

Parliamentary Norms

The Jatiya Sangsad is being robbed of its dignity and sanctity in a most revolting manner. The chair and the person of the Speaker are being undermined in a very mean and uncivilised manner. In a huff over the adjournment of the JS session at 11 on Sunday night a member hurled unprintable abuses straight at Deputy Speaker Abdul Hamid. The more responsible and sedate BNP colleagues of his, rather than trying to pressure him into his senses, were busy addressing their own investives to the Deputy Speaker which were hardly any better.

The MPs enjoy such unmatched privileges as make them almost inviolate specially for whatever they say or do in the Sangsad in session. They make law for the nation and the law gets into good effect by their bowing to it. The delicate balance that holds together these apparently opposing aspects are maintained by the most punctilious abidance by the parliamentary norms, rules and practices by each individual member. The sovereign house must of necessity be the most civilised assemblage of the nation where each member is most sensitive to the other one's rights and is as such the most accommodative of any two in a given nation.

We have no doubts in our mind that some members are, in the name of getting their rights respected, not only stepping on the other members' feet but abusing everything that sustains the parliamentary system of government.

It almost seemed a silver lining in that dark scenario when Leader of the Opposition Khaleda Zia asked all to refrain as a rule from making the nation's leaders into butts of exercises in detraction. But how will this help? And how can you incapacitate the highest body from having access to the nation's top leaders performances. They cannot be above evaluation and criticism. But there should be no problem if these were done in accordance with the best of parliamentary traditions. Refraining from castigation of leaders while hurling abuses at the Speaker cannot help matters much.

The JS must be helped to return to responsible and acceptable norms of conduct by its members, by all in the House, especially the opposition whose given role is one of stridency, as it is. All patriots must cringe from the prospect of a degeneration of the highest institution of the nation.

New Deal for Women

Apart from shedding glycerine tears, holding on to entry-level job reservation quotas as the panacea and abdicating the initiative largely to the NGOs, successive governments' score-card on women's development has been far from satisfactory. So long as we reel off the same old statistics about our sisters being half of our population and their household work going unvalued in monetary terms we are merely salving our conscience through lamentations sitting pretty and smug on them.

NGOs have shown that given the opportunity women can be an asset in the top-order policy-making and management positions. Path-breaking women entrepreneurs in private sector industries and business concerns have only corroborated that belief in their abilities. With that kind of success rating in the free enterprise area which calls up their reserve of managerial and technical skills, seriousness of purpose and attention to detail they merit co-option to top government positions to have a comprehensive impact on development endeavours.

From this overall standpoint that we wholeheartedly endorse the just revealed broad-based 'a national action plan (NAP)' the present government put on the anvil to concretise women's development from the palliatives or half-measures they are stuck in. There will be an intake of women to top government or semi-government positions on contract basis under the various ministries following a reformulation of sectoral policies and alteration in the allocation of business. It may not be to the liking of some people, but this is how it should be given their proven success as referred to above.

Our endorsement of the NAP does not, however, preclude the necessity for taking certain precautions about screening the women aspirants entirely on the basis of merit, expertise and suitability. Political considerations must be scrupulously kept at bay.

Costly Indecision

In a considerate gesture that must merit appreciation of all concerned, the Chittagong port users have relented to the Prime Minister's request for postponing their boycott plans. In other words, the seed for their future boycott remains intact. It will take the Prime Minister's renewed and assertive intervention in the matter on his return from Male involving not merely the port users forum but also the CBA and the port authorities to remove the bone of contention which is about the use of private equipment at the port.

Earlier, the workers had abstained from duty through intermittent wild-cat strikes protesting the commissioning of forklifts at the port by private shippers. Now, the port users were about to give the CBA a taste of its own medicine by planning to give no work to the port employees at all. Being chagrined at the slow pace of loading and unloading of cargoes by workers, the port users had brought in those gears to escape heavy demurrage payments. In the process, as an insult to the injury they faced the CBA's resistance against the introduction of some modern equipment. This CBA tyranny could not have lasted long were it not for the fiddling done by rival political party elements in the port area.

