

Minimum Consensus for National Good

The opposition parties were absolutely right in demanding, and Shaikh Razzak Ali was equally right in conceding, that as a Speaker of the Parliament, he could not hold a high level party position. Thus Razzak Ali's good decision to quit party positions thrown in, our lacklustre democratic atmosphere has not only had a face-lift but an element of liveliness as well. If we can utilise the promise it holds, to break the grid-lock on the national consensus building process, we will have made a fresh start in terms of creative politics with expanding circles of positivism. There is no doubt that our politics in general has been monotonously and fiercely partisan to a point that even when it comes to nurturing an institution like the parliament, which is central to democracy, the spillage effect could not be prevented from being extremely debilitating for its functioning.

Razzak Ali's straightforward preference for being left alone in his role as the Speaker, rather his defence of the innate dignity and neutrality of his high office can be regarded as an act of high-minded discretion. Giving credit where due, we must say that a person of lesser understanding and sensitivity would have failed to realise that at stake were indeed not just a high principle but also his functional effectiveness as Speaker.

Although he has proved the dictum that discretion is the better part of valour, he himself has shown no diffidence in admitting that he shed the party posts "as a mark of respect to the sentiments expressed by certain opposition quarters." Some opposition parties had threatened to boycott the assembly to be presided over by a Speaker holding the position of the first Vice President of BNP. Aside from this particular threat there was a similar one looming large in the aftermath of the Magura by-poll. So the opposition pressure was there for him to quit the party positions but agreeably this was not the category of duress that the Speaker or the BNP's central leadership would dismiss out of hand. In other words, the opposition demand in this case was something that could be conceded because it was patently logical and forceful.

Building on this trend we believe the government will see the rationale for taking up some other demands of the opposition within the four walls of national parliament. If one were to look back on the parliamentary proceedings one would invariably find that either the opposition-sponsored bills were guillotined or referred to various committees with little sign of being addressed in any positive manner. If such a sizable opposition has to cool its heels or remain frustrated over its attempts to get some of their legitimate demands fulfilled, with an eye to their constituencies, it can have the tendency to be negative and agitative.

At the same time, the opposition should not force issues in a way that they find themselves in a log-jam situation or at a point of no return. We have repeatedly advocated through these columns that major political parties should sit across the table to arrive at a workable consensus on a minimum agenda for national good.

Stop this Invasion of Vulgarity

This year's turnout on the Pahela Baishakh morning easily surpassed earlier records. And there was a pervasive festive mood in the air as well as all around. Tens of thousands milled all over the picturesque Ramna Greens with music wafting in all direction. Men and women, boys and girls and children composed a riot of colours under every tree shade of the spacious Suhrawardy Udyan. Weather responded wonderfully to the high spirit of the great concourse of people celebrating not only the new year but also a new century, something few among them will live to celebrate again.

The great celebration had as its fountainhead the musical beginning of the day and the launching of fare of love and joy at the feet of the great ashwattha or the wisdom tree at Ramna Park by Chhayanaut, who spearheaded a cultural movement in the dying years of Pakistan and popularised the celebration of the Bengali new year as a part of that. This has been so every year for 30 years but one — the Pahela Baishakh of 1971 — the celebrators were out fighting a bloody war.

This soulfilling heralding of the celebrations — a kind of mother to the Bengali new-year festivities, was this year marred in a large measure by a forceful show of vulgarity now posing to vitiate every occasion of big public assemblage. The Batamool oval is not half as large as can accommodate all that turn out for the music. And lot more than half of this incommensurable place was taken up by food stalls numbering over a hundred. The entrance to the oval was choked by these shops in a manner that left a hardly five-abreast strip meandering uncertainly on to a view of the big and high dais. For a fifty thousand-plus crowd to pass through it and get out was a deadly stampede made sure. What made this vulgar encroachment on beauty and tradition, history and national struggle was something which made the whole healthful and elevating celebrations a grist to travesty and mockery — young touts blocking that strip and seeking custom in undignified and often obscene manners, reducing the serene morning to a loathsome experience of being mired all over by the stinkiest goo.

