

HR violations are evident

Govt. denial may breed impunity

THE Prime Minister's claim of there being no human rights violations in the country is as surprising as it is unfortunate, where media reports, statistics and people's own experiences as summed up in statements by reputed human rights organisations, say otherwise.

This includes Odhikar's report which found disappearances, deaths in custody, attacks on journalists and rape to have risen alarmingly in 2011. Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK) expressed similar concern in the case of disappearances and secret killings. The Asian Human Rights Commission in a comprehensive report on Bangladesh found, in addition to the above, freedom of expression, opinion and human rights activism "being narrowed" down, including threats, attacks and torture of journalists which are yet to be investigated; several cases of illegal arrest and arbitrary detention followed by fabricated charges; and high rates of violence against women. The stories of Limon, Kadar and Razzak are only some of the more highlighted cases of gross neglect and dysfunction of the law enforcing agencies. Even more worrying are the allegations raised about the complicity of the agents themselves in some of the cases, especially those of disappearances and secret killings. If these allegations are baseless, that too must be proven, the truth divulged and action taken against those found guilty. The sense of insecurity at home and the tarnished image of the nation abroad cannot be made short shrift of.

Whether it is ignorance, lack of sensitivity, denial or outright refusal on the part of the government to accept the reality, we cannot say. In spite of the government's denial, some of the cases are plainly indefensible. If deterrent measures are not taken, the government may be condoning a dangerous culture of impunity, completely opposed to the values of democracy and civil liberties. It is past high time that the government comes out of its denial mode and takes strong and immediate action to remedy the situation.

Supplication on the bank of Turag

Message of peace and solidarity goes out

THE first phase of the annual congregations of Muslims on the banks of the Turag, known as the Biswa Ijtema, the second largest after the Hajj, ended the day before with the Akheri Munajaat, or the concluding prayer. It was attended reportedly by more than 2 million devotees, 15000 of who came from abroad from a large number of countries. And thanks to the electronic media which made it possible for millions others to participate without having to be physically present there. The participants, organisers and the thousands of volunteers deserve thanks for conducting the event without any disruption.

Over the years the number of devotees has become so unmanageably large that the organisers have been forced to organise the events in two slots since the last two years. And that only goes to show the religious fervour, the deep commitment of the people to religion, religious values and religious way of life, that motivate them to participate in the event disregarding the hardships entailed in it.

The annual congregation, also known as the World Muslims' Congregation, being held every year since 1946, is more than just a ritual gathering. The period of three days of the congregation is spent on sermons on the Quran, its explication and the ways to shape our lives and activities according to the scripture and the teachings of the Holy Prophet (PBUH). It in a way motivates people to the ways of the religion and propagates the message of peace and harmony.

And it is on this very pious hope for peace and harmony, not only for the Muslim Ummah but also for the whole world that the 3-day meet concluded. And we would like to add our hopes and wishes that the solidarity expressed at the Ijtema gathering would be reflected both in our national and personal lives.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

- January 17
- 1929
- Inayatullah Khan, king of the Emirate of Afghanistan abdicates the throne after only three days into his reign.
- 1946
- The UN Security Council holds its first session.
- 1961
- Former Congolese Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba is murdered in circumstances suggesting the support and complicity of the governments of Belgium and the United States.
- 1991
- Gulf War: Operation Desert Storm begins early in the morning. Iraq fires 8 Scud missiles into Israel in an unsuccessful bid to provoke Israeli retaliation.
- 2007
- The Doomsday Clock is set to five minutes to midnight in response to North Korea nuclear testing.
- 2010
- Rioting begins between Muslim and Christian groups in Jos, Nigeria, resulting in at least 200 deaths.

Can we become the change agents?

SYED SAAD ANDALEEB

FOR many, life has become an epic struggle for survival. In exasperation they wonder: What does the future hold? How long will I have to endure this struggle?

The next obvious question is, "Who is to blame?" Fingers are quickly pointed at the easy targets: the politicians, the bureaucrats, the police, the *mastaans*, the business syndicates, and even control freaks beyond the country's borders. While there is some truth to these contentions, nagging questions remain: What empowers these groups to make life so miserable? To what extent have "we-the-people" created these strong and unsavoury coteries? Did we not have a hand in this, and in good measure?

Let's ponder the following: Stand in line anywhere and there's always someone cutting in. Often it is a person of some stature or means who seems to have this entitlement of being taken care of first. Unfortunately, nobody protests as these insensitive line-hoppers move up to the front, led by some officious and ingratiating character. The rest just gripe and burn up without voicing any complaint.

