

FOCUS

The Myth of Party System

Mr R M Pal writes from New Delhi

What the country needs is stability with democracy, unlike stability with likely possibilities of authoritarianism under a Presidential form ... What a complex country like India needs is more democracy, not less democracy

ALL that have happened in the country since the Janata experiment in 1977 culminating in the present turmoil in recent weeks, explode the myth of the success of the party system as it operates today as also the claim that India is the largest democracy in the world.

The manner in which the Congress President, Mr Sitaram Kesari withdrew the Congress Party's support from the United Front government headed by the Deve Gowda and then by Mr Gujral was immoral, to put it mildly. The ease with which the "greatest socialist" George Fernandes has been changing his faith would but even the most diabolical politician to shame. What is the difference, may one ask, between the practices of our "democratic" party politicians, and vulgar scramble for power?

It is hardly necessary to emphasise the fact that the political atmosphere in our country is characterised by vulgarisation of the political practice of liberalism. One of the reasons for the degeneration is that the basic tenets and values which go into the making of such a system workable, namely tolerance, self-restraint, an attitude of give-and-take, have been conspicuous by their absence in our climate. The political vocabulary in contemporary writings, including newspaper writings, consists mainly of expressions like 'criminalisation of politics', 'unprincipled and diabolical scramble for power', 'corruption in electoral politics', 'lumpenisation', and so on — which are indicative of an impending collapse of the system of government based on political parties.

The two major communist parties, CPI and CPM claim to

be different — for the better — from other political parties. But the fact is that after the collapse of communism in the Soviet Union and eastern Europe, and its virtual disappearance from China, communist leaders and intellectuals have become apologetic and ambivalent; their thinking process is one of 'now this, now that' — now about the faulty theory of proletarian dictatorship and economic determinism, and now acknowledging their mistake about drifting from the ideology of Indian nationalism. In any case communism has almost always been nationalism painted red. Communists have now become the most successful practitioners of the once-hated parliamentary form of government. They don't have the stamina to think in terms of an alternative system. It was patriotic to watch their performance and hear and read their utterances after the Vajpayee government lost the confidence motion in the Lok Sabha. In what way were they different from the manipulators and small time operators of other parties including the BJP?

It is in this context of search for an alternative system that twentieth century India can be proud of three distinguished thinkers and intellectual-activists who had identified themselves with the cause of regeneration of India, and made significantly original contributions in visualising democratic social and political order based on radical decentralisa-

tion of power, and committed to the ideals of liberty, equality, fraternity, social justice, and morality in politics — different from the present system. The alternative which Rabindranath Tagore, Gandhi and M N Roy shared in common and which are eminently relevant today, was an unambiguous emphasis on giving power to the village unit, to the people. Their approach and system envisage more democracy than what is permitted under the present system.

Tagore gave active thought to this aspect, and suggested that the foundation of a democratic state will be laid in local republics (to which the communists are totally opposed) which will combine all the functions of the state as they affect local life. He formulated his ideas as in his *Atmashakti* (1905), *Bharatarvarsha* (1906), *Raja O Praja*, *Suadesha Samaj* (1908), and his famous essay, *Nationalism* (1911).

Shortly before his assassination, Gandhi suggested dissolution of the Congress party. Had he been spared the assassin's bullet, his ideas including decentralisation would have been the logical conclusion, namely a partyless democracy and form of government. They don't have the stamina to think in terms of an alternative system. It was patriotic to watch their performance and hear and read their utterances after the Vajpayee government lost the confidence motion in the Lok Sabha. In what way were they different from the manipulators and small time operators of other parties including the BJP?

