

BJP: Diluting Stance for Sake of Power?

They cannot have the cake and eat it too. In fact, this is an opportunity for the party to shed fundamentalism and join the mainstream. Let it work for conciliation and consensus as Prime Minister Vajpayee has proposed.

The Black Twentyfifth

Today is the Black Twentyfifth. This day 27 years back our people were subjected to something on the Halaku scale. Tens of thousands were shot and bayoneted and burned in the first shock attack of about 30 hours beginning the forenoon of March 25, 1971. The genocide was continued relentlessly over the rest of the ninth-month occupation by the Pakistan army. We remember all that this day which is a gateway both to an unhealing wound on our national psyche and to a glorious victory heralding our national independence.

For 27 years Pakistan has been averting its eyes from the facts of the genocide as well as the Liberation War for fear of facing its singular act of inhumanity of shooting and bayonetting non-belligerent civilians and dishonouring countless number of women. Its continued failure to meet up to its past crime makes it a prey to the successive governments' undiminished campaign of blanketing the people with ignorance of the crucial facts. Pakistan could have appeared in a better moral light if the opposite had happened.

In Pakistan and also in Bangladesh, on however small scale, there is a kind of wishing that had Pakistan not done some blunders, Pakistan would still be basking in its religious chauvinism and unmitigated hatred of India. Both these camps fail to cite the genocide as one of those blunders.

Japan had to grow truly big as well as great to come to apologise for its wartime excesses against humanity. Queen Elizabeth came very close to it by travelling up to Jallianwallabagh as if on a pilgrimage. That Pakistan is too small for that and exercises to remain as such for ever, if possible, is Pakistan's pleasure. What about the people, topped by the intellectuals and cultural leaders, of Pakistan? Should they still be shrouding themselves in their politicians' perfect fabric of misinformation — taking the very much erratic governments and the mindlessly ambitious military for saints clinically immune to doing bad things like genocide?

All this is, however, a measure of Bangladesh's failure to make a mark. Politically, diplomatically and, yes, culturally too. If Bangladesh, through a consolidation of its economy and politics, could become a presence of world significance, the world would sigh in sympathy over how this nation suffered to blossom into free nationhood. Our respect goes out to all that were martyred on the 25th and in its wake. It was firstly on their sacrifice that this land now breathes free.

Quiet Goes the 'Killing'

Twenty-six-year-old housewife Asia Begum is the latest addition to the lengthening list of garment factory employees killed in fire-related accidents. The young woman reportedly succumbed to her injuries sustained in a deja vu stampede at a city garment factory Tuesday last. It was the enactment of the same old story. Somebody raises fire alarm; workers in a desperate bid to go through the narrow single exit are caught in a stampede; in the process some are badly injured leading to one or two casualties. It is amazing the extent of time we as a society have lived with this pattern. Because these are not accidental deaths, they are murders plain and simple caused by human indifference. If only the garment factory owners had ensured spacious safety exits, these deaths would have never occurred.

We have been screaming hoarse to get it across for a long time now. But to the best of our knowledge nothing has followed. Only the other day factory workers and owners at a seminar maintained that there has not been any improvement in the working condition of the garments workers. We ask, why? What allows the garment factory owners to get away with murder? Don't they as societal members have the minimum ethical obligations? The whole thing smacks of wilful recalcitrance. The owners have it in their consciousness that human life is cheap and the workers to them are no more than disposable raw material.

This is untenable. We feel the government role in this matter has been appalling. Despite repeated casualties it has failed to make the owners observe the minimum mandatory safety standard. If it had meant to shake the factory owners out of their criminal complacency, this problem would have been long gone. Having said that we feel mere laying of law would not do. The whole system, before it gets sunken in our consciousness, has to be put through a process of periodic inspection. Only then things will change.

