

## DEMOCRACY

# 'Neither Free for All, Nor Rule by Brute Majority'

by Mohammad Abu Hena

*Choosing people's representatives should be a simple task. But in real life it is not so. Elections are reportedly fought in some places not only with programmes and policies, but also with guns and bullets. We, in our country, are not totally unfamiliar with such occurrences. These are formidable roadblocks for free and fair elections.*

SINCE the dawn of civilization, mankind around the world, has undergone the unique experience of living under different political systems. At times this experience, depending on the nature of the system of governance, has been happy, and at times traumatic or tragic. The journey from the ancient times to the present days when, at the threshold of the 21st century, democracy has come to be regarded as the best political system ever invented by man, has been a long and eventful one. The model of democracy we find today in the western world in varying forms and styles which we have, more or less, adopted in our part of the world, suiting indigenous requirements through a process of evolution — experiments, experience, struggles and sacrifices.

The fundamental question that faces us is: What then is democracy? Many definitions have been attempted. Briefly, some have defined it as 'rule by the majority', some as 'consent of the governed', or as 'representative government'. Abraham Lincoln, in his immortal words, defined it as 'government of the people, by the people, and for the people'. While talking about rule by consent, it may be worthwhile to quote what Charles Frankel said: "Democratic government is simply one technique for determining who the winners and who the losers in the political fray will be. Government by consent" cannot be interpreted to mean that those who are governed necessarily agree with what their rulers decide to do. Nor can it mean that the majority agrees. For in a democracy the minority, too, is presumably governed by its consent.

Over the years, political parties emerged as the best vehicles through which citizens' choices of policies and priorities of the State could be determined. Expression of free will was thought to be better handled by the political parties through their contact with citizens at the grassroots. However, this has also not been an unmitigated blessing. There are examples of political parties who, after having attained state powers, used the powers of State to suppress political dissent. To counteract such developments, political thinkers have placed emphasis on institution-building such as those of the free press, independent judiciary, sovereign legislature, ombudsmen to check executive excesses, and non-governmental institutions which

keep watchful eyes on the methods of governance, etc. A society which has been able to develop these institutions can be seen to be successful in steering the governmental machinery in the right direction to achieve the maximum good.

I believe, there are at least three important features which distinguish a democratic system. First, there should be an equality of rights and duties for all citizens. You cannot call a system democratic unless there is such an equality or at any rate a tendency towards an equalisation among the rights and duties for all. A hierarchical society and a democracy are contradictory. This is why democracy, after achieving political equality, seeks to administer economic and social justice as well. Second, there should be an attempt at convergence between rights and duties so that every right carries out a duty, every duty follows from a right. Third, and most importantly, there is distribution of power among different organs and possibly in a number of different centres. History has shown that whenever power has been concentrated in a single hand or in the hands of a single group, or in the hands of a single class, there cannot be a democracy.

In that event, society becomes monolithic and a prey to despotism. Without a multiplicity of groups, communities, divergent points of view, diversity of beliefs and interests, a democracy cannot perhaps be in full play. The strength of democracy lies in holding these diverse centres of power in balance and in forging some kind of cohesion and harmony among them, leading to social and national unity and improvement of the health of the body politic.

In a pluralistic society it is not unlikely that people may subscribe to different beliefs, ideas and ideologies. They may hold divergent views on policies, issues, problems and strategies. They may also have common and shared views on some or many issues. Human beings as they are, not being machines, should be free to express their opinions on any is-

ue and democracy encourages and promotes this freedom of thought and expression. This freedom may give rise to conflicts among individuals or groups, among communities or political parties in terms of their beliefs, ideas, goals or policies. Societies in transition, by their very nature, are characterised particularly by these different types of conflicts.