Immediately after independence, M N Roy, in a series of lectures and articles, pointed out that the main objective before political parties would remain limited to capture of power and that would in-

evitably lead to corruption, that a form of government based on the party system is inconsistent with democracy, and that diffusion of power will remain a distant goal. Unlike Tagore and Gandhi, Roy gave a blueprint of his political philosophy, radical humanism. He proposed organised democracy and a government based on partyless politics, and comprehensive ideal of political and economic freedom. A government under the present system represents only the ruling party and even the largest party is a small fraction of the people. Very often a government is ruled by a minority. Thus the present system is inconsistent with the ideals of democracy and is bound to degenerate into an unprincipled scramble for power, as we have witnessed in the recent weeks.

There ought to be debate and discussion about the feasibility or otherwise of direct democracy in which power is not delegated. Such a discussion need not start with the precondition that political parties must cease to exist at once. Which means we have to give our attention to (1) a long term solution, that is, a practicable democratic alternative; (2) and to a short term one relating to effective steps that can be taken here and now, to rid the party system of the evils that have befallen it and to make it functional and stable.

Furthermore, it is being prophesied by political observers that the next Lok Sabha will also be a hung one. How do

we arrest the expected instability? It is in this context that we may refer to a proposal made by former President of India, Mr Venkataraman in a lecture in 1995. In the larger perspectives, his proposal flows from an elitist approach which ignores the common man and woman. He appears to think that a little less democracy, or a centralised democracy alone can enable the Union government to function more efficiently.

The proposal envisages that the Prime Minister should not be elected by the majority party but should be chosen by all the members of the Lok Sabha through single transferable vote. Which means Article 75 will have to be amended. The Council of Ministers, too, are to be elected by means of a single transferable vote by both the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha. The Prime Minister and the Council of Ministers will not be removed through no-confidence motion or by the rejection of their substantive proposals by Parliament. The Ministry will have to carry out the decisions of Parliament.

What the country needs is stability with democracy, unlike stability with likely possibilities of authoritarianism under a Presidential form. Changes suggested above can make for stability within the present system. Moreover, since Parliament will appoint the Prime Minister and other ministers, it is hoped that only competent people will become ministers, and democratic functioning will also be strengthened. What a complex country like India needs is more democracy, not less democracy.

— Mondira

The writer is a well known columnist.

Growing Antibiotic Resistance in Bangladesh

by Dr Javed Iqbal

The incidence of antibiotic resistance is based on the frequency of use and duration of use of the antibiotic ... the more you use and the longer you use antibiotics, the chances of becoming resistant to that antibiotic increases more than ever before.

THE use of antibiotics have increased substantially all over the world since the discovery of penicillin by Sir Alexander Fleming in the early part of this century. At one point it led to the belief among concerned people that infections were finally under control. But all miracles are short-lived. Unfortunately, this popularity of antibiotics has resulted in an associated rise in the prevalence of resistant bacteria. They appear to develop resistance against almost any antibiotic they come across, one way or the other. And when one strain learns a new resistance strategy, it is eager to share it with others, an ability that has been pivotal in the quick spread of antibiotic resistance.

While millions of dollars are being spent on surveillance studies to monitor antibiotic resistance pattern in developed countries, there has never been any concerted effort to monitor the trend in Bangladesh. In our country, inadequate attention is being paid towards this potentially disastrous phenomenon that will affect not only those professionally involved, but also those actually being prescribed these medicines.

What is antibiotic resistance? It is the inability of any antimicrobial or antibacterial agent to destroy the pathogen that usually should be destroyed by that particular antibiotic. Any bacteria can be innately resistant or may acquire resistance to antibiotics. Both types are probably important in the context of infection control and management. The inability arises mainly from tactical measures adopted by the bacteria itself, change in antibiotic target molecules (which may be inside the microbe or on the surface) and production of enzymes or proteins that degrade the antibiotic. The change in target molecules are due to mutations which may result in changes in DNA structure or genes producing (a) the target molecules (b) changes in bacterial enzyme structure making them more effective against antibiotics. Let us take for example the beta-lactams, a family of antibiotics that include the penicillins and cephalosporins, which work by disrupting the construction of the bacterial cell wall. To render these antibiotics ineffective, bacteria produce enzymes that destroy the beta-lactams, called beta-lactamase. For decades, the chemists were ahead of the microbes by making slight changes in the antibiotic structure, so that the beta-lactamases or the bacterial enzymes could not recognize and inactivate the antibiotic. But the changes were always temporary as the bacteria quickly mutate their beta-lactamases or acquire new ones from other strains. For example, cephalosporins have passed through three generations and now we have the 4th generation,

that might be still ineffective against some strains of bacteria. This example, and similar ones in the case of other antibiotics not discussed here, indicate that options are narrowing down against these resistant species of bacteria.

