

PM on Bridge

It did not feature in the first hundred days of her emergence as the head of the government but when the juggernaut of protocol and bureaucracy finally took her there, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina did not fail to record her observation on the ongoing work of the Jamuna Multi-purpose Bridge with the same candour and cordiality that have been traits of her pronouncement as the chief executive of the state. Urging all concerned to consider the project as the number one national priority, she avoided the gobbledygook in such cases for a very sincere call — a call for seeking any conceivable assistance of her office to get the JMB commissioned within the earliest possible time, a target authorities think may go beyond July next year to achieve. The overall actual physical progress of the project has so far been 55 per cent against the planned 69 per cent. July or August in 1998, the 900-million US dollar project, on completion, will be a long-cherished dream come true for the mobility-starved and rather isolated people of northern Bangladesh.

Regarded as one of the biggest of its kind in the world, the JMB will not only immensely facilitate communication between the people of the northern and eastern sides of Bangladesh but will also open a new chapter in socio-economic development. Being equipped multi-dimensionally with telecommunication cable, gas-line and railway, it has the potential to explore hitherto unseen possibilities of communication network. It was very proper and positive of the PM to ask the authorities to have the 4.8 km railway track operational from day one.

The fact that procedural complexities have pushed the JMB's completion beyond the original time-table — to sometime in 98 — should not be deemed as a major source of frustration. But constant vigilance must be maintained to obviate any unwanted hindrances to the project and the PM's avowal on the accessibility to her office for speedy solution of any unforeseen problem comes as a very heart-warming utterance.

Consumer Rights

The government's plan to enact soon the Consumers Right Protection Act is most welcome. To ensure the enforcement of the law, a national commission is also going to be constituted with the power of a court capable of trying cases of violation of consumers' rights. So here seems to be a genuine effort towards addressing a long neglected area of our life. So long ours has been a sellers' market where the traders have dictated terms to their own advantage. The consumers have always been at the receiving end mainly for two reasons: a) in general, the public are little aware of their rights as consumers and no wonder they have not felt a strong urge to form consumer rights organisations or lobby groups; b) laws protecting consumer rights are either inadequate or have little mechanism for enforcement.

Against this backdrop, the proposed consumers right protection act comes to fill in a big void. A mechanism has also been thought of for the operative side. The national commission will have its branches at the district level to supervise and monitor enforcement of the law or violation of consumer rights in any way. The rights of consumers are violated or undermined either by means of devious practices, market manipulation or outright criminal acts. These are not difficult to identify. What is, however, less so is to bring the culprits to face justice.

One must not forget that there have been a number of acts or ordinances — all seeking to protect the interests of the consumers. But these have failed to serve the purposes for which they were put in place. Up against powerful vested interests how will the consumers right protection commission perform? Well, on the face of it, the commission can have some success in dealing with petty violators but the real bosses may remain behind the scene. Their enormous purchasing power is hardly likely to face any challenge. The problem, however, can be reasonably tackled if transparency in manufacturing and trading can be brought about through competition in the consumer market. A liberal manufacturing and marketing line holds the key to breaking the stranglehold of unscrupulous manufacturers and traders.

What's Happening?

Friday's brutal killing of the second son of a government official on the heels of the murder of a prospective member of the Parliament the other day, leaves us with the spine-chilling realisation that the law and order in the capital has plummeted further down. Not that it is better elsewhere in the country as the reports on gang-raping of a woman in police custody and many others in the same vein would readily suggest.

It comes as particularly felt and feared discovery in the backdrop of the resonant declaration of crusade against criminal activities reverberating in various ranks of the government.

With crime rate attaining steep rise and holding the trend for a longish time, government's anti-crime campaign looks threatened to be tainted by a none-too-aspicious start.

The government must move immediately to change the pattern of citizenry's increasing vulnerability to criminal activities.

ON September 25, 1974 Bangladesh Sheikh Mujibur Rahman apprised the world body about the principles which inspired the people of Bangladesh to fight for a homeland of their own. The noble ideals enshrined in the UN Charter, said Bangabandhu are the very ideals for which millions of our people have made the supreme sacrifice.

