underlines the new reality of Indian politics: anti-centralism. Whatever its nomenclature, Laloo Prasad Yadav's Rashtriya Janata Dal is a regional party confined to Bihar. New Delhi seems to understand the message it gives.

In any other circumstances, there would not have been reluctance to dismiss Laloo Prasad Yadav from the Bihar chief ministership, particularly after the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) had charged him in the fodder scam. But his ultimatum that he would fight even from jail made the Centre think twice because his capacity to do mischief in the state is real.

The communists wanted to oust him, not dismiss because they are against invoking Article 356, which gives the Centre powers to intervene. Intelligence agencies have reported to New Delhi that if it came to Laloo's dismissal, the army would be required to effect it. And their assessment is that he can foment an open rebellion in nearly half of Bihar, 27 districts out of 59, with the police intentionally watching from the sideline.

This means that regionalism can at times take an ugly turn. Not long ago did the Shiv

Sen-led Maharashtra witness a motivated violence against Muslims. The Sri Krishna commission report, yet to be published, is said to have put the responsibility on the administration and has referred to conspiratorial moves behind the killings and uprooting of Muslims.

Still the centralism was so dictatorial and so monopolistic under the 40 years of Congress rule that the states had to break away from it. They were bound to turn to the parties which would give them a sense of identity. The process has begun. Andhra Pradesh has Telugu Desam. Assam, the Asom Gana Parishad, Haryana, the Haryana Vikas Party, Punjab, the Akali Dal, Maharashtra, the Shiv Sena and Tamil Nadu, the DMK.

Come to think of it, Congress controls only one big state, that is, Madhya Pradesh, and two medium states, Orissa and Himachal Pradesh, besides a few peripheral territories. Similarly, the BJP holds only one medium state, Rajasthan, and one small state, Delhi. In Punjab, Haryana and Maharashtra, it is only a junior partner in the Akali Dal, HVP and Shiv Sena-

led coalition ministries, respectively, while in Uttar Pradesh it commands majority of legislators in the Mayawati-led coalition.

The Left front has been since long confined only to three states — West Bengal, Kerala and Tripura, while the Janata Dal is restricted to Karnataka. Bihar is a question mark. Moreover, there are scores of

influential regional parties operating in various states, demanding the formation of new ethnic states out of the existing ones, such as, Jharkhand Party in areas of Bihar, Orissa and West Bengal, Gorkha League in Darjeeling, Bodoland Party in Assam.

Various regional groups are demanding the formation of the states of Telengana, Vidarbha, Uttarakhand and Chhattisgarh (MP); different tribal groups asking for state-level status to their respective areas, besides Sikkim Democratic Front in

Sikkim, SP in Haryana, BSP and SP in Uttar Pradesh and RPI in Maharashtra. Yet the process of the regionalisation of parties has to go a long way before reaching a phase of maturity.

The experiment in 1989 under Prime Minister VP Singh did not succeed because the parties supported his government from outside. After the 1996

election, the situation has changed. Now the parties supporting the government, except the CPI (M), are also part of the government. Deve Gowda fell not because any constituent of the UF challenged him but because the outside support of Congress was withdrawn. Inder Gujral continues to have the UF constituents behind him.

The problem he faces is that Laloo wants to join the United Front in his new incarnation. The opposition of the original Janata Dal is understandable

because Laloo has split it so as to establish his own identity. The solution to this problem is that the UF should not bother how a particular party functions from within, its concern should be that the party has representation in the UF. Gujral has scrupulously followed this principle by not asking Laloo's nominees to quit the central cabinet.

What is at stake is really the basic principle of regionalism, the say of the state parties at Centre. So long as it is honoured, the UF will function; otherwise, it will break into pieces. The United Front rule shows that regional parties have asserted themselves. In the last one year, the power focus has been shifting to the states. The inter-state council has never been so active before in delineating powers of the Centre and the States. Several chief ministers have gone on record as saying — for example, West Bengal — that they had never received such substantial financial shares from the Centre as they have since the formation of the United Front government.

The ousting of anti-Congressism or the owning of regionalism in India is getting over distortions. Events may force that to happen. The United Front came to adopt the common minimum programme, when the rationale of anti-BJPism did not provide an answer to several questions and compulsions. The future alignment for coalition politics, which seems to stare the country in the face. And for good many years.

