

KALEIDOSCOPE

Violence over river management project

Local people should have been taken along

THE mayhem over a tidal river management (TRM) project in Jessore has been very unsettling and distressful. We don't understand why a development project which is supposed to bring respite to several hundred farmers should have been such a stormy non-starter. As we understand it, Water Development Board (WDB) decided to construct an embankment to resolve the lingering water-logging problem in Bil Kapalia and increase navigability of rivers at the same time. When Jatiya Sangsad Whip Sheikh Abdul Wahab was going to inaugurate it on Saturday, fish traders reportedly opposing the project attacked his motorcade, torched vehicles and injured many. Later, people mustering support for the project blocked Jessore-Khulna highway, and torched buses, several shops and houses in retaliation. They also protested police inaction.

Evidently, it is a project that was going to directly affect one way or the other the livelihoods of several thousand people, especially the farmers and fish cultivators who depend on Bil Kapalia, a large water body, for their bread and butter. It also has to do with the environment and overall ecology and geo-morphology of the area-i.e. flooding, soil fertilization and fish cultivation.

We expect that such an important project was conceived on a sound scientific basis and if it was so done, why were the project details not shared with local body representatives and the communities involved? As it turned out, a considerably large section of the people was not consulted and brought in the loop before taking up the project. The net result was the imposition of a project leading to destruction of public and private properties and an apparent setback to the project.

Construction in a water body is a serious environmental issue which must be preceded by a thorough assessment of its impact on the habitat and the lives of the people inhabiting the area. Therefore, advice and opinion must be sought from environmental and hydrological experts. Once the expert opinions are obtained, it devolves upon the authorities to disseminate them so that people are aware and convinced of the necessity of it. We can only regret the entire handling of the project.

Two years after Nimtoli

Chemical hazards abound in residential areas

USUALLY we try to live down bad memories, but they keep haunting us with vengeance. Be it Aila or Nimtoli, it is the same old story. But here we confine ourselves to the feelings on the second anniversary of the chemical disaster in the old part of the city that sent shockwaves throughout the country.

One can ascribe two reasons for the recurrence of nightmares. First, those who fell victim to Nimtoli inferno have neither been compensated for nor fully rehabilitated. Many households lost their earning members, many a survivor was thrown on the street with no means of livelihood to fall back on. The scar is unhealed.

Secondly, the authorities after an initial hype settled back quickly into unlearning the lessons thrown up by Nimtoli disaster. The government initiatives to remove chemical storehouses and factories from residential areas through mobile court drives fizzled out in the face of businessmen's resistance. The authorities then gave a deadline of September 30, 2010 to factory owners to relocate outside the residential areas and warned the chemical depot lessees with punitive action if they should continue renting out their premise beyond the cut-off date.

The deadline has long been overshot and chemical warehouses were spotted by our reporter at Nawab Katra, Mahuttuli, Bangshal, Siddique Bazar, Sat Rowza, Babu Bazar and Armanitola. Little wonder, several more fire accidents have occurred in old Dhaka from harbouring combustible materials since Nimtoli.

We have a law called the Environment Conservation Rules 1997 that prohibits operation of any industry using hazardous chemicals or goods in and around residential areas. In fact, the law seems toothless when you consider the rider clause that the owner of such a concern must have environment clearance certificates before they can use the materials. Are we to believe, this can be set up even in a residential area provided there is a clearance certifi-

Show zero tolerance towards black money



SYED FATAHUL ALAM

THE government hasn't said it would discontinue the option of whitening black money in the upcoming budget.

A finance ministry source said (The Daily Star, June 1 issue) that instead of a flat rate at 10% tax that was being charged previously, the owners of black money will now have to pay a tax at a normal rate plus a fine of between 5 to 10% on their whitened money. Thus, after obtaining the official clearance on only a portion of their unearned money, they can pass themselves off as normal taxpaying citizens, to the dismay of honest taxpayers.

The same source further informed that the government is under pressure from some influential quarters to provide the legal seal to undisclosed money in the next budget, too.

Are we then to believe that a government that came to power with such a massive mandate from the electorate is cringing in terror before these "influential quarters"?

In that case, do the taxpaying citizens have not the right to know who these all-powerful "influential quarters" are? Shouldn't the government, rather than yielding to their pressure, fight them with the people on its side?

We were being told so far that the

main reason for treating black money holders with kid gloves is that it would help them reroute their unearned income back into the formal sectors of the economy. But how much money could so far be whitened and invested in the economy?

National Board of Revenue (NFR) statistics say that since 1975, a total of Tk.129.96 billion of white money could be retrieved from the black economy. Given its (whitened money's) size, has then the indulgence shown so far to the entire undisclosed money (a mind-boggling cumulative sum it must come to) and its owners over more than three and a half decades been worth the effort?

