

# Awami League's Infighting and Sheikh Hasina's Embattled Leadership

by M. Rashiduzzaman

**The armed cadres of the Bangladeshi politicians have some historical parallel... the old landlords and big landholders used to keep lathial retainers for their personal protection or to beat up rivals and the recalcitrant tenants! Such shadowy hoodlums are divided like the street gangs, and one group may easily be instigated against the other in a power struggle between the leaders of the same party.**

ONE could not ignore the recent spectacle of the Awami League's (AL) celebration when Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina returned from Paris where she had earlier gone to receive the UNESCO Prize for signing the peace accord with the tribal separatists in the CHT. But beyond that "feel good" embellishment, Hasina is beset with troubles. Few would deny that. Yet, the BNP-led slogan-shouting and resignation-demanding assault on her government is not the exclusive culprit for Hasina's trying situation. Several converging factors including some self-inflicted wounds have contributed to her present embattlement. Ironically, it's her own party's rumbling feuds, rowdiness and unchecked criminal activities that have been damaging the credibility of her government, which is no longer a side issue in Bangladesh politics. More than 100 people have been killed in the Awami League's factional strife over three years. The unmitigated turf battles among its jealous bigwigs, the bloody skirmishes between the factions, and those who gripe for not getting enough don't seem to know where to stop. But she does not appear to be scared of those challenges! Is Hasina sleepwalking through the Awami League's internecine warfare?

Such seemingly inexhaustible factional fighting, especially the violent manifestation of it has disappointed and disillusioned millions of Bangladeshis. They are questioning Hasina's leadership qualities, and the growing discontent would ultimately put the party's future at risk. Disgusted with the lawlessness, terrified Bangladeshis are already urging Hasina to stop the "state-terrorism!" This is not a cacophony of opposition polemics. But a euphemism for the intra-party violence, extortion, reprisals, tortures, deaths and disappearances allegedly unleashed by the ruling party's armed cadres, their "godfathers", and the pro-gov-

ernment Chhatra League, Juba League and Sramik League factions. How did Hasina get herself into such a fix?

Sheikh Hasina put a lot of her efforts first into the broad-based anti-Ershad movements in 1990-1991 and later she led the anti-BNP agitation in 1995-96. Surely, those opposition campaigns gave her more visibility, recognition and finally the political fortune smiled on her in 1996. She worked with the other Awami League leaders and their followers, and periodically she exhorted them to support her goals but she spared little time to rebuild the party during that period. After her 1996 election victory, she had been too busy to reconstruct a well managed political party, which is one of the root causes of the Awami League's present infighting and indiscipline that is bound to embroil her. Contrary to earlier public perceptions, the Awami League is not demonstrating itself as a disciplined and internally united party, which is at the bottom of factional turbulence and rocky relations among the leaders that often come to the fore. The Awami League is more a grand but an uneasy coalition of leaders, factions, and the spawning cadres with an armed face. As the new Prime Minister, Hasina set her political trajectory evidently to reinstate her father's place in history as the nation's founder that was believed to have faded during the earlier 21 years' rule while the Awami League was out of power. Bringing the confessed and accused killers of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to justice became Hasina's next priority. Over the heads of the festoon carriers and the unending line of sycophants, she is yet to unify the Awami League with loftier goals after a long stretch of frustration, leadership crisis, factional war and hiatus. No tangible institutional steps so far came from the other prominent leaders of the Awami League except the unending pep talks for the party followers, and of course the anti-opposition

blasts that followed the trail. Hasina's contribution to bring her party to power cannot be disavowed, but she perceived it more as her personal victory inspired by her father's populist pantheon. However, that unilateral sense of victory ignored the other leaders of the Awami League and the organizational support that helped her quest for power. As a contributing factor, the sudden elevation of her close relatives to importance generated discontent inside the Awami League that Hasina was the political heir to her late father and she had dynastic aspirations. To her potential competitors in the party, Hasina used the history card to draw public sympathy and legitimize her sway over the Awami League. Some whispered: "Hasina's real interest in politics is to avenge the killers of her father!" Meanwhile, Hasina could not help her wounded feeling that the whole nation did not do "enough" to punish the killers of her father. More painfully, even some of his closest associates were behind the bloody coup that assassinated him along with family members.

