

FOCUS

For a Democratic Local Government Structure

by Abdul Moyeen Khan

The most effective role of the member of the Parliament can be played in respect of local level development programmes in their capacities as local representatives best informed in local problems as well as the needs and requirements of the local population

THE underlying concepts behind the effective working of Local Government Institutions in Bangladesh have been spelled out explicitly in the 12th Amendment of the Constitution of Bangladesh. It had also been stated categorically that functions relating to a) Administration and work of Public Officers, b) The maintenance of Public Order, and c) The preparation and implementation of plans relating to Public Services and Economic Development may be entrusted with the true representatives of the people in Local Government Institutions whereby ensuring effective participation by the people through their elected representatives at all levels of administration.

The basic approach to a rational relationship between the Local Government Institutions (LGIs) and the Central Government should be based on principles of cooperation and complementarity. While exercising such relationships, one level should be viewed neither as a competitor nor as a dictator on the other. On the other hand the Central Government may very well feel relieved of the ever increasing burden of work in view of the expanding role of the Government in national and international matters in an ever changing face of the globe. In this circumstance, there is a feeling amongst the common people that the Central Government should hand out all the three major functions outlined in Article 59 of the Constitution at the earliest opportunity to the LGIs by appropriate Acts of Law. It may, however, be argued that the LGIs may not be capable of shouldering this enormous responsibility, yet one has to accept the fact that

Local Government Institutions will eventually have to bear the brunt of this load if we at all intend to end up with a truly democratic government where the participation of people is ensured and the authority of people's representatives established over the cadre of bureaucrats "ideally" created to "neutrally" implement the policies laid down by the public representatives at various levels of the government. Such a concept, we do admit, may seem a bit unrealistic or even utopian at a first glance in the context of the prevailing realities obtaining in this country.

However, looking at the current practices in the Local Bodies in developed countries of the world, one would conclude that such apprehensions could possibly be the outcome of a mental make up shaped up over the centuries of colonial rule when a strong cadre of civil servants was created with the specific objective of undermining the interests of common people and the role of their representatives in favour of authoritarian Central Government where the administrative machinery was used as a tool for exploitation of the common people. It is indeed unfortunate that virtually the same or similar practices continued over the years even after the foreign rulers had left the country almost half a century ago. The explanation of such an audacious behaviour can only be sought in a generally non-democratic character of the government which had ruled this country after the colonial era except for very brief spells.

Here one does not deny the reality of the situation that the LGIs, at this point in time, neither has the physical infras-

tructure and logistics nor the trained manpower for shouldering this great responsibility thrust on them by the 12th Amendment and is very much aware of the pains of transition from an autocratic to a truly democratic framework of governance. Yet one can dispassionately say that the sowing of the seeds of a truly democratic government has to be done and done right now to initiate the beginning of a meaningful LGI in this country. We cannot indeed forget the fact that we are at the juncture of a historic transition through a mass movement of our democracy-loving people leading to great expectations. Indeed, if we fail to exploit this opportunity of setting right the foundations of an appropriate local government structure in this country, one is not quite sure how long we have got to wait before we arrive at another opportunity of such a dimension and magnitude.

It is with these views in mind that we believe in retaining the basic structure of the LGI at the "Union Parishad" level, keeping the villages as the focal point of all development activities. Such a structure could be free from undue pressure from the Centre, at the same time accountable to the people at the local level, through the establishment of a "mini-house" in each Union comprising elected representatives from each of the villages in that Union, called the Village Body yet comprising

ment i.e. "Jilla Parishad" (District Council) the district level officers can participate in the District Council Proceedings providing all necessary technical and administrative support/assistance to the Local District coordinator of all Central Government machineries at the district level including law and order administration in the district. At the initial stages of the crucial transition elucidated in the previous paragraph, the participation of the people in the Local Government will be ensured in various levels of administration through the mechanism described above till such time when a technically trained cadre of local administration and fall back upon him as the "key" person who is expected to take care of all social, economic as well as personal problems of "each" individual in the constituency, no matter, whether birth, death or marriage, to cite only a few practical realities for them.

