

The city of filth

Dhaka's plight is a problem and its own metaphor

EVERY city earns its own nickname. The state of Dhaka's sewer system has shown that our claim to fame lies in our endless ability to manufacture garbage and our near-total inability to dispose of them. It might sound rude but we live surrounded by filth and probably within filth, thus swiftly becoming an apt metaphor for our state of being. There can be few if any capital city elsewhere, which fails to provide sewerage access to 80 per cent of its citizens.

The collateral damage of absent sewerage lines is most apparent in the plight of the city's dying breed of lakes. Most are taking in the filth sent down from various neighbourhoods and in the process are being literally choked to death. The responsibility for ensuring sewerage disposal facilities to all lies with WASA but as usual they have provided excuses as the substitute for performance.

But WASA can hardly be blamed since they are not policy makers but an implementing agency. The governments at various points of time never felt that they had a responsibility and reports say that in the last fifteen years no expansion of the sewerage lines has taken place. This is certainly a very strange approach towards urban planning since sewage isn't known to disappear just because one doesn't plan to dispose of it properly. It seems more likely that this is an area of darkness because we perhaps live in that dark neighbourhood and can't see the problem within.

WASA has also stated that although most people are supposed to construct septic tanks inside their premises to take care of the garbage, most prefer to link their sewer lines to the main pipeway on the main road and be damned what happens next. One result of this strategy is the sight of overflowing sewage on city roads during the rainy season when the road and the sewer line becomes one.

Dhaka residents aren't famous for their civic sense and have broken every law, rule and custom that civilized society demands from its members so expecting them to take care of their own sewage isn't exactly realistic.

The implementing agencies like WASA only move when there is pressure or incentive. Since none is adequately present, the chances of a pro-active WASA chasing utility problems for resolution is low.

With the political leadership more concerned about whom to blame and how while ignoring most of the problems that all the people, a quick solution appears hardly in sight either.

Meanwhile as we stand mired in filth, let's demand in loud voices for our release, relief and civic rights.

Freshly mandated mayor needed

Meanwhile, keep DCC's day-to-day functioning above squabbles

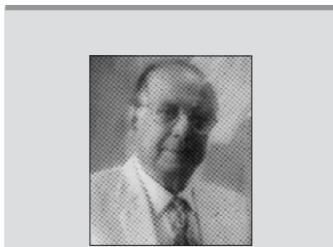
MAYOR Hanif, nearly three years superannuated on his DCC chief's job, evidently has a redundancy feeling engulfing him at the moment. His elective five-year term ended as far back as in March, 1999. And his overstay in office from that point on has been due to legal tangles concerning ward delimitation into which fresh elections got caught during the AL rule up to July, 2001. But with the change of government in October last year, there has been a pendulous shift in Mayor Hanif's circumstances, both inside the DCC as well as in relation to the LGRD Ministry headed by Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan. He finds himself at loggerheads with the ruling party-backed trade union at the Nagar Bhaban, the latter accusing him of leasing out DCC plots 'to his own men at nominal prices'. Earlier, the mayor stopped coming to office when a section of contractors at one stage of pressuring him to pay up outstanding bills had threatened him 'at gun-point' to do so. Clearly, the pressure is mounting on him to make his position untenable at Nagar Bhaban. Apparently, there have been signals from the government also, which could be read as pointing to that direction. For instance, the chief executive officer of the DCC has been replaced with Shafiqul Islam, the new incumbent, being not so much on friendly terms with the mayor, so it appears from a newspaper report. Hanif promptly relinquished his charge as chairman of the management board of the National Hospital under the DCC when he heard that he might be replaced by a government appointee.

Since the so-called legal bar to holding elections centred on the question of delimitation of wards seems waived now with a decision reportedly having been taken to keep to the constituencies as had been originally delimited, the government must declare the mayoral election schedules at its earliest.

Our civic life in this huge city riddled with myriad problems, as it is, should not be held ransom to any more indecision about the long overdue mayoral elections than has already been suffered.

While the process for new elections are flagged off, the day-to-day functioning of Nagar Bhaban has to be secured against the roller-coaster ride it's having now. There is no reason why the working relationship between the government and the DCC in this obviously fleeting transitory phase to fresh elections cannot be normal.

Reflections on President Pervez Musharraf's address to his nation



FARUQ CHOUDHURY

PRESIDENT Pervez Musharraf's recent address to the nation and his declared plan of action to combat terrorism and extremism have hopefully succeeded in stemming the nose-dive in Indo-Pak relations. The speech has been widely acclaimed all over and does set him apart from the ranks of Pakistani military rulers preceding him. Commenting on his speech, Praful Bidwai a noted Indian columnist said, 'South Asia has never seen anything like this'. Ikrar Sehgal, a widely read Pakistani political commentator exulted, 'This man means something to Pakistan -- in the future he will be looked upon by the Pakistanis in his own right, if not as much as Jinnah, certainly not much less.'

