

Sheikh Hasina breaks her pledge on hartal

Economy too fragile to withstand work-stoppage

BECAUSE Sheikh Hasina is going to be deprived of special security the nation will have to suffer an eight-hour work-stoppage. Is that the logic of AL's hartal call on Sunday? Of course the former ruling party will say it is for a far bigger cause but we know better. It is now nearly eight years that this newspaper has been calling for an end to this self-destructive political action. We started when BNP was in power the first time around and AL was calling the hartals. Then the tables turned and when Sheikh Hasina became the Prime Minister the hartal callers (AL) condemned it and those who had condemned hartals earlier (BNP) started calling it. Now that the tables have turned once again we have a reversal of roles in hartals callers and those who will condemn it. Such is the hypocrisy of our politicians. An apt description of our politics was contained in one of our commentaries, "Election is fair if we win it, and hartal is good if we call it."

Sheikh Hasina had promised the nation, while in power, that she would never call hartal again if she went to the opposition. Well within two months of her doing so she has broken her pledge to the people. She said she did not want to go for hartals but an environment was created that hartals became a must. Frankly we do not believe her nor do too many people, and for good reasons. In fact when she made her no hartal pledge while being the Prime Minister many who knew her better commented that she was saying so simply because she thought she would never have to redeem this pledge because she would not be in the opposition again. We did not believe those sceptics then and welcomed her pledge with great enthusiasm. Well now the sceptics stand vindicated and those who believed her, look foolish.

We are not engaging in any discussion whether she needs more personal security or not. May be she does. But we do not accept the logic that because the government has decided to withdraw her special security she has acquired the right to punish the people. We said so before and repeat it now. There can be no justification to damage our economy and put the country backward. Doesn't the former Prime Minister know how the world has suffered, and we along with the rest of the world, after the 11 September WTC bombing? Doesn't she know that our garments industry is at its worst since it began? Doesn't she care that about three lakh women workers are already out of work and are about to become destitute? How can she put further strain on the economy when Bangladesh faces perhaps her severest economic challenge in the last two decades? Or doesn't she care because she is no longer the PM. Is that how she wants to be judged? If not, then she has to show more care for the people than for her personal security.

Dengue stays back as winter comes

City Corporation fails to deliver or explain

EVEN before the old dengue mosquito invasion had fully retreated, the winter swarm of this buzzing pest had arrived to make life miserable and deadly. Reports also say that the City Corporation is yet to start its annual winter initiative to bring the mosquito population size to a controllable level. Worse, the pesticide is reportedly defunct. It seems that we are condemned to have these deadly insects as our immediate neighbours for the foreseeable future. And one can thank the authorities for ensuring that.

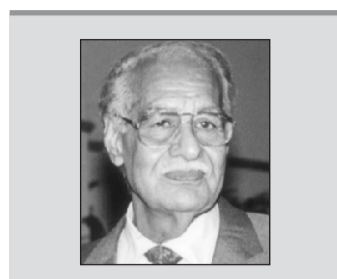
Contrary to numerous statements made by experts, the dengue wave didn't die in October but has run on till November. It's a disturbing fact of life and death that the prognosis regarding the spread and virulence of the dengue epidemic has overtaken the knowledge of the disease managers. It means this newly emerged epidemic has found a fertile place of residence. But we would be able to do little for that deadly and dramatic future if we are able to do so little now.

Discussing facts about the health management of the Dhaka city is an exercise in fear and helplessness. Although, certain basic activities are supposed to be carried out like spraying larvacide, pesticide and cleaning of swamps, we find little done and whatever done has been completed defectively. It's futile business as usual for these ineffective outfits, whether spraying pesticide, cleaning swamps or making sure that the public is motivated.

Yet things have improved. Compared to last year the doctors know much more on how to manage dengue. This has saved many lives. But doctors can't prevent epidemics and that public health responsibility lies basically in ensuring a safe environment for the city by managing breeding grounds. That task has been failed and the people denied.

