

Nuclear South Asia: Cry for Alternative

by Mohiuddin Ahmad

In the face of the ongoing jingoistic rhetoric of the nuclear lobbies of the two countries, followed by the suspension of people's fundamental rights under a state of emergency in Pakistan, there is an urgent need to take a bold initiative towards developing a people's peace movement in the subcontinent.

Organise Trips to BJMB

The Bangabandhu Bridge is under a siege. There was no sign of abatement of thousands strong crowds, curious and proud, milling around the approaches and on the bridge itself — even on the eighth day of the commissioning of the bridge. Schools and colleges, clubs and associations have all drawn up programmes to visit this one wonder of Bangladesh. Add to it the villagers of far and near all pining to have a feel of it, to touch it and take stroll on it. In six months there may not be a crowdless BB for one day. Even after six years, a constant crowd will persist — including foreign tourists and government guests. And why not?

Now that authorities are planning to effectively fight the siege and create conditions to make the BJMB secure and serviceable to the maximum, we would want to caution the Bridge authority against traps of tempting foolhardiness. The bridge is as much a thing to be used as it is to be seen and exulting about. Rather than fighting the crowding, the authority can indeed use it to cultivate that sadly missing thing in the Bengalees — a tangible object which they can feel proud of. This is one good pillar of national integration and one on which a positive forward-looking national spirit can be built.

Achievements we need to sustain us as a polity and after the great edifice of this state, the second highest achievement — very tangibly — is this bridge. The question of foreign participation need not water down the fact that the Bangladesh state has built it with its people's own resources.

Let all of Bangladesh in turn come to see it and love it. And know in their minds we are capable of even bigger things, in every direction and dimension. Only that they do it in an organised way to let the bridge function securely and optimally.

Suppose a busful of school children are taken out on a guided tour to the BJMB. What will they do? Cross the bridge by paying a 1200 Tk toll and recross it after paying the same amount again? And then? Go back to Dhaka and back to school dodgery after paying through the nose? And what do they spend the whole day? We have a number of serious suggestions to make here.

Let there be shuttle buses on either end of the bridge — ferrying sight-seers every ten minutes. And let there be also shuttle trains between Jamuna East and Jamuna West stations taking care of the visitors — exclusively. Flat-topped launches may be arranged to serve tourists who would like to have the view from the river. These vessels can house restaurants. At the stations and the shuttle bus stands let the authority sell souvenirs reminding ever the buyer of the visit, as also literature on the bridge and the river, in Bengali and English.

It will be both foolish and hurtful of the BJMB authority if even one of the enthusiastic visitors return without a sense of wonderment and pride and an urge to come back.

Environmental Gimmick

June 6 put on a big show of environmental concern against the air we breathe, virtually panting our lungs out, and the impermissibly high decibel that rips through our ear-drums everyday. Iron-clad measures were announced with a broad grin matching seemingly the defiance and mischievous skirting of the rules by the motorized vehicles. We welcomed all these adding only that they better begin with the belching government vehicles first and then take on the rest with ample preparedness against the guiles and mule-like stubbornness of their influential owners. True to our promise for a follow-up editorial on the progress of the campaign, after a week we did run one to remind the Environment Minister that the result was a comical roar-turned-whimper. Another two weeks have passed since our call-attention effort and here we are now with a detailed picture of the conclusive failures.

The Environment Minister along with her senior officers gave a great velle while leading the glitz and fanfare of the campaign but when it came to operationalise it, the difficult job was entirely left to the toothless Directorate of Environment. Besides distributing warning stickers to some vehicle operators and stamping warning seals on the drivers' blue books nothing by way of penal or legal action has been processed against anyone of them. Why was it nor foreseen that the offending vehicle operators could refuse to stop for checking by some innocuous-looking environment officials? What can an ill-equipped and powerless set of people do other than turn a meek face to the menacing grimace of the numerous recalcitrant drivers in the streets? Unsurprisingly also, the owners associations are issuing threats to the campaigners. Small wonder the environment directorate has blamed the ineffectiveness of the campaign on the non-cooperation of the law enforcing agency. Where were the magistrates? Show a concern prior to or on the World Environment Day and then quietly return to business as usual counting on the elasticity of public tolerance — that seemed to be the idea.

