

Wisdom in Wilderness

One of the most remarkable aspects of President Shahabuddin Ahmed is the ease and sincerity with which he equates politics and patriotism. Every time he speaks, no matter how overwhelmingly quotidian or officially rare the occasion is, the innate distaste of the man for myopic, internecine bickering in the name of party politics and its hindering effect on the progress of a nation surfaces unmistakably. Last Saturday was no exception. The moral guardian of the state while speaking in a reception at his native Netrakona urged the politicians both in and outside the parliament to shed the propensity to lower the rivals simply on ideological grounds. Ideals or tenets of a party, he rightly remarked, can be observed quite well without indulging in the practice of vilification. Probably, disappointed by the blurring of this message in the national context particularly in the often unscrupulous exercise of the tongues of the two major political parties the first citizen of the country urged the MPs from his district to set an imitable example of far-sightedness in placing the interest of the country above party politics. Disappointed as we are, too, in the seemingly endless crying in the wilderness of these wise words, we deem the call extremely timely and keep our fingers crossed with the hope that they will be heeded sooner than later.

Actually it is far easier than our politicians notably those belonging to either Awami League or BNP make it look. It is simply a matter of checking the temptation of rubbing it in on the rivals at very conceivable opportunity. Apart from renewing acrimony and suspicion about its sincerity over the concept of consensus what political mileage Awami League gained by loudly labelling February 15 as a day of democracy-killing? Sadly, but truly by taking recourse to this annoyingly old rhetoric the party in power could only expose its inaccessibility to conceptual modernness. It did not require the AL to go into backsliding on this issue at all in the first place. Because people, the ultimate deciding factor in democracy, rejected the farcical attempt at legitimacy by the BNP government in the June 12 elections. So what needs AL to rake up the mud? As the ruling party, it can hardly afford to misinvest energy and imagination in project as unworthy as political mud-slinging. In a frustratingly expected manner, BNP too wasted no time to travel back in time and harp on their pet shibboleth of killing the democracy in 1975. With so many contradictions lying in their professed commitments to democracy, how can one ever hope for a qualitative change in our politics? Will it ever remain a president's responsibility to sound and act wise?

Pledges to Keep

The government's first great decision soon after assumption of office was that Parliamentary committees more than any other body should do the governance at the policy monitoring and vetting level. This was the only effective means to make the Parliament supreme in both policy formulation and its execution, or in other words supreme in the exercise of state power. That was a great democratic move.

It is more than seven months now that the decision has been waiting to be put into practice. The government is not alone to be faulted for that, impediments rather than cooperation was what it has been getting in its exertions to get the committees going.

The third session of the present parliament resumed yesterday to transact a heavy set of agenda with some very weighty issues like the Ganges Water Treaty on it. More important than that, the JS session is slated to name and get going the committees which the government has offered on its own to be headed by MPs other than ministers. But before it all, the JS Rules of Procedure has to be amended to make rule by the committees possible. Once the committees get into the swing, governance is expected to be radicalised, if not wholly revolutionised. This would guarantee the participation of the opposition in the governance of the nation in an overwhelmingly greater degree than has been possible without the committees.

An equally important, if not more, move should be able to take off from this same session. A bill will seek to restructure the local governments with much more power than was given to these. Devolution of power away from an all-consuming central and monolithic set-up on top is a necessary condition for democracy to take root.

Two cornerstone issues will, it seems, have to wait for some subsequent session — the autonomy of electronic media and the repeal of the black laws. A successful third session completing its load of business satisfactorily will pave the way for their materialisation.

No Room for Confusion

The Shanti Bahini is in the midst of a process of coming to terms with the society and government of Bangladesh — and the ground so far covered is encouraging beyond all expectations. There was no light at the end of the tunnel, very visibly. And in this the Chakma side has impressed with their sincere quest for peace and normalcy — to the relief of the other party — the government and the average citizen of this nation.