We do feel that the authorities owe us an explanation. We do feel that there should be some accountability. We do hope that someone will make things right. Our only fear is that all of them might be as spurious as the insecticide they use to kill the mosquitoes in the first place.

History a la Joshi



KULDEEP NAYAR
writes from New Delhi

IT all began with a question on the 'Policy for Writing Text-books' in the Rajya Sabha. Human Resource Development Minister Murlu Manohar Joshi was not even present in the House to give reply. He had left it to his minister of state. Leader of the House Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh was equally indifferent. He did not even come to the House during the uproar which lasted for more than an hour after a senior MP characterised the policy as the Talibanisation of education.

Talibanisation may be a strong word to use for the deletion of certain portions from school history text-books. But what the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) and the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) have jointly done to mutilate history is in no way less than what the Taliban have done to disfigure human heritage. Since the ruling National Democratic Alliance and the opposition are so apart and politically so tense, particularly due to the coming UP election, that a sharp expression by either side throws parliament out of gear. It is not what is said is unbearable; it is the attitude which has become overbearing. The Taliban have come a cropper because of their fundamentalist outlook. It is only a matter of time when Joshi, under

whose orders history has been communalised, will become a relic of the past and relegated to a footnote in history books. A person who refuses to accept anything which conflicts with the interpretation of his beliefs is too rigid to fit into the modern society. The tragedy is that the harm Joshi is doing to the country's ethos of pluralism may be difficult to erase. Joshi initiated the debate that

expunged portion is that cattle wealth was decimated because cows and bullocks were killed in numerous Vedic sacrifices. Another is that "beef was served as a mark of honour to special guests in the Vedic times" and that "in later centuries the Brahmins were forbidden to eat beef". Yet another is about the feeling of 'antipathy' among the Brahmins towards Asoka and Buddhism because of 'their anti-

the deletion will absolve Hinduism for the man-made differences. Why should he fight shy of students knowing that the caste is the worst kind of slavery that the upper castes have been sustaining for centuries? The portion deleted states a fact which cannot be wiped out even if its reference is dropped from history books.

The expunged text is: The rigid bind of the caste system which

incarnation after incarnations his karma shows a record of increasing virtue.

True, the constitution of India today outlaws 'untouchability', and makes it a criminal offence to discriminate against anyone because of his caste, colour or creed. But the caste system is still very strong because of its basis in religion. Joshi or his party the BJP does not want to effect reforms in Hinduism and

no monument to support their veracity. If Joshi had allowed a discussion on that, students would have themselves rejected the thesis. Hinduism is more a way of life than the rituals which are increasingly entangling it. Openness is its strength, not weakness. Let it stay that way. The government's attitude to parochialise history is, however, only one example. For the first time in the last 40 years, when the International Trade Fair at Delhi became an annual factor, handicrafts by Muslims and Sikhs have been displayed separately at a section called, 'Minority Handicrafts'. Handicrafts are either good or bad, they are not tagged as minority or majority. During the British rule, earthen pitchers were categorised as Hindu water and Muslim water. Joshi's exercise reminds me of the mess that Pakistan has made of history. It has started history with the arrival of Muslims in the subcontinent, nearly 1400 years ago. The Mohanjedaro and the Taxila relics in Pakistan testify to the culture of thousands of years back. But their mention has been deleted because that was the Hindu

BETWEEN THE LINES

Proposals are afoot to abolish history books and replace them with a treatise on culture. One can imagine the hacking job Joshi will do. He is too biased and too fundamentalist to take any objective stand. He does not even understand what our composite culture means, let alone appreciate it... Joshi's exercise reminds me of the mess that Pakistan has made of history. It has started history with the arrival of Muslims in the subcontinent, nearly 1400 years ago. The Mohanjedaro and the Taxila relics in Pakistan testify to the culture of thousands of years back. But their mention has been deleted because that was the Hindu

period... some 'distortions' had crept into history books because the communist-minded teachers had authored them. But he never spelled out the distortions. Without any debate on what he found objectionable, he ordered the deletions.

Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee has said that they are willing to have a debate on what he has described as 'one-sided history'. But should there have been deletions before the debate? It is of little consequence now when Joshi has presented the country with a fait accompli. His fiat goes to the extent of saying that no class can even discuss the portions his ministry has found to be twisted.

The deletions suggest that Joshi is annoyed mainly over the references to the killing of cows and the eating of beef. For example, one

sacrifice attitude'.

Such deletions smack of religious bias, not of concern over the accuracy of history. That Hindus do not eat beef (even the Kashmiri Muslims do not) is a well-known fact. There have been demonstrations by the *sadhus* in the past to demand a ban on cow-slaughter. They were once able to surround the Parliament House. Some of those who are presently at the helm of affairs were behind the agitation at that time. Still Mrs Indira Gandhi's government was able to resist the pressure and endorse the views of the Nehru-appointed committee that a total ban on slaughter of all cattle would not be in the best interest of the country as it was merely a negative approach.

Joshi has also expunged one reference to the caste system as if

started out as a division of labour but was then 'made hereditary by law and religion'. The lower castes worked and toiled in the belief that they would deserve a better life in the next world or birth... What was done by slaves and other producing sections in Greece and Rome under the threat of whip was done by *vaishyas* and *shudras* out of conviction formed through Brahminical indoctrination and the *varna* system."

Whom are we trying to fool when we shut our eyes to the reality? The caste into which one is born is the result of one's past life, Hindus believe. One will be reborn in a future life in accordance with one's behaviour in this life. This record of behaviour through former lives is a man's *karma*. A man rises in caste through life after life through

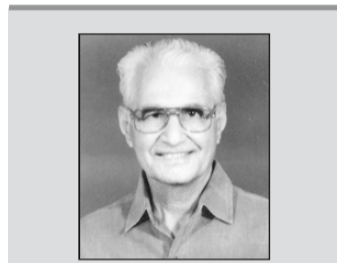
prefers to stay content with the rewriting of history.

In fact, this is befouling oneself. Proposals are afoot to abolish history books and replace them with a treatise on culture. One can imagine the hacking job Joshi will do. He is too biased and too fundamentalist to take any objective stand. He does not even understand what our composite culture means, let alone appreciate it.

I do not agree with those who attribute more importance to archaeological evidence than to traditions and writings connected with the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and saints like Guru Teg Bahadur. Whether they are myths, mere mythology or something else, they are part and parcel of Hinduism. They cannot be rejected by a historian Vincent Smith tried to do that just because there is

Kuldeep Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.

Afghanistan and emerging order



M B NAQVI
writes from Karachi

NO world order is a fixed thing. It goes on changing, generally slightly, with major developments and Afghan War is one of those things that are sure to make significant changes. Prognostication of how the war will end and what would follow in Afghanistan is a hazardous business. However, a few scenarios, mostly pessimistic, can be visualised insofar as Asia is concerned.

As of now, whether or not the UN plays a dominant role in Afghanistan some sort of a government would be hammered into shape as a result of its ministrations. And it will certainly be advertised as a broad-based and representative one. Here, some assumptions have to be necessarily made. No matter what the exact composition of the next government, it will be dominated by Northern Alliance which, in its turn, will be subject to much internal dissension and mutual jealousies among powerful warlords like Dostam, Fahim and others.

Further, Taliban are unlikely to disappear altogether from the Afghan scene. Even after their government has been destroyed, there may remain pockets in

Pushtoon areas where armed groups would hold out, or will go on losing and gaining them, thus preventing the nominal Kabul government to be successful; resistance to that government will continue in many places, particularly in the Pushtoon areas, where lawlessness might become endemic. The law and order in the country as a whole is likely to remain patchwork at best.

characterise that regime: First, Kabul would continue to be ruled by a basically pro-American set of people who will do what would be in harmony with America's larger political or economic purposes. Secondly, the US military presence would be an outstanding factor affecting the future of both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

This American presence in either country is unlikely to end soon,

purposes — doubtless aiming to deflect American attention and resources toward Kashmir's cross-border terrorism and other bilateral matters, especially more investments. India is likely to remain a national or theoretical host of Americans, if necessary of their troops; it would be a great prop for American grand designs for Asia.

