

Int'l Women's day in the wake of extreme violence

Have ruling constructs developed a stake in violence?

AS Bangladesh observes the International Women's Day, newspapers have reported that repression of women and children is on the rise. The disturbing fact is not that we seem to be able to do both, observe national days on women and violate them in the same breath. What disturbs is that it doesn't bother us.

Daily Prothom Alo has reported that according to the annual police report, 37 women and children are victims of violence everyday. Ten women are raped in that same time period. Now, it's universally accepted that police reports are way below the actual and the real figure will be many times more than that. However, what we get from them is desperately bad enough and points to a direction that appears unstoppable.

One of the fondest imagination about our self is that of the gentle Bengali, unable to hurt another and we have built an entire corpus of national lies around that. Even our dominant source of iconization, the liberation war, has constructed a tremendously heroic image of ourselves where we appear to be able to do no wrong. Unfortunately, this has led us into alleys of self-deception. Now that we have emerged in our true colors, we are unable to control ourselves.

The police report also says that we target women and children for revenge attacks including political ones. It appears we have ended up as a creature that has perpetrated every act of violence on the weak. While part of it is in our twisted mentality with regard to gender relationships the rest lies in our willingness to victimize the weak and the defenseless. The same mindset that attacks Hindus also attack women. Violence is not the monopoly of any party. Since everything is judged against party identities, we can safely say that, in perpetrating violence on women and children all political lobbies can claim equal credit.

What can we possibly do in such situations apart from platitudinous distribution? It seems like we have a situation which may be rooted too deep for sermons to heal. And that our ruling constructs may have developed stake in such a violent society. Our ruling class appears to be unaware that through our greed we are digging our own grave.

However, grim the prognosis may be at this point, we must keep struggling for a future that belongs to all. We must make our democracy meaningful for all. The present slide toward selfishness, greed and violence must be stopped. The International Women's Day is a great day to make that pledge and strengthen our resolve.

AL must return to the House

Parliamentary supremacy must be restored

THE Parliament is still without a participating opposition bench. It is with lots of hope that we had voted in the last election. We really expected that we would see an end to the politics of parliament boycott as both sides pledged to do so while seeking our votes. We have been deceived. The former ruling party that pledged not to boycott even if they lost is now reneging on their promise.

If one notes the past, one will recognize that elections are not the path to the parliament and its functioning but only a route to power. Democratic traditions have been trampled for so long that people are no longer disturbed that months after the election is held, the Opposition has not walked in. This of course comes in sequence to the very long boycott which the present ruling party, then in Opposition had carried out.

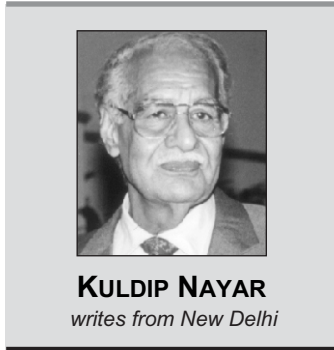
Since such boycott apparently does not impact on election results or hurts a public image, there is a minimizing of the status of the House. Both parties have refused to give up hartals showing where actual confidence in managing politics lies. When the streets are considered superior to the august House, it's difficult to convince politicians of the significance of attending the House.

In other words, politicians are rapidly losing stake in the parliament. Since decisions taken outside the parliament has more force and laws passed in the parliament can be flouted by the powerful and the well connected, how does one keep continuous faith in a crumbling house?

We have to act to reverse this process of decline. We must replace the street with the House, agitation with debate, MPs with musclemen, legal order with disorganized and orchestrated chaos. Until that happens, we may see a House that can be neglected at will. We cannot afford that because with the 'collapse' of the House, democracy will certainly be weakened.

It's in our interest to look after our Parliament. As we have said so many times before the opposition must not consider the parliament as the House of the government but as the House of the people. Let street power be replaced with the glory of the parliament.

After Gujarat what?



