

A Positive Turn

BNP Secretary General Mannan Bhuyan declared at the Jatiya Sangsad on Wednesday that his party stood ready to sit with the government to work out a national consensus on the issues of the day. Primacy is to be given to the intractable problem of terrorism.

The ruling party could perhaps draw satisfaction from the fact that while it had aimed at the sky for a consensus government it has at least hit the tree-top: governance by issue-based consensus. For the BNP's part, it has stepped out of the circle of blemish about to be drawn around its name for dithering on such a positive-sounding idea of a consensus. The idea has had ready ears among the people and the intelligentsia of the country as well as amongst the many overseas well-wishers of Bangladesh. The BNP should get a round of applause for agreeing to work for understanding with the ruling and other political parties on vital issues that impact on the prospects for peace and progress in the country.

The BNP Secretary General's overture, however, remains confined to broad generalities. We urge him now to elaborate it to make it sound like a full-fledged proposal rather than some nicely-worded gesture. It is all very good that he has requested the ruling party to name issues requiring consensual approaches but the BNP itself could perhaps list out its own choices to expedite matters. On terrorism the party secretary general sounded specific though. He seeks involvement of all political parties in parliamentary committee to make concerted efforts to combat terrorism. What about the modalities to forge a consensus on foreign policy issues including, in particular, our relations with India and pursuit of economic and productive activities free from political or other forms of agitation?

The government party should at once seize the opportunity for consensus-building offered by the BNP and make the fullest use of it with a team of negotiators put to work immediately.

To create conditions congenial to the bridge-building process both sides need to make it a point to refrain from making fire-eating pronouncements at each other. Even the usual pressure tactic of blowing hot and cold better not be applied.

Meanwhile, the tendency to keep bastions of power needs to be curbed in order not to intimidate each other. Actually the instances like making truces in Dhaka University, Sirajganj University College and Bogra should be replicated. What if an odd one proves abortive, we must still try.

Literacy Rate

Nothing could please us more than the revelation that the country currently boasts a literacy rate of 44.30. The percentage of literacy in some select areas such as Dhaka District and Jhalakathi — where it is as high as 68.30 and 60.30 respectively — should even give us some cause for celebration. Compared to developed countries and even our neighbours, our achievements in terms of literacy still fall far short of the required. But in comparison with where we were just five years back, the latest literacy figures disclosed in the Jatiya Sangsad must turn the gloom in our education arena into a celebrative mood.

However, the Sample Vital Registrations (SVR) findings, which the education minister read out, leave enough room for raising questions about the latest literacy figures. Can we refer to the statistics given in the primary education in the Bangladesh: Selected Facts, Goals and Strategies published by UNICEF, Dhaka in November 1993? It clearly states that in 1990 the literacy rate for the adult population (15 plus) was about 31 per cent. At the time only 35 per cent of the gross enrolment of nearly 70 per cent completed the 5-year primary education. By 1992 the enrolment rate went up to 79 per cent but the completion rate did not go beyond 40 per cent. What a staggering number of the young population remain outside of the pale of primary education!

We have known of very few special literacy programmes for the adults in the last five years that had a positive, direct and strong bearing on our education or literacy scene. Now we would like to know where and how we made those remarkable gains in literacy.

The distribution of literacy rates seems unacceptably uneven. That is one obvious pitfall. There should at least be some effort to bring the neglected and backward areas under some special literacy programmes to help these catch up with the better performing areas. That way the average literacy will certainly go up apart from doing justice to the less developed areas.

Most Famous Divorce

No divorce has perhaps drawn as much public attention the world over as that between Prince Charles and Princess Diana. The reason is quite clear: as heir to the British throne the prince had been the most eligible bachelor for a long long time before finally accepting lady Diana as his life (1) partner. Princess Diana on her part brought with her the mysterious and almost a supernatural halo of her namesake in the Greek mythology along with a kind of beauty appropriately mixed with glamour that was her own.

The British royalty had something to prize and the Diana spell continued to mesmerise young and old people alike. But unfortunately the fairy-tale marriage soon developed cracks. Eccentricity, emotional crisis, infidelity and constant public gaze contributed to the break-up of the marriage. On that count, the tale of the couple's married life compared favourably with the temperamental love-hate conjugal relations between the Greek gods and goddesses.

