

## The pollution in our rivers

**Immediate action is a must**

OUR rivers are in a bad state, have been for a long time. That is not surprising, seeing that we have been concerned about the situation for years. What now appears to give it a new twist is the result of a survey carried out on some of the rivers, 25 in total. Predictably, the quality of the water in the rivers has dwindled to a precarious state. Worse is the knowledge that some of these rivers may actually have reached a point where they are no longer capable of nurturing or supporting aquatic life forms in them. The pollution in the Buriganga, Turag and Norai -- and these flow by the nation's capital -- has grown to an extent where no life forms can survive in their waters. That is the stark finding by a group of researchers after a three-year survey of the 25 rivers in question. Obviously, the oxygen levels in the Buriganga and in parts of the Turag and Norai have declined to a dangerous level. Where 4 to 6 levels of oxygen are required for local fish species to survive, the oxygen level in these rivers has now declined precipitously to less than one per microgram.

The water resources department of the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology has surely done a commendable job of acquainting us with the issues involved. The 25 rivers surveyed all are at risk of losing their life forms. Of course, the Buriganga, Balu, Turag and Sitalakha are the worst affected rivers, but the problems afflicting them could also, and soon, come to characterise other rivers. And that is where the question of dealing with the problem comes in. A major reason behind the pollution of the rivers has been the dumping of effluents and myriad industrial waste by factories situated on the banks or nearby. That has been a worry for years together, with periodic calls for action on the part of those responsible for such conditions going unheeded. Add to that the careless dumping of waste matter by the municipal authorities. These lead to faecal contamination and other difficulties for the rivers. A bleak picture is thus before us: if meaningful and firm action is not taken now to roll back the damage already done, it may be too late to save these rivers. Moreover, with large numbers of people still using the waters of these rivers for drinking and washing purposes, there is a clear and present danger to public health.

An immediate and well thought-out action plan involving the government, industrial units and environment experts is today called for. Surveys and studies must now lead to concrete action. Rivers are a lifeline to a society. Inaction on our polluted rivers will thus be seen as a clear invitation to suicide. Briefly, creating awareness of the danger at the mass level must now be the priority.

## Pak-Afghan tension

**Joint efforts needed to address the problem**

EVIDENTLY it is President Karzai's frustration that has prompted him to threaten retaliatory operation across the border into Pakistan. And one cannot but sympathise with him. His government's writ runs in a very small part of Afghanistan. Efforts of International Security Assistance Force and Afghan forces to rein in the insurgents are being constantly frustrated by the Taliban whose capacity to keep the US forces and its allies in Afghanistan on the defensive have not been dented the least bit.

However, the very idea of hot pursuit across international borders by government troops of one country, against non-state actors in another, on the plea of self-defense is repugnant to international law and thus an unacceptable proposition. This will not only set dangerous precedent it will also negate the norms of interstate relations.

One must at the same time acknowledge the serious security problem that Afghanistan is facing. It has to contend with the indigenous militants that are conducting a very well organised insurgency, while at the same time deal with those that slip across the border in support of the Afghan Taliban.

Afghanistan and Pakistan must realise that they are both the victims of the same malady that should be combated not by rhetoric but by coalescing their efforts and projecting a common front against the common threat. There is very little doubt about Pakistan's ability to rein in the militants on their side -- and the spurt of activity that has seen a 50 percent increase in militant activity in Afghanistan over the last one year will not come down unless the cause for the same is addressed -- which happens to be the presence of foreign troops in Afghanistan.

Both the countries must also recognize the fact that an unstable border and an abrasive relationship between them will be used as a justification for perpetuating the presence of foreign troops in Afghanistan -- that will in turn give the militants the excuse to continue their actions inside the country -- a vicious cycle this will be, that the region cannot endure. And the spillover is inevitable.

Security of Afghanistan should be everyone's concern, most of all its immediate neighbours. That can come about through joint efforts of the Afghan and Pakistan governments. Reportedly, Pakistan's new civilian leaders acknowledge the imperative of a fresh approach to stop attacks on both sides of the border -- an approach which relies on dialogue as well as force. But that should be in close approximation of Afghan security needs to lead success to the new strategy.

