

Twists and Turns of Indian Polity

The biggest tragedy of the past decade is that no party or combination has emerged to fight the growing communalism. Hopes had come to be pinned on Vajpayee. They have been shattered. It is up to him to revive them. By declaring a ceasefire unilaterally, he showed the type of courage which is required to sustain faith in pluralism. Will he follow it up all the way?

THE last decade, which died with the millennium, was neither a period of righteousness, nor of just governments. It was a mishmash. Indian polity had to stay content with what was available or, more so, feasible. Too many cabinets fell at the centre and too often.

Power pushed the purpose, if any, to the background. The governance depended on where ambitions of different political parties would converge. The arrangement lasted till it suited the largest constituent in the combination, first the Congress and then the BJP. There was nothing altruistic about what had happened. But the consensual politics of coalition came to emerge from the confrontation of disparate elements.

This was a positive gain for a country which has 16 recognised languages and as many as 29 states. Even otherwise, pluralism provided glue to the different religions and regions. The Congress took some time to realise that the one-party rule was a relic of the past. But it learnt it the hard way, recalling how close it was to power when the Vajpayee government fell by one vote two and a half years ago. The fact is that no party can win singlehanded 273 seats, required for a bare majority in the Lok Sabha. This has not only made the politics of coalition inevitable but has somewhat converted the unitary system into a federal structure. Indeed, this was the original intention of our forefathers because, the first resolution they passed in the Constituent Assembly was to declare that the "residuary powers" would vest in the state.

The partition of the country frightened the constitution framers and made them transfer the "residuary powers" to the centre. So much

so, they also authorised it to dismiss the elected government and to rule the state directly by merely declaring that the law and order machinery had broken down. It was a mockery of provincial autonomy which the independence movement had adopted as one of its objectives.

Mamata Banerjee of Trinamool Congress, part of the ruling National Democratic Alliance, nearly succeeded a few months ago in having the communist West Bengal government dismissed. This was the pound of flesh she demanded from the Atal Behari Vajpayee government for her support, with eight members in the Lok Sabha. The stern warnings by Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu and Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi deterred the centre from taking such a course. Still it was realised in many quarters how the centre has come to acquire power to act on political considerations.

New Delhi should have imbibed the spirit of federalism. But it has not. The CBI, which is required to have the state's permission before entering its boundaries, is all over the country. The Indian Administrative Service (IAS) cadre, which occupies top positions in a state, is under the centre. They have acted as New Delhi's Trojan horse. The states have limited resources to afford large police contingents. They rely on the centre which catches them in the BSF and CRPF dragnet. Even the officials of the two forces

are drawn from the Indian Police Service (IPS), which is again under New Delhi. Still worse is the fact that the central cabinet or, for that matter, the Prime Minister takes most vital decisions, without consulting the states. The ceasefire in Kashmir is one recent example. No Chief Minister had even the faintest idea about it. Kerala Chief Minister

lessor confusion if the states had known about the centre's intentions or compulsions. It is they which bear the brunt since they are in front of the firing line. The Chief Ministers have repeatedly suggested to the centre that they can soften the impact of harsh measures if they are informed before the announcement. The Vajpayee government

the Rashtrapati Bhavan and felt assured that if no viable government was possible, fresh elections would take place. And this happened again and again.

For most of the third world countries, it is an unbelievable phenomenon. Some in the RSS want to give the military a say in the governance. They wrongly believe that the country would become stronger if the armed forces had a role. This is playing with fire. What is required is that the armed forces should have the facility to cast their vote. The Election Commission has proposed a proxy vote. But the right can be misused. In today's world of instant communication, some way can be found to enable every member of the armed forces exercise his franchise right.

India can feel proud that democracy, more than federalism, has come to stay. Where the nation can be faulted is that it has failed to consolidate its secular credentials in the last decade. Even the Christians have begun to feel insecure. In democracy, convictions of one community are compatible with the tolerance of others. This is what the composite culture is all about.

