

Catalytic Summit

The SAARC is coming into a fuller play with new ramifications that were originally envisaged in its charter but which kept eluding the member-states owing to mercurial political atmospheres from time to time. The charter for regional economic cooperation put contentious bilateral issues out of the ambit, made unanimity indispensable for decision-making; but at the same time it laid due stress on confidence-building and promotion of goodwill and amity at all levels, both government-to-government and people-to-people. It was visualised in concrete terms that in addition to the annual summits a series of consultations at the highest level of two or more member-states will take place at regular intervals to reinforce the SAARC process. Then there are Articles Seven and Ten of the charter providing for sub-regional cooperation on specific, need-based projects which has been lately invoked by the SAARC summit in Male.

Against this backdrop, we welcome the news that Dhaka is to host a summit meeting of the prime ministers of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh in November this year. We are particularly elated to note that the qualitative improvement in regional environment has been of such a nature, with the change of leaderships in some SAARC countries, that the pendulum has swung towards the long-felt need for *bon homie* in South Asia. The Male spirit in cordiality between India and Pakistan reflected through a most rewarding ice-breaking bilateral summit duly produced tangible results for confidence-building in not only the two inimical countries concerned but also, by implication, to the whole region.

Bangladesh being friendly to both India and Pakistan is in an ideal situation to bring the two countries together, especially in view of the high receptivity for good ideas being noticed in the region at the present moment. This is a kind of role we have been urging Bangladesh leadership to play taking cognizance of the fact that the SAARC's full potential and its targets for poverty eradication cannot be realised so long as New Delhi and Islamabad are at daggers drawn with each other. The Dhaka summit of the three countries can also be immensely helpful in removing any misgiving that might have occurred in their trilateral relationship.

The three-nation summitry is keenly awaited given the agenda it is likely to address: cooperation in trade, communication, investment and technology under an integrated programme for alleviation of poverty among a hundred crore people.

President's Example

President Shahabuddin Ahmed is known for his adherence to strict principles. By yet another act made possible by his robust sense of propriety and integrity of character he was proved true to his image. The event in question was for the president to return to Dhaka from Chittagong after his visit to the cyclone-affected areas there when inclement weather in the capital was regarded as incongenial for the safe landing of his helicopter. Officials in charge of making an alternative arrangement for his safe return thought it wise to vacate a few seats of a Biman ATP airliner for accommodation of the president and his entourage.

President Shahabuddin, on learning about the arrangement, firmly decided to forego the presidential prerogative. He strongly resented that passengers who had earlier bought tickets and boarded the plane should be denied their right to the flight just for his convenience. Such is the president's sensitivity to people's rights that he abstained from what he was entitled to as the most privileged citizen of the state. The president subjected himself to the less comfortable and more time-consuming road journey to Dhaka with his sensibilities providing an exemplary message.

What about the lesser mortals in the government service? Anyone who wields some power or enjoys perks goes on shamelessly exhibiting his or her importance and even fall for undeserving privileges. Important government officials may learn from the president's act about self-effacing conduct. What counts most is honesty, integrity of character and a sense of duty. We do not quite urge the government servants to match all their performances with those of the president because in his modesty, simplicity and character he is in a class of his own. But at least they can introspect and take a cue from the presidential example.

Road Damage

Overloaded vehicles — chiefly trucks — cause 60 times more damage to roads and bridges than that caused by vehicles with normal loads. A scientific survey conducted by the Roads and Highways Directorate has found that 100 overloaded trucks cause damage to the roads and highways to the tune of Tk 122 crore 25 lakh if they ply all the year round; whereas account for damage worth equal number of trucks with normal loads would Tk 2 crore 7 lakh. Unfortunately, the 40,000 or so trucks of the country are in an unhealthy competition to carry more loads than the approved 12 tons. Buses too carry more passengers than the approved number.

