

Municipal elections

The results are not surprising

THAT the AL won the municipal elections is no surprise. What is, perhaps, surprising is the margin of victory and defeat, and the extent of irregularities that reportedly took place during the elections. According to our reports, ruling party men stuffed ballot boxes, drove opposition candidates' polling agents out of polling centres, and resorted to other transgressions in at least 80 polling stations across the country; they also attacked at least 15 journalists and threatened many more at polling stations.

While we do not think that the number of violations, as a percentage of the overall number of polling centres, would have made a difference to the overall result, a free and fair election would have upheld the country's image to the rest of the world, and added to the credibility of the Election Commission (EC).

As for the BNP, we are relieved that unlike the previous occasions it did not abandon the election halfway through. However, the results are a reflection of its flawed politics and organisational lacuna, among other things. It must regroup and reenergise its workers if it wants to re-establish itself as a major party in Bangladeshi politics.

However, apart from the BNP, we are constrained to say, the biggest loser in this election is the EC. In a country like ours, violations of electoral codes are not uncommon. But we are as surprised at the inertia of the EC to put a stop to these violations and ensure a free, fair and transparent election, as we are to see the alacrity with which the EC gave the elections a clean chit.

The image of the country and the cause of democracy would have been served better had the EC been prompt in addressing the violations.

New counter-terrorism unit

An apex coordinating agency needed too

WE are informed that the Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) is in the final stages of putting together the "Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime" unit. Its purpose will be to "combat cyber crimes, terror financing and mobile bank related crimes."

While there is a need to combat terror threats that have emerged over the past years more effectively, we wonder why the proposal for 'Police Bureau of Counter-Terrorism' has been in a limbo since 2011. And while we welcome specialised agencies for counter-terrorism, it is important to ensure that resources are not frittered away between specialised agencies like RAB that currently exist today. The formation of the new unit, replete with requisite manpower is of course welcome. But there is also a need for clarity of functions between this unit and that of the RAB.

We feel that the problems that have surfaced over the past years with respect to counter-terror efforts have to do more with a lack of intelligence direction, gathering and sharing among various intelligence and law enforcing agencies. That there is no single agency dedicated to collecting and disseminating appropriate information ranging from human intelligence to cyber tracking of dangerous militant outfits is perhaps something policymakers need to take cognizance of. The problems associated with not having an apex, coordinating agency will, we fear, do more to hamper the sincere efforts of authorities to crack down on terrorists and extremists in the country.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Improving our football

Afghanistan has defeated Bangladesh by a big margin of 4-0 in the opening match of SAFF football. The Afghan coach said, "The physical condition of Afghanistan is better than Bangladesh." I think hiring a foreign coach is not the solution for Bangladesh. Our girls from Kolshindur of Mymensingh were trained in their own areas and became champions in SAFF under-14 in Nepal. This is an example of how to develop football from the grassroots level. It is time for BFF to send coaches in every upazila to teach and train children the basics of football. This is how we can improve our football.

Shafkat Rahman
BIAM Laboratory School
New Eskaton, Dhaka

Fighting extremism

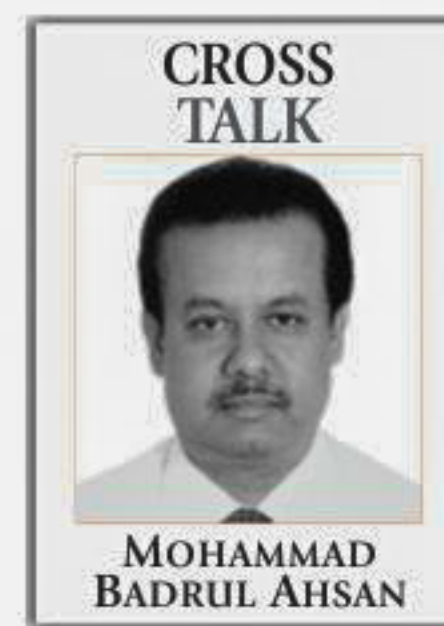


PHOTO: AFP

The year 2015 has seen a rise in terrorist activities in Bangladesh. Killing of foreign nationals, Bangladeshi bloggers and a publisher, attacks on the Shia community by the extremists have shocked the whole nation. The government should take strict measures to contain militancy in the country. We hope 2016 will be a better year for Bangladesh.