Dreaded Windstorm

Nor'westers swept through Tangail, Rajbari, Sirajganj, Chuadanga and Kushtia on Monday cutting deep swathes of damages across a somewhat diagonal terrain. This is an early tornadic assault ahead of April, the month usually associated with the season of nor'westers. A nor'wester is said to be a localised, violently destructive windstorm occurring over land. Nevertheless, in a small but populous country like Bangladesh what is 'localised' in scientific parlance can prove to be quite extensive. The gusty wind funnelling into an area is accompanied by hails and thunderbolts so that it plays havoc with human habitation. This time numerous thatched houses collapsed, a substantial acreage of standing crops was damaged, and at least seven persons died and three of whom when struck either by thunderbolt or a snapped electric wire. In Kushtia alone 50 people were injured, to say nothing of Chuadanga town, the worst-hit place.

The victims must be taken under the wings immediately and then helped materially to rebuild their lives quickly. The bereaved families with whom our heart-felt sympathies lie are entitled to special care. Monday's tornado comes as an early warning against what might be a series of nor'westers in the thick of summer. Let's roll up our sleeves to meet the challenge.

It has finally happened. The BJP and its parivar are in the saddle, although Jayalalitha gave them a few anxious moments. There is always something for something. Otherwise, it is difficult to imagine how the mess sweet talk by BJP leader Jaswant Singh, who went as an emissary to Chennai, made her drop all her claims. Her statement that let the government settle down first is ominous.

However, her demand that Tamil be made an official language betrays her ignorance. All the 15 languages, including Tamil, which are listed in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution, are recognised as official. This was made clear by the late Home Minister Govind Ballabh Pant, some 40 years ago, when the switch over to Hindi from English was vainly discussed and scuppered. English and Hindi were then accorded the status of a link language. They continue to be so but they enjoy no superiority over other official languages. In the present scheme of things, New Delhi is obliged to reply to a communication in the language in which it receives from the state.

But Tamil was one demand in the long list. What else has been conceded by the BJP to Jayalalitha will come into the open in due course. One only hopes that while making concessions, the party has departed from the culture which its Chief Minister in UP, Kalyan Singh, had initiated in appointing all the 99 defectors as ministers. Dropping cases of corruption against Jayalalitha will be in line with Kalyan Singh's thinking.

The Atal Behari Vajpayee government's problems are going to be from within, not without. An outsider like Congress wants to see the BJP suffering from the contradictions of its alliance with secular parties and the United Front laces strength to act on its own.

The Jayalalitha drama has set into motion something which the BJP may come to regret. The other allies have got the message. If she can be placated, why not they? Persons like mercurial George Fernandes will not stay quiet for long. Mamata Banerjee from West Bengal is no less vocal when it comes to display her displeasure. The Allies have already underlined their importance because they have been instrumental in bringing the support of four members from Haryana. The very appeal by Lok Shakti leader Ram Krishan Hegde to the allies not to put conditions suggests that certain hard bargains are sought to be struck.

But more disconcerting than all the claims put together is the statement by BJP leader Sunder Singh Bhandari. Since he belongs to the RSS hard core, he evokes more attention. In a TV debate, he has tried to draw a distinction between the BJP as a party and the BJP as the leader of a coalition government. He has said that the BJP will continue to demand the construction of temple, the deletion of Article 370 on Jammu and Kashmir's special

status and the adoption of a uniform civil code. But the government, he has argued, will follow the 'national agenda' which the coalition members have prepared and adopted.

Such a dichotomy cannot work, neither in the governance nor otherwise. There will be two points of decision-making. Where will the authority of government end and that of the party begin? What happens when the BJP as a party begins to feel that the government led

government. The clash was certain. When it came, the BJP withdrew its support, making the V P Singh government's fall inevitable. Will the party act in a similar way if and when it decides to launch a movement to build the temple?

The party's extremist colleagues in the Vishwa Hindu Parishad have already announced such an intention. The BJP too may have valid reasons to construct the temple because this is one of the promises it

made in its manifesto. What is the BJP-led coalition supposed to do? Any action against the BJP followers is difficult to envisage. The arrest of Advani brought down the V P Singh government. This time there may be another Advani if the movement is launched. Will he be arrested is the question.