Pervez Musharraf's speech led me to my book-shelf to search out a couple of pronouncements on communal harmony and social justice that Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan, had made in the course of the year or so that he lived after the creation of the State in 1947. On August 11, 1947, he told the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan, meeting in Karachi to draft the country's constitution, '...we are starting with this fundamental principle that we are citizens and equal citizens of one State.... Now I think we should keep this in front of us as our ideal and you will find

that in course of time Hindus would cease to be Hindus and Muslims would cease to be Muslims, not in the religious sense, because that is the personal faith of each individual, but in the political sense as citizens of the State.'

'Quaid-I-Azam and Pakistan', a book edited by Professor Ahmed Hasan Dani, from which I take the excerpt, has a number of references to Jinnah's speeches which are of great interest. I cannot resist the temptation of quoting one more from a speech that Jinnah made in

annihilate, with his armed might, not only our 'souls' but also our very existence. The rest is history!

I have digressed. Going back to President Pervez Musharraf's speech I wondered that if the 'political culture' subsequently preached and practiced in Pakistan had shown even a scant understanding and regard for Jinnah's views on the need to separate religion from politics, on communal harmony, and on the desirability of discussions and

One has to behave like an ostrich to ignore the gathering storm in our horizon. Over the past few years we have been experiencing socio-political violence of every description that a society steeped in ignorance and given to medieval savagery would. These are now daily occurrences manifested in all spheres of our life, hardly needing recounting. Terrorist attacks on socio-cultural functions, bomb blasts in political meetings, irresponsible declarations in religious gatherings,

leaders, have been dominating the political horizon over the last decade of the twentieth century. It has been their privilege and indeed the right as the elected leaders to lead the country into the twenty-first century. On each occasion the people have sent them to power with renewed hope, only to see it dashed. After the attainment of parliamentary democracy Bangladesh's performance had indeed been like that of its cricket team since achieving the test status -- tall in talks but short in perfor-

phancy with regard to their top leaders has developed, impeding the growth of the democratic culture of debate and dissent. Our democratic tradition now remains confined to elections in which the victors 'come to power' (a Bangladeshi euphemism for forming the government) as the vanquished cry foul and shun the parliament and take to strikes and streets. We have already had a decade of this sad spectacle that has frustrated the nation, has given it a bad name that it does not quite deserve, stymied its overall growth and progress and socio-politically has brought the country to its present sad state of impasse. Our political leaders, the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition in particular, must cut this Gordian knot and lift the nation from this quagmire.

They must rid the nation from this painful cycle of seeing tweedledum and tweedledee take their turn in government predictably swapping their destructive roles. This is sham democracy that the people did not fight for and do not certainly deserve. We may not have a Pervez Musharraf and do not necessarily need one. For, we have democratic infrastructure in place, set up through long struggle and national consensus. We must make those work taking advantage of our unique ethnic and linguistic cohesiveness and above all the creativity that we are blessed with.

President Pervez Musharraf in his address to his nation quoted Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee as saying, 'Mindssets will have to be altered and historical baggage has to be jettisoned'. This quotation is as relevant to our internal political context as it is to relations between India and Pakistan.

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FRANKLY SPEAKING

Over the last decade we have had four general elections through which governments have alternated, each in its turn carrying out politics of revenge and retribution, oblivious of the agony, pain and frustrations of a nation artificially divided only to meet the short time interests of a few irresponsible and ambitious political leaders. Year after year, the respective governments have indulged in exercises hardy relevant to our national interests and priorities.

Chittagong on March 26, 1948. Emphasizing that 'decisions in the affairs of State shall be guided by discussions and consultations', the then Head of the State of Pakistan said, 'Then and then alone it would be possible for each one of us to realize the great ideals of human progress, of social justice, of equality and fraternity....' In the same speech Jinnah talked about the 'annihilation of the soul, in a society based on discrimination'. In the context of later developments in Pakistan, one of the many ironies of this statement was that it was, twenty-three years to the day of its pronouncement, on March 26, 1971, that we had to take up arms because one of Jinnah's unworthy successors, Yahya, decided to abandon all 'discussions and consultations', as Jinnah would have put it, on finding a solution of the country's political problems and set about to

consultations within a nation, there would not have certainly been the need for him to deliver it as the beleaguered President of a trouble-torn country. One also wonders how very valid and relevant to Bangladesh's present day context are the contents of Pervez Musharraf's address. His comments about religious intolerance, sectarian violence, the absurd practice of one Muslim declaring the other as 'kafir', the activities of Madrasas under the influence of politico-religious parties, and the use of mosques for preaching hatred and disharmony, raise disquieting parallels with the current Bangladesh situation. One only wishes that our elected political leaders had the sagacity and foresight to call a spade a spade, like a military ruler like President Pervez Musharraf has, and to initiate consequential reformatory actions.

