

## Eviction Folly

THE pre-dawn swoop Saturday on Nimtali and Tanbazar brothels in Narayanganj to round up the inmates for a trip to the government's vagrant homes at Kashimpur and Pubal in Gazipur, for the very nature of it, appears to have done the rehabilitation programme more harm than good. The raid carried out almost in the likeness of the combating operation to nab terrorists seems only to have succeeded in intensifying fears among sex-workers of the wrath of the authority instead of inspiring in them any desire to be integrated in the mainstream of the society. The result: nearly 600 prostitutes joined the already 'outlawed' 2,400 who had left the brothels following the murder of Jasmine, one of their fellow inmates, on July 1. On the whole, in the name of rehabilitation, the government has successfully dispersed thousands of sex workers in the localities, thereby exposing the residents to a number of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) including AIDS of which many a prostitute has been identified as a potential carrier.

The way the government has so far gone about the task does not even remotely accommodate the sex-workers' right to make a choice between rehabilitation and continuation of the trade they are currently in. On the contrary, it can safely be called an arbitrary attempt to impose a rather regimented lifestyle on a group of people—the government 'considers'—in need of immediate rehabilitation. As usual, the government agency concerned—in this case, the Social Services Department—has its reason: some 698 sex workers from the two brothels have applied to be rehabilitated. Nearly two crore taka has already been allocated for a country-wide UNDP-assisted rehabilitation scheme. More is in the offing, so suggested state ministers for social welfare, children and women's affairs, and youth, sports and cultural affairs in their speeches at different public meetings, according to an influential Bangla news daily. However, the plan, noble though, has come unstuck at the implementation level, revealing thereby its in-built inadequacy. The planners appear to have failed to envision the possible fall-outs the drive may lead to.

The government itself, through its precipitous action, has let the situation go out of control. It has, knowingly or unknowingly, given weight to wide-spread suspicion over an ulterior political motive behind the whole exercise. Besides, by spreading around the sex workers, it has only augmented the bleak prospect of a major health emergency. We reiterate our position on this issue and urge the government to let go of the sex workers until such time as it comes up with a fool-proof plan in this regard.

## We Mourn the King's Death

KING Hassan II, a powerful influence on the life of Moroccan people for long 38 years, a discreetly astute peace-maker in the Middle East and a bridge-builder between different cultures is no more. We join the whole world in condoling his death and paying tributes to his memories.

Barely four years after its political independence from France, Morocco came under his kingship in 1961 in the wake of his father King Mohammed V's death. Nearly every facet of the North African Kingdom's life, therefore, bears the stamp of his personality and that goes to explain the hysteria of grief that has gripped his people. It is a constitutional monarchy that he tried to steer through to the modern era so that it grew to acquire some democratic and liberal tempers in his lifetime. But of course, the 300-year old monarchy has been an example of continuity in the basic political traditions of the country. The sheer political stability of Morocco has enabled it to be near the bottom half of the middle income countries in the world.

Uninhibited by his North African identity, King Hassan II played a larger than life role basically as a catalyst between some conflicting chemistries in the region. Islam being the predominant religion in his country he enjoyed a clout in the Arab world but at the same time he had a window open to the Israelis, tens of thousands of whom are of Moroccan origin. Little wonder, the peace accord between Israel and Egypt and the subsequent agreements between Israel and the PLO and Israel and Jordan bear imprints of his diplomatic vision, initiative and skill. Highly acceptable to the West, he was the first Islamic head of state to have visited Pope John Paul II in the Vatican. A world conference of Muslim leaders hosted by him in 1994 issued a public statement against Islamic extremism. But he was unparalleled in his balancing acts. He chaired the Jerusalem committee made up of members from Arab and Islamic states which aimed at supporting the Palestinians in the Holy City.

We wish the fraternal country of Morocco god-speed under the leadership of King Mohammed VI, the able son and successor of the venerable deceased King Hassan II.

## Build Flood Shelters

NEW habitats are being constructed on the western flank of the town protection embankment in Dhaka. Hundreds of *kutchas* houses are dotted with *pucca* office-spaces being built by some health clinics and a private entrepreneur. Some of the NGOs have also constructed schools, clinics etc. and imparting lessons in good health care.

