

Missing artefacts

The adviser's assurance amounts to nothing

HERE is an element of the bizarre mixed with the ridiculous in the case of the missing artefacts that were bound for France. It cannot but raise our eyebrows to find that objects of great historical value were stolen from what should have been flawless security arrangements and from our very doorstep, and not in any foreign land. Given that the government's plan to send these items for display at a Paris museum had raised concerns about their safety from a section in the country, more caution should have been taken to say the least, to ensure the protection of these very valuable relics of our history and culture.

There are several things related to this case that boggle our mind. Firstly, given the security arrangement that is laid on for such things, it is most likely an inside job, by people who had, or could get, easy access to the valuable articles. Secondly, if it was not an inside job then one can say that at every step, the security measures that were supposed to have been in place were missing, either as a deliberate act or due to the complete lack of efficiency of whoever that were in charge of the security of the artefacts. We find it hard to accept this.

The reality is that relics of our cultural heritage have been always under threat from the clandestine dealers. There is indeed a very well organised gang engaged in smuggling these things out of the country. And only the other day there was a report of two such antique pieces being recovered at the Indo-Nepal border. The recent heist is a restatement of the utter lack of concern for the security of valuable historical objects on the part of the concerned agencies.

We ask whether there shouldn't have been very special arrangements in view of the fact that, one, the flight was delayed and, two, that the large containers had to be unwrapped since they could not be put through the scanning machine, to verify the contents.

The adviser responsible had "committed to bring back the items safely." Now two pieces have been stolen at the very start. The adviser's assurance gave us confidence in the safe return of the artefacts. Now that his promise has turned to mean practically nothing, we think he should take full responsibility for this betrayal of our trust.

Needless to say, the government must get to the bottom of the issue, since it has brought no small amount of shame to us by exposing an utter lack of efficiency of the concerned agencies to ensure the safe dispatch of this special and unique cargo.

Merry Christmas

Jesus spread the message of love and compassion

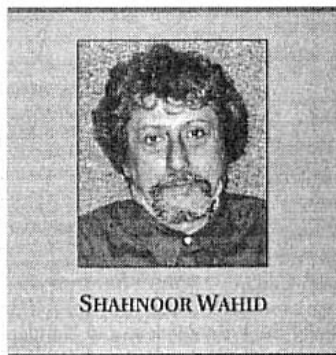
A brilliant star in the sky over Bethlehem more than two thousand years ago pointed to the birth of Jesus Christ and hinted at the colossal impact he would have on the fate of mankind. For Jesus brought to men and women all across the globe, at a time when imperial Rome was in decline, the message that faith in God was all, that morality was the essence of the creed that ultimately mattered. Like every other prophet before him, he was ridiculed by men of lesser intelligence and little wisdom. Persecuted in all forms and in all manner, Jesus Christ nevertheless persisted in spreading the message that God loved all His creations, that indeed he, Jesus, was the chosen one to disseminate His message to all men and women.

Jesus spoke of tolerance, of love spreading out and suffusing the world with its glow and thereby putting to flight every element of negativism that militates against the fundamental good which defined Creation. If you are hit on one cheek, said he, turn the other cheek to the one who has assaulted you. It was through such a demonstration of non-violence that the founder of Christianity sought to leave his imprint on the human consciousness. And yet a prophet is not honoured in his own land. And treacherous beings lurk within the tent. Judas betrayed Jesus. And Jesus' enemies, in a macabre demonstration of worldly arrogance, put an end to his life on the cross. But God's power, proving as always a whole lot more substantive and purposeful than man's shallow notions of himself, raised Jesus from the dead. The message of Jesus' love was thenceforth to move on, inexorably, eventually encompassing diverse regions of the globe.

It is a message of the compassion and the love of God, of His Creation, that Jesus instilled into the human psyche in the times when he walked the earth. It was through his suffering, through dying young at the hands of his enemies that he held up the true glory of the Almighty. On Christmas Day, it is Jesus' message of love for all, compassion for those who have nothing and remembrance of a higher power that watches over all mankind that the devotees observe today.

To the followers of the Christian faith, here in Bangladesh and across the world, we say 'Merry Christmas.'

