

The Women Need Power to Function

LADY chairpersons and members of the Union Parishads have demanded specific powers and responsibilities to enable them to play their due role as elected representatives of the people.

Organised by the government-backed Jatiya Mahila Sangstha, most of the country's thirteen and a half thousand UP members and chairpersons attended Monday's conference with the Prime Minister inaugurating it at Sher-e-Bangla Nagar.

We strongly feel that their grievances should be seriously taken by the Women's Affairs Ministry and mitigated sooner than later. Our march for progress into the next millennium cannot be conceived without the active support and cooperation of our elected women representatives.

Message of Ashura

The Tenth of Muharram is replete with epic significance. So many things pass before our mind's eye today. The evil forces of Yazid perpetrated cruelty on Hazrat Imam Hussain (R) and his entire family on the bank of the river Euphrates by denying them water, the sustainer of life.

While that meanest form of barbarity remains a blot in human history it is the sterling qualities of Hazrat Imam Hussain that have been immortalised as the perennial epitome of his capacity for surffiance and sacrifice against stunning odds.

Generally for the Muslim throughout the world the day signifies the triumph of goodness over evil, that of noble principles of peace, justice and fair-play over the mean ploys of vicious and dark forces.

That is where Ashura beckons us to be steadfastly on the side of right thoughts and actions with a spirit of tolerance and sacrifice ingrained in us. It also comes with a call for unity.

Looks Engineered

IT is a pity that Sunday's Jatiyatobadi Chhatra Dal (JCD) programme had to end in violence with the police resorting to baton charge and tear gassing, the demonstrators damaging vehicles and public properties and the attackers swooping on the demonstrators. It could have been different, though.

The processionists were at their best behaviour from the very start and even when policemen stalled their progress towards the Prime Minister's Secretariat at the Bangla Motor crossing their instant reaction were no worse than a brief rally and a few anti-government slogans. And, the government's respect to democratic norms was reflected in an unprecedented gesture, too.

Explosion of a few home-made bombs triggered off a rather unexpected and an easily avoidable rumpus. Police intervention and later an assault on the dispersing demonstrators by a group, purportedly led by a prominent Jubo League leader, created an odious scene.

The way things progressed smacks of a well-orchestrated and well-executed plan to ensnare the JCD activists to give them a beating of their lifetime. Moreover, presence of the Jubo League activists, who seemed to be lurking in the vicinity, suggests the incident was pre-meditated. If that is the case, we cannot but condemn the heinous machinations.

The ruling party has frequently asked the opposition to speak their minds on the floor of the parliament, and through vehicles available to them in a democracy. Sunday's incidents give rise to a very pertinent question: are they giving the opposition the space they have a right to get?

Talking Good Governance

Good governance is characterised by confrontational politics with the opposition talking of pulling down the government by force instead of challenging it through an appropriate electoral process; bureaucratic inefficiencies, corruption and procrastination; and a large degree of weakness in the judicial system and ineffectiveness in respect of financial sector and economic management.

LOTS of people talk a lot about good governance these days in lots of places around the world, including Bangladesh. What does it actually mean? Views differ as to the details. But, basically, there is wide agreement that it has to do with the rule of law for all citizens, people's participation, and accountability and transparency on the part of all those having governance responsibilities at all levels of society, which, if established properly, would deter corruption and improve the behaviour of the people involved in accordance with the dictates of ethics and morality. Easy to conceptualise. But how can such good governance be established? This article focuses on Bangladesh.

The purposes of governance include the traditional responsibilities of national and individual security (i.e. territorial defence, maintenance of law and order, safeguarding people's lives and properties, providing judicial redress to affected people) and also of promoting/facilitating national development. It is also the responsibility of the state to enable people to participate in the governance and socio-economic processes through effective education, health and training activities and by ensuring their appropriate access to resources and institutional facilities.

Economic growth alone is no longer considered development. A wider definition is now generally accepted, involving a range of dimensions such as economic growth, poverty alleviation, reduction in inequality, access to social services (education, training, health) and the resultant improved human capability, security of life and property, freedom of expression (religious, ethnic and in social, political, economic and cultural pursuits, and environmental sustainability). Under the ruling paradigm of free market economy, it is the private sector that would play the dominant role in production and distribution, while the government would act as the facilitator.

