

Brick Field in Algirchar

ANY things – war, famine, flood, cyclone, tornado, village moneylenders, etc have ravaged our villages. Now a new ravager looms in the horizon – brick fields. So long brick fields used to be in places away from human habitation and also away from dense vegetation. Never have they been smack in the middle of villages endangering the lives of thousands of people who live in the vicinity. But that is about to change. Algirchar village under Nawabganj thana in Dhaka district has, as of Friday, a fully functioning brick field in its very centre.

We ran a story detailing how the owner of this brick field 'managed' his permission through the corridors of power in spite of the fact that it violates all the environmental laws of the land. What is happening here is a typical bureaucratic game of the right hand not knowing what the left hand is doing. The ministry of environment and the department of environment, located within the same ministry, are sending different signals to the district administration, taking advantage of which the illegal brick field has started its operation. As things stand now the district commissioner says he has received two instructions – one from the ministry that the licence for the brick kiln has been renewed, while another from the department of environment saying that the kiln should be stopped. Now he has asked for a clarification from the ministry. Meanwhile Algirchar will continue to burn.

We have decided to take up this case simply because we think that the environmental degradation in Bangladesh has reached a stage that it is endangering our whole ecosystem in a fundamental way. According to studies, one brick field destroys the fertility and regenerative power of land within a radius stretching several kilometers from the kiln. Nothing will grow in the Algirchar village and in its vicinity for several years. When the soil again becomes capable of growing crops after several years it may never attain the fertility of the present. In the mean time the livelihood of thousands of villagers will be lost wrecking their lives, perhaps forever. And all this is being done to fill the coffers of one businessman with high political connection.

We would like to point out that there is growing evidence of serious corruption in the environment ministry. We are forced to conclude that serious environmentally damaging projects are slipping through its fingers because of corrupt practices of its officials. Our forests are being denuded, water is being poisoned, air is becoming polluted – all of this while the environment ministry merrily looks the other way. The brick field instance is the latest case in point.

We are still not in the habit of taking the environment seriously, especially at the policy making level. Nothing could be more foolish and self-destructive than this. We demand immediate closure of this brick field. We want a clear cut government decision that brick fields can be set up only in the designated places after a full consideration has been made of their environmental consequences. Please wake up to what is happening to our environment. There is really not much time left.

Thoughtful Suggestions from PHA

THE People's Health Assembly (PHA), 2000, held in Savar, was a global gathering of some 3000 committed health activists, professionals, scholars and the like, who spent five days outside Dhaka, focusing on making health care a pro-poor system around the globe, accessible by and available to all people irrespective of their economic or social standing. The mammoth event, participated by representatives from 95 countries, was a success, both in terms of its logistical and managerial organisation and also for the substance and subjects that were raised within it. We congratulate the organisers, Gono Shasthaya Kendra, and commend them for achieving this landmark event here in Bangladesh.

We believe that for a country like ours, the issues raised at the PHA are of fundamental importance. We are well aware that if we in Bangladesh are to break out of the spiral of poverty, health care for all is the very least we must offer our masses. But 'health care for all' has remained a hollow promise that has not been translated into tangible results at all – not only in Bangladesh, but also in most of the developing world. International aid agencies, together with governments and multinational organisations, have been responsible for advising and developing our health care systems, allocating resources, devising strategies and deciding on priorities. If this system had succeeded, there would have been no need for debate. But it is obvious that the system has failed. Millions of people in developing countries still have little or no access to basic health care. How can we change this state of affairs? The answer can be found in the main goals adopted by the Charter of the PHA on its concluding day – goals with which we are in agreement and which we, specially in the media, are committed to support. The solutions lies in challenging the present systems of health care, and also at the same time, trying to end all economic, social and political inequalities in the world.

It is one thing to adopt high-minded goals, but quite another to actually implement them. How can we actually make an impact? Ultimately, change must take place in the mainstream. The core of the health system must become pro-poor. Whether that can happen as a result of this one meeting, mammoth though it might have been, remains to be seen. At least the PHA has started the process and helped to raise our awareness of these issues. The task is for us to move forward and we in the media will provide our wholehearted support to the initiative in every way possible. We do not seem to have understood the fundamental fact that health lies at the core of all other issues of social development. It is only when a population is healthy that we can produce an educated human resource that will be fit to compete in the knowledge society of the 21st Century. So a pro-poor health policy is a precondition for the success of all our policies in education, IT, industrialisation, attracting FDI, etc. The faster we understand it the better it will be for us in Bangladesh, as well as for the developing world.