What compulsion is there for the truck owners to carry the excess load? They have no compulsion nor interest. Actually the various transport agents involved in between are responsible for continuing the malpractices because those serve their interest best.

Attempts to control the load has failed largely because the system of monitoring was rendered useless by dishonest men at various points. Indeed, our problem is to get a system going and keep it operative. When law enforcers themselves turn a blind eye to malpractices in return for bribes, it is impossible to maintain order on the roads. Another project to be financed by the World Bank will help detect vehicles not complying with the rules of loading; but where is the guarantee that this, too, will not be made ineffective?

Public Opinion Polls and Creation of National Debates

by Dr Khandakar Quadrat-I Elahi

Bangladesh has been grappling with myriad of hydra-headed problems. To rescue her from this difficult situation, two things need to be done. First, the key issues and problems, which are all entangled in our political system, need to be identified. Second, the victims of the situation, who have the real stake in the resolution of these issues and problems, need to be organized for creating national debates and supplying force to their consummations.

this type of research. The rest of this write-up discusses three issues: (i) nature and importance of public opinion polls POPs, (ii) kinds of POPs undertaken in Bangladesh and (iii) the kind of POPs that Bangladesh needs to resolve her national issues.

POP's interesting but inadequate

Public opinion polls are surveys conducted to learn attitudes, beliefs, and opinions of people on various topics. These polls range from fundamentally important economic, social and political issues to ordinary market surveys on industrial products. The POPs are truly an American innovation, which began with the straw poll of the presidential election of 1824, published by *Harrisburg Pennsylvanian*, a newspaper.

Historically, these polls have been conducted to forecast election results and therefore, their major clients and sponsors have been the politicians. Most polls nowadays are conducted for private patrons who are outside the political arena, i.e. business people.

While these polls are quite effective and productive in surveys like those mentioned above, problems arise when they are used to quantify public opinion on issues that have great implications for economic, social or political policies. This is because these issues are highly complex social phenomena which the general people are unable to understand intellectually but interpret them from their own personal interests, experience and perceptions. Consequently, these surveys make social issues more confusing than leading to their resolutions; and the results of the surveys provide powerful weapons to the vested interest groups, either in the government or business, for furthering their policy interests. In North America, POPs on public policies — education, health, social welfare, deficit reduction, down-sizing the government etc. — are being used to change the structure of the Western societies.

The main reason why the POPs on policy issues might contribute negatively in the public policy formulation that these issues are fundamentally different from other issues and therefore, need to be treated differently. In marketing or election surveys, simple opinion-seeking questions are just what is required to serve the purpose. But in case of policy issues, the surveys have to be more comprehensive, because the public needs more information to understand the issues. This can be done only by making POPs a part of policy research. The academic research and the journalistic approach should be combined to make the POPs contributory.

POP's Conducted in Bangladesh

We have no history of public opinion polling in our country. But interests in POPs seem to have developed after the present government came to power less than a year ago. I wish to discuss here two POPs in order to pinpoint the problems involved. One poll was undertaken by an NGO in Bangladesh and the other was undertaken by Dhaka-Bangladesh Daily News, an internet medium.

The POP conducted in Bangladesh was on the judicial investigations of the 15th August Killings, one of the hottest political issue in our country. The poll was primarily designed to elicit response on the question whether the respondent wants the trial of the killers of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, father of the nation. The Survey results did boost the morale of the government to go ahead with the trial but aggravated the political crisis.

There should not be any doubt about the fact that the whole nation is divided over the issue of 15th August killings. I am not talking about the political force that might have vested interests in banishing Bangabandhu from our national history. My concern is with the ordinary people who are really confused. The reason is that Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was not one person but two. His one identity is that he is the Bangabandhu, the father of the nation, because he was the undisputed leader of our independence movement. He belongs to the rank of the political leaders all over the world who have created permanent place in the national histories: Nasser of Egypt, Gandhi of India, Kamal Ataturk of Turkey, to mention a few.