Following our admission to the UN on September 17, Bangabandhu made his historic journey to New York to address the 29th regular session of the General Assembly. It was not the speech only that made history. It was for the first time in the UN history that a world leader addressed the General Assembly in Bengali. The message of the situation, the charisma of the presence of Bangabandhu and the history of Bengal — all joined together to lend a resonance to the moment in the glass house on the East River murmuring down to the New York harbour, past Miss Liberty, and down to eternity. Miss Liberty beckoning the message of hope and freedom; the Atlantic making the occupants of the 38th floor look helpless. The vastness of the ocean would remind them of King Canute and his eternal message that power is so temporary. Who would not think of transparency and accountability?

THE self declared assassins of the father of the nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and four national leaders killed in the jail have been rounded up and are being interrogated in the police custody for their alleged involvement in the killing. The assassin's bullet not only ended some vibrant lives but plunged the country into deepening confusion and heralded the death of a democratic society that was growing up. The assassin's bullet inflicted a wound from which the country has not yet recovered. Successive governments that came to power through the same bloody path were hardly able to create the stability needed for healthy growth and prosperity for the country.

Now with the Awami League government installed in power after long 21 years, there is an apparent enthusiasm for the people-oriented actions. But there is also resignation and concern that the current political ferment that strikes the country in different sectors, makes for an inherently unstable mix in which old demons, paranoid nationalism, partisan feelings and demagogic populism could win out as easily burying democratic governance and ideals of common spirit.

The first euphoria, seemingly, is fast diminishing and the next few months, it appears, will be a period of disenchantment and the discovery of pain and difficulties. One of the most serious problems, perhaps, is the paranoid nationalism that turned this country into a synonym for fractious politics. In the country, as mentioned earlier, the main peril is populism, the politics of playing with the discontent of the people — gathering strength by rallying support for fighting the non-existent foes.

The problem of Ganges water sharing and transit facilities with India are possibly coming up for attack by the opposition political parties and some extremist quarters. True, more

The language of then 75 million Bengalees spanning across an overarching period of 2000 years — and the slow but secure development of the deltaic region of Bengal and its people re-vegetated around the globe. The early settlers — Dravidians and Aryans, the Pathans, the Afghans, the Turks, the Palas, Mauryas and above all the Bengalees all comingled together in finding an expression in the speech of Bangabandhu. It was not only a recognition of sovereign Bangladesh as the 136th UN member state; it was a recognition of the culture and history of the Bengalee nation. The Dravidian-Aryans, the Buddhist script writers, Alawal, Mir Mosharrif Hossain, Shankar Lalon Fakir, Michael Madhusudan Dutta, Nazrul Islam or Tagore, Shamsur Rahman or Nirmalendu Goon, Anayada Shankar Rai or Asad Chowdhury — together were symbolised in the very presence of Bangabandhu in the podium of the General Assembly. Three million people made supreme sacrifice along with 13000 soldiers of friendly India, and 200 000 sisters who lost their honour, all combined together to make September 25 a red-letter day in our history. God

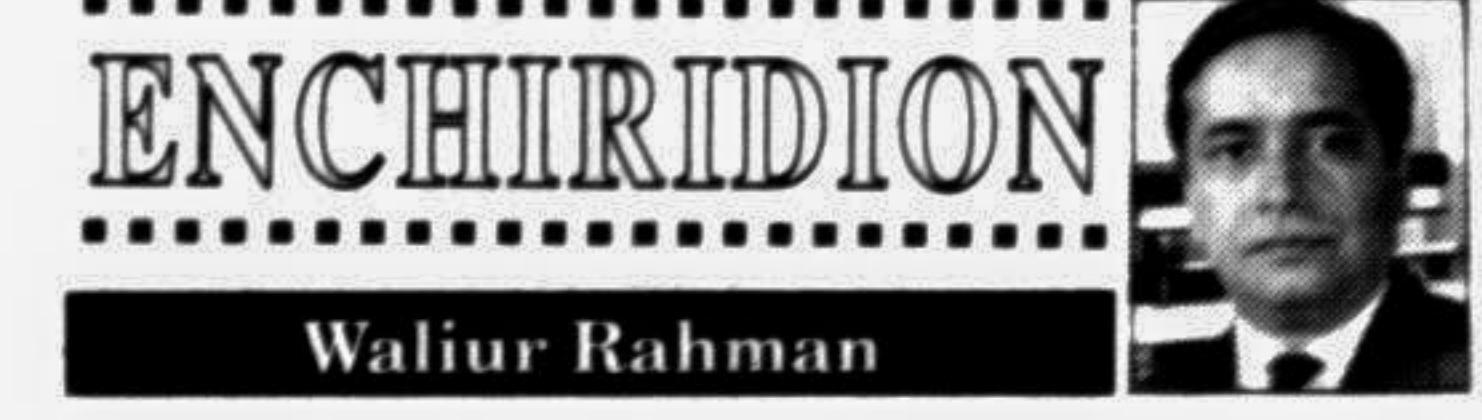
stopped at Ebo! for Carlo Levi in the ravaged desolate southern Italy following World War I. For us in Bangladesh the clock stopped in New York on September 25, 1974.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has got two very important programmes in her agenda. One — address of the General Assembly on October 24 which A Malek, Baby Moudud, as reported, are accompanying the PM's entourage underlines one simple but important fact. Artists, intellectuals and writers and journalists have always been at the vanguard of any movement in the world. The French revolution, the American War of Independence, the Satyagraha movement against