It is, therefore, necessary that the government undertakes appropriate privatisation and deregulation measures so as to give the private sector its proper scope. At the same time, however, the government has to put in place an effective regulatory framework for the private sector to function effectively and unencumbered by possible illegitimate behaviour of the actors encroaching upon one another. The private sector is beleaguered by default of loans on a large scale. This mess

needs to be cleared up through appropriate and determined actions on the part of all concerned - in the enlightened self-interest of the defaulters on the one hand, and the loan giving agencies and the national economy on the other.

For development, as defined above, and security services and opportunities for participation to be adequately accessible to all citizens, appropriate governance and service-providing institutions at all levels of society, ethics and morality driven behaviour of people, particularly of those in leadership positions in different walks of national life, democratic values and practices, and free flow of information about the functions of various components (political, parliamentary, bureaucratic, legal) of governance, making for transparency and accountability are essential concomitants.

Good governance requires that government perform all the responsibilities effectively. The political opposition needs to play a responsible and constructive role with a view to making its contribution to good governance. Currently, however, governance in Bangladesh is characterised by confrontational politics with the opposition talking of pulling down the government by force instead of challenging it through an appropriate electoral process; bureaucratic inefficiencies, corruption and procrastination; and a large degree of weakness in the judicial system and ineffectiveness in respect of financial sector and economic management.

Insecurity of life and property is a major national problem. All this has not happened overnight. Over the years, through a succession of governments, the situation has deteriorated. An urgent turnaround is necessary in order to put the country on a course of sustained and orderly social progress. Today, murder, rape, extortionism, mugging and organised crime abound in the country - in both urban and rural areas. It is not infrequent that mafians (criminals) have godfathers who are influential political leaders belonging to different political parties. The law enforcing agencies are often ineffective/inefficient in dealing with heinous crimes committed

by the mafians because of their powerful protectors. The legal system is also often ineffective, particularly in protecting the poor and the disadvantaged.

Another important reason for the failure of the law enforcement agencies and the legal system to function efficiently is the widespread corruption in both the institutions. A public opinion survey conducted by the Bangladesh Unnayan Parishad (BUP) in April 1997, polling a randomly picked national sample of 2,197 respondents, found that the police was perceived by 83 per cent of the respondents to be highly corrupt and by another 12 per cent to be corrupt; the corresponding figures for the judiciary are 77 per cent and 55 per cent. As revealed by the same survey, corruption, as perceived

inefficiency is widespread and deep in Bangladesh. Productivity is known to be very low in most sectors, particularly agriculture and small-scale and informal enterprise sectors in both rural and urban areas. Allocation of resources is inefficient.

For example, sectors with great potential such as small and medium enterprises and agricultural improvement and diversification are not receiving commensurate institutional and policy attention and resources. This has been so partly because of the failure to create the necessary economic environment for attracting investment to those sectors/activities and partly because potential investors often find it easier to make quick money in trade, both domestic

ment conduct.

A crucial element in this context is the access of the members of the public to information on the activities of the government. Accountability and transparency are two sides of the same coin. Access to full information by all who want it about a government action makes it transparent. If there is inadequate/lack of adherence to the letter and spirit of the applicable laws and rules in the way an activity has been carried out, and if that information is freely available, the matter becomes transparent; and this transparency would bring it into the public domain, which may lead to pressure being mounted demanding full compliance/accountability.

Access to information on how the public administration conduct its activities is seriously constrained as a result of the absence of public briefings and hearings even on matters of high national importance and strong public interest. The Official Secret Act of 1923 is still applied mindlessly in denying interested people and the media access to information. This makes for a high degree of non-transparency. Rules are ignored or side-tracked, waiver of rules applied to serve highly partisan purposes; action kept pending imposing losses on the nation; corrupt practices resorted to in disposing of matters in favour of those who pay bribes; employment or desired posting/transfer secured through graft, favouritism or nepotism; contracts awarded, bills passed even when projects are poorly implemented and taxes not collected in return for kickbacks/bribes; and work left undone where there is no scope for kickbacks/bribes.