Ghughu bird, politics and the powerfool



SHAHNOOR WAHID

IN Bangla there is a proverb: *Ghughu Dekhechho, Faad Dekhoni*, which means "you may have seen a ghughu bird, but you have not seen the trap laid for it." In a nutshell, it imparts the warning, look or do carefully before you do something foolish. The latest round of fabricating ghughu parable has been started by the electricity godfathers who reside behind barbed wire in Ashuganj.

When electricity snapped at the national power grid on December 15, the bagha, bagha engineers lost no time in carrying out their investigation and reaching the conclusion. They found the carcass of a ghughu bird in the vicinity and like Hercule Poirot exclaimed: "Voilà! There is the culprit! Now, show it to the world and then go home to take a nap." Tweet, tweet, boom!

Dear me! If it is true then it

SENSE & INSENSIBILITY

It is needless to mention that the electricity sector needs complete overhauling, like the bad engine of a car. But what we are doing at the moment is patchwork, as and when needed, on an ad-hoc basis, like they do in Dholaikhal. But we need a long-term plan for improving the entire electricity sector so that it becomes efficient enough to meet the need of the future consumers. We cannot be oblivious of the fact that uninterrupted electricity is the prerequisite for achieving the development targets.

means that our national power grid and those tiger, tiger engineers are completely at the mercy of little birds! Incredible? Not so. Everything is possible in Golden Bengal my dear readers. Everything is possible indeed. Doesn't the comical story remind you of those little birds in Hanna & Barbara cartoons that go about inflicting havoc on their adversaries with their tiny naughtiness? Long live our professional responsibility. Long live our sense of propriety.

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the need of the future consumers. We cannot be oblivious of the fact that uninterrupted electricity is the prerequisite for achieving the development targets.

...of politicians after the 1/11 Sidr

Politicians looked devastated after the Sidr of their own creation struck them on January 11. The cyclone, unexpected as it was, uprooted their homes, flats, villas, pillows (filled with currency notes), and more importantly their cozy little dens of corruption. They were basking in the sun thinking they were safe in their well-fortified den of corruption against any political storm. But, by Jove, they were not prepared for any Sidr!

Today, after about a year and after playing many sets of badminton in the prison compounds they remain as tricky, as cocky and as one-eyed as before. They have

seriously begun to believe that people's collective memory has sufficiently waned by now so they would not talk about their corruption anymore. Hence, Sleepy Salwar and Hannas and Mannas are now trying to divert public attention from the core issue and hooting in unison for election.

Bravo, brothers, bravo. You have never condemned or expelled a single corrupt person from the party, you have never publicly apologised for the misrule, but you are prompt enough to ask for elections! What good the election would do if unworthy and corrupt to the marrow people come to power once again? Have you had your character washed in the waters of River Jordan? Have you been pardoned by the people? No. Never. The corrupt lot remains as loathed today as they were yesterday. It is only because of ten percent of the people like you that ninety percent of the people have

to go around with the seal of "corrupt country" on their backs.

...of the powerfools in history

We know absolute power corrupts absolutely. But absolute power also turns some people into "powerfools," as they invariably forget the past and fail to perceive the future in their blind surge ahead in total darkness, like Don Quixote. History is replete with the sad tales of such "powerfools," and we have selected the life of Goebbels to throw some light on the subject.

Paul Joseph Goebbels was a German politician and Minister for Public Enlightenment and Propaganda during the National Socialist regime from 1933 to 1945. He was one of Adolf Hitler's closest associates and most devout followers.

Goebbels came into contact with the Nazi Party in 1923 during the French occupation of the Ruhr and became a member in 1924. By 1928 he had risen in the party ranks to become one of its most prominent members.

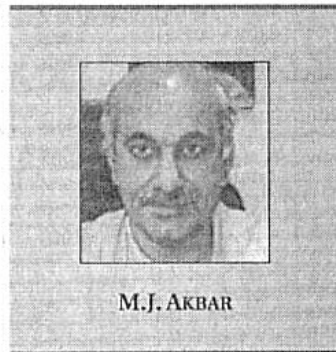
After the Nazis seized power in 1933, he was appointed propaganda minister. Following his appointment, his attacks on German Jews became ever fiercer, and culminated in the Kristallnacht in 1938, the first open and unrestrained pogrom

unleashed by the Nazis. During the Second World War, he increased his power and influence through shifting alliances with other Nazi leaders. By late 1943, the war had turned into a disaster for the Axis powers, but this only spurred Goebbels to intensify the propaganda by urging the Germans to accept the idea of total war and mobilisation. Goebbels remained with Hitler in Berlin to the very end, and following the Führer's suicide he was the second person to serve as the Third Reich's Chancellor -- albeit for one day. In his final hours Goebbels allowed his wife, Magda, to kill their six young children. Shortly after, Goebbels and his wife both committed suicide.

