

New Perspective for Primary Education

That the primary education in Bangladesh has repeatedly come under attack is not for nothing. Our achievement so far is much too little. The reasons behind the failure to realise the objectives have variously been explained by both laymen and experts. Not many are found to have good words for the government policy on primary education. But outgoing UNICEF representative in Bangladesh, Cole P Dodge seems to be an exception. When he uses the epithet excellent to describe the policy, we are left to ponder upon the subject, for the man quite familiar with and experienced in Bangladesh situation during his long stint with UNICEF in this country is hardly to err in his observation.

His seemingly lavish praise is however counter balanced by his unsparing criticism of the delivery system of services. The government's compulsory primary education programme suffers from a number of shortcomings, all of which having their links to the shortage of fund. The fact that primary school teachers in the country spend fewer hours (440 hours) compared to their counterparts in the neighbouring countries (1200 hours in China, for example) is not even a question of fund constraints. If anything, it is just a case of policy failure made further worse by the abuse of opportunities and greater incentives at times. It is simple arithmetic that fewer hours in school for primary students do not help the cause, specially because of the formative age and in a situation where their parents are illiterate and are of no help to them.

Although delivery system is a generalised term, one has no difficulty to understand the social involvement in the process. Dodge has been pointing his accusing fingers to this fact of social commitment or the lack of it. The government is as much blamable in this as its inability to create the right kind of atmosphere to support and provide new impetus to the programme. Sure enough, the political decision to invest more in the primary education sector is a deciding factor. On this count, it is not just a failure from the delivery point of view, but also a matter of national policy. Poverty-ridden as the country is, it is not possible to bring about a spectacular result in the area if it is considered in isolation. Paradoxical though it may appear, it is a fact that poverty alleviation programme may wait, but not the compulsory primary education. The chief argument in favour of this is that poverty is not always a cause of illiteracy, although a strong determinant, but illiteracy surely is a cause of poverty.

It is exactly at this point the outgoing UNICEF representative cannot be more correct. Social involvement, therefore, does not necessarily mean it ought to be achieved at a huge cost of the government's exchequer. A sort of social movement in which religious and socio-cultural organisations can participate in a most helpful manner can do the trick. This voluntary participatory basis is what is lacking and therefore need to be created. The best thing, however, would be to strike a balance between investment, with the necessary amount of accountability, and such voluntary participation. Cole P Dodge's concern has been amply matched by his contribution during his illustrious service in this country. His successor will find it quite challenging to keep up the momentum he set into motion.

Making the Dead Serve Political Ends

The killing of Dulal and Saizuddin in Saturday's clash between supporters of rival political groups at the heart of the city was inhuman enough. What the zealots of one party did with the body of Dulal was plainly sordid. Political ends are being used to desecrate mosques. It has now been used to desecrate a dead body. The sanctity of Dulal's body, the inviolability of his person, was trifled in the ultimate fashion when he was killed. It now seems there was yet some more humiliation to be done to him — by dragging his body into serving mean political tricks. Fie, if this is politics the country better be rid of this.

No state can thrive without politics which is but one aspect of the social being — essential and powerful and pervasive but nevertheless only one of society's many sides. It must be made to respect certain entities and values and stop short of crossing its limit of social validity. Although revolutionary politics of the Marxist vintage gave a seal of approval on violence as a political tool, it got its sanction from the acquiescing involvement of the greater number. Conspiratorial violence was never a political action. It was in point of truth essentially anti-political. The sad state of Bangladesh as a polity, more so as a society, owes in no mean measure its sway to the indulgence given to violence by all the political parties, mostly by way of retaining armed cadres.

That is bad. But this uneasy choice for some has been a matter of zeal for others who have been up to worse tricks at the cost of all that sustains society. Some militant parties are bent on holding meetings and rallies with Baitul Mukarram offering a sanctuary in time of crisis. There are allegations that the great mosque was used for offensive action as well on Saturday — bombs were lobbed from inside its compound. Compromising the sanctity of things of permanent value is short-sighted and will lead to consequences uncongenial for all.

Politics is being made to resort to all kinds of mean tricks and stratagems. One of them is to call for a strike by a party when society has already been preparing to respond to another and earlier strike call demanding the opposite of the later call. In the same manner, meetings are being announced on the same date and time and at about the same venue when and where a meeting has earlier been called. This is surely a sign of political bankruptcy, no doubt. More dangerously, it is an open choice for violent clashes between masses of people.

