

Give the Shahid Minar back to the people

It is far more than just a monument, it lies at the centre of our national consciousness

BNP and its alliance government are wrong to lay siege on the Shahid Minar. The reason for the move, as could be gathered from media reports, is to prevent the expected exploitation of it by the opposition forces to foment unrest and use the Minar for launching anti-government demonstration. It appears that the government's reading of the Shamsunnahar Hall and the BUET situations is that these were products of opposition conspiracy. To prevent any repeat of such events, once the Universities are opened, the Shahid Minar has to be kept under police control. Such a reading of the two events is wrong on two counts. First, we think the Shamsunnahar Hall incident was the product of political arrogance, bungling by both education and home ministries and the over politicisation of the University administration. The judicial commission report lays bare what went wrong in that incident and more importantly it reveals the mentality of arrogance of those in power that dominated the thinking that produced the crisis. There was absolutely no evidence of opposition complicity in the matter. The BUET incident may have been taken advantage of by the political forces. However the second reason for the crisis lay in the failure of the VC and his colleagues in realising that general students remained vastly dissatisfied in the way Sony's murder was being handled by the government, and by implication, the University authority.

The point we are trying to make is that both the incidents, as we can gather from newspaper reports and our own investigation, were the products of administrative failure and not opposition conspiracy. Therefore, to embark on a course of action based on that wrong premise can only lead to further wrong actions resulting in the very unrest that the government is so determined to prevent.

It is our view that the government is unnecessarily set on a confrontational course by laying siege on the Shahid Minar. What the BNP leadership may not be understanding clearly is that in the Shahid Minar affair they are setting themselves against the civil society and not just the political opposition. Shahid Minar lies at the centre of what Bangladesh is all about. It is where our spirit of self-assertion is founded. That is the place from where our demand for an independent country began, by asserting our right to speak in our Mother Tongue. Within years of the events of 1952, the Shahid Minar became the gathering ground for all sorts of people and groups who collectively wanted to express their views to the society at large.

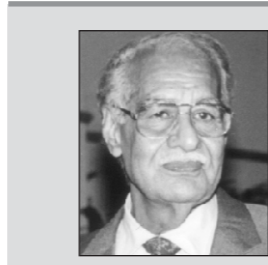
Over time the Shahid Minar has become the most poignant symbol of FREEDOM EXPRESSION. It is where we go to express our views and listen to the views of others. Whenever there is something to protest against people go to the Shahid Minar. So laying siege to it is like laying siege to OUR RIGHT TO EXPRESS. Why should a democratically elected government do that? Even if we accept the fact that opposition parties will use the Shahid Minar for anti-government activities, will keeping it under police protection prevent the opposition from doing what they want?

Why should the government forget that the main thing in politics is public support? If there is public support behind the opposition's point of view then police encirclement of Shahid Minar will only isolate the government. If on the other hand people are not behind the opposition then just gathering at the Shahid Minar will not promote their cause any further. When the government uses the police to prevent public's right to gather and demonstrate then what it means is that it has lost faith in the people -- the very people who have elected them to power less than a year ago.

We do not think that BNP has lost public support sufficiently for it to adopt anti-democratic measures to continue its rule. But its frequent and unnecessary use of police gives the impression that it prefers to rely more on the brute force of the State rather than the support of the people, which we think they still have, if not to the same extent as when it got elected.

We strongly suggest that the Shahid Minar should immediately be restored to the people and the siege on it withdrawn.

Modiland versus Gandhiland



KULDEEP NAYAR
writes from New Delhi

THE name Gujarat sounds almost like a cliché. Long use has also worn out the expression "the land of Mahatma Gandhi." But there is nothing phony about it. However distant the Gujaratis may go from what he practised and preached, they would still be from the land of Mahatma Gandhi and measured by the standards the Father of the Nation had set. This is their pride as well as shame. The outsiders expect too much from them and do not understand how the state has been taken over by consumerism and jingoism. About a week before Gandhi's birth anniversary on October 2, I went back to Ahmedabad. I wanted to see how "normal" was the state after the orgy of bloodshed and crime some seven months before (1,100 people killed and 1.5 lakh ousted from homes). More than that, I wanted to know if the pang of guilt had begun to melt the heart of any part of the Gujarati community, whether there was any soul-searching.