Buses for Women

We welcome Bangladesh Road Transport Corporation's decision to launch a city bus service exclusively for female passengers. Given the inadequate state of our public transport system and the occasional embarrassment felt by women in close encounters with their male counterparts for a place in a crammed bus it is an excellent idea and should have been implemented earlier.

It has been quite some time since the authorities announced their decision of introducing taxi-cabs to the city streets. But nothing has happened so far as one tentative schedule after another has gone by. Buses for women should arrive on the streets sooner than later. Getting more vehicles on the road would automatically mean more pressure on Dhaka's traffic laden streets. It is imperative the authorities keep in mind the problems that will be brought along by every decision to float new set of vehicles on the road. One useful idea to tackle with the problem of congestion would be to quickly implement the projects for flyovers, bypasses, underpasses that are in hand. More underpasses not only for pedestrians but for vehicles as well perhaps. Piecemeal approach would prove costly and lead to unnecessary and eminently avoidable hassle.

THE political and diplomatic fabric of the region got a tempestuous jolt when India conducted underground nuclear test at Pokhran, not far from the border of Pakistan, on 11 May 1998. This was retaliated by Pakistan in the desert of Baluchistan on 28 May. As soon as the news of nuclear tests broke out, there were spontaneous jubilation from different walks of life which is indicative of how the minds of the common people have been framed by the state-sponsored media and other forces of chauvinism.

The forces of peace and harmony across the border were caught in surprise. There were risks in expressing an instantaneous different opinion against the "popular mood", as proponents of anti-nuclear stance would have been branded as agents of the enemy country (Pakistan or India). Such propaganda sells well.

In India, the Marxist Communist Party was the lone exception among the major political parties which condemned nuclear tests. In one protest march in Delhi in the first week following the nuclear test, fifty odd NGOs and groups could mobilize not more than three hundred and fifty participants. After the Pakistani test, many have come to senses. Similarly in Pakistan, there are commentators who also started questioning that nobody is going to win in this race. But no major political party with representation in the parliament has condemned the tests yet. The government of Pakistan also declared a "state of emergency" and suspended relevant clauses in the constitution containing exercise of fundamental human rights.

On 2 June 1998, representatives of the Pakistan-India People's Forum for Peace and Democracy (PIPPFD) were prevented from holding a press conference in Karachi and were savagely assaulted by activists from Shabbab-e-Milli (a front organization of Jamaat-i-Islami). The PIPFD wanted to express its concern over the Indian and Pakistani nuclear tests. At the same time, a group of Indian scientists, expressing their concern over the emerging South Asian nuclear arms race, were attacked by activists of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in Bangalore.

Both the countries did not sign the CTBT, though others in the region did. The major argument of India for not signing CTBT is that she is for total disarmament and the nuclear capability should not be monopolized by a few. India is very much critical of the "double standard" played by the USA and its allies. Pakistan's case is simple: if India signs CTBT, we will also sign.

In a series of meetings held in Karachi and attended by representatives of several political parties and citizens' groups, an attempt has been made to formulate an "alternative opinion". A Committee was formed in the first meeting to chalk out a programme to mobilize public opinion against the nuclearisation of the sub-continent. It was named the Action Committee Against Arms Race (ACAAR). In

a statement, the participants expressed that all kinds of arms race, be it conventional or nuclear, are immoral as they not only rob the people of their right to health, education, housing, employment and other basic needs, but put their and their future generations' existence as human beings in peril. The Committee took stock of the new situation and expressed its concern about a South Asian nuclear race between two underdeveloped countries whose people at these days fighting street battles for drinking water and electricity, leave alone schools, hospitals, roads, housing and jobs. Among the signatories were representatives from PNP, PILER, Progressive Writers Association, Tehrik-e-Ishtekal, Social Democratic Movement, Pakistan Workers Confederation, Jeayee Sindh Mahaz, Railway Mefnatkash Union and Tehrik-e-Niswan. Experts of the statement are as follow:

The nuclear tests carried out by the BJP-led government in India had exposed the true designs of that fascist, religious fundamentalist party of the upper castes. The BJP which had polled hardly 30 per cent of the votes cast in the recent Indian general elections had no mandate from the people of India to indulge in such a criminal exercise which has taken the India-Pakistan cold war and arms race to a new stage of nuclearisation of the subcontinent with all its alarming consequences. Similarly, in the

1997 elections the people of Pakistan had not given the Pakistan Muslim League or Nawaz Sharif any mandate to conduct nuclear tests or make nuclear weapons.

