

Phoney Debate

The autonomy agenda for radio and television now being addressed by a government committee seems pretty much on course. Yes, there was a complaint that it could be better constituted with more experienced people on it but this hardly dilutes the terms of reference for the committee.

Unfortunately there is this charade going on apparently confusing the pressing task of autonomisation with clamours for a total or partial privatisation of the electronic media. This is defective of the principal concern at hand.

The issues of giving autonomy to the public sector radio and television, their complete hand-over to the private sector and adding private channels to the electronic media are not a jumble of contradictions but these must be dealt with in their own parameters without any conceptual overlapping.

Let's make it abundantly clear that we want the tax-payers' radio and television to be fully autonomous and with that accomplished open as many private channels as you like with everybody sure to greet it with elation. But the two things should not be viewed as arrayed against each other, nor are they to be regarded as cancelling one another. What is the total effort worth if we have crippling self-doubts that nothing in the public sector, not even the electronic media having the benefit of standard international guidelines on their autonomy cannot be decontrolled.

Besides, the supreme concern in a democracy is not only to ensure full transparency and free-flow of information but to account for any expenditure of the tax-payers' money incurred in the upkeep of a media establishment. The public will get their money's worth in tax payments when radio and television are able to exercise autonomy in their administrative and professional functioning.

We eschew no derailment of this national demand established through the three-party agreement of 1990 and the election-pledge of the ruling Awami League as endorsed by the voters in the elections of 1996.

For a Fresh Start

The decision to set up the Dhaka Electric Supply Company (DESCO) which will replace the Dhaka Electric Supply Authority (DESA) and more importantly in a private capacity, is a courageous and therefore welcome decision. Like the DESA the new arrangement will also have the responsibility for distribution of power and billing for its consumption. So the functions remain the same only the operation will be in private hands. The move has been necessitated by the dismal performance of DESA in which the Collective Bargaining Agency (CBA) like its counterparts elsewhere in the public sector has had its interests served at the expense of efficiency, fair play and service.

It is no longer a secret that deep-seated corruption and malpractices within the organisation have been responsible for the outrageous systems loss. It is a shame that donor banks or agencies have to point out such lapses on our part and add newer conditionalities for fresh aid and assistance to the energy sector. Now that DESCO is going to be set up, we must not repeat the same mistakes as were allowed to be committed in the DESA. To learn the lessons well, we should go deep into the DESA affairs and identify the causes and the people responsible for wrong-doing. The plan to give DESA employees an option to join the new set-up is welcome if the corrupt elements can be kept out of it.

We would like to see DESCO completely devoid of any DESA legacy. Let it start afresh and work efficiently. Since the responsibility is confined to just distribution and billing — not generation — both the scope for systems loss and false billing or other related deviations looks limited. Moreover, private entrepreneurs taking the responsibility in a competitive framework will either prosper or perish according to their performances. The days of undesirable stranglehold by vested interest groups on public utilities should come to an end.

UN's New Role!

We observed the United Nations Day yesterday in a perspective different from that of 80's. Two basic changes have taken place since then. The world has turned unipolar and the age of information technology has taken over. Obviously both the developed world and the developing one are confronting new challenges. While some priorities have changed and new avenues of opportunities have opened up, some old problems still continue to fester much of the globe.

Does the changed perspective call for redefining the UN role? The answer naturally is in the affirmative. But this is not to say that the UN must be pressurised by one superpower or its allies to promote their agenda. The UN reform has to be brought about with a view to strengthening its position of neutrality rather than keeping it as a toothless tiger. The UN still plays an admirable role in the socio-economic spheres. But its mediating power in international or ethnic conflicts has largely been undermined by the big powers' refusal to effectively co-operate with it.

While this aspect has to be looked into, we refer to yet another area of unsatisfactory performance by the UN. Earlier the world body used to defend — if not very stoutly often, at least consistently — the Third World countries' causes. Today the impression is that the UN has abandoned that policy. Let the UN pay attention to this matter once again.