Ahsan Habib
Shyamoli, Dhaka

Khaleda Zia's numeracy and the 1971 genocide



CROSS TALK

MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

God knows why BNP chairperson Khaleda Zia chose to make her case at this point in time. Whether it was some divine revelation or a deranged

convulsion or a dastardly act of political enunciation, she has recently questioned the number of people killed in 1971. What she has said isn't half as difficult to understand as why she has said it now.

It's not clear what political brownie points she wished to score by stirring up a hornet's nest. How does it help, if not hurt, the shaky ground on which she stands today? How does it have anything to do with her political future if three million people were killed or not forty-five years ago? An astute politician should be more focused on musing numbers on the streets than minding headcounts buried in the graves.

Let's in the name of God cut her some slack and give her the benefit of doubt. Let's say she chose to speak up for the sake of truth and unburden us of a historical blunder. But how exactly has she done it? She hasn't given us an alternative number or explained why she has her reasons to doubt. Of course, she said that different books have given different accounts of how many people were killed by Pakistani soldiers.

But anybody who has read some of those books already knows that those aren't scholarly works but personal accounts of people who closely watched or were close to those who closely watched the Liberation War. As a matter of fact, while so much scholarly work has been done on the history of our Liberation War, very little has been done to ascertain the number of people killed or raped during the nine months of 1971.

Nurul Qadir, who claims to have been one of the four roving ambassadors of the Bangladesh government in exile, has written a book titled *Dusho Cheshotti*



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Diney Swadhinata, the first edition of which appeared in 1997. In page 346 of this 720-page book, the author claims he was at the Indian embassy in Tehran on September 5, 1971. There he typed two letters, one addressed to the Shah of Iran and another to the Iranian Prime Minister Amir Abbas Hoveyda. In those letters, he claims, he put down "four million" as the number of people killed in the Pakistani military crackdown in Bangladesh.

Qadir confesses that he had alternately cited "four million" and "three million" at various press conferences and interviews during the war. In the eighth paragraph of that same page, he says that while he was quoting those numbers, he was thinking that 300,000 to 400,000 people were killed by the Pakistan army and their collaborators. At the bottom of the page, he eats humble pie, admitting that he didn't know until after independence that one million was not one hundred thousand but ten hundred thousand, that also when his nephew, who had done his PhD from

Singapore, explained it to him.

The tabulation of any genocide does not involve physical count alone but also certain amount of extrapolation. The death toll of the Rwandan genocide is still debated although the UN report of 1994 gives a safe range between 500,000 and one million. The American Indian genocide figures are also vague. It is believed that nearly 80 percent to 90 percent of this population died after the arrival of the Europeans.

The number of Jews killed in the Auschwitz concentration camp during World War II was initially claimed as 9 million, which was revised to 4.1 million. The Auschwitz State Museum tamped down that number to one million 45 years after the Holocaust. Thus, a census of victims in a large-scale population cleansing can go wrong for a number of reasons. Flawed data collection, faulty assumptions, distorted assimilation and motivated conclusions can lead to understatement or overstatement of actual figures.

What has then prompted Khaleda Zia

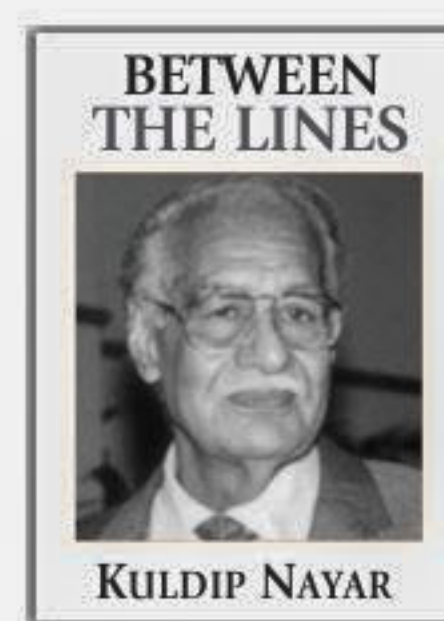
to unsettle settled matters? Why did she want to stir the sleeping dog of a foregone conclusion? But foregone conclusion doesn't mean it can't be challenged for scholarly reasons or historical correctness. It means political impulses shouldn't dominate a matter of factual judgment, and something shouldn't be said or done if it doesn't clarify things for better understanding instead of creating more confusion.

