

Communal harmony

Precautionary steps need to be cast-iron

HERE cannot be any second opinion that after the riots in Gujarat, a state of maximum alert needs to be maintained throughout Bangladesh. The reactionary elements might fall for fomenting a backlash as if putting a match-stick to the tinder-box of religious passions.

The reasons are fairly compelling therefore for adequate precautions to be put in place against any possible untoward incidents. Professional trouble-mongers and political opportunists adept in the art of rubbing the wrong side of religious sentiments might be already itching to foment trouble. They did so in Bangladesh on some scale in 1990 when the Babri Mosque was pick-axed by Hindu extremists and again in 1992 when it was razed to the ground.

It is reassuring to note however that the government being seized of the gravity of the situation in Ahmedabad that put Muslim-inhabited parts of India on high alert, has moved swiftly here to protect Hindu installations in Bangladesh. The home ministry in a fairly quick reflex has ordered deployment of police guards on the premises of Hindu temples or establishments. It is imperative that in view of the present Indian communal scenario, the government doesn't allow any repeat of the initial indifference to communal sensibilities it had shown in the aftermath of the October 1 general election. As a matter of fact, judging by the expeditious manner in which the government has taken the precautionary steps we have reasons to be optimistic on this count.

However, we would like to see the scope of the vigil broadened. Aside from their physical deployment at the temples, the police, ansar and VDPs will have to maintain close surveillance around the places of worship of all religious minorities, the Christians included. In terms of further details, all minority community concentrations, their establishments, households and business concerns would need to be covered. Intelligence agencies can make that job easier by means of effective forewarnings transmitted to the law enforcers.

At some stage, depending upon how soon calm returns to India it may be worthwhile to have composite committees at the local levels comprising minority community leaders, other community influentials and administration officials as part of the overall precautionary stratagem.

We have the ultimate faith in our people that at all the wards and hamlets of the country they will be our sentinels for sanity, coexistence and peace. Let Bangladesh stand out for its communal harmony.

The Saudi peace plan deserves support

It's not a complete document but is worth pursuing

THE Saudi peace plan, contrary to the express cynicism of some quarters, has not wilted since introduction. In fact it has gained the critical support of the United States. Its backers have admitted that the "plan" is an outline rather than a full-blown document, but is still potentially positive in content. Suggesting a land for peace swap, this plan in today's environment of extreme anxiety and violence is all the more worth pursuing. It's vagueness may actually be its more resilient strength as adjustments are the key to peace in a land which has seen only violence since recorded history began.

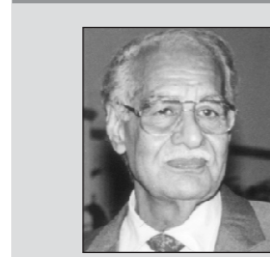
In very broad terms, it says that Arab relations will be fully normalised and activated with Israel in exchange for Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza strip and the West Bank including East Jerusalem. Much of the ideas isn't fresh and some of the core problems -- the future of the Palestinian refugees -- have not been addressed but it's the only proposal which has met with positive reactions from all sides bar the Israelis. They might feel that this doesn't go enough as far as its security concerns go. But global interest in the plan has been created.

In fact, the proposal is about being interested in peace and when a country as significant as Saudi Arabia tables such a "plan" one must recognise its historic importance. Even the Saudis aren't saying that it's a full blown proposal; but it has the potential to go forward. In the background of still-born initiatives by the United States, the lone player in the Middle East who hasn't acted evenhandedly in the conflict management process but now may like to, this proposal is a way out.

Of course, the militants in the Arab world as well as within Israel can't be expected to take kindly to it. But then peace happens not at the initiative of the militants but peace partisans. The fact that the US and its closest ally in the Middle East -- after Israel -- Saudi Arabia are backing it makes it worth pushing.

This peace plan provides a starting point, a break in a situation dominated by conflicts. For once, amidst the orchestra of explosions and deaths, it's the only beacon of peace.

V for VHP or Vajpayee?



KULDEEP NAYAR
writes from New Delhi

POLITICAL parties, like individuals, should learn from their mistakes. If they don't, they are thrown into the dustbin of history. It does not appear that the BJP is any wiser after its rout in all the four states -- UP, Uttaranchal, Punjab and Manipur, where the assembly elections were held recently. The statements by the party leaders are more rationalisation than realisation of what went wrong.

The BJP wants to keep its eyes shut to the fact that the takers of its Hindutva line have declined in numbers considerably. The party's parochial stance has created a scare in the society, which wants to sustain its pluralistic character. The lesson that communal forces of all hues have to learn is that they cannot take people beyond a point. If they do so, it begins to recoil. The fate of the BJP is an example.