Strengthening Local Govt in Bangladesh

by Mohammad Siddiqur Rahman

An Essential Institution to Bring Democracy to the Doorstep of the People

DEMOCRACY literally means "rule by the people." One very simple and popular definition of democracy is that it is "a government of the people, by the people and for the people." People is thus the keystone as well as the supreme player in the true concept of democracy. If all the people of a state could directly take part in the decision making process, that would perhaps be the most ideal form of democracy as the people decide for themselves how to govern the country to safeguard and promote their own interests. This was done in the city states of ancient Greece where the area and the number of the people were small. This system of direct democracy is not possible or practicable in a modern nation-state where the territory and the population is too large to take part in the decision making process of the national government. So in modern times democracy has taken the form of Representative Democracy in which the elected representatives of the people run the government through the parliament (the sovereign legislative body) and the Cabinet

(executive organ of the government). In a representative democracy the members of the parliament are elected by the people and are entrusted with the task of law making and deciding on national issues, but do not take part in the day to day executive functions of the government. The ordinary people hardly feel that they have any participation in the decision making process except that the member of the parliament elected by them represents them in the parliament, not necessarily expressing the wishes of the people he represents.

It is in this respect that the local government plays an all important role in the democratic process by ensuring the participation of the people in the conduct of administrative and developmental functions of the government at the local level. Thus the local government brings the governance and the governed nearer to each other through greater participation of the people. The nearer the government authority is to the people and the larger the people participating in the process of

governance, the greater is the scope of expression of the will of the people and the application of democracy in practice. The Local government by way of greater participation of the people in the decision making process in administration, development and welfare functions at the local level is the sine-qua-non of democracy.

The local government draws its authority and right to govern within its territory through devolution of authority or transfer of power under constitutional provisions or by Act of Law. The powers and functions specifically given to local governments through the process of government remain as preserves of the local government, while the national government has its jurisdiction in all other matters. The local governments should be free to exercise their powers according to their own rules and regulations without interference or hindrance from the national government unless they come into conflict with national laws.

The other means by which the local government may enjoy powers and authority to carry out some functions and

responsibilities of the national government is through the process of decentralisation whereby the latter delegates its executive functions and powers to the local government institutions through executive orders or regulations. For such decentralised functions the local governments remain accountable to the national government. In performing such functions the local governments act as an agency of the government and may get the necessary administrative and financial support from the national government.

Local government in the true sense of the term should enjoy full authority and right to govern within its jurisdiction to the extent of its powers vested through devolution. Local government should be a government in its own right and not a Subordinate Agency of the National Government. Even in respect of decentralised functions local government should be given the authority to act within the frame-work of rules and regulations without interference and control by the national government.

The Case for a Village Parishad

HISTORICALLY union parishads and zila parishads were established in our country with the very beginning of the institution of local government (1885). Thana parishads were established much later (1959) but yet have been functioning for more than 35 years now as thana or upazila parishads. These three tiers of local government have generally gained acceptance of the people. But the establishment of a village local government is a new concept and needs a closer examination.

Village is the basic unit of our society and gives us our identity and sense of belonging. In rural Bangladesh every person is known by the village he comes from. Traditionally, village has been the closest orbit of society round which the life of all the villagers revolve, where everybody knows everybody and where the inhabitants have a community of interests. The villagers share the benefits and difficulties of common facilities as well as common problems of social, economic and physical infrastructure. In our society, village is the primary point of social and political contact for developing any institution. The common interests of the villagers form the core instinct for consolidating the village local government. If the people of the village are to be involved in the democratic process of the country, and if their participation in the administration and development of the localities are to be ensured, the establishment of a local government institution, say the Gram parishad, is a must.

The Gram parishad may consist of one chairman and ten members to be elected by all the voters of the village. Those should not be any nomination and appointment by govern-

ment as democratic principles and constitutional provisions require that all local governments should be manned by elected representative of the people. Since the Gram parishad is at the base of local government structure, it is all the more necessary that its chairman and members should be directly elected by the people. The chairmen of the Gram parishads within a union may be the representative members of the Union parishad. The fundamental principles of state policy as enshrined in our constitution states that "special representation shall be given as far as possible to peasants, workers and women" in the local government bodies. It is also provided in the constitution that "Local government in every administrative unit of the Republic shall be entrusted to bodies composed of persons elected in accordance with law. As such seats may be reserved for women, peasants and workers for election by the general voters of the village, and the question of their nomination, or appointment should not arise."