Unfortunately, the Hindu middle class is getting saffronised. It may not be in favour of building a temple at the site where the Babri masjid once stood. But it laps up all the phrasology of Hindutva. Intellectuals deceive themselves when they say they are guided by the middle-of-the-road philosophy. This is their way of

rationalising the Hindu bent of mind. They have been wrongly taken in by the nation-state concept, which demands conformity, not pluralism. India is yet to assess the damage the BJP has caused to the country's ethos of secularism in the last decade, when Home Minister LK Advani led the *rath yatra* through northern India in 1990 and when the masjid was razed to the ground in 1992. Perhaps the country would have been worse off if the religious frenzy had continued as Vajpayee tried to explain during a debate in the Rajya Sabha. Still, secularism got weakened.

One redeeming factor is the indignation which the nation exhibited over Vajpayee's words that "the national aspiration to build the temple still remained unfulfilled." He explained that the media had misinterpreted him but the damage was done. The biggest tragedy of the past decade is that no party or combination has emerged to fight the growing communalism. Hopes had come to be pinned on Vajpayee. They have been shattered. It is up to him to revive them. By declaring a ceasefire unilaterally, he showed the type of courage which is required to sustain faith in pluralism. Will he follow it up all the way? Federalism and the democratic structure, the earning of the last decade, may be adversely affected if he thinks that he has done enough by giving explanation to his observation.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

E.K. Nayanar told me that he learnt it from the press. And till today no state has any clue to what is sought to be achieved in Kashmir.

In contrast, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru kept the Chief Ministers in the picture through a fortnightly letter. Much before the 1962 war with China, he informed about the intrusion in the Ladakh area where Beijing had built a road to connect Sinkiang with Aksai Chin. Vajpayee may not have Nehru's flourish in English but he is lyrical in Hindi. There are enough officers in the PMO who would aptly translate his Hindi fortnightly letter into English, if he were to start one. The real purport of the exercise is to maintain constant contact with the Chief Ministers. Even on economic reforms, there would have been

has not even revived the National Integration Council, an apex body to discuss the country's problem. The meeting of the National Development Council, which has the Chief Ministers as its members, met only once during the two and a half years of Vajpayee's regime. The council is supposed to discuss economic policies and what goes by the name of Five Year Plan.

It is not being understood that such bodies are the sinews of democratic structure. Indeed, democracy, which has taken deeper roots in the country is the best fallout of the last decade. When governments at the centre fell like nine pins, neither the people nor the political parties even feared the collapse of the parliamentary system. Everyone looked towards the Parliament House or

Sharaf Sharif

Ardeshir Cowasjee writes from Karachi

For years to come we will remain broke. All the government organizations and institutions, many of which do not justify their existence, and the armed forces are all living beyond their means. The country's revenue earnings amount to some Rs.450 billion per year. Debt servicing takes care of around Rs.350 billion and the armed forces consume Rs.230 billion.

AT the ending of the millennium the Sharaf Sharif era of our country has drawn to its close. Mian Mohammad Nawaz Sharif has been banished and General Pervez Musharraf rules the roost.

But, with Pakistani politics and its super-mercurial flow, there is no guarantee that the man who robbed the nation (at best the first crook, or at worst the second) will not stage a successful comeback. The probability is he will stay away for as long as Musharraf remains in the saddle, but he could return as prime minister with Musharraf as president or, the ways of this country and its ignorant people being exceedingly strange, even vice versa.

On October 17, 1999, five days after the general rode in with his men, he spoke:

"My dear countrymen, my aims and objective shall be : 1) rebuild national confidence and morale; 2) strengthen the federation and remove inter-provincial disharmony and restore national cohesion; 3) revive the economy and restore investor confidence; 4) ensure law and order and dispense speedy justice; 5) depoliticise state institutions; 6) evolution of power to the grass-roots level; 7) ensure swift and across-the-board accountability."

Objectives 1) to 3), admittedly difficult, have not been achieved, as have not 5) and 6). Objectives 4) and 7), relatively simple and achievable, remain similarly unachieved.

There is absolutely no reason why, with the army exercising abundant power, law and order cannot be enforced. It is not understandable why saboteurs and obscurantists are allowed to hold sway and why violators of the law are not found and punished. As do the politicians, our armymen maintain that a foreign hand, or a hidden hand, is at play and cannot be found. This is inexcusable.

