

Trying to be a first-time reporter on the average American newspaper is like trying to play Bach's 'St. Matthew's Passion' on a ukulele.

Bagdikian's Observation

Civic volunteers and citizenry

A motor-biker riding without a helmet was beaten to death by a civic volunteer at Madhyamgram recently. It shows the way civic volunteers have been trained by the authorities. CVs are not policemen, they are 'volunteers' to assist regular policemen. The urge for appointment of civic volunteers arose out of the ruling party's political compulsion of providing jobs to young unemployed men who did not have much education. The West Bengal Government informed the Calcutta High Court in March last year, that in April, 2013, 875 candidates for civic police were interviewed in a single day and another 1,351 on another day, four days later. Recruitments were made from them for two police stations. The High Court bench asked the Advocate General whether the interview board had enough time to interview so many candidates in one day. The reply was that the interviews were taken without a break from 8 a.m. till the next morning.

The AG also volunteered the information that 875 candidates were interviewed in one day in and another 1,351 on another day in April. This shows the hasty nature of the interviews and suggests the ruling party's eagerness to give jobs to boys who were eligible to be recruited if they had passed the Class VIII exam. An advertisement by the Commissioner of Police, Kolkata, issued on September 21, 2017, said the civic volunteers could be 'demobilized', among other reasons, for indiscipline and involvement in a criminal case.

The Madhyamgram incident is a poor commentary on the quality of discipline and professional training imparted to them. Local people have complained that civic volunteers in the area had been known for their misbehavior with the people and for highhandedness. This must have been known to the local police authorities but for reasons best known to them they chose not to do anything till Saturday's gruesome murder. The accused civic volunteer has been arrested and murder charge under Sec. 302 IPC has been slapped on him. Both the death of the motor biker and the possible conviction of the civic volunteer could have been avoided if the CVs were properly trained and made aware of their responsibilities and how to discharge them. The brutal death of a citizen should now wake up the police authorities to be more careful of the recruitment and training of CVs. It should be ensured that hoodlums patronized by this or that faction of the ruling party are not recruited as 'civic volunteers'.

Sensitive issues Bangladesh faces

REFLEX ACTION

Mrinal K Biswas

Before Bangladesh elections are held in the year-end this neighbouring country has to contend with issues which will surely have repercussions even beyond her borders. But the issues nevertheless will persist in some forms or others with whatever the outcomes of the elections.

First of course is how far Myanmar is prepared to take back the staggering number of 688,000 Rohingya refugees who fled to Bangladesh after a severe army counter-insurgency operations maiming the Rohingyas people at large following 24 August Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) strikes on Myanmar military establishments. The international outcry on the fast developing refugee issue was caustically articulated by Zaid Ra'ad al-Hussain, UN high commissioner for human rights, as "a textbook example of ethnic cleansing." He even saw elements of genocide present while speaking at the UN Human Rights Council last December at Geneva. (UN defines genocide as acts intended to destroy a national, ethnic, racial or religious group in whole or in part). The Rohingyas extremists' violent attacks on the State military establishments had missed international attention by then but the potent threat assuming the character of pan-Islamic extremism has made India and some countries quite concerned. At the very time of Rohingyas unprisings and exodus India moved in multiple directions: Asked Myanmar to exert restraint while dealing with Rohingyas extremism, helped Bangladesh in her relief operations during refugee influx, struck an agreement with Myanmar for economic development of Rohingyas-concentrated Rakhine province with India's help, looked positively on the Bangladesh-Myanmar agreement for repatriation of refugees while making it known that some 40,000 Rohingyas taking shelter in India will also be deported.

The Sk. Hasina Bangladesh government will politically gain on the domestic ground and internationally if it can effectively take up voluntary repatriation of Rohingyas refugees in next two years, as agreed. The first phase of repatriation set to start on 23 January was held up for lack of preparations on both sides of agreement parties. There are reports of continued army operations in Rakhine. But Bangladesh Hasina government is understandably keen to send back a sizable number of Muslim Rohingyas before the elections to