We denounce the whole lot of such desecration of politics itself. Now this has invaded the dignity of the body of the dead. The parties must stop and turn from here — we warn them in the name of the people and of the nation.

SEVERAL experts, including guest columnists of this paper, have spoken up against the wave of hartals which hit the country, especially the capital, from time to time, sometimes without much of a warning. Their views reflect a broad consensus in the country that as a political weapon, strike or a hartal — there are differences between the two — is a much abused option, one that can be best described as "institutionalised lawlessness" an apt expression used by a guest columnist of this paper, Shah A M S Kibria, in his piece last week.

However, despite the near-unanimity of the opposition to hartals, several questions and possible solutions have eluded the government and the political parties. We are in no position to know if any serious attempt has been made to identify the question, not to mention their possible answers.

In the first place, we are unaware if the administration has an early warning system that effectively alerts the authorities of the possibility of a strike or a hartal well in advance, setting the stage for negotiation or conciliation. Assuming such a system exists, the dilemma facing the government is that any move made towards the "disgruntled" potential strikers may be interpreted as a sign of weakness, while a firm refusal to recognise the advance warning may be interpreted as an act of arrogance that raises the level of demands — and the latent militancy — of the involved party or group. For the administration, it can often turn out to be a "no win situation."

One answer to the question is that a popularly elected democratic government, like the one we have today, should have a major advantage over the previous ousted authoritarian administration. We assume that its organisational network extends to labour unions, associations of low-paid office employees — the ardent protagonists of hartals — and, last but not the least, the student bodies. How often do government leaders meet these groups for informal exchanges of ideas, not necessarily to resolve a deadlock?

One aim behind these exchanges, based on political rapport rather than on administrative arm-twisting, could produce, in the best of cir-

cumstances, a social contract between the government and unions in different categories. Maybe this is easier said than done. However, the possibility can be explored if government leaders do more listening than talking, before explaining to their audience some home truths about our economic predicament, with the help of simple facts and figures. Of course, we will put a lot of blame on the misdeeds of the past authoritarian government. However, can we, for a change, start talking about the future? Where are we now in agriculture, industry, public health and education, as compared to other Asian countries, and where do we go from here — and how?

The modalities for reaching such a social contract are time-consuming and complex. However, at some point, the understanding must indeed be linked to a national consensus that involves all the major political parties, with all the groupings agreeing to take a common stand against strikes and hartals which

success pretty highly, with the public treating them in a mood of despair, the opposition parties viewing the situation with subdued satisfaction and the government weighing its options in terms of political and financial fall-outs.

Assuming that, through this national consensus, we are able to reduce hartals and strikes to the absolute minimum, what do we give the concerned people in return? What can we offer them as a tool for expressing their grievances, genuine of phony, for the attention of the public at large, of the opinion-makers and, last but not the least, of the government?

A silent procession with placards? A signature campaign? A sit-in strike outside the Press Club that does not halt the traffic? A media exposure?

Most experts would regard these methods as poor tools. Without dismissing them altogether, we should perhaps look in another direction.

AT HOME AND ABROAD

S. M. ALI

come about without exhausting all the avenues for conciliations.

Again, this is easier said than done. It is always hard for a political party, almost in any country, to give up its immediate gains derived from its control and influence over, say, a section of labour or students in favour of long-term national interests. A commonsense view is, one major party will make the move provided other parties do the same. A more sophisticated opinion is, with moderate groups in each party exerting their influence over its leadership, various groupings may come together on the basis of a minimum agenda for national salvation.

Instead of treating it as a secret deal, we should publicise the proposed national consensus as a gain for the country as a whole as well as a deterrent to hartals and strikes. At this moment, right from the time of Hussain Mohammad Ershad until the present day, organisers of most hartals rate the chances of their

A problem facing Bangladesh today is, despite the end of the authoritarian regime, a vast majority of our population, especially important segments or vital interest groups, remain outside the mainstream politics. Most do not belong to any organisation; many shun the thought of running in any election for the parliament; and they are without any forum through which they can make their voices heard and opinions known.

In this situation, labour leaders, student activists, social reformers, representatives of women organisations and business leaders are at a serious disadvantage. Then, when one adds to the list representatives of human rights bodies, consumer associations, journalists' unions, peasants organisations and educational institutions, we can see that the Jatiya Sangsad is "representative" only in theory. In reality, it is anything but a national forum.