How could these infernal things crop up on government property? And on a park so very well protected and cared for? Did they have government permission for their business purveying not food but vulgarity? Chhayanaut was there by force of tradition and government permission. Who set these neo-mastans in the guise of caterers to spoil the pure, almost sacred, ambience?

This is no new phenomenon, we saw the Ekushey Boi-mela being raped by this same manifestation of mastani in a new garb. The government can do a very good job of nipping this in its bud. Failing to do the needful in the matter may boomerang on the government itself.

The Ekushey Boi-mela and the Pahela Baishakh main fare and all other cultural happenings of importance should be rid of such abominable infestations without fail and without delay. No one may ever be allowed to make a market of parkland. The government owes this to people.

RSS Stance is against Secularism and Democracy

The RSS has sounded the conch for a war, ... Now it is up to non-RSS forces to pick up the gauntlet. They have no option because the very ethos of India is sought to be mauled. Once secularism is defeated, democracy cannot be sustained.

In the first interview as the RSS chief, Rajendra Singh has demanded that the mosques standing beside the two temples, one in Mathura and the other in Varanasi, be handed over to the Hindus. One believed all that was behind us. Apparently, the RSS has some other ideas. It has probably forgotten the mayhem in the wake of Babri Masjid's demolition. The Hindu-Muslim rioting that followed, according to an Intelligence Bureau report, was the worst India ever faced since the subcontinent's division in August 1947. Communalism in one shape or the other engulfed all states, except Himachal Pradesh. The economic growth came tumbling down; the industrial production dropped to less than two per cent. Foreign investors withdrew their hand. And the nation stood ashamed before its own eyes and those of the world.

If the RSS and its parivar still want to push the country in to a cauldron of hatred and chaos, they can try that. But let it skip the crap that its purpose to occupy the mosques is to "undo the injustice" done to the Hindus hundreds of years ago. The move is purely political, meant to win the vote of Hindus who, incidentally, will be the worst sufferers in any disturbance because they constitute 83 per cent of India's population.

It appears that the RSS parivar has forgotten the lesson it was taught during the state assembly elections. The Bhartiya Janata Party, political

wing of the RSS, was pulled down from power in Himachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh. The poll reverses dealt a severe blow to its stock all over the country.

In the next one year, when 10 states go to the polls, I shall be surprised if the BJP wins more than one. It is in for a bigger shock in Karnataka where it polled 28 per cent votes in the parliamentary election in 1991 and where it seldom has a well-attended meeting. The Hindus, by and large, have shown revulsion over the destruction of the mosque. They wanted a temple but not at the expense of the Babri Masjid. The RSS and its parivar do not seem to appreciate one thing: the Hindus believe in the pluralistic society that India has been for centuries.

The RSS and its parivar have planned several rath and religious gatherings. But it is not going to be easy to revive the frenzy it was able to foment between 1990 and 1992. Secular forces are far better organised than before. Also, the nation's agenda has changed in the last three years. The reservations for the backward have articulated the caste factor and pushed religion to the background.

I am not making any value judgment. But the image of the RSS and its parivar is that of an upper class which looks down upon the backward and the Harijans. The RSS chief has himself said that they will

be paying special attention to the backward and Harijan, admitting the lapse. By promising concessions, he cannot win them. His parivar has to change its attitude, which so far reflects the typical upper caste superiority.

Rajendra Singh's reemphasis on the three mandirs at Ayodhya, Mathura and Varanasi also indicates the organisation's intellectual exhaustion. Apparently, the call to go swadeshi has not clicked. It was bound to happen because

recognised and no claim against their authenticity will be entertained. The Babri Masjid was not covered by the provision because a dispute concerning it was pending in the Allahabad High Court at that time.

True, the RSS has little faith in the institutions like a law court because its parivar demolished the Babri Masjid even after giving an undertaking to the Supreme Court that the masjid would not be touched. But the nation's faith

basic feature, the BJP would be treading on thin ice if it were to get involved in religious jumblees and other junkets. Its governments, dismissed as adjudged justified as they had violated the tenets of secularism. Then one mosque was involved; now there are two more. The crime would be compounded if the target is the two remaining mosques.

While this demand is pending, the RSS has revived the Babri Masjid-Ram Janmabhoomi dispute. It underlines that the RSS wants to regain its religious momentum in the two years before the general elections. The sadhus' conclave at Haridwar, at the instance of the VHP, is a step in that direction.