Indeed, files do not often move even for the most genuine and straightforward cases unless 'bribes' are paid, the amount involved in a particular case depending on the importance/value of the case. These are some of the ways which reportedly characterise widely the functioning of public administration in Bangladesh. But, information on specifics about such matters hardly come into the public domain.

The individuals affected often fear retribution and therefore do not give out details to the media. But such happenings are open secrets. Only the

'unlucky' few get charged for their misdeeds, while most of those involved enjoy the spoils. In fact, social values have collapsed so much that there does not appear to be a social stigma associated with riches amassed through corruption.

In fact, 'wealthy' people, even when they acquire their wealth through corruption and misdeeds, are accepted in society to be among the social elite.

Hence, on the one hand, laws need to be enacted as necessary and all laws properly implemented to allow free flow of information on the conduct of public administration in general and on the activities of individual public officials in the interest of promoting transparency and accountability. At the same time, a social movement is necessary to form/strengthen public opinion against corruption. Institutionalisation of democracy at all spaces of society and a free press can play important roles in improving transparency and accountability. Bangladesh does have an appreciable free print media. But the national electronic media (TV, Radio) still remain captive as ever. Regarding democratic institutionalisation and practices, there is the National Parliament composed of democratically elected representatives. But, it remains far short of what it should be in terms of real debates about major issues facing the nation and finding real solutions thereto with both sides of the aisle purposefully engaged. It is not infrequent that the main opposition party is not in the Parliament at all; and when they are, it is not infrequent that exchange of bickerings turns out to be the business being transacted, more than anything of substance. And, of course, an effective local government system appears to remain as elusive as ever. There are ideas and instincts expressed by the present government which are in the right direction. But only if they are converted into policies, institutions, and practices, can there be progress.

The choice is between finding and putting in place, through the efforts of all concerned, appropriate solutions to the governance problems raised above, which are seriously constraining the nation's prospects, and suffer persisting self-abnegation by allowing continuation of the business-as-usual process or worse to happen. The choice is obvious. Can this nation make it? I would like to believe that it can; but, as of now, I see very few signs of such optimism.

Lest We Forget ...



by Qazi Kholiuzzaman Ahmad

by the people, is also pervasive in other areas of public administration: Customs Department (78 per cent; 13 per cent); Income Tax Department (64 per cent; 26 per cent); and Secretariat (35 per cent; 47 per cent).

The public perception as to how crimes can be reduced/removed, as shown by the above mentioned survey are: by giving exemplary punishment to criminals (94 per cent); through generation of employment opportunities (89 per cent); parents taking greater care in bringing up their children (87 per cent); through proper use of the existing laws (suggested by 85 per cent); political parties avoiding confrontations and embarking upon a path based on democratic values and practices (80 per cent); and by creation of recreational facilities (56 per cent).

Now consider the issue of economic efficiency, which it is the responsibility of the government to facilitate and promote. In broad terms, it is about ensuring the best utilisation of limited resources, given people's tastes. It involves allocation of resources, production of goods and services, and distribution of goods and services. Currently, in all the spheres,

and international, and by investing in the production and distribution of luxury goods, for example.

There can be 'accountability and transparency' within the system without public knowledge and concern about what is happening. The tasks are assigned and responsibilities distributed with the supervisory and decision-making powers hierarchically allocated. If the assignments are carried out properly as detailed by all concerned to the satisfaction of the supervisors, there is accountability and transparency of sorts, which in fact had been the case with the Indian public administration in the colonial period. It was the British Raj implementing its agenda through the administrative system it put in place; people were altogether excluded. But in an independent country, the issues of accountability and transparency immediately bring into focus the perspective of the people. Accountability to the public is not only the enforcement of laws and regulations and the carrying out of responsibilities by public officials but also the existence of independent systems and facilities for public evaluation of govern-

No Tears for the BJP

Praful Bidwai writes from New Delhi

The BJP once claimed to be the party "with a difference". It now stands politically sullied and faction-ridden. It has lost its USP (unique selling proposition): viz, we are novel; we are different; try us out. The public tried and found it wanting. Why did the BJP coalition fail? It practised confrontation everywhere: Pokharan-II, offensive against minorities, Saraswati vandana.