I concede that Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, as he claims, has not ever played the Hindu card in elections. But then his writ does not run even in his own government, much less in the party. All can see how the cabinet and the BJP high command are divided between liberal Vajpayee's supporters and those of hard-line Home Minister LK

Advani. It is Advani who has his ways and that way does not lead to secularism. Vajpayee may resent the word, mukut (mask), once used to describe him. But his weak policy has often provided a shield to the extremists to shoot their darts from behind. When the chips are down, it is Advani or, for that matter, the RSS, which counts. Vajpayee seems to go along.

Take construction of the temple at the place where the Babri masjid

action against the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), which has thrown down the gauntlet to the government on starting construction from mid-March. Carved pillars for the temple are not far from the site. There is genuine fear that the law and order machinery may not move quickly or adequately.

When a former governor of UP requests the Chief Justice of India to take suo motu action to maintain the status quo, it indicates that the

BJP government has rewarded some of the officers of those days and a couple of them have even become party MPs. The situation in UP is that the BJP has been defeated and the alternative government has not come into being. "In this duration," as the former governor has warned, "there will be confusion and absence of any clear directions from the interim government." If 10 lakh people assemble at Ayodhya, as the VHP has warned,

the consensual politics. The arrogance of some BJP ministers is too pronounced to go unnoticed. With 14 states in the Congress kitty, the BJP should try to keep it in the picture before embarking on any important policy, domestic or external.

The election of the President in July will be one such test. The BJP should know that its candidate can be defeated if it decides to challenge the opposition. What the BJP has to

tangible yet because of the Congress dislike of the Mulayam Singh's Samajwadi Party, which has emerged as the single largest party in the UP assembly. He had refused to support the Congress president Sonia Gandhi when she could have formed the government at the Centre in 1999. The CPI (M) is trying its best to bring together the secular parties to challenge the Vajpayee government.

On the other hand, the BJP is making every effort to woo Mayawati, the Bahujan Samaj Party leader. Her party's 14 seats in the Lok Sabha are more important to the NDA than the 95 she has in the UP assembly. The BJP favours supporting her government from outside. Probably, the party realises that the electorate has defeated it. That its entry through the back door may boomerang and cost it dearly in the general election. Mayawati's predicament is that her party could split if she decides to join hands with the BJP. Muslim members might revolt against such a situation. Whatever Mayawati's decision, the position of the BJP will continue to remain untenable if it does not change its image or comes out openly against the construction of the temple. The party can go more fundamentalist to placate Hindu chauvinists. But that kind of posture will not cut any ice with the minorities and the Dalits. The assembly elections have proved that point.

Kuldeep Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.

BETWEEN THE LINES

...the position of the BJP will continue to remain untenable if it does not change its image or comes out openly against the construction of the temple. The party can go more fundamentalist to placate Hindu chauvinists. But that kind of posture will not cut any ice with the minorities and the Dalits. The assembly elections have proved that point.

stood before its demolition in December 1992. True, Vajpayee has said that there were only two alternatives: one, a settlement between Hindus and Muslims and, two, a judicial verdict. In the absence of either, the law will take its own course. Still, he dare not tell his party to drop the temple construction from its agenda because the hard-liners have the last word. What do people infer? Vajpayee is not opposed to the construction of the temple in principle. But he is not wanting to disturb the status quo lest he should lose even a few from his allies who give him a majority in the Lok Sabha.

No doubt, the Vajpayee government has given an unequivocal assurance through the President's address to parliament that it was duty bound to maintain the status quo at Ayodhya. Yet there is no

government's words have ceased to evoke confidence. The former governor goes to the extent of saying that "the only hope rests with your lordship."

Indeed, the Narasimha Rao-led Congress government made more similar pronouncements on protecting the mosque. At that time also, it was said that the Centre would never allow anyone to take the law into his own hands. The Supreme Court too had directed the state to maintain the status quo till the final judgment on the case pending before the state High Court was pronounced.

Still, the mosque was pulled down and the Centre did not lift even a finger to stop the destruction. Central police forces stood by as spectators. The state machinery saw to it that even the last brick of the mosque was pulled out. The

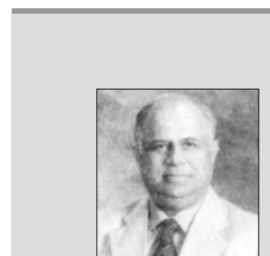
government might feel helpless. So did the Centre in December 1992. The time to act is now and stop people from assembling at Ayodhya. Vajpayee has assured at an all-party meeting that the government is taking necessary steps not to allow people gather near the site.