Regrettably, I found little evidence of that except among the Jains. There is no repentance. What sounded strange at times was the loud-voiced defence as if many were feeling embarrassed for all that had happened and were making an effort to cover up. Some even

admitted this in private. But I am sure their number would dwindle drastically after the Swaminarayan Temple incident on September 24. But the attack by the militants should not come as a surprise to Deputy Prime Minister LK Advani as the Intelligence Bureau had warned that such an incident could happen.

There can be two reasons for the attack. One, the Pakistan-based militants may have done it to foul up

incident is bound to help the BJP, which has been steadily losing support because of the economic hardships the state is facing.

In fact, the strong reaction to the carnage worldwide has touched the Gujarati intelligentsia to the quick. Businessmen, lawyers and technocrats were keen to convey that they were not the type of people the country had come to believe them to be. "We have been pushed to a

Ahmedabad is normal in the sense that buses ply, people move around and stores are reasonably crowded. But you can feel that something is missing from the place: the semblance of togetherness. The city is too polarised and too divided. Even liberal Muslims are moving to the Muslim localities for security reasons. There is some sort of economic boycott going on. For example, the upper middle class

has closed the camps, without making any alternative arrangements. Even the compensation has not been paid to more than 20 per cent of the victims. And what has been paid is a pittance, from Rs. 50 to Rs. 500. The insurance companies have not settled any claim involving a large amount. The Prime Minister's assistance of Rs. 150 crore has not been utilised properly, according to official sources. But the

busy destroying the country's secular base for a long time. It has now succeeded in demolishing the secular ethos that Gandhi and Sardar Patel had built up. One can see the debris of destruction. There is no social contact between the two communities. For two decades Gujarat has been following the Gandhian philosophy. The manner in which Gujarat was forging ahead economically showed that the state had realised that religion alone could not deliver the goods. Economic empowerment was also necessary. It looked as if it had found a way to reconcile the two. But then came the BJP. It played the Hindu card and sponsored communal riots to polarise the society. The party saw to it that the police would not interfere to enforce law and order.

The BJP and Modi seem to believe that by sustaining the divide between Hindus and Muslims they can win the coming state elections. The Sangh parivar is trying to arrange the gaurav yatra till the polls so as to keep Hindu chauvinism on a high note. When I visited Ahmedabad, 55 per cent of the 182 seats looked like going to the BJP. The recent incident may increase the number by 40 seats. But it is possible that the land of Gandhi may wake up to the Gandhi's message after partition. At a time of bitter religious tension, Gandhi's prayer meetings became a defiant symbol of tolerance and secular approach. The military junta at Islamabad and the fundamentalists in India and Pakistan are determined to destroy India's secular credentials. The people should accept the challenge by following Gandhi's message which was moral, humanist and cosmopolitan.

Kuldeep Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.

BETWEEN THE LINES

The BJP and Modi seem to believe that by sustaining the divide between Hindus and Muslims they can win the coming state elections. The Sangh parivar is trying to arrange the gaurav yatra till the polls so as to keep Hindu chauvinism on a high note. When I visited Ahmedabad, 55 per cent of the 182 seats looked like going to the BJP. The recent incident may increase the number by 40 seats. But it is possible that the land of Gandhi may wake up to the Gandhi's message after partition. At a time of bitter religious tension, Gandhi's prayer meetings became a defiant symbol of tolerance and secular approach.

the atmosphere in the state, which was beginning to improve. Another reason could be that it was meant as an "act of revenge" for the Gujarat carnage. Something like this happened in Mumbai in 1993 after a spate of communal riots following the demolition of the Babri masjid. And to cap it all, chief minister Narendra Modi is trying his best to see that normalcy doesn't return.