Prime Minister Narasimha Rao, who has promised a temple and a mosque in the area, has been told to hand over till October 24 the site where the Babri Masjid stood. No date has been announced for kar seva, the building of temple through voluntary efforts. Obviously, the purpose is to stretch the date as far as possible so that there is enough time to polarise the society. Also, an ultimatum has been hurled.

This is a familiar exercise. Before the Babri Masjid was demolished the same course was adopted: an ultimatum to forcibly occupy the site as the sadhus have done at Haridwar. The big difference, however, is that the state government is

now headed by Mulayam Singh Yadav, who had successfully stalled the first onslaught on the masjid in 1990, not by Kalyan Singh, the BJP chief minister, who practically supervised the demolition.

The RSS has sounded the conch for a war, the Mahabharata, as some of its leaders put it. Now it is up to non-RSS forces to pick up the gauntlet. They have no option because the very ethos of India is sought to be mauled. Once secularism is defeated, democracy cannot be sustained.

The matter is still pending before the Supreme Court, which has already begun the hearing. What the RSS is trying to achieve is a verdict in its favour at the gun point. It is unfortunate that neither the RSS nor the parivar has appreciated the basics of justice. Many believed that after the Supreme Court's judgment on secularism, the Indian politics would eschew communalism and embark upon an era of ideas, thoughts and programmes. But the RSS feels confident only on its familiar ground.

I think the RSS and its parivar have enacted the play far too long, a play that is generating hatred and trying to defeat the concept of composite culture. Isn't it time to tell them: "Come, children let us shut up the box and the puppets, for the play is played out." If such advice were heeded, the nation would be able to plan a stable future. Otherwise, hatred will be increasing and risks worsening.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

the RSS and its parivar have never been associated with any economic programme.

All along the tune has been that of Hindutva, the anti-Dunkel voice sounds a false note. Conceded the RSS has a disciplined, obedient cadre, which can be switched on or switched off at will. But the success of a campaign depends on the commitment it reflects. A cadre imbedded in fanatic Hindu thinking cannot put across with conviction an economic programme, which has no religious ingredient.

The claim over the mosques also questions parliament's credibility. It has passed a legislation that all religious places, as they existed on August 15, 1947, will be

in parliament as the topmost legislative body is unflinching, like that of other democratic countries.

It is significant that the RSS chief, while talking about the handing over of the three mosques, has not mentioned the BJP at all. Unlike the agitation over the Babri Masjid when the BJP was in the forefront, the spotlight this time is on the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP). This seems to have been done purposely to keep the BJP, which fights elections, distant from the programmes that may be chalked out to heighten the Hindutva pitch.

After the Supreme Court's judgment, characterising secularism as the constitution's

Errors Corrected and Errors Compounded

by Salauddin Quader Chowdhury

TO change is to improve; to change often is to improve often; to change continuously is human endeavour for perfection. Recent strategic changes in the Awami League policies illustrate a consistency with this Churchillian homily.

A valiant attempt has been made by Shah AMS Kibria, a retired career diplomat, to justify the change in stance of the Awami League towards the Indo-Bangladesh Friendship Treaty — asserting that the AL no longer supports the renewal of the Treaty when it expires in 1997.

Politicians in a populist environment are not obliged to explain their change in political positions as long as they are in accord with popular opinion. It is a credit to the Awami League and its leadership that it has recognised the need to align itself with overwhelming public opinion on the issue.

Where popular opinion has rejected the Friendship Treaty with India for the last two decades, complaints that the "benefits of the Treaty have been 'skilfully concealed' tend to sound rather pathetic. It is a pity that the last vestiges of a less than credible legacy continue to be obliged to justify the unjustifiable.

Why should any politician in Bangladesh, be inclined to rouse sentiments against India? Politicians and political parties are only concerned with increasing their support base. If popular opinion is unsympathetic and apprehensive of Indian attitude towards Bangladesh, politicians would naturally align themselves to be consistent with these sentiments. Indeed, some quarters may suggest, with reasonable justification, that the perceptible change in the Awami League position viz a viz India may have been prompted by similar political compulsions.