We do not wish to quote figures because they are too frightening to look at. The worst victims of this war-mongering, arrogant and competitive nationalism (fraudulently rationalized in the name of "security") are ordinary people. The social and economic costs of development, foregone thanks to military posturing, have already proved onerous. For all the official bluster about pursuing "national greatness", India and Pakistan both feature, by all accepted indices, at the bottom of the human development ladder.

As for Pakistan (which is also applicable to India) an economically stable Pakistan with strong democratic institutions and without nuclear bombs will be many times more secure than an economically shattered Pakistan with a few nuclear weapons in its arsenal but with a population robbed of their basic human rights to a decent existence. This is a lesson one should have learnt from the fate of the mighty Soviet Union which collapsed and disappeared, not because it had no nuclear weapons and delivery systems but in spite of having so many of them. Soviet economy fell victim to the armaments race, the nuclear race and crashed under its weight.

and with it went down the Soviet State.

The already entrenched international Nuclear Club has already demonstrated its inability to stop any country from going nuclear. If the countries of this exclusive club are sincere about every country signing what they call the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) and Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), they should set an example by starting to dismantle their own nuclear arsenals first.

In the face of the ongoing jingoistic rhetoric of the nuclear lobbies of the two countries, followed by the suspension of people's fundamental rights under a state of emergency in Pakistan, there is an urgent need to take a bold initiative towards developing a people's peace movement in the subcontinent, and also globally, that aims at people-to-people reconciliation and maximal economic, political and social progress for all the peoples of South Asia through close regional cooperation. To promote peace is the most urgent task of all the people of goodwill and liberal outlook. It is high time the peoples of South Asia took a bold initiative and forced their governments to publicly announce the renunciation of nuclear tests and production of nuclear weapons and missiles. (Press Release, ACAAR, Karachi).

The response of SAARC

leaders other than India and Pakistan was too cautious and protective. There were statements from spokesperson of respective government that "we are for peace and they (India or Pakistan) may have genuine security concerns. There was no condemnation. The SAARC summit meeting scheduled to be held on 11-12 July have been postponed till end July."

Where there is a war cry by the war-mongers, sensible people for peace, progress and grass-roots democracy also cry for a different world. This has been formulated in emotion-packed words of a poet, Sahir Ludhianvi:

*Dear civilized people
Be this blood ours or theirs
Humanity is bloodied
Be this war in East or West
A peaceful earth is bloodied.*

*Whether the bombs fall on
homes or borders
The spirit of construction is
wounded
Whether it is our fields that
burn or theirs
Life is wrecked by starvation.*

*It matters not that tanks advance
or retreat
The womb of the earth becomes
barren
Be it a celebration of victory or
loss' lament
The living must mourn the
corpses.*

*That is why, o civilized people
It is better that war remains
postponed
In your homes, and in ours
It is better that lamps continue
to flicker.*

The writer is Coordinator, South Asia People's Committee.

Eliminating Terrorism from Student Politics

Quest for Original Prescription

by A R Shamsul Islam

In former days national politics was largely honest, transparent, people-oriented, constructive and selfless. Student leaders were imbued with those positive qualities. As national politics deteriorated and degenerated student politics, too, suffered a corresponding slidown.

NEVER has probably, in recent times, a topic gained so much sensation as the banning of student politics. Discussions on the matter have poured down in such a fashion that if one could have put them in black and white it would have filled miles of pages.

While everybody is in full eulogy over the glorious role of the students in the near past in shaping the destiny of the nation, a lot of them have categorically suggested a moratorium on student politics for the present to restore the normal academic life. There is no denying the fact that student terrorism has gravely crippled the educational institutions. Hijack, loot, toll collection, tender controlling, gun fight, outraging girl students etc. have occupied, so to say, the order of the academic life. Escalating session jams have relentlessly cut short the future professional life of a student.