Even the Intelligence Bureau has reported to Advani that Modi's speeches could inflame "communal passions" between Hindus and Muslims. But the Home Ministry has hardly taken any notice of it. It is the most despicable attack, purposely carried out in Advani's constituency. General Pervez Musharraf may be desperate but he is not a farsighted person. The Swaminarayan Temple

situation in which we have no choice except to support even a person like Modi," said an editor of a leading Gujarati daily, "You ignore him. The Gujaratis would take no time to drop him."

Politics in Gujarat now revolves around Modi. He sees to it that it stays that way. He brings in Muslims and Pakistan in his speeches purposely so as to play upon the feelings of Hindus. No political party, not even the Congress, has tried to propagate or practise the secular ethos. The Muslims are included in different electoral strategies, not in developmental targets. Even Shankarsinh Vaghela, Modi's main opponent, would like to play the soft saffron card but has been strictly told by the Congress high command not to do so.

Hindus have stopped sending their vehicles to the Muslim-owned garages.

The urban areas are more contaminated than the rural areas. Some Muslims cannot return to their homes because Hindus do not want them. Or they want them on conditions which the Muslims find too humiliating. Some such 5,000 Muslims are still in camps. Others have moved to their relations and friends. Many have just left the state altogether. The entire Chhilya community (momin) which had a chain of small, cheap hotels in the state have migrated to Hyderabad. The Islamic Relief Committee has all the figures, locality-wise, and other details of the migration.

"They had no choice," many Muslims told me. The government

Muslims' complain that a sizeable portion of the money has gone to the pockets of politicians and bureaucrats.

Muslims regret their loss. "We have only 4.8 per cent of Gujarat's business," some of them told me. At a rough guess, the state has already lost more than Rs. 10,000 crore in the aftermath of the carnage. There is further loss of 80 per cent daily in the sales tax and octroi collections. Whatever brave posture it may adopt, the BJP high command is worried over the economic straits in which the state has plunged. Politically, the Muslims do not count much for the BJP. On its own, the community can bag two seats and influence another four to five in a 188-member house.

The Sangh parivar has been

Insecurity behind bravado

SYED MAQSUD JAMIL

THE month of November is going to be a testing time for the American president. Half of the senate, congress seats and gubernatorial offices will be up for grab. There is great unanimity that the Republicans are going to lose a number of seats. They can even become a minority in the congress. It can reduce G.W. Bush to a greatly clipped president. His fiscal measures may run into uncertainty. For there will be not many ardent supporters to push it through the house. On a personal level, his brother Jeb the governor of Florida is up against a tough contest from Tim McBride. Besides, Florida also has the importance of personal vindication for him, for here the much questioned recounting took place. November indeed can be much chilly.

He has already the reasons to fret, "It's the economy", as his father said. Sadly, America's economy is in decline. Gone are the buoyant mood and years of robust growth. The President does not have the panache for economy. Neither it is a natural turf for him, as it was for Clinton. Even his corporate buddies are letting him down. Enron and others are symptomatic of a malaise that may trigger an economic turmoil. His hand on the gun bravado is of little relevance to economic management. The economy can even restrict him to the doleful fate of one term president. It is a tragic prospect for the Bush family. Rightly in fact the American president is driven by a sense of insecurity.

Moving the focus on to something that galvanizes the nation can push the economy to the back seat. His bravado comes very handy here. And surely he is very good at it. He was already drifting when the twin tower tragedy hit the world. It invigorated his presidency. America's pride rose to the occasion. It

swept the whole of America in a great upsurge of national fervour. He rode the crest well. It was a time for leading American honour and of pursuing the enemy to the end with mighty resolve and unrelenting ferocity. I remember him speaking on the eve of holy Ramadan. The whole scenario looked so credible when he spoke with mellifluous accent powered by gritty determination, "The enemy will not rest during Ramadhan, neither will we". It looked

first time America truly came out of insular existence. League of Nations was formed. Even that was not enough. Americans remained content to remain at home to enjoy the remarkable economic growth of the twenties. Calvin Coolidge was their model president who gave America prosperity and kept her sons home.