A number of countries which achieved dramatic economic growth seem to have responded to such conflicts by forcefully guiding the competing forces for what their leaders felt was in the best interest of their national economy. Some of the East Asian countries — in varying degrees — represent this model. Another model is represented by countries which accept the right of individuals and groups to air their differences and provide legally sanctioned methods and institutions within which the conflicting claims can be resolved. In these countries, while economic development has been at a slower pace, political and social institutions have been created which provide durable and known structures for handling different viewpoints and interests.

Harmonisation of these different viewpoints through open debates, dialogues and discussions is a key function of true democracy. An individual or a group or a political party which is not prepared to allow others to speak out or present their points of view, even though unpalatable, cannot be branded as democratic. An essential attribute of a democrat is his unwavering belief in the freedom of speech and expression of others including his opponents.

A true democrat believes that if he has the right to express his own opinion, others also have the equal right to ventilate their views and that the former has no right to interfere with the right of the latter. He will uphold, in letter and spirit, the words (attributed to Voltaire): "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it." Here lies, I believe, the essence of democracy.

In a democratic society there

are certain essential values which need to be sincerely cherished, cultivated and nurtured by the people. These make a democracy work and help the democratic process grow, advance and mature. These norms and practices, in fact, are the warp and woof of the fabric of democratic life. The most important of them are freedom of thought, speech and expression, tolerance, respect for law and human rights.

In many countries including ours, many are seen to be preoccupied with the form of democracy in operation. Without undervaluing the importance of this concern, I may venture to observe that a democracy derives its real strength more from its 'substance' rather than its mere form. The 'substance' stems from awareness and observance of democratic principles and practices. In their absence, a democracy is a mere body without its soul. A country will have only a facade of democracy, if the democratic principles and practices are non-existent. To rotaries of non-democracy, this situation is nothing but an anathema. I believe, the combination of democratic principles and practices acts in real sense as a propeller that makes democracy operate and move forward.

These values do not emerge in a society all of a sudden. Nor can we introduce them just by law. They are basically matters of faith and mental attitude. They are disseminated through a process of awareness, continuous cultivation and practice. The promotion of these values has to start from the grassroots level, right from the family. What brand of democratic culture can we expect at the national level, if we do not practice democracy within our own families, within our own organisations or within our own political parties? It is my firm conviction that democracy cannot take firm roots in our society if democratic culture is not fostered through concerted efforts of all stake-holders at different levels of our socio-political life.

Freedom of expression is sometimes misconstrued as a licence to say whatever one chooses in total disregard for accepted norms of civilised behaviour. A civilised man is expected to observe these norms while articulating his views. Any statement made out of sheer malevolence or any statement not based on facts or based on willful distortion of facts, or a tendentious report is, I believe, a veritable abuse of freedom of speech and expression. That is why this freedom is not unbridled, it is subject to reasonable restrictions, as enshrined in our Constitution (Article 39).

The democratic system derives its elixir from the system of regular opportunity provided to the electors to choose their representatives or to pass opinion on important matters of state. The systems of election, recall, referendum, etc., energise the democratic process and reinforce citizens' belief in democracy as an institution. Various systems of elections have evolved over time. Each country follows the brand it thinks best-suited to the country. Simple majority (first-past-the-post), proportional representation, run-off to choose the most preferred candidates, and blending of more

than one method of election etc., are practised. In some countries, reservation in representative bodies is provided for women and disadvantaged groups. Apparently, choosing people's representatives should be a simple task. But in real life it is not so. Elections are reportedly fought in some places not only with programmes and policies, but also with guns and bullets. We, in our country, are not totally unfamiliar with such occurrences. These are formidable roadblocks for free and fair elections. Building up a healthy political culture based on respect for democratic rights of the people can reduce substantially the need for the existing unavoidable practice of mobilising heavy security forces to forestall or deal with these undesirable occurrences.

Then, there is the issue — in many changing societies — of the role of money power. For the practice of democracy, in true sense, the influence of money has to be curbed in an effective manner. In some countries campaign finance laws are in place; some of these are inadequate and some do not have any enforcing mechanism. Attention needs to be given to develop an effective system of campaign finance regulations. The subject deserves serious consideration in Bangladesh.