Even in modern times we see tiny, hitherto nondescript men turning into unstoppable megalomaniacs, or "powerfools," when given absolute power. As long as they are in power they forget their antecedents and go about wielding power like crazy. They forget they will have to go and live amongst the people one day when they will be stripped of their power. Once done, suddenly they will look even tinier than before. And mind you, when they fall, they take the whole bunch along with them. But alas! Who cares!

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Big Chiefs



M.J. AKBAR

THE results of the Gujarat elections appear on December 23, and politics resumes in Delhi on the 24th. Judging by the tension on the faces of politicians, no one really believes either the polls or the exit polls. Even the bookies, who were certain the BJP would get a majority, began to cover their bets just before results were due. The miracle of a genuine election is the secrecy of public opinion. A friend who met Narendra Modi after the last ballot had been cast found him a bit withdrawn, a little less than his ebullient sarcastic self. If Modi cannot be sure of what is lying in those electronic machines, you can bet that no one else is either.

Two points need to be flagged, before we are all exposed as wearing blinkers instead of spectacles. The Congress has everything to gain and little to lose in Gujarat. Results are measured in the balance of expectations. No one expects the Congress to win, so if it does pull off a surprise the political momentum will shift in its favour. It is difficult to say how

long this momentum will last. In 2004, the BJP had convinced itself that three sweeping victories in the states would add up to a majority at the Centre. It is still kicking itself for that mistake.

The BJP has everything to lose in Gujarat, and not much to gain. In cold terms, another BJP victory will be a fairly impressive achievement. We think of incumbency only in terms of Narendra Modi, but the Congress has been out of power in Gujarat for nearly 18 years. Modi replaced a BJP chief minister, Keshubhai Patel, only because the incumbency factor was beginning to wear out the party already. But since hyper-expectations have been established around Modi, a defeat will destabilise the BJP while a victory will be forgotten, or attributed to poison-politics.

The second point is about result comparisons. The normal tendency in all statistical analyses is to compare present Assembly results with those of five years ago, in the last Assembly polls. What is missed is the general election

BYLINE

There is very little that is general in a general election now. The results in Delhi are becoming a reflection of the popularity of state governments, driven by regional issues. As the federal instincts of India sharpen, the country is being run by chief ministers, rather than a prime minister. It is their performance that holds the key to which alliance will get how many seats. The BJP's last hope in 2004 disappeared when the Congress won as many as 12 seats in Gujarat. It is the chief ministers who will deliver the next prime minister. They are the Big Chiefs of Indian politics.

results of 2004. The Congress won in 92 Assembly segments in the 2004 polls. In other words, it won a slim majority in Gujarat, which has 180 seats. For Modi to win, he would have to reverse a natural slide that became all too evident in 2004. The Congress, on the other hand, needs to improve its tally by only three Assembly seats in three years to emerge as an undisputed champion. Modi will have to get an improbable 110 seats or more to achieve a similar triumph.

Those who think that the Gujarat election results will determine the date of the next general elections miss the point. The government is not being brought down by the BJP. The government is in danger because its support from the Left has wobbled. The Congress and the Left are not in conflict over Modi. Their dispute is over the nuclear deal and the strategic relationship with the United States. When the applause dies down after the Gujarat electoral curtain goes up, the debate on the future of the UPA government will return to the deal. The

Gujarat elections gave the Congress a little pause for breath, but that is over.

Within the next fortnight or month, the Congress will have to indicate clearly whether it is going ahead with the nuclear deal or not. That is the decision that will determine the date of the next general elections. If the Congress does well in Gujarat it might be encouraged to test the national waters, but it will be the wrong reason for a decision that must be based on other considerations. The more important question is: if the Congress cannot win, will it regroup within the status quo, or will it still chase the nuclear deal? Certainly, the party needs a bit of time now to throw out seeds to its core supporters. We are bound to hear talk of a development plan for minorities, for instance; and if there is opportunity for a budget to be placed before Parliament, we can be certain that it will reek of generosity rather than economic reform. This is politics as usual. But there is also a view that too much has been invested in the

nuclear deal to let it stagnate in the corner, neither fish nor fowl. This group also believes that the Congress can mobilise a vote on electricity, and turn the nuclear deal into a national mantra for an energy-starved country.