KULDEEP NAYAR

writes from New Delhi

MANY years ago I met Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, a tall leader of our national struggle. Out of respect, we called him the Frontier Gandhi. He lived in a ramshackle cottage at Jalalabad, Afghanistan. Pakistan would not accept him because of his participation in India's independence movement.

The communal orgy at Ahmedabad in 1969 was very much in his mind when I met him. Badshah Khan, another endearing title for him, asked me whether the victims at Ahmedabad were Muslims. I said: "Most of them." He fell silent. After a long pause, he said: "We had imagined that the Hindu-Muslim riots would end after the British left since it was their creation." Yet more poignant was his remark: "How could it happen in the land of Mahatma Gandhi?"

Strange as it may sound, the rioting between Hindus and Muslims in Gujarat hurts the nation more than the riots in any other state. It is well known that the place is the most dangerous powder keg of communalism, ready to explode any time. Still Gujarat is so much associated with Gandhi in the minds of people that every Gujarati is weighed on the scales of Gandhian values.

Even after realising that most Gujaratis hang Gandhi's photo in their houses just for formality, without following any of his teachings, there is a faint hope that their conscience would one day prick them. That would be the time when they might realise the folly of not respecting the apostle of Hindu-Muslim unity, the greatest son of their soil.

Gujarat may be the worst case. But it is a symptom, not the disease. The disease is the distance

the anti-Pakistan feeling.

Probably Gandhi could foresee this. He insisted on the payment of Rs. 55 crore to Pakistan, its share that India had withheld during the war on Kashmir. It was Gandhi who took up the cause of the Muslims in the country. Despite the partition, he said that the Hindus and the Muslims-- he called them his two eyes-- could forget their personal tragedies and past quarrels and live like brothers. The belief in pluralism was

BETWEEN THE LINES
Blinded by fundamentalism, the BJP is not seeing the writing on the wall. Muslim jihadis have destroyed Pakistan and put on the country's back the army which refuses to return to the barracks. The Hindutva 'jihadis' are out to install in India a theocratic state. The BJP leadership cannot conceive what type of forces it will unleash. The leadership may be the first victim. But one thing is certain: India, a secular, democratic nation, will cease to exist

between Hindus and Muslims, still yawning even after 55 years of partition. We have adopted the most secular constitution in the world.

But we have failed to cultivate the temperament required to implement even the letter, much less the spirit, of the constitution. Muslims are generally suspect and they still carry the cross of partition on their back.

The Pakistanis do not realise the price that the Indian Muslims continue to pay for what was an agreed formula on the division. The terrorism, which Islamabad has been exporting to India for more than a decade, has only heightened suspicion against the Muslims and created more problems. The reason why some in India have doggedly pursued good relations between the two countries is the co-relationship between the anti-Muslim feeling and

the only way to keep the different religions together, he said. Rioting would tear the fabric of common heritage they had shared for centuries. He was right, but once he disappeared from the scene, his ideas began to fade. Parochial considerations began to raise their ugly heads.

What happened in Gujarat, in fact, was happening all over India after partition. The fires of communalism were raging high. The country looked like coming apart. The Hindu Mahasabha and its allies talked of a Hindu Rashtra even at that time. But people did not pay any heed to them. Gandhi was such a bright secular light that even the dark corners of communalism came to shine. What really killed communalism was his assassination.

People began to hate the very idea of Hindutva which they felt was responsible for the killing of the Father of the Nation. There was an electric change in the atmosphere, from hate to understanding, from alienation to amity, and from communalism to pluralism. The fanatics were boycotted. The extremists were on the run. No party pandering to communal sentiments got any attention, either electorally or otherwise. The Jana Sangh, the

naivet  gave the RSS parivar a chance which they grabbed with both hands.

Today we have a situation where the Centre is led by the BJP which has pronounced Hindu credentials. Once the torchbearers of secularism, George Fernandes, Sharad Yadav and Ram Vilas Paswan, are now its allies, with eyes fixed on power, not on Gandhi's philosophy of secularism. The Congress is beginning to take a stand against

But the BJP continues to be politically dependent on the RSS.