Interestingly, Darwin's law of natural selection appears to be applicable even in the bacterial world. Repeated or even an unremarkable single course of antibiotic therapy may exert selective pressure leading to the survival of the fittest, i.e., resistant bacteria unaffected by the antibiotic. Exposure to antibiotics is then one of the principal risk factors in the emergence and selection of antibiotic-resistant bacteria.

It may be stated in simplistic terms that the incidence of antibiotic resistance that we have discussed previously is based on the frequency of use and duration of use of the antibiotic. More simply, the more you use and the longer you use antibiotics, the chances of becoming resistant to that antibiotic increases more than ever before. The use of antibiotics in humans include therapeutic and preventive, the latter being usually limited to short-term use of one or two doses. The bulk of antibiotics are mainly used to treat various infectious diseases, which makes it imperative that the drugs be prescribed and administered appropriately, minimizing the potential for antibiotic resistance. Indiscriminate use of these drugs resulting from uncontrolled availability in our country has had its toll on the effectiveness of antibiotics against fatal & non-fatal infectious diseases.

The use of antibiotics is also quite common in animal husbandry, used by farmers for controlling infection of animals, as growth promotion agents, and prevention of infections. Though these practices are quite logical from the veterinary point of view, the consequences leading to emergence and dissemination of antibiotic resistance cannot be ignored. Recent scientific reports have

ciprofloxacin resistance in Bangladesh was in BIRDEM which showed a small proportion of resistant bacteria, around 4-5% (1). However, a study carried out several years later showed a dramatic increase in the incidence of resistance against this antibiotic, almost 20% (2). Moreover, the incidence has been increasing, associated with a rise in consumption of this antibiotic. The use of this particular drug has increased by almost 300% in the last 5 years.

Question is what should be done or what can be done. The issue of controlling the spread of antibiotic resistance requires a multi-faceted approach since it involves several parties with conflicting priorities: doctors, patients, veterinarians, industry. It has two loci of origin: hospitals & community patients, having different prescription policies and guidelines. Controlling the hygienic condition and better infection control practices will definitely help in preventing the spread of resistant-organisms. Early and accurate identification of resistant organisms in microbiology laboratories, efficient interdepartmental communication and awareness of the hospital staff are all essential prerequisites.

The development of antibiotic resistant bacteria in the community or out-door patients is a result of indiscriminate antibiotic prescribing practices, poor compliance and uncontrolled sale of antibiotics. Also, ignorance, overcrowding

ear and sinus infection, particularly in the children was growing upto 50% during the 1980's. To counter this trend, the physicians started to change their prescription pattern by relying more on non-penicillin or non-beta-lactam drugs. This has brought down the resistance rate against penicillin among the bacteria. Organization's Society of Infectious diseases or the society of chemotherapy of that country attempted to educate physicians about the dangers of over-prescribing antibiotics. That the pattern of drug resistance can actually modified by change of prescription pattern has been confirmed by other clinical study results (ref).

To be realistic, the solution to rising antibiotic resistance is the discovery of new antibiotics or concentrating on other options such as vaccine development. Recent progress in learning the genetic structure of many bacteria and advances in synthetic chemistry may lead us towards a bulk of newer antibiotics, although the lack of funding in the western countries has created serious concern on the part of researchers and after sales service. Corporate offices without expertise in the computer sections were probably the worst sufferers, spending enormous sums on cleaning up their PCs where they should have got free service or a much lower price. And so questions pop up.