Then, China has no theoretical objection to War against Terrorism

hearts, there would be resentment in China and also in Russia. American advance is largely, in current terms, at the expense of China and, to a smaller extent, Russia. Notionally, the scope for Chinese activities, economic and political, has shrunk by the ongoing political advance of the US in what used to be the Soviets' backyard. Russians are now economically (and politically) at sixes and sevens. The communist

American economic interests — things on surface might not give any indication of what is going on inside. This ferment would also be helped by the growth of globalisation under WTO and World Bank group. The latter's contradiction creates strong resentment among the poor and the unemployed and the perennially deprived sections. The reason is that the growth of globalisation promotes prosperity in a relatively small section of each underdeveloped society — though it is also true of developed countries but these are not under discussion — while resentment among the poor and the unemployed is sure to go on being aggravated by this disparity. Pakistan is likely to be a typical example of this whole process.

This characteristic impact of globalisation on individual economies, especially in underdeveloped countries, is replicated at the global level: it promotes prosperity in some countries while leaving other (underdeveloped) economies out in the cold. Much of the opposition to WTO and American geo-political overlordship, represented by the trend sketched here, is likely to combine and may add fuel to the fire of anti-Americanism. Should there be economic or other setbacks to other major economic-power centres, a precondition would then be created for them to exploit the general disenchantment against America and its policies, particularly in populous Asia, to challenge the American supremacy-dominated and this unipolarity of the world. In this possible contest decisive battles are likely to be fought in Asia.

MB Naqvi is a leading columnist in Pakistan

PLAIN WORDS

While discontent may continue to grow at the grassroots in most countries that would come under American influence — with governments deciding major policies which keep them in step with the US and which in some fashion promote American economic interests — things on surface might not give any indication of what is going on inside. This ferment would also be helped by the growth of globalisation under WTO and World Bank group.

An important subject is what impact would the defeat and destruction of Taliban regime have on the phenomena called Islamic Fundamentalism — or rather different extremist schools of Islam. Can it be destroyed or even damaged, leading to the loss of its elan. The assumption being made here is that nothing of the sort is likely to happen. On the contrary, all extremist schools will be strengthened; they may become even more paranoid and extreme. Other Taliban-like phenomena can go on erupting throughout the Islamic world.

Hopefully, during initial years there would be a united Afghan state, though the government in Kabul might not be stable or make its writ run uniformly throughout the country. But two facts would surely

though most Pakistanis would like it to disappear as early as possible. So long as the Musharraf regime lasts — and it is likely to last in one form or another for a fair amount of time — the opposition to American presence would be kept contained. In Afghanistan, American influence, based on its troops' presence, is not likely to be constrained in the manner that it might be in Pakistan; Afghanistan, despite its internal lawlessness, is likely to become a major staging station for further advance into Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, in the first instance, and later throughout central Asia — and maybe in Russia itself.

The Americans have gained many other advantages, beginning with the fact that the BJP government in New Delhi is pinning to be of greater use to America's geopolitical

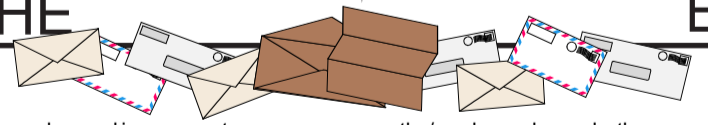
and, after its admission into WTO, it is not likely to strenuously oppose the American advance into Central Asia at this stage, though friction is surely to arise later on account of agreed Pakistan-China joint ventures on the Mekran coast (Gwadur port) and many other matters. Russia too has its own interests that are seen to coincide with American opposition to Islamic Extremism. But thanks to its economic and financial needs, it is unlikely to offer any resistance to America's economic designs on central Asian republics. The road to American investments in central Asian republics is wide open — for exploiting their hydrocarbons, other minerals and possible contracts for infrastructure development and equipment for armed forces' modernisation.