This is precisely the time to strike for those that do not like peace and settlement to blossom. In a Roangchhari ambush they killed three police constables with a very transparent motive of sabotaging the present peace process. These elements must not be allowed to have any effect on the process — no one need confuse them with the Shanti Bahini that is marching towards peace.

The government must be stringent and unyielding in its role of containing terror — and the murderers at Roangchhari must be punished. But this can hardly be possible without the Shanti Bahini's cooperation. That is the reality of the hills.

These sporadic outbreaks of violence should only help the two parties close their gaps evermore and bring prosperity and happiness to the hills.

Microcredit Summit and Professor Younus

When Prof Younus compared his work with those of the Wright Brothers, and claimed that his days of flying Boeing, Jets and Concord etc., were not very far away, he injected among his audience an inspired vision of a future for the poor people that could be created through his type of model and dedicated work.

THE three-day Microcredit Summit held in Washington DC in the first week (2nd-4th) of February has ended with bold declarations and a Plan of Action. It has launched the most challenging programme of eradicating the poverty of 100 million people in the world by the year 2005 by mobilising a vast amount of man, material and financial resources costing about \$21.5 billion. It was certainly not a pipe dream of some starry-eyed visionaries or utopians as some sceptics might think; rather it was a global extension of the work plan of some experienced, down-to-earth, hard-headed and dedicated people who have devoted decades of their lives in the task of poverty alleviation in various parts of the world with a leading component from Bangladesh. Over 2000 people from about 100 countries who attended the Summit included some colourful personalities like the First

Over the years, Professor Younus has been given awards after awards by various governments and institutions from all over the world for his accomplishments in the areas of lifting the hardcore poor from the bottom of the pit, as it were, to a reasonable plane of survival through self-employment.

In his address to the Summit, when he compared his work with those of the Wright Brothers, and claimed that his days of flying Boeing, Jets and Concord etc., were not very far away, he injected among his audience an inspired vision of a future for the poor people that could be created through his type of model and dedicated work. No one thought it was stuff and nonsense. The large part of the credit for Microcredit Summit, therefore, goes to him. Hats off to professor Younus, for he has brought fresh laurels, honour and respect not only for himself but also for Bangladesh, an otherwise poor and wretched country.



INSIGHT
by
Kabir U Ahmad

Bangladesh Teaches the World

Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton of the United States, Queen Sophia of Spain, former Prime Minister Tsutomu Hata of Japan, President Yoweri Museveni of Uganda, President Alberto Fujimori of Peru, the Treasury Secretary Robert Rubin of the United States, the World Bank President James Wolfensohn and Vice-President Ismail Serageldin, Executive Vice-President Nancy Birdsall of the Inter-American Development Bank, and heads and executives of many other international agencies, NGOs, lending institutions, and government departments of various countries.

From the seriousness of intent with which it began, the commitment and the Plan of Action that came out in the final declarations, and the political and financial support that it has been able to mobilise, one can see that the Summit was a great success. It was the first of its kind that was ever held and most important international gathering of the deeply concerned world leaders and activists for the purpose of world poverty alleviation. The organisers and participants of the Summit deserve hearty congratulations.

However, from the perspective of economic development efforts around the globe over the last 50 years since the Second World War and the accompanying failure to eradicate poverty, this Summit has special significance. It amounts to a direct intervention in eradicating the grassroots level poverty which neither the traditional free market system nor the planned development process has been able to come to grips with. In spite of massive investments over a prolonged period of planned development in many countries of the Third World, the hardcore poverty had largely remained unchanged if not increased over time. These issues are further discussed below. However, what comes next is the harder task of implementing its Plan of Action. Hopefully, the leaders of the Summit will spare no time in getting down to their most formidable task of Plan implementation. It seems nine years is too short a period to complete such a gigantic programme of global dimension. Time, resources and leadership seem to be the most critical elements in successfully implementing the programme. Nevertheless, even if they are able to reach 80 per cent of their targets in 15 rather than in nine years, as they have stipulated, it will be a major achievement. It will change the face of this wretched earth.