Time to Confront Political Terrorism

If the campaign against political terrorism is to succeed, co-operation among different political parties will have to be initiated, and the momentum generated by various socio-cultural organisations and public outcry demonstrated in the news media in recent days will have to be sustained. Instead of finger-pointing, all forces believing in a peaceful, democratic process should join hands in combating political terrorism.

THE defining feature and the most revolting aspect of terrorism is that it deliberately targets innocent people, not those who are able to defend themselves. The revulsion that terrorism creates is intended. It seeks both to astonish and frighten people. In that single, repellent sense, the political terrorists who are regularly killing innocent people throughout the country are successful.

The recent spate of killings in various parts of the country are particularly shocking, perhaps because of the barbaric fashion of the acts and because the atrocities are occurring in places that are not widely known as a cockpit of political violence.

The blame for the killing of political opponents and innocent civilians in different places rests squarely on the shoulders of those who commit these crimes. Political terrorism can be at least partly explained and understood, but it can never be justified. It is the work of the morally bankrupt. Everyday, the news media are carrying reports of concerted violence among political adversaries that show an alarming pattern which would leave any rational individual concerned about the direction the country is moving towards. These acts, both individually as well as collectively, undermine civil society, political system and the country's sovereignty by normalising violence and graft and introducing a corrupt cancer into the political structure.

There appears to be a concerted effort to destabilise the transition to democracy in Bangladesh. Whoever is involved in unleashing violent terrorist activities on innocent people should be brought to justice. The Awami League, as the ruling party, has a dual role. On one hand, it should take decisive actions against those involved in these activities. On the other hand, it should also prevent its own supporters from participating in similar acts of violence.

It is unfortunate but true that no major political party is immune from the criticism of using armed cadres to suppress their opponents. Awami League has done it. BNP has not been far behind. Who can forget Jatiya Party's activities during its heyday. Extremists, on both the right and left of the political spectrum, have a long history of annihilating those with whom they differ on political issues.

The fight against terrorism is difficult under any circumstances, particularly in areas where terrorists can run and hide. It doesn't help either when, supplying virtually no evidence, political parties exploit the killings for political purposes.

I remember, last year when Sajal died allegedly in the hands of goons associated with a ruling party legislator, BNP raised a ruckus while AL painted a different picture. The tables were turned when the hartal-mongers burned alive a poor rickshawpuller who was only working to feed his family. AL took over the voice of sanity while BNP fell silent. Domestic political terrorism by disenchanted individuals and groups is sometimes difficult to prevent due to the less predictable nature of this type of threat. A number of contentious issues which elude consensus can attract few people who would move their political agenda through conflict. Inspired by extremist beliefs, or by real and imaginary grievances, they resort to random unconstrained violence.

Decentralised decision-making by the terrorists add to their unpredictability. Leaders of various political parties establish the broad directions of the movement, and decisions on what actions to take rest with individuals

or small cells. Trouble mongers can take advantage of this situation by advancing their own agenda.

Faced with this scenario of terrorism, the prospect of achieving radical improvement in the Awami League government's measures to combat terrorism lies in its consistency and courage in maintaining a firm and effective policy against terrorism in all its forms. They must abhor the idea that terrorism can be tolerated as long as it is only

their party affiliation. Given the Home Minister's closeness to the party hierarchy, it was assumed during the early days of his tenure that he will have a freer hand, than his predecessor, in weeding out terrorists from his own party. His initial public statements were quite assuring. Mohammed Nasim was quoted as saying, 'I will not compromise on the question of curbing terrorism. Stern action will be taken against any terrorist whichever party he may belong to' (DS, March 15, 1999).

would be to eradicate terrorism from our lives.

