

Governance

Public deliberation: One way to strengthen democracy

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cation and reciprocity among themselves. So is the case with a society or a polity, where every individual acts as a cell, the primary component of the whole.

In light of the above simile, the political hall of this country is definitely full of cacophony. All of us are working hard in our own separate ways, but only to increase confusion.

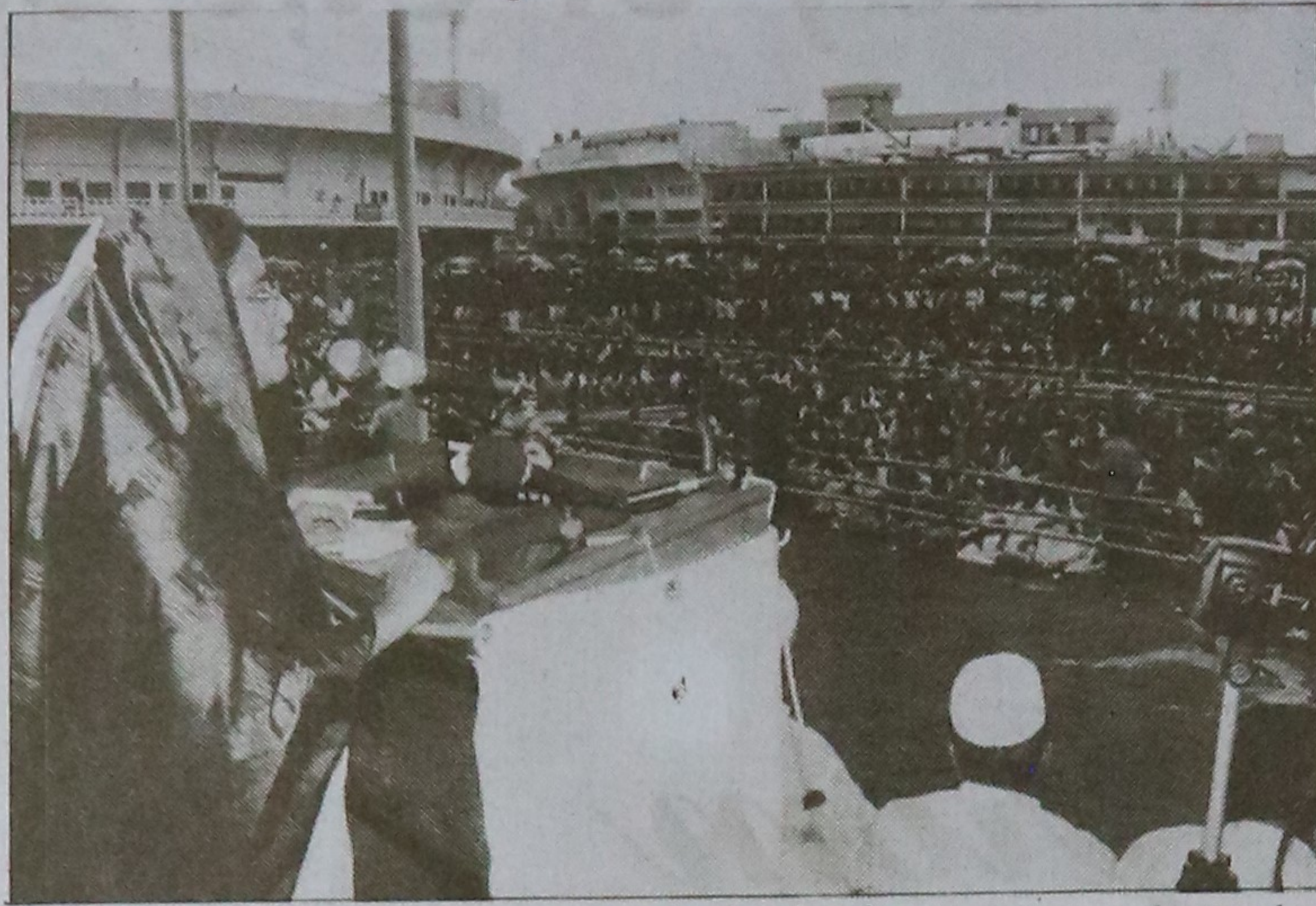
The cry in the wilderness

Long we have been waiting for and trying to get models - of development, of political and economic systems - from outside. Some of us were looking to Marxism, to Soviet Union and China.