# For the leaders, by the leaders, of the leaders



SHAHNOOR WAHID

## SENSE & INSENSIBILITY

**In this country, people have been fighting for democracy introduced by the West (just as cleverly as they had introduced tea and tobacco), and then made us dependent on it. See, now we cannot do without either of the two! Well, since then numerous people gave life for it while numerous more enjoyed whatever they got from democracy -- name, fame, infamy, notoriety, money (black), foreign trips, foreign health trips, foreign apartments, government property, and name plaques on every bridge. See, that is why democracy is now defined, "for the leaders and by the leaders."**

TODAY, let us deliberate on "democracy," the mysterious word, being used by all sorts of "minority" people in the world to perpetuate their rule over the "majority" with... mere promises. But before getting involved in the fracas let us make some changes in the definition of democracy that was articulated by Abraham Lincoln. Democracy is no more "for the people, of the people or by the people." Today, "people" are mere pawns in chess and I am sure you will not differ with me. So, let us say: "Democracy -- for the leaders, by the leaders, of the leaders."

Going back to promises. You see, promises grow plentifully in this fertile land of ours, like those succulent jackfruits, which the "leaders" dish out by the dozens from a podium at a safe distance.

The hungry people, the majority, come to the meetings to listen to those promises and then go back on the same trail their hungry ancestors took. And leaders drive away in expensive vehicles to another meeting.

Democracy has this fascinating thing about it that makes it so easy for the leaders to lie, cheat, corrupt, dupe, trick, hoodwink, and finally bring their corrupt kinds out of jails. We are stuck with it, and it seems like we are preordained to go to our graves ever wondering what good it had ever done for us when we were alive. It did not help us in doing well in our studies (or bad), it did not help us in getting a scholarship, it did not help us in getting a good job, it did not help us either in dying peacefully in our bed.

In this country, people have been fighting for democracy introduced by the West (just as cleverly as they had introduced tea and tobacco), and then made us dependent on it. See, now we cannot do without either of the two! Well, since then numerous people gave life for it while numerous more enjoyed whatever they got from democracy -- name, fame, infamy, notoriety, money (black), foreign trips, foreign health trips, foreign apartments, government property, and name plaques on every bridge. See, that is why democracy is now defined, "for the leaders and by the leaders."

Well that was our take on democracy, as we have experienced it in this country, as it has been served by our own leaders.

But what do the academics and the wise of other distant countries think about democracy? Are they as cynical, as disillusioned, as we are? Let us have a look at some of the sayings on democracy by some renowned personalities in history. To me the very best has been said by Theodore Roosevelt. He said: "Behind the ostensible government sits enthroned an invisible government owing no allegiance and acknowledging no responsibility to the people. To destroy this invisible government, to befool the unholy alliance between corrupt business and corrupt politics is the first task of the statesmanship of the day."

Dear readers, please read those lines once again and then feel that thought inside you trying to come out fashioned in words. Now you

rest a while and read the following lines said by Abbie Hoffman: "You measure democracy by the freedom it gives its dissidents, not the freedom it gives its assimilated conformists." But is it the same in this country, in our very own democracy? Do we allow the dissidents to talk? Rather, if we did, then we would not have been in the mess we are in today.

Louis D. Brandeis, a US Supreme Court judge said the following: "We can have democracy in this country, or we can have great wealth concentrated in the hands of a few, but we can't have both." Now, dear readers, do you think you have heard of such things being discussed by your friends at one of those parties?

Noam Chomsky has some bitter words to say about capitalism and democracy. Read and do your own analysis.

"Capitalism is a system in which the central institutions of society are, in principle, under autocratic control. Thus, a corporation or an industry, if we were to think of it in political terms, fascist, that is, it has tight control at the top and strict obedience has to be established at every level... Just as I'm opposed to political fascism, I am opposed to economic fascism. I think that

until the major institutions of society are under the popular control of participants and communities, it's pointless to talk about democracy."