His other identity is that he was the President of our country. President Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, on the contrary, was a controversial person. His economic, social and political policies were highly disputable. Ordinary people had suffered during his rule and many people had been personally affected. People compare his activities with those of our past government leaders, dead or alive, e.g. Ziaur Rahman, General Ershad and Khaleda Zia. Sheikh Mujib was killed as the President of the country, not as the Bangabandhu. Any attempt to portray his killing as the killing of the father of the nation may confuse the people and therefore, jeopardize the efforts to restore him in his proper place in our national history. The irony of the fact is that, that is exactly what is being done.

President Sheikh Mujibur Rahman is dead and a history. On the contrary, Bangabandhu

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman is part of our national heritage; he can never be dead or killed; he is alive and will remain so forever. The other opinion survey was conducted in September last year by the Dhaka-Bangladesh Daily News. The subject of the survey was 'students' politics', a theme that was one of the hottest political issues at that time following the President's remark on putting a moratorium on student politics. Like the previous one, this survey also did not serve any useful purpose, because the topic 'students' politics' represents a misconception of the issue and has nothing to do with the kind of problems that our educational institutions have been experiencing.

I truly believe that none of these surveys contributed to the resolution of the issues they were concerned with. On the contrary, they added more confusion to the already troubled situation.

Opinion Polls that Bangladesh Truly Need

If our objective of conducting POPs is to help improving political situation in Bangladesh, what should be the subject-matters of those polls? I can think of five topics which are socially and politically relevant and intellectually interesting. These include (i) role of students' organizations, (ii) politics of Bangladesh-India relationships, (iii) nature and role of hartal in current politics, (iv) Bengal versus Bangladeshi nationalism, and (v) place of Bangabandhu in our national history. All these are today's hot topics in Bangladesh and therefore good candidates for POPs. More importantly, these issues must be resolved permanently for solving our national crises.

Three points must be remembered while organizing POPs on these issues. First, there is a very strong political force in the country that does not want to resolve these issues, because the foundation of their politics rests on these confusing issues and therefore, their vested interests lie in keeping these issues alive. Second, these issues are very complex; any attempt to simplify them will create more confusion and aggravate the crisis. Both to counter this political force and to avoid the risk of creating more confusion, these issues must first be studied theoretically and then the results be presented in such a way that the general public understand them. This will serve twin purposes: the political force will be compelled to face the truth and the public will be provided with relevant information to form their own concepts about the issues. Finally, the POPs should be conducted, as part of the research project, to provide both

the necessary research input and political force to bring the debates to their fruitful consummations.

Roles of Students' Organizations: Two facts must be noted to understand the issue. First, all students organizations are youth units of our political parties and therefore directly controlled by them; their policies and principles are determined by their parent organizations. Second, parts the students organizations have turned into terrorist groups serving no interest whatsoever of educational institutions or the nation, but only those of their leaders and the political parties they belong.

Everyone knows these facts; what however most people do not understand is how they affect the complex social and political structures of our society. Thus, the people should be supplied with relevant information in order to clarify their conceptions about the issues and that can only be done through analytical studies. The opinion polls should follow as an integral part of the research.

Bangladesh-India Relationships: The fact which must be noted is that the relationships between Muslim and Hindu communities in the Indian sub-continent had become acrimonious over centuries which ultimately resulted in its partition in 1947. Although the bitterness of communal feelings has indeed eased in the area after the creation of three nations, it still haunts the people in all three countries. I do not know whether or when this bitterness among Muslims and Hindus will disappear. There are very strong political forces in all the three countries which want this communal feeling to stay alive.

Whatever feelings we have, the reality is that India is our biggest and virtually the only neighbor and therefore, our national prosperity critically depends upon our ability of building up good foreign relations with her. We have little changes to do so if we are guided by anti-Indian sentiments and political rhetoric. The irony of our fates is that the fundamental principle of one our major political parties, need not mention the smaller ones, is anti-Indianism. If we want to stop this, we must do systematic analysis of the issue and them mobilize public opinion.