'T Didn't Know'.

Could this accident have been avoided if there was a proper monitoring system of the country's computers? None want to venture an answer. Marketeers look away. Sufferers rub more salt into their wounds. Experts say that most of the computers would have been intact, (even unaffected) if there had been some circulation of updated virus information (or more simply, awareness) or a monitoring system among

Excessive use of antibiotics should be tackled by better education of prescribers at all levels, better definition of infection and implementation of more rational control on antibiotic dispensing.

number of antibiotics are the same as those used in humans. Not much thought has been given to the effects of this expanding scope of antimicrobial use in our country.

The inappropriate use of antibiotics is often responsible for high treatment costs, avoidable side-effects, treatment failures and antibiotic resistance. What actually is inappropriate use and how do we circumvent this problem? Use of antibiotics are more often driven by the objective of treating an infectious disease as quickly as possible, at least ameliorating the major signs and symptoms of the disease. The pathogen-specificity of the pathogen or the cost involved is often ignored in regular clinical practice. However, the lack of proper clinical microbiology facilities, reliable laboratory data regarding pattern of antibiotic resistance and above all absence of any national health policy regarding controlled use of antibiotics make the scenario more confus-

and poor hygiene are responsible for the spread of resistant bacteria.

Let us take the case of Scandinavian countries and the Netherlands as an example, where antibiotic resistance is low. In these regions, traditional agents are widely used in preference to more recently introduced antibiotics. In the USA and in other parts of Europe the standard treatment for an acute ear infection (otitis media) is 10 days, in UK it is 5-7 days while in the Netherlands, antibiotics are not usually prescribed. This example stresses the importance of individual national practice pattern which may be important factors in determining resistance trend. Let us consider another European country, Hungary. This country has maintained a remarkable surveillance system for antibiotic resistance since early 1970's. Data showed that penicillin-resistance among pneumococcus, a bacteria frequently cause of pneumonia,

has resulted in improvements in the input-output ratio of power generation, hybrids, transmission related efficiency, flexibility and reliability in distribution, environment-friendly processes, and energy-efficient products as well as equipment, to mention a few. The above and related developments are vital for Bangladesh. They can provide *inter alia* viable options for an affordable and sustainable strategy in the areas of generation, transmission, distribution and utilization of electric power in the country.

One of the key challenges though for the strategy to succeed would be to ensure the optimization of service outputs with relatively less power inputs. Working towards meeting the challenge would require, among other things, an analysis of the rating status of electrically powered products, equipment etc., currently in use in Bangladesh. The reason is that the service demand at the user-end is dependent on the above ratings subject to operational variables. In other words, it implies that it is possible to cut down on the existing level of power consumption at the user-end without any reductions in the service through an improvement in the energy efficiency of users products, equipment, etc. A decrease in

per capita service demand could, in an aggregate term, create a substantial amount of surplus power within the present level of generation. The surplus power could feed an additional number of customers without incurring any extra generation costs. It is, therefore, essential that the in-country market for energy-efficient products, equipment etc., should be improved through appropriate policy redirection, controls and incentives. A review of the existing import policy in light of the above, standardization of pertinent products and tax concessions (at the initial stage) could be a good starting point in that direction.

It is, however, important to note that too much dependence on imported goods (electrically powered products in this case) without comparative advantages (in favour of Bangladesh) could be detrimental to the well-being of the country's economy, particularly in the context of the imminent GATT regime. To overcome the problem, a meaningful use of local knowledge and indigenous talents for the localization of the production of products (both energy-efficient and environment-friendly) should be ensured and promoted. The underlying assumption is that while the production of pertinent products, equipment etc., would progressively replace the imported ones, an increased efficiency in power utilization

could be instrumental in the improvement of Human Development Index (HDI) of Bangladesh.