For effective working of democracy, the pursuit of healthy politics is an imperative. Not power, but people's welfare, being the ultimate goal of politics, the conduct of the political parties, especially the ruling party and the opposition, is expected to be constructive and responsible, and to conform to standard norms. In fact, for a successful democratic and responsible opposition are both crucial as they together help the constitutional machine operate effectively. Opinion polls conducted by independent agencies, tragically, indicate that impolitic conduct, irresponsible activities and lack of mutual trust and tolerance on the part of political parties are eroding people's confidence in politics.

Signs of this disenchantment are visible even in some countries which have practised democracy uninterruptedly for long years. This crisis of confidence portends an ominous future for democracy. This should be a matter of grave concern to any person who advocates the

cause of democracy and its future development.

Modern democracy has become synonymous with multi-party political system. Party nominees are elected by voters to represent their respective constituencies in the Parliament. Over the years as political parties became central to public life, they also came under increasing public scrutiny. In response to this situation, many countries have evolved strict rules guiding political fund-raising and campaign finance. In the western world, political parties remain under pressure to avoid association with 'dirty money' and foreign funding. There is again the concern expressed in some countries about the criminalisation of politics. Some of these countries are engaged in devising methods of keeping out criminal elements from their parliaments.

As a measure of improving transparency, some countries have established the system of registration of political parties and/or provision of public funding while some have adopted different combinations of these measures. These issues are important for the growth and sustenance of democracy and each country has to debate their merit and suitability in the context of its own culture and goals.

I would like to re-emphasise that democracy is neither a 'free-for-all' system nor the rule of 'brute majority'. Freedom of the individual citizen can be best ensured when the rule of law is upheld: when equality of opportunity is embedded in law and when law is applied to all citizens — equally and rigorously. One can find that this structural framework of democracy operates successfully in a culture that practises tolerance as an essential value.

In Bangladesh, we have covered long and difficult ground — at considerable cost — to embrace parliamentary form of democracy. In the process, we have innovated a unique constitutional device for orderly and fair method of change of government — equally and rigorously. One can find that this structural framework of democracy operates successfully in a culture that practises tolerance as an essential value.

Let us all take up this challenge and do our best to prove equal to the occasion. Let us not forget the supreme sacrifices our people have made for the birth of this nation. Imbued with the spirit of the liberation war, let us all "with malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right" strive to make our fledgling democracy take wings, our freedom find meaning and our future radiate hope and promise.

The author is the Chief Election Commissioner of Bangladesh.

## Heart Surgery Braving to Attain Expertise

Naimul Haq talks to cardiologist Dr Momenuzzaman

MALFUNCTION of heart valves due to rheumatic fever — a serious disease that usually affects children — is common in Bangladesh as elsewhere in the world. The disease causes disorder of the mitral valve which gradually shrinks its diameter from a normal span between 4.5 and 6.5 square centimeter to 2.5 square cm affecting normal flow of blood between different compartments of the heart. The disease takes its toll on a good number of patients every year. Its only remedy is surgical treatment. In Bangladesh, conventional operation or Closed

Dr Momenuzzaman during an hour-long interview with *The Daily Star* recently said, "Though I respect the effort of the government to improve healthcare facilities but I must blame the total system for not introducing PTMC much earlier."

He said, "The conventional method of correcting the disordered mitral valves termed — mitral stenosis, is no longer in use in the West. Even Indian doctors widely use the 40-minute procedure of PTMC to treat patients. It was introduced there long ago."

"I have performed three PTMCs after receiving a 13-month training at the Institute of Madras Medical Mission and three-months additional training at the Escort Heart Institute in New Delhi."

"I got inspiration to perform PTMC after assisting Indian doctors performing two PTMCs back in 1994 at the NICVD. Following their work, I practised to gain knowledge in PTMC."

