

Honorary Citizenship for Amartya Sen

This paper strongly urges the government to confer honorary citizenship of Bangladesh on Dr Amartya Sen, the solo Nobel Laureate for Economics this year, the pride of Bengalees, and a genuine friend of Bangladesh. This is the minimum honour we can do for him for the maximum he has done for us. That is all we can give him from the bottom of our heart, just a token of appreciation for his great works already emblazoned on the long list of accolades received by him with the Nobel prize coming as his crowning glory. A symbolic gesture such as this could have a practical value by way of increasing his desire to visit Bangladesh more often.

He feels so drawn to his roots — by his own admission, Dhaka and Manikganj have had a strong influence on his formative years — that he wasted not a single day since receiving the Nobel prize in Stockholm to fly direct to his 'spiritual home': Dhaka. Although the visit was on the cards for last year, it is so much the better that this is taking place now when he has become a recognised icon in world economics much to our glory and delight as Bengalees.

Dr Amartya Sen has said a few simple things most forcefully giving in the process an 'ethical dimension' to the discussion of vital economic problems — a 'human face' to development pursuit, so to speak. Some gems of his well-researched deductions are: greater prosperity *per se* does not mean greater welfare (an anti-thesis of market-centred neo-classical theory of development through so-called trickle down effect); distribution of prosperity is more important than prosperity itself; famines occur not because of shortage of supplies but because people do not have money to buy; the purpose of development should be to improve capabilities and quality of life of ordinary people; and economics should be devoted to the well-being of mankind (not concentration of wealth in few hands). Dr Sen has been a staunch advocate for social concerns which remain universal knowing no boundaries.

He worked on the basic assumption that growth rates, GDP and per capita income, etc. miss out on the rich-poor gaps because they are aggregative calculations slurring over the depth and dimension of poverty in a country.

Thus he came to stress the role of the state and the need for public action and choice in matters of gender inequality, illiteracy, ill health and malnutrition taking the position that standards in these areas mirror the true level of growth and advancement of a country.

His uncompromising stand on egalitarianism, concern for humanity and human freedom, and the strong belief he holds in democracy add a governance content to his path-breaking economic theories.

His publications titled 'Poverty and Famines', 'Hunger and Public Action', 'Collective Choice and Social Welfare' and 'Inequality Re-examined', are four of his 14 major works that contain highly relevant guidelines for developing countries throughout the world. There is a clamour in India now to pay heed to his economic ministrations. We are entirely in agreement with his view that universal functional literacy is central to socio-economic development of a country.

Dr Amartya Sen has shown how a Bengalee can reach the pinnacle of glory in a proper and stimulating work environment. There is a message there for those who want to follow the footsteps of Dr Sen. He shines as a beacon among economists in this region. His example is certainly worth emulating, but what is more to the point at this particular moment is the relevance of his empirical findings in the context of Bangladesh.

If we give Dr Amartya Sen the honorary citizenship of Bangladesh it will be more of an honour done to ourselves than to him. Let the government confer it on him as this paper extends a most warm welcome to his most endearing sojourn in Bangladesh.

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Politics of Tit for Tat and the Economy be Damned

Today it is our political culture that has emerged as the single biggest impediment against our progress towards a prosperous future. Ours is the ONLY country in the world that indulges in the frequent luxury of hartals. Our demonstrators break cars and shops, attack non-participants with impunity. Our students boycott classes, and MPs boycott the parliament more often than any other country we know about. Here we uproot railway lines to enforce strikes, block national highways to postpone exams, deny life-saving treatment to critical patients to create pressure for pay hikes, prevent private citizens from using the roads to enforce strikes by bus and truck drivers, and all this in the name of democracy.

It is our belief that even if the angels had conducted the Pabna by-polls BNP would have rejected it, unless of course the result had gone its way. AL would have reacted the same way under similar circumstances. Why? Because ours is a politics of tit for tat. You did this to me, so I will do it back to you. So what if I had vigorously, passionately and relentlessly condemned you for having done the very same thing I'm doing to you now? These actions hurt the country. So, what, again? If you did not think about how these things hurt the country when you were indulging in them, why should I think about them now?

So goes the perverted logic of our politics. If today you take aside any leader of the BNP and point out how their hartals are killing the economy, pat comes the question: 'Where were you with your advice when the Awami League was crippling the economy with its relentless hartals?' If you happen to be the Daily Star, and reply, that you had condemned the AL every time it called for hartals, then pat comes another question: 'Did AL listen to you?' No. 'Then how do you expect us to listen?' But didn't you say a thousand times that hartal was wrong?' Yes, but the times were different. During our time Awami League had no reason for calling hartals. But now we have all the reasons for resorting to them.' And it goes on, and on, and on.

Most of what BNP is doing today, the Awami League did yesterday. Frequent walkouts from the parliament, boycotting it under this or that pretext, making threats that the opposition would resign en-mass from the House, asking party MPs to submit resignation letters in advance, etc., are everything that the AL did when in opposition.

