

Will Nothing Remain Sacred?

This is politics gone mad. How can any political party worth the paper its name is written on denigrate the occasion that commemorates the martyrs of our language movement? There is no division of opinion as to the centrality of language movement in our subsequent national assertion. It is one of the few events which has not yet been taken over by the all enveloping partisanship that is eating into every aspect of our social life.

By all accounts it was a peaceful day. Hundreds of thousands of enthusiastic citizens — mostly young, and many under the banner of their respective schools, cultural and social organisations, and some even under the banner of their professional bodies — had gathered from the early hours to place wreaths at the Shaheed Minar. Mostly people were singing the well known special songs historically associated with this occasion.

An SOS Call

The BGMEA poll inter-face has produced an impassioned call to keep the Chittagong Port smoothly operational for the next ten years. The implication is certainly not that after a decade the flood-gates would be flung open to troubles.

More substantive sounds the diagnosis of the problem as being 'political'. Hence, a suggestion has been put forward to hold a national convention to sort it out on the basis of consensus. Theoretically, this is a correct approach given the fact that the intractability of the problem is attributable to the political party stalwarts' acting at cross-purposes in the Chittagong Port.

We think it is time the government issued an ultimatum to all concerned that if the management of Chittagong Port does not improve substantially with the employees' cooperation by a certain date, it would be handed over to the private sector to save the country's vital interests.

Appeal for Speedbreakers

Five persons were killed in a silly and sad traffic accident on Friday. A minibus, traveling to Aricha from Dhaka, collided head-on with a Sabhar-Ashulia tempo. The minibus, as a result of the impact, fell into a ditch. While veering offroad the mini ran over Shafiqul Islam, a student of J N University sitting still on his motorcycle.

In a country where no controls are effective on the movement of vehicles and vessels, the highway mini is the last thing one would allow to carry people. And, the tempo's high manoeuvrability in squeezing in and turning makes it an unusual denizen of the highspeed world of the highways.

A highway is now a seriously dangerous thing. It is on these that vehicles move at their fastest capacity. Its affairs must be seriously planned and operated. The reality is exactly the opposite in Bangladesh.

Japan's Defence Build-up Striking a Delicate Balance

Japan's concept of defence has been "based on prevention of armed aggression by building up a system capable of dealing with any form of aggression..."

JAPAN, one of the revanchist powers of the second world war proved difficult for the allies till the last and could be humbled into submission only with the first ever use of the atomic bomb. Ever since the awe-struck nation horrified by the holocaust was baptised to a new set of ethos in international law shunning its militaristic stance.

This left Japan despondent in a strategic milieu emerging after the war and the United States, the sole beneficiary of the decline of Japanese power in the Pacific, felt only too eager for providing conformist Japan her desperately needed security umbrella.

The Soviet military threat that sustained the American-Japanese alliance throughout the cold-war period is now rusting away or being broken up for scrap. Also the countries' continuing trade war, kicking over burden-sharing for US troops stationed in Japan as well as certain lapses and ambiguities in the alliance itself already vitiated US-Japan security understanding.



PERSPECTIVES by Brig (Rtd) M Abdul Hafiz

Nevertheless, Japan is still critically vulnerable to a number of insecurities. Although Russia is now less of a threat than the former Soviet Union, the continuing stationing of Russian forces in the Far East constitutes a destabilising factor for the security of the region with Kurile Islands not yet returned to Japan.

Given the animosity of DPRK, the chances of its possessing nuclear weapons and its long range missile covering Japan within their range, Japan has to determine the degree of unilateral action, she is required to take during any hostility from that quarter. Japan has territorial disputes with ROK over Takeshita Island and also with PRC and Taiwan over Senkaku Islands.

An impressive array of American forces that include an infantry division, a marine division, 430 combat aircraft and 80 ships are readily available in the region to be deployed in assistance of Japan, should she be threatened. Yet, the Japanese are increasingly sceptic in post-cold war realpolitik about America's political will to become militarily involved in Asia.