It is in this context that the idea of creating a second chamber in the parliament of

Bangladesh merits attention. It was proposed by A S M Abdur Rob, the so-called Leader of the Opposition in the last Jatiya Sangsad. However, it has recently received support from two unlikely quarters — unlikely because they are essentially non-political — former banker Syed Ali Kabir, a columnist for "Sangbad", and educationist Zillur Rahman Siddiqui, a guest writer for this paper. Siddiqui regards the proposition as "pre-mature", but it has certainly caught his attention.

There is nothing new in the idea of a second chamber in a democracy. Unfortunately, in such Asian countries as Malaysia, Thailand, India and the Philippines, where we have seen it working, the institution has been anything but a great success.

In Bangladesh, we face a different — indeed a more challenging — situation than in any of the countries mentioned earlier. Here, democracy is still to take roots, with increased participation of all segments of people in the political life of the nation.

Can we avert a transport strike if leader of the labour union speaks out during a session at the second chamber and outlines his grievances, with the concerned minister giving him a patient hearing and discussing his complaints? Will it make any difference if student activists from Dhaka University use the forum to offer a plan for ending the campus violence, committing their own support to its implementation? Will representatives of women's organisations take up the question of population planning and offer their down-to-earth evaluation of the government's performance in this field?

How we should answer these questions, I do not know — yet. What I do know is that we must widen the scope for organised democratic participation of people from all walks of life in our system, the kind of participation that should defuse tension in the society, enlarge the area of free debate and increase the interaction between the government and national figures who, so far, have been left out in the cold. Herein lies a challenge facing the country. How we tackle it, whether by setting up a second chamber or not, is another matter.

The Need to End Confusion and Controversy about Local Self-government

by Mustafizur Rahman

IN the first place, there is no doubt about the existence, necessity and usefulness of some form of local government almost everywhere in the world including Bangladesh. The local self-government of every country is based on its own historical process and social values.

The historical background of local government in this part of the world, that existed during colonial rule and thereafter till today is known to us all. The changes after 1947 partition have been too frequent without any consistent purpose which should have been better service to the people and their welfare. The changes have so far been clearly motivated by hidden or naked intention of administering, controlling or ruling the people rather than managing the affairs of and serving the people for an overall better living and national prosperity.

Basic democracy of Ayub Khan, Bakasol of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, initial thana administration system of Hussain Mohammad Ershad with an intention of placing army officers as administrators there and later upazila system with upazila Nirbahi officer as the virtual administrator, an elected chairman and other elected and ex-officio members have all been said to be for the welfare of the people with veiled intention of ruling, though none of these could be comprehensive, functional and fair to live up to the unexpressed desire of people.

Distribution of relief goods or food for work through upazila chairman in place of deputy commissioner or other officials does not justify restructuring of local government. Placement of upazila magistrates with hardly six months' training cannot be said to be for better discharge of justice, placement of virtually untrained and unmotivated agriculture officers for mainly handling the control of distribution of agricultural supplies cannot be said to be for the promotion of agriculture, and the placement of new medical graduates at upazila or thana medical centers without facilities for treatment can hardly be said to be for the betterment of the people.

In an independent country, all the citizens, whether they are in the city or in rural areas have equal right of state service and facilities. The idea of second class or third class service in such fields as education, medicine, communication, social security and so forth for the rural people is an expression of hatred towards the rural people who are literally supporting the urban life.

Present change of the "upazila" into "thana" shall not definitely serve the real purpose of "local self-government", and the sense of autonomy. This institution once set alight may outlive us, and serve and not exploit the people for years to come.

In a brief discussion with the minister in charge of the commission on local self-government the other day, I was immediately asked straight about the financing of local self-government and the number of tiers that may be suitable for Bangladesh. These two points are important, but not the most important ones. One-tier or two-tier or three-tier system can be structured to serve the same purpose. This is basically a political decision that can better be taken once the philosophy of the local self-government is well understood.

The local self-government is a vital institution the wise structure and use of which may bring peace and prosperity to the nation and the abuse of which can literally create a hell in the country, which we are probably heading to too fast.

The local self-government can ensure citizen registration; birth and death registration; better family planning; instant census; local data collection for national and local planning; better production depending on locality; better health service to the people — free or under health insurance scheme; training of manpower as required by the locality and the nation; land development suited to the locality; protection of environment; provision of agricultural input appropriate to the locality; develop-

ment of local irrigation, housing, roads and safe transportation; public safety; financing of local economic activities and many many other services for real prosperity of the people and the state for better future for the next generation. If the leadership, the parliament members and the politicians really understand the importance of this institution, I would request them to go for it systematically.