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Aseasonal tallpiece: Since British columnists (unlike Americans or Indians) love sending up VIPs, readers and themselves, one is never too certain whether what they say is a fact, an assertion, or a tease. Rod Liddle wrote in the December 16 issue of the Sunday Times of London that he had met a certain Syaikh (sic; normal people would spell this Shaikh) Muhammad bin Shalih al-Uthaymeen, who had been advising British Muslims that to say "Merry Christmas" was forbidden. Assuming that the name is correct and the item is authentic, I have news for this Syaikh.

Islam and Christianity, both Abrahamic faiths, of course have many differences, but there is one

important element of doctrine in common. Islam, too, believes in the virgin birth. Islam does not accept that Jesus died on the cross, and obviously cannot accept Jesus as the last prophet; but the Quran says repeatedly that Mary was a virgin when she gave birth to Jesus. The Quran mentions Mary (Maryam) more times than the New Testament does: 34 to 19. There are references to Jesus (Isa) in 93 verses spread across 15 suras (chapters). Verse 91 of sura 21 is one of the references to the virgin birth: "And (remember) her who guarded her chastity: We breathed into her of Our Spirit, and We made her and her son a sign for all peoples." Verse 45 of sura 3 says: "Behold! The angels said, 'O Mary! Allah giveth thee glad tidings of a Word from Him: his name will be Christ Jesus. The son of Mary, held in honour in this world and the Hereafter, and of the company of those nearest to Allah'."

The question arose: if Jesus was not born of a man (he is constantly called son of Mary) then it gave credence to the Christian belief that he was son of God. The Quran gave him the status of Adam, who was born of neither man nor woman and was yet not considered divine.

Muslims may not accept the Biblical version of the death of Jesus, but his birth is an essential component of Islamic history. So forget about that silly Syaikh with a silly spelling -- and Merry Christmas!

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ODA decline marks Japan's dwindling influence

CLOSEUP JAPAN

Hence, any drastic decline in that allocation could erode that unquestionable trust in Japan at a time when the emerging Asian giant China is aggressively pursuing the policy of winning over support of the developing world by extended her helping hand in a generous way.

MONZURUL HUQ

THERE was a time not long ago when Japanese investors were roving restlessly around the world with pockets full of money, and many in Japan believed that the inflated purse the country was holding would allow them to get hold of everything they desired. While corporate Japan was busy buying all it could, ranging from landmark buildings to movie distribution companies, top executives of many Japanese companies were pondering upon art and culture with the hope of getting hold of everything they thought rare and valuable. The result was a skyrocketing of price in art auctions being held regularly in major cities around the world.

The government, too, was not sitting idle. The bubble in the country's economy generated enough

money in the hands of the Japanese government, and policy-makers in Tokyo came to the conclusion that the best way for Japan to expand her diplomatic influence was to use part of that cash to compensate for what the country could not gain or get otherwise. So, when Japan was virtually rebuked by the US administration for her failure to participate in Papa Bush's grand coalition against the rag-tag army of Saddam Hussein, which was already exhausted fighting a futile eight-year war against Iran, the Japanese government didn't waste time in signing and handing over a cheque worth \$13 billion for the war effort.

It was also a time when Japan's disbursements figures for Official Development Assistance (ODA) climbed further and further with the passage of every consecutive year, bypassing by far that of the United States, and, by the mid-

1990s, reaching an all time peak in the history of ODA. It was a time when policy-makers in Japan were seriously thinking about the possibility of purchasing dreams with the excess money, never having the slightest idea that the car they were driving was about to run short of gasoline, compelling them to walk the rest of the journey to reach the destination as no gas station was in sight anywhere nearby. And when the fall came, it looked like a sudden awakening of a nation that was forced to adjust to the reality of life after a long night of sound sleep full of fairy dreams. With the end also came the lost decade, the impact of which is yet to be overcome by Japan.

