

# Should NGOs get involved in Politics?

To eradicate poverty we have to send good, honest, patriotic and pro-poor people to form government I think the NGOs can play a very good and effective role in this regard. The NGO activists are closer to people and more friendly and caring to the poor than the present day politicians. I am inclined to support the involvement of NGO activists and the primary group or Federation Members of the NGOs, who are representatives of the poor, in politics. I don't think that involvement of some NGO activists in politics will cause any deterioration of the quality of service of the NGOs to the poor; because the NGO activists have acquired the ability to serve the poor as a class and irrespective of their religious or political affiliation or liking.

MD. GIASH UDDIN PATHAN

A few days ago, the local office of the World Bank released its report entitled "Economics and Governance of NGOs in Bangladesh." The newspapers reported that after the presentation of the report, Dr. Hasan Zaman, chief author of the report told reporters that the World Bank had praised the role of the NGOs in health, education, women-empowerment and other development sectors in Bangladesh. He also said that they had proposed the establishment of an independent Commission to oversee NGO activities in the country and that, for the sake of transparency, the NGOs should publish their audit reports for information of the people in general. He further stated to the reporters that the World Bank report had suggested that in the legislations relating to NGOs the government should not have arbitrary power to interfere with the administrative and management structures of the NGOs such as dissolving or superseding the executive committee or governing body and replacing the same with appointed administrator. Dr. Zaman also observed that NGOs should not get involved in politics, as they are not political parties.

atives of all leading NGOs having micro-credit programmes, PKSE, Grameen Bank, Federation of NGOs in Bangladesh (FNB) besides concerned officials of the World Bank. In that meeting while offering my comments on the contents of the draft report, I invited attention of the World Bank officials and others present to some provisions of the draft "Micro-credit (Programme Management) Act, 2005" which the govt. was preparing to enact for regulating the activities of the NGOs concerning micro-credit. I pointed out that the draft law was going to provide for establishment of a Regulatory Authority with enormous powers to regulate micro-credit operations of the NGOs. The proposed Regulatory Authority would have the power to remove the chairman or any member of the governing body including the chief executive of the NGO and also to fine any of them up to five lacs taka for, in the opinion of the Authority, activities harmful to the interest of the members or depositors. I said that such arbitrary powers of the Regulatory Authority would be harmful for the smooth and efficient functioning of the Micro-Credit Organizations and there would be every possibility of misuse of the powers for political considerations. I requested the World Bank to take up the matter with the govt. to persuade them to refrain from including such provisions in the draft law, in consideration of the fact that micro-credit activities of the NGOs had been playing a very important and effective role in

through human resource development. These NGOs activists have realised that poverty cannot be eradicated without empowering the poor in all the necessary areas of life and that is the way to convert them into real human resources. Providing the poor with relief and doing only social welfare activities will not do. Empowerment is not charity or favour to the poor; rather it is their justified demand and legitimate right. The poor have to be empowered in all the necessary areas of life so that they can themselves come out of the vicious circle of poverty and improve their standard of living themselves. Political empowerment of the poor is no less important than their empowerment in other areas and it has to be effected simultaneously in all the areas to achieve the right objective in the shortest possible time.

3. I have not yet seen the final version of the report, but I am happy to know that the Bank has suggested that the govt. should not have such arbitrary powers. I would suggest that the Bank follow up these points with the Govt. so that such provisions are omitted from the draft law or provisions be made for taking such actions against the Governing body or chief Executive of the NGOs through courts of law.

4. Now, regarding involvement of NGOs in politics; Dr. Zaman has observed that NGOs should not get involved in politics as they are not political parties. I have some comments to make on this observation by Dr. Zaman. First of all I think that it is probably not proper to say that "NGOs" should or should not get involved in politics. Actually it is not the NGOs which take part in politics, rather, it is the NGO activists or the members of primary groups (primary level organisation of the poor formed by NGOs) or the union or thana federations of such primary groups who take part in political activities and I do not see any strong ground for denying this right to them.

5. I have been associated with the NGO sector of this country for a long time and I have seen, and I believe, that there are still NGO activists who are really dedicated and committed, and have been working devotedly to achieve their objective of eradication of poverty cannot be ensured gradually. But the poor are not politically organised and they severely lack in political consciousness and these are the main reasons for their political powerlessness. They are not fully aware of the value of their votes and do not have the capability to cast their votes freely and prudently and thus to elect candidates of their choice, i.e., those who are patriotic, honest and pro-poor. Black money and muscle power control elections in this country and the poor are the helpless victims of these two evils. The free and proper exercise of the right of franchise of the poor is obstructed and influenced by black money of the dishonest candidates, their musclemen and also by intentional, politically motivated and distorted interpretation of the religious doctrines by the fundamentalists. So the poor need to be organised politically and to be made aware of their political rights and responsibilities to create an enabling atmosphere for the free exercise of their right of franchise.