We have no dependable statistics on the size of the black economy. At a post-budget press conference last fiscal, the finance minister pointed to the colossal size of the black money. It is said that the government at that time carried out an investigation whereby it could be learnt the figure ranged between 84% of the GDP at the highest level and 48% at the lowest. Given the size of GDP in FY 2011 at around Tk.7.88 trillion, the size of the black economy last year was around Tk.6.62 trillion at the highest level.

Now compare this mind-boggling amount of black money of a single year (2011) with that of the mere trickle of Tk.129.96 billion whitened in total over a period of more than 36 years (since 1975).

Simply put, it has been a barren exercise at wooing the undisclosed money-holders to take benefit of the government's generosity towards them. Meanwhile, taking advantage of this laxity on the government's part, they got further emboldened to continue with their practices to amass more ill-gotten wealth. Rampant corruption, worsening law and order, money and muscle in elections, rise of criminality in society, you name it and you will be able to trace

the link to that "dirty black money."

What are the main sources of this black money? Is Bangladesh the only sanctuary of such black economy?

The Indian finance ministry released a White Paper on black money last month in the Indian Parliament (Lok Sabha). The white paper, however, could not give any idea about the actual size of the black economy in India. About the definition of black money it was rather ambiguous and indicated both its legal and illegal origins.

Legitimate sources include tax-dodging or leaving the transactions unreported to the regulatory agencies. Illegitimate sources, on the other hand, include drug trafficking and smuggling, bribery, extortion (*chandabaji*) and the criminal world also contribute to this black economy in a big way.

So far as the black money has to do with illegal means, the handling of the subject falls under the law and order authority. So the paper suggests, strict implementation of the law is the way to contain the illegal practice.

For tax evasion in the case of legally-run business, the tax department has to be stricter to stop such practice.

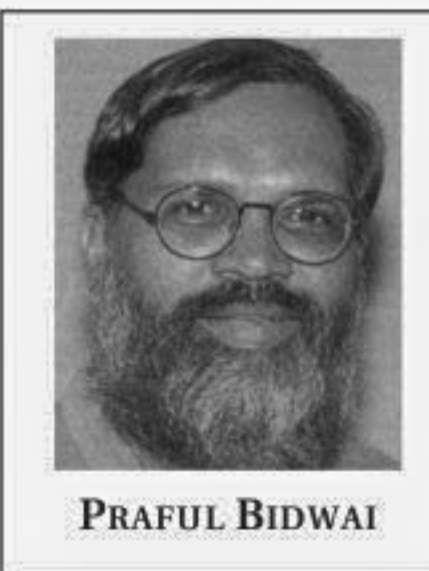
There are many points of similarity between Bangladesh and India in terms of the sources and behaviour of black. The difference is India's law-enforcement machinery as well as their tax department are facilitated by a more transparent authority.

The governments in Bangladesh have so far generally failed to put the "black money whitening" effort to any good use. The government should not any more run after this chimera. It should instead show zero tolerance to undisclosed money and apply the law more strictly on sources of black money. At the same time, it should reward the taxpayers so that more people are encouraged to pay tax and continue in their honest efforts to earn money.

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PRAFUL BIDWAI COLUMN

Modi stages a coup



PRAFUL BIDWAI

THE Bharatiya Janata Party's national executive meeting in Mumbai will go down as a watershed for anointing Narendra

Milosevic Modi as its supremely important leader and its likeliest prime ministerial candidate in the next national elections.

Mumbai takes forward a process begun at the April 2002 national executive in Goa, which killed all hope that the party, then in power nationally, would dismiss Mr. Modi for the butchery of more than 1,000 Muslims.

In Goa, Atal Behari Vajpayee cast off his "moderate" mask. He disgracefully equated Islam with aggression and terror. He sanctified Mr. Modi's nauseating "action-reaction" rationalisation of the massacre following the Godhra train-burning, caused by an accidental fire, but falsely attributed to a "conspiracy."

In Mumbai, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh -- the BJP's ideological mentor, political master and organisational gatekeeper -- caved in to Mr. Modi's demand to drop his *bete noire*, RSS *pracharak* Sanjay Joshi, from the executive.

This led L.K. Advani and Sushma Swaraj to boycott the concluding public meeting -- a symbolic, but futile, gesture. Equally futile was Mr. Advani's anti-Gadkari criticism in his blog.

Earlier, Mr. Modi refused to campaign for the BJP in five recent state Assembly elections in protest against Mr. Joshi's RSS-approved induction as Uttar Pradesh election organiser by BJP president Nitin Gadkari. Mr. Modi defied the *sangh*, something you don't generally do in the BJP.

The RSS swallowed the insult. It extracted only one concession: Mr. Gadkari would get a second presidential term beyond 2012.