"While describing his maiden experience of performing PTMC, a highly advanced technology that involves entirely on-screen monitoring performance called the cath-lab, Dr Momenuzzaman said, "I approached Dr S R Khan to perform PTMC instead of performing conventional surgery on one of his patients who was scheduled to undergo surgery on January 19."

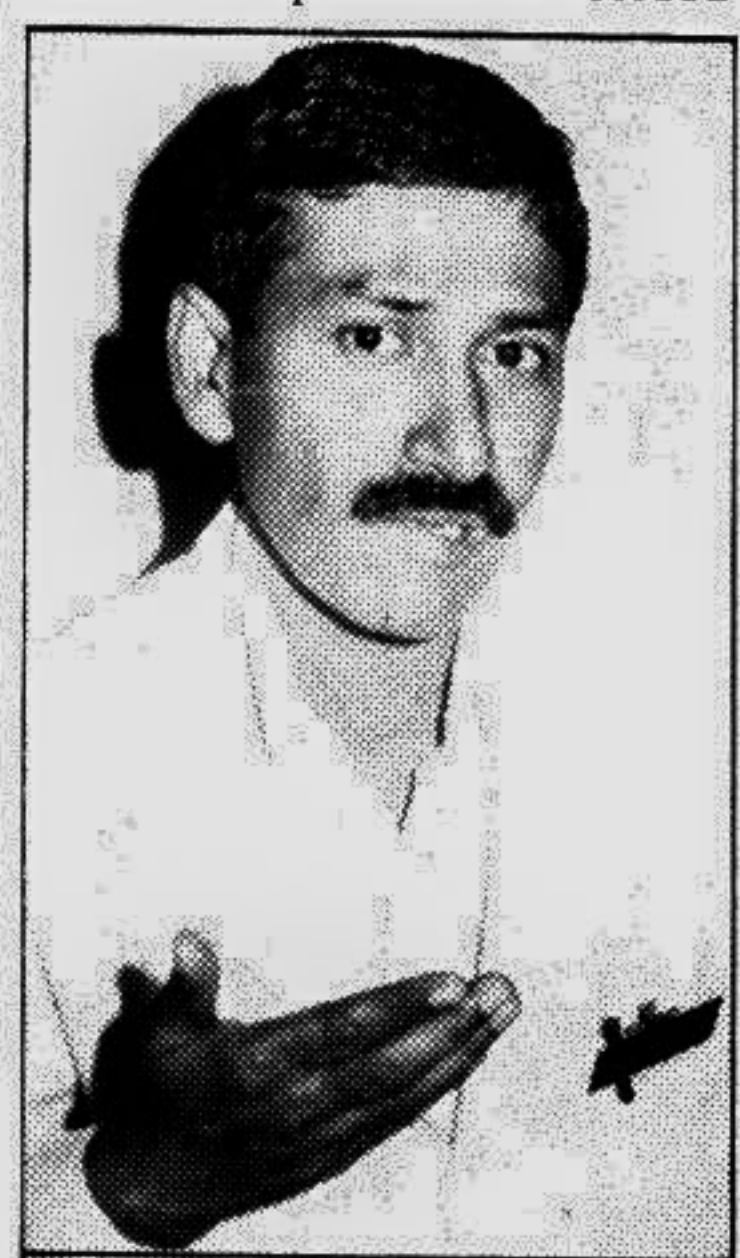
"Encouraged by Dr Khan, I braved performing PTMC. I was on my own at the operation theater and felt very confident about the procedure so it really did not make me nervous."

One of the biggest advantages of PTMC is that the patient can walk to normal work soon after PTMC is completed and it needs no follow-up medication unless absolutely needed.

Compared to the conventional surgery it costs about five times more but had the Tk 80,000 more been available in competitive market in the country the cost of PTMC would have come down to reasonable amount.