Hartal: Hartal, which had been used very successfully many times in our country, is an effective political means to force the government to obey public demands. It, however, imposes heavy costs on the public life in terms of all sorts of sufferings. The public are prepared to bear with those sufferings only if they perceive real national interests that could ultimately benefit them

personally. I believe, few people will argue that the hartals, as being executed recently in Bangladesh, fall in this category. The general public despise hartals and they will welcome all efforts to stop the political groups from executing them. The question is: How? The politicians argue that hartal is a political right and therefore cannot be forbidden.

If we want to make hartal an issue for National Debate, we must approach the problem theoretically. The little time that I have spent on surveying the theories of political science to investigate the issue has convinced me that we can build up sound political logic to stop this kind of hartals. All we need is to study the problem theoretically and conduct public POPs accordingly.

Bengali vs Bangladeshi Nationalism: During the second half of the seventies, the political forces, that finally survived in the power after President Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was killed and his government was toppled, concocted a new political catchword, *Bangladeshi Nationalism*. Since then politics in Bangladesh has been revolving around two major slogans: *Bengali Nationalism* and *Bangladeshi Nationalism*. These political slogans basically concern Bangladesh-India relationships; the proponents of *Bengali Nationalism* have been accusing their opponents as anti-liberation forces while the proponents of *Bangladeshi Nationalism* have been accusing their opponents as pro-Indian.

This debate has no contribution whatsoever on the principles and policies that determine our individual prosperity and national development. Quite on the contrary, it is confusing the public and diverting their attention from the real issues and problems of the country. It is also clouding the Bangladesh-India relations and thereby hurting our national progress.

Thus, the debates must be closed and the issue resolved. This again can be done by studying the issue analytically and organizing POPs.

Place of Bangabandhu in Our National Life: Every one knows that he was the leader of our independence movement and hence is the Father of the Nation. But a strong force in the country is downplaying his role in our freedom struggle, because its political existence rests on banishing Bangabandhu from our national life. My real concern is with the general public that is confused because of the dual identities of the personality. As explained before, we must expose this truth before the public so that they can understand what they are being told and what they themselves are thinking about.

There are no other ways than a meticulous research to unearth this truth and then conduct POPs to both inform the public and reveal their opinions.

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To the Editor...

Man, the ultimate winner

Sir, Your editorial 'Man's Defeat' (May 14, 1997) involving the defeat of Garry Kasparov against Deep Blue has been a small but an interesting piece of writing. Readers must have enjoyed it. While reading this editorial, I, however, formed a different set of views which I take the opportunity to express below.

IBM supercomputer Deep Blue's win against Garry Kasparov in chess has certainly created a lot of sensation, particularly to the chess enthusiasts worldwide. The triumph of Deep Blue is described as man's defeat against his own creation. Stretched it further it is remarked that the computer has won man against machine the age of Frankenstein might have begun. Yes, some people are alarmed and now tend to question what is next in which man will bow out to its own creation and possibly court undesirable and unpalatable consequences.

Doesn't it all sound out of tune? Is it not a crude way of glorifying the status of spiritless machine over spirited man? Is it not a rude way of depreciating man's matchless and ultimate power to dominate over his own creation?

Perhaps Garry Kasparov suffered defeat not against machine but against man himself. After all, powerhouse behind the creativity of a mechanical device always remains the superlative computer called MAN. Defeat suffered by Garry Kasparov is, in fact, a big boon for him: a blessing in disguise for him. He must have been galvanised to attain even a greater height in his own field in the coming days. At least this is apparent now from his recent statement: "I hereby challenge IBM to a match of 10 games, 20 days long, to play every second day; I think IBM owes me, and all mankind, a rematch."