The argument of Bhandari, if taken to its logical end, will mean that every BJP MP will wear two hats, one as the party member and the other as a member of the treasury benches. What does he do when he finds the government's line at variance with that of the

Prime Minister Vajpayee has proposed.

The same type of quibbling, which Bhandari advanced, destroyed the Janata experiment in 1977. At that time, the Jana Sangh, which subsequently acquired the name of the BJP, was a member of the Janata government as well as the party. It went back on its promise to snap ties with the RSS, which continued to follow the programme of parochialism and chauvinism. The Janata Party was split when the Jana Sangh insisted on sustaining relations with the RSS. The present coalition may face a similar situation if what Bhandari has adumbrated is true.

Even without the embellishments, which Bhandari has provided, it is going to be quite a feat to keep the disparate elements together. The BJP was right when it remarked that the United Front could not function properly because it was a haphazard combination of 13 parties. But the constitution of the present government is no different because it too comprises of the same number of parties. If not more. The chance of its going apart is greater than that of the UF because there is no ideology stringing the BJP and its allies together. The constituents of the UF were at least motivated by the same sentiment: Secularism. And when the chips were down they cooperated in the name of keeping the communal forces out. The BJP and its parivar has nothing in common except staying in power. Those who predict a mid-term poll by the next year may not be very wrong. There are already straws in the wind.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

by it has gone wrong? How does the party rectify the mistake of the government? Does it mean that the party is at liberty to start agitation any time? It is a familiar scenario. It has happened before.

Take the L K Advani's Rathayatra during Prime Minister V P Singh's regime. The BJP gave its support from outside. In one way, it was part of government because it voted the way the V P Singh cabinet indicated. Once the party felt that its purpose would be better served by organising an onslaught on the Babri Masjid, it went ahead with it, without consulting the

made in its manifesto. What is the BJP-led coalition supposed to do? Any action against the BJP followers is difficult to envisage. The arrest of Advani brought down the V P Singh government. This time there may be another Advani if the movement is launched. Will he be arrested is the question.

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Moral Condemnation is Not Enough

by Dr. A. R. Chowdhury

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FEDERAL Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic is at it one more time. Milosevic, one of the architects of ethnic cleansing in Bosnia a few years ago has now turned his attention towards Kosovo. During the last several days, Serbia's crackdown on the innocent Muslim population in the southern province of Kosovo has spread panic among the local communities who are leaving out of fear of an explosive conflict.

There are clear signs of ethnic cleansing of Kosovo as happened during the civil war in Bosnia, when Muslim and Croats were expelled from their homes or massacred by Serb forces.

Serbia rules the province of Kosovo, even though ethnic Albanians make up about 90 percent of the population of two million. Since 1981, Kosovo has been the focus of tension between an intrinsically local population and the Serbian nationalists. Led by Ibrahim Rugova, the leader of the Democratic League of Kosovo, the ethnic Albanians overwhelmingly backed independent in a referendum held in 1991. Slobodan Milosevic stripped Kosovo of its provincial autonomy in 1989, a move

that unleashed Serbian nationalism and eventually led to the breakup of former Yugoslavia. Serbia has ruled with a heavy police and army presence ever since. Rugova's policy of passive non-confrontation has helped maintain an uneasy peace in Kosovo since 1991.

The latest fighting began a few weeks ago, when rebels seeking the independence of Kosovo started a campaign against their Serbian rulers. The rebels belong to the Kosovo Liberation Army (UCK) and are funded and led by Albanians in exile. They are fighting for Kosovo's independence from Serbia, the dominant republic in the Yugoslav federation. They believe that independence for the province would be better than restoration of the autonomy stripped away in 1989. Ibrahim Rugova's position as the leader of the ethnic Albanians is under threat from the rise in popular support for the UCK.

