

The governance issue

Accountability in high places must be ensured

THE decision by the council of advisers to do away with the import of duty free vehicles for lawmakers raises anew the matter of corruption in high places. In the past sixteen years, members of Parliament have often abused privileges they have been entitled to. A very significant number of parliamentarians have imported duty free vehicles and then sold them off at hefty profit to others. Such behaviour has naturally shocked all conscientious citizens. The scruples that we thus expected from our elected representatives have been conspicuous by their absence. Our sentiments take a little more battering when we are informed that telephone bills amounting to huge sums of money have remained uncleared by our now former MPs, in spite of the fact that they received special telephone allowance.

In light of such realities, the question of how to ensure accountability in high places acquires renewed significance. Government is by definition a matter of ensuring the greatest good for the greatest number of people. But the record of the last decade and a half, and even more, shows clearly how elected government has worked at cross purposes with the aspirations of those whose welfare ought to have been its fundamental aim. The spoils system which developed (and this is now being made clear in the crudest manner possible through a recovery of relief materials from the homes of putatively public figures) has eaten away at the vitals of almost every institution of the state. Parliament, especially in its final stages, was reduced to an institution unconcerned with issues of public welfare. The various standing committees of the Jatiyo Sangsad met either fitfully or not at all, which again was a drain on the public exchequer in terms of the resources wasted. When, therefore, Adviser Mirza Azizul Islam speaks of a need to free the government machinery from corruption, we comprehend fully the exigencies of the situation.

The circumstances demand that a full, relentless programme of reforms be undertaken and taken to a meaningful conclusion. All the political, administrative and other institutions undermined or destroyed in the past must be thoroughly recast through institutional reforms. Political reforms must also be brought into the workings of the political parties if democracy is to become a truly sustainable exercise. Overall, government must go back to doing its fundamental duty, which is to ensure the material and intellectual well-being of the nation. It must ensure a foolproof system of checks and balances that will make it impossible for individuals, groups and parties to subvert popular aspirations.

Hill flattened for housing plots

Telling upon eco-system

DISTRICT authorities of Cox's Bazar allegedly bypassing rules and despite protests by the forest department, demolished a hill near Cox's Bazar beach to create housing plots for bureaucrats. The 51 acre vast expanse of land now stands flattened and denuded of its valuable forest resources in a government-declared 'ecologically critical area'. It is worthwhile to note that the hill in question at Kolaitoli has been levelled by felling trees in violation of a law that prohibits such action without permission of the Ministry of Forest. We are also concerned over the fact that an erstwhile IGP is listed amongst the beneficiaries ranking atop a total number of 500. The list also includes several Deputy Commissioners including many other government officials. The controversial project was approved by the erstwhile BNP government.

In the meantime we find it rather outrageous the claim made by some of the allottees that they had no knowledge about the adverse impact on the ecology the project may have on the surrounding areas and beyond.

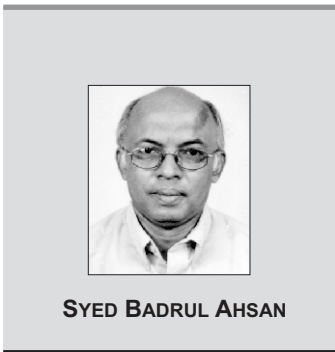
We find the whole incident not only shocking but bizarre. It is sad that such debilitating acts can take place with explicit involvement of a good number of people of the society who are otherwise known to be responsible and conscientious citizens of the country.

However, it's good to learn that the construction work has been suspended since February 19 due to joint forces' intervention in response to media reports and environmentalists' express concerns. But the damage had already been done.

Bangladesh is already at the cross roads of being a veritable time bomb of ecological disaster, both man made and natural. In recent times scientists have already reminded us by predicting that a large mass of land of Bangladesh particularly surrounding the coastal belt may go under the sea in not too distant a future due to global warming.

It is thus our earnest hope that the present government would carry out a thorough investigation into the whole incident, punish those found responsible and reforest the area. No flattening of hills, please!

