

## KALEIDOSCOPE

### Gruesome and shocking

#### Promising lives cut short

**T**HE gory killing of a journalist couple has sent shockwaves throughout the city and beyond. We are at a loss for words. One's senses are numbed by the sheer brutality of the incident. The loss to the kin as well as to the profession is irreparable and we can only offer our deepest condolences to the family members of the deceased couple and hope that they would be able to find courage to overcome their grief.

The killings expose how dehumanized the society has become. And the matter is made doubly painful because the killers not only cut short the lives of a young couple and left a 5-year old orphan they have also caused the brutally premature end to two very promising and upcoming journalists. Known to be friendly and affable in disposition, their loss is all the more grievous.

It is a sad day for journalists. And although it is too early to say the killings had any connection to the calling of the unfortunate couple, to our understanding, it is nonetheless a fact that journalists have become increasingly vulnerable and their life is being constantly put on the line in the performance of their professional duty.

We call for urgent solution of the murder case and apprehension of the killers, and in this regard we welcome the directives of the prime minister to nab the culprits immediately. However, we would like to emphasise on several things here.

The outpourings of sentiments from people in authority are natural and we would only hope that the flurry of activities, orders and instruction emanating from various official quarters will be carried through and will not peter out after the dusts settle. For that has been the experience with several cases of murder, where the culprits are yet to be apprehended. That city dwellers in particular have a growing sense of insecurity from the unsolved murder cases and lack of conviction should prompt the government into some energetic and visible action on the law and order front.

We feel that the matter is a test case for the police and we would like to remind the people in position of responsibility not to make callow remarks, like ordering the police to apprehend the culprits in 48 hours, which detracts the sensitivity of a most unfortunate incident.

### The cost of traffic jams

#### No time to lose on mitigation

**I**N an unusually candid manner, the government has virtually admitted that the biggest culprit of air pollution is the result of long hours of excruciating traffic jams. A joint study by the government and the World Bank has found that the pollutants from vehicles stuck in gridlock along with brick kilns are creating havoc with the health and wealth of the capital.

According to the Ministry of environment and Forests, vehicles move at a snail's pace of 14km on average and if things do not improve, by 2025 it could go down to about 4km. With many unfit, diesel-run vehicles, well past their expiry dates, stranded on Dhaka's streets for hours on end, the effects of the fumes they emit are disastrously long term.

When people are stuck in these jams they inhale these toxic fumes which contain harmful gases and metal, some of which are carcinogenic. The rate of respiratory diseases has increased manifold along with the deepening of the traffic crisis. The ministry says that if this pollution can be reduced by even 20 percent then at least 1200 to 3,500 lives can be saved and 80 to 230 million cases of respiratory diseases can be avoided each year.

Apart from the cost to health and general wellbeing, a huge amount of fuel is lost while vehicles trudge along in traffic jams with the engines running. It is appalling that while cities all over the world are trying to reduce their fuel emissions, we in the country's capital have allowed the city to be engulfed in a shroud of polluted air, thanks to the everyday traffic gridlocks.

The latest World Bank-supported project of the government called clean Air and Sustainable Environment (CASE) to reduce the capital's brick kilns and vehicles which have been steadily increasing over the years is in place.

How such miracles will occur will of course depend on the sincerity of the government to enforce regulations and adopt the clean technology.

# Murder of a journalist couple



SYED FATTAHUL ALAM

**T**HE morning of Saturday first saddened journalists and then the entire nation. Sagar Sarowar and Meherun Runi, both of whom were journalists and married to each other, were murdered by unknown killers in their living quarters at West Rajabazar area

of the capital city.

It was not a stray incident of death or murder on the highway, nor were the couple a victim of circumstances. Sagar and his wife Meherun Runi were murdered in cold blood in their own bedroom.

There is no way to explain this tragic end of these two persons as something accidental, or unavoidable. In their death they have again brought to focus the level of insecurity society is exposed to these days. It also brings to glaring light the alienation and vulnerability of those who think they are secure within their so-called protected walls of apartment complexes.

Had it not been for their five year old child Megh's courage and presence of mind to telephone his grandmother about the tragedy that his parents had suffered, it might have taken longer for the news of the barbaric murder to spread outside the four walls of their living room.

The five-storied apartment complex where the couple lived had protected entry in the front. Security guards were on 24-hour watch to question the identity and purpose of people intending to meet the residents of the apartments. At the entrance of the apartment, the security people also maintain a register to monitor the entry and exit of visitors.

But the existence of all these arrangements proved futile, since those could not save the lives of those two promising journalists of the electronic media. They had to succumb helplessly before the knives of their mindless slayers.