A striking example of the 'tit for tat' politics is the similarity of the abusive language that our two leading parties use about each other. If we were to delete the name of the speakers, and put samples of speeches by the leaders of the AL and the BNP and ask people to identify who said what, we bet our readers would find it hard to identify which is a quote from Hasina and which from Khaleda. What Khaleda Zia, as the Prime Minister, said against hartals, against negative politics, against opposition for opposition's sake,

against political activities that drive away FDI, etc., are precisely the things that Sheikh Hasina is saying as the PM. The BNP chief nowadays congratulates the public for 'spontaneously' supporting her hartal calls just as Sheikh Hasina used to do during her opposition days. The BTV covers hartals just as it did during BNP days — footage ofrickshaws and buses plying the streets, and some people working in the office, with the TV newsmen narrating how normal life was in the country. BNP did it during its time, and the AL is doing now.

Will we be totally wrong to suspect that BNP wanted the Pabna-2 by-polls to become AL's 'Magura'? Its strategy was to 'catch' AL rigging the election.

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BNP's post-election reactions were pre-predictable. In fact it was so predictable that people took it as a part of its planned strategy rather than a reaction to the outcome of the polls. This was the direct result of its announced threats prior to the elections of going for a 48 hours hartal followed by non-stop hartal till the government falls if BNP loses in Pabna.

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words and phrases like 'sorry', 'regret', 'we made a mistake', 'our conclusion was wrong' etc., were used by our leaders in addressing issues or the opponents. Instead it words like 'liars', 'thieves', 'dacoit', 'Baitmaan', 'Munafeekh', 'Traitor' etc., are in use. And the words are getting worse. Here again the Tit for Tat formula is at work.

So where do we go from here? Can we not change? Are we condemned to rot in this abyss of hatred and selfishness. In contrast to our politics, look what the people have achieved. The most devastating flood of the century could not humble the spirit and resilience of our poor, deprived and hungry masses.

Our people have overcome the biggest challenge imaginable, and they have done with perhaps minimum help from the government and the world. We think Sheikh Hasina's government deserve commendation for its tackling of the flood and post-flood situation. But the real credit belongs to the people. When this is the real nature, and the underlying strength of our masses, do we not deserve better politics?

We think we can change. But the initiative and the leadership for that change must come from the ruling party. We said so during Khaleda Zia's time, and we repeat ourselves in Sheikh Hasina's time, that the initiative for change must come from the party in power. Even if the opposition does not reciprocate, the ruling party must make all the gestures, take all the necessary initiatives, implement the necessary steps to change the present nature of our politics and create an atmosphere of participation and co-operation. This the ruling party has singularly failed to do. There is sufficient evidence at hand to conclude that police oppression, innumerable court cases, political threats by party workers, especially to rural level workers and leaders of the other side, physical harassment of the opposition, and the like have increased considerably.

These tactics will perpetuate the political culture that has ruined us, and foreclose all our prospects for growth and change. We urge our political leaders, especially of the ruling party, to understand this basic truth, and do so without wasting a further moment.

TOPIC OF THE WEEK

By Mahfuz Anam

BNP had hoped that sufficient pressure could be built around this by-election to tempt the ruling party to adopt large-scale unfair means in winning the election. This, it hoped, would help 'expose' the ruling AL as the so-called 'vote-thieves' (as AL had done to BNP after Magura) and help to galvanise public support behind opposition. Politics of Tit for Tat again.

The Awami League, in our view, partially fell into this BNP trap and did show more eagerness than was necessary to win this election. It should not have attached so much importance to this one by-poll which neither had any impact on its parliamentary majority nor a public profile big enough to make it into a prestige contest. The dispatching of the two ministers was a mistake. Even if these two ministers did not use, as they claimed, official facilities and vehicles, they were there as ministers, and as such were bound to have an impact. Their official positions lead to bureaucratic and official responses that gave a certain edge to their campaigns. More than the use of ministerial facilities it was their promises of development projects and governmental funds that constituted the violation of the election codes. It was here that we fault the CEC for not taking a

which would have inevitably followed otherwise. After Eid, BNP will try and prove that Pabna-2 polls were rigged and that a movement has to be launched to oust this 'corrupt, inefficient, subservient' government, a call for which has already been given.

Our main contention is that in this 'Politics of Tit for Tat', FACTS do not matter but PREJUDICES do. In fact that is the only thing that matters. The bottom line for both the parties is that it cannot tolerate the other in power, even if the opponent wins the best, the freest and the fairest of elections. Democracy is well and good only, and only, if it goes 'my way'. If it does not, then it has to be 'rigged'. For both these parties the real issues of poverty, malnutrition, over population, illiteracy, public health, women's empowerment development, and the like are important ONLY if it helps to harass the other party. If these are not catchy enough then new issues will have to be manufactured. So what, if those 'manufactured' issues divide the people, make fundamentalists stronger, drive the foreign investors away, further spoil our international image, corrupt our students, debase our schools, colleges and universities, and distort our values.