With all those good news, it goes without saying that appropriate tolerances are to be considered in the designing of the aforesaid strategy because engineering does not stand still. The promising developments that could revolutionize the power sector in the foreseeable future include:

* a commercial use of fusion process in power generation within the next 25 to 30 years;

* further improvements in the conductivity of engineering materials;

* an increased capacity of engineering materials to withstand the up-cycle and down-cycle of heat treatment; and

* an enhanced role of renewables in meeting service demands.

Finally, it appears that a successful formulation and implementation of the strategy would require a multi-sectoral intervention involving a number of ministries of the Government of Bangladesh. To this end, the roles of private sector and civil society in support of the government efforts cannot be ruled out simply because they could bring investments for, and facilitate transparency and accountability in, the policy, programme, implementation and impact sustaining phases of the strategy.

Vaccinating into the Future

Windows Flu Gives PCs a Chill!

by A. Maher

Somebody decided to celebrate it with a bang and came up with a deadly computer bug that caused innumerable PCs worldwide to go out of order. Data totaling millions of dollars were lost in a flash as soon as computers were turned on.

yet to give an "official" reply or initiate measures to confront such an issue. As some hardened bureaucrats in a sarcastic vein put it, they were amused at how the Ministry also failed to prop up a quick ad-hoc committee, as numerous national activities were "committee-based".

Pirate Paradise!

Pirated software was thought to be another source of the CIH. In a country in which the computer market has grown with such a steep gradient, pirated software could have been an ideal fuel. Here only a few buy the real thing, and those few constitute mostly of corporate offices and prospering businesses. Almost every private individual has his operating system copied before delivery and pre-loaded popular programs have become run-of-the-mill in computer packages. But many are almost forced to go through this process. With 70% of the population below the poverty line, computers can hardly have any say or culture in daily life. Since computers started becoming a common household item only from 1993-94, professionalism and respect of "rights" is another inactive concept. Some low-profile user-experts have been brewing a new idea. They suggested that the Government subsidies purchase or procure original anti-virus packages since copying is illegal by international law. So front-end users have to pay less with a little backing by becoming members of a Government-run "club". Parallel to this small anti-virus commercial bodies might be encouraged as "computer clinics".

One programmer smirked, "if you can get loans to develop a poultry farm, why not for a (anti) virus firm?" With the right incentives piracy could be discouraged.

"Virtual" Steps Won't Do!

Information technology (IT) has no doubt found a foothold in Bangladesh. The Government has often gone public with its intentions of promoting IT highlighting it as an indirect answer to socio-economic problems. It is almost natural for the Government to sound like banging on empty drums as it becomes outpaced with such technology. A progressive attitude has to be adopted and such issues cannot be left midway of their development. With almost half or much more of the country in the dark about IT, getting the message through could be much more than just formulating "policies". Drafting piles of paperwork with wordy assurances won't make it go away, only a solid step is the solution. And speaking of steps, we appear to be leaving virtual footprints in a sector that is the beacon of survival in the 21st century.

Towards an Affordable and Sustainable Electric Power Strategy

by Dr. M. S. Haq

CONTINUAL progress in electric power technology has resulted so far in improvements in the input-output ratio of power generation, hybrids, transmission related efficiency, flexibility and reliability in distribution, environment-friendly processes, and energy-efficient products as well as equipment, to mention a few. The above and related developments are vital for Bangladesh. They can provide *inter alia* viable options for an affordable and sustainable strategy in the areas of generation, transmission, distribution and utilization of electric power in the country.

In conclusion, antibiotic resistance requires to be better defined in terms of its incidence and medical impact. Surveillance systems need to be initiated with or without international assistance, targeted at specific population to define the problem more precisely. Excessive use of antibiotics should be tackled by better education of prescribers at all levels, better definition of infection and implementation of more rational control on antibiotic dispensing. Since the problem of antibiotic resistance is a multi-faceted problem, the approach to tackle this phenomenon should also be multi-faceted.

TOM & JERRY



By Hanna-Barbera