Considerable emphasis has been placed in the fact that as per article 1 of the Treaty India agreed to respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Bangladesh. Was not India obliged to respect our sovereignty and territorial integrity without the Treaty? If not, then the Awami League owes it to nation to enlighten us as to what dross of apprehensions forced the then Awami League government to seek India's documentary assertion to respect our sovereign-

ty and territorial integrity. In according with Article 1 of the Treaty, Bangladesh has certainly respected the sovereignty and territorial integrity of India and refrained from interfering in the internal affairs of India. However, empirical evidence of the past 23 years suggests that reciprocity to our goodwill has been in rather short supply.

Rebubari/Tin Bigha, Talpatti, Insurgencies in Chittagong Hill Tracts, Push-In, waters of the Ganges, are only a few of the numerous issues in which Indian attitude has not radiated the friendliness that the Treaty ostensibly sought to secure. Bangladesh is hemmed in by India in the West, North and East. The only conceivable attack or a threat to attack to our territorial sovereignty can come from India. To presume that Bangladesh would invoke Article 9 of the Treaty to consult with India — if at any time the country is under attack or under threat of attack from India — is a presumption that boggles the mind.

We have been reminded that the Treaty has never been invoked by either side in the course of the past 23 years. Neither the Awami League, nor for that matter any other government of Bangladesh has invoked Article 9 of the Treaty in 23 years. One may be forgiven for being grateful to the Almighty that the Article 9 of the Treaty was never invoked. To justify the need for the Bangladesh-India Friendship Treaty in 1972, it has been suggested that newly independent Bangladesh needed strong allies to withstand the efforts to undermine the state by both internal and external forces. Between the 16th of December 1971 till the signing of the Treaty in 1972, the only external forces in and around Bangladesh were the India forces; and the only internal forces — the Razakars — had either been exterminated or incarcerated.

By considerable stretching of the imagination we can possibly visualise, that the Treaty was to deter a possible military threat from neighbouring Burma. But it is appalling to suggest that the government of late Shaikh Mujibur Rahman had signed the Friendship Treaty with India "to withstand the efforts to undermine the state by the vanquished Razakars — who if alive and free were seeking nooks and crannies for shelter to save their miserable hides from the wrath of the victors."

An error corrected is an error forgotten — an error justifiably forgotten is an error compounded. To err in politics can be costly. To justify errors is an invitation to disaster. The contention that a renewal of the Bangladesh-India Friendship Treaty is not essential for our national security needs today, speaks of the revised sagacity — albeit belated — of the Awami League. The argument that the Treaty was essential for our security needs in 1972, only serves to dilute this wisdom.

Why should sentiments against India, be identified with sentiments against the Awami League even by implication? Current positions consistent with national sensitivities provides abundant possibilities to erase legacies that do not relate to current needs or lack popular appeal.

The fortunes of the Muslim League in Pakistan and the Congress in India amply demonstrate that popular perceptions regulate the fate of politicians and political parties. Fondness or abhorrence in history can only offer nostalgic thoughts — and nostalgia is too expensive a diversion for contenders in power politics. In an atmosphere of competitive multi-party system of government, political rewards are seldom earned by nostalgia. Pragmatic policies rarely recognise individuals or collective contributions of the past — only history exercises that privilege. Our political fate is determined by the level of our competence to contribute in the present. Our ability is appraised by our proficiency in mastering today and preparing for the tomorrow.

To err and regret is acceptable. To amend an error is commendable. To err and then regret under pretensions is unforgivable.

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OPINION

Choosing a Vice-Chancellor

Abu Taher Majumder

In his recent column (Choosing a Vice-Chancellor, March 1, 1994) Professor Zillur Rahman Siddiqui has rightly and, I think with genuine concern, voiced his apprehensions about the future of autonomy of the four universities of the country which are enjoying it now. I think all conscious, responsible and democratically-oriented citizens of the country will spontaneously share his apprehensions and thank him for providing a basis for reconsideration of the issues that have called for a revision of the University Act 1973 on the part of the Government and opposing such a move on the part of the teachers who think that their freedom will be directly affected by any such revision. However, Professor Siddiqui has (1) nowhere thrown any light on the responsibilities entailed in any kind of autonomy, particularly that of university autonomy; (2) not thrown any light on the abuse of this autonomy; (3) not given any suggestion regarding the proper use of this autonomy; (4) avoided mentioning the imperfections of the 1973 Act and their possible remedies; (5) not pointed out that autonomy does not mean 'imperium in imperio'; (6) not also, for understandable reasons, said that since the Act is not a 'sanctum sanctorum', it can be revised to suit the changing circumstances and needs and demands of the future. Being an insider he could have come out with concrete and viable suggestions for the improvement of prevailing conditions.