Another significant aspect of our present-day politics is to NEVER admit any fault on our part, and to consider the opposition as the devil incarnate. According to the AL and BNP leaders their respective parties have never, and can ever, do anything wrong. ALL THE WRONG THINGS ARE DONE BY THE OTHER SIDE. It is always the other guy who is the culprit and who is destroying the country. All virtues are with us and all vices rest on the other side. Imagine the magic that would sweep our politics if simple

challenges.

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Friday Mailbox

Poor Doctors

Sir, In reply to the letter published on 14th Dec '98, I could make only one comment — 'truth hurts'. And I make one more attempt to focus the attention of the respected writer on the subject matter. Please read carefully the 'Star Weekend Magazine' (Dec 4, '98) particularly page 11, 'Patients Rights' and page 12, 'Common Complaints against Doctors', before accusations ranging from rudeness to harassment of women! And since we are on the subject — how are we to accept the statement, 'Before talking about tax, check yourself please'?

Yes, I believe I did hear (and read a little bit too) that transplants are common(?) in India but not still over here. Are we to look forward to it then?

I am deeply disappointed at the remark, 'This is the Bangladeshi style of judgement', particularly in this special month! And though we are aware of the dictionary meaning — 'layman' is always used as a derogatory term. Well, when patients feel that they are harassed so commonly in this country, why not in papers too (without being referred as 'mud-slinging')? So that they will be afraid(?) to be so eloquent next time. Therefore please, let's get our bearings right.

Munirul Haque DOHS, Dhaka

Plant nutrients

Sir, For proper growth, nourishment and optimum yield there are at least one dozen nutrients which are absolutely necessary for plants. These are classified into three categories namely — primary, secondary and micro-nutrients. So long our farmers were familiar with primary nutrients (fertilizers) namely nitrogen (urea), phosphate and potash. With the passing of time due to extensive cultivation of land without applying balanced fertilizers and organic manures, soil has become depleted when necessary for applying other two kinds of fertilizers are essential to obtain satisfactory yield of the crops. As a result secondary nutrients like sulphur and calcium are now being used by farmers.

The last group — micronutrients or trace elements (iron, copper, zinc, manganese, boron, molybdenum) are needed in very small quantities. The deficient symptoms of micro-nutrients are very difficult to identify without conducting thorough investigation of soil and crops. Country's soil scientists could not come out with specific recommendations on this issue. But traders have started marketing a good number of micro-nutrients either by formulating locally or importing. For example, a trader has formulated boron micro-nutrient by using boric acid from market.

Similarly a number of micro-nutrients are being locally formulated by using different chemicals. As of today over a dozen of micro-nutrients are in the market. Being dealers-oriented market, farmers are easily convinced by the dealers to buy these although they are not sure whether their lands may or may not require the same. Side by side some products known as plant growth regulator (PGR) are also in large-scale use. Growth regulators are the micro inputs of high-tech agricultural practices. But in our country where farmers could not even apply organic manures and balanced major (NPK) fertilizers, growth regulators and micro-nutrients can't nourish the soil for optimum yield of the crops.

By applying those products without any test and trials, chemical structure of soil will be disturbed and depleted. Due to gradual deterioration of soil, fertility per hectare yield of all crops has been drastically fallen down.

M A Jallil
372/B, Khilgaon, Dhaka

Why lights?

Sir, In Dhaka city in a number of places, there are traffic lights to control and regulate the vehicular traffic. But apparently it seems that these lights have been installed only to disobey not only by the drivers of the vehicular traffic but also by the keepers of law as well. In most of the places, traffic is regulated by the traffic sergeant posted at road junction without

abiding by the traffic light. This gives the impression that these lights are there only to disobey. If the responsibility of regulating traffic rests on the traffic personnel by using his own judgement, in that case these lights are to be switched off otherwise in places where there is no required police personnel available it is free for all without adhering to the light signal. This is not only causing unnecessary congestion, but also posing serious threat to life.

The normal rule is keeping the flow of traffic in mind, lights to be adjusted accordingly and on yellow lights everything to stop and wait for green signal.

Let us not destroy every rule and every norm, thereby creating complete chaos.

A K Khan
Swamibag, Dhaka

A good opposition

Sir, One would agree that, people here at large always believe in and expect for a strong qualitative opposition. The all-time expectation says that, especially the chief opposition being a qualitative one, they would always do their best with the help of their political prudence and excellence in protesting the government's faults, failures and wrongdoing. The claim often made by our present opposition leadership is that they are the only largest opposition of the country since independence. The reason they present behind such claim is the total number of JS seats they have bagged during the last general election in 1996. And obviously there have been no disagreement to this point from any quarter. In this connection, may we humbly request the opposition leadership that they are the only largest opposition of the country since independence. The reason they present behind such claim is the total number of JS seats they have bagged during the last general election in 1996. 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