Oddly, Musharraf's objective listed at number 4) was the premier objective of the country's founder, Mohammad Ali Jinnah. On August 11, 1947 he told the members of the constituent assembly: "The first and foremost thing that I would like to

emphasise is this remember that you are a legislative body and have all the powers. It therefore places on you the gravest responsibility as to how you should take your decisions. The first observation I would like to make is this you will no doubt agree with me that the first duty of a government is to maintain law and order, so that the life, property and religious beliefs of its subjects are fully protected by the state".

The general exercises and possesses more power than any legislative body could ever have. Yet people lose their lives, their properties are destroyed, and religious beliefs are tampered with. Obscurantists and street forces are able to threaten and intimidate our military men.

As for the judiciary, it has been so badly mauled that it is unable to right itself. Charging those who say this with alleged contempt of court helps not a whit. When it comes to justice and accountability, the only court which could successfully deal with thieves and defaulters such as the Sharifs was the Queen's Bench Division of the High Court of Justice in England.

Hudaiba Paper Mills Limited (first defendant), Mian Shahbaz Sharif (second defendant), Mian Mohammad Sharif (third defendant), and Mian Mohammad Abbas Sharif (fourth defendant), borrowed money from Investment Funds Limited, operated by Al-Tawfik Company. A master of the court, not even a judge, served an order on the defendants on September 4, 1998 and the court attached valuable properties in London owned by the Mians : 16, 16A, 17 and 17A Avenfield House at 117-128 Park Lane, London. End of story. The Mians paid up. The loan plus interest, amounting to approximately \$450 million, was repaid

by the good Canadians, have produced a report for the year 2000. In true Pakistani style it is entitled "Social Development in Pakistan Towards Poverty Reduction", when it should have been given the title "Bankrupt Pakistan". Apart from this it is a fairly accurate report.

Moeen Qureshi is a highly intelligent person who has spent most of his life in a civilized society. For three months in 1993 he was our caretaker prime minister and it remains beyond my comprehension how a man such as he could have succumbed to the charms of Benazir Bhutto, that accomplished robber of the people's money, and appointed Maula Bakhsh Abbasi, a known confirmed robber, to head our then reasonably solvent National Development Finance Corporation. Abbasi proceeded to rob the NDFC bone dry and is now as can be expected a declared absconder.

Sartaj Aziz, once Nawaz's finance minister, was privy to the shenanigans of his boss but did not have the decency to either resign or try to do something to prevent Nawaz from robbing.

Hafiz Pasha is a talented man who tried his hand at planning and policy-making during Nawaz's second round. He failed and gave up. Now he has gone to the UN in New York as an assistant secretary for economic affairs. We wish him luck. How much robbing can the people endure and our country bear? The first paragraph of the synopsis of this report sums it up.

"Today, 46 million people of Pakistan are poor and one in every three families is unable to meet its basic requirements of nutrition and other needs. During the decade of the '90s [Bhutto/Sharif years] the

number of poor has increased by as much as 25 million. If present trends continue then we expect that within the next three years the number of poor will increase by another 14 million and approach 60 million, almost 40 per cent of the population. Clearly poverty has emerged as the principal problem requiring urgent attention if a large-scale social breakdown is to be averted, with its concomitant implications for law and order".

For years to come we will remain broke. All the government organizations and institutions, many of which do not justify their existence, and the armed forces are all living beyond their means. The country's revenue earnings amount to some Rs.450 billion per year. Debt servicing takes care of around Rs.350 billion and the armed forces consume Rs.230 billion (130 b. salaries and other recurring

expenses ; 50 b. defence spending-- tanks, aircraft, ships, etc in Benazir's time this cost us 100 b per year ; 25 b. pensions ; 20 b. ISI and paramilitary-- rangers/coastguards/levies/constabulary ; 5 b. nuclear deterrent, capital and recurring).