Finally we would like to add a few words on the relationships between the LGIs and other private social welfare and NGOs within the locality of a Union or Jilla Parishad. It is generally viewed that exchange of ideas and collaboration between LGIs and such organisations can contribute positively to underprivileged target groups in the regions if development programmes are drawn up and coordinated in spirits of cooperation and goodwill.

Practice

While it is still being debated within the government as well as within the bureaucratic structure whether Local Governments should simply be decentralised organs of the Central Government in an outstretched system of National Government of rather a self-government in its own right, all logical corollaries of Articles 9, 59 and 60 of the amended Constitution should eventually lead us towards a truly self-governing institutional structure in the local level in prescribed designated sectors.

A lot has been said in the past as to what should be the appropriate role of the public representatives in general and the MPs in particular in a future infrastructure of the Local Government in this country, having due regard to their limitations and expectations out of them in the constituencies they represent. Here we would also like to spell out a few realities of the "dilemma" of one's being an MP in a country like Bangladesh.

The role of an MP in an underdeveloped country cannot just be the same as that of a public representative in a developed country. The reasons for such diverse roles would be obvious when one contrasts the two worlds: developed and underdeveloped. However much one like to argue that the MP's role is that of a legislative nature, the public representative in the context of our country

nevertheless has to play a very important role in the local level planning and development process, no matter whether he would like to play this role or not, in view of the "dire necessities" of our people living in a state of utter underdevelopment. Thus the question is not really whether, rather to what end and to what extent.

The other issue involved is the "great expectations" of our people out of their public representatives as well as the conceptual ideas, political awareness and the way of thinking of the people who are the electorates of the members of the parliament. In spite of the fact mentioned before that the primary role of the representative as a panacea for "all" problems and fall back upon him as the "key" person who is expected to take care of all social, economic as well as personal problems of "each" individual in the constituency, no matter, whether birth, death or marriage, to cite only a few practical realities for them.

Strange it may sound though to many in the other parts of the world, the supposed primary role of the MPs which is no doubt legislative turns out to be only secondary in the eyes of the local electorate compared to most complicated of the national problems whether political or economic. As a matter of fact, the absence of the MP in discharging these secondary roles could very well ... his "focus stand" amongst the very conscious voters in the constituency who essentially and perhaps justifiably believe that the MP has been elected to reshape the whole way of their life towards a prosperous one, irrespective of what his representative does in the national legislature which is only a distant thought for them. As a matter of fact, however might an MP like to argue that he would not like to get involved in the day to day activities of the constituency, he can't simply avoid it. The lines have however got to be drawn as to what end and to what extent, as we emphasised.

Local Level Policy Planning vis-a-vis Central Planning

The most effective role of the member of the Parliament can be played in respect of local level development programmes in their capacities as local representatives as the best informed person in local problems, as well as the needs and requirements of the local population. In this respect the public representative has to retain a complete overview of his constituency at large and the questions of equity and distribution in the micro level has to be taken into account as best as could be done from the bottom-up as well as top-down approach. The MPs will no doubt be in the best position to give their considered opinion in the choice of specific local level development projects, setting up their priorities as well as in

budget allocation within the framework of the total block allocation of funds from the Central Government, which is also a must for achieving success in the bottom-up planning approach envisaged for the future LGIs. Once these policy planning exercises are complete the MPs could then very well forget about the day to day implementation of the programmes and entrust it with the Union Level public representatives and the local level administration which of course by all means act as the implementation agency of the policy planners composed of the public representatives within the administrative units concerned. This will completely clarify the current conflict that exists in many local levels between the public representatives and the administrative structure.

Local Level Coordination and National Level Communication

The major objectives of the role of the MPs within the framework of the LGIs should be those in their capacities as coordinators and there is no reason why this should extend beyond the advisory level.