This slightly complicates, but it doesn't undermine, Mr. Modi's plan

to bid for the prime ministerial nomination in the 2014 elections after becoming party president following the Gujarat elections this year, which he hopes to win.

Mr. Modi showed himself too petty-minded, parochial, vindictive, egotistic, and self-serving to be a national-stature leader. Mr. Joshi is no threat to him. He's little known outside the *parivar* and holds no public office. He hasn't yet overcome the setback he suffered in 2006 when a CD alleging a sexual escapade was released and he resigned as BJP general secretary.

In Mumbai, the RSS indulged Mr. Modi despite his angularities and his role as a polarising figure who cannot shake off the stigma of 2002. It believes these disadvantages are outweighed by Mr. Modi's ability to inspire the party through militant demagoguery.

Mr. Modi got a rousing reception at the Mumbai public meeting as *Gujarat ka Sher* (the lion of Gujarat). The RSS is looking for the Supreme Leader, behind whom BJP cadres can rally in a warlike formation -- although such bellicosity vitiates democracy and the social-political climate.

The RSS gambles that many potential allies who are supposedly allergic to Mr. Modi will line up behind him depending on how many seats the BJP wins in the next elections.

In the past, numerous secular parties, barring the Left, Mulayam Singh's Samajwadi Party and Laloo Prasad's Rashtriya Janata Dal, joined the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance and tolerated affronts to secularism and the rule of law. They include Bahujan Samaj Party,

Trinamool Congress, Telugu Desam, Biju Janata Dal, Asom Gana Parishad, National Conference, DMK and AIADMK, besides core-allies Shiv Sena and Akali Dal.

Here, the BJP's weaknesses in relation to the Congress -- lack of inclusive appeal to Muslims and most Dalits, poor voter support (under one-fourth the national total), and upper-caste bias -- become its strengths.

Because the Congress is the regional parties' main rival almost everywhere, they expediently ally with the BJP, which opportunistically welcomes them while promising to keep aside its own trade-

mark, sectarian Hindutva agenda.

However, the BJP has steadily advanced its agenda, making Hindu-communalism acceptable to the upper-caste upper-class elite, and imposing its will upon its allies. They went along with its unilateral, secret decision to conduct the Pokharan-II nuclear tests in 1998, about which they weren't informed, let alone consulted. Defence minister George Fernandes wasn't

informed till the morning they took place.

The BJP's refusal to act against Mr. Modi for India's worst state-sponsored pogrom provoked some protests from the allies, but only the Lok Jana Shakti Party quit the NDA. Even Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, who keeps Mr. Modi at a distance, failed to speak out against the pogrom, or order an inquiry into the Godhra incident as railway minister.

Mr. Modi escaped political punishment for the massacre, and was re-elected.

India's justice delivery system has

repeatedly failed to bring the pogrom's culprits to book. Take the latest effort of the Supreme Court-appointed Special Investigation Team (SIT) to let Mr. Modi off the hook for the massacre of 69 people, including former MP Ahsan Jafri, in the Gulberg Society case.

This defies credulity and insults intelligence. The Hindutva mobs could not have killed at will without the complicity and collusion of the state police, acting with encouragement or a nod from the top. This was documented by more than 30 citizens' inquiries, including some comprising eminent jurists and international academics.

Senior officers have corroborated their findings, which say Mr. Modi transported the bodies of the Godhra victims to Ahmedabad to provoke Hindu-communal violence. He told officials after the Godhra incident to allow the Hindus to "vent their anger." Thus followed the orgy of killing, arson and rape.

The SIT tries to falsify this account by deviously introducing ambiguities while relying solely on Mr. Modi's collaborators. It contradicts its own preliminary report, which maintained that Mr. Modi adopted "a discriminatory attitude" and "watered down" the situation's gravity; two of his ministers directed operations from the police control room.

The final report also ignores the analysis and further investigation suggested by Supreme Court-appointed amicus curiae Raju Ramachandran. Worse, it says Jafri "provoked" the mob that dismembered him. Such fraudulent reasoning and prejudiced reports are unbecoming of a half-way civilised society.

Yet, India's top industrialists have rallied behind Mr. Modi as an "efficient," "development-minded" leader. This combination of Big Capital and Hindutva could prove the undoing of the rule of law and Indian democracy. Mr. Modi must be stopped in his tracks -- to start with, in Gujarat.

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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

June 4

1961

In the Vienna summit, Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev sparks the Berlin Crisis by threatening to sign a separate peace treaty with East Germany and ending American, British and French access to East Berlin.

1989

Ali Khamenei is elected the new Supreme Leader of Islamic republic of Iran by the Assembly of Experts after the death of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

1989

The Tiananmen Square protests are violently ended in Beijing by the People's Liberation Army.

2001

Gyanendra, the last King of Nepal, ascends to the throne after the massacre in the Royal Palace.