It was the Japanese havoc of Pearl Harbor in 1941 that forced America to plunge headlong into

omy will come to the forefront. It will not listen to his bluster. But the economy is showing no signs of recovery. It is drifting in to further stagnation.

America wants a continuation of Clinton era's prosperity. Jobs, investment and growth are the things America needs. For that America needs a peaceable time. You cannot make war and do business as usual. The eight years of Clinton era did not plunge America

to encourage growth. His greater involvement with the economy at home produced result. Foreign investment increased remarkably. Middle Eastern businessmen, large corporate groups from Europe and the Far East made large investment in America. Even some corporations relocated their business to America. Millions of jobs were created. New business and industrial units were set up. The old ones expanded. Budget deficit of around 2.5 trillion

a corporate constituency. His fat campaign war chest was greatly funded by his corporate cronies. The huge tax cuts also do not inspire. It is certain his economic package will have to face even stricter scrutiny from the congress. As things go, his leadership will bog down in economic morass. The President wants to break out of it.

A disaster at the November polls, decimation at the least, will shrink his leadership further. One may even see a siege mentality at work. It will serve the President well to seek a new mission of chastising the evil. Saddam bashing is understandably the popular choice. It looks to me like a pendulum swinging between insecurity and bravado. The D-day is 2004. Two years is not lot of time. Even if Saddam is driven out and his arsenals are destroyed, it offers no guarantee that the son can win the reelection bid where the dad failed. It took not even a year for the 92 per cent approval rating to dwindle to an electoral defeat. The economic bug may come back to hunt down the son as well.

Leadership should begin at home. The task at home produces far more bountiful reward in popular choice. Winston Churchill's party could not win the parliamentary election even though he displayed the most remarkable leadership in winning the war for Britain. Labour Party came to power and Anthony Eden became the Prime Minister, not the war hero Churchill. War can make heroes but domestic success makes good leaders. No amount of victories abroad can make up for good times at home. For continued good times at home the American President shall have to lead for a stable world at peace. All successful American Presidents knew and showed that peace made America richer. The world hopes President G.W. Bush will keep it in focus and benefit from the legacy he has inherited.

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so similar to when President Truman told the Soviets after the Second World War, "Move out of Iran, or I am going to drop that goddam thing over you". Soviet Russia withdrew from Iran in the face of nuclear threat.

Now that Afghanistan is rid of Al Qaida and Taliban, the fire has died down. So has his popularity. President Bush needs a menacing foe for his motivation. Iraq whipping as a target fires him. Arab leaders have deftly denied him of the opportunity of riding again on the national upsurge of patriotic spirit by pursuing Iraq to accept UN arms inspectors.

Americans are contradictions of two dominant characteristics. They are historically against overseas involvement. It was William McKinley, the 25th American president, who took America out of insular existence. He took over the Philippines out of the hands of the Spanish conquistadors in 1898. During First World War President Woodrow Wilson had great difficulty in persuading his nation in joining England to fight against Germany. It was the

war. Thus America was permanently integrated into the rest of the world as a superpower. The basic instinct of the Americans is to focus on jobs, greater purchasing capacity and general prosperity. It is however equally true that American sense of pride is also a strong sentiment. The twin tower tragedy was a grievous blow to America's sense of pride. It convulsed the whole of America. For President Bush this was the ideal setting for the display of his leadership talents. He acted with the frontier spirit that conquered the Wild West for America. His rallying call touched the most sensitive chord of the American nationhood. America stood as one behind him. It was a tempo that suited the President well. He was in his best and he enjoyed it.

