

Solving Hill Tracts Problem

Coming Monday the authorities of Bangladesh and India are to meet to expedite the return of the refugees from India. The talks acquire a special urgency in view of the expressed desire of the refugees to participate in the ensuing parliamentary polls. The Advisor for Foreign Affairs told this journal that steps have been taken to speed up the repatriation process to enable the refugees to take part in the election.

We are happy at this development. The willingness of the refugees to take part in the electoral process is a definite expression of their faith in the neutrality of the present government and in the genuine nature of the coming election. Ensuring a proper representation from our tribal areas in the new parliament will be a sure way of building that critical trust which is so essential for a stable and long term solution of the Hill Tracts problem that has eluded us for so long.

The origin of the problem lies in the insensitivity of the erstwhile government of Pakistan concerning the welfare of the tribal people. No genuine attempt was made to solicit their views on the various development projects that were built there. As to the tribal's participation in the political and the decision making process, the less said the better. Bangladesh can be said to have inherited the problem. Acute poverty in other parts of the country and the tremendous pressure on limited land resulting in a steady migration in those areas did not make the resolution of the problem any easier. The rise of Shanti Bahini and their programme of armed insurgency, forcing the use of our army to protect innocent lives, further complicated the problem.

After years of negotiations and many failed peace plans, the Local Government Council Bill was enacted in 1989 in consultation with the tribal leaders including those from Shanti Bahini. An election to the local bodies was held in January '89, leading to the setting up of the three local councils. Under the Act 22 subjects, save defense, foreign affairs and finance, were to be given to these elected bodies. To ensure that the tribals continue to enjoy the control of the local councils, provision was incorporated in the Act that non-tribals could not become chairmen of these bodies. The councils were also given power to raise tribal police.

The root of the current controversy is the demand by the Tribal Students' body for the dissolution of these elected bodies. APSU and some political leaders, by giving support to this demand, has given it added credibility. The point to be made here is that the Tribal students' body has not given any specific reason for its demand except that the election was held during the discredited Ershad regime. It might be recalled that this election to the local body was hailed by national and foreign observers to have been very fair and free. Following the election and the setting up of the councils more than 22,000 refugees have returned to Bangladesh, according to official figures. This is as strong an indication as there can be that the problems is moving towards a possible solution.

At this juncture we have the demand for the dissolution of the local government by the Tribal students. If we do so, for the sake of argument, then we are back to square one. Where do we go from there. Is it the system that is being objected to, or is it the people who have been elected? In case of the latter the next election will be due in January '92 when a new set of people could assume control of the local bodies.

Since there is no clear articulation of alternatives and since a form of representative body is already in place and a process of resolution to the decades long problem has been set into motion, it is our view that any drastic change now may lead to further complication of the complex tribal problem and we may lose whatever little that has been gained through years of peace negotiations. It is to the credit of the major political parties that they have not made the Hill Tract problem an election issue. Given the sensitive nature of the problem and the fluid state in which our national politics is now in, we urge our leaders.

To examine the Hill Tract issue in great details before making public pronouncements on it. In fact it is highly advisable that all leading political parties should have consultation among themselves on this vital national issue and try to adopt a collective position. This will give sufficient strength and the necessary public support to the process of finding a durable solution to this complicated and territorially important problem.

The Caring Society

How does one find out if the society one belongs to is a caring one? By counting schools, colleges and medical clinics which have been set up by public-spirited individuals or by foundations established by philanthropists? On both these counts, Bangladesh is said to be lagging behind, which was not the case with Bengal in British India. Most colleges set up in the districts of the province started off as private colleges, established by public-spirited individuals. True, some of these individuals wanted to leave their mark on their home towns they left for a different kind of living in Calcutta. That was long time ago. The pity is, the tradition has not been sustained by affluent members of our society who also leave their home towns, like Rajshahi, Bogra, Sylhet or Rangpur, to settle in Dhaka.

In many countries, funds contributed to charitable causes are exempted from income tax. This must also be the case in Bangladesh. Unfortunately, as some cynics might say, this would hardly provide much of an incentive when a sizeable number of people — we nearly said, most citizens — are more interested in tax evasion rather than in tax exemption.