The PM has a problem on hand to steer clear of the mess and arrive at a decision to help the port out of the mire of inefficiency and bad name it has worked itself into.

Lessons in Macro-economic Management

If exchange rates are stable, funds borrowed from abroad would cost 60 per cent less. Why we should have such high cost of funds — particularly when the industrial investment as well as production are not increasing at desirable rates of growth?

ACCORDING to Dr. Wahiduddin Mahmud, former Advisor to the Caretaker Government and a well-known economist, "There is no immediate threat to macro-economic stability. However, macro-economic balances which deteriorated during the last two fiscal years still remain fragile despite the current low rate of inflation. The existing strains in fiscal and external balances are likely to continue or even worsen during the coming fiscal year unless bold initiatives are taken to strengthen domestic resource mobilisation efforts." He further stated, "the real test for the government's macro-economic management will come if and when there is a pick-up in the investment and activity levels in the economy."

The statement has raised many questions whose answers are important in terms of a policy prescription. As for example, what are the bold initiatives for strengthening domestic resource mobilisation efforts and the pick up in the investment and activity levels are functions of the macro-economic management process itself. As I mentioned before in this column, the economy is definitely not moving up at the desirable rate and speed and there is a need to influence the economic variables in the short run so that the primary objective of maximising the growth rate is achieved — as far as possible.

What are these influences? The growth rate is a function of production in agriculture; industry and the service sectors. The incremental output contributing to the GDP will determine its size and growth. If we produce more, we have a bigger GDP cake — it is as simple as that. We all know that we had a bumper Aman crop which is now going to be followed by equally unprecedented Boro rice and wheat harvests. So our expectation from one of the three sectors is fulfilled. The main drawback is in industrial production — both new industrial investment and outputs from installed capacity failed to come up to the desired levels.

On the other hand, service sector's growth in Bangladesh is basically a function of the other two sectors and may not be independently considered for the purpose of short-term policy measures.

According to my own analysis, the failure of the industrial sector is primarily due to lack of domestic demand. Farmers did not get a good price for the Aman paddy. Now for the Boro season, paddy at the moment is

selling at 160 to 190 taka per maund. It would hardly meet the cost of production. Given such poor returns from major agriculture commodities, domestic demand for manufactured goods and all sorts of services are bound to remain depressed. Therefore, the immediate short-term task is to boost the returns to farmers through attractive procurement prices of paddy/rice and wheat. This would automatically increase the farm-gate prices, returns to farmers will increase and create the conditions for lifting up the domestic demand for non-farm goods and services.

It may be noted that the amount of paddy or wheat procured is not relevant. Far more important is to ensure the upward pressure on the prices received by farmers, while the actual procurement of the harvest may be largely carried out

by traders and millers. The key policy elements in this respect will be the following two:



Window on Asia

Shahed Latif

1. The procurement price should be determined on the basis of the cost of production to farmers inclusive of interest charges for the borrowed funds for cash inputs which is relatively high in case of Boro rice due to cost of irrigation and fertiliser. Also, the cost of imported rice of comparable quality should be assessed. The actual procurement price should be a weighted average derived from these two sets of estimates. I am sure the existing farm-gate price of Tk. 160-190 per maund will be much lower than the suggested procurement price.

2. The rice traders and millers should have access to short-term credit and at favourable cost. Financing of additional storage, drying and milling capacity may also be arranged on an immediate basis. An important consideration in this respect is the continuation of the fertilizer subsidy. It is well recognized that output price support is much superior to input subsidy. The former can be eventually recouped through open market operation, thus involving no burden on the budget. The latter is always a drain on the public resources, as is the case under the present budget. The fertilizer factories should

not be increasing at desirable rates of growth?

Another important measure will be to reduce import duties on those imported products whose volume of imports are likely to increase within the short term. One such item is telephone hand sets. It is expected that the private mobile telephone companies are capable of handling over 100,000 (if not more) new connections every year. However, the existing tax structure increase the price of hand sets by as much as 60 per cent which itself might deter the expected rate of expansion.