The history our children must know



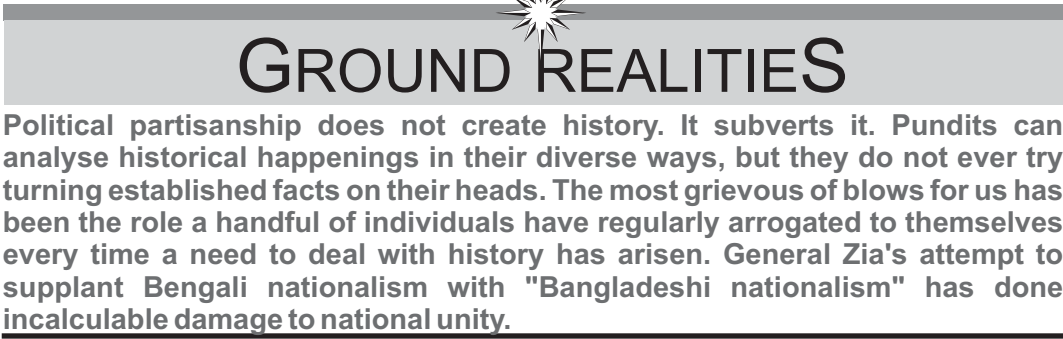
SYED BADRUL AHSAN

A nation that teaches false history to its young is a society condemned to perdition, or worse. In Bangladesh, especially since the coups d'etat of 1975, a palpable distortion of history has been going on with, of course, a slight intermission during the period of Awami League government between 1996 and 2001.

The general run of things, however, has been to inform the young at school and college that Bangladesh's history is not what it really has been. That was a criminal act to indulge in, and successive governments after 1975 remain guilty of perpetrating that falsehood.

In the last known attempt to inject a large degree of adulteration into our national history, the four-party Bangladesh Nationalist Party-led government of Begum Khaleda Zia sought, to our sheer outrage, to tear out the Proclamation of Independence in the constitution and replace it with a document that would have General Ziaur Rahman emerge as the prime mover behind the struggle for a sovereign Bangladesh.

There would be hardly any point recapitulating all the misdeeds that have been committed in the interest of partisan politics in the country.



Even so, there are facts that the people of Bangladesh, particularly those who came of age in the post-1971 period, need to be acquainted with, where the matter is one of a mutilation of national history.

The first assault on historical truth came in the minutes immediately after the assassination of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in August 1975, through the swift, sinister replacement of the liberation war cry of Joi Bangla with the un-Bengali Bangladesh Zindabad. That shock came along with another, when Bangladesh Betar was quickly pushed back into being Radio Bangladesh.

The first, tentative steps toward a formalisation of historical mutilation came when the journalist Khondokar Abdul Hamid told a surprised Ekushey crowd at the Bangla Academy in February 1976 (the country had conveniently been placed under a state of martial law) that "Bangladeshi nationalism" would serve as the underpinning of the state. The only brave soul at that gathering was Professor Kabir Chowdhury. It was he who spoke, however briefly, of the role of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in Bangladesh's history.

Beginning in early 1976, therefore, things began to fall into a pattern. These days you will hear a good number of people extolling Zia over the reality that he never claimed, as his political successors were to do so unabashedly in later years, to have declared Bangladesh's independence in March 1971.

Of course Zia did not make any such claim. How could he? He had, after all, in a 1972 article in the weekly Bichitra, loudly proclaimed his participation in the War of Liberation through the inspiration of the Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

But if Zia did not try to superimpose himself on national history, he certainly made sure that Bangabandhu was reduced to being a non-person in the five years of his military administration.

None of the observances of national historical importance in the electronic and print media remembered the seminal contributions of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to the story of Bangladesh. The Zia years were effectively spent airbrushing Mujib out of Bengali history.

His political loyalists, in the years after his murder, pretended that the autonomy movement of the 1960s and the war of 1971 occurred without any political guidelines. The

biggest shame of the Zia years was the anointing of Bangabandhu's assassins as the country's diplomats abroad. It was not our finest hour.

When, today, the caretaker administration speaks of a correction of history in school textbooks, these and other disturbing aspects of our politics must be taken into account. It is not merely a matter of placing the right individuals in their proper places. It ought to be a far more serious issue of restoring history as it was forged in 1971 before being riddled with scandal after 1975.

History is never an act of striking a balance between individuals or events. Which is why any move to correct Bangladesh's national history must steer clear of the chances of trying to make everyone happy in light of recent political happenings. The facts matter.

And the biggest fact is that Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, through his lifelong dedication to the national cause, remains the founding father of the country. Once you acknowledge this truism, you need to move on to another, in this case the role of the Mujibnagar government during the War of Liberation.

Our young have never had the

opportunity, not even during the two phases of Awami League government, to know that the government led by Prime Minister Tajuddin Ahmed rests on a high pedestal of history not merely because it was the very first government shaped and run by Bengalis but also because of the intellectual brilliance and pragmatism it brought into its conduct of the independence movement. When you do not enlighten the young about Tajuddin Ahmed and his wartime associates, you run a long knife of premeditated falsehood through the truth.