Combating terrorism can act as a double-edged sword for the Awami League government. The response has to combine law enforcement techniques and political measures. This, of course, is easier said than done. Involvement of the law enforcement agencies in a democracy is a delicate problem. This involves a political decision, based on a threat assessment or risk analysis, which assumes that there is a consensus supported by the majority of the population. Because of the involvement of law-enforcement agencies in anti-terrorism activities, it raises an important issue. How far can a democracy go in combating political terrorism without destroying itself? Are terrorists likely to succeed, that is, achieve their political, religious, or social goals through the tools and logistics they use? More specifically, can the phenomenon of terrorism be a direct threat to a democratic state? The answers are important in order to determine how far a democratic state can infringe on individual liberties in order to protect those very same rights.

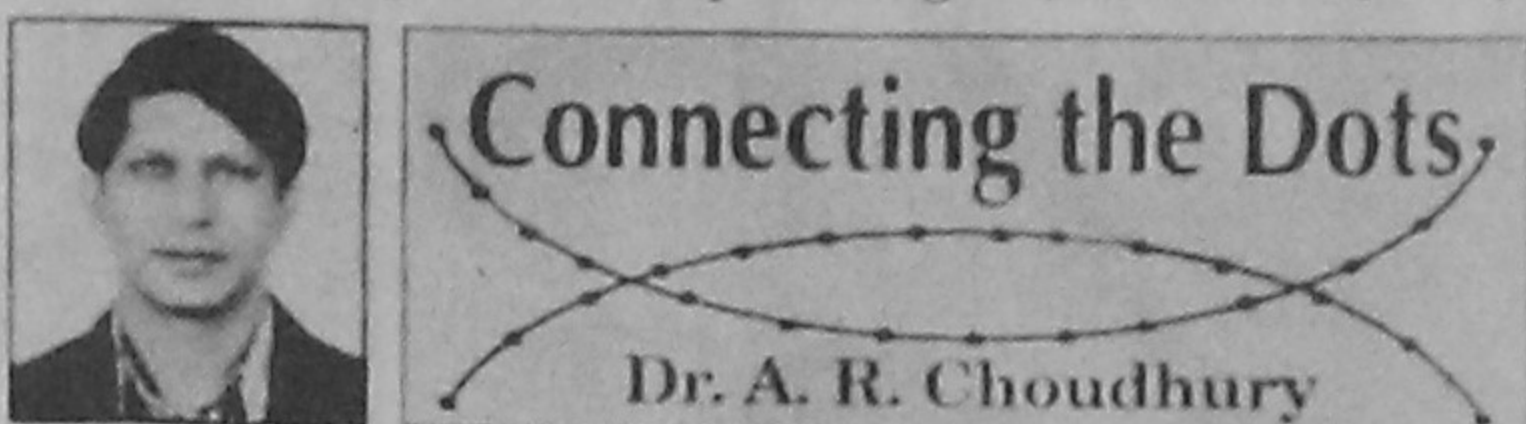
Never once in history, a political terrorist group was able to destroy an open democratic society because there is an outlet for political discontent in the normal process of governing. Only a very small minority of extremists will turn to violent methods. However, it has happened that democracies destroy themselves in the process of fighting terrorism. If the response to terrorism involves suspension of democratic rights, this will play into the hands of the terrorists. As an example, consider the case of massive arrests by government to combat the terrorists. Often

the real criminals will escape in those actions but the public confidence will be dealt a blow. One of the goals of terrorism is to provoke government overreaction, especially indiscriminate action.

It is important to realise that terrorist activity doesn't take place in a vacuum. Rather, increases or decreases in political terrorism are the results of an interaction between terrorist activity and counter-terrorist initiatives. The two are inherently linked. Hence there is a need for well-thought out policy responses to a terrorist threat and to warn of the danger of overreaction. In other words, a simplistic approach will only further serve the terrorist groups with political opportunities and support from the local population. The Home Minister will have to walk a fine line. Tactical measures alone, without the willingness to look at the political situation and the roots of the violence, are doomed to be ineffective in the long run. The government that falls into this pitfall loses its normal ground.