There are good reasons for raising this issue now. We assume, candidates nominated by various parties for the forthcoming parliamentary election will be facing many tough questions from the voters on major issues facing the nation, from a possible change in the political system to the fate of the Special Powers Act. These are undoubtedly good valid questions. But we cannot help wondering if it would not be appropriate for a voter to ask a candidate if he had ever made a contribution towards the setting up of his village school or in establishing a private medical clinic. What is his record in social service anyway? It would be good if mass meetings addressed by candidates are turned into public hearings on the credentials of the nominees. We may thus get an idea as to what kind of individuals we will be sending to our parliament.

ALONG with our transition to a representative government we must ask ourselves the question whether we are creating the conditions that make for the functioning of a healthy democracy. I raise this question with a specific issue in mind, namely that of the number of political parties that exist in Bangladesh now. In fact there are so many that we are all confused as to their total number. Whatever the figure, 90 of them asked for election symbols for the ensuing polls. Of them 21 fielded no candidates and another 13 only one each. The reality of the situation is that except for a handful of them, all the other political parties are little more than a gathering of convenience of a few individuals, working more as pressure lobbies for local, group or even individual interest.

What has led to this situation? Is it a sign of our democratic spirit that seeks a thousand expression? Or that of a schizophrenic nation not knowing what it wants and thus allowing itself to be so splintered? Perhaps both. I cannot deny the fact that there is an expression of freedom in having so many political parties. It constitutes a practical demonstration of a fundamental right guaranteed by our constitution. Yes, it would have been so but for the fact, as already mentioned, most of the parties are not the democratic expression of a social cause but examples of using the format of political parties to promote personal, family or local ambition.

There is also the question of our peculiar psychological disposition that to some extent, in my opinion, lends itself to the type of political situation that we now have. We are a highly individualistic people without some of the positive aspects of individualism. For example, going one's own way alone can lead to creativity, risk taking and pioneering activities. In our case it has led to a sort of aversion to any sort of long term collective action. The undirected rebelliousness, habitual impatience and a deeply suspicious

nature all lead to the process of splitting and counter splitting of our political forces. We are not comfortable unless we are the leaders ourselves. We set up a party, adopt its very own by-laws and rules of conduct and follow them as long as they serve to keep us in the helm of affairs. The moment the table is turned and those very rules threaten our privileged position, we refuse to play the game and split the party and form one of our own.

Personalised nature of our politics and of the political parties is another contributory factor for our splintered political canvas.

Take the current election-cumference for example. We all talk of what Sheikh Hasina or Begum Zia said. We are hardly concerned of the position of the AL or the BNP. Do the leaders say what the party as a whole thinks. Or the party says what the leaders decide. Except for the occasional faint voice of one or two others we hardly know what the other leaders are saying. If anything, during this crucial time of winning the peoples' hearts.

Decline of ideological basis of political parties has dealt a serious blow to the cohesion of political forces. Nationalism, socialism, communism or religion served as the basis of forming political parties in the past. Issues of language, autonomy, economic rights and cultural identity added to the basis of formation of political parties in the post partition period. During the Pakistani phase the political parties by and large conformed to the overall ideological or socio-economic and cultural base as mentioned above. However the charismatic growth of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as the towering figure of our politics in the late sixties and his transition to Bangabandhu in the liber-

Political Parties, A Few Too Many

tion phase so dwarfed all other political leaders that Awami League without realising, lost its inner leadership hierarchy. In the later period the formation of the BNP and the Jatiya Party took place around the personality of their founders, the others in the parties with a few exceptions were basically hangers on.

Let us come back to the question, what has led us into all this? Late Abdul Mansur Ahmad, in many of his political essays, attributed this phenomenon to lack of democracy and the infrequency of holding elections. His view was that a regular public verdict on political parties would naturally

eliminate those that do not promote social good. Only parties that serve the people would survive a democratic process. A natural offshoot of autocracy, he said, is the mushroom growth of political parties.

We have all witnessed the bias of autocratic rulers for a splintered electorate. They like it because it gives a picture of a people divided. This enables them to say that no political point of view enjoys majority support, as such there is no alternative "but for me to stay on to serve the public". Thus while "serving" the people the autocrat would be able to create his own coterie and at a convenient moment float his own political party and put on a democratic facade, as was done by Ershad.