President Milosevic struck back with predictable brutality in Kosovo to reassert Serbian

authority and deter further insurrection. Serbian forces have killed at least 100 people in last week alone. The Serbian reprisals in Kosovo, echoing the ethnic cleansing of Muslims in Bosnia, have been especially cruel; bodies have been dismembered and parents executed before their terrified children. Milosevic is adamant that Kosovo is Serbia's concern alone. The brutal crackdown could end up radicalising the broader Muslim population of Kosovo and work as a recruiting bonanza for the UCK.

The nature of the conflict in Kosovo is in some way different from what we witnessed in Bosnia. In Bosnia and Croatia it was a fight among members of the same Slav family, essentially speaking the same language but divided by religion and historical alliances. In contrast, the conflict in Kosovo is between two totally distinct ethnic groups Serbs and the Albanians.

Although ethnic minorities are scattered throughout the Balkans, Kosovo is especially

feared by many as the possible first scene of a nightmare scenario in which ethnic violence could spread to nearby Macedonia, which itself has an ethnic Albanian population. Violence in Macedonia could spur intervention by Greece, which has strong ties to Macedonia and is continuing to back Milosevic. This could eventually pull Albania, Greece, and Turkey into a conflagration that would consume much of south-eastern Europe.

For once, the United States appear to be on the right side in this conflict. Realising the need to act decisively and quickly in order to end the explosion of violence in Kosovo, the US is trying to convince the members of the Balkans Contact Group — Britain, France, Germany, Italy, and Russia to impose, at the very least, new arms embargo against Yugoslavia. However, Russia with its traditional ties to fellow orthodox Serbs is resisting any new sanctions. As a major arms supplier to Belgrade, Russia considers the threat of force or

extra sanctions against Belgrade to be unacceptable.

If his past is any indication, Milosevic will try to negotiate a political settlement with the Muslim population in Kosovo once his security forces have eradicated all resistance to his occupation. However, the international community must realise that the conflict can spiral out of control before Milosevic is ready to talk. They must be prepared to use force if Serb repression in Kosovo does not end.

In many ways, the violence instigated in Kosovo by Serbian forces is a last ditch effort of Milosevic to try and create a greater Serbia. Rather than seeing the opportunity for greater glory in Kosovo, many enlightened Serbs now see this as a lost cause. Struggling to stay afloat in an economy crippled by war, embargo and widespread government corruption, they believe the latest repression to be a desperate act of the Milosevic government to divert their attention from all domestic economic problems. Unlike the

early 1990s, when Milosevic whipped the Serbs into a frenzy of war against Bosnian Muslims, he has become so unpopular even among his own people that he can no longer resort to the nationalist argument to re-vamp his political image.

New violence in the Serbian province of Kosovo is not an obscure struggle in a remote and meaningless part of eastern Europe. It is a test of the moral authority, courage and relevance of NATO, and a challenge to the leadership of the United States. It is time for these countries, who consider themselves to be the standard bearer of human rights, to rally support behind swift, strong, and persuasive measures to deter Milosevic. Moral condemnation is not enough.

The US NATO, and other western countries dithered for several years while Bosnia was methodically dismembered. They cannot afford to abdicate their responsibilities again. If NATO and the US fail to act in a timely and effective way in this new crisis in the Balkans, they will be guilty of the worst sort of cowardice and moral ineptitude.

The author is a Professor of Economics at Marquette University, Wisconsin, USA.

To the Editor...

No export of gas

Sir, Attention of the Ministry of Energy and Mineral Resources has been drawn to your news items captioned "Govt considering gas export to India" and "Is the gas reserve big enough for export?" published respectively on March 22 & 23.

The government does not have any plans to export gas at present. The country has a shortage of gas now and there will be a shortage after the 160 mcfpd gas is added to National Gas Grid from Sangu Field next month.

As per the terms and conditions of the Production Sharing Contract (PSC), all the gas produced by the international oil and gas exploration companies will be utilised domestically for setting up industries in Bangladesh, especially in the power sector and downstream petroleum products.

Muhammad Liaquat Ali Khan, Senior Information Officer, M/o Energy and Mineral Resources.

