

# Uglywrath turned on dissent

A body-blow to democracy

THE attacks on M A Mannan's house, businesses and factories in the wake of his resignation from the ruling BNP and joining an alternative political forum only show that we still have a long way to go before living up to the basics of democratic behaviour. In this case, a citizen's right to dissent as enshrined in the Constitution, has been blatantly trampled. The ruling BNP, by allowing its activists to hurl bombs at Mannan's house, and ransack his offices and businesses, both in Dhaka and Chittagong, has proven two things: first, they are not prepared to accept any voice of dissent within the party; and secondly, they are even more intolerant of a dissenter joining into their detractors' fold.

The ruling party can't shake off its responsibility for these attacks just as they couldn't do it in the case of not allowing Dr B Choudhury to hold the planned first-ever meeting of his newly-formed alternative political forum last Thursday. And that's also after he had sought and received 'permission' to hold the rally. He and his associates were physically attacked when a motorcycle sped into the crowd surrounding him in the street leading to the venue. Even those who were trying to reach out to express their solidarity with Dr Choudhury, were brutally attacked and beaten up.

If the government had all the good intentions, then such naked invasion on democratic right would not have been allowed to take place. And, secondly, if the government really wants to disassociate itself from such attacks, then we ask them -- why no one has been taken to task till now, especially since everyone saw who the perpetrators for those attacks were.

We strongly condemn such highhandedness, particularly on the part of a democratically elected government. They ignored the intense outrage expressed all over the country following the ruthless attack on B Choudhury and continued with their crusade against MA Mannan, thereby firming up the impression that they are out to crush any opposition to the government. This majority party arrogance and democracy cannot go together.

## MPs' incorrigible default

When will it end?

IT is the same olds news. In the first 19 months of the eighth parliament, telephone bills owed to 110 MPs stood at Tk 47,77,665, even though they had drawn allowances in the order of Tk one crore twenty-five lakh. As for the broader picture -- since the country's independence -- 619 MPs have piled up Tk 8,37,42,000 in arrear telephone usage charges. On the defaulters' list are speaker, deputy speaker and whip of the Jatiya Sangsad together with ministers, both sitting and former.

Members of Parliament, both of the ruling and opposition parties have had the unique privilege of the government of the day staying away from realising their outstanding telephone bills. This is perhaps the only conclusion one can draw from the telephone bill arrears piled by members of different parliaments during the last 31 years. None of the governments took any effective measure to realise the outstanding usage charges. Here is perhaps one area where a covert consensus between the ruling and opposition parties existed. Even though there may have been a more pronounced dodging tendency among the ruling party MPs compared to those of the opposition, the cumulative default overtime happened to be the creation of MPs from both sides.

Are we fast reaching a point where telephone bills will have to be written off like they are doing in the case of bank loans in the classified category remaining unpaid for five or more years? That is a sad commentary on the elite ruining the national economy through their privilege-play. In the particular case of the MPs evading payment of telephone bills, how do the people view it? Well, they think that those who were elected as lawmakers are breaking law. Moreover, the very fact that they are doing it with impunity while ordinary defaulters' telephone lines are disconnected with much less telephone bill in arrear, is clearly a negation of the fundamental principle that all are equal before the eye of law.

Bangladesh Telegraph and Telephone Board (BTB) seems to have no other authority than to merely send notices for payment of outstanding bills to the MPs. There should be some authority and some mechanism to make sure MPs paid their bills.



M ABDUR HAFIZ

NOTWITHSTANDING a confrontational posture adopted by each the discerning observers of South Asian affairs seldom missed a subtle undercurrent of love-hate relationship between the region's two arch-rivals. After all, their bondage spanning thousand of years could die hard. Despite occasional rupture of this bondage they repeatedly came back for rapprochement -- the urge for which has never been so irresistible as of now. Following a long saga of missed opportunities, disillusioned hopes and bungled negotiation the two countries now seem to have reached the foothills of what have been called the shining peaks of the 'peace heights'. The landmark agreement signed between President Musharraf and Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee on 6 January last portended a period of achieving a modus vivendi to end the 56 years of conflict and confrontation once for all.

How did it all come about? It is generally believed that the near-war situation between the two nuclear power adversaries of South Asia was convincing enough for

international community that a lasting settlement between India and Pakistan was a must for world peace. The United States concerned with its war on terror was particularly interested in freeing both the countries to gear them up towards that end. An urge for peace in both the countries also emerged from the continuing fatigue and cost of confrontation. The recent SAARC Summit in Islamabad provided the long-awaited occasion to

their leadership. Evidently the concerned quarters in both the countries are proceeding with utmost caution and circumspection, yet the pitfalls cannot be overlooked.