Therefore, a reduction of taxes may enhance the total revenue generation.

I am sure that there are several other manufactured items where the high price elasticity of demand will enable a rise in revenue collection if the taxes are lowered.

It is true that low interest rates will have an inflationary impact. But the two successive bumper harvests should be able to generate sufficient counterbalancing influence to moderate the expected pressure on the price levels. In fact, an immediate inflationary impact on the foodgrain prices should be good for the economy and this is part of the economic boldness which is necessary at the moment. However, the traditional government thinking has always

been in favour of low foodgrain prices. Elections are won or lost on this account. I do not think it is true any longer. Neither low nor high — the right price is the just price for political victory.

An important factor in the revival of the economy is the expected farm-gate price of Jute when the new crop will enter the market from next month. Jute is a cash crop and if a comparatively high price to the farmers can be assured, the lack of effective demand in the economy can be eliminated in no time. We are yet to hear of any government thinking in this respect.

The savings from the fertilizer subsidy should be earmarked for those projects and programmes which should contribute maximum in terms of short-term employment generation. This is the surest way to boost the effective demand. Therefore, the allocation to the rural works programme, labour-intensive irrigation projects, housing construction etc., are some of the sectors of expenditure which should immediately benefit from the budgetary reallocation for the year 1997-98.

In particular, the construction/housing sector has considerable multiplier effects, and a deliberate policy of special housing loan programme, a revised duty structure for imported cement, financing of real estate developers etc., will favourably influence the growth of the GDP within the short term.

In the foreign trade sector, government should immediately negotiate favourable tariff arrangements with India so that trade with north-east India in particular can be enhanced within the next 12 months.

Lastly, the government should within the current fiscal year, complete all negotiations and award the contracts for new power stations, gas development, exploration and drilling. This should firmly establish for the rest of the world to see that at least a billion dollar worth of investment only in the energy sector would be forthcoming in the next few years. This is the surest way to ensure that direct foreign investment on a fairly large scale should be reaching Bangladesh in future. No doubt, there will be criticism of individual contracts and awards. But in the greater interest of the country as well as for the sake of ensuring a victory at the next election in the year 2001 (four years from now) the government must be bold and decisive.

To the Editor...

"A grand opportunity missed"

Sir, This refers to Mahfuz Anam's commentary entitled "A grand opportunity missed" published on April 1997. Hats off to him for writing such a timely incisive write-up. Our newspapers seldom play a constructive role in nation-building. Most of them are prone to jumping on the bandwagon and playing to the gallery. A very few newspapers come out to speak the unpleasant truth and call a spade a spade. The Daily Star is one of them and he is one of the journalists who has been writing profusely (Wake-up Call to AL, Grand Opportunity Missed, etc.) in *The Daily Star* to wake up the nation from slumber and to put the nation on its right track. He is the one who has been fearless in detecting the mistakes, follies and foibles of the government.

With a chequered history the Awami League went over with a bang in the last general election. After 20 years, the party has come to power certainly with an avalanche of workload and commitment to fulfil. History repeats itself. If Awami League fails to do what is to be done and drop what is not to be done, the boat the party has floated is certain to sink scuppering any further chance of returning to the helm of state.

I am in agreement with you that the howling victory over the brave and daring boys achieved from the Kenyans acquiring a berth in the next World Cup cricket afforded a unique chance for us to forge a national unity through a plenary assembly of all the parties in the civic reception to our heroes. But to our utter surprise what we witnessed at the Manik Miah Avenue was not expected. A spectacular and jubilant event that could usher in an era of national unity and solidarity ended in a parochial and partisan colour and clout. The AL performance at the Manik Miah Avenue appeared that it could claim alone the credit as it happened during its tenure. The partisan spirit dominated the reception. Party slogans, canned music praising Sheikh Mujib, speeches larded with quotations from Sheikh Mujib and party chief and colourful banners bearing Mujib's portraits all these marked the reception gala. Nowhere was it seen that it was a non-party national reception. Prime Minister's recent statement that there were specific reasons behind the arrest of four top ranking BNP leaders and later her failure to substantiate the claim had ultimately brought slight on her personality.