It is high time for the idealists to realise that it is all right for them to speculate about the nature of truth as long as they don't impose their beliefs on others. That what exists is real and reality is the only truth.

It's high time also for the so-called realists to discard with their cynicism and scepticism, their opportunism and loathsome Epicureanism in disguise of pragmatism.

But this nation has long been looking and striving for some other kind of leaders who have a good blending of ideological sky and a deft grasp of empirical earth.



Resorting more to rhetoric and castigating each other than focusing on issues of national and public interest have been our political practice.



shall get pictures of the society from all possible angles, as every individual is a unique camera, and will thereby be able to construct well-rounded conceptual models.

A little dash of history

Now, what exactly is meant by deliberation? Deliberation is a particular form of reasoning and talking together in which we weigh carefully the costs and consequences of our various options for actions.

In ancient India, King Janaka (5th-6th century BC) used deliberations to a great extent as described in the Chhandogya and Aranyak Upanishads. After the death of Goutama Buddha (483 BC?), history records that four great synods (deliberative councils) of Buddhist monks in India and three in Ceylon held in order to resolve contradictory and different interpretations of his doctrines.

The Second Synod was held 100 years after the death of Buddha during the reign of Kalashoka, son of Shishunaga. It was attended by 700 Arhats selected from a congregation of 12,000 monks.

It is common knowledge that in Greece a highly systematised form of deliberation was introduced by Socrates and his disciples including Plato in finding out the meaning and context of philosophic terms and notions.

And in Surah Al Shura "..... Those who hearken to their Lord, and establish regular prayer; who (conduct) their affairs by mutual consultation;..... are the servants of Allah. (Al Quran, 42: 38).

in life is open and determined by mutual consultation between those who are entitled to a voice, e.g., in private domestic affairs, as between husband and wife, or other responsible members of the household; in affairs of business, as between partners or parties interested; and in State affairs, as between rulers and ruled, or as between different departments of administration.

"Consultation". This is the key-word of the Sura, and suggests the ideal way in which a good man should conduct his affairs, so that, on the one hand, he may not become too egotistical, and, on the other, he may not lightly abandon the responsibilities which devolve on him as a personality whose development counts in the sight of God.

My intention in giving all those historical accounts and quotations are not to impress the readers about my knowledge but to point it out that public deliberation is not only an old tradition but is more oriental by origin than occidental.

Debate vs. deliberation

The need and importance of deliberation arises from the fact that no two individuals perceive any event or object exactly the same. In other words, perceptions of individuals differ, and therefore, their opinions differ too.

As the inescapable result of individuality or subjectivity, there always exist a wide range of opinions about any given political issue in the polity. The task is to find the hidden similarities of those opinions, the common ground, to shape a solution acceptable to and shared by the majority, if possible - all, of the citizens.

This situation is superbly described by Deborah Tannen in "The Argument Culture: Moving from Debate to Dialogue". She reflects, "Our spirits are corroded by living in an atmosphere of unrelenting contention - an argument culture.

The process of deliberation was described by the Kettering Foundation as a progression of the following five stages; "because experience suggests that this is how human beings act in tackling a problem. The stages are a conceptualization of extensive experience - not a theoretical construct.

Briefly, the stages are: "Stage 1: Coming Together Around a Problem: At the beginning of this process, a citizen concludes that a situation hurts her/his interest badly enough to require change.