If the campaign against political terrorism is to succeed, co-operation among different political parties will have to be initiated, and the momentum generated by various socio-cultural organisations and public outcry demonstrated in the news media in recent days will have to be sustained. Instead of finger-pointing, all forces believing in a peaceful, democratic process should join hands in combating political terrorism. The Awami League, because of its current position, bears the major responsibility in initiating such a combined front. The BNP shouldn't shrug its responsibility either and, for once, should extend an olive branch.

Remember, the political terrorists that are harming your opponent today may soon return to harm you. Get them before they get you!



affecting someone else's democratic rights. They must adopt the clear principle that one party's terrorist is also another party's terrorist.

The actions by the government in combating terrorism must include the following. First, they must show an absolute determination to defeat terrorism within the framework of the rule of law and the democratic process. Second, no deals and concessions should be made even in the face of the most severe intimidation and blackmail. Third, an intensified effort needs to be made in order to bring the terrorists to justice by prosecution and conviction before the court of law. And finally, tough legislative measures should be introduced to penalise sponsors who provide terrorists with safe haven, explosives, cash, and moral support.

With less than a year left before the next general election, it is time to turn a new leaf in the fight against terrorists. Irrespective of

We could only expect his deeds to match his words. Is the country safer today than it was when Mohammed Nasim took control of the Home Ministry? Well, I will leave it to the readers to decide. The leaders of BNP also have their own responsibilities. Instead of directing all their energies towards the Awami League, they should also create an atmosphere where violent anti-social elements feel unwelcome in their party. Positive steps by the two major parties would help to isolate those who are on the fringe.

During every prior incidence of political violence, leaders of the major parties have tried to portray a holier-than-thou role. They would have us believe that violence are always instigated and perpetrated by the supporters of the opposing party. Nothing can be further from truth! It is a fact that all major political parties have armed cadres of their own. The sooner the leaders realise the follies of this policy, the easier it

Is Vajpayee's Moderate Image at Stake ?

Opposition MP's stormed the parliament demanding prime minister's resignation over his increasingly "communal outlook". Hopefully, Vajpayee will seek to retain his liberal image not only for the sake of living upto the expectations of those who see in him an acceptable leader but also for the cause of the secular politics in the largest democracy of world.

INDIAN prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee has come under severe attacks from the opposition parties and also not been spared by the secular allies of his ruling coalition for some of his recent remarks which they feel amounted to tarnishing the image of the multi-party NDA (national democratic alliance) government on one hand and moderate credentials of the prime minister himself, on the other. While the opposition has launched a virulent criticism of the prime minister on the issue and uproarious scenes were witnessed for several days in both the houses of the parliament describing Vajpayee as "communal", the other NDA partners who are much smaller in number compared to those of Vajpayee's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the main partner in the coalition, have questioned the rationale of such comments which have communal overtones. These allies are keen to retain their secular character despite being cobbled together in a coalition with the driving force the BJP which is otherwise considered as communal by many.

The opposition has demanded the resignation of the prime minister and his government charging that Vajpayee is whipping up communal tensions. The alliance partners say that the prime minister and other key functionaries of the government need to be cautious in their remarks so that their observations reflect the policy and position of the NDA and not that of the BJP which is the party of the prime minister. In a meeting with the constituents of the NDA government like the Telegu Desam of the southern

Andhra Pradesh and DMK of Tamil Nadu state, the prime minister explained that his comments were not exactly as being portrayed and sought to allay fears that the NDA government was echoing minds of the BJP. He also told them that by the remark "unfinished task" he meant the dispute centering the construction of Ram temple at the site of the demolished Babri mosque and he did not mean that the construction of the temple remained an "unfinished task" but it was the resolution of the dispute that was still "unfinished".

This explanation has mollified the partners to some extent but the opposition Congress and other secular and leftist organisations like the CPI, CPM, Samajwadi Dal are keeping the pot boiling and keep on harping that his comments these days are dangerous to damage the secular fabric of India and it is better he resigns before going too further with his 'avowed intention' to communalise the country on the line of the policies of his political organisation.