"My plan is to build up a team who can share my capacity of knowledge on the subject and popularise PTMC," Dr Momenuzzaman said.

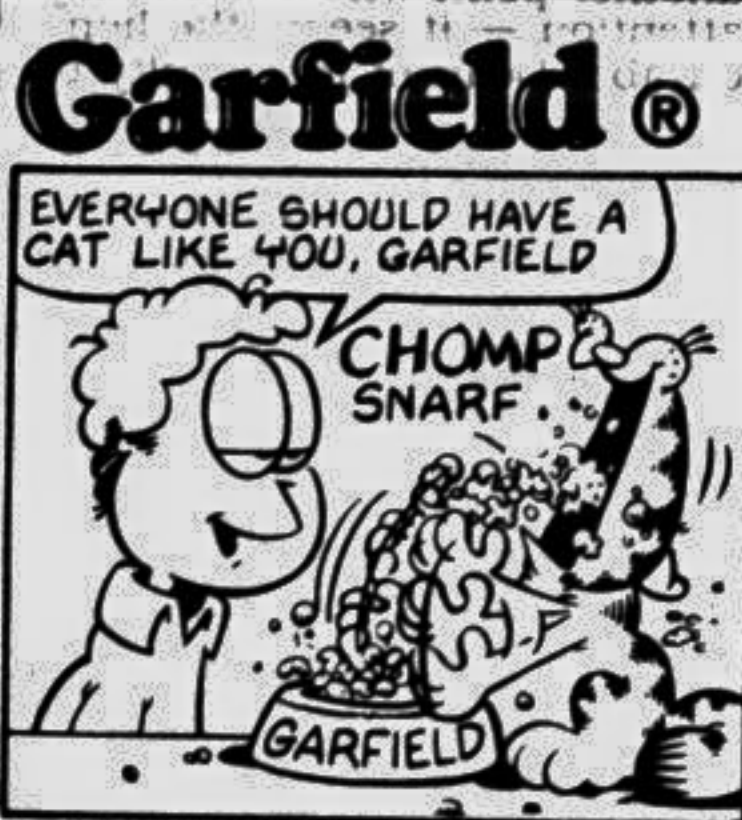
"Gradually we should focus on introducing PTMC as a procedure involves fewer risks of accidents. More cardiologists should attain expertise in it," he added.



Dr. Momenuzzaman

Mitral Commissurotomy (CMC) surgery is the only method available for correction of the disordered valve but since January, a cardiologist of National Institute of Cardiovascular Diseases (NICVD) has successfully put to use Percutaneous Transvenous Mitral Commissurotomy (PTMC) or Balloon Mitral Valvuloplasty (BMV) for the first time in Bangladesh.

The balloon is then inflated from outside, that causes the small diameter valve to dilate and restore its normal diameter of about 6.5 square centimeter.



## Metropolitan

### Publication ceremony held

By Staff Correspondent  
The publication ceremony of a book titled "Je Agun Jolchhilo (The fire which flared up)" written by renowned economist Mohammad Anisur Rahman was held at the lecture theatre of Dhaka University yesterday. The book with the theme "Spontaneous outburst of the spirit of the Liberation War contains various issues and concerns of development problems of the post liberation Bangladesh. Organised by Jana Ithash Charcha Kendro, the publication ceremony was participated by a number of scholars, academicians and researchers. Pointing to the development problems and NGO activities in Bangladesh, they opined that the government should take steps to ensure accountability of the NGOs.

Among others, the ceremony was addressed by Dr. MM Akash of Dept of Economics at DU, BIDS research fellow Dr. Atiur Rahman and Editor of Samaj Chetona and assistant professor of History of DU Mesbah Kamal. The book was published by Gano Prokashoni.

