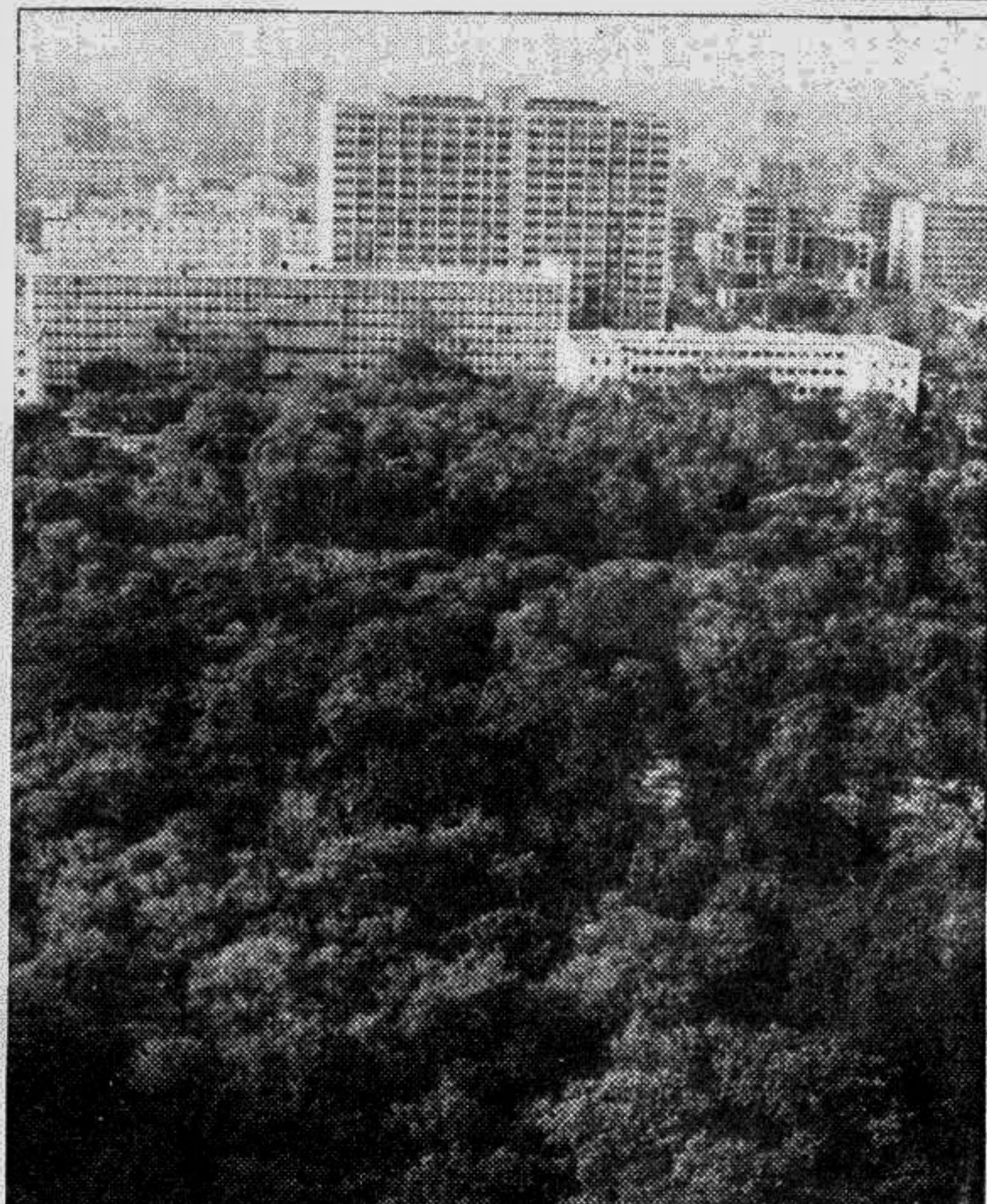


FOCUS

Dynamics of Decision Making

The Osmany Udyan Preservation Case

by Dr Tasneem Siddiqui



OVER the last month, a citizens' movement has emerged centering round the government's decision to construct a convention centre at Osmany Udyan to host a summit of the Non-aligned Movement. We are aware that in a democratic system, the decision making process involves the aggregation of various demands articulated by different sections of the society and skillful selection of the ones that accommodate the interests of the largest number of groups. Again if any decision or action is taken by the policymakers that does not seem to reflect the wishes of a particular section it is very much within democratic practice that those aggrieved will try to convey their disapproval to the decision makers and suggest alternative options. It is in the interest of the policymakers to accommodate or respond to such demands in a responsible way. A political system can only gain strength by constantly adapting to the rational demands of the diverse sections of its polity. Unfortunately, our policymakers do not seem to appreciate the dynamics of such a rational decision making process. It is quite disconcerting to notice the Prime Minister's sharp reaction to the peaceful movement of citizens concerning the protection of the open space at Osmany Udyan.

The government's decision to construct the convention centre for the Non-aligned Movement has raised serious concern among various sections in the community. Initially concerns were expressed by citizens at a private level. Then the print media started publishing pieces on the probable impact of constructing a massive structure at the site, situated in the business hub of the city. Concerns have been expressed on the ground that it will lead to felling of many trees harming the Udyan, known as the lungs of the city and the planned construction will increase the traffic problem manifold. It will also add to the already unacceptable level of pollution in that part of the city. Furthermore, the planned move will reduce the poor and middle class people's access to the public park.

Over time, it appeared that the government was not taking the above issues in cognizance and was firm in its decision to go ahead as planned. One would

have hoped that the non-governmental sector of Bangladesh, which has a major environmental component, would mount a campaign against such an environment unfriendly decision of the government. However, individual NGOs or their caucus bodies such as the Association of Development Agencies of Bangladesh (ADAB) and Coalition of Environment Network (CEN) were not forthcoming in taking up the issue, for reasons best known to them. In this context, some individuals from different professional background — university teachers, doctors, lawyers, journalists, youth and student activists — after a series of consultations, decided to form a citizens' group. The group held a citizens' rally at Osmany Udyan as its first public programme. At that rally, the organisers made it clear that they were not against holding of the NAM summit or