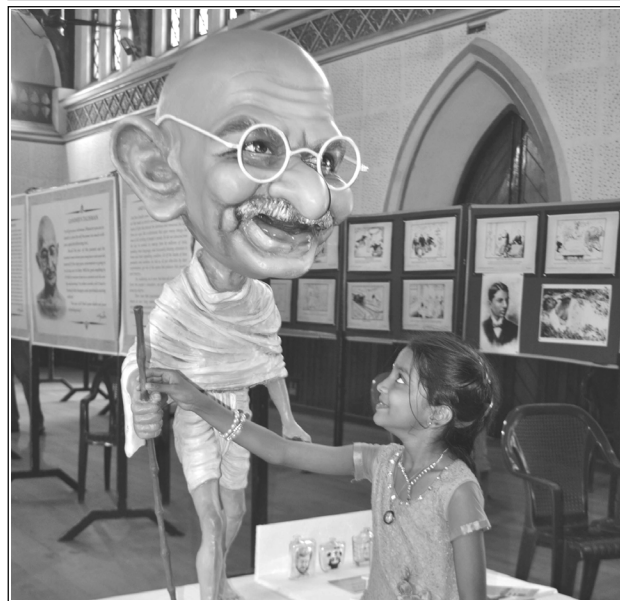
circumvent any possible opposition ploy of exploiting the situation pregnant with Islamic fundamentalism. This is a hard test for Bangladesh. For Bangladesh, and for the Hasina government in particular, accessing the Teesta river water is another issue to be resolved with India, before elections. After former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's failure to agree for sharing of the river water originating in Sikkim State of India because of West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's intransigence his successor Narendra Modi could only go a half way to assuage the Bangladesh feelings of deprivation. The present rulers of Bangladesh are hardly enthused by Modi's assurance to his counterpart Sk Hasina Wajed for an eventual agreement on the Teesta river water. Since elections are not very far off Bangla leaders belonging to Awami League want some tangible results to keep off Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and its dishard anti-India ally, Jamaat-e-Islami, for any profit-booking in the polls alleging Sk Hasina is too soft for India. The India government, careful of West Bengal's stated position of not enough water in the Teesta even to cater "our own requirements," has initiated a move to sign an interim agreement with Bangladesh. This is a significant development for the Bangla leaders of present disposition. However, India is found in an awkward position when Bangladesh Parliament was given to understand that an interim agreement on the Teesta had been drafted for signing, ostensibly before elections. It is obvious a Teesta water sharing is a compulsion for Bangladesh, obligation for India.

After Begum Khaleda Zia's failure to win India's support for holding the next Bangladesh elections with a caretaker government, without Sk Hasina's Awami League at the hot seat of power, Begum Zia's BNP has not only hardened its attitude on the Awami League government it has intensified an anti-India tirade to the satisfaction of

Jamaat-e-Islami. Significantly, both Awami League and BNP seem eager to hold talks with BJP in India. BNP, sensing declining Hindu support for their traditional attachment for the Awami League, Begum's party is trying to balance its political moves with a strategy of goading the 12 per cent of the total minority votes stop going to the Awami League. A minority party is emerging this time in Bangladesh. It is however certain that BNP will enter into the election fray and hold-coyot-poll stand will be given up this time.

Sk Hasina's government is no more a secure set-up considering reports of coups spreading time and again. Apart from some military aspirants and other men of uniform wanting to directly involving themselves in government affairs the Islamist radicals remain a potential threat. Most of them are rallying under Jammat ul-Mujahiddeen Bangladesh and Ansarulah Baganag. Even Myanmar's Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) is quite active in Bangladesh and Rohingyas are known to providing foot soldiers to all these extra-parliamentary parties which are continuing their clandestine armed operations with or without support of Pakistan's ISI and ISIS of the Middle East. Indeed, ARSA appears to be the headache of Myanmar, Bangladesh and India all at the same time. Bangladesh claim of demolition of all anti-India terror camps is significant in this context. The serial murders of professed secularists working with their bloggers have stopped but this is not end of the story as yet.

The stand-off the judiciary and Parliament is a severe blot on Bangladesh democracy. Prime Minister Sk. Hasina came down heavily on Supreme Court Chief Justice S K Sinha before his sabbatical abroad. This judge belonging to the minority community was made the chief of the judiciary at Hasina's promptings but lost her confidence when Justice Sinha approvingly referred to a Pakistan court order that led to Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's disqualification from office. Sinha's resignation or forced leave demand followed soon. Though Justice Sinha left for Australia to leave the Bangladesh top court did not quite appreciate the Awami League move for punitive action. If this recalcitrance persists Bangladesh will delve into a deeper crisis.