The Indian foreign minister Yashwant Sinha's remark on Dr A Q Khan episode already raked up some old bitterness reminiscent of his preemption theory for Pakistan. Prime Minister Vajpayee also kicked off his campaign for

progress in peace efforts. The recently established functional relationship between the two countries is apparently strengthened and people seem ready on both sides to get out of fixed mindsets and entrenched position on issues. Also the confidence building measures are reinforced. Prime Minister Vajpayee himself intervened to remove restriction on the travel of Indian cricket team. For a change the restrictions

on TV channels and promotion of cultural exchange are considered defeating measures even in Pakistan these days. The cultural barrier that existed between the two countries all these years are already demolished. Indian movies and songs as well as Pakistani Ghazals and drama have already reached the remotest places in the two countries where there is electricity.

Yet Kashmir would constitute the litmus test for the success of the rapprochement now underway. There is no point in making a demand which the other side cannot accept. Neither will be a

rush congenial to unravel the tangles involved in the issue itself. They will only entangle the countries in the most complex phases of problem prematurely and inadvertently. Consequently it will undermine progress on all other fronts. So far the leaders of both the countries demonstrate the realisation of the truism. For the first time conflict is not considered an option for a breakthrough. Indeed, negotiations alone, no matter how long they take, hold the promise of a resolution. In the case of complex issues like Kashmir involving national honour, huge sacrifices and public emotions, it is difficult to find solution and the compromises and give and take are the only way out. The stunt of 'principled' position is not any realistic option. Pakistan seems to have accepted the home truth and embraced unpleasant realities of the situation -- thus brightening up the prospect of a lasting rapprochement at long last.

However the true dynamics behind the rapprochement should indeed be the belief on both sides that hostility and consequent heavy expenditure on defence plays no part in alleviating poverty, both the countries are trapped in. In this regard the onus to promote confidence among the neighbours by reducing defence expenditure lies with India which is already too powerful to be threatened by any of its neighbours including China. India is nevertheless welcome to concentrate on becoming an economic power. In a conflict-free South Asia the sky is the only limit for India.

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# Vajpayee for facade, Advani for PM?

## BJP's great con-trick



PRAFUL BIDWAI  
writes from New Delhi

THE one thing the BJP cannot be accused of is lack of energy. It has been in campaign mode for almost three months. It concocted, and dressed up, its "achievements" through a Rs. 450-crore blitz at public expense. It has promoted "feel-good" through Rs. 20,000-crore tax-breaks for the rich and disinvestment from bluest-of-blue-chips ONGC.

It has euphorically inducted film stars and other glamour-figures (although its only substantial catch is singer-composer Bhupen Hazarika).

After such saturation-level campaigning, why should Mr L.K. Advani launch his 33-day-long Bharat Uday rath-jatra?

Clearly, Mr Advani is re-launching himself!

The jatra will help him mobilise cadres to help the BJP in some 100 "weak" constituencies. Mr Advani will stress its "conceptual and emotional link" with the original jatra of 1990 and remind the sangh

parivar that it's his Ayodhya campaign which built up the BJP's strength from a pathetic two seats to 100-plus. The first jatra was his career's highest point.

This jatra too will project Mr Advani as a major campaigner, independent of Mr Vajpayee. The all-important message? If the NDA wins, Mr Advani will succeed Mr Vajpayee--if not immediately, then soon.

The jatra is a calculated depar

ture from the BJP's exclusively Vajpayee-centric campaign. It'll use Mr Vajpayee's (deceptive) image as a "liberal", "moderate", "soft" leader to bolster Mr Advani. The BJP will seek votes for Mr Vajpayee--to install Mr Advani in power!

This is a big confidence trick. Very few people approve of Mr Advani as PM. According to an India Today poll (Feb 9), his rating is a pitiable, unelectable 2 percent, less than even Mr Mulayam Singh's 3 percent, and incomparable to Ms Sonia Gandhi (23) and Mr Vajpayee (47).

Mr Advani faces a tough choice in the jatra. If he whips up hysteria and instigates violence--as in 1990, causing 300 riots--he'll antagonise middle-class voters with no stomach for bloodshed. He'll also invite the Election Commission's intervention.

If he avoids militant rhetoric, and the jatra only projects Mr Vajpayee's "capable leadership", it could "turn out to be a non-event"--according to a BJP leader.