Professor Younus's Role

The key role in planning, organising and holding the Summit, as well as in preparing the Plan of Action seems to have been played by Professor Younus. It was evident from the list of dignitaries who inaugurated, chaired various sessions and actively participated in the Summit proceedings. Most of these personalities were genuine admirers of the work of Professor Younus done under the umbrella of his Grameen Bank in Bangladesh over the last two decades. They heard about, learnt and appreciated the activities of the Grameen Bank, and some of them have even visited Bangladesh to see for themselves what was being done under various projects.

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It is a pleasure to see that Bangladesh, rather the work of Professor Younus, becomes the source or centre of learning for, if not the whole, at least the poor part of the world on the most thorny problem of poverty elimination. While the universities in Bangladesh, which are supposed to be the centres of learning but have been driven to a dismal state, Professor Younus's hands-on, practical, innovative, problem-solving and humanistic approach to poverty eradication has become a lesson for the whole world. Further, while 50 years of practice of the development economics since the Second World War with trillions of dollars of expenditure through various development institutions and government budgets of various countries have not been able to tackle the problem, Professor Younus's approach comes to grip with it quite successfully. That's precisely the reason why the policy makers and politicians of various countries of the world are so eager to learn from him.

What is Professor Younus's Model?

Professor Younus, a former professor of economics in Chittagong University having been thoroughly frustrated during the days of 1974 famine to see that his classroom economics was not of any use to the dying people on the streets, began experimenting with lending small amount of money from his own pocket to the starving poor without any collateral to see if they could produce something which they could sell in the market and earn some margin for themselves after returning the capital. After a few months of such experiments he found that it worked. This gave the idea in his mind that a lending institution could be developed, but he faced insurmountable problems when he approached the traditional commercial banks and the Bangladesh Bank. Through painful experiences, he was able to set up his Grameen Bank in 1983, approved by the Bangladesh Bank with a small amount of capital. It has now grown into a major lending institution. By 1994, it has served 2 million of its members from about 36 districts of Bangladesh lending about \$385 million, mobilised an additional \$306 million as savings and deposits, recovered over 90 per cent of the total cumulative disbursements of about \$1.1 billion, established 1,045 branches and employed about 11,000 staff.

Its essential features are the following: i) it lends small amounts of money (about \$100) to its members, who are poor people, without any collateral, ii) its members have to form a group of five persons who take the collective responsibility of repaying the loans (this group monitors the behaviours of the members), iii) the members have to repay their loans every week from their income, iv) the members have to compulsorily deposit an amount every week to their individual savings account (which introduces financial discipline and the habit of accumulation in their behaviour) as well as the Group and Emergency accounts (which is an insurance against disasters etc), v) the members have to follow the code of conduct and

are assisted by the Grameen employees in making productive use of their credits and income as well as in running and managing their productive activities, and vi) the members lose part of their savings if the Group disbands itself (which prevents collusive behaviour).

The most attractive feature of this institution is that it lends money to the poor people who cannot provide any collateral. It closely monitors its activities of the group and requires the members to build their savings which are later ploughed back again for further investments. It injects a sense of financial discipline and the habit of accumulation for future among its members. The scheme teaches self-reliance by way of earning one's living by doing productive work and a sense of Group cohesion and inter-dependence. The promotion of self-interest is linked with maintaining collective or group solidarity on a small scale.

However, what is most interesting here is that the loan recovery of this Bank is over 95 per cent with borrowers who cannot give any collateral while that of the traditional banking system with rich borrowers giving collateral is less than 30 per cent. The loan default in the latter system has given rise to a major crisis of the financial sector. The two systems of banking has two different cultures, as it were. One conclusion that follows from the two systems of banking is that the poor people have proved themselves to be more credit worthy than the rich borrowers of the traditional banking system who have turned loan defaulters. No wonder, it has attracted the attention of the world outside.

There are some issues of long-term behaviour and competitive market environment which need special attention. There have also been a lot of adverse criticisms of this model both by Bangladeshis and some foreigners which would be dealt with in the next week's column.