involvement of our nationals with Taliban in Afghanistan, and intolerance of the authorities of political dissent, are among the many disturbing signs for a nation in urgent need to unite to fight illiteracy, ignorance and poverty.

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Amidst all these travails, the country, through successive general elections, has thrown up two major political parties, who, and more appropriately whose two

manoeuvres of the two political parties, the Awami League and BNP, one is fifty years old and the other nearly half of that. This is indeed rare among fledgling democracies of the developing world. Yet their performances leave so much to be desired. The main reason for this lies in our national decision making process. In a democracy, its institutions must function according to the letter and spirit of the constitution. The Parliament should be the hub of all democratic activities from which the actions of the government must flow. The tragedy is that the Parliament has been hardly allowed to function. We have excellent people in politics who must be given the opportunity to show their mettle. They belong to both sides of the Sangshad and are denied that role because of the moribund parliament. At the same time, in the fora of their respective political parties a culture of syc-

Stretching thing to its elastic limit



M ABDUL HAFIZ

THE war has never been the poor nations' option. Those who do it, they do it at their peril. More so when the world's sole superpower stands on the way. Late last month when the war was imminent between the sub-continent's two arch rivals, the anxiety of the United States far exceeded those of the countries involved in the conflict. It's real purport could have been opaque in the vision of the obsessed enemies but standing overhead the US knew exactly where a clash between two nuclear power could lead upto. But her problems were of immediate nature. Her game plan in Afghanistan had to go away if there was a full blown war in the vicinity. As the US war on terrorism against Afghanistan started in October last the US made it abundantly clear that it would be long drawn out war and she might stay on for a considerable time. The way the things have been developing in Afghanistan, the prospect of a long term presence of US-led force in the region is a foregone conclusion. The British and American special forces are already in Afghanistan and handling there the al-Qaida captives

while the multinational peace-keeping forces are on their way in. With Pakistan's approval the US commands may yet enter Pakistan to assist the Pakistan military in pursuing the al-Qaida leaders on the run.

The Western powers do see a possibility of tapping the oil and gas resources of Afghanistan as well as to use the country as a transit route to Caspian oil basin. Now that the 'golden goose' of Afghanistan is in their grip it will continue to be in their possession

Afghan territory along Pakistan the latter by sealing the porous border have been doing a crucial job for the Americans; putting the escapees of Tora Bora in the jaws of the nutcrackers.

Pakistani forces already apprehended a good number of al-Qaida men as the latter tried to sneak into Pakistan and dutifully handed them over to the US authority. Recently the cent-com chief General Tommy Franks praised Pakistan's effort to round up al-Qaida members in that country.

readied to launch an attack.

The US has been counselling restraint to both India and Pakistan since 13 December when Indian parliament building was attacked allegedly by Pakistan based terrorists. In the prevailing anti-terrorism mood across the world and in the face of aggressive Indian diplomatic drive for years to paint Pakistan as a state sponsoring terrorism, if not terrorist state itself, there was little scope for Pakistan to plead its innocence. Neither could she, in any way, explain what

Sharif for disgraceful climbing down of the 'Mujahideens' from its heights and one who made 'freedom struggle' in Kashmir an emotive issue was later dubbed 'America's pliant general doing all the dirty jobs of a junior partner in a blatantly unequal coalition. He traversed a long distance in his new role by throwing away Pakistan's two-decade long Afghan policy, abandoning the Taliban allies it propped up, curtailing the country's Jihadi culture and even in some way reinterpreting

George W Bush acknowledged that 'Musharraf was delivering'.

But India is yet to relent. After President Bush talked both to Indian and Pakistani leaders late last month it certainly diffused the crisis; but the danger is still looming. President Musharraf complied with all what were demanded by Indian authority through the US leadership except the extradition of 20 wanted terrorists. Many think it to be face saving measure for Musharraf who displayed great courage in dismantling what all were built up with state patronisation for years. Although Musharraf took great risks in disregarding Pakistan's powerful religious right it was not adequately reciprocated by India who first called Pakistani steps 'cosmetic' and later 'action in right direction'. But there is no de-escalation of tension in the border and their are still regular exchange of fire. The troops are yet to be withdrawn from their battle locations.