When the electricity, phone, or gas bills seem elevated we look for someone to "fix it" in return for a "generous" thank you. When our driver parks illegally, takes a wrongful turn or drives on the wrong side of the road, creating a massive jam, we bury our heads in a newspaper or pretend to be someone pompous who has this exclusive right to do wrong!

It is we who do not hesitate to ask for things we know we shouldn't be asking for; whether it is a job one is not qualified for, a job transfer that is not proper, an admission for a candidate who is not admissible, etc. *ad nauseum*.

Media reports expose other egre-

gious acts of ours. When (fake) exams are available in the market, we-the-students rush to obtain them for a possible advantage. If we need a passport, we do not go through the usual procedure; instead we pay the touts who manage its delivery. When there is a *hilsa* ban, we buy this illegal catch. I will not even get into what we resort to when it involves "bigger" matters -- of position, privilege, prop-

the blame game.

It takes two to tango. If one emboldens the other to do wrong while seeking an unlawful advantage, we instill and perpetuate those behaviours in society that we abhor. And the social pie becomes smaller.

By all that we think, aspire, intend, say and do -- positively or negatively -- we set in motion similar forces that replicate and multiply. If we-the-



Clearly, "we" must become the change agents where, according to a respected writer, each citizen assumes responsibility, individually and collectively to question authority... and demand accountability."

erty, taxes and the like.

Admittedly, the examples I use have a class bias. But many who belong to this class are those who can do something to bring change. Yet we don't. As long as things are going our way at a personal level, we don't seem to care how our actions affect others. Only when things go against us do we begin to lose our composure and play

people are constantly ignoring what is good for society in exchange for personal advantage, should adversity not follow at a collective level? If we are not willing to make sacrifices, in great numbers, what incentive is there for those who play god with our lives to change? If we do not engage directly to change things for the better, who will?

There is yet another side to us,

PRAFUL BIDWAI COLUMN



THE Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) lurches from blunder to blunder. After tying itself into knots over the Lokpal Bill, it recruited some of the worst politicians expelled from the Bahujan Samaj Party in Uttar Pradesh. They include former family welfare minister Babu Singh Kushwaha, and thuggish former ministers Badshah Singh, Awadhesh Kumar Verma and Daddan Mishra.

Mr. Kushwaha is no ordinary corrupt politician. The quality of his corruption is special, allegedly involving one of the worst-ever scams in the National Rural Health Mission, running into Rs.2,000 crores. This resulted in the installation of defective medical equipment on which people's life depends. Two chief medical officers were killed in this connection.

Corruption is bad enough; but this is literally deadly. Yet, BJP president Nitin Gadkari inducted Mr. Kushwaha into the party just when his associates were being raided by the Central Bureau of Investigation.

The decision was strongly supported by RSS full-timer-cum-Organisational Secretary Sanjay Joshi, who was brought to UP by Mr. Gadkari from political exile following his clash with Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi, who allegedly tried to discredit him by releasing a sleazy CD in 2005.

Mr. Kushwaha's induction has at one fell swoop destroyed the BJP's credibility as a party inclined to disassociate itself from grossly tainted leaders. It has lost what little advantage it gained after Mr. L.K. Advani's anti-corruption *yatra*.

So miffed was Mr. Advani with Mr. Kushwaha's induction that he threat-

ened not to campaign for the party unless he was removed. Under a dishonourable compromise, Mr. Kushwaha "offered" to keep his membership "in abeyance." But that's not removal. He will now mobilise his Kushwaha caste for the BJP, and eventually be given due importance. Meanwhile, other BSP discards will continue in the BJP.

The BJP stooped low because it's desperate to shore up its shrinking Other Backward Classes (OBC) base, to building which former C.M. Kalyan Singh, a Lodh OBC, was crucial. But he has quit the BJP. The BJP zeroed in on the Kushwahas (also called Koeris) as a substitute. They command about

a tenth of the vote, about the same as the Yadavs.

However, Mr. Gadkari didn't reckon with either the risk that the tactic wouldn't work, or the discredit it would bring when its closest-ever civil society ally, Anna Hazare, has made anti-corruption his main plank. Mr. Gadkari, a regional leader without national perspective, didn't take into account the likely tensions this would generate within the BJP, and in BJP-RSS relations.