A prime minister is a pride for a nation. He or she shouldn't say or do anything which she/he doesn't know. A slight mistake of the leadership

can plunge the whole nation into a serious disaster. In the light of the present activities of our leaders, it seems that the wise words of Nelson Mandela have gone unheeded. Our leaders should remember that "you can fool all the people some of the time, some of the people all the time but you cannot fool all the people all the time." It is time AL rose to the occasion if it really means business.

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Wrong idea

Sir, I read the article written by Mr Shah Hossain Imam on our CHT problems in *The Daily Star* dated 10-5-97. Let me quote the last part of his writing — "The basic question in the CHT revolves around a colourful indigenous peoples' right to their own culture and traditional way of life. This need to be safeguarded by political autonomy granted constitutionally to six hundred thousand of our compatriots on this hills."

I am sorry to say that like other people who forget or don't know or intentionally hide the history of our hill people, the writer also did the same. The people of the hill (Upajati, an ordinary people say) came to this area in the 17th or 18th centuries, but the Bangladeshis have been living in this area since the pre-historic times, that is, for thousands years.

Now the question is, who are indigenous? Next, the CHT is

about 10 per cent of our total area but the people of hill are less than 1 per cent of total population. So is it a correct suggestion to give political autonomy to less than 1 per cent settler-people for more than 10 per cent of land of this densely populated country? My earnest request to those who write column should remember his country's political, economical and social condition.

Md Muhiuddin Osmani
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Mohammadpur, Dhaka

South Asia Confederation

Sir, BBC's (April 24) follow-up of the Indian suggestion for a loose confederation of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, is a new lead of interest to western power groups. The scenario is being unfolded step by step.

From Quadrangle to World Bank Triangle (Dhaka meet, April 20; next meet in July), to bigger triangle! Any superpower would like to tap the combined goodwill of over a billion people.

Who are behind the "Tigers" in Sri Lanka to sustain it for a dozen years? Anything to do with the proposed use of Trincomalee as a naval base on global scale? The ghost of "Greater Bengal" might become vocal in the coming days. We need guidance from our leaders.

A Husnain
Dhaka

Take Your Daughters to Work Day

Farzeen Saleh

On the 1st of May, the World Bank organised a "Take your daughters to work day" where girls of 8-18 years of age were invited to spend a day in the workplaces of their parents. I was invited to go by my aunt Shirin Jahangeer.

The purpose of inviting daughters only was to bring attention to the potential of girls and motivate them to develop their abilities and skills. It was a way to emphasise that girls in Bangladesh should be given opportunities to contribute more fully to the development of their country. Throughout the day we were introduced to the people working in the different sectors: Agriculture, Population, Health, Education, Energy, Infrastructure, Water and Sanitation. We were shown data and pictures of the projects under operation at present.

The World Bank was started in June 1946. Today it is operating in 180 different countries of the world. Its main goal is to reduce poverty and improve living standards of people in the world.

Later in the afternoon we had a video-conference live from Washington with Ms Mieke Nishimizu, the Vice President of the World Bank. She spared us her time to listen to our questions regarding the World Bank and Bangladesh's future.

On her visit to Bangladesh last year she said she believed Bangladesh "will be able to improve if its people try." She wishes us well and hopes we will be able to build a brighter future for ourselves.

After our video conference, Mieke sent a letter addressed to all the girls she spoke to.

Weekend holiday

Sir, Following the Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's announcement on the shifting of weekend holiday from Friday to Sunday, some of our fellow citizens and business people have started campaigning for the same. Their arguments are based on the assumption that Friday as holiday hampers our profit-making business transactions with overseas countries. This argument, however, does not sound convincing since, unlike what happens in a village market, all international deals run prescheduled.