Moreover, as a consequence of growing insistence in some quarters that Japan assumes greater responsibility for its own defence, Japan quietly built up her defence system over the years within the frame work of its constitutional limitations. Japan's concept of defence has been "based on prevention of armed aggression by building up a system capable of dealing with any form of aggression..."

One of the interesting facts about Japan's military, often hedged by her ostensible pacifism, is that she has, according to the official statistics, the highest defence spending in the world only after the US. The vastness of Japanese economy allows her to spend as huge an amount as \$ 50bn (which comes to one per cent of her GNP) for the country's military.

On the surface, Japan's defence organisations and inventories look rather impressive. There are considerable quantities of major equip-

ment. Its force structure is flexible and balanced. SIPRI (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute) Year Book 1995 notes that Japan produces a full range of major conventional weapons even though the country's constitution forbids the export of defence materials but it is impossible to monitor the end use of such materials.

Japan's Army at about 151,000 is the best balanced of the three services in terms of the combat capability. It is equipped with tanks, heavy infantry divisions and two composite brigades. Japan developed her main battle tank, the latest being the Type 90 with main armament of 120mm smooth bore gun. The SDF has well over 1000 tanks with 108X Type 90 and 870X Type 74 — equally robust and reliable workhorse with 105MM gun. Japan has also produced 227 MM multiple launch rocket system and surface to air missile. Army has acquired 80 modernised AH-1s helicopters intended for anti-armour operation. It has a mix of self-propelled and towed artillery including about 380X F4-70 155mm guns indigenously manufactured.

Japan's Maritime Self-Defence Force (MSDF) has equally formidable inventory and can ensure passage of Japanese-flagged vessels throughout South China sea against existing threats. It is composed of 4x Aegis-equipped Kongo class destroyers capable of providing coordinated air defence over a wider area than other 6x Kongo class vessels with missile 5M-1MR Tartar area air defence system. 54x Frigates in the fleet are considered adequate for convoy close protection duties. Japan's 4x re-supply ships are capable of providing replenishment at sea with skill. MSDF is well equipped for "surveillance, escorts and the defence of ports and harbours, and straits."

Its 39x Mine clearance vessels and 9x counter measure helicopter squadron can cope with inshore mining and clearing choke points to main land Japan from the South. Nav-y's air arm is large indeed with Harpoon-equipped 115X P3c aircrafts. Its 2x Electronic Warfare (EW) P-3s aircrafts actually complement larger Air Force inventory of such aircrafts. MSDF is also acquiring amphibious ships of which four are already under construction. The government is likely to sanction construction of four more LST-type vessels which will be capable of carrying tanks, artillery and troops.

Japan's Air Self-Defence Force (ASDF) is large and competent for its constitutional purpose of defending Japanese archipelago with the potential of expansion. After having allocated the combat helicopter role to Army and maritime reconnaissance role to the Navy the ASDF concentrates on its primary tasks: Air Defence and strike. Japan manufactured US-designed F-15 strike aircrafts of which 200 are already in service. Some sources state that Japan has had AV-8B (UK Harrier) technology supplied by the US and the establishment of three carrier based on VSTOL (Vertical and Short Takeoff and Landing) can be achieved within short time. The joint development of FS-X "next generation support fighter" aircraft, a derivative of F-16 is under way with the US. Within 30 months Japan could construct an aircraft carrier from the keel up. She possesses a network of ground and early warning radars in addition to about 140 improved patriot ground-based anti-missile system perhaps to counter possible DPRK ballistic missile attacks.

Training standard of SDF appear adequate but a major drawback is the fixed perception of "defence" not allowing the defender to bring to bear the overwhelming force on the opponent at a decisive moment and against a decisive point which is a fundamental principle of war. Nevertheless, by all reckoning Japan's defence build-up is simply formidable except its purely defensive orientation. The full potential of it to be released depends on whether and when Japan would change its posture from defensive also to offensive.

However it is a matter only of time and decision by the Japanese people. A frank public discussion of Japan's national security concerns would probably fan Japan's latent nationalism. Ambitious politicians from Japan's three centrist political parties are likely to play to this nationalism — even though cautiously — and to the potent sympathies of the Association of War bereaved families, one of the Prime Minister Hashimoto's support groups. Till then Japan would continue to strike a delicate balance between the country's constitutional obligation of opposing the resurgence of militarism and its latent desire to assert an international role commensurate with Japan's economic power, if required, also militarily.