Meanwhile, responding to a writ petition of one Jahangir Alam, a High Court Bench com-

Death of Prisoners in Jessore Jail Government Owes a Fresh Explanation

by Nurul Kabir

With the last order of President Shahabuddin Ahmed to release those affected by the misinterpretation of the Home Ministry, things have taken the right direction, but who is going to take the responsibilities of 11 lives that were lost as a consequence of police firing on the agitated prisoners?

TWO recent news items on late last year's jail revolts in the country, carried by The Daily Star on January 7 last, clearly indicate that 11 persons were killed in Jessore jail due to the Home Minister's failure to grasp the meaning of a general amnesty order and an indifference towards prisoners.

The prisoners of Jessore jail revolted because, everyone knows, many of them were reportedly told by the jail authorities that a general amnesty, given in 1991 by the government of Acting President Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed, was cancelled by the interim government of Justice Habibur Rahman in 1996.

The prisoners, who were eligible for release under the amnesty order of Justice Ahmed, suddenly learnt that they would not be freed on the dates fixed by the authorities earlier. It is not unnatural that the new 'information' provoked the prisoners counting their days for the desired moment of freedom to protest against an order that allegedly robbed the privilege they got earlier.

Understandably, the prisoners went for an agitation to restore the 1991 amnesty order that said that the convicts, who were yet to serve half of their sentences, until December 6, 1990, would be entitled to freedom after serving half of their jail terms. It was only natural that their charter of demands would also address certain issues relating to the country's jail management, specially when prisoners are constant victims of often barbarous and corrupt practices of a section of jail officials, who do not regard their charges as humans.

Reacting to the agitation of prisoners, according to the newspaper reports published in December last year, the police resorted to indiscriminate firing on them with a view to what the Home Ministry said restoring peace in the jail. But ironically the so-called 'peace drive' of the government claimed lives of 10 prisoners and one constable, left several hundred prisoners injured, some of them maimed.

Meanwhile, responding to a writ petition of one Jahangir Alam, a High Court Bench com-

prising Justice Mohammad Mozammel Hoque and Justice Mohammad Abdul Matin observed that the interim government of Justice Habibur Rahman did not scrap even a part of the 1991 amnesty order of Justice Ahmed. The verdict was delivered on January 20 last.

Justice Rahman rather announced almost an identical but separate amnesty on June 1, 1996 that paved the way for the release of many after serving half of their sentences. According to the reported judgement, while granting the amnesty to many prisoners, Justice Rahman cancelled only the 'special remissions' earned by the prisoners concerned for good conduct inside the jails.

Again, cancellation of special remissions by the order of Justice Rahman did not affect the special remissions earned by those entitled to be released under the amnesty order of Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed.

Failing to understand the directives carried in the order of Justice Habibur Rahman, the high ups of department concerned told the prisoners that Justice Rahman had cancelled the amnesty previously granted by the government of Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed.

Accordingly, the jail authorities refused the dates of release of around one thousand inmates of different jails in the country.

The High Court Judgement referred earlier pronounced clearly for the first time that the 1991 order of Justice Ahmed was relevant for those who had been sentenced before his taking over as acting president of the country on December 6, 1990, and the order of Justice Rahman had nothing to do with the cancellation of anything of the order of Justice Ahmed. While arguing before the High Court Bench, the lawyer of the petitioner Abdur Rob Chowdhury also pointed out that a privilege once granted to a prisoner by a government could not be taken away by another government. While passing judgement the High Court found this point to be valid in this case.

However, another news item of The Daily Star said that Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed, who had taken over as the President

of the country for the second time last year, recently ordered immediate release of those who were entitled to be freed under his first order. Under this recent order, the jail authorities are to immediately release around one thousand prisoners who were refused to be freed by the jail authorities on the ground that Justice Habibur Rahman had cancelled their privileges earned under the first order of Justice Ahmed.

It is also evident that the last presidential step was very much in line with the said High Court judgement that said that the order of Justice Habibur Rahman had nothing to do with the 1991 order of Justice Ahmed, and it was illegal on the part of the state to detain a person any longer who was supposed to be released earlier under the 1991 amnesty order.