In the second instance, Bangladesh's problem is not with Friday, Sunday or any other day. With almost all countries with which we have trade relations, there remains trade imbalance against us. Again, before 1982, when Sunday, before the weekend holiday, our economy and international trade was in a more dire situation. This implies that it is imperative we go ahead with firm industrial initiatives and positive policies rather than shifting holidays here and there. After all, sound national economy and balanced overseas trade follow political stability and social security. In that case, Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) will also pour in to a greater extent.

Thirdly, Sunday is identical with Christian religious tradition. Suppose all the Muslim countries with Friday as holiday become economic giants, it is improbable that developed Sundayers will abandon Sunday as their holiday. Because it has sprang from their deep cultural core. If they can respect their roots, why can't we? It seems that some of us are so overwhelmed with either inferiority complex or immediate sectarian benefits that they sometimes tend to undermine our essential interest. We choose to follow the rules of the affluent, but forget to try to become affluent ourselves in collective terms.

Fourthly, some argue to set Sunday as holiday within the context of globalisation. "We are in global village, we are getting closer day by day in one world." But questions come around: globalisation of what? Is it globalisation of products of multinational corporations? Globalisation of satellite programmes? And so globalisation of Sunday? In fact these amount to subscription of colonial heritage. Globalisation can do nothing to eradicate global poverty and injustice. It is a baffling term.

We eat to live, not live to eat. Considering above circumstances, we solemnly protest any move towards shifting Friday as holiday in Bangladesh.

Bapt. Shefa
DU, Dhaka

Those Eccentric Cat Lovers

by Lavina Ambreen Ahmed



They say we are not animal lovers. The trend of keeping pets is not all that popular here. When it comes to cats however it's a totally different story. There are plenty in the city who shower those furry creatures with tender loving care. Unlike dog lovers cat crazy folks are a little obsessed with their pets. They eat with them, sleep with them, caress and cuddle them. In short, treat them like their own kids. "And why not?", argues a proud owner of five cats "cats are beautiful, adorable animals, they are a little mischievous but not at all troublesome. They deserve to be pampered."

When you think about it, it's quite difficult to understand the bond between a cat and its owner. Taking pictures of those much-adored four legged creatures is a favourite pastime of the cat lovers in town. A young lady brings snaps of her 'darlings' to the office pretty frequently. Another keeps a series of albums entitled 'My cat family'. The fascinating series contains photos of Mama Zoey and her offspring Ace and Pushkin in various interesting poses and angles. And you thought only humans were models! The captions are cute. "Ace in action" shows a thin black and white coloured cat doing a somersault. In the snapshot 'Pushkin taking a nap', the lazy snowy white cat can be seen perched comfortably on top of a kitchen cabinet sleeping the day away. Another cat lover sings lullabies to her cats, buys something for them whenever she goes shopping, requests friends to talk in hushed tones when they are asleep, at times even cancel appointments with friends because her pets are feeling a bit 'under the weather' yet, she refuses to believe she is suffering from Excessive Love for Cats Syndrome (ELCS).

When a cherished pet cat gets lost the owners are totally devastated. In some cases the missing cats return to their homes and the family is happy once again. In this regard allow me to tell you a lost-and-found-again cat story. Recently, my friend Farah's (an ELCS victim) cat Murphy returned after a long sojourn. For months my friend was dejected. She acted like the jilted lover deserted by her

partner and constantly whined and moaned on why Murphy left. The situation was quite hilarious. But one fine day Murphy returned. Not alone, she brought two kittens with her. Here is how the auspicious event took place. She was on her way to my place [we live in the same area] when she saw a forlorn cat behind a rose bush whimpering in a heartening manner. When she entered my room she was in a daze, mumbling something quite incoherently about seeing Murphy. I joked: "why didn't you ask the cat whether she is Murphy?" To my surprise, she gave me a hug and said it was a brilliant idea and rushed downstairs. Ten minutes later I called her up and an elated Farah informed me that the cat is Murphy indeed. Although the once fat sassy, healthy Murphy is emaciated now, she is back and nothing else matters to Farah. I couldn't resist begin a killjoy. "Don't you see, she is a selfish little creature, why else would she desert you for no reason and show up in her time of need?" Farah defended Murphy by saying: "she just needed time to be alone. I totally understand."