There is then the matter of the roles other political individuals have played in guiding Bengalis down the road to freedom. Despite his periodic bouts of adventurism, Moulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani has remained a powerful, poignant symbol of Bengali protest. He deserves a special place in the pantheon of national leaders.

But when, in the interest of historical balance, it is suggested that men like Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy and Sher-e-Bangla A.K. Fazlul Huq be given pride of place in the Bengali hall of fame, you tend to get perturbed.

Suhrawardy and Huq were both brilliant, if somewhat controversial (in the case of the former) and erratic (in the case of the latter) men. Their politics was focused on the All India Muslim League's program of Muslim nationalism. Even in the post-partition years, for all their leadership of such forces as the United Front, Suhrawardy and Huq continued to link their role in politics to their acceptance of the Pakistani ideology.

To suggest, therefore, that these formidable individuals need to be given places as dreamers of a free Bangladesh would be tantamount

to undermining their original politics, as well as sowing confusion in the minds of Bengalis who remember only too well the course that the movements for autonomy and independence took between the 1960s and early 1970s. It would be stretching the truth, with all its uncomfortable ramifications.

Political partisanship does not create history. It subverts it. Pundits can analyse historical happenings in their diverse ways, but they do not ever try turning established facts on their heads. The most grievous of blows for us has been the role a handful of individuals have regularly arrogated to themselves every time a need to deal with history has arisen.

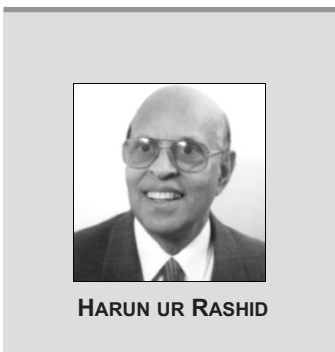
General Zia's attempt to supplant Bengali nationalism with "Bangladeshi nationalism" has done incalculable damage to national unity. General Ershad's ugly move to strip away at secularism pushed us into a deep pit.

It is these truths, and others, that need to enter the books, and the minds of the young. And do not forget that these young, and their children to come ages hence, must learn too about the foreign soldiers who pillaged and killed in their country, of their local collaborators who assisted in the murder of brave Bengali men and in the humiliation of helpless yet courageous Bengali women.

If it is history we are looking for, we will search far and wide until we have retrieved it for ourselves and our children. We will not go half way. And our minds will not be influenced by thoughts of a need for balance. Compromise is alien to history.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Current Affairs, The Daily Star.

After New Delhi



HARUN UR RASHID

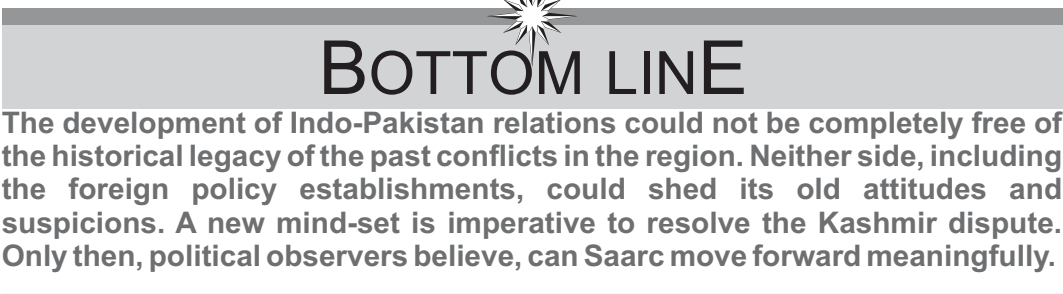
THE just-concluded New Delhi summit (April 3-4) appears to have injected a new dynamism in Saarc. This is evident from the speeches made by all the eight leaders of Saarc. One golden thread seems to have run through all the speeches, that they have to do something to get Saarc moving ahead, and not remain stagnant as before. This is good news.

In the past, Saarc had become too much of a talking (and arguing) shop and too little of a practical doer. Some say that if the money extravagantly spent for holding the past thirteen summits had been targeted for development, it would have had a great impact on the poor.

The tradition of "sitting, meeting and eating" of Saarc leaders appears to have been abandoned in New Delhi. For example, two agreements -- one on forming a Saarc Food Bank, and the other on setting up a South Asian University in India -- were signed in the presence of the Saarc leaders.

New member and observers

The New Delhi summit was the first in which Afghanistan participated



as a full member. China, Japan, US, European Union and South Korea attended as associated observers to Saarc. Iran has been invited to be an associated observer at the next summit.

The attendance of observers demonstrates that Saarc is being taken seriously as a regional forum by development partners. It is a region of 1.4 billion people, with large natural resources. It connects the Middle East and South East Asia. The Indian Ocean that stretches from the sands of Egypt to the Straits of Malacca stands at the centre of South Asia.