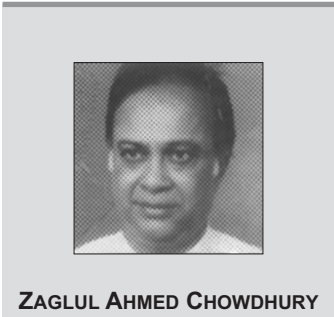
It is a pity that the Centre has taken no action against the Vishwa Hindu Parishad leaders when they have openly incited people to support their communal agenda. My fear is that the government might give them some secret understanding on the acquired land around the disputed site where the Babri masjid stood before demolition. "Not to disturb the status quo" is the directive of the Supreme Court. Anything done overtly or covertly to devalue the order will be tantamount to playing with fire.

Increasingly, one feels that the BJP-led government at the Centre does not have the will or firmness to fight obscurantism. Even on the communal flare-up in Gujarat, it adopted a lackadaisical attitude. The party, internally divided, cannot do anything. Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee looks a pathetic figure. He is willing to strike but he is afraid to wound.

Secular forces have to assert themselves to save the country from going communal. Blinded by fundamentalism, the BJP is not seeing the writing on the wall. Muslim jihadis have destroyed Pakistan and put on the country's back the army which refuses to return to the barracks. The Hindutva 'jihadis' are out to install in India a theocratic state. The BJP leadership cannot conceive what type of forces it will unleash. The leadership may be the first victim. But one thing is certain: India, a secular, democratic nation, will cease to exist. Playing the communal card for power is suicidal but playing it for governance is a national disaster.

Kuldeep Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.

Vajpayee's commendable stance on "Ram temple" issue - how far the zealots will go?



ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

INDIAN Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee has threatened to quit rather than succumb to the pressures of the extreme Hindu nationalist forces on the issue of construction of Ram Temple in the disputed site in Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh. This is not the first time that the veteran politician, three-time Prime Minister of world's largest democracy, has expressed readiness to resign out of sheer frustration and anger. Last year, the Shiv Sena, the West Indian State of Maharashtra-based Hindu militant organisation mounted a blistering attack on the Prime Minister's office despite being a constituent of the multi-party national democratic alliance (NDA) which is ruling India. Some leaders of the party accused the PMO of corruption and wrongdoing, which infuriated Vajpayee, and he tendered his resignation, asking the rationale behind such criticisms in public particularly by a partner of the government. Vajpayee has an unassailable position in his

Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the NDA and the government for the simple reason that his leadership is essential for all the three segments to remain in power. None other than him enjoys unanimous support for the position of the head of the government or is a rallying factor for divergent forces within the NDA in a monolithic platform. The Shiv Sena had to eat its own words as recalcitrant MP Sanjay Nirupam, who

charge of the secretariat. This time, another militant Hindu organisation, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) has come out as the troublemaker for the Prime Minister and the NDA. It is demanding construction of a Temple in the disputed side in Ayodhya where a 16-century mosque built by Moghul emperor Babar was demolished by the Hindu zealots in December, 1992 triggering the worst communal riot across

issue, threatening to go ahead with the building of the temple after March 15 regardless of what the government thinks. This is definitely a threat and possibly, the VHP means it since it has a large following across the country unlike the Shiv Sena which has a strong base only in the Maharashtra state. The Uttar Pradesh, the largest component state of India, is a stronghold of the VHP and the state is ruled by the