A girl touching the statue of Mahatma Gandhi's photography exhibition organised by Kerala Public Relations and Cultural Department in Thiruvananthapuram on Monday

Surveys on India under BJP rule

With what face was Prime Minister Narendra Modi preparing to stand up and deliver his plenary address to the World Economic Forum on January 23, 2018 knowing that, only the other day, anti-poverty charity Oxfam had in its report indicted his government of having failed miserably to make a dent on poverty in India? Back of his mind, did it even lurk that one per cent of India's 125 crore Indians had cornered 73 per cent of the national income generated in 2017?

As a matter of fact, the 140-member India's delegation to Davos was entirely packed with representatives of the 1 per cent, from the CEOs to Shahrukh Khan and Karan Johar. For far too long has this minority of Indians pocketed the spoils of India's development and Modi's 'Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas' was a hollow slogan, mouthed at glossy meets such as the WEF. India under Modi has been a failure. India under Modi slid further behind China and Pakistan on the 'inclusive development' front. In the circumstances, the IMF estimate that India's GDP would grow by 7.4 per cent was nothing to crow about because it was just that — an estimate, nothing more. According to Oxfam, up to 670

million Indians saw just one per cent increase in their wealth while the richest one per cent stole 73 per cent of the national income. "The wealth of the elite 1 per cent increased by 209.13 billion rupees (\$32.7 billion), equivalent to the total budget of the Indian government last financial year," the Oxfam report said. Indian billionaires' wealth increased by \$76.5 billion (Rs 4891 billion) — from \$247 billion (Rs 15,778 billion) to over \$324 billion (Rs 20,676 billion) making India one of the most unequal in the world, the report added. It was one per cent versus the rest, and nothing short of loot. Modi should not forget that starvation deaths have not stopped in India. Those in power are saving one thing and doing another. The only government policy succeeding has been the deliberate one to line the pockets of the already uncommonly shameless rich.

It would not be wrong to say that the rich are being subsidised in India and the poor are being crushed under the burden of poverty. Land has been taken from them, employment does not exist. For whom was Modi wooing global investors at Davos? For who was he hosting the dinner for the globe industry bosses of 18 countries on Monday night? Activists and

development economists are worried at the accumulation of wealth in the hands of the rich in India. Last year, 58 per cent of national income went to India's richest one per cent. Modi's policies that pamper the rich in the name of achieving higher growth have failed.

The growth that occurred has been accompanied by the absolute impoverishment of large numbers. Such inequalities undermined the foundations of India and its survival as a secular democratic republic. Oxfam said the figures suggested that "approximately two-thirds of billionaire wealth was the product of inheritance, monopoly and cronyism. The report 'Reward Work Not Wealth' blamed the race to the bottom between countries on tax and on wages as a top contributor to deepening inequality, along with the crushing of workers' rights. It would take around 17.5 days for the best-paid executive at a top

Indian garment company to earn what a minimum wage worker in rural India will earn in their lifetime (presuming 50 years at work)," the Oxfam report said.

That was the certificate Prime Minister Modi took with him to the WEF. From taking office in 2014, the Modi government has announced schemes to increase spending on infrastructure, including ports and roads, to boost economic growth but it has fared miserably in combating poverty. Its efforts to cut down inequality and combating poverty have been woefully inadequate. "It needs to stop the super-rich and the corporates from continuing to hoard India of its wealth," Nisha Agrawal, CEO of Oxfam India said. The government has to invest more in agriculture and implement fully social protection schemes such as rural job scheme and the Food Security Act that already exist. India's wealth inequality also contributes to lack of access to quality medical care

for the poor. Oxfam India urged Modi before he left for Davos to tax the super-rich and ensure that the Indian economy "works for everyone and not just the fortunate few". In an online survey conducted by Oxfam, 73 per cent Indians said they wanted "the gap between the rich and poor to be addressed very urgently". In the survey with sample size of 11,000 Indians, a majority of respondents said CEOs should accept pay cuts up to 60 per cent. Oxfam said it used calculations to compare returns to shareholders and CEO compensation with returns to ordinary workers for its analysis. It used data from Credit Suisse's annual Global Wealth Databook and the Forbes billionaires list. India lifted 120 million people from extreme poverty between 1990 and 2013 but one out of two Indians remained vulnerable to falling back into poverty. India's march to reducing poverty has been significantly slower compared to China. Over the same 1990-2013 period, China reduced the number of people living in extreme poverty from 756 million to 25 million.

The message to Modi was pretty clear: It will be very difficult for you to return to power in 2019, not with your record. (IPA)

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