Some questions remain unanswered about the twin murders. Though it is up to the members of the law-enforcing agency to unearth the chain of events

that led to the murder, the first question that worries the common observers' mind is how did the killers enter the victims' room and then escape after carrying out the murder, though the front door of the flat remained shut from inside? The reports on the killing provide indications that the murderers might not have been quite strangers to the victims.

Whatever the identities of the murderers or their motives behind the killing, it will be the responsibility of the intelligence and the law-enforcement department to find it out and finally solve the mystery behind the killing.

It is appreciable that the government has come out with a very prompt reaction immediately after the incident. The prime minister has expressed her

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shock at the killing and ordered the law enforcers to find out the killers in no time. The home minister as usual sounded very stern in her order to her lawmen to arrest the killers within 48 hours. The prompt response from the people in the highest places of the government soon after the senseless murder is reassuring. We hope the actions from the police administration will be equally prompt in tracking down the killers and putting them through the due process of justice.

In the wake of the journalist couple's death, we have noticed a rare, albeit brief, show of unity of purpose between Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and opposition leader Khaleda Zia. They wasted no time in expressing their shock at and condemnation of the outrageous killing.

We would like to see a similar demonstration of concurrence of views also on other occasions that concern the people in general. And as they reacted

with shock at Sagar-Runi's deaths, we expect that they will show an equal degree of concern at other types of murders taking place day in day out due to political rivalry on the streets, at the educational institutions, in police custody or through the so-called disappearances or police encounters, or in the BSF firings at the Indo-Bangladesh border.

Once they take all such killings purely from their human angle without taking into account the political or other identities of the victims or their executors, that will help the common people to regain their trust in law and order.

The people expect more than words of concern, sympathy or assurances from them. In this particular case of the journalists' murder, they will now wait to see matching action to ferret out the felons and then put them on trial.

It is needless to explain why people should be able to see that justice is being done in each case of such killings. For they have seen in the past how the dust begins to settle on the files of such violent deaths and killings, after they create a lot of furore in the media.

The result of such of poor follow-ups after those tragedies is that people gradually get de-sensitised to these deaths and murders. It is not just a loss of people's faith in the law that is the matter of real concern. The worst comes to worst when people begin to take the law into their own hands. Incidents leading to lynching of people by frenzied mobs on the mere suspicion that they are thieves or robbers abound. We have seen such tragedies in the case of the six youths murdered at Aminabazar near the capital in July last year. These are nothing but patent prescriptions of social disorder or anarchy.

We want to see that Sagar and Runi's murderers find no place to hide. Justice will only be established when the killers are nabbed and brought to immediate justice. It is only then that the victims' orphaned child Megh may find some solace in the uncertain darkness of life he has unknowingly been thrown into.

The writer is Editor, Science & Life, The Daily Star. E-mail: sfalim.ds@gmail.com

## PRAFUL BIDWAI COLUMN

# New political alignments in the offing ?



PRAFUL BIDWAI

**A**RE any new trends discernible in the Assembly elections underway in Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Uttarakhand, Goa and Manipur? The states are so different in social structure and political culture that it's hard to generalise. Opinion polls are of no help.

Yet, one can detect significant changes in the axes along which electorates make their choices, including party profiles, government performance, identities like caste, tribe, religion, region and ethnicity, and less importantly, personalities.

Uttar Pradesh seems headed for a hung Assembly, with changes in party positions. In Punjab, which saw the highest-ever voter turnout (79%), the Shiromani Akali Dal-Bharatiya Janata Party alliance is likely to lose. In Uttarakhand, the BJP is trying to limit the damage caused by former Chief Minister Ramesh Pokhriyal Nishank's super-corrupt regime, which was replaced in September. But it's unclear if it can neutralise the Congress's advantage. In Goa and Manipur, the Congress seems to have the edge.

Contrary to the middle-class view that corruption would be pivotal to these elections because of the Anna Hazare campaign, it's likely to be only one of the many issues which matter. Corruption has not become irrelevant. But it's not primarily a moral issue. People appear to be linking it to economic and political considerations like governance and diversion of resources away from public services, including roads, water, food security, electricity, healthcare and education. Besides, corruption's now-diffused focus is no longer exclusively on the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance.

The Mayawati government and Prakash Singh Badal's family-based regime in Punjab are widely seen as highly corrupt. The BJP stands badly discredited -- thanks to the plunder of mineral wealth in Karnataka, and petty as well as big-time corruption in Uttarakhand.