Thanks to the personal intervention of President Bush the Indo-Pak conflict seems to have been averted for the time being. If the terms of the de-escalation is stretched further by any of the parties, it will be only counter productive. There can be a serious backlash to whatever Musharraf has yielded so far. The US administration is right in stressing that Musharraf needs to be given time and an incremental approach to the crisis management is the most appropriate one given the volatile nature of the situation that exists on either side of the divide.

Brig (ret'd) Hafiz is former DG of BISS.

PERSPECTIVES

Thanks to the personal intervention of President Bush the Indo-Pak conflict seems to have been averted for the time being. If the terms of the de-escalation is stretched further by any of the parties, it will be only counter productive. There can be a serious backlash to whatever Musharraf has yielded so far. The US administration is right in stressing that Musharraf needs to be given time and an incremental approach to the crisis management is the most appropriate one given the volatile nature of the situation that exists on either side of the divide.

till it lays its last precious egg. In the meantime the US has also to vindicate its hugely expensive war that still unceremoniously drags on. The US military strategy in Afghanistan, for all its success, has so far failed to deliver on its principal aims: Capturing or killing bin Laden and shutting down his network. While Pentagon, for the moment, has stopped speculating over the whereabouts of bin-Laden, the US believes that hundreds of al-Qaida terrorists still lurk in Afghanistan and many of them are on their way to escape across the border. After the Tora Bora fiasco as the US bombing continues to intercept the fleeing al-Qaida men in the eastern fringe of

For the unfinished part of the US' war in Afghanistan this arrangement is desired to be in place as long as possible from the US' point of view. But around 22 December last a critical situation arose almost to disrupt the arrangement as well as the peace under way. President Musharraf of Pakistan conveyed to Collin Powell, the US Secretary of State, his decision to pull out his troops almost of the strength of 2 corps from the Pak-Afghan border to redeploy them in the country's eastern border as an attack was about to be launched by India. Pakistan intelligence gathered information of bringing the IAF aircraft out of their hangers an indication that they were being

India was upto by implicating her in the crime. Instead, the US and most of the world put pressure on Pakistan to take action against the groups alleged to be behind the assault. Musharraf was already in the line of fire from the country's Islamic militants for his policy reversal in Afghanistan which, according to him, was justified for preserving the security of Pakistan and its Kashmir cause. Musharraf was now faced with prospect of abandoning one or the other.

Yet the metamorphosis the general underwent was tremendous. President Musharraf once thought to be the mastermind behind Kargil, one who differed with the prime minister Nawaz

the ideology of Pakistan. He brutally swooped on the country's clerics as well as religious extremists, took in custody their leaders and sidelined the generals sympathetic to Islamists. Pakistani authority has been faithful in apprehending the al-Qaida men within its territory and handing them over to the Americans. No exception was made even in case of Abdus Salam Zayeeef who was hosted by Pakistan government for years as Taliban envoy. It is learnt that Pakistan is not unwilling even to allow the American special forces within Pakistani territory to search al-Qaida operatives reported to be hiding within Pakistan. At long last President

UP's make-or-break election: BJP has no trump cards

PRAFUL BIDWAI
writes from New Delhi

ONLY the naïve will see mere coincidence in the passing of the so-called Ram chetavani yatra through Haidergarh the very day Mr Rajnath Singh filed his election nomination from there. The BJP has once again stooped to exploiting the temple issue to win votes.

The BJP knows the UP election has a decisive make-or-break character. It is desperate not to lose it. But it cannot win it on its own. So it is speaking in many voices, but acting through the VHP.

Initially, different BJP leaders had different lines on the temple: it's a political issue, a "cultural" matter, a Hindutva trademark. But after many somersaults, the hardliners succeeded in putting it into the manifesto.

This highlights one truth. The BJP holds no trump cards in UP. Its sole route to power may be an alliance with the Bahujan Samaj Party. This is the main conclusion

from the latest opinion polls by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies and Outlook-Cfore.

A second conclusion is that two-thirds of the UP population does not want a war with Pakistan. The BJP can't really use aggressive anti-Pakistan nationalism beyond a point.

The BJP will need Machiavellian tactics and a lot of good luck to avert defeat. It has used up many options since it replaced that liability called Mr Ram Prakash Gupta.

Mr Rajnath Singh first tried to "clean up" his coalition's tarnished image by sacking the notoriously corrupt Naresh Agarwal. He also removed Mr Amar Mani Tripathi, against whom there are more criminal cases than against gangsters.