Poverty, weak state institutions and internal disturbances pose a threat to security and democracy. They are also the sources of many of the world's problems, from civil wars to drugs and terrorism. No doubt peace, progress and stability of this region are of strategic importance to development partners, and they want to help, assist, and cooperate in the march of economic and social development of the region.

New Delhi declaration

The 30-point New Delhi declaration dealt with, among others, inter-regional connectivity, multi-modal transport system, millennium development goals, Saarc

Development Fund, energy development, terrorism, Safta, environment and global climate change, multilateral trading system, women's empowerment, and the Saarc Food Bank.

The New-Delhi Declaration is a forward-looking document, and progress on each item needs commitment and cooperation from all states. The items mentioned in the declaration are quite relevant for achieving peace and progress.

Unilateral India breakthrough

India's long-standing policy of strict reciprocity seems to have been put aside this time, and the "Gujral doctrine" has been adopted with respect to its neighbours. India's former prime minister in his book titled A Foreign Policy of India (1998) writes: "The Gujral doctrine, if I may call it so, states that first, with neighbours like Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal and Sri Lanka, we do not ask reciprocity but give what we can in good faith."

On April 3, in an address to the Saarc summit, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh unilaterally announced concessions to South Asian neighbours, without reciprocity. They are as follows:

"As an immediate step, India is announcing a unilateral liberaliza-

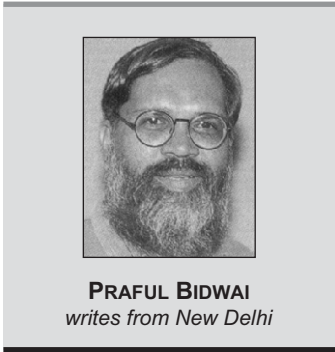
tion of visas for students, teachers, professors, journalists and patients from Saarc countries ... India is ready to accept asymmetrical responsibilities, opening her markets to her South Asian neighbours without insisting on reciprocity. I am happy to announce today that we will allow duty-free access to India, before the end of this year, to our South Asian neighbours who are least developed countries, and further reduce the sensitive list in respect of these countries."

The least developed countries in South Asia include Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, and Nepal. Already it has been reported that a list of goods is being sent from Bangladesh to India for obtaining this facility.

India has shown to its neighbours that it is willing to provide concessions without reciprocity. This is appropriate for India, being the largest country and endowed with huge natural and human resources.

For example, India is the seventh largest exporter of food grains in the world. The surging economy is complemented by a stock market surge that saw index values go up to a third, and by 200% since 2001, low external debt and large foreign exchange reserves (more than \$100 billion).

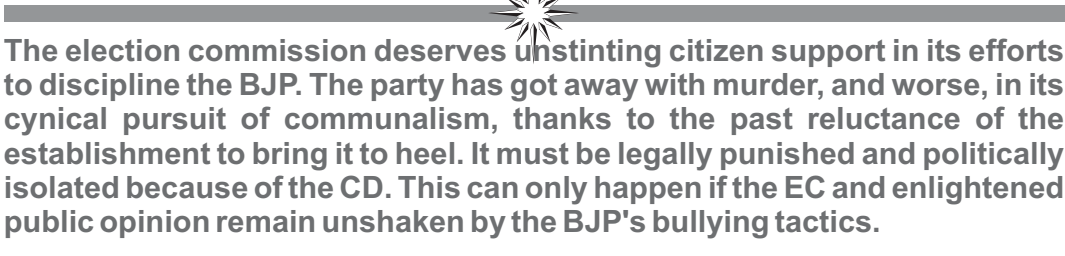
BJP plumbs the lower depths



PRAFUL BIDWAI
writes from New Delhi

THE Bharatiya Janata Party has resorted to foul communal means to win votes by producing a virulently anti-Muslim compact disc. The CD was expressly commissioned for the Uttar Pradesh elections, and released with fanfare by top leaders Lalji Tandon and Kesri Nath Tripathi.

So obnoxious was the CD that the BJP hastily "withdrew" it. It now pretends that it knew nothing about it. Yet, faced with a First Information Report filed by the Election Commission, party president Rajnath Singh melodramatically



courted arrest. BJP veterans Atal Behari Vajpayee and Lal Krishna Advani colluded with this rustic and crude tactic.

The BJP has also published lurid advertisements in Hindi newspapers. Emblazoned with the lotus symbol, these accuse the BJP's opponents of shielding terrorists, opposing Saraswati Vandana and appealing Muslims. They show a neighbourhood full of Islamic flags, with a slogan: "kyu inka irada pak hai?" (Is their intention pure?). Pak is shorthand for Pakistan.

