

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 atmospherics 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 summit 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 congenial 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 yields 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 Qudrat-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.

POPs 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.

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 in 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 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 reassess. The academic research and the journalistic approach should be combined to make the POPs contributory.

In this situation, we must look for a new force, the force that will initiate the all-important second step. And we do have a vast and enormously powerful force which is both latent and unorganized: all we need to do is mobilize this force so that the perpetrators can hear its voice and feel its strength. This new force is voice of the victims, the afflicted and exploited mass of our society.

How do we go about mobilizing this force? The most effective method is perhaps surveying public opinions through the mass media. The modern developments in the mass communication media have made it extraordinarily expedient to do

whatever we want to do.

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

POPs 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 Mujib 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 Mujib 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 their 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 Mujib 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. 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 lies 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 conceptions 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 of the students organizations have turned into terrorist groups serving no interests 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 Relations

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 politics 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 fate 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 then 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 Mujib Rahman was killed and his government was toppled, conceded 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. 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 down-playing 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 personally, 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 both to inform the public and reveal their opinions.

The author is a Visitor, Department of Economics, University of Guelph, Canada.

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 its own creation. Stretching it further it is remarked that with the defeat of 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 its own creation?

IBM 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 Garry Kasparov. Is in, in fact, a big boon for him. He must have been galvanized 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 mankind, a rematch."

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. He must have been galvanized 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 mankind, a rematch."

Emdadul Haque
Road No 18, House No 22
Dhamondi R/A, Dhaka.

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

Mohammad Ashequllah
(Kayesh)
Dhaka

Man and machine

Sir, Garry Kasparov just after resigning from chess match held between man (Garry 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 in 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.

Garry 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 is 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 Garry Kasparov.

Bose Asoke Kumar
House#413, Road#10
Block-B, Chittagong R/A
Chittagong-4212.

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 categories of officials and officers.

It is well known that 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.

A B Siddique
Nasirabad College Road,
Mymensingh.

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 flagging. All its front-line leaders, including Khaleda Zia, have made frontal attacks on the Indo-Bangla relations now getting warmer. Charges brought 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 remarks on the ruling party wanted to see the betrayers