Here are the words of Howard Zinn. I am sure many of you will wonder why he had to say whatever he said. And this is what he said: "When people refuse to obey, then democracy comes alive."

But no deliberation can be of any meaning unless ended with the words of none other than the greatest of all minds, George Bernard Shaw. His wit has lent meaning to so many of our follies, thereby immortalising both the words and the follies. He finds "democracy is a form of government that substitutes election by the incompetent many for appointment by the corrupt few."

Well, so much for democracy in the context of the world. Since Bangladesh's future hinges so badly on getting the "saviours of democracy" back to business, we can only hope their lust for wealth has subsided considerably, and now they will sit in parliament to do something for the "majority" who will give them the mandate. Will they fail this time too?

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# Food market: Fire and farsightedness



ABDUL BAYES

## BENEATH THE SURFACE

**The recent UN projection shows that the pressure that developed in the food market worldwide might wane for a while in the near future but the prevailing prices of food grains might be well above the previous ones. It is, therefore, the responsibility of both the developed and the developing countries to frame rational policies with regard to food and agriculture.**

IT'S now a well-established fact that most of the countries of the world are grappling with the crisis of three Fs: food, fuel and farming. In fact, after decades of a modicum of calm in the international market for food, the sudden volatility and its ferocity has seemingly changed the whole course. Real prices of food are still below their mid-1970s peak, but reached their highest points since then. For example, food price index calculated by FAO rose nearly 40% compared to 9% the year before, and prices in the first months of 2008 again increased drastically.

Wheat prices tripled, maize prices more than doubled, and rice prices reached unprecedented heights in March 2008. Meat and dairy products also joined the fiery foray. By and large, the food and nutrition situation of poor people in developing countries woefully worsened to ignite civil unrest in some countries.

The poor people in Bangladesh felt the pinch when high food prices hit them below the belt

over the last year or so. A typical, poor Bangladeshi household with an income of Tk.5000/month, spending half of it on food, will lose Tk.1500 due to a 50% rise in food prices. This is in addition to energy costs. A Brac-backed survey in 2008 appears to show that real income in rural areas dropped by 20-25%, and the incidence of poverty, after declining, moved upwards. Quite obviously, against this backdrop, national governments and international actors are bent on bringing the situation under control through a panoply of policies.

Joachim von Braun (DG, IFPRI) appreciates these efforts but, in addition, points to some pertinent pockets to be addressed with earnestness, effectiveness and cohesion. We can possibly draw upon some of his submissions and examine their relevance in our context.

### Factors fueling the fire

Joachim von Braun reckons that the world food situation and prices of food are driven by the new and ongoing forces shaping both the supply and the demand sides of the spectrum. For example, higher prices of energy are fueling food prices, and these two

items have growingly become interwoven.

The US response to high oil prices resulted in a massive shift of acreage from soybean, wheat and maize to ethanol production. "About 30% of US maize production will go into ethanol in 2008 rather than into world food and feed markets. High energy price have also made agricultural production more expensive by raising the cost of inputs..." Second, poor weather and speculative capital also played a role in fueling food prices. Third, panicky response from some countries in terms of export bans and import restrictions made the international market thinner, thus pushing up prices again. Such nationalistic naivety might bring short-term relief for the countries concerned, but could also recoil in the long run.

On the demand side, rapid growth of population and demand for different kinds of food, increase in purchasing power from rapid economic growth, etc., caused a parametric shift in the demand curve for food. Specially, demand for meat and dairy products are giving rise to demand for fodder, which is

being met by diverting lands from food to fodder. It can possibly be concluded that, more or less, Bangladesh was caught by the above-mentioned crises. Most importantly, high-energy prices and poor weather conditions paved the ways for the current peril.