(singer) Stefan Heyn (author) or Regine Hildebrandt (author) and Erhard Krissmann (priest), who risked their lives to give intellectual leadership. Cardinal Sinn stood up against the plunder of Ferdinand Marcos of the Philippines. Albert Camus against the German occupation of France. Bishop Tutu against apartheid in South Africa. Mahatma Gandhi against the British in India. The inclusion of these thinkers and intellectuals in the delegation is a vindication of the significant role they played in liberating the population for the historic struggle of liberation. They were with Bangabandhu. They were uncompromising, they were fearless. We are missing someone today — Jahanara Imam.

Foreign Policy Establishment has always played an important role in putting us right in the midst of decision making process in the world chancelleries. Our contribution has been larger than our economic and strategic position would allow us to. In May 1972 we secured the highest votes in the history of WHO and were elected. We defeated Japan and got elected to the Security Council. Foreign Secretary Farook Sobhan served as Chair-

man, G-77. Bangladesh was elected President, General Assembly. We have dominated over the years UNDP, UNESCO, Human Rights Commission. The author himself served as Chairman, Namibia Council for Law of the Sea, and Chairman, Governing Body of the World Food Programme.



is otherwise known as the United Nations Day. Fifty-one years ago on this day the UN Charter was signed by fifty-one countries. Two — her address at the Harvard University. While the UN was the focal point of many of our activities over the past 25 years, Harvard provided the intellectual nexus to our cause. Struggle against oppression and historic injustice. The fact that eminent personalities like Kabir Chowdhury, Syed Shamsul Huq, Ghazul Huq, M the British Raj — were all supported and in some cases led by artists and intellectuals. Andre Malroux created a stir on Bangladesh. He wanted to send a brigade to us in our war of liberation — as he did in the Spanish civil war by sending anti fascist brigade in 1930s. He was important because he symbolised philosophy against oppression. Even as late as 1989 the fall of the Berlin Wall was virtually the work of a handful of artists like Wolf Biermann

Transit Facility — an Optimistic View

by Md Asadullah Khan

Transit facilities cannot pose a threat to the sovereignty and security of any country. By allowing transit facilities through Suez Canal the sovereignty and security of Egypt have not been liquidated, nor Panama have to suffer in any way by allowing transit to the US.

than anything else, destabilizing and disruptive forces are at work to undo the process of reconciliation that is in progress at the state level talks between the two governments. People feel that the water sharing issue and transit facility are two distinct issues and they must not be tagged. Shockingly, to the peril of this country, no water-treaty exists with India since 1988. The opposition leader's call for allowing Bangladesh 38,000 cusecs of water and not even a drop lesser than that is a vibrant demand that must be hailed by all. But people also remember the previous government's failure to get even one cusec of water through talks, negotiations or treaty and this must be construed as a diplomatic failure. Over the years, people have gone through a traumatic experience while it has been amply demonstrated that water issue is a life and death problem for our people and country. It is unfortunate that politics and only partisan politics can overshadow the national interests at such a heavy cost. If the present government after hectic parleys, discussions and races could strike an accord, it would definitely benefit the whole country and in no case only the Awami League or the BNP or any other party.