The mechanism for operation could very well be in a consultative manner where decisions in the local bodies can be taken in the best spirit of cooperation and coordination. Beyond the spheres of respective local level bodies there will be an immensely responsible role that has to be played by an MP where the questions of communication would arise as to the resolution of contradictions and conflicts at intra-regional as well as inter-role of the MPs whereby they have to act as the chain of communication from the grassroots level to the highest level of the government in the capital. In the true perspective of the concept of public representation in a democratic infrastructure of governments, it has to be understood that the role of MPs would be most vital in maintaining these links between the people and the government. Besides, it has to be borne in mind that the legislative role of the MPs in the national level would be immensely enriched by the participatory process described above. No doubt, this is an extremely important mechanism whereby the democratic institutions can continue to maintain their vital links with the people. This would also ensure, particularly after a political party has formed a government through the process of expression of the wish of the people in a general election, that they do not get alienated from the people which had resulted in the disruption of the democratic process in the past half a century.

With the above views in mind, the MPs in the district can be associated with the District Council as Advisors and participate in the proceedings in all matters relating to the district except the judiciary. This will not only allow the District Council to formulate regional and mid level planning policies and ensure proper and

timely implementation of the same in addition to using the good offices of the MPs in solving inter-regional and inter-sectoral conflicts in addition to serving as the pivotal link-pin between the Local Government and the Central Government. We would like to mention explicitly the participation of the women MPs of the Parliament would be most effective at this level in view of the logistics, time constraints and realities of large areas of their constituencies involving several districts. The MPs will remain involved with the District Council only during the tenure of their offices.

At the thana level also the Member/Members elected by the voters in the respective constituencies can act as advisors to the thana Development and Coordination Committee and the Committee shall consult with the Advisors in respect of all matters relating to the Thana concerned except the judiciary thus ensuring the participation of local public representatives in the planning and development process of the local area concerned. The Thana level Development and Coordination Committee has been designed to act as the interface between the Central Government Planning and the Local Level Planning thus serving as the meeting point for top-down and bottom-up planning exercises.

Postscript

The institution of Local Government in Bangladesh is a very old one, although initially it was also possibly created for the purposes of giving a public representative character to the colonial regime in the sub-continent. It will now be left entirely to us to decide as to what purpose do we really intend to use it for. If one's prime objective is just to us it again for the purposes of perpetuating the ends of a Central Government by means of creating a local power structure to serve, at times, the unhygienic needs of the government in collusion with the local level administration, the results would be obvious and it has been demonstrated more than once that such motives of any ruling party fail to realise at the end of the day.

Given the constitutional obligations, the Local Government Institutions have to be truly representative of the people, with real authority and accountability with the people and not quite with the Central Government has to come whereby real self governments have to be set up at the local levels and responsibility handed over to local level political leadership to look after areas and sectors which have been designated to local levels. It is in this true spirit of people's participation that the public representatives can play their desired roles in the society and institutionalisation of democracy which has become a major issue for us can have its roots in the form of our governance.

The author is a member of parliament. This piece is based on a lecture delivered by him at Nuffield College, University of Oxford recently.

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Winners of BPS Int'l Photography Contest '97

By Staff Correspondent

Winners of the second BPS International Photography Contest '97, organised by Bangladesh Photographic Society (BPS), were announced yesterday, says a press release.

Some 235 photographers from 22 countries, including Bangladesh, participated in the contest. A total of 395 black and white, and 607 colour photographs were submitted, of which 20 in each category were awarded.

The winners are:

Black and white

FIAP Gold Medal - Bhaja Govinda Chowdhury (India), FIAP Silver Medal - Min Mahboob Rishad Ashraf (Bangladesh), FIAP Bronze Medal - Abir Abdullah (Bangladesh). FIAP Honourable Mention - S R Mandal (India), Ngoc Thai (Vietnam), and Kourosh Adim (Iran).

BPS Gold Medal - Zahid Hossein (Bangladesh), BPS Silver Medal - Le Cuong (Vietnam) and BPS Bronze Medal - Md Mainuddin (Bangladesh).