It's the government's task

Sir, Unless the government is serious in setting its police force right, news of rapes, murders, robberies by the police personnel and the criminals combined shall come on pouring in the national dailies everyday and the people's government shall only be onlookers and the public will go on suffering.

A Concerned Citizen, Dhaka

Sanctity both before and after death

Sir, Ms. Ifrat Parveen raised an unnecessary debate "What about sanctity before death, Ms. Halima?" DS, 13.03.98 on the matters of Ms. Halima's letter, "Sanctity after death" (DS, 6.03.98). Ms. Halima rightly asked for appointing female doctors for doing postmortem of female dead bodies to maintain sanctity and to follow Islam in dealing with the dead bodies of Muslim women. Ms. Parveen is perhaps aware that female dead bodies are to be given bath by women, not men. If the system of postmortem was in vogue during the Prophet's time, the Muslim rule should have been the same.

However, Ms. Parveen's stance is also praiseworthy because she laid more emphasis on the sanctity of living fe-

males. We see the news of rape and killing not only of women but also of female children not only by outrageous adolescents but also by the law enforcers themselves for which Mr Mahfuz Anam wrote a commentary "We are outrageous..." (12.3.98). We often ask for exemplary punishment to the culprits, i.e., we run after cure only, but not prevention!

MAS Molla, Member, BAAS, Dhaka

Buses for students

Sir, Islamic Institute of Technology (IIT) is an international engineering institute which is a subsidiary organ of the OIC, located at Board Bazar, Gazipur district, 30 km north from Dhaka. Students from 54 Muslim countries are studying here. Besides foreigners there are many Bangladeshi students also. But it is a matter of great regret that IIT has no bus of its own for the students. Not only students, but also teachers and staff of IIT come to the institute by some local buses from Dhaka everyday which is totally dangerous and risky.

So, we the students are requesting the PM to give at least two buses for the students as a gift like other universities of our country. Students of IIT will be very grateful if the PM does so.

Md Saifur Rahman, EEE Dept., IIT, Board Bazar, Gazipur 1704

An American view

Sir, I have come to learn about the ongoing stalemate situation in the Department of Architecture, BUET, from one of my Bangladeshi colleagues (who is a graduate of the same department). Though it is true that educational contexts and contents in Architectural education differ from country to country, however, the current situation in BUET regarding the admission test is quite bizarre. Architecture, by virtue of its proximity to other branches of arts, especially visual arts, requires open mindedness and fluidity of thinking. Thought process in architecture should be more lateral rather than narrow and specific. One of the ubiquitous features of Architecture education is its unlimited boundary in seeking solutions for problems. Architectural solutions are not guided by any hard and fast rule or formula.

Ron Lewis, San Francisco, USA

Mohammadpur Red Crescent

Sir, It is quite disappointing to know that there is no doctor in well-known Mohammadpur Red Crescent at night. I went to Mohammadpur Red Crescent on 12.3.98 at about 10 pm along with somebody whose father was in need of blood. It was my pleasure to help the patients by donating blood. But what I saw at that night is totally surprised me. The officers in the Mohammadpur Red Crescent said that there are two doctors work in office time. So, it is not possible for them to make cross-match now. They also added that we can take blood but we cannot test and make cross-match. As the cases were not emergency we went to Bengal Nursing Home Hospital where the patient hospitalised and we told all these to the doc-

tors. Then the doctors said that you donate blood in Red Crescent and we can make cross-match here.

Since Mohammadpur Red Crescent was the nearest one we went there again and I donated blood. I took my blood to the hospital and submitted to the doctors. During all these times patient was suffering from anaemia.

Is it possible to think a Red Crescent centre without a single doctor?

Mahmud Kaleli, English Department, University of Dhaka

English medium schools

Sir, This is in response to a letter by Mr Yousof Jamil on the 20th of March. Mr Jamil suggested that the standard of education provided by English medium schools is below the standard of education provided by Bengali Medium schools in which they studied during their time. Now, let me ask you one simple question, when was this time... The Stone Age?