A continued democratic process would therefore constitute the best and the most stable solution to our present divisive political scene. That however is a long term solution. We will need at least three of four regular elections to bring that about, a tall order given the tragic tale of political evolution in Bangladesh over the last two decades. What do we do in the meanwhile? There is talk about some sort of legislation to curb the growth of political parties.

There is no denying the fact that at some stage recourse to legal means will have to be taken. But we will have to make sure that it is done with the participation of all concerned and in no arbitrary fashion. There are examples in other democratic societies that we can emulate. It is a common practice to de-regis-

ter political parties that fail to get a minimum number of votes in an election. It is similar to the practice of forfeiting the deposit if a candidate fails to win a minimum percentage of the popular vote. Financial accountability can be another process of regulating the growth of political parties. Failure to submit a detailed account of election campaign funds—already made a requirement by the Election Commission—can be used to reduce the number of political parties.

The ensuing elections will show which are the parties that enjoy public confidence and which do not. Not counting the seats won, but on the basis of a minimum percentage of votes gained, we should really try to bring some semblance of discipline into the myriad of political parties that exist now. Politics is not a trivial matter and formation of political parties should not be so either.

There are two questions here. One is of a mandatory change of leadership after serving two or three terms of a fixed period. The other is of a periodic testing of the popularity of the leadership through the regular holding of a party's general body meeting. In the latter case the leadership may continue for as long it enjoys the confidence of the members—as in a parliamentary form of government where the leader of the house can continue to be so for any number of years as long as he or she enjoys the confidence of the House.

Democratic practice within the party is important for many reasons. It makes the leadership accountable, sensitive and keeps it in touch with the workers. For the workers it provides training in democracy. For the mid-level leadership it provides an opportunity to prove their mettle, gain the confidence of the general members and rise in the party hierarchy. Most important, it provides an opportunity for the entry and play of new ideas, energies and people in the

party leadership which contributes towards making the political parties representative institutions that they claim and are supposed to be.

The tendency to go out and form one's own party, just because of the failure to become its leader can be directly linked to the absence of inner party democracy, not to mention the egotism and over ambition of some of the individuals concerned. If the party leadership does not go through the process of rejuvenation, and is not refurbished from time to time with new people then the tendency to split and breakdown cannot be resisted.

The early days of the Congress and the Muslim League appear light years away with their practice of a party congress every year. Leaders got elected to party positions, served their terms, stepped aside for a while and then got themselves re-elected through winning the confidence of the party workers. Later Mr. Jinnah broke this practice and remained party chief throughout his stewardship of the Pakistan movement. Since then the tradition of a renewal of leadership through an election process within the party gradually disappeared. Today it has reached a stage, that a party worker is suspected of disloyalty if he would ask for an election of his own party hierarchy.

Needless to say that such a state of inner party democracy hardly augurs well for establishing national democracy. Now that we have a chance of correcting all the wrongs of the past, it is our hope that all the major political parties will look into this after the election is over. Let us not forget that existence of both a highly splintered body polity as reflected in the 90 odd political parties is as unhealthy for stable democracy as is the fact that our leading political parties do not train their workers in democratic norms and practices through the regular holding of its own party elections.

The writer is Executive Editor of The Daily Star

Representation Proposed for Mountain Provinces

Claro Q. Eosen writes from Manila

REGIONAL autonomy may not be the only path leading towards the achievement of political stability and economic prosperity in the Cordilleras. The Cordilleras consist of mountain provinces in northern Philippines.

With the failure of the proposed Cordillera Autonomous Region to win an endorsement from the various units it covers, proponents of regional autonomy may want to consider other alternatives.

One is representation for Cordillerans in the different branches of government.

In this exercise they can probably learn from the experience of Laos which, like the Philippines, is a poly-ethnic society. Laos has 47 ethnic groups. They account for about 10 per cent of the country's estimated 3.9 million population.

The Philippines, on the other hand, has about 86 tribal communities, making up some 18 per cent of the national population of over 60 million.

The Philippines is just now trying to set up autonomous regions as provided for in the 1986 constitution. Laos actually has set up autonomous zones earlier and had only dismantled the system in 1975.

Both French and American colonial rulers chose to keep

the Laotian ethnic groups as relatively separate entities apparently in pursuit of a "divide and rule" policy.