An opinion poll conducted by some private organisations reveals that majority students of the Dhaka University want moratorium on student politics but the teachers, in majority, have verdicted against this prohibition. Still, there are a quite sizeable number of persons, no less thoughtful, who have boldly advocated against banning student politics. They tenaciously preach that student politics did many a gem in the past in the critical juncture of the nation like the Language Movement of '52, Mass Uprising of '69, Liberation War of '71, Dictator's Fall of '90 etc. and it has not outlived

its necessity, particularly in the context of our country which is highly illiterate, vastly poor and where political leadership is unfortunately far from honest. What is needed is to clip off terrorism from student politics. Banning the latter is a ridiculous prescription of cutting the head to remove headache.

While studying the deterioration in student politics from the past to the present, we should also notice the forerunning deterioration in national politics. During the forties, fifties, sixties and even seventies the national politics was largely fair, rational and constitutional. Towards 1947 of undivided India the national politics chiefly aimed at winning independence from the British and was quite lucid. In Pakistan regime some great movements were launched against the fascist government but these were not merged with unconstitutional hiccups. The movements were well-meant, well directed. Their leaders were highly educated, wise and vastly selfless. They could rise above petty, personal interests. "Horse trade" was not the order of politics of that time. It may not be true that all politicians of those days were free from personal greed. But that greed,

too, must have some limit and form because a national leader could not think of retaining his position in the eye of the public by accumulating repeated slurs.

National politics is the trend-setter of politics of other sectors. It is like the fountainhead of political pattern. It trickles down other tiers of politics like labour politics, youth politics, student politics etc. Politics of money and muscle is of a recent origin. When there raged political movements against British government before 1947, the rulers, in general, did not practice the policy of subsidising them by scattering money among the agitators or cowering them down by employing extra-legal forces. During the Pakistan rule the West Pakistani rulers were greatly irritated by the political movements of East Bengal. But they tried to quell them with the help of the police, rifles and army. Governor Monem Khan was practically the first to initiate the process of employing mercenary students (NSF) to create a thin line of student front, in exchange of bread and butter, in support of the government. He may be said to have begun sowing seeds of terrorism in student politics but it could not give the government

any relief from the students' anti-government agitations.

Most of the movements of those days were hurred for ending exploitation of the government and the protesters and their leaders had no link to personal gains. A spirit of selflessness born of a love for the nation featured their character and conduct. But things began to worsen drastically. After the Liberation War of 1971, there came up the youth used to the use of arms. The war-ravaged country cropped up many a social and political problem. Old values receded into backseat. Capable leaders to guide the youth to nation building works were in dearth. Concept hitherto unknown regarding immediate acquisition of wealth by hook or by crook began to gain ground fast. The leaders, supposed to nip the concept in the bud, were the first to stoop to it. There were many others to jostle to join the bandwagon. Even the erstwhile 'muktijodha' students returned to the campus bathed in this new psyche.

Seemingly the philosophy that has now struck deep into the minds of the political leaders is that no power politics can be done in Bangladesh without massive money and musclemen and a network of operation devices. Student is the most sensitive active sector in the political circuit. They cannot be allowed to remain unhooked to

the network. Student leaders drunk with the new philosophy of material acquisition are found ready responders to the call made by the politicians.

Student politics is no isolated phenomenon. When national politics is affected with terrorism, it is simply simplistic to believe that the political arenas of other communities will remain infection-free. The virus of terrorism cannot be kept confined to a particular area particularly in this age of computer communication.

By banning student politics by law can it be ensured that educational institutions will remain free from violence? Debarred from open politics it may tend to go underground yielding no better results. The situational proximity between the political leaders and student leaders is an undeniable reality. The link, declared or undeclared, between the two is too deep seated to go. It is often quoted that the constitution of the Awami League does not bear any provision for any student wing. But who can deny that the Chhatra League works directly under the umbrella of the Awami League? Practices, long-timed and deep-rooted, do not necessarily cry for legal coverage for their continuation.

In former days national politics was largely honest, transparent, people-oriented, constructive and selfless. Student

leaders were imbued with those positive qualities. As national politics deteriorated and degenerated student politics, too, suffered a corresponding slide-down. The national leaders of those days were wedded to idealism and no force of temptation could break them away. But what situation prevails now? Idealist and ideal national leaders are our terrible want. Of course, there are some leaders who are truly honest and patriotic. But the hard fact is that they are being marginalised day by day. The evident degeneration of national politics has infiltrated into politics of other arenas, in which the students' world is one. The cruel truth is that unless national politics is cleared of terrorism, politics of other sectors cannot be hoped to be violence-free. The need is to, prescribe for curing the malady of national politics. If that be cured, which is till now found non-attainable, student politics will be automatically purged of many of its blemishes that have bedevilled the educational institutions. Here lies the original prescription which is, to our great distress, nowhere within our sight now.