The Make-or-Break Elections

A wide range of intellectuals and secularist forces in India seem to believe that Hindutva will mean the collapse of India as one federal entity. Officially this is why a seemingly reluctant Sonia Gandhi was virtually compelled to enter the fray to shore up a teetering Congress.

FOR Hindu nationalists ranging from spaced-out RSS leader Bal Thackeray to the more human face of BJP's PM nominee Atal Behari Vajpayee, these elections are a make-or-break scenario to take the veil off secularism and get acceptance from the world for their extreme right wing colours. Confronting the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) juggernaut are a collection of disparate regional parties misnamed as the United Front (UF) and the once-mighty Congress, brought to its knees by internal feuding and in-fighting. Analysts earlier had pointed to an easy BJP walkover, by election day it had become a three-way horse race, a resurgent Congress brought back to life by Rajiv Gandhi's widow Sonia, rapidly closing the electoral gap, albeit most of it at the expense of the UF but a chance to garner enough seats to deny BJP a chance to form the Central Government.

Given the disparate nature of the religious, sects, ethnicity communities, etc secessionist movements based on religion (Kashmir, Punjab, etc) and ethnicity (Gorkhaland, Bodoland, Manipur, Nagaland, Mizoram, Assam, Tripura, etc) have proliferated. As the fabric of the nation's society together, secularism is being dumped by Hinduism's upper class for the more potent rightist ideology of Hindutva to try and inculcate a national spirit. Prior to the appearance of Muslims (1500 years ago) and Christians (500 years ago) to rule in succession, India was one homogenous Hindu nation with a fairly large Buddhist community. In their frustration at the never-ending problems, even people opposed to religious-based nationalism have turned to Hindutva believing that solutions can be found by gingerly embracing nationalism. On the mass level this concept has been fairly successful, at the intellectual level secularism has still got moral force to sustain it. While anything which negates equality can be said to be regressive and backward, there is a concerted effort to give it a more humane face from the intellectual plane down to the masses.

Since such a premise of unequal status militates against every concept of democracy, the Hindutva movement has no real political thought among its available literature. Intellectual mobilization is non-existent and as such the movement is sparsely served in this regard. One cannot have a cultural and/or political movement without an intellectual base to back up its pretensions. Lacking this, considerable money and effort is being made to make Hindutva's past and future bright, at least in intellectual terms, appealing to the masses desperate for change in their economic lives and who are finding a new spirit in Indian nationalism. Very cleverly BJP has stoked the ambitions of the youth to mesh with the frustrations of the old, using disaffection among the electorate against long ruling Congress Party and other mainline politicians, the years of misrule having shown them up to be bankrupt of fresh ideas, vision and/or hope. For the Muslims, who have been scarred by decades of brutal behaviour by Hindu nationalism and who are well aware that it was BJP's initiative that led to the destruction of the Babri mosque, the failure of the then ruling Congress to stop the sacrilege has been cleverly exploited by the BJP. Fear of retaliation and subjugation if they did not come into the BJP fold is acting as a negative incentive for the Muslims.

Realizing that they had reached a plateau of sorts that would always give them a majority vote but would not allow them to form a government in the Centre even in a coalition, BJP, the political wing of the secretive and militant RSS, seriously started courting the regional and minority vote against the grain of their stated ideology. They set up commensurate alliances in the North-West, in the East and in the South, looking particularly to the Muslim bloc as the great swing vote. This is nothing but blatant

hypocrisy, a clear-cut politics of convenience that could backfire and is already unraveling. The party faithfuls, rank and file, are more blunt about treating the Muslims as serfs and have militated against this clear deviation from their so-called beliefs and principles. With an inclination to compromise their way to power in bringing known criminals among the legislators into the cabinet in alliances for their government formation in Uttar Pradesh (UP), BJP made a mockery of their assertions that they would never ever sacrifice principles for power. This expediency because of a taste for power has made them vulnerable. A cold blooded view recognizes that BJP represents a divisive rather than a unifying force. Unifying a broad section of Central India BJP leaves the rest in tatters. In essence BJP may act as a catalyst to the eventual break-up of India into four separate identities. A wide range of intellectuals and secularist forces in India seem to believe that Hindutva will mean the collapse of India as one federal entity. Officially this is why a seemingly reluctant Sonia Gandhi was virtually compelled to enter the fray to shore up a teetering Congress.