It is common understanding that when money runs short generosity takes a back seat. With the bursting of the bubble economy, Japan, for the first time in years,

was in a situation where people were compelled to feel that money was really running short. The first victims of such a situation were obviously the art galleries -- that had mushroomed during the bubble to convert each and every super millionaire into connoisseurs of the world of art and getting hold of a part of their millions -- which started shutting their doors one after another; the expensive drinking houses and clubs that catered for exhausted executives and company officials tired of running after money all the time suddenly turned their glittering lights off and plunged into darkness; even not-so-expensive places of evening entertainment found it difficult to keep their doors open as people suddenly turned cautious and began showing extreme restraint in their daily expenditure.

A thick cloud of deflation covered Japan as consumer price index started to show continuous decline and retailers were forced to cut prices of everything to attract cautious consumers. Even that tactic didn't work out well, and bankruptcy jumped to a record high level. The gap was filled-up by the mushrooming of the so-called "Hyaku-en," or 100-yen shops, that sold everything from toothpicks to

teapots at a flat rate of 100 yen. The gold-eaters of the glittering bubble era suddenly found themselves standing in a barren land and pondering upon what really went wrong. With that came the period of austerity when the country was compelled to think that unless it changed its pattern of behaviour associated with the bubble, further slip would simply be unavoidable. Everywhere, there was a ringing call to downsize and downgrade expenses, and the government too was not an exception.

That was also the time Japan started to decrease her ODA budget, and ever since, for nine consecutive years, the country's allocation for helping the developing world has been following a declining trend. The ministry of finance has just announced that it was planning to cut ODA spending by 4 percent in the next fiscal year that starts in April 2008. Budgetary negotiations between the finance and foreign ministries over ODA allocation are heading towards the final stage, and it's unlikely that a last minute change of decision would put the plan on hold. A 4 percent drop in ODA budget would bring the total allocation to around \$ 6.2 billion, a far cry from the period when the amount reached

almost \$15 billion.

For more than 50 years, ODA has been an important means of Japan's international contribution. Tokyo's generous assistance also helped the country to become an important player in global politics, as many developing countries were willing to extend support to various initiatives being taken by Japan to promote peace and development in the international community. Though Japan has been campaigning rather unsuccessfully until now to become a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, the regional Asian block did not hesitate to select the country as its non-permanent representative to the council for a record number of times.

It is mainly because the countries of the Asia-Pacific region consider Japan to be in the best position to serve their common interest, and this has become possible because of Japan's firm commitment to help the neighbouring regions move forward to a desired path of economic development, and assisting them in all possible ways to reach that goal. Hence, ODA can be considered as one of the basic pillars on which Japan's international image is getting a strong footing. Hence, any

drastic decline in that allocation could erode that unquestionable trust in Japan at a time when the emerging Asian giant China is aggressively pursuing the policy of winning over support of the developing world by extended her helping hand in a generous way.

A number of recent studies suggest that Japan, once the number 1 provider of ODA, will likely to drop to sixth place in 2010 if the recent trend of ODA allocations remains unchanged. The Development Assistance Committee (DAC) at the Organisation for Economic Cooperation for Development (OECD) in its forecast ranked Japan sixth in ODA spending by 2010, behind the United States, Germany, Britain, France and Italy. The DAC made the estimate by reviewing the past ODA figures, including their numerical targets for increased spending and other statistics for each of the 22 members. According to the estimate, Japan's ODA is expected to stand at \$10.09 billion in 2010, down by \$1.1 billion from 2006. Japan's ratio of ODA to gross domestic products (GDP) could also decrease to 0.21 percent in 2010, from 0.25 percent in 2006. This would be a far cry from reaching an important target of the

Millennium Development Goals, under which the donor countries are obliged to increase their ODA allocations to 0.7 percent of GDP by the year 2015.

So, something must be going wrong with the ODA matters in Japan. The country is claiming to have come out of the worst recession it faced during the post World War II period. This has been achieved through various measures of austerity and cost cutting initiatives taken by both the government and the private sector. As we have already seen, ODA was also not immune to that downsizing trend. But once economic health has been restored, further cut in ODA budget probably does not fit in to the image of Japan, that owes much of its high stake in international diplomacy due to a generous ODA policy. Or has Japan taken it for granted that a dwindling influence is a fate accomplished, and it cannot be reversed by increasing ODA budget? It is up to the policy makers of Japan to focus upon this crucial issue and provide an answer to the enthusiastic onlookers both within and outside the country.

Monzurul Huq writes from Japan.