That didn't work. Last fortnight, he again refused tickets to four ministers on account of their corruption.

Mr Singh next "adopted" Dalit children. That only marginally affected his casteist image.

The BJP's options narrow down to the anti-"terrorism", anti-Muslim platform, and the mandir. Anti-terrorism has lost some importance. Mr Vajpayee's brinkmanship hasn't produced dramatic results. Even if it leads to the release of Pakistan-exiled Khalistanis, that won't impact UP much. War is a fading option after Mr Colin Powell's visit... The mandir's appeal too seems limited. Building is not as attractive even to lumpen minds as demolishing.

He then promised huge pay increases to the bureaucracy. But the state coffers had no money. Mr Singh then resorted to an improbable tactic for a party whose USP (unique selling proposition) was to oppose OBC reservations. He announced sub-quotas to drive a wedge between the upper OBCs such as Yadavs and Kurmis, and the most backward classes (MBCs) like mallahs, nais, bhishtis, dhoobis, etc.

That was to create 40,000 jobs, but produced none thanks to the state's insolvency. The Supreme Court has since blocked the move. Mr Singh's "populist" measures, including tax-breaks for traders, will cost Rs. 1,644 crores. His state doesn't have the money.

To survive, it allows trucks to be unacceptably overloaded! Mr Singh has also antagonised state employees, the BJP's traditional constituency, by not paying salaries on time, and sometimes not at all.

It will be near-impossible for the BJP to garner the 32 per cent vote it bagged in the 1996 Assembly elections. Then, Mr Kalyan Singh uniquely combined OBC politics and combative Hindutva. That magic ingredient is now absent.

The BJP would be lucky to repeat its 1999 Lok Sabha performance (corresponding to 115 Assembly seats). The Outlook-Cfore estimate represents an optimistic scenario for the BJP.

The poll gives the SP 160 seats.

(An earlier Lokmat poll gave it 175-185). The BSP could get about 80, and the Congress 35.

The SP and Congress thus seem better placed to form a viable coalition. Assuming they have "friendly" contests, they could even win a solid majority.

An equally big if is the BJP's possible understanding with the BSP. According to the Outlook poll, 68 per cent of BJP voters oppose allying with the BSP.

Three reasons explain this. The BJP wants to split MBC and "most Dalit" votes by sponsoring 125 candidates from these communities. But these castes don't "mix" with its upper-caste core supporters.

Second, the upper castes

loathe Ms Mayawati. As CM, she diverted development funds only to "Ambedkar Villages", recruited Dalits as village officials, and implemented the SC-ST Atrocities Act. Third, there is a shift in the BJP's base away from the Brahmins towards the Rajputs, who are far more hostile to Dalits and MBCs.

Thus, the BJP's options narrow down to the anti-"terrorism", anti-Muslim platform, and the mandir. Anti-terrorism has lost some importance. Mr Vajpayee's brinkmanship hasn't produced dramatic results. Even if it leads to the release of Pakistan-exiled Khalistanis, that won't impact UP much. War is a fading option after Mr Colin Powell's visit.

The mandir's appeal too seems limited. Building is not as attractive even to lumpen minds as demolishing. The BJP can start riots and polarise the situation to win a few votes. But it could end up antagonising its own allies who don't want this divisive issue to be stoked.

The BJP's secular opponents are far better placed. But can the SP substantially gain Rajput, non-Yadav OBC and Muslim votes? Will the BSP succeed in winning Muslim and upper-caste votes by clever candidate-selection? Could the Congress win enough seats to provide "outside" support to an SP-led coalition?

These are tough questions. About 20 per cent of the voters remain undecided. But the SP seems set to significantly improve its vote. Mr Mulayam Singh has emerged as the strongest chief ministerial candidate. The BSP's strategy of fielding non-Dalits runs counter to the party's USP, founded on Dalit direct self-representation.

The Congress' success will

depend on how it competes with the BJP and BSP, not the SP.

Finally, there is a yawning gap between what all the parties offer and the people's real concerns, including unemployment, the power crisis, malfunctioning schools, bad roads, and corruption. Party leaders are not addressing these issues, stuck as they are in ethnicity-based "identity politics".

Only 12 per cent of the people feel satisfied with the UP government's performance. So there is real scope for a progressive agenda based on development and justice issues.

UP cries out for a shift from identity politics to the politics of transformation--changing India into a liberal, tolerant, forward-looking democracy responsive to its masses' needs.

The whole country longs for emancipatory change. Will UP start the process?

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