A pictorial report in an influential Bangla daily on Sunday described in detail how this embankment is being occupied by needy people as well as landgrabbers who are constructing new houses to offer them on rentals. Repair and extension work on the embankment was supposed to start as soon as last year's flood waters receded but this has actually got underway now, in full monsoon; the result being the fattening of bills of the contractors without their doing the stipulated work in an area of three and a half kilometres. A number of cooperative societies have sprung up in different names and are doing various kinds of business. Shops of various sizes and categories have mushroomed to cater to the needs of the inhabitants. All these *pucca* and *kutchas* constructions have their definite impact on the embankment. This will have an adverse effect during the coming floods. But where would these people go? They are always in search of high lands to save themselves from flooding. The government should have built flood shelters before the monsoon set in.

# An Ignominious Defeat against Corruption

*Whom can we turn to for rescue? Anyone, but the government. Although it holds all the power, its inept leaders could do precious little, for example, to recover huge bank money from the defaulters or stop the country-wide pilferage of electricity. ... None of the successive governments since independence had been sincere in stopping bribe, toll collection or extortion — the multiple facets of corruption.*

viate poverty, at least the pretensions for fair play and myriad measures against rising crimes. There is no open acceptance of defeat in the sectors where we bungled in the past and that in itself generates hope that we may one day succeed. But there is at least one monster, the corruption, to which we have totally capitulated. We lie prostrate before its overwhelming power.

The corruption does not anyone elicit any reaction. Even if one grumbles over its enormity there is no serious complaints. It is now an accepted norm of our society and does not taint one's reputation. No one asks a police inspector or a national airlines purser how he owns a chauffeur-driven car or possesses three houses in the city's posh locality. The politicians, social workers and even the intellectuals prefer to maintain calculated silence over plethora of corruptions taking place in front of their eyes — let alone the question of their raising battle cry against its assault. It does not sensitise the conscience of the most sanctimonious of the savants of our moral standard. The picture is bleak and one of total resignation.

It is true that the corruption is an universal phenomenon. Man throughout the history succumbed to acquiring easy money and his avarice for material possession knew no bound. Despite its multiplicity of forms, most of them stem from the lust for money. The sensational news of blatant corruption often hit the news headlines. Even in the developed countries the people amidst affluence unabashedly resort to corruption. There are stories of giant multinationals securing market by heavily bribing the officials and politicians in poor third world countries. Even in our country the politicians and high officials

are believed to have lucrative share in state deals. The common men remain non-challant to such transactions, consider them to be the preserve of high-ups in high society and tend to be amused by those graft stories. Indeed, the life in the lower strata of the society remains untouched by its sleaze and is seldom concerned about what happens in a MIG-29 deal and who become its beneficiary.

No more so. The culture of graft in our country has now filtered down to each layer of the society and administration. What worries us today is its alarming spread affecting not only the high ups but all citizens

visitors to those offices to fleece them of their last penny. The premises of these offices are infested with such parasites who cleverly intercept the clients to extract extra fee or commissions before the latter have an access to the dealing officer for help or advice. Those are worlds by themselves in the maze of which the ordinary folks are lost and bewildered.

Have you ever visited a revenue office administered by a tiny Tehsildar? There is nothing possible in his office. He will draw your attention to the intricacies of your problem and innocently let you know of his inability to help. Again there is

some tax return for which the statement is a requirement, in time.

Your crusading attitude not to compromise with the bribe can put you in real trouble. You will be put through a never-ending process of formalities, of course with due courtesies, about the job you want to get done. At the end of the day, you will not find it worthwhile or cost effective to adopt that meandering path. You will be adequately punished for your puritan impulse in a world which is profane and intriguing at the same time. And your tormentor will be bemused at your impracticability. Because by then you would have spent much more in term of time, efforts and also money than what was originally demanded from you.

There was a time when the corrupt officials did have in them an element of hesitation which could have stemmed from their fear of being detected or their latent conscience. Even now some of them are shy enough not to openly demand their 'chae-paan'. They, instead, often ask you to send your 'man' next time. But their veil of that hesitation is now lifted. They now audaciously bargain for their 'dues'. The police, without a grain of shame in their eyes, want their hands to be greased by poor rickshaw-puller or pavement vendor in front of whole lot of crowd.

On the contrary it is now-a-days considered misdemeanor to get into argument on the point of morality with the officials in an obliging position. Even the friends consider it miserly on your part to haggle with them. When stuck up with a problem, the friends would insist on finishing the matter promptly with little extra instead of seeing their dirty faces again and again. At times the smart friend would pull out his wallet containing crisp currency notes and strike a deal

with the dealing official on your behalf. Once my contractor friend argued: After all, they also are to survive. They are meagerly paid. And the market prices of things rise by leaps and bound. Blah, Blah, Blah. You have to inevitably give in with a sense of guilt.