The world would perhaps witness more scintillating permutations and combinations from the chess legend called Garry Kasparov and host of others, still unknown and relish the up-to-date development in chess world. So, defeat against Deep Blue should not make us feel blue because man is designed and destined to reign supreme over all other elements in the world. The only thing needed to complete the full cycle of achievement is to praise his benevolent master, the Almighty and also to cultivate a sincere feeling: "I am

scratching the surface; I am still ignorant; I am still learning; I have still a long way to go."

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Man and machine

Sir, Garri Kasparov, the world chess champion just after resigning from chess match held between man (Garri Kasparov) and machine (IBM Super Computer) told the newsmen: "The computer is beatable, it has too many weak points. If we were playing a real competitive match I assure you that would tear down Deep Blue into pieces. I apologise I am ashamed of what I did at the end of the game but this had nothing to do with chess."

Man cannot be defeated but destroyed.

Garri Kasparov has come back with confidence just after resigning from game with a challenge on behalf of mankind to the machine. His psyche has allowed him to come back fight but in no case machine can do the same. This indeed the excellency of mankind.

CNN boastfully recited that a man has been defeated by a computer programmed by men. But we cannot concede defeat as machine itself is heartless. Heartless creature might cause devastation. Man's excellency and supremacy over machine could not be disapproved by temporary retreat of Garri Kasparov.

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Systems loss in RHD

Sir, We hear a lot about systems loss in the Power Development Board (PDB), which is about 40 per cent in place of normal 20 per cent. Nowadays, another public department — the Department of Roads & Highways (RHD) — has come to the limelight with widespread extravagance and is likely to top the list in misusing public money. For the last few months, everything has gone wild in this department since arbitrary appointment of a controversial man to the post of head of the department for a period of four months. Since this appointment, a full-scale trade unionism has emerged in the rank and file of different category of officials and officers.

Everyday there is rally, processions, discussions, meetings, work stoppage etc., causing colossal wastage of wage-money. The entire Sarak Bhaban has become an obnoxious place. It was very unwise for the popular government to give an extension to this controversial man. After all, no individual is important; it is the organisation that works as a team. The last straw was added on the 10th May 1997 in the premises of Sarak Bhaban when about 80 big buses full of supporters were brought in by this man from different places of Bangladesh in support of his retention for a period of five years. There was an arrangement of grand feast also for about 6,000 people under a grand shamina.

Everything in this world has a price. Nothing is free. The money spent is definitely going to be realised out of public works through our benevolent contractors and engineers. Will someone from the public calculate the systems loss of Roads and Highways Department for such occasions?

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Degree results

Sir, The crying need to be established in life is "education". But our education system fails to sustain its own balance. The cause of this failure are many: hooliganism in the educational institutions, session jam and being late in result publishing.

The learners and the guardians feel frustrated. The same is the situation about degree result. The examinations were held on 9th November and ended in 30th December last year under the National University. It's about four months now. There's no sign about the results coming out.

It is mentionable here that the authority concerned took a long time to publish degree result in 1995 also. The duration was about 8 months.

The students who may fail in the said examinations will not get expected time to prepare themselves for the next one. For this reason, I am requesting the National University to publish the mentioned result in the last week of this month and redeem the sufferings of the examinees and their guardians.

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Dangerous Undertone in Politics

by Nilratan Halder

Governments alone do not bring nations together but private initiatives by individuals also go a long way in bridging the gap. A political party has its mechanism to reach the people, and individuals in their personal capacities have little such means and the vast majority are both gullible and malleable.

BANGLADESH Nationalist Party (BNP) is on an India-bashing campaign. That India becomes the primary target of BNP's attack is because, it thinks, the ruling party's weakness can best be exposed through such a flaying. All its front-line leaders, including Khaleda Zia, have made frontal attacks on the Indo-Bangla relations now getting warmer. Charges levelled against the Awami League government vary from politics of appeasement to selling the country out to India. Even the Ganges water treaty has been looked at with suspicion by the BNP. The party is dead against allowing any transit facility to India, sub-regional co-operation and South Asian Growth Quadrangle (SAGQ) because involved in all these arrangements is India with its imposing presence. Last week the BNP chief in her vitriolic remark on the ruling party wanted to see the betrayers and collaborators who have handed over national interests to India off from power.