building a convention centre for that purpose, but they only wanted to highlight the environmental impact of construction of the structure at Osmany Udyan which they felt was not considered in detail while making the decision. The aim of the citizens' group was to articulate dispersed opinion of individual citizens and put forward the same to the policymakers and contribute to a process of rational decision making.

It needs to be reiterated that this movement was formed spontaneously and the organisers have time and again stressed that once the government acceded to their demands the committee would cease to exist. The group therefore does not represent any political interest, nor does it project itself to be an adversary of the government. It merely wants to articulate wishes of a large number of Dhakaites who are genuinely concerned about the ad-

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EVER since Slobodan Milosevic (a Serb from Montenegro) came to power in Serbia (one of the six constituent republics of former Yugoslavia) in 1989, so many intellectuals, historians, journalists and political strategists have written so much and so brilliantly on Kosovo, (which is variously described as a crisis, a problem, a tangle etc.) that I hesitated a long time to give my opinion on this subject. I am not a historian, nor an intellectual and definitely not an expert on geopolitics. But I am going to examine the issue from an ordinary citizen's point of view, who has had considerable contact with the Slav people of different nationalities, including that of the United States and does not much understand leaders who take political decisions, affecting the lives of millions of human beings, in the closing years of the twentieth century, based on self-serving interpretation of medieval history and ancestral hatred.

My earliest recollection of the Slav people dates back to I think, 1961 or 1962, when a severe earthquake destroyed towns and villages in Yugoslavia (meaning land of the South Slavs). My English mentor, Frank Harcourt-Munning together with several British charities organised relief operations to alleviate the immediate sufferings of the earthquake victims. In that connection, he visited the country several times and came in contact with a good number of local people there, particularly in Skopje (now capital of the independent republic of Macedonia). In one of his trips to Yugoslavia, he brought back to England a student called Boshko. He came from a small town in southern Macedonia (then part of Yugoslavia), very close to Pella (part of Greek Macedonia), where Alexander, the Macedonian conqueror was born in 356BC. Later we came to know other members of Boshko's family.

Since we belonged to more or less the same age group, Boshko and I became good friends. It is from him that I first came to know about the ethnic, cultural and religious complexities of Yugoslavia, which was composed of six republics (Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia, Montenegro and of course, Serbia), five languages (Serbo-Croat, Macedonian, Albanian, Slovenian and Hungarian) three religions

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