It is also envisaged that the Gram parishad should constitute different committees with the elected members and others to deal with various fields of activities like — roads and culverts and their maintenance and repair, maintenance of law order, agricultural extension, education, health and family planning, fisheries and livestock, water-supply and sanitation. These committees will discuss their respective subjects with the people of the village, identify the problems, suggest means to solve them and coordinate with the government officials at the field level dealing with the respective fields. They will also help the village parishads in preparing plans and submitting them to the union parishads and thana

parishads if they are beyond their means to implement them. The most important benefit of such a system would be to conscientise the society about their needs and to educate everybody on the democratic process.

It is further envisaged that the chairmen and members of all the Gram parishads of a union should form a General Assembly to act as a forum where the programmes and activities of the union parishad should be discussed openly for information and response of the people. Any member of the public should have a right to ask about the activities of the union parishad. This forum should also be utilized to mobilize public opinion and cooperation in undertaking special programmes of activities. Above all, the union parishads or the Gram parishads shall be accountable to this general assembly. Meetings of this forum may be held once every quarter or six months and all information regarding progress of implementation of projects should be given by the parishads including thana/upazila and zila parishads taken up within the area of the union.

A Gram parishad, with its small area and limited resources and manpower may not be able to take on heavy responsibilities. But they may be entrusted with some rudimentary responsibilities which they can voluntarily perform. Traditionally there used to be panchayets (group of elders) in our villages in the past. They were respected by all and formed an informal court for adjudication of disputes, conciliation and arbitration. Gram parishad may constitute such a panchayat (elders' group) on the basis of consensus for maintenance of law and order and for settlement of disputes and to impose fine up to Taka 5000/=

in cases on unanimous decision of the panchayat. The Gram parishad should also be given authority to control and supervise the activities of the village chowkidars and the VDP and Ansars in cooperation and coordination with the union parishad.

The Gram parishad should undertake responsibilities for social mobilisation for sanitation and cleanliness, health and family planning, education, sports and culture etc. They may undertake programmes for introducing sanitary/hygiene latrines, in every house, site selection of tubewells and their maintenance, road-repairs and road side plantations, clearance of water-hyacinth where it is a menace, cleanliness of school, mosque, temple etc. They should coordinate with the officials of the various departments working at the village levels i.e. block supervisors, agricultural assistants, health and family planning workers, social welfare workers, education officers, public health workers etc. and help and cooperate with them in solving the respective problems and promoting extension work in the village.

The Gram parishad may also be given authority to collect Chowkidary Tax and suitable fees and maintain their accounts in a bank. They may also be allowed to undertake income generating activities and projects in khas lands and khas ponds in the village up to a specified size. The intention here is not to go into details but the idea is to encourage them undertake small economic and social development activities and mobilize local resources. Village parishad may employ a secretary-cum-accountant to keep records and accounts and help carry out their activities.

Local Govt Commission Should be Given a Fair Chance

IT is indeed very gratifying that the newly elected democratic government has rightly given due emphasis on strengthening the local government institutions and formed a high powered Local Government Commission to study the present conditions of the local governments at various levels and to submit report and recommend measures to make them effective and efficient. It is a welcome step and we wish it all success.

It may be recalled that the previous government had also constituted a local government commission which submitted its report on 30 July 1992 after lot of deliberations but without any effect. The report went into cold storage because of inaction on the part of that government. The initiative of the present government to set up a new commission to make its report and recommendation within a specific time frame has given rise to great expectations in the minds of the people about the seriousness of intentions of the government.

The commission has in the

mean time circulated questions to individuals, institutions, and through newspapers to elicit opinion of the cross-section of the people on various issues. They include tiers at which local government should be established (village, union, thana, district, division or any other level), their structure and composition, method of representation (by election, nomination or appointment of chairman and members), functions and responsibilities of different tiers, sources of funds and generation of local resources, etc. The questionnaires are quite comprehensive and according to newspaper reports, about fifteen thousand answers to the questionnaires have already been received. Round Table discussions have been held on important issues by eminent experts and experienced persons and practitioners. This is going to be an intricate task for the commission to study and analyse the various points of view and to prepare its report and recommendations on an objective and pragmatic basis. The time is also a constraint as the

commission is to submit its report by the 15th November 1996.

Government should however take caution to see that no action is taken by which may preempt the local government commission in making an independent recommendation or bind it by any predetermined parameters or ideas. The commission should be absolutely free to give their judgments without any interference or influence of preconceived ideas.