Well, our misfortune is that a party of almost equal standing in public reckoning can have a basis such as this for its politics. So long the party made use of the India bogey in general terms. But last week the party chairperson came up with specific charges of Indian intrusion or infiltration. She is on record that 'an Indian helicopter landed in Sylhet, its ship was seen at the Chittagong port and officials of that country met the DC of Mymensingh'. We do not know whether such incidents took place and if they did under what circumstances. We are not aware that the government has come up with any clarification or statement refuting her claim. Why?

It is too serious a charge to be dismissed so lightly. If the Indian helicopter, ship or officials have shown up in Bangladesh territory, the public must know what the purpose was. If they did not, Khaleda Zia has a responsibility to authenticate her position or else she should be held accountable for misleading the public. Irresponsible utterances in politics can have serious repercussions

in society much the same way the demolition of a mosque or a temple has. We would not like to believe that politicians are not aware of the wrong signals such words may give. After all, such statements can have different interpretations to different people. If politicians, who are considerably educated people, well-read and familiar with people's sentiments, can go on saying what they do not mean, it may be advantageous for their politics and they can reap temporary political dividends too, but some unforeseen fallouts of the convulsive situation likely to be created can bring about immense tragedies on society or societies.

Why is India identified as a villain? Largely because the charge smacks of communalism. It is not so much that a certain party or parties are obsessively friendly towards India or others are equally hard-core opposer of it. Today's geopolitical reality leaves no scope for Bangladesh to have a hostile India as its neighbour and yet benefit from any alternative bilateral or regional arrangement of co-operation. Yet any party making its opposing stand public does so deliberately and with an objective in view. Did Khaleda Zia's government closed all routes to New Delhi when it concerned the bilateral relations? In reality we get a different picture. Trade and economic co-operation between India and Bangladesh increased during her tenure.

We are not sure what political dividends this constant campaign against the big neighbour will bring her, but we know it for sure that a false step or two can invite unmitigated tragedies. Whatever may be India's credentials as a secular state, Bangladesh definitely cannot afford fanning communalism. The communal undertone discernible in the attack on India may indeed come to the surface and get flared up by the constant bombardment of malicious campaign against India. A country is not just a land area, it is also an aggregate of people into press some religious etc. In the sub-continental context, religious identification of the majority of popu-

lation and the state is a potent threat not only to the minority but also to human rights and democracy.

Shall the major political parties take cognizance of this bare truth? We have been witness to the Babri Masjid shockwaves and Bosnia-Herzegovina tragedy over the religious divides only recently. What is most ironical is that the BNP is not a political party wedded to communal politics. But it harbours such an intense hatred towards the ruling AL that all the oblique or direct references it makes in connections with the growing confidence between the two countries end in India-bashing. Unwittingly perhaps, it may succeed in creating an atmosphere of mistrust and fear psychosis that in the long run will not help strengthening the understanding between the two peoples. Governments alone do not bring nations together but private initiatives by individuals also go a long way in bridging the gap. A political party has its mechanism to reach the people, and individuals in their personal capacities have little such means and the vast majority are both gullible and malleable. That is how politicians view them.

The danger lies there and it is against that that the big political parties must have a vigilant role. When the government suffers from a sense of smugness that people will ignore such outlandish charges and it feels no compulsion to come up with its objection to the charges, common and simple folks are sure to get convinced of the allegations. That is not the way of dealing with issues like this. Today or tomorrow people will know the truth but that is small consolation. Because in politics time is a major factor. By the time they come to know the truth, the tragedy may happen. Or if it does not, the atmosphere may get vitiated to the extent that it leaves no room for good sense to prevail. We ask the politicians to be factual and responsible. The country's future depends to a large extent on how they lead the nation.