The French, who made Laos their protectorate in 1893, adopted a cross-racial administrative system which kept the various ethnic groups mainly to themselves.

When the Americans took control of the country in 1954, they set up 16 autonomous zones, a move likewise interpreted as an attempt to keep the nation divided to facilitate colonial rule.

The autonomous zones were only abolished in 1975 when the Lao People's Democratic Republic was formally set up. The move was prompted by the ruling Pathet Lao's belief that "their continuance will only lead to the establishment of Meo political units, separat-

ing the Meos from the Laos." Meos, as explained by Dr. Mayauri Ngaosyvathn in his paper entitled "Politics of Tribes, Tribal Policies in the Lao People's Democratic Republic," is one of the original three main ethnic groupings in the country. The three groups are the Lao Loum (valley-

dwelling villagers), the Kha (uplanders) and the Miao or Meo (highlanders). A minor group is the Mien or Yao whose ancestors arrived in Laos from South China sometime in 1840.

Dr. Ngaosyvathn, who was in Manila for the recent National Conference on Philippine Ethnography: Issues in Cultural Pluralism and Nationalhood, said the Pathet Lao chose to grant ethnic representations to the tribal com-

munities in national and local branches of government rather than perpetuate the autonomous zones setup.

Proportionate representation was ensured for ethnic and non-ethnic leaders in various levels of government. Laotian ethnic minority members

were appointed to positions of authority in the national government.

The possibility of representation instead of autonomy for Cordillerans has emerged following a decision of the Supreme Court that no Cordillera Autonomous Region can be set up with only the province of Ifugao constituting it.

As originally envisioned, the Region was supposed to consist of the provinces of Abra, Benguet, Kalinga-Apayao,

Mountain Province and Ifugao and the city of Baguio.

It was provided for in Republic Act No. 6766, the Cordillera Organic Act, enacted by Congress to implement the Constitutional provision for the creation of separate autonomous regions in the Cordilleras and in Muslim-dominated parts of Mindanao.

Autonomy, as provided for in the Constitution, becomes in effect following the ratification by the majority of population in the affected areas of organic acts passed by Congress.

The Cordilleras are home to the second largest ethnic groupings in the Philippines, next only to the Muslims in Mindanao. The ethnic communities are the Bontoks, Ibalois, Isnegs, Itnegs, Kalins, Ifugaos, Iwaks, Ikalahans and Kankanaeys, who number about a million.

In a plebiscite held in January 1990 for the purpose of ratifying the Cordillera Organic Act, only the province of Ifugao voted in favour of autonomy.

Given the Laotian experience, some experts now advise the Philippine government to consider representation of the Cordillerans in various branches of government.

—Deptheus Asia

WHAT OTHERS SAY

Russians are Protesting

First Lithuania, then Latvia—but the world is transfixed by war in the Gulf. Even so, as the Kremlin again unleashes deadly force, again it faces angry resistance from within. Across the Soviet Union, courageous citizens by the thousands stand up to protest the turn to repression. Their vigorous dissent is a hopeful sign that today's Soviet Union has come a long way from its totalitarian past, too far to retreat. And the protests send a warning to Mikhail Gorbachev that the use of force by a discredited party, military and internal security apparatus will not make the Soviet Union more governable.

Opposition comes from Mr. Gorbachev's old colleagues like former Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze; leaders of other republics like Russia's Boris Yeltsin; and Nikolai Petrakov and Stanislav Shatalin, economic reformers. Meanwhile, newspapers like Komsomolskaya Pravda and Moscow News print accounts of the brutal Baltic events that belie official propaganda.

What may be the most hopeful sign of all is that the revolution against Mr. Gorbachev's turn toward authoritarianism extends beyond leading circles. Railies drew tens of thousands to the streets of Moscow, Leningrad, Sverdlovsk and other Soviet cities. At a time when food shortages are being manipulated to create the impression of chaos, it is reassuring to know that so many ordinary people are prepared to rise in protest against the iron fist.

Mr. Shevardnadze sounded his clarion call against dictatorship a month ago. He called on democrats to rally against reactionary forces. His resignation, on a matter of principle, was unprecedented. Then Mr. Yeltsin spoke out. He cautioned Russians in the Red Army that "violations of law, violence over the people of the Baltics will beget new serious crisis phenomena in Russia herself."