The opposition's rallying cry against the proposed transit facility to India and other issues have actually boiled down to one demand—Hasina should resign soon and hold election under a caretaker cabinet. But at this juncture, the Awami League is more volatile than ever before, although there is no guarantee that the opposition would be able to fully exploit those weaknesses to their advantage. Hasina is ready to fight the BNP-led opposition, but the infighting that has been eroding her governance from within goes unabated. On the

question of handling conflict with the opposition and irrefragable utterances against the judiciary, the Awami League ministers and their legal advisors are reportedly divided between the so-called hard-liners and those who want a pragmatic compromise. The trial of the accused killers of Mujib left behind unverified suspicions that may someday bring Hasina in collision with some senior members of the Awami League. The Kader Siddiqui episode is reverberating with continuing factional unrest in Tangail that even rattle the Awami League's national leadership. By claiming to be a "real" Mujibist, Kader Siddiqui has thrown a gauntlet to Hasina, who, as Mujib's daughter, should be the natural keeper of her father's mantle. It is now difficult to predict the fallout of this challenge, but this could be a catalyst to other discontents to follow.

I have been inclined to believe that, with her power of incumbency, Hasina would be able to overcome such sporadic factional quarrel, but a spate of recent intra-party incidents raised fresh doubts about her grip over her own party. The Akhtuzzaman Babu incident is still making news, and the eye of the scandal is still a free man moving around with little challenge from the authority! Senior Awami League leaders, including those in the cabinet, are reportedly divided on how to deal with the UCLB incident, a blatant breach of law, which undermined the prestige of the Awami League government. Factionalism in Bangladesh politics, in general, and the Awami League in particular, is not a recent vintage. But the ruling Awami League's factional

quarrel has recently gone out of control and the violent outbursts in the districts are no longer confined to its student group. The Sramik League and the Juba League, two other front organizations, also divided and at each other's throat, are terrorizing ordinary citizens. No unified strategy for halting such self-destructive conflicts inside the Awami League and its supportive organizations was visible.

Chittagong and Khulna divisions are among the areas worst affected by the Awami League's intra-party killings and violent confrontations. Dhaka (including the neighboring areas) is possibly the third worst killing field of the ruling party's factional shootings, bombing and knifing. Most gun battles that rock the Dhaka University campus are between the rival factions of the Awami League supported student front. Hasina's coming to power coincided with Chhatra League's chasing the BNP-supported Chhatra Dal out of the halls of residence in the university. So when the (Dhaka) university students fight in the campus now, they are mostly the intra-party clashes. But innocent students and passersby are also killed and injured in the crossfire. A "silent procession" of Dhaka University teachers demanded a "terrorism free" campus earlier this month. It was indeed a message against the ruling party-backed instigators who were accused of fusing the halls of residence, among other illegal activities, as the "dens" of kidnappers for extorting ransom. Two rival groups (not students) of the Awami League fought gun battle over a piece of disputed land in Narayanganj that shook the lo-

cal citizens who made angry denunciation of such shooting sprees. In another incident in the same city, the ruling party's organized cadres were accused of attacking the courthouse and the local jail that shocked the country.

There was a horrifying cycle of violence recently in Chittagong between the two challenging groups of the Bangladesh Chhatra League when Abu Taiyub, a faction leader allegedly killed Tipu, the ruling party's local M.P. is believed to be the patron of Taiyub who was never arrested although there was a dozen of criminal cases filed against him. During Tipu's funeral prayer, Mafia-style gunfire rattled in at least 30 persons including that suspected Awami League M.P. attending the janaza. Following those incidents and in the wake of the Akhtuzzaman Babu saga, the ruling party's Chittagong (south) district unit was split into two rival groups, one denouncing the other. Since 1996, numerous Mastans, many with criminal records, and terrorists have also joined the Awami League's armed cadres (such elements prefer to support the ruling party, irrespective of ideologies) to get necessary protection from the government. It will not be an easy job for Hasina to purge those elements from her party, nor has she demonstrated the political will to do so.