"Stage 2: Mapping the Problem, Naming It and Framing It: This stage takes the citizen's viewpoint, not the government's or expert's in defining a problem. The citizens will talk to put the problem in perspective that reflects why and how it threatens what citizens in that group value. Then by examining the alternatives to the present situation, they will frame the choices for dealing with it.

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Stage 3: Deliberating and Settling a Direction: When they are ready the citizens meet to deliberate to weigh with others the choices they have identified; they deepen their understanding of the consequences of the options for themselves and those whose cooperation they need in dealing with the problem.

Stage 4: Designing a Course of Interactive Steps - Scenario Building: "When participants have determined the general direction in which they want to move, they must then figure out how to get there." One way to do this is to list the obstacles in the chosen direction, list steps for removing those obstacles, list actors who can take those steps.

Stage 5: Acting Together: Once a scenario of complementary actions has been designed, the group must decide whether and how it will put that scenario into action.

Immediate results of deliberation

Sometimes we find people to reject an idea at the first glance simply because it seems too simple to be of any consequence. The same thing happens with the concept of introducing the process of deliberation in democratic practices.

A common question that is encountered at this point is that is this a full process for everyone? The answer is "No. Many people will participate in deliberation but not stay the full course of moving directly to action."

Some will simply take the deliberative mode of talk they have experienced back into their own walks of life and act differently there. Others may make an effort to distill a report of how citizens have talked about an issue which they will pass along to others, including officials.

Some participants at the far end of the spectrum will actually come back together to design and generate a course of action." (A Citizen's Political Process, by Harold H. Saunders and Ramon Daubon, IDDW 1999, P 11)

Debate and deliberation: Not one or either

"Yet deliberation will not replace debate. Adversarial debate will always occur and it is necessary to resolve polarized conflict between two well-defined technical options.

The strength of the kind of conversation that is called 'debate' will always be demonstrated at the stage of making an either/or a yes/no decision in a legislative or executive process. The purpose of deliberation, however, is to frame the type of decision that might ultimately have to be made.

If we interpret the above, it means, not all subjects or topics come under the purview of deliberation. There are instances called 'broken arm' cases where the only option is to get the bone set, the arm plastered and provide adequate medication.

Again, in politics or societies, where a deep rooted hatred exists between political, religious, ethnic, communal or any other kind of factions, a preliminary stage is required before the members of these groups can deliberate on some issues.

It will not be irrelevant to make another point here. We have a formal attempt to deliberation presently in vogue in our culture called round table discussions. Here we observe certain weaknesses in method and form that make them rather angular than round.

No one is infallible

As our politicians often love to quote that there is no last word in politics so in deliberation the underlying principle is that no one is perfect, infallible or absolutely right. The history of this country insists that we should agree on this point.

Gender

The millennium is ours

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men fell asleep. This is very symbolic and indicative of women's empowerment.

Over the entire span of the century women fought against colonialism, participated in the language movement and the movement for democracy. Usually people think that women's movement is only against violence such as rape, killing, wife battering, acid throwing etc.

have ignored, suppressed and obliterated the records.

For us, the twentieth century began with Rokeya Shakhawat Hussain and closed with Jahanara Imam and Sufia Kamal. They have opened up new possibilities and new politics for the women of Bangladesh.

nence and her politics of responsibility. She took responsibility in every movement that was necessity of the time. She felt that Pakistan was a necessity because of the historical contradiction between two religious communities of the sub-continent.

The future for us, therefore, means how we read our past histories and interpret it for our present struggle.

cial matters she was always vocal. It was also extraordinary when she felt the responsibility to raise the voice against the unethical fashion of Lehenga, brought from India, sold at Tk. 50,000 during Eid.

I believe that this millennium will be ours.

We have survived the witch-hunting to wife burning, battering and all forms of violence against women and subjugation. In the South Asian region, we grew out of the wisdom of Khona. We can take her as a brilliant example to symbolise the struggle of feminine knowledge and feminine politics.