Any Ataturks in sight? Moaning and groaning and giving in to threatened riots and marches on the capital does not help. Yesterday was the first day of the new millennium. We must thank our stars that despite the destroyers of our country who have led us since Jinnah died in 1948 we have so far only lost half of it. Now, on the foreign affairs front, would it not help if we were to adopt a less belligerent posture?

Saving the Politicians

by Abul M Ahmad

WHO will save the politicians, now that Dhaka has become the metropolis of bad governance? Nothing is going right in every day life, as monitored in the print media. Normally it is the other way round the elected politicians of the ruling regime introduce good governance, and ease out the piled up ills of the society. With the parliament dozing since the early 1990s, the interactive feedback is simply not there. Are we looking at Don Quixotes in politics?

Now the politicians, working within the confines of a bad or ineffective system, are creating more unnecessary garbage, for others to clear. This happens when the naive workmen find fault with the tools. Since the politicians still believe in the rabble-raising method of politicking, braced with the confrontational type of politics, laced with agitation, blockade and violence, routine systematic processing of problems in the administrative and management sectors are not possible, adding to the disorder.

Today the cultivation of political styles is passing through a vicious cycle, and only third outside forces can break it up, by not siding with the dubious political leadership. It is now getting more and more obvious to the citizens that changing political regimes in power will not provide salvation to the oppressed nation and deliver it from the grip of the evil forces at work at official and social levels. Dhaka needs a new type of movement, to tame the bad politics openly practised by the sly and cunning politicians, of which we have a surplus.

The outcome is political adulteration in all spheres of life. The established institutions have been unwittingly destroyed one after another and now things are beyond the control of the politicians, the governors, the administrators, and the management. Nobody is listening to anybody. Other nations have faced this naked situation before, and the fights of liberation have been well recorded. Once again the Bangladeshis have to display their fighting qualities, but this time within their very own society.

Unruly students are controlling the education sectors (though DS editorial Dec 5), spoiling the nation's seedlings; and we also see the uncommon and strange sight of a retired judge and a member of the Law Commission appearing before the court facing contempt charge. A former president of the nation is

also the limelight facing corruption and contempt of court. The ruling politicians are after the judiciary, and the former cannot handle the judiciary reforms, awaited for decades; as also the administrative reforms. The law and order network has virtually broken down, generating no-confidence in the present regime, and destroying the image of the police force. The people are seeking good images of the police force. The people are seeking good images, and it is a commodity which cannot be sold or exchanged.

Land-grabbing in Dhaka and elsewhere is also one of the hottest underground games in town, plainly due to political connivance and nepotism. Politics is now open business, and big business at that; along with the pre-election seasonal rush. While crime is rising steeply, low-key political favours are spreading horizontally, and the tangential effects are felt by the outside citizens who have nothing to do with evil godfatherism.

The political representatives of the people can neither conceive nor deliver: while the cradle of the nation is still operating at the illegitimate baby-sitting stage. However, the situation is pregnant with possibilities, and the midwifery services are likely to continue into extended hours even after thirty years.

A nation has to steer, not drift along. Drifting is a one-way trip; but what about swimming against the current? Fights between two political parties are not gaining the nation any advantage. Therefore the induction of a third force appears to be a foregone conclusion. Deprived societies, especially the Bengalees, yearn for change. It has nothing to do with loyalty, but the players are the politicians, and they now have to defend themselves with better goods and services than they have been vying so long, the market has gift offers; where are the non-consumable and long-lasting political gifts? Are we a nation short of ideas? Then it is time for political entrepreneurship of the right kind. When the people rise, the rest bow down.

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.

BA's disconcerting attitude

Sir, I am writing this letter on behalf of most of the passengers on British Airways flight 145 from London Heathrow to Dhaka, Bangladesh via Calcutta. Upon arrival on Monday, December 25th at 3:50 AM, many of us discovered that our luggage was missing. We were made to fill out a complaint form and were told that the bags would arrive on the following Thursday, December 28th. We were also told not to call the British Airways office, and that they would contact us. However, my mother did call the office on the 26th, and she was informed that non-residents such as myself would receive compensation for the inconvenience. Upon arriving at the British Airways Head Office in Gulshan, she was offered tk 3,000 for the missing luggage, which by the way had not yet been traced. When she inquired about any written policy stating the amount of compensation given to passengers, the officer on duty stated that the head office did

not hold any such records, but that the airport did. She was then made to speak to the officer on duty at the airport where she received the same answer. When my mother insisted on knowing who determined the amount of compensation given to passengers, the officer stated that the information was confidential. Needless to say, we did not accept the tk 3,000. I suffered the inconvenience of being without my personal belongings until Saturday, December 30th.