BPS Certificate of Merit: Tran The Long (Vietnam), Mamsud Ahmed (Bangladesh), Nguyen Dan (Vietnam), Dao Quang Minh (Vietnam), Nguyen Cuong (Vietnam), Van Bao (Vietnam), Lin Dung-Leung (Hong Kong), Quazi Sadique Athar Dhrubo (Bangladesh), Nguyen Tat Binh (Vietnam) and Shammin Sultan Munni (Bangladesh).

Special Jury Award - Mohammad Monirul Alam (Bangladesh), Zia Zahir Pallab (Bangladesh).

Suggestions sought for formulating law for the disabled

Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs Minister Abdul Matin Khasru said it is the constitutional obligation of the government to create opportunities for the disabled persons so that they can live in society with due honour and dignity, reports BSS.

Addressing a seminar on "social rights of the disabled persons" in the city yesterday the minister said, the disabled are not always liabilities to the society. It was seen that some disabled persons had given extraordinary services to society, he said.

Regarding the demands of some disabled groups to formulate legislation for making special provision for the disabled, the minister sought suggestions from concerned quarters to formulate such law.

The minister said, the state, the civil society and affluent persons should collectively work so that the inherent talents of the disabled are effectively utilised.

The minister also pleaded for wide media publicity to create public awareness about the problems of the disabled to effectively combat their problems.

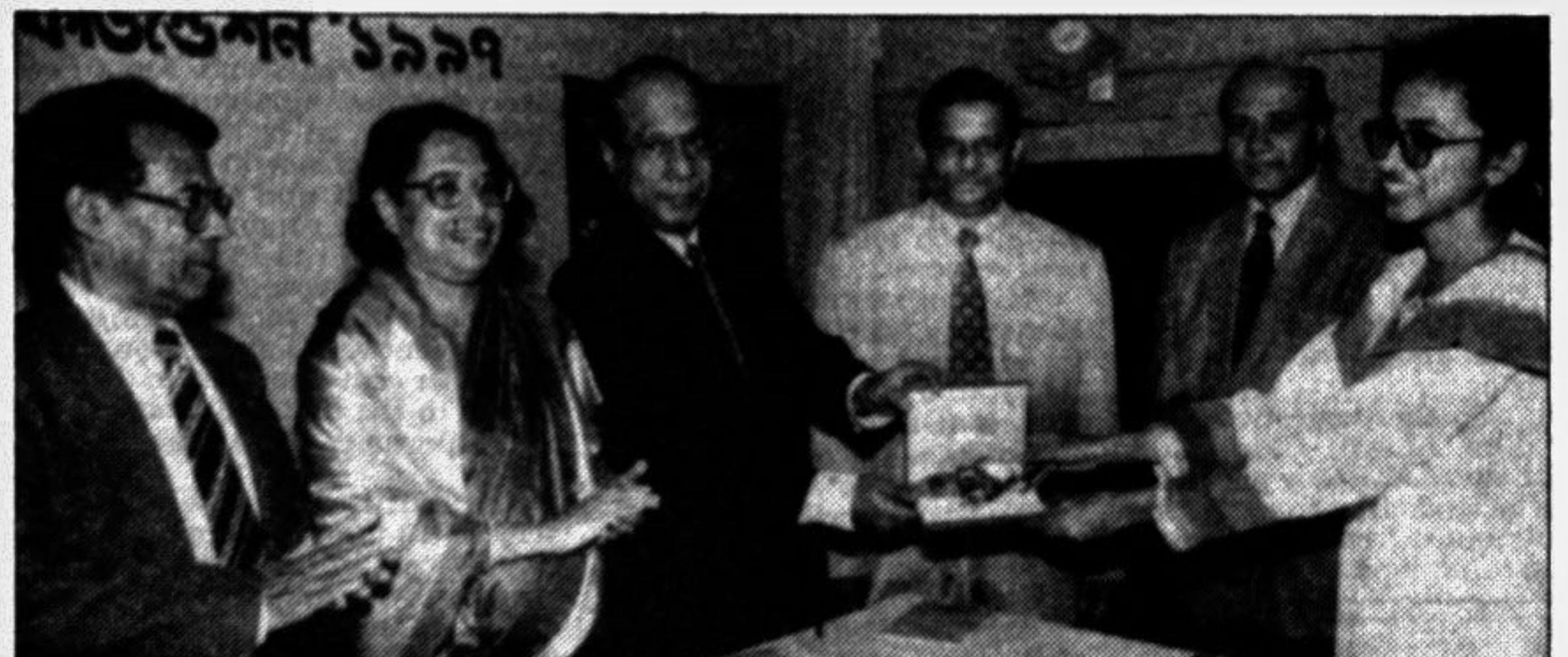
Organised by the Bangladesh Organisation for Disabled Advancement (BODA), the seminar was also addressed by the president of BODA Mohammad Siddique Rahman and secretary M Khalilur Rahman.