As an approach, I would suggest that first they try to incorporate the major provisions into the Constitution so that undesirable changes cannot be made just because of any government's liking alone. The details that may need refinement from time to time due to material, technological or other development that may be forthcoming, may be subject to regulations by law. As it may be difficult to change the Constitution immediately, I would suggest that a local self-government law be enacted with the following provisions at least:

ARTICLE 1: Local administration shall be executed by elected representatives of the people, who shall not be members of any political party.

Regulations concerning organization and operation of local public entities shall be fixed by law in accordance with the principle of local autonomy.

ARTICLE 2: There shall be Thana Parishad (or Upazila Parishad); Zila Parishad; Municipal Corporation; Municipality; and Ward in a Municipality or Municipal Corporation, which shall be the units of administration with their chief executive officers designated as Chairmen of their respective units unless otherwise provided for by law, elected by people by direct popular vote according to the provisions of law. Other officials and members shall be appointed or elected as per provisions of law.

These local public entities shall establish assemblies as their deliberative organs in

accordance with law.

ARTICLE 3: Local public entities mentioned in the preceding Article shall have the right to manage their property, affairs and administration and to enact their own regulation within law.

ARTICLE 4: A special law, applicable only to one public entity, cannot be enacted by Sangsad without the consent of the majority of the voters of the local public entity concerned, obtained in accordance with law.

ARTICLE 5: The Thana Parishad, Zila Parishad, Municipality, Municipal Corporation and Ward offices shall also execute some affairs of state as state agency under the supervision and direction of some competent minister according to provisions of law.

The Chairman of a Zila Parishad shall have power of supervision and direction over the Chairmen of Thana Parishads and Municipalities in his district.

The Chairman of a Municipal Corporation shall have power of supervision and direction over the chiefs of Wards within his Corporation.

ARTICLE 6: If a competent minister finds that any Chairman of a Zila Parishad or a Municipal Corporation or any other equivalent public entities, has violated law or ministerial order or has been otherwise remiss in the management or execution of the state affairs within his power, he may warn such a Chairman in writing to take corrective measures in such manner and by such time as he may specify.

(2) If a Chairman so warned fails to take corrective measures by the specified time, a competent minister may file a suit with the High Court for a writ of mandamus.

(3) A competent minister shall, as soon as he files such a suit, notify the Chairman to that effect. A High Court shall be informed of the date, place and method of such notification.

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.

An appreciation

Sir, As a Bangladeshi who has lived abroad for many years, I am delighted with the consistent quality of The Daily Star. The latest of many "firsts" scored by this newspaper are the penetrating interviews with Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto. How like The Daily Star to give both viewpoints! And also how farsighted to give its legions of readers a run-up to the Prime Minister's visit to Pakistan. Having spoken to numerous friends and acquaintances on the subject, the con-

versations with famous people and leaders are something we all look forward to. No other daily newspaper has come out with such original ideas. There maybe some cheap imitations, but others can only copy the cover, not the contents! Keep up the good work of keeping citizens of this fledgling democracy informed — in a balanced way.

Husein Raschid
Lulmatia, Dhaka.

Speed-brakers

Sir, The road Janapath connecting Jatrabari and Say-

edabad is a busy one through which a good number of vehicles of different kind pass, sometimes causing traffic jam and difficult transport situation. Putting of speed brakers at suitable places would effectively control the situation and the number of accidents, which do occur frequently, would come down considerably.

It would be much appreciated if you kindly ventilate through your esteemed paper the urgency and propriety of putting speed brakers to ease the situation.

Md Solaiman Sardar
Adanyee, Dhaka.

What's in a name?

Sir, It is learnt that the government has decided to change the name of 'Upazilas' to 'Thanas'.

What is in a name? There exists different schools of

thought pertaining to the value of a name. But generally a name is important for the identification of the unit. And a name carries status of the unit. So, by status, Upazila is superior to Thana. Hence, it might put a negative impact on the population of an Upazila if the name of their administrative unit is changed to Thana. I have reason to suspect that people may lose motivation to participate in the development process under thana administration.

I sincerely hope that the present democratic government will not change the name of Upazila to Thana with a view to upholding democratic value and the national spirit. This government has already demonstrated its democratic attitude by retaining a number of peoples' welfare projects.