With the last order of President Shahabuddin Ahmed to release those affected by the misinterpretation of the Home Ministry, things have taken the right direction, but who is going to take the responsibilities of 11 lives that were lost as a consequence of police firing on the agitated prisoners? The series of events clearly indicate that there would not have been any agitation inside the jail had the prisoners not been given misinformation about their release, or, in other words, conveyed a misinterpretation of the amnesty order concerned.

Here arises another question: How did the Home Ministry officials, especially the top notches of the ministry make such a mess?

Justice Habibur Rahman issued his amnesty order on June 1 last year, while the prisoners in Jessore Jail began their agitation on December 16 the same year. How was it possible for the officials concerned to be failing to read between the lines of the amnesty order over a period of six months?

The answer definitely lies both in their professional incompetence to grasp the content of a government order and indifference towards the human existence of the prisoners.

Justice demands that the government explains its position on the issue to the people and punish the officials responsible for creating the disaster.

The India-spectre a Stale Metaphor

The stark reality is that India is, by all standard, a powerful neighbour. In a practical situation, political and economic strategies demand that we learn how to live in peace and harmony with her. But that must not mean that we place ourselves at India's command. We must hold on to our sovereignty, territorial integrity, self-respect and indomitable spirit of nationalism, writes Kazi Alauddin Ahmed.

NOTWITHSTANDING the political animosity she has with her rival, the leader of the opposition has focused on the 'salesmanship' (or should we say 'salesmanship') potentials of the Prime Minister. Begum Zia has revealed to the nation that the present government, or for that matter, the leader of the House and Awami League Chief had already completed all the already formalities of the sales deal now awaiting execution. The single commodity being 'Bangladesh' — our hard-earned independent motherland!

The leader of the opposition gave her reactions on the sub-regional forum of cooperation within SAARC between Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Bhutan. It is tough in a preliminary stage, the proposal has engaged the attention of the people here. Taking cue from Begum Zia's flat observations some of the lesser political parties with so-called 'left leanings' have also started through grant of aid from or being fully satisfied with the BNP for instance has turned on the BNP mega-cycle to let its listeners know how such a proposed sub-regional forum of four neighbouring nations would make Bangladesh a province of India. Playing further on the Indian bagey the WP thought our mighty neighbour was in a pre-meditated plan to annex our country to eventually establish a passage to her eastern states Assam, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura etc. The subject of 'transit' was thus alluded to, in a round about way. Being plainly uncertain about their convictions wading through shallow grounds, the Workers' Party found the proposition viable barring of course the Indian ghost) or else they would not have suggested that China and Myanmar could also be included.

The concept of a sub-regional forum of four neighbouring countries has been in line with article-7 of SAARC document. Essentially therefore, the forum members will be members of the parent body as well. And since neither China nor Myanmar is on the SAARC body the suggestion of the Workers' Party can be treated as an anti-dote to allay the psychological fear of India that China has been visualized as a sort of 'care-taker' of the interests of the smaller nations against the 'imaginary' Indian onslaught. May be, sub-consciously, the Workers' Party wanted to drum-beat their so-

called "China-connection" which the people of Bangladesh had seen in 1971! I consider it as a self-infatuating bid to overlay such linkage with a covert attempt for currying favour with both the fending ends in the home front.

BNP Chairperson must have been profusely calojed at finding WP and some other 'brief' matter, the leader of the House and Awami League Chief had already completed all the already formalities of the sales deal now awaiting execution. The single commodity being 'Bangladesh' — our hard-earned independent motherland!

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relationship with India has been more an induced phenomenon than a real malady. There is no denying the fact that this has been a legacy in perpetuity handed down to us by our former Pakistani masters. It should have been a long dead thing but it is yet to happen that way because some of us cannot forsake our past linkage. These are the people who, at every opportunity, frighten people with the 'India genie'. Again, these are the crude ones who enjoy Pakistan's patronage, may be, through a number of Arab countries.