If the standard of education and teachers is so below average then why is it that most of the students who get a good TOEFL or SAT result and fly off abroad with a good scholarship usually from an English Medium school? There may be a few exceptions, but when Mr Jamil said all English medium schools have surely made a mistake. I am not saying that Bengali medium schools have a very low standard, but only that he was wrong to brand all English medium schools below standard, because after all, Mr Jamil might have the experience, but we the people are not blind either.

As far as his nephew is concerned, I believe that guardians can do a lot about this ordeal.

S M Iftekhhar Ahmed, 65/E, West Rajabazar, Dhaka.

Is the centre falling apart?

Sir, I noticed the front-page on the 22nd of March with horror and dismay. A coloured photograph was printed where boats were shown unloading rice at Bhuapur Ghat in Tangail. One might ask — so what's the harm?

Well the harm lies in the fact that the rice is imported from India. Not that I have anything against Indian products,

but are we so incapable to produce rice? Lately there has been an extreme shortage of electricity, because of which all the areas are going through a massive loadshedding. Are these the signs for future electricity deals with our neighbours too? Price of essentials are beyond the reach of the normal people. Electricity, water and gas is in short supply. Why is everything breaking down?

Maybe someone should notify the PM as to what is really taking place in this country of ours.

Masroor Ahmed Deepak, Dhaka

Teacher, indeed!

Sir, To save his skin from administrative action for academic irregularities, a teacher of the Department of Architecture has stooped down to involving students in the name of saving architectural studies in Bangladesh. This is the teacher who has given only 2/4 lectures out of 28 lectures in one single term and was an examiner of the same subject.

Another illustrious example of his contribution to architectural studies is the questions he sets in final exams. Sample questions set by this teacher (30 minutes time allotted for each question are: (a) "Name the eleven post of the Executive Committee of the IAB", (b) "What is a 2 envelope system?" Indeed he is a teacher "popular" among students!

M Islam, Ex-student of Architecture, BUET

"The Quest for Political Leadership"

Sir, I would like to draw your attention to the article "The Quest for Political Leadership" published on 16th March 1998. I cannot but agree with him in his analysis of the state of our political leadership, past and present. It is also right that our role models of leadership should be persons like Dr. Mahathir Mohamad. He has also stated that the character of such a leader should be. But how such a leader will come up? Definitely not from the stock we have now. They just do not pass the criterion any way. I have a suggestion.

We really should not look for one pragmatic leader who will salvage us from darkness of a pit to light above. We have done it before and it had proved fail-

ure. We have to make our quest through democratic process. Although our political system is democratic as of now after 16 years of military rule, still we cannot say that democracy is playing its proper role in our society. One major criterion of democracy is people's participation in all affairs. This participation does not end just at the time of voting at national elections. The general public should rise to understand to do the needful for democratic activities. To make this happen I would suggest re-structuring of the tax system.

We should reduce the personal income tax slab from Taka 60,000 to Taka 24,000 per year. All people salaried or otherwise shall pay personal income tax. The amount of tax may be very low for the low income group, but whatever be the amount, tax should be paid. However to increase the earning of people we should take steps to create new jobs. One way is rapid industrialisation.

Nurul Bashir, Dhaka

Marriage registration

Sir, Generally we know a marriage is a social contract. In wider sense, it means a tie between a male and a female. The objects of a marriage is procreation and legitimation of children. According to the Muslim law it is not a sacrament but a civil contract. So, a contract cannot be made without documentary evidence.

Although there is no need for registration in a Muslim marriage as it is not made obligatory in the Quran or in the Sunna. But on the other hand, there is no prohibiting sanction against registration of marriage. It can be useful various kinds of protection including denial of a marriage, establishment of paternity and right to inheritance.

A marriage can be valid without registration but the non-registration of marriage causes a doubt. Only 25 per cent of our rural marriage are registered. As a result, many people are breaking away marriage easily and females face many harassments and become deprived of their marital rights. So, I individually think that registration of a marriage should be obligatory.

Shohel Rana, 509, Zia Hall, Dhaka University.