BETWEEN THE LINES Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

me is the writer's appeal in the last paragraph of the write-up. He seemed to have lost faith in everyone about doing anything and appealed directly to the people of the country to save the railways from, I quote, "the anarchy of the government, from the mindless decisions of the politicians and from the self-destructive choice of the railway bureaucracy."

This brings us to the basic issue: is the railway worth saving? Has the railway a future in this country? I am absolutely sure that it has. With a population-density of more than 850 people per square kilometer, it will be impossible for us to build any more roads for the simple reason that we don't have enough land. When one freight train can transport what it takes 200 trucks to carry, it is suicidal on our part to think of any mode of transport other than the railways for our future long and medium haul transport. But the only catch in this logic is: the railway, operating at the present level of inefficiency and mismanagement, cannot deliver the goods.

This brings us again to the writer's agony. Who, in this country, can do something to save the railway? I am thinking about someone at the political level, who, whatever our unhappy writer may think, is ultimately the representative of the people. He brings out one interesting point. It is like this: two BNP ministers have done maximum damage to the railway. And now, the present minister, who is a JP man, is poised to put the "last nail to Railway's coffin." Why can't we hope now that someone from Awami League would appear as the saviour?

There is a historical reason for such thinking on my part. Railway was one of the worst affected organisations during our War of Liberation. It suffered massive destruction in the nine months of war. But it is to the credit of the then Awami League government and railwaymen that within two to three years of liberation the entire railway was put back to normal operation. I still remember the day when Bangabandhu inaugurated the Bhairab Bridge and through-train ran between Dhaka and Chittagong first time after the War of Liberation. It was a glorious and proud moment for the railway.

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the table to open their mind and put their cards on the table to save Dhaka, but some of the participants' excuse was, nothing can be done under that government.

Now, we have our apparently the most democratically elected government. Why then the pollution is on the rise and endangering urban life? If I narrate my recent visit to DoE and the experience, then I hope it won't offend anyone.

DoE is a multi-storied palatial ceramic brick building (near Bangladesh Betar) at Agargaon. As one enters the approach road from the main and observes his right (dumped garbage), and his left (shanties), he will obviously feel that he is not going to a good environment. Next to the gate of DoE, there exists a shift office of a particular political party of that ward in the lap of shanties. Inside DoE area, one will find an uncared huge lawn around, but full of bushes, as if, a perfect environment for jungle animals. Beside the car portico of DG (DoE), there is a wide pond. It is better not look at that sight. In that water body a good yielding cat fish cultivation could have been possible, but instead, under the nose of DoE, shanties and open latrines are on the increase. If anyone visits any one section of the directorate building, it will immediately come to his mind that the 'who cares' culture strongly prevails here.

After 21 years (probably for the first time), a politically renowned lady has taken over the Ministry of Forest and Environment. It was expected that within a year, some revolutionary solution of environment problems would emerge; but is it there? At the chequer's expense, the minister recently visited abroad and enjoyed the environment of that country. Back home, she should have spared some time to see the environment of her own domain (DoE). I wish her all the success for her words and work. I think, it is high time for our government to get out of the honeymoon and get going to suit the action to the word. Otherwise the DS's efforts and Mr Jallil's cry, in their own ways, won't affect much unless 'who cares' attitude of the government functionaries are thoroughly pruned away.

A R Choudhury, Uttara, Dhaka

Saving the Railway Sir, I read with interest 'Saving the Railway' which appeared in your paper (Opinion, July 6, 1997). While fully in agreement with the writer, a retired railway employee, I could feel the anguish and frustration of Mr Chowdhury at seeing his old organisation being destroyed. What, however, has interested

me is the writer's appeal in the last paragraph of the write-up. He seemed to have lost faith in everyone about doing anything and appealed directly to the people of the country to save the railways from, I quote, "the anarchy of the government, from the mindless decisions of the politicians and from the self-destructive choice of the railway bureaucracy."

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To the Editor...

Toxic pesticides being imported due to faulty ban order

Sir, We refer to the above report which was printed July 16 in your esteemed newspaper. As the largest crop protection organisation in Bangladesh and in the world, this report may impact our credibility. As the report does not identify the companies involved in importing synthetic pyrethroids, we, Novartis, categorically deny being involved in the import of synthetic pyrethroids since the ban on the import of these products was imposed in March 1996 by the Government of Bangladesh. Our last imports were prior to March 1996. In fact, our principal had to bear losses due to cancellation of confirmed orders for our brand of synthetic pyrethroid due to this ban.