In the fairy tale, the life of the rakshas (monster) is kept concealed in the body of a bumble-bee transported beyond the corners of the world. To kill the 'rakshas' there is no other way than killing the bumble-bee. Killing terrorism from student politics downright needs eschewing terrorism from national politics. In the fairy tale an angel in the guise of a prince is ordained to do the mission. In our case when will that angel, no matter in which guise he or she comes, appear?

The writer is retired Principal Govt Mahila College, Pabna

To the Editor...

Letter from America

Sir, I do not intend to enter into a debate with Dr Fakhruddin Ahmad (Letter from America) but a constrained to seek the courtesy of your columns again to put across the facts about the 1947 referendum in NWFP.

It is surprising that Dr Ahmad should base his assertions solely (your issue of 1 July) on the book written by the son of the leader who "wanted to join India."

How would you dismiss the reality that almost 100 per cent people who voted in the referendum opted for Pakistan.

Karam Elahi
High Commissioner of
Pakistan to Bangladesh

The Bridge politics

Sir, With the auspicious opening of the Multipurpose Bridge over Jamuna, dubbed and hailed by everybody irrespective of party affiliation as "magnificent engineering feat," on the 23rd of June '98, Bangladesh has not only heightened her image in the international arena by entering the world books of records but also paved the way for rapid economic development of her far-flung north-western region, bridging the hiatus between centre and periphery, and thereby accelerating a balanced development, hopefully to a considerable extent. Undoubtedly, it's a magnificent achievement for the people of this country in general, and not for any single party.

The way the Bridge opening ceremony was hosted disappointed many. It rather looked like a birthday celebration of the ruling party itself. The speakers lauded the role of the ruling party, robustly ignoring the immense contributions made by other parties. I can't understand how they claim the Bridge to be a great achievement of theirs as it is they who manifestly opposed the idea of the

Bridge. Need I remind you, the fellow readers, of the dawn-to-dusk general strike called by this very party on the very day the foundation stone of the Bridge was laid about four years back in an abortive bid to thwart the mega project? Need I remind you of the Awami League's non-cooperation and blockade that pushed its construction work to a virtual halt for about three months which cost the nation an additional amount of more than 100 crore taka? This is nothing but a sheer wastage of resources on the part of the nation as a whole or should I say a "dead-weight loss" in the jargon of economics.

Jamil Ahmed
Sylhet

"Death wish: USA and Bangladesh"

Sir, I have read, with a chill running through my spine, the article "Death wish — USA and Bangladesh" written by Mizanur Rahman Shelly from USA and appearing in DS of 18th June '98.

The horrible incident which shook whole of America took place in Arkansas only in March last. A 13 year old school boy wanted to have a deeper relationship with a girl — a fellow class mate. On rejection by the girl the boy wanted to take revenge. The boy accompanied by even a younger chap (11 year old) collected fire arms from his grandpa's armory, went to his school in a microbus, set the fire alarm ringing and as soon as the bewildered teachers and students came out sprayed them with bullets — killing one lady teacher and four students including the girl who refused.

The live scenes on TV were simply terrible. In his write-up, Shelly focused on the political history and socio-economic reasons behind the precarious condition of the present American society. Mr Sersfield, San-

francisco City Manager, rightly said in 1980 that "the San Francisco people were afraid of their own children as three-fourths of the crimes there were committed by the young below seventeen."

Aren't we facing almost the same scenario today in Bangladesh?

It is natural that a girl in teens is more mature mentally and physically than a boy of her age. Thus when a school boy makes an advance towards his fellow class-mate, the girl is supposed to refuse because the boy, in the words of a TV commentator on the aforesaid incident, does not know "what is life and what is death". In other words what is a 'fun' to the boy is a major turning point of the girl's entire future life.