It is true that in their heart of

ideology has disappeared and no replacement has yet been found. Men like Kissinger thought that Russian nationalism, with its innate aggressive and expansionist tendencies, would become a dominant force. Well, it has not done so — not yet, at any rate. So far, economic decline and anarchic conditions have prevented Russian nationalism to claim any significant victory. But should economic stabilisation take place, it would have a fair chance of succeeding — mostly by default. But then, it will have to be militaristic like any other Fascism.

While discontent may continue to grow at the grassroots in most countries that would come under American influence — with governments deciding major policies which keep them in step with the US and which in some fashion promote

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR



"Yes gas, no gas, very good gas"

I thoroughly enjoyed reading the article "Yes gas, no gas, very good gas" written by Afsan Chowdhury published on 20th November in your esteemed daily. His idea accords with mine, "Why don't we set up a neutral caretaker gas export deciding committee who will decide the job for us?" A council of advisers who will study all angles of our country's benefits, discuss with everyone and then submit a report considering our country's welfare.

I readily agree to Mr Afsan's thoughtful and practicable proposal of his column "Straight from the Heart". There should be at least a dozen expert in this subject in our country whom we can trust or rely on. "If we don't have them, then we don't deserve to have gas." — it is really wonderful statement. Hats off to Mr Afsan Chowdhury.

Fouzia Haque
Teacher, South Breeze school, Dhaka.

Our politicians

Our politicians are always paranoid about finding fault with other politicians. They always mix up party

politics with the government and creates confusion and gives rise to political unrest. Before being elected to power, they offer the world to the voters but after clinging to power all they are concerned with is petty party politics. Shouldn't looking after people's welfare be their top priority?

Rina Sultana,
Mohammadpur, Dhaka

Why do they cheat?

When people of this country wonder why a big majority of exam students cheat or at least make an attempt to cheat on their academic exams, let me cite one reason:

The student whom my sister tutors (who is only 8 years older) was in her class one day, at a supposedly "good English medium school", when a teacher from another class room came in and asked the 2nd grade teacher for the answers to the exam. This teacher has a niece in the same school, also in the 2nd grade (coincidental?).

These teachers didn't even try to disguise the fact that they were helping a child to cheat. They just assumed that the class was young, and wouldn't understand what was going on. Believe me, they might be

young but, they realise what is happening. When the teachers have no morals how do you expect the children to have any? Children copy what they see.

A concerned citizen, on e-mail

A frustrated nation

The nation has celebrated its 31st Independence and National Day. But what have we achieved so far? Bangladesh is considered the most polluted country in the world. Law and order situation of the country is deteriorating day by day. Instead of studying, students are involved in cheating and mass copying in the examinations. Instead of looking after the welfare of people, the politicians are involved in petty party politics. Frustration and despondency are the order of the day. Is this why millions of people sacrificed their lives in 1971?

Samina Alam
Mohakhali, Dhaka

Woes of Karwan Bazar

Karwan Bazar is one of the most important commercial areas in Dhaka city. Everyday lakhs of people come in this area for various purposes.

In this area there is a 5-Star hotel, important commercial establishments, government/semi government offices, restaurants, shops, fish market, wholesale/Kancha Bazar etc.

During the fog end of the last regime some steps were taken to evict the unauthorised shopkeepers/hawkers from the foot-

paths/roads, parks and other open spaces. The huge dump of 'garbage' was also cleaned.

The area was slightly better for a few days and people got some relief.

Unfortunately after the recent change of government it has been observed that the hawkers/shopkeepers have come back in full force and occupied the footpaths/roads/parks etc. It has now become impossible for the pedestrians to move on the footpath. Car parking has become extremely difficult as well.

I would therefore request the Ministry of Home Affairs/DCC etc to look into this matter and take effective measures to clear the footpaths/roads of Karwan Bazar area. Also arrangements should be made to clear the 'garbage' regularly for better environment.

An Observer
Dhaka

Our sufferings

Is there any government in the country to take care of our woes and grief? Who will save us from pollution, traffic jams, copying in exams, increasing crimes and so on.

We have elected the BNP gov-