The most vital issue of Ganges waters remained stalled for two decades all due to such inconsequential, rather stupid intransigence. The governments during the past twenty years must jointly or severally accept their responsibility for having deprived the nation of the waters of frition. Now, some of the BNP leaders are even demanding compensation from India for damage of our crop while no farsighted endeavour was ever made to get our share of the Ganges waters. They could not realize that a change in attitude would have reversed the situation even during their time also as of now. The element of distrust kept saner thinking continually eclipsed.

BNP's criticism of the present government and its friendlier ties with India coincidentally confirms existence of an otherwise linkage. At times, the statements of some of the BNP leaders appear to be overtly representative of Pakistani stand-point. On the issue of the sub-regional forum within SAARC, the opposition leaders have discovered in it a strategic plot to isolate Pakistan. Curiously enough, Pakistan is yet to come out with such a feeling of isolation. It is not that the detractors of our national interest do not realize the geographical proximity which has been uppermost in the concept of a sub-regional forum. It is also not to forget that Pakistan, aware of her territorial boundaries, has already entered into similar associate with Iran and Turkey in the pattern of old RCD.

Concurrently, both India and Pakistan have time and again expressed their willingness to improve bilateral relations within SAARC. There has been some headway also in this direction. Pakistan herself is unconcerned at what India and her three other south-eastern neighbours Bhutan, Nepal and

Bangladesh feel or do about such sub-regional association. The opposition BNP here, on the contrary, is rather unabashedly whipping up the imaginary Indian spectre for Pakistan.

On the issue of the Asian Highway on which ESCAP survey provides a very bright prospect, the BNP leaders remain haunted by the self-same ghost. To them the very existence of India as our formidable neighbour on three sides has been, as it were, a great misfortune. But it must be acknowledged that one has to live with reality for his/her own interest and survival.

Though grim, the stark reality is that India is, by all standard, a powerful neighbour. It is trying to be considered as a permanent member of the Security Council of the United Nations at par with other super-powers. In such a practical situation, political and economic strategies demand that we learn sooner as how to live in peace and harmony with our big, powerful neighbour like India.

But that must not mean that we place ourselves at India's command. We must hold on to our national sovereignty, territorial integrity, self-respect and indomitable spirit of nationalism. We must never forget that our national independence is hard-earned. It did not come from the blue all on a sudden and certainly it was no body's mercy or gift to us. We must also recall with pride that we fought the War of Liberation in 1971 gallantly. Again it was we who laid down our lives for our mother tongue Bangla back in 1952. So, there is absolutely no point in nursing any fear about anyone on earth and let our tested valour, determination, abounding sense of patriotism and nationhood be moth-eaten.

We have most unequivocally shown the whole world that we were the ones who fought the briefest war of liberation and were eventually crowned with success. Every single citizen of the country, irrespective of political party affiliation must assume the responsibility to keep this spirit ever-kindled in the minds of present and future generations. To do otherwise by illusory means and mere political invectives would be a criminal offence.

And last not the least, we must remember that our war of liberation was led by Awami League and it will be an unacceptable overture to hold the same party guilty of bartering away our independence.

To the Editor...

"Well-done, DMP"

Sir, I refer to the opinion titled 'Well-done, DMP' by SHI, published in The Daily Star of 15 Feb, '97.

With no malice to the writer, I beg to differ with him as I see no reason to 'give the city police administration a big hand for presenting us

In fact, quite a few muggings, snatching, etc., took place within a few hours on the same busy road (Road No. 3, DRA), while two groups of policemen stood idly by on two ends of the

road. Frankly, in my opinion, I think we should give 'DMP a big hand' for their incompetence and ineffectual presence.

Perhaps SHI is trying to glorify DMP without sufficient factual backing. But such glorification will only inflate the ego of the corruption-ridden, incompetent DMP. It's better to refrain from publishing such ill-founded opinions for the sake of peace and security and also because these give a wrong signal to the readers.

Jamal Ahmed
Dhanmandi, Dhaka.