I travel British Airways because it is known to be a responsible and well reputed airline. It is a shame that they discriminate and treat their passengers with such disregard. It may not make any difference to British Airways, but I for one will certainly not travel the airline again.

Sumanah Khan
Dhaka

Making the wrongs right

Sir, A news story entitled "Stop

brain drain, worried JS body urges govt" (DC, Dec. 14, 2000) tells about the concern of the political leaders about tremendous loss the country is incurring, as the meritorious students are going abroad. On principle, it sounds very "patriotic", but the reality is that our corrupt politicians have polluted the country to such an extent that nobody wants to return to this country when they find a disciplined life abroad despite their yearning for their motherland.

The fact is that the politicians do not want these assets of the country back home, as they like to exploit the prevailing situation in the country for their own aggrandisement. I hope you understand where the problems lie.

Mahmudul Hasan
Leicester, UK

Diplomat sours relations

Sir, Mr M M Rezaul Karim has written a highly objective and fair article captioned "Pakistani Diplomat's Remarks and its Reaction" (DS, 9 December).

He has cited articles 13, 14 and 15 of the tripartite agreement signed by the foreign ministers of Bangladesh, India and Pakistan in New Delhi during 1974, in which the question of 93,000 Pakistani

prisoners of war, including 195 war criminals, were given due attention and an understanding was arrived at, with the approval of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

These articles form part and parcel of an international treaty agreement signed by three sovereign states.

Mr Karim also mentioned Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's recent message of felicitations to the Pakistani government on March 23 in which she termed Pakistan as a fraternal country.

Given these circumstances, one cannot comprehend as to why Irfan Raja, the expelled Deputy High Commissioner of Pakistan in Dhaka chose to make offensive and unbecoming remarks to sour relations between two governments.

Robert Kader
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Chittagong

Book fair not patronised!

Sir, After visiting the Dhaka Book Fair 2000 in December, I urge the authorities to pay serious attention to the changing trends in the universal implications of the book publishing industry, in which Bangladesh has to take an active part, or be left out, after the WTO provision apply fully in the Third

World countries after the grace period. At present the local accent is on local Bangla publications. Foreign attention comes through non-text books published in internationally-recognised languages. The co-publishing sector was poorly represented at this Fair. The regional flavour was missing. There is no point in having Book Fairs in isolation, and bask in the glory of Bangla. The impact of the national language has to reach out at global level.

The Bangla Academy has to look out rather look in, and has to strengthen its translation section (two-way, in and out, in coordination with the national book agency and the local publishing industry) for providing a window to the world in the export and publicity of Bangladesh literature and culture (must use the Internet also).

The nation's international image suffered due to step-motherly treatment of English (since Independence), which is a recognised medium at the international level. There is still time, as the English-medium education is very popular in Bangladesh, and the new and future generations would be able to face the world through the print media.

There is no point in holding Fairs during the month of Ramadan (the peak visiting period is the afternoon

and evening). The Book Fair may be held during the cooler months according to convenience. The organisers have to call in international exhibition agencies to provide the proper perspective and approach to the whole show, which should be oriented at the multinational level, with accent on local products and activities. This year's Fair at Mohammadpur looked rather amateurish in presentation. It was a welcome sign to notice a Book Guild coming over from Calcutta, but it will take some time to get the feel of the participation from both sides.

The future Book Fairs have to be glamorised, but the government should not interfere too much (especially politically, which has become a bad habit!), but provide the backing and act as the facilitator. The time to start planning of the next Fair is right from the beginning of the new year.

A Mawaz
Dhaka