M Zahidul Haque
Asst Prof, BAI, Dhaka.

(4) A High Court, with which such suit was filed, shall summon both parties on the date of its inquiry, which shall be held within fifteen days of the date when such suit was accepted.

(5) A High Court, if the suit of a competent minister be found sustainable, shall issue a writ of mandamus to the person, ordering him to take corrective measures by the specified time.

(6) If the Chairman fails to comply with such writ by the time specified therein, a competent minister may for confirmation of the fact file a suit with the same High Court, which shall then summon both parties within ten days for further inquiry.

(7) When a confirmatory decision is given in accordance with the preceding paragraph, a competent minister may take such corrective measures himself on behalf of the defaulting Chairman.

(8) The Prime Minister may dismiss such a Chairman when a confirmatory decision is given by High Court under the provisions of the preceding paragraphs.

(9) Even if a confirmatory decision is given under Paragraph 6, a Chairman may file a suit with the same High Court to suspend the dismissal power of the Prime Minister under the preceding paragraph, upon proof that he has complied with the writ issued under paragraph 5.

(10) The decision under paragraph 5 or 6 shall be appealable in accordance with rules of the Supreme Court.

(11) An appeal under the preceding paragraph shall have no suspensive force.

(12) If a Chairman of Zila Parishad or Municipal Corporation finds that any Chairman of a Thana Parishad or a Chief of a Ward within his jurisdiction, in the capacity of an agency of State, has violated law or ministerial order or has been otherwise remiss in the management or execution of the State affairs within his power, he may warn, file a suit with District Court, act for such Chairman or dismiss him in pursuance of the preceding eleven paragraphs.

(13) Any Chairman dismissed under paragraph 8 or the preceding shall be disqualified for any office of State or any public office of a local public body, for two years from the date of dismissal.

(14) Any suit contesting the dismissal under paragraph 8 or 12 shall be filed within thirty days from the date of notification of such dismissal.

(15) If the dismissal of a Chairman be reversed by the court referred to in the preceding paragraph, he shall restore his qualification forfeited under paragraph 13, on the day when the decision has become final.

(16) Necessary matters pertaining to a suit, inquiry or proceedings under paragraphs 2, 4 through 6, 9 and 12 above shall be fixed by the Supreme Court.

(17) The provisions of the preceding sixteen paragraphs shall not be applicable, where corresponding procedures are provided for in other laws.

ARTICLE 7: Any elected

Chairman or other public officials of any public entities mentioned herein may be dismissed by the vote of the majority of voters of his constituency, obtained as per law.

The procedures, power and any other matters not provided for elsewhere regarding removal, dismissal or disqualification of any elected member of any local self-government shall be regulated by law.

ARTICLE 8: The elected members of respective public entity can remove their Chairman or any other member for grave misconduct or for violation of law by a resolution supported by three-fourths or more of their total members and submitted to the Chairman of the public entity superior to it or the competent minister.

The superior entity or the minister as the case may be, may request such member to resign or may suspend him pending a decision by court as per the procedures determined by law. If the person so removed does not file a suit to restore his office within thirty days, there shall be an election for the vacancy in the following thirty days. However, the person vacating the seat may be qualified for election again unless his violation of law or misconduct is confirmed by a court.

ARTICLE 9: Unless otherwise disqualified earlier, any person elected to any office in any public entity of local self-government shall hold his office for five years from the date of taking office.

ARTICLE 10: The qualification for election for any office of any public entity of the local self-government shall be same as those for a member of parliament, provided that the candidate is not a member of any political party since not less than 180 days prior to the date of election. Joining of any political party after being elected shall automatically disqualify him for holding such office.

ARTICLE 11: The Zila Parishad, Thana Parishad and other public entity shall supervise the police force and the educational institutions for compulsory education as State agency, as may be provided for by law.

ARTICLE 12: The Zila Parishad, Thana Parishad or other public entity may set up and run their local representative offices within the area of their respective jurisdiction to provide services to the people efficiently and conveniently.

ARTICLE 13: The Chairman of any such public entity may, with the approval of the members of its deliberative organ appoint any advisor or advisors, consultants, or ad hoc or permanent committees under such terms and pay as the members deem it appropriate.

As it has already been mentioned, these provisions are only the fundamental ones to establish the spirit of the proposed law that shall give the local public entities sufficient autonomy with accountability and save the people from political interference in their private and day-to-day social life. Many additional detailed provisions shall be necessary to make the basic law functional and effective.

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