

IT worked only once for me, on a matter of considerable significance. I tried, again and again, and finally, it worked. That experience comes to mind as I sit and watch my co-workers blowing smoke circles through the gap in the window in our designated smoking area. The street noises outside, on Kazi Nazrul Islam Avenue, once known as Mymensingh Road, are joined by the intermittent sound of dry smoker's cough.

I had almost given up trying to quit because, as millions of others in the same boat might appreciate, an addiction to nicotine is the worst kind of compulsion, almost as bad as an addiction of the heart. Not that I can claim much experience in the latter department, but a friend once told me that smoking is like falling in love: you feel terribly ill, but you can't give it up.

My friend probably exaggerated. In any case, there is something to be said about falling in love, always, even when it makes you feel ill. It is certainly less dangerous than smoking and bound to be more conducive to longevity (doctors say love makes you live longer; this is a fact). But nicotine, perhaps like some forms of love, is war. A war against yourself. he love bug).

But the brave A-type people evidently persist. To them, it is a challenge that must be overcome, no matter what the odds or the discomfort involved. Type A achievers frequently pursue life in the fast track and the cigarette is an easy constant companion, sometimes becoming a lifestyle

Quitting was hard, no two ways about it... Quitting is easy, provided one does not make a habit of it... I tried everything. Like Mark Twain, I gave up smoking every day of my life. Sometimes, it lasted for a few weeks, once for nearly three months... Eventually, sheer persistence and the good offices of a hypnotist in the UK, cured me of the habit of nearly a lifetime... Experience tells me to speak out, so that others, young and old, who are sitting on the fence may take heart.

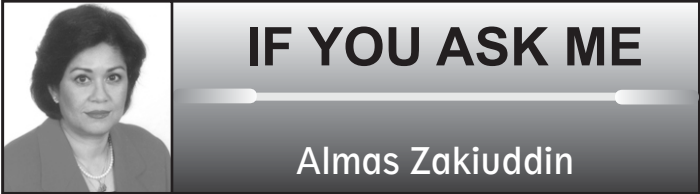
crutch.

My own memory is somewhat hazy, considering my earliest encounter took place with a gaggle of experimenting school-girls, all of whom proceeded to choke and sputter exceedingly loudly and in unison, eventually being found out by the Mother Superior of the convent school whose canteen we were using as our hiding place. Though severely reprimanded and given detention, some of us persisted in tasting the 'forbidden' fruit, whenever opportunity beckoned.

Peer pressure is a huge factor, that we all know. Young people tend to take to the smoking habit in spite of pressure against it, usually by their elders, and because most discourses on the negative values of cigarettes are indirect ways of saying the habit is actually quite cool. Advertisers peg their messages to attract new smokers, especially young women. It is a daunting fact that the single highest new group of smokers in the developed countries is young teenaged girls. As women climb the ladder to success, that Virginia Slim slogan which caught the imagination nearly four decades ago, still holds true. If you recall, there was this photograph of a beautiful career woman, (somewhat

like the girl in the ad for "Charlie", the perfume by Revlon for women that has a man's name), which said simply: "You've come a long way, baby".

That slogan is finding echoes in lifestyle values that are being promoted in the developing world for both genders, young and old,



these days. One does not see women puffing away on the Bangla television channels that are beamed via satellite to so many of our homes, but overall, the message is clear for all to see and understand. Cigarettes are a status symbol, a sign of modernity, a signal that one has travelled to the upscale world of fine cars, fine homes, fine lifestyles and a fine cigarette.

To give it up is a far cry; many are taking to smoking without a second thought. At this health club that I used to frequent in Dhaka (before someone shot at a member on the premises and

scared me into staying away permanently) nearly all the girls/women who used to pant and pedal furiously on treadmills and steppers with me, used to smoke. Indeed, one svelte siren in her early 30s once told me breathlessly that without cigarettes, she would die. Not that

rest from the smoke and so, when I first gave it up, it was something of a relief. A couple of weeks later, my air cavities and tongue tasted clean again, and I could run up two flights of stairs without looking like an epileptic. The urge would come back again, and this time when I took that first puff, it almost felt good. Seconds later, of course, I would groan with guilt and angst and regret and everything possible that told me this was a mistake. But it was done. I had quit and started up again.