### 'Workers' social security must for successful privatisation'

Policy-makers, donor representatives and labour leaders at a discussion yesterday agreed on the necessity of ensuring social security of employees for successful implementation of the privatisation process, reports BSS. The discussion was organised by the Privatisation Board following the visit of a nine-member Bangladesh delegation to New Zealand and Malaysia to see the privatisation process in those countries. Labour and Manpower Minister M A Mannan said the country has to ensure that the employees of the privatised enterprises find alternative jobs and sought donors' assistance in this regard. Awami League president member Amir Hossain Amu, who led the delegation, said privatisation process in the two countries visited caused no problems as the majority of employers there are either foreigner or they get government benefit for being unemployed. UNB adds: Referring to the absence of job and social security in the country, Amu said the privatisation process would face serious problem. Trade Union Centre (TUC) president Nurul Islam said, "We should identify the exact cause of the losses incurred by the SOEs and arrange open discussion in the mass media to find out the solution." State Minister for Jute A K Faezul Haque said privatisation needs continuous government support as it has legal barriers. Injunction by the court as per the country's existing law is a major obstacle to privatising loss-making industrial units, he said. State Minister for Textiles K M Jahangir sought World Bank support for creating alternative job opportunities which will provide job security. Delegation members Shajahan Khan MP, Tajul Islam MP, Abul Bashar of Bangladesh Sramik Federation, Abdus Salam Khan of Jatiya Sramik League and Shah Md Abu Faruk of Jatiya Sramik Party were also present. Chairman of the board Kazi Zafarullah presided.

### BELA letter to DCC regarding Dhanmondi Lake Project

By Staff Correspondent  
Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association (BELA) yesterday in a letter drew the attention of the Mayor of Dhaka City Corporation and Director General, Department of Environment (DoE) to a complaint that the Dhanmondi Lake Development Project was initiated without incorporating public opinion. A BELA press release said that it has also asked for information regarding environmental clearance from the DoE, which is required prior to implementation of such a project. The release quoting the letter said that as per a newspaper report the DCC has sent a legal notice to the contractor of the project for initiating the work without approving plan for the entire lake. "Such news gives rise to the legal status and future of the Project," the release said quoting the letter. BELA requested the authorities to respond to its letter by March 29.

### UNESCO Int'l Peace Award for Hasina

National Association of UNESCO Clubs in Bangladesh has decided to confer UNESCO International Peace Award '98 on Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina for her contribution towards ending two-decades of insurgency in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, reports BSS.

### Weather Dry weather forecast

Weather is likely to remain mainly dry with partly cloudy sky over the country during the next 12 hours till 6 pm today, reports UNB. Slight rise in day temperature is expected over the country during the period, according to Met Office. The country's highest temperature 30.7 degree Celsius was recorded yesterday, at Teknaf and the lowest 12.5 degrees at Rajshahi. The sun sets today at 6:05 pm and rises tomorrow at 6:13 am.

### Obituary

Omar Ali, Assistant Director (Accounts) of Dhaka University, died at his residence in the city yesterday. He was 60, reports BSS. All has left behind his wife, two sons, two daughters. His quikhwani will be held March 11 at the University Mosque, Nilkhet residential area.

## Bug 2000 Will the IT Industry Go Ga-Ga?

by Masroor Ahmed Deepak

*I was born on July 19, 1971. So in the mm/dd/yy format we store that as 07/19/71. If I computed how old I am today... that will be 98, which is this year, minus 71 which is the year I was born and that will come up as 27, that's right, assuming an absolute value integer, I'm 27 years old (actually I'm going to be 26 in July).*

Again, you may ask, how come we use only 2 digits when we know we need 4 of them come year 2000? Well, the bad news is we deliberately did it. This problem began many years ago when programming decisions were made that stored and processed date field information using just two digits. This decision was based on the fact that computer disk storage and computer memory were very expensive. To save on these costs, programmers developed software applications that processed date information using these two-digit fields. As you can guess, when the clock ticks 12.01 a.m., Year 2000, the year becomes '00 for these two-digit fields. Many systems that are not prepared to handle this date change will immediately fail or incorrectly calculate date information. Examples range from calculations of pay in payroll systems, banking transactions that use dates for calculations, healthcare systems that process information using date fields, to calculating retirement benefits in human resource systems or retirement software. These are just a few examples that are now being reviewed.