The BJP's stand on the CD is egregiously contradictory. Its wants to dissociate itself from it. But it also behaves as if it owned the CD and is being wrongly punished for it.

Duplicity comes naturally to the BJP and is integral to its politics. After the razing of the Babri mosque, Mr Advani said that December 6 was "the saddest day" of his life. But he has always defended the ideology that led to the demolition.

Gujarat-2002 made Mr Vajpayee "hang his head in shame." But within days, he was blaming Muslims for the pogrom. The BJP seamlessly vacillates between expressions of shame and pride for the same act! However, BJP leaders can't pretend that they weren't consulted during the CD's production. According to the Bulandshahr-based Fakira Films, which produced it, they were consulted "at

every stage..."

"Withdrawing" the CD doesn't mean much. Its copies are in unrestricted circulation. Excerpts have been aired on television. The CD's potential to vitiate the election process remains unmitigated.

The EC is right to treat the CD's use as an unfair electoral practice under the model code of conduct and sections of the Indian Penal Code and Representation of the People Act which pertain to "inflammatory material capable of creating enmity/hatred..." The CD pours hatred upon Muslims as "traitors." It is designed to provoke a strong reaction from Muslims -- and a Hindu backlash.

It says Muslims kidnap and

forcibly marry and convert Hindu women; deceitfully and illegally kill cows; and run "anti-national" madrasas. The message is: "(If) you don't vote for the BJP, disaster will strike this country... The BJP (alone) thinks about (India)... All other parties are agents of the Muslims."

The CD contains false and malicious allegations: e.g. about Mr Mulayam Singh Yadav having organised iftar parties on the ghats of the Ganga. Its purpose is unmistakable: arouse hatred, and turn it into votes. The BJP routinely distributes obnoxious propaganda. During its national executive meeting last December, it distributed a similar CD as part of its official press kit.

In content, the December CD is no different from the present one. The BJP's intent of using religious identities as political instruments is well established. It mobilises votes through hatred, often wrapped in "nationalist" attire.

Communal practices should be altogether banished from India's public discourse. Unfortunately,

they aren't effectively banned. Hate-speech and hate-acts directed at religious-ethnic minorities go unpunished.

A sordid example of concessions to majoritarianism is the questioning of the patriotic credentials of the minorities, especially when terrorist incidents take place. But India does have an electoral law developed under an independent, assertive election commission, which explicitly prohibits the use of inflammatory means -- on pain of disqualification of candidates.

Such disqualifications have indeed taken place -- as in some Shiv Sena leader's case. But disqualification isn't enough to deter communalists. India needs an explicit code of conduct, and solemn commitments by political leaders that they won't use innuendo, vulgar slang, or indirect references to particular communities while canvassing electoral support.

The present case offers an opportunity for such reform. The election commission must curiously consider de-recognition the BJP as a political party if its FIR charges

are established.

The EC must supplement this by extracting from BJP leaders serious pledges that they won't use religion as "a loyalty test." Won't exploit the Ayodhya temple for electoral gains, nor depict the Babri mosque's razing in triumphant colours, as the present CD does. Should the BJP violate these, it must be automatically de-recognised.

Such reform is imperative. Secularism is not an option in India. It's a categorical imperative. It's part of the basic structure of the Constitution, and a precondition for India's survival as a pluralist, vibrant democracy, which respects minority rights.

As two supreme court judges put it in the trend-setting (Bommai) case (1994), the Constitution requires not just the state, but "political parties as well," to be secular in "thought and action."

The BJP -- with the Shiv Sena -- stands apart from all other parties in seeking to transform India into a Hindu-majoritarian entity. Like the Jana Sangh, the BJP has routinely incited communal passions to win

votes. It must be prevented from doing so.

The BJP must be watched closely in UP, where it is desperate to prevent a bad rout. According to two major opinion polls, the BJP and its allies are likely to do much worse in these elections than they did in 2002.

The BJP's upper-caste support-base in UP has shrunk from 72 to 50 percent. Extremist parties like the BJP act waywardly when faced with defeat. They must not be allowed to damage India's secular fabric and democratic political framework.

The election commission deserves unstinting citizen support in its efforts to discipline the BJP. The party has got away with murder, and worse, in its cynical pursuit of communalism, thanks to the past reluctance of the establishment to bring it to heel.

It must be legally punished and politically isolated because of the CD. This can only happen if the EC and enlightened public opinion remain unshaken by the BJP's bullying tactics.

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.