As regards the transit facilities through Bangladesh, people would like to take up this issue most dispassionately. People would never approve an accord that poses a threat to the sovereignty and security of Bangladesh. People should not unconditionally be striking the first of parochial nationalism. If nationalism and patriotism in the country is defined by the rejection of openness, keeping the nation a prisoner of the past that stifles growth and improvement of living standard, then the country must be heading towards a gloom. Stripped

of militant religious fervour, Bangladeshi nationalism could be a positive force. It helped our national leaders maintain and safeguard the sovereignty of the country against the aggressive designs of the Pakistani rulers. Nationalism that actually means patriotism must be reckoned as a force for the good.

It is argued that India wants transit facilities on three primary considerations, namely (i) promotion of inter-regional trade, (ii) strategic military manoeuvre, (iii) political ambition. It is further argued that the transit facilities will help India save about 8,000 crores taka in a year while Bangladesh will be earning some 700-800 crores taka in a year in the form of tariff. More fallacious arguments have been raised, such as, in the event of a Chinese attack on India and a possible victory, India would fall back on Bangladesh. More potential arguments are: to contain the separatist movement in the north-eastern region of India namely, Assam, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Mizoram, etc. where ethnic, divisive and cultural antagonisms (schisms) simmer for a very long time, India would be advancing its troops movement over Bangladesh.

In a borderless world when all countries are marching ahead with openness, transit facilities cannot pose a threat to the sovereignty and security of any country. By allowing transit facilities through Suez Canal the sovereignty and security of Egypt have not been liquidated, nor Panama have to suffer in any way by allowing transit to the US. Stripped of false values and regional antagonism, Bangladeshi nationalism could be a vibrant force. With caution, pragmatism and commitment to national goal and prosperity brought into play, nationalism's darker side,

the ill-treatment of the minorities, extremist movement and militant religious feelings seem unlikely to re-emerge. Sadly, however, the past is no more a guide to the future in that the country has changed so much during the last two decades.

Democracy had been under assault throughout the last two decades and often succumbed. To-day democracy is gaining strength in this region and all the regional alliances like SAARC, unless it stands for name's sake, can provide mutual, political and economic support. If public memory is not very short, people in this country remember that the previous government had even agreed to allow transit facilities to Nepal but Nepal could not avail that because of the rupture of sort in its relations with India. Now that the relation with India have been repaired, how come that this country would say 'no' to that proposal? If we could have agreed to allow that facility to Nepal, how could we go back from that stand when it concerns our own interest? We have to study the whole gamut of our relations with our neighbours in a spirit of neighbourly feelings and mutual understanding, however, never at the cost of our national interest.

Any political party, whether in the government or in the opposition, must have its first

prerogative tuned to improving the living standard of the people. Ominous signals are already there. Prices of commodities are rising, often astronomically, and unemployment threatens millions of people in the country. 25000 Bangladeshi workers declared as illegal residents are being repatriated from the UAE. Finding a place to live and to have a living are, if anything, more difficult than some five years before. Such hardships could provide platform for populist politicians to indulge in rhetorics of imaginary solutions that might keep people happy for some time but often at the expense of national interests.

Since populism is frequently suffused with nationalism, any leader appealing to a constituency of discontent attaches himself to as many national symbols as possible. Few political leaders in the opposition bench have been more adept at it than our BNP Chairperson and her cohorts. These leaders have been attacking the present government as being one out of touch with 'Bangladeshi values' and national yearnings. Very often extremist ideas, fanatic philosophies and practices are being tabled as Bangladeshi nationalism. Livid with horror and shock, the nation recalls the traumatic experience

of the Pakistani rule and the carnage unleashed by the Pakistani marauders on the innocent people of this country during the liberation war of 1971 in the name of protecting Islam and Pakistan. Without contradiction, most people believe in and envision a modern democratic state where Islam must be followed by the Muslims but not necessarily enforced 'to the letter' as fundamentalists might want it to be, overriding the spirit of democracy.

On the issue of extending transit facilities through Bangladesh, let it be repeated, that people would never allow the interest of the country to be mortgaged to any one. But people would again want the knotty problems with our neighbours to be resolved peacefully and amicably allowing unabated growth for all at the present moment to meet the expectations of the jobless and the hungry. At the same time, the administration running the statecraft now must prove the skeptics wrong through their prudent commitment and actions.

The present trend of creating panic among the people, unreasonably and ranting slogans when in doubt or in trouble or out of power will only aggravate the relations between the two countries and complicate solutions. When the cold war among the superpowers has ended and a spirit of compromise based on competitiveness has spurred, our country and people can hardly remain isolated and out of touch with reality.