The corruption constitutes an underworld of abysmal depth which is difficult to fathom. It will be a futile effort to attempt a full account of its sleaze and bring its full dimensions under scrutiny. In this country there is none who has no tale to tell about his agonising experience as a victim of corruption in some form or other. It may be a worthwhile exercise to collect and collate those stories to build up a coherent picture of its extent and devastations. What has however been done here is only to focus on the fringes of this underworld. What goes on in the more sensitive places of the government like the secretariat etc. where the stroke of a pen can decide the fate of the millions is rather incomprehensible. But one can feel everywhere the presence of this festering wound which has been draining nation's vitality, slurring its image and desecrating its soul.

Whom can we turn to for rescue? Anyone, but the government. Although it holds all the power, its inept leaders could do precious little, for example, to recover huge bank money from the defaulters or stop the country-wide pilferage of electricity. Instead only what they could do was to enhance the bank interest and the price of electricity, further victimising the common men. It is not the power but the commitment and the good will that could make a difference. The successive governments since independence had been in one way or the other accomplice in perpetrating corruption in public life. None had been sincere in stopping bribe, toll collection or extortion — the multiple facets of corruption.

But everybody else will have to think of his progeny to whom he has a duty to leave behind a clean society.



## PERSPECTIVES

by Brig (Rtd) M Abdul Hafiz

zens of the republic each one of whom is now drawn into its dragnet. All utility services of the country which inescapably form the part of our civic life are now in the clasp of unfettered corruption. The extent and enormity of this corruption will require a treatise to be graphically and empirically described. Yet it does not prick the conscience of our intelligentsia which is more preoccupied with a banal debate as to whether the NATO should intervene in the Balkans or not. The helpless sufferers of the rampant corruption in public life hardly figure in its philosophical discourses.

Go to any public office — that of PDB, WASA, T&T, airlines or railway; immigration, BRTA, Pura Corporation or Education Boards — to mention only a few, you will be first confronted with the agents, brokers or middlemen having nexus with the officials who waylay the

nothing impossible for him. He may be petty official but he is immensely powerful. On the condition of paying his service charges he can turn day into night and vice versa. He will simply hand you over to a stranger hanging around his office, give an estimate of the cost involved and ask for an advance for the conveyance etc. Then only he will ask if you would care for a cup of tea.

There is a price tag for every job in every office. The organisations packing in clout also devise contrivances and bottlenecks in the way of getting a work smoothly done to make their importance felt. Getting a computer print of the annual loan statement from the HBFC takes several arduous trips to its office. If they also paste a price tag to cut down those trips a poor pensioner, for example, will be obliged to comply. Because he has another set of worries to be able to submit his in-

## Indian Electoral Scene

## What are Sonia Gandhi's Prospects?

*Sonia Gandhi will have to tackle the foreign origin issue as well as the Kargil issue very well and succeed in turning the table on the opponents. These two are evidently difficult tasks although not impossible. Much of her electoral prospects lies on these two crucial issues. Her future may lie in tatters if she fails in these two areas and is unsuccessful in making dents in states like Uttar Pradesh where she drew a blank the last time.*



## MATTERS AROUND US

Zaglul Ahmed Chowdhury

Congress which is seeking to make someone with 'foreign origin' the prime minister of the country while the other faction maintains that the party with a clear secular credentials cannot align itself with the 'communal' BJP regardless of the Sonia factor in the matter.

It is unfortunate that a party studied with so many notable leaders and working for strengthening of secular ideology in India and also contributing to the progressive ideas as a 'centrist' political force now stands divided. True, the organisation has lost some of its strength and charm as its showing in the last general elections was not impressive but there is no denying that it holds an important position in the Indian political scene where it can assume strategic significance when situation emerges in the form of a fluid condition after polls when the question of a new government comes. In fact, this is how the party twice formed government in India in the recent past — once under Mr Deve Gowda and then under Mr Gujral. It also set a precedent of good governance earlier under Prime Minister Vishwanath Pratap Singh.