Mr. Petrakov resigned as economic adviser to Mr. Gorbachev and joined Mr. Shatalin and other intellectuals in signing a letter harshly critical of Moscow's use of tanks in Vilnius: "Economic reform has been blocked, censorship of the media reinstated, brazen demagoguery revived and an open war on the Soviet republics declared." Mr. Gorbachev insisted that he is being misunderstood and that he still intends to push for reforms. It is hard to know how he can achieve reforms when he alienates the people needed to bring them about.

—The New York Times.

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

SAARC: Male Summit

Sir, 27-point Male Declaration "reiterating that co-operation among the South Asian countries was necessary for improving the quality of life of peoples of the region" was a renewed hope for a unity in diversity of the seven SAARC countries of the Indian sub-continent. Aged only six years, SAARC's pace in organizational inertia was distinctly positive because of the good neighbourly attitude of the member states at its delayed fifth summit in Maldives.

Born again with the British colonial background, the multi-national South Asian region has yet to achieve harmony at all relations of inter- and inter-SAARC nations toward a regional individuality of greater significance to the rest of the world. The prerequisite for such an objective underscores mutual understanding and cooperation on any issue which

gradually pave the way to prosperous life of the nations concerned.

SAARC leaders appear to have adopted such a forward-looking position with "desire to promote peace, stability, amity, and progress in the region through strict adherence to the principles of UN charter and the Non-aligned Movement particularly respect for the principles of sovereign equality, territorial integrity, national independence, non use of force, non interference in the internal affairs of other states and peaceful settlement of disputes". As an initiator of the concept of regional harmony in South Asia, Bangladesh has been playing a definitive role in the association ever since its formation despite adversities both on her domestic and international fronts. While her disputed territories with bordering India have yet to be demarcated, some other problems like sharing interna-

tional water remain to be taken care of. Only realistic approach to the regional problems should harvest national progress for the India realm; and, for the desired outcome, SAARC will benefit from the instances of similar groups in the world, such as ASEAN, GCC, OAU, BENELUX, COMECON, and EEC.

M. Rahman, Zila School Road, Mymensingh.

Child labour

Sir, There is a convention regarding child labour, which says that children below a certain age should not be forced to work.

However, it is indeed unfortunate that there is no dearth of child labour in our country in violation of the convention. Children of every age, starting from 5 years to anything below 12, are seen doing all sorts of jobs, and odd jobs.

They are domestic aids, hawkers, hotel cleaners, on the street errand boys; practically engaged in just anything which can be done by them, even if erratically.

It is really a sad sight, and we should as civilized people be ashamed of ourselves at this state of things. But it seems we

have become hard and blunt like the concrete city we live in. Nothing moves us.

We are no longer conscious humans. We do not think in ways of educating and rehabilitating these children, rather we like them to grow up uneducated, half-clad. We think not even of a way out.

Don't we feel concerned for the society we belong to? These neglected children are part of it. Their accumulated frustration may one day shake the edifice down.

Rehana Begum, Bangsal, Dhaka.

Loudspeakers

Sir, Those of us who stay in the old part of the city are plagued with a very peculiar and annoying kind of problem—the use of loudspeakers in abundance. Every occasion is graced by the use (or overuse) of this very 'popular' instrument.

The loudspeaker broadcasts popular Hindi songs, played on a rusty record player and amplified at as much as high pitch. Sometimes, there are some self acclaimed singers going on in their very own broken, out of tune voices adding unbearable ability to disgust.

We appeal to the authorities to please help us from such tortures.

It is specially disturbing when someone has an examination to go through or if there is a patient in the house.

I am sure there are better and quieter ways of celebrating important occasions.

Taslim Talukdar, Islampur, Dhaka.

Rose festival

Sir, It is a heartening note that there is going to be a 'rose festival' this month.

These occasions provide opportunities for flower lovers to enjoy the flowery freshness, fragrance and beauty of flower, in abundance at a venue. Besides, to the residents of the city it provides a chance for a pleasant outing.

The beauty of a flower is not only pleasing to the eye, but it is a nice memory to take back home. There should be more such flower shows.

There can be nothing as pleasing to the eye and refreshing to the senses as the splendour and fragrance of a flower.

Fahim Ahmed, Jhikatola, Dhaka.