The Sonia Gandhi factor was not expected to cause much of a flutter given the initial BJP lead as well as the Congress apathy but the Nehru charisma is something else and as South Asia knows, we believe in generational politics. Moreover, in South Asia, widows and daughters of dead Presidents/PMs seem to have special place of appeal to the electorate, e.g. Sirimavo Bandernake, Chandrika Kumaratunga, Indira Gandhi, Benazir Bhutto, Khaleida Zia and Hasina Wajed. Instead of her Italian lineage becoming a handicap as the BJP had hoped when it attacked her on this count as a "foreigner", it was counter-

productive crowd-puller. In the eastern culture a girl is believed to be adopted by the husband's family. In their panic the BJP resorted to over-kill and thus messed up in its attempts to convince the electorate. The prospect of being shut out by a BJP victory and a revival of the Bofors scandal galvanized her into action. Earlier she state-managed the downfall of the UF Government from behind the scenes through Sitaram Kesri in order to keep wraps on the Bofors issue. To keep it a closed matter she must ensure BJP remains out of power by emerging as a king-maker for the Coalition that comes to power.

The Sonia Gandhi factor is likely to raise Congress from its estimated count in the 130s to maybe about 180, the increases coming mostly at the cost of the United Front, significantly also some projected BJP seats. As the party getting the third place in number of seats the last time around, Congress felt compelled to support UF from outside the government, as the second largest majority they should be able to convince the UF to form a coalition government with them or give it the same support they did for the UF the last time around. BJP may be given first crack at forming the government, it is also apparent that the Congress and the UF, whatever their differences, would never allow a BJP government over their combined majority. Bihar's Laloo Prasad Yadav remains a wild card, what he does with his projected 20-25 bloc of seats may tilt the balance in BJP's favour. Pakistan would be much happier with a BJP Government, at least we would know where we stand with them.

Furthermore, after years of Muslims being labeled as fanatics, it would be interesting to see how the west copes with Hinduism's class-ridden viciously parochial society where human beings are not considered equal, in fact a vast majority of men and women are considered untouchable. As individuals or in coalition, Congress and/or the UF victory will mean more of what Pakistan has faced for the past 50 years. A BJP Government would show the Hindutva movement for the extremists that they are and take the camouflage off the face of rabid nationalism based on religious obduracy of the most blatant kind.

AS I SEE IT Ikram Sehgal writes from Karachi

Realizing that they had reached a plateau of sorts that would always give them a majority vote but would not allow them to form a government in the Centre even in a coalition, BJP, the political wing of the secretive and militant RSS, seriously started courting the regional and minority vote against the grain of their stated ideology. They set up commensurate alliances in the North-West, in the East and in the South, looking particularly to the Muslim bloc as the great swing vote. This is nothing but blatant

Never Call a Spade, a Spade....

Colour barriers, prejudice, discrimination and racism are all a big deal. For one thing, many of us know so little about it that we have no idea how to confront it. We, ourselves, may be helping to perpetuate a value system which in the end, discriminates against us.

THE guy who told me off was a large person. Like about seven feet tall, with wide shoulders and a voice like a ghetto blaster inside an elevator shaft. He was black. "You've got no idea what you've just said, have you?" he asked. Sure I have. All I said is that you should call a spade, a spade. What's wrong with that...? "Plenty!" interjected a woman, also black, kicking me under the table. We were sitting in the students' cafeteria at the University of Toronto, grabbing a quick snack before class.