The rath carries Hindu-religious motifs. When it was despatched for Kanyakumari amidst chants of "Jai Sri Ram", Mr Dilip Singh Judeo, of cash-on-camera fame, sacrificed a

goat to bring good luck to Mr Advani!

The jatra won't greatly affect the BJP's election prospects. It will increase its dependence on RSS cadres for voter mobilisation.

The jatra signifies changed power-equations. The BJP didn't even bother to tell its allies about it. This shows how domineering it has become and how marginal them. The plan was worked out by Mr Pramod Mahajan and kept

Mr Advani's weight in the BJP has greatly risen, like his profile in government. In June 2002, he was installed as Deputy Prime Minister--an office without Constitutional sanction. He was given new responsibilities like talking to the All-Party Hurriyat Conference...Mr Advani has increasingly sought parity with Mr Vajpayee. He wanted to use official aircraft during the election campaign--a privilege reserved for the PM. The attempt failed, but the message got across that he's not too far from the top job... Mr Advani also entertains delusions of grandeur. He says he'd like himself and Mr Vajpayee to be remembered as India's "new architects and visionaries"!

secret even from second-rung BJP leaders.

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Kalyan Singh. (In 1999, Mr Singh damaged his Lucknow campaign and caused a 93,000-vote fall in his margin).

Last June, Mr Naidu equated Mr Advani with Mr Vajpayee through his vikas-purush and loh-purush formulation. That provoked a sharp rebuke from Mr Vajpayee. Mr Naidu abjectly apologised.

However, now, the BJP all but accepts the "two mascots".

The BJP/NDA won't have an easy election win--despite their opponents' failings. The BJP enjoyed an exceptional 54 percent success-rate in 1999, twice higher

than the national average. Assuming the rate holds--despite the allies' depleted number and strength--the party won't even win 190 seats (if it contests 350). For a convincing 220-230 seats, the BJP would have to antagonise allies and dismantle the NDA!

The NDA seems to have peaked in numerous states. It won all the seats in Haryana, Himachal, Delhi and Goa, 41 out of the 54 seats in Bihar, 19 of 21 in Orissa, 36 of 42 in Andhra, 26 of 39 in Tamil Nadu, 20 of 26 in Gujarat, 16 of 25 in Rajasthan, 28 of 48 in Maharashtra...

It'd be a miracle if the NDA doesn't lose many of these. The odds are especially stacked against it in Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Bihar and Andhra.

Potentially, the BJP can gain only in Uttar Pradesh and perhaps Assam and Punjab. Even Mr Mahajan admits that "it will be difficult" for it to reach the 200-seat mark nationally without an extra 20-25 seats in UP.

In UP's three- or four-way contest, the BJP might come third--as happened in the 2002 Assembly elections. Unless there's a "wave", it won't exceed its earlier tally (25).

The BJP's opponents must fight it resolutely--through an alternative vision/programme and skilful alliance-building. They have a historic opportunity--to combat the menace of Hindutva and elitist neoliberalism.

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## OPINION

# Wind turbines and poverty alleviation

Dr. M. S. HAQ writes from New York

ONE of the leading Bangladeshi English dailies reported on 12 March 2004 that the Government of Bangladesh is planning to install a total of four 225 KW wind turbines in the country by July 2004. Mr. Syed Abdul Mayeed, the present chairman of the Bangladesh Power Development Board has expressed the hope that the turbines would generate one MW of electricity, once commissioned. It is indeed an encouraging development because it could, among other things, be instrumental in facilitating a more productive and sustainable use of the country's energy resources in the foreseeable future.

In 2003, I wrote an article titled "Bangladesh must improve its energy situation". In that article, I discussed, among other things, the urgent need for Bangladesh to harness its recoverable (at the economic level), as well as affordable energy resources including the wind energy for

accelerating the implementation of the poverty reduction strategies. It was in that, as well as other contexts, I suggested a number of measures as to how to increase the per capita energy consumption in the country; examined the role of wind energy; analysed the engineering, technological and environmental aspects of the present day wind turbines; and recommended the use of pertinent local, as well as non-local expertise including those of the GE, the biggest domestic turbine manufacturer in the US, to mention a few. The article was published in a number of leading dailies between 9 September 2003 and 24 September 2003, both days inclusive.

Now that Bangladesh has decided to invest in the pioneering wind power project, one of its key challenges would be: how to optimise the eventual benefit of the project in the pursuit of eradicating poverty from Bangladesh within a minimum possible time. The time mechanics would play a critical

role in meeting the above challenge because of its relationship with, say, the costs of poverty alleviation in Bangladesh.