The Taliban have vanished and Bin Laden is in the flight of his life, the mission looks almost over. President Bush's drive needs steam to fire it up. Iraq, Saddam in particular, tops the list of evils to be hunted down. He has to drive on the mission at full throttle. Without it, the econ-

into injudiciously partisan partnership with Israel, estranging its allies. It did not patronise or nod approvingly of the arrogant acts of reprisal by state terrorism that drove the wronged, to uglier missions culminating in September 11 carnage. There were ethnic hostilities all over the world during Clinton's eight years. Americans suffered casualties from hostile acts at Somalia and at Yemen. They did not however drag Clinton administration in to major engagement. He took out his soldiers from humanitarian mission in Somalia. The Yemen tragedy was addressed with studied restraint.

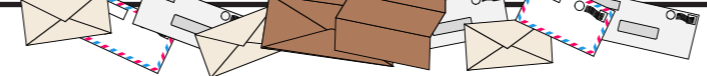
It was in the Balkans that America acted firmly with the participation of allied forces. Although belated, the action produced peace. Bosnian carnage came to an end. Slobodan Milosevic's Yugoslavia was brought to its heel by sustained and decisive air attack. America did not see any protracted and bleeding engagement. Eight peaceable years of Clinton was a time international business preferred. Clinton did not have to push through huge tax cuts

dollars was a thing of the past. Inflation was under control. All this happened although Clinton's personal conduct was scandalous. He had no insecurity to address to.

Clinton conveyed an image of self-assurance, confidence, eagerness and the knowledge to handle the economy. He knew the job, treated it as the foremost agenda and most of all loved to do it. Even Monica Lewinsky, Paula Jones and congressional censure could not obliterate his economic achievements. His economic leadership made his presidency.

The situation is different for G.W. Bush. His slim margin and the controversies about the recounting took away the mantle of unquestioning approval. The Presidency started with an inherent sense of unease. It yearned for an opportunity of vindication. Twin Tower tragedy brought the opportunity. Unfortunately for Mr. Bush, the economic bug is back. It appears that the corporate scandals are just the tip. American corporate sector is beleaguered. And the President has

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



Gujarat temple killing

I condemn in the strongest terms, the heinous attack on the temple by some sinister radical group. Killing of innocent lives is the least heroic thing to do. Anyone with a gun loaded with bullets and a distorted mindset could do that. How would those who killed the worshippers in the temple feel if their own kind is subjected to such slaughter and mayhem?

A Man in Uniform
Dhaka

BUET reopens: Good luck

It is nice to hear that BUET reopens on September 28. We hope that the authorities have consulted all concerned parties in the conflict that led to violence and police action. Who is right or wrong should not be the question now. The authority should come one step forward to mend the differences that were sharpened by some outside forces (as we gather from different reporting of *The Daily Star*).

Misunderstanding between teachers and students should not be

allowed to continue, regular dialogue regarding different problems between the groups is essential. Teacher-student relationship is the most important ingredient in maintaining congenial environment in any university which is sadly missing in most of the public universities including BUET, as can be assumed from reporting and letters in *The Daily Star*.

Difference of opinion between different groups is very natural but there should be a mentality to hear each other, reconcile where needed or at least honour other views. Teachers should play the leading role in this direction. We hope the outsiders will keep off from the others' internal problems. Good luck BUET.

Ashikul Mowla
Elephant Rd, Dhaka

What about the Kurds?

The plight of the Palestinian resonates loudly with the Muslim world, but what of the Kurds? They, too, are a landless and stateless people who are being oppressed and are

equally deserving of a country of their own yet there is little or no attention paid to them.

Why is that? Is it because these Kurds occupy lands that are under the control of Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran-- the fellow Muslim countries whom we dare not criticise for the sake of Islamic unity?

The Kurds are treated far worse than the Palestinians, in my opinion. Because they are neither Turks, Arabs, or Persians, but a distinct ethnic group with their own culture and language.