With or without the blessings of national leaders, a new generation of the Awami League and their supporters established their local sway over the last 20 years or so. Numerous such leaders were elected to local government and some to the national parliament. Along

with their respective groups including armed cadres, they were influential in their districts and towns. Generally speaking, the pattern of Mastan-infested politics was found in other Bangladesh parties as well, but that does not exonerate Hasina if her partisan terrorists and criminals let loose a reign of terror while she is in power. Such violent infighting not only makes newspaper headlines but also roils the government that she leads. Indeed, Hasina's predicament should be a lesson to all the politicians not to rely on the armed factions for their partisan activities. The local activists, their rival factions and their "godfathers" care little for party discipline, and often one group retaliates against the other for their respective interests but ordinary people suffer the brunt of it. In exchange of their support to the ruling party, they may ask for cash or other tangible benefits—unauthorized collection of tolls, extortion, kidnapping for ransom, a share in government contract, occupation of government lands, just to name a few. Most such coercive extractions and victimization go unreported, but they create a legacy of deep resentment towards the politicians who lead the government.

Many of those who now claimed to be the local supporters of the Awami League also worked for the other major parties in the past. Hasina has recently been accused of using the armed activists to break up the BNP-led hartals and disperse the opposition meetings and processions. She will possibly need them for winning the next election! The armed cadres of the Bangladesh politicians have some historical parallel—the old landlords and big landholders used to keep lathial retainers for their personal protection or to beat up rivals and the recalcitrant tenants! Such shadowy hoodlums are divided like the street gangs, and one group may easily be instigated against the other in a power