The next meeting of the Bangladesh Development Forum (BDF) is expected to be held in Dhaka in May 2004. Bangladesh should take that opportunity to explore, among other things, additional donor support for expediting its poverty reduction through a rapid enhancement of the country's per capita energy consumption. A comprehensive, well articulated, pragmatic and marketable energy driven anti-poverty strategy having high result generating potentials and stringent development accountability requirements could inter alia facilitate positive outcomes of the above effort.

Bangladesh would need to work hard to improve private sector participation (including multinational companies) in, and attract additional FDI for, the energy sector. It can negotiate grant-cum-cost sharing arrangements with the bilateral and multilateral donors for

supporting the utilisation of the country's energy resources in a more productive, as well as equitable fashion.

Bangladesh should be mindful about the fact that mobilising resources for development activities is, in many senses, relatively less difficult than creating and sustaining optimal outcomes from those resources with '100 percent' accountability to the stakeholders. One of the ways to deal with the difficulties is through a continuous strengthening of the accountability regime for developmental outcomes. It is expected the BDF would deal with the matter in a more innovative, as well as user-friendly manner in its discourses and debates leading to the meeting in May this year.

In fine, I would like to congratulate the government and in particular, the Bangladesh Power Development Board, on the wind power initiative. It is hoped Bangladeshis would, among other things, be able to witness the completion of the project in time.

# Obscenity in satellite TV programmes

ERSHAD KHANDKER

THE effect of slow poison is exactly that, slow but deadly because poison is fatal. The issue of obscene dance videos is very serious. The poison simile is given to drive home that, not to sensationalise what is seemingly a social issue. I have another simile in mind. The debate on vote for the women went on for so long, yet the issue was so clear, women should get the right to vote. Our realisation sets in only after much suffering has been caused.

In the same vein, the issue of obscenity shown in Indian music videos and its serious effect on the minds of impressionable young people needs to be highlighted. The rationale of the simile of female suffrage becomes more obvious, when we see that obscenity on television touches on the issue of dignity of women, as human beings. They are not mere objects of desire as some of the videos and other programmes may depict them to be. The regulation dance videos,

on view in some of the satellite channels, seriously denigrate women.

It is so common that one can shuffle through TV channels available in Bangladesh, and one of the very first images that may prop-up is the obscene dance sequence of an Indian music video. The movie clippings, that run al most round the clock are even worse, with lurid movements and sexually explicit gestures that have socially subversive connotations. Subversive? Yes subversive because of the way the videos may subvert the normal growth of the human mind in a society like ours. And no doubt, some of the crimes on women, and so money of the crimes that are unreported, owe their genesis, if not wholly then partially, to the images shown in the Indian dance videos.

The question is, why do we have access to so much explicit material available on casual surfing of the TV channel button? Please understand that, this is not the case even in western

societies, the same societies we deem to be the very harbingers of casual social values. Western TV programmes, usually are a mix of comedies, social dramas movies. Each programme has ratings that indicate the nature of the programme and content. But there is no need to talk about the west here. What about the South East Asian countries like Singapore, Hong Kong or Malaysia and Indonesia? If you are passing through one of these economically developed countries, and decide to surf the channel of the hotel TV chances are that the image that may appear is a detective movie or a comedy serial. This scribe saw the image of the eccentric detective "Monk" in a recent visit to Hong Kong. None of the channels carried such wanton movements as you are likely to see daily in the dance videos sitting in Dhaka since these channels are not shown and would not be permitted.

People have the right to choose what they want to watch. However, there are some decisions that have to be taken judi-

ciously. Social leaders are there to decide on many matters that depend on only their discretion and understanding, not the choice of the common person. That is just the nature of leadership and decision making.

In Singapore, Star TV programmes was introduced with a careful eye on the effect on society. Explicit scenes, which are hardly as frequent as dance videos, were cut for some time. The broader question is to be discussed and decided upon by the broader society. The personal opinion of this scribe should be very clear by now, a way has to be found to ensure that the constant obscenity, now on show in the TV channels, have to be lessened. Satellite TV has so many good channels for viewing. Even some of the Hindi channels are very good, with dramas and talk shows, great golden oldie Hindi movies and clippings of current releases. Therefore, the issue is not to abrogate the Hindi channels, the issue is to stop the constancy of obscenity, in only some of the TV channels.