By-poll Habiganj-2 Voters Want Peace and Progress

by Muhammad Quamrul Islam

Hopefully, the Chief Election Commissioner will make all out efforts to take the opposition into confidence and dispel all their doubts regarding free and fair election. The voters do not like to see a repetition of Magura debacle, following non-participation by opposition in by-elections.

IT appears that the by-poll for the vacant seat, Habiganj-2, will be held on 15th October. The Coordinating Council for Human Rights in Bangladesh (CCHRB) has declared to observe the by-poll and other NGOs, on electoral matters, are expected to follow suit. But the non-participation of BNP in the above election can not be taken lightly. One may, however, differ reasonably with the various issues raised by BNP to refrain from contesting the election.

But, it is not understood why the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) has been faltering to issue Identity Cards for which there is an on-going project and high level personnel at the Election Commission's Secretariat. What is the job of Project Director, who is of the rank of Additional Secretary, his officers and staff? If there is any confusion, that can be easily sorted out by consultation, if required, with the previous Secretary of EC's Secretariat who is now the secretary of the Ministry of Fisheries and Livestock Resources. A little bit of co-ordination and consultation could ease off the situation, to complete the process of issuing identity cards to the voters. It is an accepted procedure in our near-by countries also to ensure free and fair election. Any delay to issue the same can reasonably raise doubts in the minds of the opposition parties about the neutral behaviour of the Election Commission. So, on this score, we cannot dismiss the apprehension of BNP, which was, otherwise, avoidable by the Election Commission. The silence of EC towards the demand of BNP for identity cards, in bureaucratic fervour, is rather amazing!

Meanwhile, it is reported, Minister Muhammad Nasim declared in the first session of the Seventh Parliament that the fourteen corruption cases were being lodged against the former prime minister. Naturally, it caused commotion among the opposition MPs within the parliament, rank and file of BNP. The question is: Why Muham-

mad Nasim preferred to say so in the parliament. Was it proper? Actually, such cases were not instituted, only at the stages of preparation. So, whom the Minister wanted to deal a heavy blow, beforehand, by talking about the subject? We don't know if there is any political motive behind it. But, it can't be the way for a party or person to be discomfited. Such utterances also run counter to legal and judicial procedure. If the leader of the opposition had committed any offence, then she can be brought to book, according to law in force. It is the responsibility of both parties in 'position' and 'opposition' to show respect to law instead of indulging in propagandist activity, to place any person in tight corner. Surely, it is not expected of a Minister, to have recourse to such statement, which is unbecoming.

In the sequel, the main opposition party made it an issue at the field, and even hurled extreme threats on Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, in various tones. As reported, most filthy words came out of the month of Salahuddin Quader Chowdhury (SQC), a new entrant in BNP, just before election, after abolishing his party NIP, to retain his seat in parliament, in 12th June election, by any means. SQC is a lucky chap, they say, who has reaped huge benefits from independence of Bangladesh against which he was at war in 1971! But what has mortified us is the angry voice of Sadek Hossain Khoka, MP, who is a political element, unlike SQC. We hope Mr Khoka has, by now, got back his cool political temper. The opposition party should demonstrate tolerance, reply politically and look for legal procedure, as per exigencies, in due course. If any, it is of no use to intimidate the leader of the House, which may only benefit AL and tarnish the image of BNP, from different angles.

In this melee, the political parties could pay scant attention to the current miseries and grievances of the people. The falling price of jute and paddy

have hit hard the cultivators, who cannot fetch the production costs, by selling their produce in the market. The benefit of government declaration of bank credit operations, to purchase at fair prices, hardly trickles down to the cultivators; there are middlemen and administrative leakages, for illegal gains, before it finally reaches the cultivators' end. The prices of fertilizer also are showing uppitch tendency in different places; a portion is smuggled out to Myanmar, as reported. The system losses in power, gas and water are taking alarming turns, finally causing hardship to the consumers. We anticipate that our leaders in 'position' or 'opposition' should debate on these issues, to solace the people, as their representatives.