As a two-and-a-bit time prime minister of the country and repository of the trust and adulation of a sizeable portion of its people, Khaleda Zia has every right to tell the truth if that truth tells something. She may or may not have some substance in what she said, but how has it improved our knowledge of 1971? She has only made her admirers more doubtful and critics more spiteful.

It was a waste of breath for her to take on history. She sounded as questionable as the history she questioned.

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Modi takes a leaf out of Vajpayees' book



BETWEEN THE LINES

KULDIP NAYAR

THE best tiding of the year gone by is Prime Minister Narendra Modi's impromptu visit to Lahore, while returning from Kabul. It was, indeed, a welcome gesture that has been applauded all over, particularly in Pakistan. The feeling in that country is that India wants to undo it. Seventy years of Pakistan's

independent entity has not removed that fear. Modi's remark that such visits by both the sides should be a common occurrence is a welcome assurance. Whatever diplomatic hurdles might have come in the way of the two talking to each other to sort out the problems facing them has been pushed into the background.

Unfortunately, the media on both sides continue to be spoilsports. Commenting so much on the visit, as on the gesture to probe what prompted Modi to do so, is anybody's guess. The visit was his thinking. Ideas do not have to be prompted by outsiders.

The applause, even in Pakistan, shows that the act of breaking the ice was overdue. False prestige had stood in the way. Modi spanned the divide to everybody's admiration. The comment by Congress, to run down Modi, is absolutely unwarranted. Instead of putting Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the wrong, by saying that it had come to appreciate the line which the Congress had adopted for decades, the party said that there was no roadmap.

Years ago, when former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee said that he would take a bus to Lahore, he took everyone by surprise. The talks were successful. According to Mushahid Hussain, the then government's spokesman, a time frame was agreed upon to sort out the Kashmir issue. It is unfortunate that intermittent dialogue on the problem has not found any solution.

Kashmir leader Farooq Abdullah showed a streak of his respected father, Sheikh Abdullah, when he said that whatever part of Kashmir is under Pakistan should be part of their territory while the part under our country should continue to be an integral part of India. In fact, that is the situation on the ground. Any violation of line of control creates tension between the two countries and even a war-like situation.

Modi's meeting with Nawaz Sharif in Lahore should open a new chapter. Both countries should foster not only friendship but take steps to benefit the region economically. There should be trade between the two across the border, instead of using Dubai as the place for import and export of capital goods.

Modi's statement after the visit that such an occurrence would be common and they would be coming and going to each other's country without any protocol is what should have been done earlier. Vajpayee was a visionary come to think of it. Modi appears to be following him because soon after his

return from Lahore, the first thing he did was to call on Vajpayee. The latter is incapacitated, but did say by gesture that what Modi had done was something which he would have himself done.

If Modi is to succeed, he should tell the RSS to give up the agenda of Akhand Bharat and recognise Pakistan as a sovereign country. It is regrettable that soon after the meeting, some statements, particularly by RSS leaders, brought up the oft-repeated slogan of Akhand Bharat. This will only increase the deficit in trust which is really the problem between the two countries.

Unfortunately, the goodwill created by Modi in Pakistan is being dissipated by the build-up in Ayodhya over the arrival of stones from different parts of India. The extremists are once again playing the old game and reviving the Ram temple controversy. It was the

demolition of the Babri Masjid that made Muslims in Ayodhya, they would defeat the purpose of Modi's visit. The structure of Babri Masjid was a testimony to our country's faith in secularism.

One person remarked at the time of the demolition that Mahatma Gandhi was shot on January 30, 1948, but he died on December 6, 1992, when the demolition took place in the presence of BJP leaders like L.K. Advani, Murli Manohar Joshi and Uma Bharti. Advani was then sensitive enough to submit his resignation from Parliament to register his disapproval. But subsequently, the atmosphere created by the Hindu extremists was that of victory and Advani sheepishly withdrew his resignation.