There is no denying that Vajpayee is the main strength of the NDA government and he has particularly been not only acceptable but also admired by partners of the NDA who believe in secular politics and say their association with the BJP in the government is based on other considerations like providing a stable government which the opposition has failed. Vajpayee, it

is widely believed, has grown into a moderate politician over the last two and half decades as far as the issue of religious communalism is concerned. He began as a worker of the RSS, the social and political movement aimed at resurgence of Hinduism in India, and remained an active leader of the erstwhile "Jansangh" which was the political platform of the RSS. But the Jansangh was merged with the Janata Party in the wake of the Indira Gandhi's "Emergency era" and the new

records show he identified himself with the liberal section of the partymen who were against using religion too much as a basis for political advancement. He was not much in prominence when the hardliners led by L.K. Advani, M.M.Joshi and others gave the BJP the communal character with a strong Hindu sentiment, which, however, paid dividends and the BJP showed meteoric rise in the Indian political scene by emerging as a major political force from almost a scratch. But

known as communal in many quarters. The opposition charge that the present government is communal could not gain much attraction because the head of the authority is seen as a moderate.

However, Vajpayee's image received some setback a few months ago during the United Nations Millennium summit when he told a rally organised by Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) in New York that he was proud of his links with the RSS and admired its policy. This caused immediate furore in the opposition circles and also among the NDA constituents but the sentiment was obviated as partners were later pacified and opposition could not make it much of an issue. But this time his remarks marking the anniversary of the destruction of the "Babri mosque" in Ayodhya seem to carry bigger potential to antagonise the opposition, coalition constituents and also the secular-minded people who like Vajpayee even though he belongs to a party which they don't. It remains somewhat inexplicable why the prime minister is making such comments that are only helping him being projected as a hardliner, jettisoning his moderate image. Earlier, as the new president of the BJP, Bangaru Laxman said, Muslims and Hindus both form integral feature of India, the comment assuaged the feelings of the minorities. Vajpayee favoured Laxman becoming the party chief while hawkish leaders were only

lukewarm in expression.

It is possible that Vajpayee is coming under increasing pressure from organisations like the RSS and the VHP which form the support base of the BJP as a political force. It is also possible that the prime minister is finding the going little tough as the hardliners in the BJP are certainly greater in number. It is also worth noting that his reported controversial remarks taking a communal line are coming in recent times when Vajpayee is not physically much well, having gone through a major knee operation not long ago. Physical handicap may have weakened him to a certain extent within the party as far as confronting the hardliners is concerned, and is consequently turning him to rely on the majority of party leaders who are broadly not moderate.

The hardliners argue that BJP's rise stemmed from "Hindu" sentiments and this has to be retained at any cost while Vajpayee and others have been maintaining that moderation is necessary to rule India and party must adopt this image or strategy. Now if there is really any shift in the prime minister's attitude, indeed, this will be something that cannot be good for secular India. Opposition MP's stormed the parliament demanding prime minister's resignation over his increasingly "communal" outlook. Hopefully, Vajpayee will seek to retain his liberal image not only for the sake of living upto the expectations of those who see in him an acceptable leader but also for the cause of the secular politics in the largest democracy of world.



party won elections and formed the government of that "old guard" Congress leader Morarji Desai was the prime minister and Vajpayee the external affairs minister. It was during that period that India's relations with all the neighbours were relatively good and as foreign minister Vajpayee began to gain an image of "moderation" both in his approach to small neighbours and also in his approach to religious politics.

Later, Janata Party was split on the issue of communalism and former hardliner RSS supporters formed the Bharatiya Janata party (BJP) while others remained with the Janata Party. Vajpayee chose to join the BJP but his

Vajpayee remained the attraction of his party because of his oratory skill, leadership qualities and liberal approach that made him acceptable as a national leader rather than a party politician.

The prime minister's moderate approach brought the BJP closer to the minorities including the Muslims. When the "Babri mosque" was tore apart by the extreme Hindu zealots, some BJP leaders were gleeful but Vajpayee was restrained; some BJP leaders are even facing charges of being involved in the demolition. Vajpayee's liberal image kept the secular opposition somewhat at bay as they could not cut much ice against the ruling coalition although the main partner BJP is

To the Editor ...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Simply disappointing!