Until recently, Turkey denied the Kurds to speak their own language. Iraq has long mistreated the Kurds, even using them as human guinea pigs to test chemical weapons. Where was the OIC and the Ummah then?

It is a shame that we accuse the West of humiliating and mistreating Muslims, when we ourselves do it so well.

Karim Abdullah
New York, USA

"American way of life"

It is so pathetic that people are blaming one entire nation because

of one man's effort to fight international terrorists! Only "An immigrant's" seemed logical enough. You simply can not blame the Bangladeshis for the acts committed by Ershad Shikdar or for famous criminals in Bangladesh. If the September 11 attack took place in Bangladesh, wouldn't our PM have taken the same action?

So you simply cannot blame the whole American for the Bush Government's 'war against terrorism'.

Iftezar Sayeed
One-mail

I have been closely following the debate on the role of the US and surprisingly, I found out that some of the writers look to the US as the "great provider". I would request them to look at the other side of the story.

There is no denying the fact that being the citizens of a developing nation, we are dependent on the US in many ways. People go to the US for education and even for permanent residence. Our trade also is

largely dependent on this nation. Nevertheless, we should not forget that the US hardly gives us anything for free. We have to fulfil their strict criteria and conditions to export our goods. Those who go there for higher studies on scholarship leave their valuable research works when they return to their homeland. Those who have no skills are doing odd jobs just to earn a living. Even those who have got Green Cards are working hard for long hours to live decently.

Actually the US economy is very much dependent on the contribution of the immigrants. The nation could excel in science and technology because the most brilliant people from all parts of the globe joined their universities to do research works on every plausible topic under the sun. In return the US gave its immigrants the "American way of life", which entails a secured and decent living.

Therefore, we should not stop short of criticising the US policy just because we are dependent on them in some ways. When the American foreign policy is drawing criticism from all parts of the globe, we should

also make our voices heard.

Ahmed Zamil
Mohammadpur, Dhaka

"Fuel-less pollution free"

If the large colour ad on your front page (September 25) is to be believed, a Bangladeshi scientist has solved every problem in the world.

But wouldn't Ghowsia Trading, when placing such an expensive ad, also do well by giving a phone number? I am sure there are so many gullible people just dying to invest in this miracle.

Kim
Dhaka

"Terrorist defined"

This is in reply to the letter by "A Man in Uniform" (September 25). The question he presented is, in fact, the most crucial question before the whole human civilisation; how it can be that one group's terrorist is another group's freedom fighter. There are varieties of ideologies and faiths on the globe. The followers of these ideologies and faiths

are none of them hypocrites; though often the different groups believe in diametrically opposed ideologies. Each person loves his own faith very dearly. If each group thinks that its ideology is the best and others are either hypocrites or idiots and are unable to see the correct path, there shall be clash and conflict and one group may term any attempt of the other group to protect itself as a terrorist activity. Throughout the whole human history, we find enough of such examples.

The whole human civilisation is now on the verge of extinction due to environmental and other types of pollution. If human beings on the globe do not forget their differences and do not respect each other's ideologies, we shall proceed towards complete annihilation.

As regards his nagging daughter, I would advise him to kindly tell her that she will understand many things as she grows up. In the mean time, he should teach her how to love mankind. We should try to make this world a happy place for the coming generation.

Prof. Ayesha Sultana
Department of Philosophy, DU

Traffic tangle

Someone in the DCC must have come to the conclusion that traffic in Uttara wasn't bad enough already.

Recently by my great amazement, they started building a round about adjacent to Jashimuddin Road. You can already see the traffic flow slowing down and backing up.

I can think of only one rational reason to build a roundabout on a highway; DCC is planning to lease the space for putting up garish neon signs. There can be no other explanation.

Satyajit
Dhaka

Note
The readers are requested to send their comments on 'Bangladesh cricket' (the cricket team, their performance in the ICC tournament and other international tournaments-how to improve their performance, what future they have, the government's role in improving the cricket standard etc).
--Editor