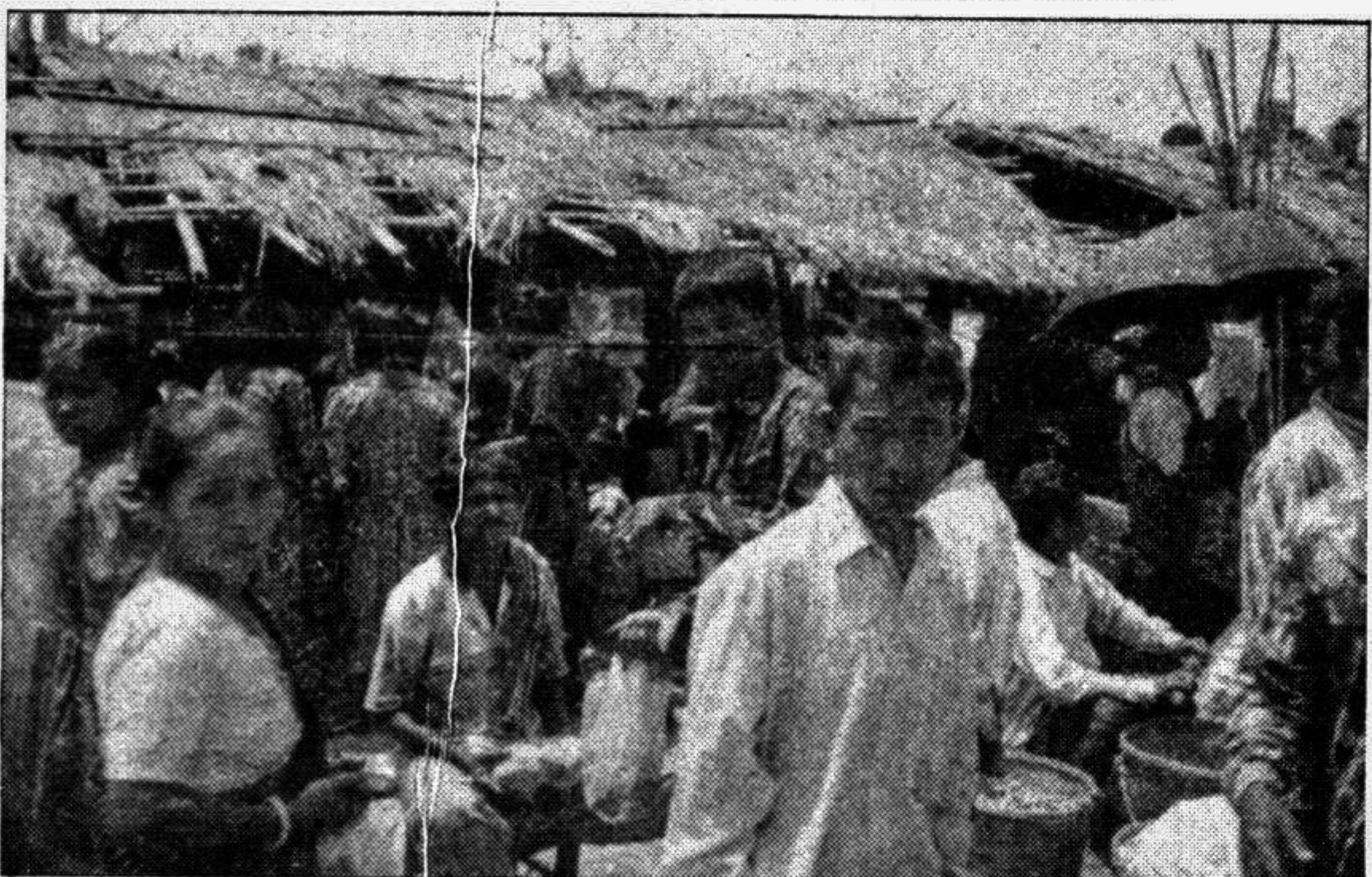
struggle between the leaders of the same party. On numerous occasions during the last three and half years, the police reportedly failed to arrest the gun-fighters, bomb-makers, bomb-throwers and other suspects in criminal offenses because of minister-level (and the Awami League's Presidium-level) leaders' interventions, one challenging the other.

The Awami League has been on a lower ebb since the violent coup in 1975 following which the BKSAL vanished from the political scene, and Mujibism became a discredited doctrine, none of which was resurrected when the Awami League was back in business as a party. People are not fully aware of her political convictions, but so far, Hasina is not known for any particular ideological passion, she has not yet publicly rekindled the flame of Mujibism! Yet it is believed that inside the Awami League leadership, there is still a faction that wants to repossess the party with a modicum of re-BKSALization. They are possibly adapting the (BKSAL) idea to the changed political climate—keeping a multi-party façade but preserving the single party dominance of the Awami League even at the cost of stifling political pluralism. Hasina's recent proposal for a restrictive Public Safety Act is reminiscent of the special powers assumed by the government shortly before the authoritarian BKSAL regime was launched in 1975. On the other hand, since the Awami League was revived, it has gone through a de-BKSALization, and Hasina jettisoned the last of its socialistic rhetoric during the 1996 election campaign. But Hasina is yet to clearly define the path down which she is taking the nation! Is Hasina now lost between the two ideologically inclined factions—one tilting towards re-BKSALization and the other still seeking de-BKSALization?

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## Launching a Pro-people Plan for CHT

by Dr Mahfuzul Haque



A typical marketplace in Khagrachhari

WHILE trekking the hills and hillocks of Chittagong, no visitor can miss the lush green forests of bamboo and bushes in the creeks and rivulets down the hilly, winding roads. Wherever you go in the Chittagong hills, to Ramgarh down the Feni river, to Panchari beside the Churni, to Dighinala, Barkal, Jurachari or even to godforsaken place like Thanchi, you are never alone, always surrounded by hills, forests, lakes and river—the nature unfolding its bounty for you. They often look monotonous though, scenic beauty of the Chittagong Hill Tracts continue to cast an enchanting spell in the minds of the visitors away from the din and bustle of city life.