6. The NGO activists also firmly believe that good governance in the country is a pre-requisite for empowering the poor and eradicating poverty. There is no denying the fact that in Bangladesh good governance is totally absent. But good governance cannot be had without establishing true democracy because democracy is the best form of governance in the world. Again true democracy cannot be established without good, patriotic and honest people in the govt. To have true democracy we have to have good people both in the local govt. bodies and in the parliament.

7. NGO activists have seen that true democratic culture is absent in our country and so good governance is not being established. Therefore, democracy is meaningless to the poor who make up 90% of the population and a handful of rich and powerful people are enjoying all the benefits of democracy and so the poor are becoming poorer day by day and the rich are becoming richer. The poor have to be politically empowered so as to be able to succeed in this political struggle. The poor will continue to be deprived of the benefits and advantages of democracy if their representation in the state power

# For science to serve society

In the run up to the next general election, the S&T community has to make their case to all political parties and convince them to give S&T issues due importance in their election manifesto. Different S&T professional societies like Bangladesh Association for the Advancement of Science, The Institution of Engineers, Bangladesh, and other professional bodies for physical, agricultural, biological, medical, earth, and social sciences should come together to initiate national debate on how this country should proceed in creating its own S&T base. S&T leaders have to be engaged in convincing the politicians, decision makers, and other stakeholders that S&T expenditure does pay back in the long run. The civil society also has a big role to play in developing nationwide awareness, thereby creating conditions favourable to S&T in this country. Science indeed has the power to give a lot to the society. But for science to serve the society, society has to serve science first.

DR. ASMA HASEEB

any country that aspires to call itself a modern nation to invest heavily in science and technology... The fruits of this foresight are now widely visible... This is placed it (India) in strong position to engage in the global knowledge economy, rather than remaining on the margins... Other countries in our neighbourhood including China, Thailand, Malaysia and Vietnam are also aggressively pursuing their S&T programmes. Take the case of Vietnam that has an economic condition similar to ours. Recently, the Vietnamese government embarked an ambitious national S&T effort. How much importance Vietnam attaches to the development of indigenous S&T can be gauged from the fact that it even created a new position of vice prime minister and put him in charge of the S&T activities. In 1995, the Vietnamese government supported nine thousand S&T research projects in different institutions and Universities.

For S&T to be an effective tool in our economic development, substantial investments have to be made in creating S&T infrastructure and supporting research projects in the short as well as long term. Investment in S&T in Bangladesh is minuscule compared to what is necessary for S&T to have an impact on the economy. Statistics show that the annual S&T expenditure in our country is about 0.22% of GNP. Of this amount, the actual expenditure in research and development was only 0.09% in the early 1990s, which declined to 0.01% in 1996. In contrast, the Vienna Programme of Action on Science and Technology for Development recommended a yearly expenditure of 1% of GNP in a developing country. Developed countries and some aspiring devel-

oping countries spend 2-4% of GNP annually on S&T. To get the most out of S&T activities a sound base in terms of investment, human resource, and knowledge has to be created. It is, therefore, no wonder that the industrial sector of this country could not benefit from our feeble indigenous S&T activities. The government in this country has to play the leading role in the area of investment in S&T. Given the infant state of our industry, one cannot reasonably expect a lot of S&T investment by the private sector at this stage. In fact, be it in a developed or a developing country, the major share of S&T expenditure is met by the state. Even in the most capitalist of countries, USA, the government spends a hundred billion of tax payers' dollars each year in funding S&T research. The Indian government in 2003-2004, spent 24,226 crore rupees on S&T and the spending is rising every year. Obviously, one cannot expect our government to spend a similar sum. But it needs to start spending a meaningful sum of money on S&T which is long overdue. As our industry expands, the private sector will take an increasing share of the burden in the long run. But at this stage, there is no alternative to spending public money in S&T.

For a national S&T programme to be meaningful an efficient management system is needed. There are successful S&T management models existing in different countries. These models depend on the participation of scientists/technologists in the management of the national S&T activities. The key element of successful S&T management is that it engages researchers on time bound, goal oriented research programmes commensurate with actual national needs. It creates an envi-

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# Our bridge to the world

Written words are the fountainhead of civilization. And they on the other hand are the offspring of our thoughts. Our thoughts for their profundity need constant stimulation to soar with imagination, to delve deeper like an explorer and to seek like a voyager. Thoughts find permanence in written words. One must read to write, confer to speak, more because, we live in a modern time, in a world that keeps advancing. The worth of a country or a society depends on how well they move with the time. A country and a society ready and up to date in their comprehension and knowledge of the world ride the advances of the time into the future. Reading makes us ready. And the habit of English reading and writing can be an enabling vehicle for Bangladesh to ride into the ranks of developed nations.