The pre-election scenario is now replete with so many developments mainly centring the search for new friends in the electoral fray. However, the prospect of Congress staging a comeback and its president Italian-born Sonia Gandhi becoming prime minister has generated much interest among the electorate as well as the India-watchers. The widow of slain Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi came close to assuming office of the prime minister three months ago after the Vajpayee government had collapsed following its failure to win a trust vote in Lok Sabha.

President K R Narayanan provided the scope to opposition parties to come out with an alternative government but the opposition effort in that direction fell through as they could not agree on a party or a leader to take over at the helm of India. At one stage, the Congress had looked poised to form the new government with the help of centrist and leftist parties but unwillingness of Samajwadi Dal leader Mulayam Singh Yadav and some small leftist parties like the Forward Bloc in the West Bengal scuttled its aspirations.

An electoral debacle under P V. Narasimha Rao a few years back had left the Congress in a total disarray before it made a dramatic turn-around under the leadership of Sonia Gandhi in the state elections. Mrs Sonia Gandhi has indeed rejuvenated the Congress by joining politics and taking over its stewardship but also got embroiled in controversies that are affecting her personally and the party politically.

The 'foreign origin' issue continues to dog her despite the fact that over the last few years she has spared no efforts to mingle with the Indian culture and custom. Many feel that a person not being a native cannot lead the nation. While the BJP and her critics have relentlessly harped on this point, some senior leaders within the Congress made matters worse when they quit the party dis-

proving Sonia as a future prime minister, saying 'foreigners' cannot hold key positions like prime ministership even if they become citizens of this country. Former defence minister Sharad Pawar, former parliament speaker A P Sharma and former central leader Tariq Anwar parted ways with her and formed Nationalist Congress which is taking part in the next elections on separate platform and contesting the Congress in many places. This has been a major setback for the Congress and it remains to be seen how much damage Mr Pawar and company can inflict on Sonia Gandhi in the ballot-

ing. But the most important and much discussed issue about Sonia Gandhi's prospects in the elections is whether she will be able to mount a serious challenge to the BJP-led NDA and more particularly to the leadership of Mr Vajpayee after the Kargil issue? Many believe that the incoming Vajpayee government has dealt with the critical Kargil problem quite well and this is expected to help it in the polls. If it is so, then certainly it will be at the cost of the Congress. But Sonia and the Congress believe Kargil will, in effect, brighten Congress' chances since they say the Vajpayee government will in fact be ridiculed on the issue. Sonia says that utter negligence of the intelligence agencies to detect the intrusion in Kargil, delay in flushing out the intruders and the huge cost of materials and lives in the operation are pertinent big questions which the people will not take kindly and the crunch will obviously fall on the Vajpayee government.

However, the BJP claims that Kargil will see it flying with success.

Sonia Gandhi's main problem is finding some electoral partners despite the fact that some secular forces like the Rashtriya Janata Dal in Bihar are keen for seat adjustments with it. The Congress has not forged any broad and effective electoral alliance as yet while some may be in the offing at later stages. Of late, it has come closer to leftists like the CPM in West Bengal but this has not resulted in any alliance which is difficult in a state like West Bengal for a variety of reasons. Besides, her apparent reluctance to support a government in India led by West Bengal Chief Minister Jyoti Basu after she herself failed to form one recently caused some setback to the progress that was achieved in the otherwise bitter Congress-leftist ties.

Sonia Gandhi will have to tackle the foreign origin issue and the Kargil operation very well and succeed in turning the table on the opponents. These two are evidently difficult tasks although not impossible. Much of her electoral prospects lies on these two crucial issues. Her future may lie in tatters if she fails in these two areas and is unsuccessful in making dents in states like Uttar Pradesh where she drew a blank the last time.

## Reunion Would Give Socialists Greater Leverage

P. Jayaram writes from New Delhi

THE political churning in the run-up to India's parliamentary election is likely to give the socialist partners of the

Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) a greater say within the coalition the latter leads.

The alliance of socialist groups that is expected to be floated soon is likely to include the Janata Dal and its three breakaway factions — the Samata Party, the Lok Shakti and the Biju Janata Dal (BJD). The last three are already part of the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) and some prominent members of the Janata Dal have also expressed their willingness to ally with the alliance in the September-October elections.

The socialists feel that if the BJP rejects their demand for a larger seat share, it would leave the road open for them to negotiate with groups like the Samata Party and Lok Shakti in Karnataka and the BJD in Orissa.

In the last election, the BJP managed to increase its electoral presence decisively in all these states with the help of the Janata Dal's breakaway factions. Once the merger is completed, we expect to have heavy clout in seat-sharing demands, a pro-merger leader said.