While there is quite a bit of confusion on the issue of synthetic pyrethroids, our stands is that the ban should be lifted given the benefits of using synthetic pyrethroids in agriculture. The withdrawal of the ban on use of synthetic pyrethroids against mosquitoes is a positive step in the right direction. We hope the authorities concerned will lift the ban as soon as possible for the use of synthetic pyrethroids in agriculture.

Sarwar Ahmed, Executive Director, Novartis Crop Protection, Dhannondi R/A, Dhaka 1209.

Taking responsibility

Sir, The biggest problem with our leaders is that they don't want to take any responsibility of the things going wrong during their rule. They must always remember that "the captain of the ship is entirely responsible for the safety of the ship and for whatever goes on in the ship, good or bad." Even President Nelson Mandela pointed this out in his speech given here on his recent visit. He said that the government must take complete responsibility of whatever goes wrong during its rule. It should never put the blame on any other party or the previous government. He also pointed out that the problems must be discussed with other parties, however small they may be. Another thing that he said, I think, was promises made to the people must be honoured.

All these are very good and wise points, and necessary for a good democracy. But sadly enough all are lacking in this regard in our country. There's no harm in taking good advice from learned and experienced man like him.

Polluted Dhaka city

Sir, A letter (Polluted Dhaka city) by Mr M A Jallil (DS-27 June '97) has appeared in this column. I have appreciated it, but felt pity. I am also appreciating DS's efforts of publishing it. But factually, who cares for all these write-ups! I remember the initiative, "Save Dhaka Campaign" which was organised at your end, and supported by scouts and other volunteers. It was a crusade against pollution and to turn Dhaka into a city with livable environment. At that time, DS brought all heads under one roof and across

OPINION Balanced Development of Road, Rail and Water Routes

Alif Zabr

The roads in Bangladesh developed in a satisfactory manner during the last few decades, as successive regimes accorded visible priority to this sector. It cost a lot of human and technical effort and money, as this deltaic region is crisscrossed with hundreds of rivers and thousands of canals; needing an abnormally high percentage of bridges and culverts per running mile; and millions of tons of earth filling to keep long stretches of the road network above the usual flood levels. The capital and maintenance costs are very high for this region. Road embankments resist the flow of waters and cause drainage problems, another maintenance headache for another ministry.

Both the road and inland water transport systems have to be developed in a balanced manner. Now the users prefer the roads for faster communication, as the other sectors, rail and inland waterways, have not yet seen the surge of comparative development, to compete with the road transport. A user should have ideally have equal choice in the three modes.

But develop in what ratio? The IWT sector should not receive step-motherly treatment vis-a-vis land surface transport systems (roads, railways); as a large percentage of points in the country can be reached cheaply using water transport (starting with the country boats, followed by the powered boats).

While new roads provide the glamorous demonstration to the state planners, the neglected railways are needlessly being bled to a slow death, for no scientific or economic reasons. With the high density of population in Bangladesh (approaching 1000 per sq km), and private car ownership at economically low level, the railway will continue to provide handsome profit for many decades (passengers and goods). The systems loss in BR is human and not economic or technical. The Malaysian railways was reported to have been offered for sale for one dollar only, but there were no bidders (population 16 million at that time, and concentrated in the coastal areas). The situation in Bangladesh is quite different. The Asian transit system might in the near future. Railways have traditionally been operated by the state universally. Now the government can let a private consortium operate it, keeping a minority state share (for coordination, and land and infrastructure facilities); as the public sector is morally and mentally incapable of operating and maintain BR, due to graft, lack of sense of duty and responsibility, and absence of financial accountability (sarkar ka maal darya may dhaal). The well developed rail workshop at Saidpur is an asset (as is the Machine Tools Factory at Gazipur). A time will come in the next couple of decades when the roads would be choked with traffic, and people would seek faster way of travelling by train. There has to be a parallel to the Asian Highway, namely the Asian Railway, with the potentiality of travelling from Singapore to Moscow, and further West, India and Pakistan have well-maintained railway systems. There is no excuse for creating a gap in Bangladesh. A fresh feasibility study by UN agencies may provide a glimmer of hope for this neglected railway sector. This policy neglect and indifference does not appear to have any justification, in a region with the highest density of population in the world.