Mr. Joshi's re-induction as UP campaign coordinator made Mr. Modi boycott the BJP's national executive. Now, Mr Gadkari is trying to keep him out of UP. This is related to their rivalry, and Modi's ambition to strike the national centre-stage after the Gujarat elections later this year.

The BJP has scored a potentially game-changing self-goal. It isn't likely to greatly exceed its 2007 tally of 51

Assembly seats (total, 403). So even on *realpolitik*, inducting Mr. Kushwaha makes no sense.

From the larger moral-political viewpoint, where principles matter, the decision will remain a black mark against the BJP. The party, infamous for its Hindu communalism, chauvinist nationalism and militarism, is now comfortable with politicians for whom crime and corruption are a way of life.

The BJP bears no resemblance to the image it wants to convey to its upper-caste middle-class core constituency. When in power, it pitched for foreign investment in retail with neo-liberal zeal. But now, afraid of being branded as apathetic to its destructive effects, it opposes it.

Even worse is the BJP's degeneration into an intolerant, mean-minded obscurantist party, which has made the chanting of Hindu religious hymns before state-funded mid-day meals compulsory for schoolchildren in Madhya Pradesh (MP).

MP has just passed a draconian law against cow slaughter. This inverts the burden of proof of innocence on the accused. Under it, the police can invasively search premises on the suspicion that "an offence has been, or is likely to be, committed." The punishment for keeping beef at home or in a restaurant is seven years' imprisonment -- much harsher than the two years for destroying or defiling a place of worship under the Indian Penal Code.

The law's social impact became evident last month when Bajrang Dal

aply portrayed by an avid writer: "We, as a nation, have come to accept the unacceptable, tolerate the intolerable and permit the despicable acts. This is the surest sign of degeneration and disintegration of a society 40 years after liberation and victory." The message is crisp: we have ceased to act on the basis of our conscience and consciousness, choosing to remain in the shadows for things to become right ... somehow. What has so unnerved and enfeebled us in these 40 years that we bow to the weakest threat? Have we forgotten how our glorious liberation was achieved?

It is not unusual to hear the refrain that it is our leaders (at various tiers of society) who are at the root of all our problems. A book of wisdom offers deep insight into this matter: "It is as if the people's deeds appeared in the forms of their kings and leaders. If the people are upright, then their kings and rulers will be upright, and if they turn away (from uprightness), then their leaders will turn against them. And if they oppress and tyrannise, then their kings and rulers will tyrannise and oppress. And if deception and treachery becomes manifest amongst them, then the same will appear in their rulers." These words resonate with deep wisdom -- those who emerge to lead will bear the hallmarks of the ranks they represent. Thus, if the ranks want change, they must change!

Clearly, "we" must become the change agents where, according to a respected writer, each citizen assumes responsibility, individually and collectively to question authority... and demand accountability." Waiting in the backdrop for that elusive "other" to deliver the needed change will remain the saga of our unfulfilled dreams.

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vigilantes in MP attacked a Muslim trader ferrying cattle for resale after accusing him of taking the animals to the slaughterhouse. Although he had a valid receipt for the sale, they demanded ransom. When he refused to pay, they tied him up, beat him and shaved off a part of his scalp, half his moustache, and an eyebrow.

Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chauvan has himself promoted bigotry by publicly exhorting state employees to participate in RSS activities, which is illegal. He has renamed government schemes after Hindu rituals. The MP police regularly harass Christian institutions.

The BJP mocks the Constitution by promoting medieval-style bigotry and lynch mobs. This should put paid to the pious hope that it can cut its umbilical chord with the RSS and modernise itself. It's simply not that kind of party.

The UP scenario is complex and fluid. Ms. Mayawati won an Assembly majority in 2007 through a Dalit-upper caste alliance. But that's coming apart. She is no longer pursuing the proposal for a 4-way split of UP. She has sacked 16 ministers for corruption. But that's unlikely to burnish her image, and help the BSP emerge as the largest party.

The SP is drawing large crowds. Mulayam Singh's son Akhilesh is emerging an articulate campaigner. Several leaders from Ajit Singh's Jat-dominated party have joined the SP. But it's hard to say how the SP will do.

The Congress, long alienated from the OBCs, is making a bid for OBC votes, supported by Kurmi leader Beni Prasad Verma and Jat leader Ajit Singh. It's hard to say if the impact of Mr. Rahul Gandhi's campaign will translate into votes. The BJP may have the most to lose unless the political mood changes dramatically.

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