But I did not give up. I tried everything. Like Mark Twain, I gave up smoking every day of my life. Sometimes, it lasted for a few weeks, once for nearly three months. I watched my sons become smokers and beat my chest in guilt, and I smoked when they were not around until one of them smelled smoke on my breath and I was back to square one. My boss at the time had similar aspirations and like him, I went around with needles sticking out of the back of my earlobes for a week or so, before abandoning that acupuncture line of action because it made me look like a circus freak with a cigarette in my mouth.

Someone suggested that a good way to sustain the new

regime was to change old habits that went with smoking. Immediately, I altered various constants, such as the route to work, the ashtray in front of the telephone, the standing-around-at-parties scene as well. Staying at home put me in a worse temper though and depriving myself of the normal carton of cigarettes only made me rush out in the dead of night to buy a pack from the nearest 7 Eleven or its equivalent.

Eventually, sheer persistence and the good offices of a hypnotist in the UK, cured me of the habit of nearly a lifetime. The old man who hypnotised me, (and he has probably retired for he was nearly 75 years old when he 'treated' me some eight years ago) told me something that has stayed with me since the day I went to him. I entered his office a smoker and left it a non-smoker. How it happened is beyond me even now for I remember nothing except that we discussed music and the weather. The old man told me hypnosis would work if I did not try to analyse it and because, in my case, he believed that I had tried long enough.

One reason I have dwelt on my success against nicotine is because experience tells me to speak out, so that others, young and old, who are sitting on the fence may take heart. It may be impossible to fall out of love, even if one tries. But one can quit cigarettes. As the saying goes: *If at first you don't succeed, try, try, try again.*

LETTER FROM KARACHI

The Nation Must Seek Political Stability

by M J Zahedi

The public was led to believe that a very strong hand was directed toward the wicked and the evil, they would soon be taken to task and the looted and hidden money would soon be unearthed and would start flowing into the public coffers, which the plunderers had depleted. A new, previously unheard of mechanism, the National Accountability Bureau, was created. In the first instance the NAB really nabbed some well-heeled individuals and sent a signal that the army meant business. But the result of this exercise belied popular expectations.

biggest of them all, to carry out a tax survey and document the economy. Soon the plans began to peter out or were quietly being abandoned. For the first time the army became the butt of criticism. It was stripped of the halo it was usually viewed with and stood demystified as an institution, perhaps the best run and organized one. It was perhaps the one happy outcome of the military's intervention, the *Dawn* thought.

One other plan of the government suffered a fatal blow towards the end of 2000. It was the government's programme of accountability. The 'lethal' (according to *Dawn*) was served by the Nawaz Sharif saga: his release from prison, pardoning of all his crimes and exile to Saudi Arabia, apparently all these were done at Saudi Arab's intercession.

Publicly, this was done in return for some money and property. But the government seemed to have forgotten that the military intervention rested on the alleged

ruin Nawaz Sharif's governance had been bringing on state institutions. And the former prime minister had been built up as the biggest 'culprit' of them all. But in his case the course of morality and justice was subverted by political necessity, if one does not take into account the cash involved.

The act though accomplished in complete secrecy was announced to the people suddenly, without even an inkling being available to the general people. The unsuspecting people were astonished to read in the morning papers that Nawaz Sharif was pardoned of all his crimes, his prison sentence had been remitted and he was allowed to fly out of the country, to Saudi Arabia, with almost his entire family, including his brother Shabbaz Sharif who was the chief minister of the province of Punjab, considered by many only second to the prime minister of the country, in matters of power, prestige and influence.

Although the whole thing had

been accomplished in the strictest of secrecy, an outcry was raised once the details became public. It was so loud that the government was put on the defensive, the chief executive General Pervez Musharraf had to take recourse to the airwaves and explain to the people the reasons for the decision. Even then most people remain unconvinced, and remain so even today. Then there was the economic situation that also took its toll. The people's mood became increasingly bitter and remained so till the end of the year and still continues to be so. The signs of recovery of the economy were not there, at least very prominently. The prices of ordinary daily-use commodities began to rise and kept on rising all throughout the year.