We in Bangladesh are very fast approaching to that stage (by the courtesy of the Internet and satellite TV channels). Now we see our knife-wielding Romeo killing their lady-loves on refusal. Rape in Bangladesh has become an almost everyday event and these are perpetrated by those who hardly understand sex. Only the other day four boys were roped by police for raping a six year old child in Sutrapur area and it is surprising to know that one of those four was an eleven year old kid! I am quite an aged person having passed through three different periods namely British, Pakistani and the present Bangladeshi model and I frankly admit that I shiver in my boots to see our head-long fall towards a fathom of no-return. Throwing acid on girls is a child's play now. The monstrous psychopaths are moving around us. The sooner we catch them the better for the entire society which includes each one of us. None of our sisters and daughters will be safe even inside house corners if we don't wake up now to arrest the situation.

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OPINION

The Social Responsibility of the Politicians

Abul M Ahmad

How much is too much politics — considering that 99 per cent of the population above the age of 18 do not actively take part in politics — and the most excluded the voters? How much is excessive politics for the politicians themselves? Strong medicine is prescribed in small and controlled doses.

The electorate is not supposed to indulge in political programmes round the year, week after week. It is an undesirable enforcement by the political system to serve its own ends, whether it be nationally oriented or party oriented. Begin with politics, end with politics; and in between the two, live with politics. God is one, but variety in life is not immoral.

Professional politicians are supposed to carry on their work quietly most of the time, and surface now and then to reveal to the public that they exist, not for themselves, but for us voters and citizens, without making much noise and dislocation during the non-election period. Their place of work, and activity, is in the Parliament, not on the streets and in the processions. They are supposed to work in their constituencies without disrupting normal routine life. Why they cannot concentrate on their own jobs, and let others concentrate on theirs? Is politics a service-oriented pastime, as universally understood?

Our tireless but rolling politicians are extremely busy in cleaning up the mess, created due to non-democratic breaks for many years. The political weaknesses created the political mess by allowing the import of the 'outsiders'; and the cur-

rent standard of politics is responsible for the continuation of this other kind of mess (weak-kneed convalescent patient) for a quarter of a century; or half a century, depending on which phase/s we are willing to consider. Our politics and politicians are 'attractive', noisy, disruptive, and distractive. They crave for attention all the time — like babies — and detract us from concentrating on our own day-to-day work.

What has happened to our adult behaviour pattern? Our social scientists are not doing enough research on our breed of political leadership. The western books are full of good guys. Why there is no consensus on our leaders, and respect for 'other' leaders? This personal split has split the nation into two main streams, with the third waiting to wedge in.

The politicians never hold debates, seminars, workshops to analyse their own syndromes; nor allow others to do so, as the society is divided into two political camps, leaving no third neutral group to judge or referee the performance. Neutrality has lost its credibility! How do we achieve unity towards the single goal?

A Jattiya Sangsad delegation went abroad in the recent past, courtesy UNDP, to study parliamentary systems (an endless exercise for decades), for modernisation of the local services at this end. It may not mean modernisation of our politicians — perhaps that might be taken as interference in the internal affairs of their mental processes.

Here are some technical ideas (confined to one para-

graph): use negative feedback in the microphone system to lower the voice; the louder the human speaker; auto cut-off the mike at the end of the allocated time-period; on-line service internet/www (for global publicity); electronic monitoring system for invoking the penalty clauses imposed by the Hon. Speaker.

Attention is respectfully drawn to the social responsibility of political behaviour (not the society's behaviour towards the politicians). Since the politicians are a part of the same society, do they have to behave all the time in a political manner? There are so many non-political issues to choose from, for keeping the politicians engaged in nation-building activities. Perhaps there is a Farakka barrage effect in the upper region.

The terrorists are the illegitimate output of such indoctrination, now infesting the society. They are free like the air we breathe, and thrive in reflected glory (the difference between the sun and the moon). The 'society' is made the scapegoat, so on this issue the politicians limit themselves to platonic verbosity, 'urging the public to do what they themselves cannot do.

The politicians are teaching us too much, beyond our capacity to absorb or digest. What we need is an unlearning process, or a simple flushing system. Need large capacity dust bins to dump the refuse. Do we need more political enhancers for a "Cleaner Politics Week"? This is a high-level campaign. Very difficult to find the right candidates. We are short of the right type of politicians.