Mahfuz Anam, Editor of The Daily Star was the chief guest in the working session.

Nurul Islam returns

State Minister for Religious Affairs Moulana Mohammad Nurul Islam returned home yesterday after a 10-day official visit to Saudi Arabia, reports BSS.

The ambassador held discussions with the managing director and chief editor of BSS, M Anisuzzaman on the ways and means for increased news exchange between BSS and the national news agency of Indonesia, Antara.



Donation of German medical equipment handed over

A donation of German medical equipment of three automatic blood pressure checking units has been handed over to the Ministry of Defence on Saturday, reports BSS.

The award giving ceremony was organised by Hira Lal Sen Research Centre of Manikganj at the village Bakjuri Munshi Bari in Manikganj yesterday.

State Minister for Land Rashed Mosharaf was the chief guest at the award giving ceremony.

Renowned film artist of India Suchitra Sen and noted poet Shamsur Rahman have been awarded the Hira Lal Sen and Dr Dinesh Chandra Sen Award for the year 1997, reports BSS.

The award giving ceremony was introduced by Hira Lal Sen Research Centre at Purana Paltan, reports BSS.

Both Hira Lal Sen, a legendary figure in the field of Indo-Pak sub-continent and Dr Dinesh Chandra Sen, who earned fame writing on folklores of Mymensingh, were born in Manikganj.

The grand daughter of the Sen brothers and an educationist of West Bengal, Debakarna Sen, received the award on behalf of Suchitra Sen.

Suchitra Sen, Shamsur Rahman awarded

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Reputed writer Shamsuzzaman Khan was awarded Dr Shamsur Rahman Award for 1994 and noted film maker and actor Subhas Dutta for 1996.

Hira Lal Sen Research Centre introduced the Award in 1993.

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World Press Photo show begins tomorrow

By Staff Correspondent

The world's most prestigious photojournalistic exhibition 'World Press Photo' begins at the Drik Gallery in the city tomorrow.

The show will be inaugurated at 5 pm and will remain open daily till January 7, 1998 from 3 pm to 8 pm, says a press release.

The exhibition will be jointly opened by Shafiq Rehman, editor of the Jai Jai Din, Mahfuz Anam, editor of The Daily Star, DCB Den Haas, Dutch Ambassador in Dhaka, Bijon Sarkar, president of Bangladesh Photographic Society and Md Salauddin, president of Bangladesh Photojournalist Association.

Otherwise, it feared, disparity in promotion policy would frustrate officials of various cadre services, said a press release issued by the Association.

It also demanded withdrawal of proposal to reserve 70 to 80 per cent posts for BCS (Administration) cadre in case of promotions from deputy secretary up to secretary level.

Golden Tones' concert ends amidst great enthusiasm

By Staff Correspondent

Cold weather and drizzle could not stop city youth from rushing to Hotel Sheraton to join Tunisha, James and Rahul in an exciting concert last evening.

The concert, styled "Golden Tones," was organised by the Sandhani National Eye Donation Society and sponsored by Benson and Hedges.

The two-day musical show ended yesterday amidst great enthusiasm and a promise to help set up a modern "Eye bank" in the country.