At any rate, with provoking brevity, Professor Siddiqui has drawn attention to a very malignant problem, "concerning the appointment and promotion of teachers" which, according to him, "points to a dire development in recent years." However, he has judiciously stopped here and did not proceed to elaborate the point, obviously because this is unequivocally a ground where angels fear to tread. One expected him to be more positive about the 'entirely... non-partisan basis', he has suggested because reticence, though at times more eloquent, sometimes also amounts to side-tracking the issue. An independent observer of the whole scenario would probably suggest a thorough scrutiny of the application materials of the candidates, recommendations of the respective selection committees and final decisions about them of a period of, say, last 10 years, by an honourable judge of the High Court (retired or in service) whose terms of reference might be to identify irregularities and suggest methods to streamline such activities for better and healthier academic atmosphere and administration. No one can, with reason, dub this as an infringement on autonomy which does not mean any kind of autocracy in any form. On the other hand, it can be said that such an action will considerably strengthen the cause of autonomy in the universities and serve the long-term cause of education.

Professor Siddiqui who was Vice-Chancellor for two terms without having to go through the travail of electioneering (he was directly appointed by the government) is well-aware of the seamy sides of the pro-

cess of choosing a Vice-Chancellor directly or through election (as is sometimes done now) and then choosing one from the three persons elected by the senate. "Politicisation of universities, mainly through politicisation of the office of the Vice-Chancellor" makes, as Prof Siddiqui says, "fair administration" difficult. He further says that "non-academic considerations have prompted the present government and the one preceding it, in selecting men for the office of the Vice-Chancellor. The dignity of the office has been lowered, in the eyes of the faculty, of the student body, and I dare say of the people. Lowering of the standard and the ascendancy of the partisanship have gone hand in hand." He has again stopped short of elaborating. He has dexterously put the onus for the ills in the universities on two governments, the present and the previous one, though, as an insider, he is well-aware of what is actually happening in the universities. Regarding direct appointment of Vice-Chancellors by the two governments this much can be said that the Vice-Chancellors were chosen from among senior professors, not from among outsiders, and the process, followed was the same as followed in his case when he was appointed direct. In every case the government has applied its discretion in the same way as it does when it chooses one elected Professor from the panel of three. Regarding the 'lowering of the standard' it must be admitted that it is inherent in the very Act — which compels one whether he is a candidate for the post of Vice-Chancellor, for membership of the Syndicate, Finance Committee, Academic Council, for that matter, any elective position or office, to beseech, entreat, supplicate and pray for notes by moving from place to place and from door to door. Just think of a would-be Vice-Chancellor entreating very humbly a student-senator for his vote. Does it ennoble the position of a Vice-Chancellor to the student body? The hard fact is that the Vice-Chancellor remains vulnerable both to the government for choosing him and to his electors for electing him to the panel. One probable solution is that there should be one talent-finding committee headed, probably, by the University Grants Commission which will make a list of all the senior professors of all the universities and grade them according to their bio-data and recommend the best of them confidentially to the government for appointment as vice-chancellors of various universities. But here again the question of individual ability and competence will arise, since the best scholar may not always be the best administrator and the most tactful person.

This, however, also applies to the elected panel. Alternatively, we can use the provisions of the Act more intelligently, judiciously, circum-spectively, with greater sense of tolerance, understanding, spirit of accommodation, sobriety, fellow-feeling and friendliness, subduing ego, ambition and whim for a healthier academic atmosphere.

Professor Siddiqui has commented on the closure of Jahangirnagar University 'the third time in a year or so', but has not gone into the circumstances that have led to its closure.