### Short-term solutions

The author suggests that in the short-term government should expand social safety net programs. The budget for 2008-09 has rightly earmarked the areas of interventions and allocated a sizeable portion of resources for addressing the ailing poor. Special mention may be made of employment guarantee for 2 million poor people for 100 days at Tk.100/day. Extension of the safety nets is another step. Von Braun thinks that donors should also provide more money.

Second, developed countries should eliminate their biofuel subsidies, which are proven to have distorted world food markets. Subsidies on biofuels are, in fact, an implicit tax on staple foods on which the poor rely most. Third, developed countries should eliminate trade barriers to



increase access to their markets by developing countries. If these three steps are taken and implemented properly, much of the rot could be stemmed.

Joachim von Braun suggests policy actions in three areas: (a) comprehensive social protection and food nutrition initiatives to meet short and medium term needs of the poor, (b) investment in agriculture, particularly in science and technology to augment supply in the long run and (c) trade policy reforms through a revision of the developed countries' stance on domestic biofuel production.

A happy note is that the current budget addresses both (a) and (b) by providing special attention. If long-term projects could be materialised, Bangladesh could be on an even keel through a shift in the supply curve of food grains. But opening of market access by developed countries could impart a positive sum game for these types of countries.

### Facing the fire, not escaping it...

Rome was not built in a day, but could be burnt in a day. Likewise, stability in the world food market and increase in food security were achieved in decades, but are facing perils in just one year. The recent UN projection shows that the pressure that developed in the food market worldwide might wane for a while in the near future but the prevailing prices of food grains might be well above the previous ones.

It is, therefore, the responsibility of both the developed and the developing countries to frame rational policies with regard to food and agriculture. A world should be created where all people have enough food for a healthy and productive life. The fire in the forest should be extinguished -- shifting of respective shelters is of no help in the long run, if we all are not dead by that time.

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# Transition is messy, reversible, but real



PRAFUL BIDWAI  
writes from New Delhi

## THE PRAFUL BIDWAI COLUMN

**Mr. Sharif's stand corresponds to Pakistan's prevalent mood, which is against hierarchy and authoritarianism, and favours democratisation. The tenacious lawyers' movement expresses this phenomenon and has infused energy into it. This is in keeping with recent social trends: a media explosion with free, robust debate -- more vigorous and political than in India -- spread of education, and the burgeoning of self-confident urban and rural middle-income strata, which have broken some shackles of the old feudal order.**

PAKISTAN stands at a crossroad. It could either shift to wholesome democratisation, or lapse back into military-dominated half-civilian government. Long-term social trends favour democratisation. But the actual outcome will depend upon how the main actors -- President Pervez Musharraf, Pakistan People's Party (PPP) co-chair Asif Ali Zardari, and Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) chief Nawaz Sharif -- play their cards.

Secondly, the result will depend on how the United States prosecutes its war against al-Qaeda and Taliban along Pakistan's western border. India, too, could help by accelerating the peace process.

One can thus be modestly, not exuberantly, optimistic that Pakistan's toxic tryst with the "Three A's" (Army, Allah and America) will come to a much-needed end, and India-Pakistan reconciliation will become genuinely sustainable. That's the conclusion from my Pakistan trip last week, during which I met political analysts, social scientists, former diplomats and social activists.

Four months after national elections, Pakistan lacks a stable government; most of the PPP-PML(N) alliance's promises remain unfulfilled; and the PML(N) isn't about to return to the cabinet, which it quit in protest over the PPP's refusal to quickly reinstate judges dismissed by President Musharraf.

The two parties are drifting apart. This wasn't unexpected given their disparate bases, leadership backgrounds and priorities.

The central question is whether they can hold together until President Musharraf makes his long-overdue exit, and the army's role is weakened enough for a robustly constitutional-democratic government to emerge. That prospect now seems uncertain -- not because President Musharraf retains the support of an army eager to defend him, but because Mr. Zardari lacks the courage to confront him.

He's under US pressure to let President Musharraf continue.

Washington is convinced, wrongly, that he's its best ally against the Taliban and al-Qaeda -- despite his record.