Christians. The Vajpayee government pushed a parochial agenda, manipulated the official media, compromised learned institutions, even communalised the armed forces. The Bhagwat episode involved not just muckraking about with a combat service, nor just corruption; but the imposition of a communally-minded deputy chief (Vice Admiral Harinder Singh) on the Navy. The last 13 months were a record of Hindutva misgovernance, venality, communal bloody-mindedness and aggressive postures towards our neighbours (only partially countered by Lahore, welcome as was). It just won't do to pretend that Mr Vajpayee was the Boy on the Burning Deck, defending liberal values against the parivar or transforming the BJP into a modern, forward-looking, tolerant force. Despite his apparent softness, Mr Vajpayee owes his primary loyalties to the sangh parivar. In the last analysis, he always bows to RSS dictates - as he did over the Babri demolition.

Mr Vajpayee capitulated to the RSS from Day One, surrendering his prerogative as PM to choose his own finance minister. His first reaction on visiting the Dangs, was to call, RSS-style, for a 'national debate' on conversions. This indirectly endorsed the anti-minorities campaign, culminating in Staines killing. It was no accident that Mr Vajpayee took Mr Advani with him when he went to the President to tender his resignation on April 17. The BJP conclusively lost the confidence vote. It is absurd to plead that it be re-invited to form a government.

This goes against all Westminster practice, and authorities such as Dacey, May and Jennings. A party defeated in Parliament cannot be re-invited. The re-invitation clamour is meant to keep the BJP's own defection-prone MPs together, not serve a constructive purpose. Today, the Congress, warts and all, appears best placed to form a government. To be fair, it is hoist with a situation not of its own choosing. Had this crisis occurred four months earlier, it could have focussed on real issues. With all one's reservations about it, one should welcome the Congress if it forms a government which is secular, possesses minimum coherence and reverses some of

the damage the BJP has done. With 140 seats, the Congress lacks an unambiguous, stable, mandate, as did the BJP. The Congress must do a holding operation, which gives a secular push to our politics and restores consensual processes - before calling for fresh elections. The Congress starts with two handicaps. It is seen as marred by manipulative politics, and its supporters are far too disparate. Unless two major blocs, the Left with 50 MPs, and the Rashtriya Loktantrik Morcha with 37, support it, it cannot form a government even if other parties split - as the Samata, BJP and Akalis might well do.

In today's fluid situation, the Congress has two alternatives. It can come together a majority without a programmatic basis, agreed rules, or criteria of dispute resolution. The result could be one vast mess, especially if the coalition includes the AIADMK with its horrendous corruption and communalism. (It supported the Ayodhya kar seva). When such a regime collapses, the ensuing elections could become a referendum against it, rather than against the now-disgraced BJP-led combine.

The second alternative is a Congress-only minority government committed to a secular-liberal agenda, supported from the outside by parties which it regularly consults. This would be more coherent, inherently stronger and more responsible. Its line of authority would be transparent. Most important, such a government would be publicly more accountable. The snag is, of course, that it might not get formed.

democracy" are not without value. In spite of many limitations, if countries such as India with bourgeois democratic institutions are able to prevent the scale of human horror that took place under Maoist China, then there some good in having these institutions and practices. Secondly, national democratic institutions do not guarantee social progress and the improvement of the economic circumstances of the majority of the people.

Even with regular elections and a relatively unfettered but corporate-owned press, the ruling class can get away without responding to the needs of the majority. This is true both in advanced capitalist countries, like the United States, and in developing countries, like India or Bangladesh. The main crucial point is that the well being of people depends on how well organised are social classes and groups. The chief public policy lesson to be drawn from Sen's work is that parliamentary democratic institutions and elections are useful but are not a substitute for popular people's organizations that can force public actions to promote social welfare.

OPINION

Umar on Amartya Sen

Tanweer Akram

Mr Badruddin Umar's assertions that Professor Amartya Sen has made no contribution to the history of ideas ('Badruddin Umar: Champion of Free Thinking', The Daily Star, April 23, 1999) should be disputed.