In a recent meeting at Rangamati Regional Council, the CHT leader Shantu Larma was very candid while narrating his childhood days passed between the hills and forests. While travelling down the memory lane, he could recall many wild birds and animals seen in his boyhood which are first disappearing these days. Hill bio-diversity is under severe stress. Pressure on land and forest is on the increase. He maintained that people in the hills have developed a symbiotic relationship with the nature. They are the children of the hills and forests. Taking them away from their habitat or destroying the natural surroundings would cause their unnatural death. Their survival depends on the conservation of nature. The delicate eco-system of the hills and the inhabitants therein are to be looked into in an integrated manner while developing plans and policies in the region.

Ministry of Environment and Forest is currently implementing a five-year Sustainable Environment Management Programme (SEMP) funded by UNDP. Under this programme, there is component titled, "Participatory Upland Resources Management" in the CHT. Prior to undertaking proposed development activities, it was thought that the following issues are to be addressed first: a) what is the carrying capacity of the Chittagong hills; b) whether the proposed development interventions are eco-friendly; c) whether Ethnic Impact Assessment (EIA) has been conducted prior to such development measures; d) whether people of the hills at grassroots

level are consulted during drafting, implementing and monitoring of these projects; e) whether the issues of indigenous community, disadvantaged sections of the society, the women groups are given special consideration; f) whether a participatory planning process similar to that of many "bottom up" plans has been followed; and g) whether the Regional Council, tribal leaders, chiefs and headmen and Karbaris are consulted.

The launching workshop for preparing a pro-people Environmental Action Plan will be held at Rangamati on 26 October. PCJSS leader Shantu Larma along with a number of CHT leaders including local MPs are expected to attend the one-day event. The workshop would be participated by the representatives of various professions from Khagrachhari, Rangamati and Bandarban hill districts. The participants would set the stage for a series of grassroots workshops all over the three hill districts in the next four months.

Methodology of the grassroots workshop is simple. Following NEMAP model, people would be asked to identify environmental issues of concern, to prioritise them and also to suggest institutions responsible for their implementation.

It may be so that priorities of the hill people are different than that of the plainland people. They are likely to stress upon education, health and sanitation, water conservation, irrigation, agriculture, income generation etc. Malaria is a great menace in the hills. Death of malaria patients is very common there. Besides malaria, marauding elephants, wild pigs and dogs cause destruction to crop fields and consequently, death in Ramgarh and Manikchhari in last ten years, around 455 people died in the stampede. Denudation of hills, massive deforestation, illegal logging, misuse of forest permit, pollution and siltation etc. are likely to figure in prominently in those grass-

roots workshops. People may raise their concerns regarding various projects undertaken in the name of development. Adverse effects of Kaptai hydro-electricity mega-project, rubber plantation, upland settlement scheme etc. are expected to dominate the list of concerns. While raising concerns, the people would suggest recommendations in addressing the issues as well.

Like Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), the social and ethnic issues are gaining ground in assessing likely effects of a future development project. Through Ethnic Impact Assessment (EThIA), a planner can examine likely effects of the project on the ethnic community for whom the project is intended to. The local indigenous groups are to be consulted through a series of consultation process. As most of the facilitators and moderators would be taken from the local community, communication would not pose any problem, it is hoped. Very few local consultants are recruited for this purpose and most of them know the local dialects also.

It is hoped that with the involvement of all stakeholders, government, non-government agencies, people's representatives and professional groups, it would be possible to finalise an Environmental Management Action Plan for CHT by mid next year. Under SEMP, some of the projects identified by the people could be implemented. It is also expected that other donors would come forward in implementing parts of the Action Plan.