Amidst the dust raised by the VHP, one should not forget that the four states, where the BJP has been crushed, embrace nearly one-sixth of the country's population. True, the state elections are different from those of parliament. Yet, the verdict has damaged the credibility of the Vajpayee government. There is something called moral responsibility and the BJP cannot run away from it. If nothing else, the Vajpayee government should learn to be more responsive to the opposition. Its initial reaction in parliament did not suggest that. The party must pursue

guard against is the revolt that is brewing among the allies in the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), the coalition of 24 parties that Vajpayee heads. Some of the allies have been sulking for a long time because of the scant attention paid to them. Most of them have unimportant portfolios with the BJP state ministers attached to them to dilute their importance. They also nourish the feeling that when it comes to real issues, the BJP confines the discussion to its top party ministers. "The Sangh cabinet is above the cabinet," a non-BJP minister says. The allies may ask for greater participation in the affairs of the government.

But the point of concern for the BJP should be the permutations and combinations that have begun to be discussed to pull down the NDA government. There is nothing

Shame and resolve



IKRAM SEHGAL
writes from Karachi

IF the fact of Daniel Pearl's kidnapping was senseless, the act of his murder was inhuman. While we Pakistanis may never be able to live with the shame of Daniel Pearl's brutal killing, being battle-innoculated by two decades of terrorism we will eventually come to terms with this ghastly atrocity. Skeptical about Pakistan as a viable entity when he (and his wife Marianne) first flew in on Sep 16, 2001 from Mumbai where he was based as "The Wall Street Journal" (WSJ)'s Bureau Chief, he would comment quite frequently about how wrong he had been about Pakistan, how one could never discover the real truth without personally visiting the area and inter-acting with the people.

Tragically a vicious minority proved Pakistan otherwise. Refined and sensitive, Daniel had been filing material in WSJ favourable to Pakistan, his confidence in moving about freely without any personal security reflected how much he was at ease in Pakistan and with Pakistanis. Unfortunately that trusting approach was his undoing. Danny was inquisitive but unlike many of his profession he was not cynical, or for that matter naive, he was simply far more ready to believe. That he was a Jew and his grandparents lived in Israel made him no less a good human being and a friend. Jews are people of the Book and our

only difference with Israel should be the status of Al-Aqsa. The mutual terrorism unleashed against each other by the Israelis and Palestinians is a matter to be settled between them. Can anyone refer me to when Yassar Arafat last mentioned Kashmir favourably with Pakistan? Danny's frank, candid comments showed an absolute lack of prejudice that was not only refreshing, it made Daniel Pearl much more, a friend to cherish, both

forgive this rage within me that the world was denied the beauty of his living being. To his widow, Marianne, who had the strength of character to be gracious about Pakistanis even in her bereavement, words only serve a reflex cross purpose, forgive us and even though this venal horror was perpetrated by a vicious handful representing the savage and callous among us, the shame of Daniel Pearl's murder will live with Paki-

families, the perpetrators of the Daniel Pearl atrocity had enough sense to understand clearly the consequences of carrying out the horrific, senseless murder. These murderers must not go unpunished. Of those released from Indian prison because of the Kandahar hijack, Moulana Azhar Masood and Omer Saeed Sheikh are prominent because they were never charged for any crime in any Indian court despite five years of incarceration.

being contested, the BJP power rests in the Center and in four States, only one, Gujarat, being of any size. Jharkhand, Himachal Pradesh and Goa are small States having only marginal influence in the Center. A wounded tiger is far more dangerous and herein lies the danger. BJP's campaign was based on stoking anti-Pakistan feeling in the electorate like they successfully did after Kargil. Blaming Pakistan on flimsy grounds for the Dec 13 "ter-

may well be toppled in the Centre by a Congress-led insurgency in the coming months. The only card left for BJP to play is the last desperate Pakistan option, despite our other troubles, economic and political, we may yet have to face war, or at least the gravest of provocations. By forcing us to keep our troops on the border and thus divert scarce funds from the economic agenda, India is successfully waging a proxy economic war.

Musharraf's credibility stands for something in the west and his initiatives are well regarded, India has thus been desperately seeking to undercut his credibility and get Pakistan declared a terrorist State. Even though we have self-inflicted religious extremism on ourselves, we are engaged in serious initiatives to reverse the situation. On the other hand those who hate Islam and Pakistan will try and implicate us somehow. Those who have been arrested in connection with Daniel Pearl's murder must be expeditiously handed over to the US, subject to interrogation and investigation by their criminal and terrorism experts by sophisticated, modern methods. If claims about Pakistani intelligence operatives, retired or serving, being involved, we must extradite them, whoever they may be. If the US discovers otherwise because of its own enquiries, India's crying of wolf will stand exposed. That will be the acid test of Pakistan's credibility and resolve, a sure sign of our long-term commitment.