SYED MAQSUD JAMIL

THE viewer in front of the television screen has the power of a sovereign. There are over 70 channels waiting to come alive at the mere push of the programme button. Today quite a number of them are Bengali channels. The attention of the viewer is naturally diverted ready to travel down into the fidgety thumb at the slightest realisation that the show is slowing down. Most television shows are therefore tailored to the attention span of the viewers. The standard time span is 20 to 30 minutes including commercial breaks. It is a fact that television brings great development gain for countries like Bangladesh with a large population and with a low rate of functional literacy. But the task of improving the quality of learning, in terms of functional knowledge and communication skill, is equally important. It is evident that Bangladesh has to obtain the functional ability of communicating effectively with the outside world. And at the same time to raise the enabling quality of its expatriate community to compete well with other nations. The ability to communicate in English has immense benefits. Written words in particular are enduring treasures that bring ability, enlightenment, imagination and delight. We get a ready account of the labours of mankind in the past and the about the goals they had laboured for.

Academy book fair has become a national festival. I, however, don't know whether the country has seen an equal increase in the publication of technical and medical books in Bengali. In Bangladesh, generally, the English medium boys and girls are known for the cultivation of English and to a lesser degree for excellence in it. Honestly, the love of language and written words languishes in the case of English, while it is appreciable for Bengali. The love of a language, if it seeks self-improvement through greater aesthetic fulfillment, has to explore beyond the home of our mother tongue. It applies for all pursuits that they should begin with love and should be spurred on by an ever-increasing appetite. The joy one finds remains as a lifetime enchantment. President Thomas Jefferson, the third President of America, had great love for books that found expression in his observation 'I live for books'. President Kennedy used to finish reading a book every night. He was however a speed-reader.

Sir Winston Churchill, a politician, went on to earn the Nobel Prize for literature for his writings on the Second World War. Honest Abe, or Abraham Lincoln, rose from the humble beginnings of a log cabin and ultimately triumphed to become America's most righteous President by winning a war against slavery. He persisted with his love of written words since his days as the sales clerk. It made him into one of the finest communicators among the leaders of the world. The speeches he made, the words he articulated became lasting definitions of government, of national responsibility and the duties of a leader. He personally wrote the Gettysburg Address in his tent and the speech was over in two and a half minutes. Yet, it endures as a precise defini-

tion of the government that 'government of the people, by the people, shall not perish from the earth.' Reading transports us to a comforting retreat, a haven of delight, and a niche of enlightenment. We become one with the imaginary and real characters that writers develop with the profundity of their thoughts and the probing nature of their facts. It can be a realm of perennial youth even at an advanced age. In fact, reading is our right to know and writing is our right to express. The right to know on a broader level, seeks fulfilment through enlightenment; and celebration of life through the stimulation of our imagination. The right to write seeks to release oneself in the permanence of thoughts through sharing. A mind that seeks to know by reading is befriended by information and knowledge. It builds an inner world where we relax, renew and rejoice. And a mind that travels beyond has a greater view of the world. The ones who hold this view have a better understanding of the world when it comes to building the bridge to the world. The world speaks many languages, holds many beliefs. But the need of communication among nations is not defeated in unilingual nations. A shared history has developed common languages like English. For Francophone countries, it is French and for the Latin countries, it is Spanish and Portuguese. Accordingly, over the last two and half centuries the countries of South Asia have a common vehicle to travel in English language. In the last 57 years, India has been very successful in keeping English as a language of her own to the greater benefit of the country. So has Sri Lanka and to a lesser extent Pakistan. These countries stay on the road to the modern world by using English language as an instrument for development. For Bangladesh, the constancy of purpose as to the use of English language has not been even over the last three decades. The sixties saw the growth of an enlightened middle class in our country. It was to a great extent inspired by brave journalists, romantic socialists and a handful of pucca sahib educationists. The pioneer in this field was late Abdus Salam the editor of the then 'The Pakistan Observer'. I also remember with great regard the late lamented Enayetullah Khan for his lonely crusade with avant-garde weekly 'Holiday'. The standard of English prospered on the love of English language cultivated by the English newspapers and periodicals of the time. In recent times, The Daily Star is doing a creditable job of rallying people around the cause of upholding the standard of English education. I should pay a personal tribute to late S.N.Q. (Syed Nasru Qader) Zulfikar Ali an eminent educationist of the country and a steadfast practitioner of the art of English writing. He wrote a weekly column under the title 'As I See It' in 'Observer' under the pen name 'Astryx'. He was not a rebel neither was he brash, but he carried his love for English language to the last day of his life. C.P. Snow, P.G. Wodehouse, James Joyce and all other titans of English literature were among his many companions. He loved them; he lived them and encouraged others to discover the treasure. Written words are the fountainhead of civilization. And they on the other hand are the offspring of our thoughts. Our thoughts for their profundity need constant stimulation to soar with imagination, to delve deeper like an explorer and to seek like a voyager. Thoughts find permanence in written words. One must read to write, confer to speak, more because, we live in a modern time, in a world that keeps advancing. The worth of a country or a society depends on how well they move with the time. A country and a society ready and up to date in their comprehension and knowledge of the world ride the advances of the time into the future. Reading makes us ready. And the habit of English reading and writing can be an enabling vehicle for Bangladesh to ride into the ranks of developed nations.

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