In this connection, a recent press report, suggesting that the government has issued a notification for holding of the union parishad elections on the basis of nine wards in each union, may be cited as an instance in point. The union parishad elections on the basis of nine wards (one member from each ward) would logically be more representative and democratic at the grassroots level, than the existing system of electing three members from three wards each. But since the composition and structure of the union parishads, and the gram

parishads (if recommended to be established as a village level local government institution) is yet to be determined, the government notification seems to have anticipated that wards will be the constituency for the election of union parishad members. The question as to whether the union parishad members should be elected from wards or from villages (if gram parishads are established) should remain open for decision and not be taken as predetermined. As such the question of constituency for election of union parishad chairman or members should, in all fairness, be deferred till a decision is taken about the local government structure and composition by the government after considering the Local Government Commission report.

While we appreciate the intentions of the government to hold election of union parishads as early as possible, but at the same time we should not put the cart before the horse. The author is a former Ambassador and Cabinet Secretary

To the Editor

New rule for students in USA

Sir, There is a new rule just being enacted in the USA regarding foreign students. According to the new rule, no new students will be allowed to have SS cards. SS cards are the cards by which one would be able to look for a job though he or she is not supposed to do so according to the law. But now that this card is not going to be issued to the students, it is going to be literally impossible to work at all. Make no mistake, there is absolutely no chance for a job without an SS number. Two forms of ID are required when one is looking for a job. And one of them must include one's SS card. The students used to have a number but beneath that there

was a seal saying that "permitted to work only with INS authorisation", so at least they could say that they had the permission. New students will not have that chance either.

Anyone who is hoping on working and studying at the same time, I would say, think twice, and rather finish the graduate studies and apply for assistantship because that is pretty easy to get if someone can score good on GRE or GMAT as well.

Golam Jahangir Rochester, MN USA

Statements of assets

Sir, During an election projection meeting held in Bagerhat on May 17, 1996 the Awami

League Chief Sheikh Hasina had promised that if her party could go to power, statements of ministers' assets would be made public every year to bring transparency in the government.

It is heartening to learn that most of the Awami League ministers and state ministers have submitted their statements of assets as per prescribed form supplied by the Cabinet Division.

We, however, wonder why the statements of assets have been kept under the safe custody of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. What purpose would it serve other than the political and personal interests of ministers and state ministers? We strongly feel that the statements of assets of all min-

isters and top bureaucrats should be deposited to the Bureau of Anti-Corruption. The Awami League government should prove its objective of transparency of making public the assets statements of ministers and bureaucrats for the sake of decency, accountability and honesty.

We in Bangladesh believe that less than only one per cent in power in our country, whether they belong to JP, BNP and Awami League or any other party, are above corruption. The poor people of our country despite many hardships and untold sufferings always search for truth.

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A Visit to London

Meeting people in different walks of life convinced me that British society was clinging on to a false sense of prestige arising from memories of the colonial past.

DURING a recent stopover in London, a leading British journalist invited me for dinner at an exclusive club in Pall Mall. At the entrance the receptionist stopped me when I tried to go in. "You have to wear a jacket," he brusquely informed me.

I was amazed at the draconian rules which had not changed since the time of Queen Victoria. But I didn't argue. My host came running from inside when informed about my arrival. Laughingly he said, "It could be an interesting story that a former Indian High Commissioner to Great Britain was barred from the club because he was not wearing a jacket and tie."

I enjoyed the situation but wondered why British society was still so particular about style and not content. London is a typical example. It is so evidently in decline that it looks like a Third World capital when you arrive from New York. Still the pretension to opulence is there.

Meeting people in different walks of life convinced me that British society was clinging on

to a false sense of prestige arising from memories of the colonial past. In the drawing rooms they still display knick-knacks from the past, a sword, a bugle, or an old picture to recall how their fathers or forefathers served in a regiment stationed in some far-flung place in India, or in a district where a near relation of theirs was a deputy commissioner or a superintendent of police.

The service sector has, however, given Britain the edge over its rivals inside the European Union. Yet, even this may not last because Britain is dead against the creation of a single currency in Europe. If it is ever introduced, Britain will have to transfer all its gold reserves worth £20 billion to Frankfurt, the new financial centre of the European Union.