The "anti-incumbency burden," heavy for three decades, is decreasing in importance. People used to treat elections as a plebiscite or referendum on ruling parties and sent four-fifths of them packing. However, ruling parties were recently re-elected in Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Orissa and

Haryana, and the UPA returned to national power in 2009. Blanket anti-incumbency is probably giving way to a differentiated approach, in which performance and social-political factors count.

Caste, ethnic and religious identities continue to matter. But their relative weights are changing. For instance, in UP, Dalit "self-respect politics" remains important. But the Dalits are demanding, and getting, schemes like the Ambedkar village plan, under which villages are given hand-pumps, toilets, solar lighting systems and even English tuitions for children.

Similarly, that other great 30-year-old trend, the Forward March of the Backwards (OBCs) remains important, but internal differentiation is accelerating within the lower OBC (mainly non-Yadav) castes, which are looking for greater self-representation. Thus, major parties are wooing the relatively better-off Kurmis, and even lower OBCs like the Kushwahas and Lodhis. Even the Most

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Backward Classes are demanding self-representation.

The BJP is trying hard to recapture the Lodhi vote from former Chief Minister Kalyan Singh, and has fielded another Lodhi, Uma Bharati, as a star campaigner. Similarly, the BJP hopes to win support from the Kushwaha caste through the scandalous move to induct former family welfare minister Babu Singh Kushwaha, who was sacked from the Mayawati cabinet for the Rs 5,000-crore National Rural Health Mission scam.

In a significant new trend, the Congress is making a bid for OBC votes by projecting Union Minister Beni Prasad Verma, a Kurmi, and allying with Ajit Singh's Jat-dominated party. This is the first time that the Congress is trying to re-establish links with the OBCs, which snapped in 1967.

UP is witnessing fierce competition for the support of Muslims, who form 18% of the population, and the upper castes' disillusioned with Ms. Mayawati. The Peace Party has emerged as UP's

first Muslim-dominated party in decades. It can play the spoiler in many of the 100-plus constituencies in which Muslims constitute a sizeable 20-45% of the population. Which parties this helps isn't clear.

The Congress is also making an explicit bid to attract Muslims by offering them a share of the Dalit and OBC job quotas. The SP, desperate to overcome the stigma of recruiting Kalyan Singh into its 2009 campaign, has persuaded the Shahi Imam of Delhi's Jama Masjid to ask Muslims to vote for it.

The SP promises to reserve 18% of jobs for Muslims. The BSP hasn't announced a comparable figure, but has given tickets to more Muslims -- 84, than the SP (75) or Congress (61).

The BJP, eager to win upper-caste voters, opposes this "minority quota politics." It can, however, at best hope that the Congress won't repeat its 2009 performance, which would translate into 90-100 Assembly seats (total, 403). The BJP is regressing to rank communalism, including a promise to build a Ram temple in Ayodhya and an "Adhyatmik Disneyland" in Mathura.

The contest for UP's top two slots appears confined to the SP and BSP. But this may change depending on how the non-Dalit vote divides and whether Mayawati can win back Brahmin backing.

If the SP wins a large number of seats, it's likely to rope the Congress into a coalition in UP. This will influence the complexion of national politics.

In Punjab, the SAD-BJP alliance is in retreat since it lost the 2009 Lok Sabha elections. There seems to be serious revulsion against it for diversion of funds away from public services, and for family-centred politics. An interesting healthy new phenomenon in Punjab is opposition to dhakkashahi, or rule by muscle power. Punjab has developed a winner-takes-all authoritarian system under which the Akalis and Congress monopolise all control over public institutions, including the police, panchayats, municipal bodies, mandi committees and cable networks, when in power. There is growing concern about addiction to drugs.

There is some welcome loosening of the hold of religion-based politics too. A Hindu candidate has been fielded for the first time in Tarn Taran, a "Sikh stronghold," and a Sikh is contesting in Hindu-majority Batala.

Under the trend, the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance might weaken nationally.

The writer is an eminent Indian columnist. E-mail: bidwai@bol.net.in

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

February 13

- 1668**  
Spain recognises Portugal as an independent nation.
- 1739**  
Battle of Karnal: The army of Iranian ruler Nadir Shah defeats the forces of the Mughal emperor of India, Muhammad Shah.
- 1881**  
The feminist newspaper *La Citoyenne* is first published in Paris by the activist Hubertine Auclert.
- 1931**  
New Delhi becomes the capital of India.
- 1951**  
Korean War: Battle of Chipyong-ni, which represented the "high-water mark" of the Chinese incursion into South Korea, commences.
- 1990**  
German reunification: An agreement is reached on a two-stage plan to reunite Germany.
- 2010**  
A bomb explodes in the city of Pune, Maharashtra, India, killing 17 and injuring 60 more.