People of CHT weary of two decades of insecurity and insurgency are looking for a respite. They look forward to seeing a healthy environment, where their children can be raised with dignity and honour in a place surrounded by the hills and forests. Peace loving people of Chittagong hills have the right for such a claim. As we step into the next millennium, let's see, how the people themselves would like to shape their future against the onslaught of development activities taken

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without their consent, which brought immense miseries and sufferings to this minuscule population in an area so long remained forbidden and a mystery to many.

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## Shying Away from Gender Issues

Swapna Majumdar writes from Lucknow

INDIA'S only woman prime minister, Indira Gandhi, hailed from Uttar Pradesh, which also holds the record of electing the maximum number of women to the Lok Sabha, or lower house of Parliament, in the last three general elections.

Yet, politics in the northern state of the state is yet to receive a woman's touch, says the Women's Feature Service. Is their insignificant contribution related to the patriarchal and feudal ethos of the state, or does the problem lie with the women politicians themselves?

The answer lies somewhere in between, contends Rooprekha Verma, a academic and veteran women's rights activist. While the feudal mindset prevalent in Uttar Pradesh does hinder women from making a foray into politics, it cannot be the sole reason for their inability to make their presence felt, she says.

Verma says most women shy away from raising gender issues on purpose. Merely blaming the existence of a feudal attitude for their low profile has become commonplace. It does not absolve women politicians of their failure to demonstrate the political will to stand up and be

counted. They have been so busy trying to be as good, if not better, than the men that they have forgotten to be women.

Therefore the hope that the presence of women would humanise politics and improve its character has not been realised. One has not been able to distinguish their work, whatever little, from that of the men," argues the former vice-chancellor of Lucknow University.

Uttar Pradesh sent the largest contingent of women Members of Parliament to the 11<sup>th</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha, with many hailing from the backward classes. Nine of the total of 85 seats in Uttar Pradesh this year went to women—making women's representation 10.6 per cent.

Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) leader Mayawati, a two-time state chief minister, feels that since the majority of women politicians in the state hail from the upper castes, they have not been able to feel the pain of the oppressed. Consequently, they have done little to change the face of politics.

That the old order has given way to a new one is evident from the poll statistics of the last decade. The erosion of the

Congress party from its traditional bastion, the transfer of power from the upper castes to those way down in the social hierarchy, heralded the polarisation of politics in Uttar Pradesh.

The steady rise of the BSP from a state-level party to a national organisation is perhaps indicative of the changing social consciousness among the electorate. In the recent election, the party's grew to 22 per cent of the votes and as many as 14 MPs. Its growing leverage within the Dalits (former social outcasts), who constitute one-fifth of the voters in the state, has been significant.

Although the change in the political fortunes of the BSP is largely due to its president Kanshi Ram, the contribution of Mayawati cannot be ignored. Her supporters claim that her work among the Dalits and other backward communities has helped lay the foundation for the BSP's march in the state.

Certainly, Kanshi Ram was confident enough of her administrative abilities to select her as the state's first Dalit woman chief minister. But she too, despite announcing a number of

development schemes, did not tackle some crucial issues.

Consequently, statues of B.R. Ambedkar, considered the leader of oppressed classes, mushroomed as Mayawati sanctioned Rs. 1.7 billion (\$39.5 million) from the contingency funds for the installation of 5,000 statues. The much hyped Rs. 1 billion (\$23.2 million) Ambedkar Park took priority over more pressing social concerns such as the fact that only 20 per cent of rural households in the state have electricity as compared to the national average of 43 per cent, or that only 15 per cent of the state's villages have safe drinking water as compared to the national average of 25 per cent.

In fact, a preliminary state inquiry of the expenditure into this project has held Mayawati guilty of sanctioning funds without ensuring proper monitoring and accountability.

The state still suffers from a low level of literacy, particularly among women (26 per cent). The population is growing at a rate of 2.5 per cent annually and Uttar Pradesh, the most populous state, tops the national list as far as shortage of community health centres and medical officers is concerned.

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