Let us use the shame that we must universally bear for Daniel Pearl's murder as a catalyst to stiffen our resolve to rid ourselves of all terrorism, perceived or otherwise.

Ikram Sehgal, a former Major of Pakistan Army, is a political analyst and columnist.

AS I SEE IT

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in life and in death. Those who killed Danny were no friends of this country, or for that matter Islam. To call them human beings would be to cast aspersion on civilization as we know it, animals are far better beings than such savages. Our beautiful religion has no place for such scum of this earth. How dare such people profess Islam to be their religion? More than shame, one feels anger. We are responsible for not standing upto such a vocal, deadly minority in our society. Do we remember the Chairmen of KESC late Shahid Hamid and of Pakistan State Oil, late Shaukat Mirza? We failed to bring their killers to justice, it was only a matter of time before our inaction condemned another gentle soul like Daniel Pearl to such brutality. An intense young man, father of as yet an unborn child, Danny had so much to give to this world, so please

stanis for a very long time. Daniel Pearl was my friend and I am proud of it, I will grieve for him as much as others who cherished his friendship did. I will also grieve that monsters of the kind who murdered Daniel Pearl claim association with my country.

The most bitter anti-American, anti-Jew among us would have that much sense to realize that kidnapping and murder of Daniel Pearl at this time would be taken adversely against Islam and Pakistan. Would genuine muslims and patriotic Pakistanis carry out such an act? Howsoever much the world lays terrorism at the doorstep of lack of education and/or affluence, there was no element of poverty or ignorance influencing the perpetrators in the committing of the dastardly act. Well-educated, most suspects belong to well-to-do or middle class

Neither having ever physically fought within Kashmir, Omer's claim to notoriety is a penchant for luring and kidnapping western tourists. His very first potential kidnap turned out to be an Israeli, horror-struck his immediate superior sent him back saying, "do you want us to be killed?" Holder of a British passport, Omer was allowed to roam freely in Pakistan, and now surfaces as the brains behind the recent atrocity. One must call into question his motives, was it a desperate act to scuttle the growing US-Pakistan relationship? Or is it a mere coincidence that the motives of India and Moulana Azhar/Omer seem to coincide, to defame Pakistan and to have it declared as a terrorist haven that is beyond any redemption, all of Musharraf's good intentions and commitment notwithstanding.

With the rout of the BJP in the State elections in all the four States

rorist" attack on Parliament was convenient, it afforded easy passage for the "anti-terrorist bill" even in the face of reluctant allies. India has mobilized its entire Armed Forces on Pakistan's borders, leaving only Counter Insurgency Forces (CIF) within Occupied Kashmir, in Assam and the Eastern States. In spite of the hoopla in the US and western world about the need to increase defence spending because China was the real threat to India, only a skeleton force has been left facing China in NEFA and Ladakh. If the Indians really wanted war they would have hardly mobilized so deliberately or allowed Pakistan to mobilize, the sabre-rattling was only to tap the inherent patriotism of the Indian electorate. The voters were not fooled, the BJP Hindutva-policy has already peaked, it is now on a waning card. Though analysts doubt this, BJP

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



Textbooks doctored

Doctored of history books is as old as studying history itself. Heavy handed tyrants like Stalin thought they could just airbrush enemies from history. A more subtle approach would be to sponsor scholarly revisionist research into various facets of either President Zia's or Bangabandhu's policies, personal life etc and deflate their persona through ostensibly disinterested reports and journals.

Look at what left wing British historians have done to the legend of Churchill.

MA
Dhaka

Bashant Utsav in Pakistan

The people of Pakistan celebrated Spring or Basant Festival by arranging parties, musical shows and flying kites. This news was published in *The Daily Star* on the 19th of February 2002 along with a picture showing young Pakistani women dancing with the beat of the drums.

After reading this news I was waiting eagerly to know what the Khatib of National Baitul Mukarram

Mosque Obaidul Huq had to say about it. But surprisingly he remained silent so far.

Maulana Obaidul Huq if you can give fatwa against the Pahela Baishakh or Bangla Nobo Borsho, then why not against the Basant Festival?