Why has she kicked me, I wondered to myself, staring at her in surprise. What is the problem with these people, these blacks, why are they so ultra sensitive about everything. "She doesn't know what she said means," the black woman said quickly, putting her hand on the black guy's arm to calm him down because he was leaning forward, looking dangerous. "The word spade," my woman friend continued looking hard at me now, "is slang, derogatory. It's an abusive word for a black person." Oh, Oh dear. (I gaped at both of them). I had no idea. You mean spade is a derogatory term, like, uh, nigger...? The large black man made a growling sound. I think my use of the word nigger may have upset him a little. And so I hastened to explain to him that I did not mean to use the word nigger in a derogatory way, any more than I meant to use that harmless phrase, let's call a spade a spade, in a derogatory way. Honestly, I had no idea it was offensive to blacks. I know nigger is an awful word, but this is

the first I've heard that spade is a word like nigger, an abusive term for blacks... "Shut up," the black guy said to me.

"I beg your pardon...? Why don't we just drop it, let's get some coffee," my newly acquired black woman friend said brightly, kicking me under the table again, and pulling at my arm to go get some coffee. I rose after her, feeling like a smelly burp rolling off a surprised tongue. Later, when I realised that the black woman had saved me from a confrontation with a key member of the black student faculty, I thanked her profusely. She, in turn, proceeded to show me a scar on her right arm where she had been knifed by a gang of white youths in the UK when she was only 14 years old. I had no idea people hated blacks so much. I told her, I like black people. "Do you," she said quietly. Of course I do. I'm not prejudiced or anything. I have an open mind about everyone. We have to judge people by their actions, not by the colour of their skin. I pronounced it piously. "Would you marry a black guy...?" she asked, flatly. What. Sorry. What was your question...? Didn't quite understand it. Marriage is a personal choice, it's such a gamble anyway, ha, ha, so who knows anything about that, I laughed, very nervously.

"You're no different," she snapped. Thereafter, she avoided me. I discovered, eventually, that she had been engaged to a young man from the sub-continent, a South Asian-Canadian student, for almost a year. But the student was forced to break off his engagement because his family, especially his mother, was violently opposed to having a black daughter-in-law. Big deal, you might say. So what. What difference does it make to us, here, in Bangladesh, if a black girl got knifed by white youths in the UK. If a South Asian guy won't

she can only be lovely if she is fair. That colour is everything. Beauty is skin deep, after all. Colour barriers, prejudice, discrimination and racism are all a big deal. For one thing, many of us know so little about it that we have no idea how to confront it. "You have an interesting accent," said my white, North American boss to me soon after he had employed me. I had no idea what he meant, of course. Only later did I learn that "interesting" in the broadcast world is a polite term for

marry a black woman in North America? If black people have to cope with racism, wherever. Not our problem. If you've watched the advertisement for a product called "Fair & Lovely" on television, you may find an answer to these questions. I don't know about you, but every time I watch that ad I wonder what it must be like for people who are not fair. If I had a daughter who had dark skin, I would worry about the subtle message which ads like this might be sending to her: that

and African heritage of Euro-pean civilisation. Furthermore, it reduces all non-white people such as you and I to the status of potential and perpetual immigrants. Similarly, only non-white people are regarded to be "ethnic" in any way — in their customs, dress, food, beliefs or even activities. Marriage, for instance, is seen as a deeply significant cultural rite in the non-white tradition. Among white people, marriage (or its absence) are both seen as the "norm", not as manifestations of cultural or traditional preference. Violence, too, especially violence against women, is seen as an attribute of select, usually non-white cultures. Patriarchy, patrilinealism, child labour (abuse?) are regarded as inherently non-white in origin and expression. (This, in spite of the reality that in the countries of the west, child abuse has been proven to be a predominantly white, middle-class, male crime: serial killers, likewise, are far and large male and white; and native North Americans are among the most abused and exploited people in history.)

"I wonder," said this white colleague of mine to me once, "whether you had an arranged marriage — don't all you women have arranged marriages in Bangladesh?" No, I replied. I did not have an arranged marriage. "Really. Did you date before you



Coming Home... Almas Zakiuddin

Share our views about racism. I guess, talk about it; bring it out into the open. Refuse to believe in fair and lovely myths. And never use that phrase about a spade being a spade, ever again.