



Star cartoonist looks at The Parliament

Democratic Edifice

by Rahat Fahmida

The imposing off-white edifice with its picturesque surroundings at Sher-e-Bangla Nagar houses the country's law-making body the Parliament brain-child of renowned American architect Louis Kahn, the architectural marvel stands as an epitome of the architects' imaginative expanse as well as the throes of democratic desire in which the bangalee nation has so long been—and will be.

Like most great institutions, the parliament here has its own atmosphere: an expansive compound with far greater aerial spaces all around. The magnificence married to somberness and ceremonial aura gives one the sense of being at the centre of politics and also makes hungry for the status and savoir-faire of the old hands. Any pupil of a school with great tradition should experience the feeling. As in school, the intangible can be powerful agents in moulding the pattern of life and in setting standards and codes of conduct, but they can also be powerful enough to inhibit critical thought and innovation leading to ritualisation of the vitality of life.

Many people think the House is at its best at question hours. The importance of question hours lies in the opportunity it provides to counter-balance those bureaucratic tendencies found within any civil service. Devoting a definite part of parliamentary time to questioning ministers responsible for the work of departments does much to safeguard individual rights. A question prompts the responsible minister delving into the detailed administration of his department, and the civil servant loathes this probing. As Professor Lowell says, questions turn 'a searchlight upon every corner of the public service.'

Naturally, questions are used as a weapon by the opposition to embarrass the government, especially where some fact damaging to its reputation can be discovered. Or they can be the means to the government to explaining certain points of its policy where a full-scale debate would be premature. The Government, on the other hand, may not yet be ready to commit itself. Here the art of replying to questions is tested. What the minister must be prepared for is the insidious supplementary which always lurks behind the original question and may be put on the spur of the moment. The department does everything possible to brief the minister beforehand. It gives him the answer he reads out, adds notes on the questioner and his knowledge

of the subject, anticipates possible supplementaries and provides replies to them. It is said that the ideal answer to a question is 'brief that appears to answer the question completely. If challenged can be proved to be accurate in every word, gives no opening for awkward "supplementaries", and discloses really nothing'. Nevertheless, occasions can occur when supplementaries do not follow the expected course and the minister is left without a complete brief. Here only a minister who thoroughly understands his department and is quick in thought and repartee will come through with flying colours. But the House is quick to appreciate, and the Leader of the party to recognise a minister who is consistently master of situation when faced by hostile questioners and who appears to have a complete grasp of the work of his department. Only on exceptional grounds, such as defence considerations, will the House not frown severely on the failure of a minister to answer a question, and it is most unlikely that the matter will be allowed to drop.

Question-time also gives an MP the opportunity to raise special local problems affecting his constituency. In this he may be genuinely seeking information; or he may merely be taking advantage of his one real chance to advertise himself to his constituents.

The main function of the Speaker is to preside over meeting of the House in full session, a quasi-judicial task which can be fulfilled satisfactorily only by strict observance of his independence and impartiality. It is here that even minor traditions, such as the custom of bowing to him on entering or leaving the House, play such an important part. But the overriding reason why he succeeds in standing above party politics is the care taken by all members to preserve his position, a care which springs from the desire to make the hallowed institution work. The Speaker is regarded as the referee in charge of the game, who sees that it proceeds smoothly and according to the rules. His decisions are rarely questioned and then only through the accepted procedure. Breach of the rules can be punished, even by sending a player off or abandoning the game.

There are several possible differences—between tradition and change, between vague sentiments and precise thought, between ministers and backbenchers, between those who have precise responsibilities and those who do not.



Cartoons by Sharier Khan