Advani and Dr. MM Joshi are considered as hard-liners. Evidently, the VHP and similar organisations draw sustenance from the hard-liners although conservative leaders do not always see eye to eye with the VHP. At a recent meeting with the Prime Minister, the VHP leaders urged Vajpayee to take steps so that they can begin the construction of the temple after March 15. The PM did not agree with the demand and

a sensitive issue like the construction of the temple on a site which the Muslim and secular forces see as a potentially dangerous step to damage the secular fabric of India. India has a large Muslim population. Besides, several partners in the NDA like the Telegu Desam of Andhra Pradesh, DMK of Tamil Nadu and Samata Party of Bihar are secular parties which would not like a decision on the Temple issue in line with the wishes of communal VHP. Their withdrawal of support may cause the fall of the present NDA government, which will create new political instability in the country. As a seasoned statesman, Vajpayee probably can not take a highly controversial stand at the fag end of his political career. The 76-year-old Prime Minister is also somewhat handicapped by physical problems and dropped hints that he may not be in the centre stage for too long. Certainly, Atal Bihari Vajpayee has sided himself with the principles and ethics of secular India and has not fallen into the design of the communal zealots, who however, will continue to disturb him and the government. However, they can not possibly fully jettison Vajpayee who remains the symbol of a unifying factor for various groups in the NDA and Indian government.

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TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE

Learning Arabic in school

Apart from reading and understanding the Quran, for our compulsory five-times-daily prayers we need to recite surahs and other set prayer formulas in Arabic. Thus a certain level of Arabic is a must for each and every Muslim.

All Muslim parents are obliged to impart at least some basic religious education to their children. As a result they employ private tutors or Moulovis to teach Arabic at home. In my experience these Arabic sessions are non-productive.

Little children can learn very quickly and early education mainly focuses on social-skills discipline and creativity, and it is flexible and independent of the choice of subjects. By introducing Arabic/Islamiat in school curriculum (for Muslims) from a very early stage we will be able to teach our children Arabic without much effort on their part, and ensure that our children are getting enough extra hours after school to spend Quality Time with their family and friends. At the same time it will save parents' money too.

We desperately need to modify our educational priority that was set up by our anti-Muslim colonial masters in the first place. Also there is a need to impart moral teaching to our children based on Islamic values. No one can deny the importance of virtuous and moral life, and our religion is in the best position to impart that morality because it is prescribed by the Creator Himself. Thus there is a pressing need to

make Islamic education easily attainable for the general public of Bangladesh.

But unfortunately if anybody proposes anything about Islam or Arabic, doesn't matter if it is a beneficial proposition or not he/she is termed as 'anti-liberation force' of 'Jamate-Islami' by a section of emotionally-unbalanced people. Are they bent on revenge and trying to settle their old scores at the expense of the requirement of the majority?

Shukla Mirza, on e-mail

America's strange war

Absolute power in the hands of a person is dangerous and it is more dangerous when that person presides over the military might of the only superpower of the world. There is no power to balance the American power. America carried out devastating air attacks on Afghanistan only because of Osama bin Laden's stay in that country, even though his direct involvement in the crime has not yet been proved. This war would have been inconceivable in any other time and in any other context. Only America's present position as the sole superpower has led to its happening! As long as Soviet Union was there to act as a balance to America, the world was relatively at peace since the end of World War II. But after the collapse of Soviet Union, conflicts and tensions have erupted in many parts of the world with no sign of abating.

Then came America's war on terrorism. The US president and his policymakers seem to think that

terrorists are a group of people or a tribe separate from the rest of the mankind and if they could be eliminated somehow, the world would be permanently at peace! It is as if these people were born terrorists and they indulged in terrorism just for the fun of it. The Americans apparently refuse to look for the inherent causes that lead a particular group to resort to terrorism to achieve their objectives.

Needless to say people take recourse to violence or terrorism only when they fail to get redress of their grievances in a peaceful manner. Repression, injustice, deprivation etc. drive people to take up extreme measures which end in violence and terrorism. Presently this is the case with the Palestinians. Having practically nothing to counter the military might of the Israelis who use repressive and harsh methods to keep the Palestinians under control in the occupied territories they are compelled to use violence and terror tactics to give vent to their grievances. It is their fundamental right to oppose illegal Israeli occupation and repression. However, strangely enough, the US President Bush seems to deny even this right to the Palestinians. Recently he equated the Palestinian uprising with terrorism. This is very unfortunate; instead of condemning Israeli occupation of Palestinian land, he is actually encouraging it by criticising the Palestinians who must be wondering what sins have they committed to deserve this kind of treatment from the American administration.