This is exactly the same problem programmers ran during those times. Hollerith cards were not big enough to store all the information they needed to store. So they compromised. They wrote 101371 instead of 10/13/1971, thereby saving themselves four precious characters, two of which were the crucial '19'. So that's how we did it. So what can be done? Well, one solution is to create another data bit that handles this problem. If the flag is set to 0 then 71 refers to 1971, and if it is set to 1 then 71 refers to 2071. Neat...and we have to do this before December 31, 1998, 1998? Because you'll need to test the whole application required to process the full fiscal year for your company. Here you saw, I mean you read, the scope of the Year 2000 problem is much broader than you might think. Face it, unless we take action now, 2000 is not going to be a

### Bug 2000

good year for data processing. All computer programs, big or small, which use date or time will go on strike on January 1st 2000. That's the bottom line. Unlike Unix and IBM-compatible systems, Macintosh systems do not have the year 2000 problem, since Macs have always used 4-digit dates. This being the case, most Mac software also use 4-digit dates, and are exempt from the problem as well. Did you know the magazine *ComputerWorld* is projecting that corporations and the US government will spend approximately 230 billion dollars to correct these computing problems. A *Fortune 500* insurance firm has estimated their dilemma to cost 300 persons years to correct, fixing 35 million lines of code, costing 20 million dollars (\$5.7/line). The US government will spend 30 billion alone on this project. The IRS is just getting a good start in fixing their systems. The solution that is proposed is... drums rolling... the Y2K solution.

How would you go about implementing the changes? Comments: The choice of a solution for the date expansion was a very minor part of the overall problem. The real problem was HOW do you implement something this large with no impact to the rest of the company. The scenario represented just one system out of 72 different systems that our company has changed. We opted to include century in all of our dates rather than use a switch. The solution for this problem: programmers have identified five separate components in this system. A module was written for our large IMS Database, that when called expanded the dates into the expanded format, or un-expand if outputting to the data base. (This allowed expansion of all the programs before physically expanding the Data Base). All files that went across components or to/from other systems had a twin 'bridge' file. The

vary last thing that was done, was to convert/expand the large IMS Data base and change the called module to just pass control to IMS or back to the program. Conclusion: The real problems with most Y2K problems is not so much the date expansion, or the slight modifications to the programs, but HOW to implement hundreds of programs and convert hundreds of files all at the same time. The first point is that there is no magic solution, silver bullet or quick-fix to the problem. Yes, it's true that we can put a man on the moon, we can speak to people on the other side of the planet and if we want, we can even blow the world up a thousand times over. But we can't fix the Year 2000 problem with one swoop of a magic wand. Because of the complexity and number of different business applications, platforms, languages, technologies, programming styles and business scenarios, it is impossible to come up with a one-time, fix-all solution. Instead, the problem needs to be addressed by each company individually. Unfortunately, the only way of being 100 percent certain that a given application will function as expected into and beyond the next century is to physically address every single line of code and thoroughly test each function in the given application. Regardless of the size and complexity of an application, it only takes one single line of programming code to bring a system to its knees! This is why each application needs to be looked at in turn. In a small single application environment, this will not pose much of a task. However, the majority of businesses today rely heavily on technology and business applications play a major part in the success and future of most companies. It is likely that most companies will need to scan hundreds of thousands of lines of code, if not, millions. This will have a massive impact on resources. The cost of fixing the Year 2000 problem can often be hard to justify to senior management, especially when you consider that there is no tangible benefit to be gained from the exercise with the exception of keeping the company alive! It has been suggested that the world wide cost of fixing the Year 2000 problem could be anywhere between 400-600 billion dollars!