Sir, When all the nationalist people of Bangladesh blew their tops at the outrageous remarks of the Pakistani diplomat in Dhaka about our liberation war, the BNP was conspicuous by their silence from making any immediate press statement, much less any demonstration. We were taken aback at the BNP's posture of going non-reactive and its wait and see attitude. We, however, were given to understand through newspapers quoting the BNP General Secretary that they would make their statement soon. While they kept the news media waiting for their statement, the Pakistan government, knowing of the widespread anguish demonstrated by different political and social organisations by even burning the Paki-

stan flag and the official protest in strongest terms by the Awami League government, was compelled to withdraw the diplomat. Reaction against such offensive remarks willfully made while on the soil of Bangladesh by the Pakistani diplomat whose former masters had perpetrated heinous acts of genocide and ravaged our land by indiscriminate looting and arson, ought to be instant and spontaneous. But BNP for reasons best known to it was not at all forthcoming. What made them so cautious or meek about Pakistan? But for any trivial acts of India, BNP and its leaders miss not a single minute to explode in rage and come down heavily on India as well as on the AL government. But in the case of the Pakistani diplomat's audacity, the BNP's visible silence and failure to rise to the occasion was really

painful and deplorable.

AH Dewain
Dhaka

Bangladesh - Pakistan relations

Sir, I am a Pakistani living in Canada for many years. In fact I am from Punjab. During our stay here, we have established very close relations with many Bangladeshi families. In a foreign country like Canada, we don't have any halal and haram problem with each other and can safely take each other's meal. In the mosques, as compared to many other Muslim communities throughout the world, living in Canada, Pakistani, Bangladeshis and Indian Muslims are quite closer. At other public forums, we jointly safeguard our interests against 'whites' and 'some so-called champions of South Asia'. I am so much closer to Bangladeshi families here that I can say that in case of need; I would depend more on my Bangladeshi brothers than Pakistanis. We all feel disturbed over

the sad news coming from Bangladesh about 1971 events. What happened in 1971 is the tragic part of our history. No one can deny the fact. But this is fact as well that both the countries suffered; if Pakistan lost the decency and maturity in internal politics, which was part of Banglali politics, Bangladesh is still struggling to build its image at the international level. Some of my Bangladeshi friends here are old Mukti Bahini and Awami League workers and we discuss all these issues quite frankly and criticise each other in a friendly way.

I still remember that in 1973, when wounds of 1971 were unhealed, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman visited Lahore to attend the Islamic Summit and was accorded a rousing welcome by Punjabis and similar treatment was extended to Mr Z A Bhutto when he visited Dhaka in 1974. In the year 1976, when I was a student, I wrote a letter to some Bangladeshi newspapers to have penfriends with Bengalis. The response was hundreds of letters. At the end, let me quote a verse

from the poem by Faiz Ahmed Faiz, which he wrote on demand from Sheikh Mujibur Rahman during Bhutto's visit to Bangladesh: *Hum Kay Tehray Ajnabi Insi Mudaraton Kay Bad* (We are still strangers to each other, even after so many entertainments); *Phir Banayen Kay Ashna Kitni Mulaqaton Kay Bad* (After how many meetings would we become friends again?).

Mohammad Khalid Sarwar,
Queensdale Avenue,
Ottawa, Canada

Narsingdi tragedy

Sir, On 25 November at about 8 PM, fire broke out at Chowdhury Knitwear in Narsingdi which caused about fifty lives. We express our heartfelt sympathy to the members of the bereaved families and pray for the salvation of the eternal souls.

According to newspaper reports, in our garments sector about 300 people lost their lives in different accidents in last 10 years. But still no effective preventive measures have been

taken by the relevant authorities for recurrence of the same as yet. BGMEA and the chief inspector of factories and establishment cannot avoid their responsibilities in this respect. According to different dailies, in Chowdhury Knitwear most of the death caused due to suffocation and stamped as the only exit door was locked from outside. Owing to our socio-economic circumstances, the needy people mostly women, are compelled to work in garments factories where minimum-working condition is absent. How long their legitimate rights will be ignored? How long will they continue to be the victims of the concerned authorities negligence? We urge the authorities concerned to take immediate necessary steps in this regard to stop such recurrence in future and to take drastic disciplinary action against the guilty party. The victim's families must be adequately compensated as well.

MH Bari
Khan Jhan Ali Road
South Tarek Pukur, Khulna