Hopefully, the Chief Election Commissioner will make all out efforts to take the opposition into confidence and dispel all their doubts regarding free and fair election. The voters do not like to see a repetition of Magura debacle, following non-participation by opposition in by-elections. The Chief Election Commissioner is well aware of the situation and responsibilities conferred on him under article 118 (4) and protection granted to him under Article 118 (3) and proviso to Article 118 (5) of the constitution. If need be, he should not hesitate to resign as per Article 118 (6), in the interest of the nation.

Perhaps, CEC MA Hena, a retired Member of Planning Commission, is better placed and equipped, than anybody else, to brief the 'party-in-power' and the 'opposition' about the current problems and prospects of our economy, and the need to compete with other economies for attracting foreign direct investment (FDI) by cutting down 'uneconomic' costs. Towards that end electoral transparency and political stability are so much necessary, which CEC cannot ignore but to impress them.

The writer is an economist and advocate, Bangladesh Supreme Court.

To the Editor...

Unwise recommendation

Sir, There was a news in The Daily Star on September 11, 1996 that the Energy Ministry has recommended for increasing power tariff by 15 per cent within December 1996. In my opinion, the recommendation is unfair, to say the least.

Power Development Board (PDB) and Dhaka Electric Supply Authority (DESA) have suffered a loss exceeding 40 per cent in their electric grids. Technically the system-loss cannot be more than 8 to 10 per cent. This is true world-wide. It means 32 to 33 per cent or one-third of the electricity produced is pilfered or stolen. The process of the pilferage are shared between the corrupt officials of the power organisations and some dishonest consumers in the country. To the extent of the price of this one-third of the electricity produced, the honest consumers have to bear the burden of the loss. In other words, if there was no pilferage and all the consumers would have paid their electricity bills correctly and honestly, the present tariff would have gone down by about one-third. But instead of reducing the system-loss and decreasing the tariff, the Energy Ministry is considering to increase it by 15 per cent. It means the honest consumers will have to suffer more.

The World Bank about 3 years back stipulated conditions precedent to disbursement of loans for Power Sector of the country that the pilferage or so-called system-loss was to be eliminated. In fact the construction of the Titas-Bakhrabad gas connection line and several other power projects was stalled because of the World Bank condition. It may be recalled that the US Ambassador to Bangladesh at about that time remarked at a seminar in Dhaka that the whole

country was a hostage to the corrupt officials of the PDB and the DESA.

In fact the regular load-shedding to which the consumers have been subjected during the last one year is because of the delay in the construction of some of the power projects. It is not that the PDB did not know about the shortage in power generating capacity of Bangladesh. They made plans in time, but these did not work out because of the stipulations of the lenders regarding system-loss. So the two evils, i.e. the load-shedding and high tariff to which the honest consumers have been subjected, are the results of unduly high system-loss in the power grids of the country.

The news of The Daily Star to which I have referred, quoted the various tariffs of the DESA in US cents. What is the idea behind this? It must be remembered that an average Bangladeshi earns 60 US Cents a day compared to 68 US dollars earned by an average US citizen. Stating the figures of tariff in US cents is irrelevant.

The previous government failed to reduce the system loss even though they made many efforts about it. The present government, if instead of reducing the system-loss decides to increase the tariff, it will be a very unwise decision on their part.

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New system of local bodies

Sir, It appears from a news item on the above subject of your esteemed daily on 17th September, 1996 that eight-member Local Government

Commission (LGC) has been constituted to make a report on the possible outline of local government at village, union, thana and district levels. The Article 59 of the Constitution reads: 'local government in every administrative unit of the Republic shall be entrusted to the bodies, composed of persons elected in accordance with law'.

Thus the constitutional obligation of the government is to enact laws to establish local bodies with the people's representative in the every administrative unit of the Republic. At present we have three administrative units viz. division, district and thana. But unfortunately we do not have representative bodies in these administrative units to perform the following functions prescribed under Article 59(2) of the Constitution: (a) Administration and the work of public officers, (b) The maintenance of public order and (c) The preparation and implementation of plans relating to public services and economic development.

The above constitutional provision does not relate us to establish local bodies like union or village councils as these are not administrative units. We have union bodies functioning from British days, but they could not effectively perform any of the above quoted functions due to the geographical reasons and lack of sources of revenue. We may strengthen these.

I would urge upon Ministry of Local Government to issue a clarification through the press as to why they proposed to leave out the Division Level Bodies and include Village Level Bodies. Do they contemplate establishment of administrative units at village level?

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