Even the royal family has become a metaphor for the decline of the country. Once upon a time, the ruling dynasty was projected as a symbol of decent and enduring family values.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

India is beginning to occupy space in the press. What British newspapers talk about is business. New Delhi's economic liberalisation is the running story, except when there are serious floods, riots or instances of starvation. British newspapers have seldom looked at India as an emerging political entity with an open society, free press and independent judiciary. These themes do not make news in the press, which has fed its readers on the glories of the Raj, maharajas and snake charmers.

There are a few commendable exceptions, just as there are some British newspapers which are resisting the temptation of playing to the gallery. They still want a newspaper as a purveyor of information, ideas and serious thinking, not a product like soap, toothbrush or talcum powder. Surprisingly, almost all British newspapers have withdrawn their staff correspondents from India in the name of economising. But they are putting in extra hands to cover Hollywood or soccer matches. Even the most conservative newspapers do not mind printing a picture of bikini-clad or topless women to attract readers. Recently, one prestigious Sunday newspaper ran a five-page supplement on sex, not for information but for cheap enjoyment.

The new generation is different, but only slightly so because their attitude towards the people of the subcontinent settled in Britain is one of superiority. It is as if their pride from the past lingers somewhere in the corner of their minds. Sometimes, I wonder if this has something to do with racism. They resent prosperity among Asians, but do not always give them credit for the hard work.

When I first visited London in 1949, I saw most people from the subcontinent engaged in menial work at the airport and found them running grocery shops that knew no closing hours. Subsequently, they were in charge of small post offices. Now most of them own their businesses and houses.

It is no surprise that Indians are managing many British pubs, a job that demands 18 hours work a day. The British

Now the family endures only in name; so many are divorced. It started with the Queen's sister, Princess Margaret, then her daughter, Princess Ann and, more latterly, her two elder sons, Prince Charles and Prince Andrew. No wonder former prime minister Mrs Thatcher told me that what she admired about India was the age-old strength of the family bond.

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Art Buchwald's COLUMN

A Message to Saddam

WHEN I am confused about our foreign policy I go to Merrilweather at the State Department, who seems to know everything about everything.

"Tell me about the cruise missiles in Iraq," I said. "This is our way of sending a message to Saddam Hussein. We want him to understand that it is a no-no to attack the Kurds in the north, and when we asked him via the Internet he just laughed at us."

"Tell me about the Kurds." "They are the largest ethnic group in the world without a country to call their own. But that doesn't mean that they don't want to kill each other."

"One faction is supported by Iran and the other by Iraq. The Iraqi Kurds are winning the war with the Iranian Kurds. That's why we are firing cruise missiles at Saddam."

"Don't we have an embargo against Iraq? But in this case we're supporting the Iranians to send Saddam a message — the same message we E-mailed to him some time ago."

"If the Iraqi Kurds beat the stuffing out of the Iranian Kurds, what can the United States do about it?" "Send in more missiles to let the Iraqi Kurds know that we are not going to stand for it."

"At the same time we're not taking sides in the war between the good Kurds and the bad Kurds in the area. Our quarrel is with Saddam, and while we won't say it publicly, we hope that one of the missiles hits him — by accident of course."

"Why does the United States allow Saddam to give us so much woe? Why can't we eliminate him without prejudice?" "Because everyone in Iraq looks like him."

"They all have the same mustaches, the same haircuts, the same berets. We keep knocking off Iraqis, but we never get the right one."

"Are we uncomfortable having Iran for an ally in this war?" "Well, we'd rather have France, but since the French won't play ball this time, we have to take what we can get."

"Is Iran taking us for a ride by supporting the same Kurds we are?" "Probably. But we have to support the Butchers of Tehran against the Butchers of Baghdad if we ever hope to obtain peace in the region."

"How many million-dollar cruise missiles will it take before Saddam gets our message?" "Maybe two or three thousand."

"Each one we launch is our way of saying to him, 'Enough, you rotten outlaw. If you don't play by the rules, we'll make you suck poison gas.'"

"Well, at least I now understand what's going on. For a moment I had no idea what we were doing in that neck of the woods."

"Saddam should get our fax any day now, and when he does we're sure he'll tell everyone in the Middle East that he is sorry."

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