Be that as it may, the break-up will provide more fodder to the scrutiny of the royalty's public image. The British royalty has lost some of its prerogatives but not its traditional dignity.

Policy Agenda for Development: Some Reflections

by Kazi M Aminul Islam

The public sector has to realise the strength, potential and promise of the private sector. When the private sector becomes more and more involved in areas of public interest, the Government must put in place the appropriate institutions for preserving the rights of the citizens and protecting the consumers.

THE other day a Dhaka University economics professor turned-bureaucrat was arguing that policies don't matter for development: the people have to change. I think he was wrong. It is policy that matters because an appropriate policy regime may bring about necessary changes in the development process including those among human beings.

The Agenda for Action has been prepared by a development partner. It contains short self-contained policy briefs on 11 areas namely, macro-economic stability, private sector development, power, communications etc. The briefs succinctly describe the current state of affairs obtaining in Bangladesh.

The issue of economic stability, as it appears in the agenda, has been conceived within the traditional demand-supply framework which is the focus of an adjustment policy. However, the supply response in an economy depends on many such factors as are not covered within the standard adjustment programme.

The political disturbance disrupts macro-economic stability. It is true that protest, demonstration and strike are part of democratic process; but violence, loss of public and private property are not. So, the political parties irrespective of whether in position or in opposition, must come to a consensus to leave the economy free from political action. The politicians must not hold the economy and a hundred and twenty million people hostage for any issue of whatever significance.

The ruling party has been showing signs of democratic norms as the PM declared that the policy of Ministers alone to chair the Parliamentary Committees' would go in fact it did; Parliamentary Committees are headed by non-ministers. She also set an example of accountability of public officials when she went to the party programme not as Prime Minister but as a private citizen.

The opposition, for that matter all our political parties, have to read the writings on the wall: they have to behave responsibly in order to be able to face the people, mere blaming the government by the opposition is not enough, they have to come up with goodwill and co-operation, reach a consensus on issues of vital national interest and keep certain things including the economy above all narrow party politics. They have to prove that their concern for national interest is not less significant than that of the government. This is undoubtedly a difficult task. The opposition may fail to perform this task only at their own peril.

The underlying factors of rigidity and instability in the Bangladeshi economy are physical, social or religious in origin. All these have to be addressed globally: partial treatment of one or a few, in isolation may at best lead to a second-best solution.

Bangladesh with very low level of urbanisation during independence lost a rare chance

for planned urban development. Lack of political commitment, institutional arrangement, corruption etc. were responsible for our past failures. By the end of the century, Dhaka will become a mega-city with all the attending problems of unemployment, crime, environmental degradation, deterioration of health and sanitation and explosion of slum-dwelling etc.

Unfortunately, we are ill-equipped to handle those problems. Any development in this sector presupposes adequate political commitment and appropriate legal and institutional arrangements.

Financial sector is in disarray. This is a reflection of the situation obtaining in the rest of the economy. Whatever be the nature of the problem, accountability, transparency and improvement of the methods and processes will improve performance in that sector. Every year the banking sector is adding billions of taka of bad debt. But culprits in the financial sector are seldom caught and brought to justice. In the long run, the only cure for financial sector reform is to privatise and decentralise.

Agriculture, natural resources and the environment have to support our quest for development. We cannot afford to repeat the same mistakes in the field of natural resources and the environment as were committed by some other nations.

It seems that the efforts for creating forest have subsumed all our initiatives for environmental enhancement.

We have to examine our life style, weigh our development options in the light of our environment and resource constraints and emphasise on conservation of resources.

A nation cannot develop leaving its vast population into the morass of abysmal poverty. Key to alleviating poverty and improving the quality of life is human development which is much less expensive than is usually thought to be. We have many success stories in the areas of health, sanitation, education and family welfare. With proper policy directives those may be replicated throughout the country.

Development and prosperity make little sense when poverty shows its ugly face especially among the most vulnerable.

The development process may be sustained and supported only if those people have some kind of safety net, initially for food.

However, medication and information dissemination should also form part of the package of requirements for sustainable development.

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