Happily, the foreign secretaries of the two countries are meeting later this month. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's adviser Sartaj Aziz has already said in a broadcast from Pakistan that all problems cannot be

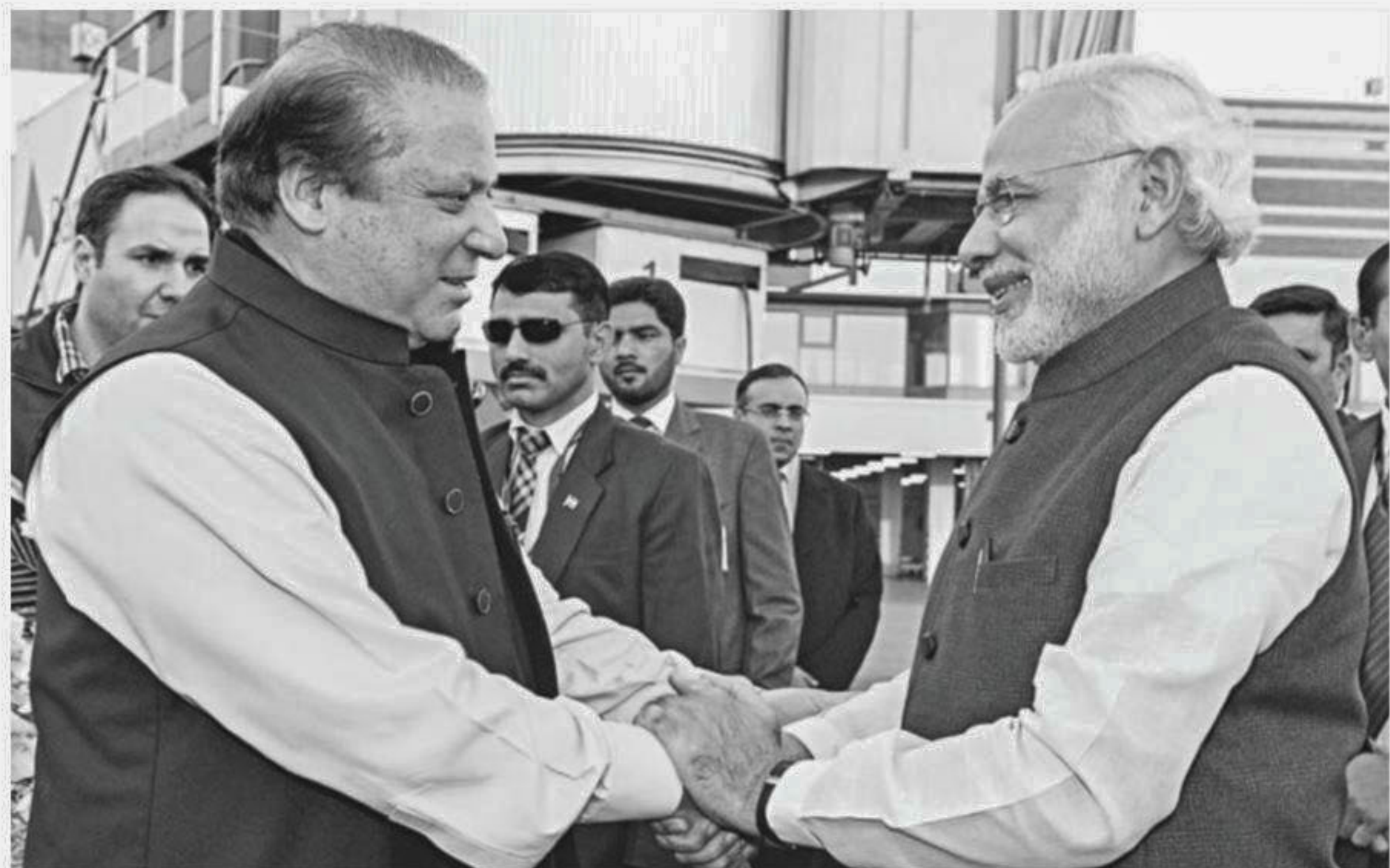


PHOTO: AFP

solved in one sitting. But there would be a serious effort to clear the hurdles that crop up off and on in the culmination of concrete results.

Modi, who has taken the initiative, seems determined to normalise relations with Pakistan. That the gesture has been praised in Washington, Moscow and London indicates how anxious the world is for New Delhi and Islamabad to come to an understanding so that the region is not plagued by war or hostilities and it prospers economically. After all, the largest population of the poor lives in this part of the world. Modi, whatever his past, has taken a step towards a bright future. And everyone should endeavour to ensure that he succeeds.

Ultimately, it all depends on Modi. He has to control the hotheads in his party and those in the RSS. If they once again talk about building the Ram temple

The writer is an eminent Indian columnist.