Iqbal Ahmed
New Eskaton Rd, Dhaka

Catalytic converter and air pollution

Catalysis is an aid to chemical reaction or conversion. It does not

involve in the reaction/conversion itself but facilitates/expedites the same. A catalyst is not a consumable item in a reaction but yet it has a limited life. During the active life it needs regeneration at times. Catalytic converter in a motor vehicle will convert the harmful components present in the exhaust fumes of the petrol/diesel engines into innocent ones before it is released to atmosphere. The exhaust will pass through a closed chamber containing the catalyst. Over a period of time the activity of the catalyst will be reduced and be stopped altogether eventually. The box (con-

tainer) of the converter will only be a showpiece doing no useful conversion.

This information was given by the VC of BUET Prof. Nooruddin in a seminar a few days ago and expressed his doubt about the effectiveness of catalytic converter in reducing air pollution. Two important ministers were present in the seminar and appeared to absorb the information.

The state of air-pollution in our towns, extent of affordability by the vehicle owners and the level of our civic sense indicate that enforcing the use of catalytic converters is a premature measure.

Second hand motorised vehicles should be discouraged. City dwellers should be encouraged to use buses. But that takes us to square one, that is arranging adequate number of public transports.

MAH
Dhaka

"Wrong wording in a Rabindra Sangeet"

I would like to thank Mr. N. Karim for rightly pointing out an error made by one of the most prominent singers of our time. Having seen that a lot of

people have already expressed their views on this issue, it will be unwise for me to come up with any further comment. Rather, I would like to raise one more important point that I think will be beneficial for Rabindra Sangeet lovers across the world.

As someone who belongs to the new generation of Rabindra Sangeet performers, I believe that the art of breathing is equally important in Tagore's music. Too often breathing works like punctuation in our songs perfect breathing is crucial in understanding a phrase or certain meanings in a song. Breathing in between a word or a coherently linked phrase often leads to the misinterpretation of the meaning of that song. To some readers, this will become clear with the example I am about to give.

In one of her recent CDs, Rezwana Chowdhury Bannya sang the song "Bishsho bina robe bishshojono mohiche". In the second stanza, the words are as follows, "...shaunchare dhire re, Ënoditre... Ëbut she sang Ë... shaunchare dhire [breath], Ërenoditre...". From this it seems as if 'renoditre' is a single word but this is clearly not the case. In the same song, the word

'mohiche', was sung in two halves, 'mohi (breath) che'. These would certainly confuse (and in some occasion surprise) any listener who would try to understand the meaning of the song at the same time as listening to it.

I would like to add here that I have utter respect for Ms Bannya (I once had a rare privilege of learning a song from her). I admire her rich voice and her devotion towards Rabindra Sangeet. All I tried to do here is to highlight an important point that I think all Rabindra Sangeet teachers and students should be aware of. It would certainly help if the readers take this as a piece of constructive criticism as opposed to a 'conspiracy against her', as I recall someone once mentioning in one of the letters.

Shobhon Andaleeb Ahmed
London, UK

Arabic compulsory language

This is in reference to Mr. Wadood's argument against making Arabic compulsory in our schools. Mr. Wadood, I live in the U.S. too and have been doing so for the last 15 years. I have seen many American born Bangladeshi children learning

to read and write Bangla at local Bangla schools, Arabic at local Islamic Centers, not to mention English at their regular schools along with a second language, either French or Spanish as part of the curriculum. I haven't seen any of these kids performing badly in school because of the added burden they have taken on.

The reason why Bangladeshi students in U.S. have a tough time in English and Math is mainly due to the way English and Math are taught in Bangladesh, not because they had too much to study while they were students in Bangladesh.

Over the years I have met Americans who are proficient in multiple languages, on the other hand, I have met Americans who are ashamed that they don't know anything other than English. The rate of success in professional, as well as, social lives is much higher in the first group. Because language skills always open up doors to new perspectives, new opportunities, allows proper interaction with people -- a very necessary ingredient for success in today's global economy.

Learning a new language never hurts especially when that language presents an opportunity to truly

understand by far the most fascinating book of revelations in our possession.

Anwar Babar
Dallas, Texas

Medical transcription service

There is not much information for the computer buffs in the mass media on the medical transcription service available in Bangladesh (February 26). Also there are too few advertisements -- even in the computer magazines. As for the training, the government regulations may be publicised so that the trainees are not swindled.

Where is the central one-stop information counter? There is no association, and the BCS are rather quiet on this new job line. Whom to contact for further information and brochure? I could not find the telephone numbers of any of the firms in the official BTB T&T Directory. Let these service providers make some noise.

Izzy
Dhaka



Death by smoke