Mr. Zardari is probably too tainted by corruption to want to risk reopening the National Reconciliation Ordinance, which indemnified him against prosecution. Many analysts believe the NRO will be reopened if Chief Justice Iftukhar Chaudhry is reinstated. Mr. Zardari has appropriated the PPP, but has no independent standing and is vulnerable to pressure.

To counter growing unpopularity, he has now called on President Musharraf to step down "for Pakistan's sake," or face parliament. How firm he remains is open to question.

Mr. Sharif is adamant, perhaps obsessively so, that "Musharraf the usurper" must go at once. He has revived old controversies, e.g. Kargil, which put them against one another.

Mr. Sharif's clear anti-Musharraf, pro-judiciary stand, coupled with public disenchantment with military rule -- not just with an individual, as was the case with Ayub Khan, Yahya Khan or Zia-ul-Haq -- has brought Mr. Sharif a groundswell of backing from traditional PPP supporters, including the Left-liberal intelligentsia.

Mr. Sharif's stand corresponds to Pakistan's prevalent mood, which is against hierarchy and authoritarianism, and favours democratisation. The tenacious lawyers' movement expresses this phenomenon and has infused energy into it.

This is in keeping with recent social trends: a media explosion with free, robust debate -- more vigorous and political than in India -- spread of education, and the burgeoning of self-confident urban and rural middle-income strata, which have broken some shackles of the old feudal order.

These strata instinctively

distrust the army because of its economic mismanagement and corruption, and demand accountability.

Pakistan's electricity supply situation is even worse than India's, with daily load-shedding for 4 to 8 hours. A major reason for this is that the military regime didn't add a single megawatt to generation in 8 years. This highlights governance issues.

These social trends are related to a generational shift -- from an India-obsessed military-bureaucratic and political elite, to one which was born and grew up after Independence.

The old elite's consciousness was shaped by opposition between "Hindu India" and "Muslim Pakistan," a clash of cultures defined by religion, and bitter memories of Partition.

The new generation, which has matured over the past decade, isn't India-centric. It's influenced by its discovery of the common roots of South Asian culture since the Indus Valley civilisation, and is unbored by the uniquely violent past linked to the mass killings of 1947.

It doesn't equate Pakistan's survival with hostility towards

India through a Pakistani National Security State, to which democracy is alien and military rule natural.

All this spells a much stronger pro-democratisation momentum than earlier. But Pakistan's squabbling leaders can myopically make mistakes. Pakistan's parties too have very little experience of, or success in, fighting dictatorships or external pressures.

These pressures are huge. The US doesn't quite have a Pakistan policy, only a Musharraf policy -- of keeping him in power because he's loyal and useful in fighting anti-US jihadis.

President Musharraf willingly handed over 600 extremist "suspects" to the US in return for millions of dollars, and connived at their detention in Guantanamo Bay. He also sacrificed over 1,000 Pakistani troops in the US "war on terror."

It's another matter that he diverted most of the \$10 billion-plus "anti-terrorism" aid to buying long-range weaponry for the Eastern border, and cut dubious deals with pro-Taliban chiefs in the tribal areas.

Journalist Ahmed Rashid has

just revealed that President Musharraf allowed a secret CIA base to be established, that enables anti-militant missile strikes. On Tuesday, US forces killed at least 11 Pakistani troops.

With this, relations between the US and Pakistani militaries have reached their lowest point since 9/11.

The Pakistani army is being forced to fight America's war and faces desertions. Its Frontier Corps is refusing to fight. Recently, the Taliban captured 250 of its troops without a shot being fired.

All this, hopefully, might change Washington's attitude towards President Musharraf.

This is the right moment for India to make generous gestures towards Pakistan to support its democratisation and demilitarisation. India can earn tremendous goodwill among Pakistanis if it unilaterally allows duty-free imports of Pakistani goods while liberalising visas.

India should offer to discuss gradual demilitarisation of the border to give practical shape to the "grand reconciliation" idea. That's the way to the future.

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.