There was also the question of accountability. The government in the beginning had made much of the plunder indulged in by the previous governments. The public was led to believe that a very strong hand was directed toward the wicked and the evil,

they would soon be taken to task and the looted and hidden money would soon be unearthed and would start flowing into the public coffers, which the 'plunderers' had depleted. A new, previously unheard of mechanism, the National Accountability Bureau, was created. In the first instance the NAB really nabbed some well-heeled individuals and sent a signal that the army meant business. But the result of this exercise belied popular expectations. But as a corollary to NAB's creation and enthusiasm, the banks from their defaulting creditors recovered some amount, but the higher business class went underground with its money. With no or very poor domestic investment, it was only natural for the lower-strata businessmen to complain of poor business. The inept manner in which the tax survey was carried out shattered the confidence of the business class. In the final analysis, however, the Musharraf government is the most benign of all

military governments Pakistan has had since 1958. It has not used the cudgel on the Press, which is perhaps the freest since the inception of the country; unlike its predecessors the Musharraf government has allowed the Press to criticise it, a novelty indeed in Pakistan.

Although some individuals have been caged without any trial, or even without any charge, repression as understood in most of Third World countries has not been perpetrated. General Musharraf, with his frank and open manner, has come across as one who means well. Even his latest address to the nation was an example of his forthrightness and frankness. His government enjoyed and still does, popular goodwill. Obviously it is dogged by confusion and ineptness and ineffectiveness and has squandered much of the goodwill.

People, it seems, are still willing to give him time and opportunity. The IMF too is willing to give it a chance. In Kashmir, fresh winds are blowing which if utilised properly could yet lead to a softening of hard positions, if not a resolution of the longstanding vexed problem.

And within the country itself, there is a fresh realisation, including even by the rulers, that whatever our travails, the nation must seek political stability in the turbulence of democracy.

Vajpayee on See-saw Game

by AMM Shahabuddin

The Congress should now come forward with a bold policy to put its own house in order as well as to make a thrust to 're-occupy its lost territory.' When BJP is likely to lose ground because of its following a double policy, by putting up one set of teeth for showing, and another set for chewing, it is now for the Congress to seize the opportunity. The minorities in India, particularly, the Muslims and Christians, had been disillusioned by the behaviour of BJP leaders...

he said, on 6 December last, on the occasion of the eighth anniversary of the 'holy action' of his followers that the move to build a temple on the ruins of the mosque was an 'unfinished national task!' This instantly created an uproar in the Indian Parliament where the Congress and other secular-minded party members demanded his resignation. Foreseeing the gathering storm on the horizon and particularly being pressed by some of his own secular coalition allies to withdraw his controversial statement, Vajpayee changed his 'mask' to distance himself from the communal frenzy that he had ignited by his statement. It was later announced as a face-saving device that PM's statement was taken 'out of context' and what he had said was that the move for building the temple was a 'national sentiment.'

But the damage had already been done. The damage inflicted by the inaction on the part of Rao's Congress government when the zealots had their heyday on 6 December 1992 in demolishing the 16th century Mosque had now been further accentuated by the hide and seek game being played by the incumbent Prime Minister with his double-edged controversial statements.

And all this double-game was surprisingly staged by its sponsors, within a month or so of their launching in November last a nation-wide campaign for "wooing" the Muslim voters and improving the image of BJP, perhaps as a secular party as its name indicates, before the forthcoming elections. The high profile campaign was billed as aiming at 'bridging the gap between the country's largest political party (BJP) and the country's largest minority community (Muslims).' But the mask fell too early. The mid-stream changing

of horses by Vajpayee within a month or so of launching its highly orchestrated campaign to woo the Muslim voters, had further exposed the BJP. When the recitation of the 'holy scriptures' come from wrong quarters it creates more suspicion than trust. The Indian Muslim leaders had already dismissed BJP leader's new stance on Masjid-Mandir issue as a "political gimmickry."

It would be a great tragedy for India if the policy of secularism, preached and practised by 'Father of the Indian Nation', M K Gandhi, and the first Prime Minister of independent India, Pandit Nehru, meets its 'Waterloo' in the face of BJP's onslaughts, because of lack of commitment, absence of a charismatic leadership and disunity among party leaders, plus rampant corruption among top-notchers. But circumstantial

evidences rather speak loudly that the Indian Congress is almost lost in the crowd. It is difficult to forecast to what extent Sonia Gandhi's impressive leadership will be able to salvage the 'wreckage' to give it a new life and clear secular direction. Only time will show how far she succeeds.