Well, I don't understand this mysterious, unreasonable passion for felines. A certain middle aged man has opened up an informal restaurant for stray cats. He whistles, make cat sounds and calls out 'oi tora ai shab' (come all of you) and invites a group of cats everynight for a free meal.

Contrary to popular belief, guys can be just as crazy about cats as their female counterparts. A twenty year old boy in New York cried buckets when his pet cat 'Sinclair' died. He wrote an elegy in Sinclair's memory which hangs in his bedroom right next to the cat's big portrait. Another ELCS sufferer returns home from work with stray cats quite often. She has nine cats and it's hardly a surprise that she wants to start a cat farm (whatever it means) in future.

Really, the eccentricities of the cat lovers know no limit. It's almost as if those lovable, seemingly innocent looking creatures, have put them under a spell and make them comply to their every wish.

OPINION

Anniversary Syndrome!

A Zabr

Bangladesh is coming up and progressing. After winning a minor cricket tournament, now we may forward a claim to the Guinness Book of Records to accept this land of lotus eaters as the world champion in the observance of anniversaries and holidays. Ashamed? Why? It is the official policy of the state, the administration, and the political rulers of the country.

The daily newspapers are not published for how many days in a year? Can we afford to be that much indulgent? Not an essential service like electricity, water, and broadcasting? Is it not time for the newspaper barons to sit down together and plan to offer reader-friendly service, just for a change? Except for the two Eids, the hawks and the distribution of the papers could be managed. Have one-stop centre in several zones of the city for a limited number of papers to be collected personally by the readers (or roving rickshaw vans). The publishers could follow a roster on 'consensus' basis.

Let us face the unpleasant reality and real truth. Basically we are a bunch of shirkers (phaki-baaz). That applies mostly to the employees, not self-earners, the self-employed, and the owners of business establishments. Introduce extra overtime pay during holidays. The leaders of the society, including the political leaders, have to take the initiative to start a vigorous movement to change the traditional mindset of the people who have a tendency to loaf. The general addiction to adda has to be restricted to the right time and place, if the nation is keen to develop through hard work, and less talk.

Subjective priority is a negative attitude (the politicians may note), and this perversion should be discouraged officially. Of course there are economic reasons for the home-ward rush during the longer holidays, because urban migration creates separation from the families in the lower-in-

come groups. But why grind the national activities to a complete halt?

The number of official holidays may be reviewed and cut down by at least 25 per cent, and thereafter ten per cent per year for five years. We just can't afford to waste millions of man-hours of non-activity. We have a history behind us (who haven't?), but we have to focus on the history in the making, and look forward, more than look back (we could not do anything with our brilliant hindsight all these past decades for half a century). Other developed nations can have longer and bigger anniversaries. Pragmatic nations are not that sentimental. Work like a machine, then relax like a human being (not the other way round).

BTV went berserk on May Day, devoting the first 15 minutes of the National News bulletin to the mouthies and footies. All this footage could have been shifted to a separate special programme of 15 minutes after the News. We are listening to news or garbage collection?

The political leaders have a big self-training programme before them: lead by the head, not by the heart. Artificially raising the blood pressure is no good. There are a lot of empty upper chambers available all around. Fill these with the right stuff (not through street processions, hartals, and violent agitations).

By the way, it was amusing, and refreshing, to see the photograph in the papers of opposition workers wearing the mask of John Majors on the eve of the general elections in Britain last week. They have a sense of humour (major taxes during Major's time!).

Target: all services should be available during the holidays. Most of the holidays are not necessary. More of these holidays should be made optional (limited to not more than three per annum per person. Extra absence: no work, no pay).