Abul Mohsin

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"WB recommendations anger local experts"

The writer of this editorial seems to be focusing on the errors of the World Bank and if that is the case then more power to him.



Just as an example, in the 60's the WB was the leading proponent of wasteful, unnecessary and unsustainable infrastructure development, especially dams.

But I would hardly carry this valid criticism to include the IMF and the IFC (the commercial lending arm of the WB).

The IMF, in the case of Bangla-

desh, is simply asking the government to take greater responsibility and fiscal discipline. Although it may make us feel like we are being hectorred, any local experts can refute none of the recommendations of the IMF, within the bounds of fiscal prudence.

However, it is entirely valid that many consultants and foreign

Plummet to a nadir

This is in response to Mr. M. Abdul Hafiz's feature "Palestinians' Fortune: Plummet to a nadir"

This article portrays the stereotypical perspective of a Muslim born Palestine theorist. As a Muslim, born and raised in a Muslim majority nation, I perceived this philosophy to be the epic one ultimately.

To understand the scenario let us try to look at the recent history of the land in dispute.

Over the centuries, for a much longer historic duration, Judaism has had its root in south-west Asia. That land is blessed with the footsteps of most, if not all of the prophets since prophet Ibrahim (pbuh). Ironically, the same land carries the bloodiest history as far as religious animosity is concerned. The Genocide by the Crusaders followed by the rigorous defence by Saladin left the Muslims in charge of Jerusalem. The conglomerate of Jews in the Western wall, Christians in the Bethlehem and Muslims in the Dome of the Rock co-existed for centuries but from time to time one group or the other became overzealous that eventually lead to circumstances alike what we are seeing today.

In the late 1800s, Jews from around the world began to dream of returning to the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea, The Palestine. This was materialised after the World War I but at a negligible degree. In 1930s, the Jews were drifting slowly to their Holy land, the

land of prophet Musa (pbuh). During the World War II as Jews were killed in Europe, many of those who survived, migrated to the Palestine. Not surprisingly, many of them made United States their new home.

At the east end, after years of conflict, in 1948 the nation of Israel was formed by the Jews and without more ado, was blessed by the recognition of United Nations. This left the Palestinians in a state of refugees in the neighbouring Arab countries or in Israel.

At the west end, the striving and persevering immigrant Jews worked their way up the politico-socio-economic ladder and managed to place them as the architect of guiding principle in this Catholic majority nation. Today it is evident from the 'tapes released from Nixon presidency period' that neither Nixon nor Preacher Billy Graham were happy about the way the Jews controlled the media in this country (Chicago Tribune: March 1, 2002: "Nixon, Graham anti-Semitism on tape": by James Warren). But it is also evident today that this nation was able to do very little about it since then.

Half a century after the birth of Israel, in 1995, the past Government of US brought the then Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and the then PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat closest ever. In the era of that Government, the Palestinians had a land of their own once again and a leadership of their own. The critical thinking ensues here. Did this development in Middle East politics go past the point of allowance by the architects?

Is this the reason why we saw the fall of that administration despite economic prosperity in US and despite having the first ever Jewish Vice-President candidate? Is this why we are seeing quick inference of the "arms shipment to Palestine from Iran" notwithstanding the appeal of independent investigation from Arafat? And the list goes on. Twenty-five years from today when the tapes from this regime are released then we will know the answer for sure and I will be shocked if any response of these are negative.

The spectrum of today's unfortunate incidents is much broader than just "almost daily incursion into Palestinian territory to occupy towns and villages. The bulldozers are driven into Palestinian neighbourhoods and houses razed and...." "...by suicide bombing precisely because they (Palestinians) have no weapons to fight the Israelis". When the Arab world and other Muslim nations are indulged in westernising themselves instead of giving precedence to their religious agenda and when the Israeli's and Jews living in America working hard to ensure their stability in their holy land, we should not expect anything other than what we are seeing today.

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