Undoubtedly, it is the weakness of Congress due to the gradual deterioration of its quality leadership that made the field open for its new rival BJP with its more eye-catching 'postures' and tantalizing slogans. When the people in general were disenchanted because of the failure of Congress government at the centre to fulfil its mouthful of election promises, they looked for a change for the betterment of their lot. As nature abhors vacuum, BJP filled it very successfully and smartly. Otherwise how could they make such a tremendous advancement from only two members in the Parliament to the present largest party there, with 188 members, within a decade or so?

The Congress should now come forward with a bold policy to put its own house in order as well as to make a thrust to 're-occupy its lost territory.' When BJP is likely to lose ground because of its following a double policy, by putting up one set of teeth for showing, and another set for chewing, it is now for the Congress to seize the opportunity.

The minorities in India, particularly, the Muslims and Christians, had been disillusioned by the behaviour of BJP leaders towards their sentiments and rights through several recent incidents, the most horrible being the demolition of the Babri mosque, and burning of several Churches. A close ally of BJP, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) recently had declared to go

ahead with their 'plans' to build a grand temple on the ruins of Babri mosque, no matter whether the present BJP Government stays or falls, has added more combustible fuel to the already ignited fire, this is indeed a bad omen for India's secular ideals. As an Indian political analyst, Mahesh Rangarajan, in a recent comment, said that Vajpayee had made 'Short-term gains by pandering to the powerful, hardline Hindu organizations, who provide crucial backing to the BJP.' The chief cleric of Delhi Jame Masjid Syed Bokhari had regretted that the extremist Hindu organizations' campaign for building a temple had become the focus of discussion, instead of the question of re-building of the demolished mosque.

So all the 'ingredients' are there to further ignite a devastating fire, the hey-stack, the match box and the communal fanatics. Any wrong step would lead India to a national catastrophe. But where are all the peace makers and trouble shooters? The western countries, particularly America, will certainly maintain a safe distance from creating unnecessary ill feelings with the BJP government, obviously for commercial reasons, having a sharp eye on the billion-mouth consumer market, world's largest in one country, for their goods. As they say, they put their mouth where milk is. Certainly, they won't put their hands in the hornet's nest. It is, therefore, up to the secular-minded political leaders to take up the challenge thrown by BJP and its sister organizations to save the secular image of India from disaster. Otherwise, the apprehension expressed by the chief cleric of Jame Masjid Syed Bokhari that any attempt to build a temple on the ruins of Babri Masjid would 'tear apart the country's secular fabrics,' would come true, making it 'the last nail in the coffin of communal harmony and unity of India,' as he said. Let not the 'mixture' of BJP's 'communal secularism' and 'secular communalism,' ultimately end in the proverbial 'golden stone bowl'.

The writer is a retired UN official.

To the Editor ...

Furore over fatwa

Sir, On the very first day of the new year one bench of Bangladesh High Court Division declared all kind of *fatwas* illegal. It can be said without any shred of doubt that this historical decision will be considered as a milestone in our judicial strata. In the wake of multifarious administrative snags, judiciary is the last resort of the general public. And the judiciary by its sagacity/prudence, neutrality and above all by its courageous move proved it many a times.

This landmark verdict has already been acclaimed by people from all walks of life. The

London based Amnesty International has also expressed their satisfaction over the verdict. Hopefully from now on, one cannot pronounce *fatwa* at one's sweet will.

The High Court, in its judgement said "*Fatwa* means legal opinion of lawful person or authority. And the legal system of Bangladesh empowers only the court to decide all questions relating to legal opinion be it Muslim law or other laws in force."

However, this landmark verdict has been opposed by the reactionary people like Mufti Fazlul Haque Amini and others. They have already declared the

judges *murtad* (apostate). I wonder what is their legal authority. Rule of law prevails in the country and if anyone is aggrieved by any sort of judgement of the court, he/she can seek remedy appealing to the higher courts. Then why aren't the *Aminis* going that way?

Anyway, the government must come forward to implement the High Court observation in the truest sense of the term. Simultaneously, it would be appreciated if the government deem it fit to establish a separate department in the university for studying Islamic jurisprudence. This department will carry out necessary research on the Holy

Qur'an and Sunnah giving special emphasis on Islamic jurisprudence and law which will remove our superstition about Islamic rules and orders.

Besides, the following recommendations may be considered regarding this burning issue:

1.Policy dialogues on religious issues should be arranged.

2.Science-based religious education should be promoted.

3.The media should play the necessary role in this regard.

4.Above all, civil society and human rights activists should come forward to help the government implement this historical verdict.

MH Bari