Leaving aside Sen's contributions to mathematical economic theory on the implications of relaxing some of the axioms of Arrow's Impossibility Theorem, which by no means is unprofound, let's consider his empirical work on poverty, famine and public action. Sen has shown in his empirical and historical study of actual famines in West Bengal, Ethiopia, Bangladesh, and China that famines are not caused by the shortage of food, but by economic conditions under which groups of people are unable to obtain food because of changes in terms of their entitlements to goods and services. Sen's merit lies in empirically demonstrating the validity of this proposition. Sen has argued that if a country has democratic institutions, it is able to prevent virulent disasters like famine and mass starvation.

The authorities are compelled to undertake transfer programs to help the needy because there is public pressure to do so. Free press and democratic elections can be instrumental in preventing many catastrophic human tragedies by providing timely information and creating political pressure for public action. The importance of devoting state resources to meet basic human needs is clear from Drze and Sen's (1989) comparative study

of India and China. Whereas India was able to avoid famine, unlike China, India invested far less in rural healthcare services than China. And the result of this has been catastrophic: Approximately every 8 years in India, the number of people who dying from starvation, poor health, malnutrition, and diseases equals to a 1958-60 Chinese famine. This is an important finding. Sen and others are quite explicit about the deprivation and destitution that exist in countries, such as India, with rudimentary democratic institutions.

What Sen has written is that Indian did not experience the level of Chinese famine of 1958-60, although chronic starvation and malnutrition is a very serious problem in India. And Sen's policy contribution lies in pointing out this, and showing that the food availability doctrine is vacuous. This may seem an obvious point, but the most profound of scientific work comes in explaining and being surprised as simple but phenomenon, such as explaining blood circulation, gravity, or the motions of stellar objects.

Once given a proper explanation, theories seem trivial but the merit lies in providing a rigorous, elegant, and often mathematical robust framework for thinking about a social or natural phenomenon. The implications of Sen's findings are both deep and radical. Firstly, routine democratic and political freedoms, rights, and procedures of 'bourgeoisie

To the Editor...

Power shortage

Sir, Instead of trying to blame the opposition for the current severe shortage of power, our PM should start considering about practical solutions. Just a few days back there was a news item in the DS that we are heading for an even more serious situation by this time of year in 2000. There can be one immediate step towards preventing that.

The Army can be given the job of curbing theft of electricity in the name of 'systems loss' which is a staggering 30-40 per cent in our country. We have heard that in Pakistan they were facing a similar situation and now they have surplus power through the help of the Army.

So, instead of using the Armed Forces for merely 'guarding' the power-stations, the PM should consider to proceed in that direction starting from now. Let us, at least, begin the process of a rational solution.

An Anxious Observer
Chittagong

The world and we

Sir, In the March 8th edition of the International Herald Tribune (the most widely read newspaper throughout the

world) two articles appeared in the same page: "Two Bombs Kill 7 During Concert in Bangladesh" and "In Bangladesh, Many of the Latest Natural Disasters Aren't Nature's Fault."

This, then, is the picture of Bangladesh being presented to a world-wide reading constituency (including donors).

Sarah E Coghlan
Health Consultant

Arsenic alert

Sir, Since the international and local mass media have been exposing the arsenic menace in the underground water in Bangladesh, and the initial field research on this new menace to health started in Bangladesh, the background is right for establishing, with UN technical and financial assistance, the International Research Centre in Dhaka, on lines similar to the initial establishment of the Cholera Institute, now world famous as ICDDR,B.

The UN member nations have to carry out field tests to spot presence of arsenic in water; followed by control networks. The affected Asian nations could benefit from the location of the centre in Dhaka. The study is urgent as the adverse effects are detected after

decades of drinking the contaminated water.

It is hoped that the Arsenic Cell in the Ministry of Health would seize the initiative to lay the proper foundation for accelerated growth on the study and field application on this new hazard of the elusive disease.

A Zabr
Dhaka.

No TB6

Sir, We, in Kalabagan, Dhaka enjoy more than 35 channels through cable operators. Of these a popular one called TB-6 of Russia has of late become the victim of some strange conspiracy. The reception quality of TB-6 had always been excellent and we used to enjoy very good movies and musical programmes through this channel. But of late its reception after 10 pm Bangladesh time has become very poor and we fail to receive any picture at all (the sound, however, remains OK) after 11 pm every night. At about 10 am the reception becomes normal again. This happens only in the case of the Russian TB-6 channel and not in case of other channels like BBC, CNN, National Geographic Channel etc.

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