"The problem in all these cases", Professor Siddiqui says, does not lie with the 1973 Act, since not all the universities have it. The problem lies elsewhere. This "elsewhere" is very important. As far as I am concerned, by elsewhere I would like to mean the "intention" of the government, the political leaders, the teachers and the students. The government and the political leaders must not make things difficult for the universities. In the same way the teachers and the students must not make things difficult for themselves in the universities by their activities. Teachers are guides and the students are the ones who are guided; teachers teach and the students are the ones who learn. When there is any lapse in such a relationship there is always a debacle.

Professor Siddiqui has not thrown any light on the role of politics in the universities of Bangladesh. It is a very useful and unfortunate fact that both the teachers and the students in all the universities of Bangladesh are politically divided and are, more or less, political opponents in one way or another. This, I think, seriously affects the academic atmosphere of the universities. All of us are political beings, no doubt, but we can not bring our politics down to a reasonable limit? We can follow the examples of British, continental European and American universities both in matters of teachers' politics and students' politics. The remedy lies, firstly and lastly, in our intentions and it must evolve from within. There is a saying: 'Physician heal thyself.' We must do everything to heal ourselves first, before blaming others. Professor Siddiqui has blamed the present government while admonishing others to "have the decency of refraining from blaming others."

When the democratic process is at work and the Vice-Chancellors are not appointed direct, the University Senate plays the vital role of electing a panel of three persons from which one is selected by the government for the office of the Vice-Chancellor. Apart from this the Senate has no power to exercise to influence the activities of the Universities. The budget which it passes hardly allows any room for manoeuvre because of financial constraints. It is accepted in the form the Treasurer presents it. Thus the passing of the budget is just a mechanical exercise. This is what I have experienced as Senator at Jahangirnagar. If the Senate could exercise greater powers in university affairs and play a more decisive role things would have, perhaps, taken a better shape. If it were given powers to evaluate the activities of the Syndicate, the Senate could have exercised its authority with greater circumspection. Professor Siddiqui is, however, silent about the functions of the Senate which should be made effective as an instrument of control over all other bodies of the university with necessary stipulations.

To the Editor

The Fatwa brigade

Sir, To the best of my knowledge, the 'fatwa-brigade' began their unholy activities in Bogra.

Yet, to the best of my knowledge, the honorable Prime Minister hasn't made a single comment on the subject — neither as the leader of the country nor as a member of the oppressed class. Isn't that strange?

Shaf Rahman, Char Komiapur, Faridpur

EPZ in northern Bangladesh

Sir, In order to encourage foreign investors we need to establish more Export Processing Zones in important places of the country. The foreign investors will not be allured to invest only on the basis of the availability of cheap labour. They will see how quickly they can get the infra-structural facilities for installation of gas, power, water, site facilities for installation of machineries etc.

At present the investors who are setting in industries in places other than EPZ cannot set up then in quickest possible time. They are waiting for power, gas, water and telephone connection for years together. The local touts are also demanding huge money as donation before starting of civil construction. The EPZ can ensure all readily available service and free the entrepreneur from any tension.

Rajshahi and Dinajpur produces huge quantities of good quality mangoes, paddy and silk. The products are exportable. Besides, extraction of coal and hard rock will also provide scope for export of surplus coal and hard rocks. At present we are making business at a tiny scale with Bhutan through Burimari of Lalmonirhat district. We can make business with Nepal and also with China via Nepal and India from Tetulia of Panchagarh district.

Bangla Banda of Tetulia is directly connected with pucca road in India similarly Hill is directly connected with pucca

road in Bangladesh. These places can be chosen for establishment of Export Processing Zone. The places are ideal site for industries and very cheap labour are available there. The undeveloped areas of the country will be equally developed if more Export processing zones are established in the places where there is road communication with neighbouring countries. Besides, with the completion of Jamuna Multipurpose Bridge the communication facilities of northern Bangladesh will be improved.

Mohabbul Haque Chowdhury Kalabagan, Dhaka

An appreciation

Sir, I am a regular reader of The Daily Star. Your steps to hold Quiz Competition is very much appreciable. So, I have to greet you on your steps. I think this competition will make Bangladeshies real readers and fond of The Daily Star while it increases our knowledge of games.

Shahin Dhaka