The existing Janata Dal may have to split before a reunited Janata Dal can take shape. A

section of the leadership wants to build bridges with Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's BJP to ensure the party's political survival while another section is opposed to any truck with the BJP, which it considers 'communal' and pro-Hindu.

The pro-BJP leaders, led by Karnataka Chief Minister J.H. Patel and Bihar leader and former federal railway minister Ram Vilas Paswan, want the Dal to merge with its breakaway factions.

They feel being part of the BJP-led NDA would ensure their political survival. Janata Dal president Sharad Yadav and former Prime Minister I.K. Gujral also favour an alliance with the NDA. Gujral had been elected to the Lok Sabha, lower house Parliament, from the Jalandhar constituency in Punjab last year only because he was supported by the Akali Dal, which is part of the NDA.

But former Prime Minister H.D. Deve Gowda, former Information and Broadcasting Minister Jaipal Reddy, former Planning Commission Deputy Chairman Madhu Danavate and a few others are strongly opposed to the move. They too support merger of the socialists, but want to have nothing to do with the BJP. This group, however, is fast becoming isolated within the party and it appears as if it will have to walk away soon.

another splinter group.

Patel, who has been campaigning here for the past few days, met Vajpayee twice and the latter was reported to be keen for an alliance between the NDA and the Janata Dal. But the Karnataka unit of the BJP has warned the party leadership against having anything to do with Patel, especially since the anti-incumbency factor is likely to go against him in the Karnataka state elections to be held simultaneously with the parliamentary polls.

Even though their party may benefit in terms of numbers in Parliament, some BJP members are far from happy with the proposed coming together of the socialist groups. What happens after the elections is a question bothering them.

The socialist grouping, they fear, could become a force more destabilising than Tamil Nadu leader Jayaram Jayalalitha, whose decision to withdraw her All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) support brought Vajpayee's BJP-led government down. The sceptics within the BJP point out that the socialist parties could well change their minds after the election and try to form a government with the help of parties that are currently in the opposition.

They also feel these parties would get much more leverage within the BJP-led alliance if they come together, tempting them to demand a greater share in power. Political observers say the developments in the Janata Dal could also have a bearing on other parties like the Communist groups which may have to jettison their current positions depending on the political equations that emerge.

The Communists have been pushing for a Congress party-led front to challenge the BJP and its allies. — India Abroad News

## To the Editor...

### For how long?

Sir, In early '50s while working as a Medical Social Worker at the Gangaram Hospital attached to the Fatema Jinnah Womens' Medical College, Lahore, I was assigned to work with a Kashmiri refugee family with tuberculosis along with others afflicted by the same disease. The family had six members, two of them were suffering from the same disease.

One day, a home visit while taking note of the family medical history, I inquired

about their future plan: whether they would like to go back to Kashmir, if circumstances permit or whether they would settle down in Pakistan. Their categorical answer was that they would go back to Kashmir after the 'foreign' occupation was vacated. To them life and environment in Kashmir cannot be substituted by Pakistan or any other country.

This response of the family enthused me to ask the same question to about 30 Kashmiris of various socio-economic backgrounds excepting a couple

of them all had the same unequivocal answer.

At that point I decided to ask the same question to similar number of non-Kashmiri refugees from India. The answer from the latter group was opposite.

Even in half a century India failed to subjugate the Kashmiris. Will they be able to keep their freedom loving people subjugated? For how long? Syed Wailullah, 108/JA, Mohammadpur Pisciculture Housing Society Ltd., Dhaka-1207

### "...Healthy Homes"

Why must we always assume that the woman needs to make all the choices in terms of career and family? What if the woman makes more money than the man in the family? Wouldn't it be more beneficial for the man to quit his job to take care of the family? I suppose to prevent these situations, the writer has arrogantly stated that women should only work in professions like teaching and nursing that require less time outside of the home.

While I admire these two professions (my mother has been teaching for 31 years), I

believe that confining women to any two or three professions (be that medicine or aeronautical engineering for that matter) would cause a waste of talent that is contained in half the population of the world. What we need is a society that allows everyone to grow in their full potential, regardless of gender.

We must have the men realise that they too need to help out in the household chores, they too need to spend quality time with the children for they too, are equally responsible for developing and maintaining a "healthy home."

Wafa Taufeeq Texas, USA