# Public deliberation: One way to strengthen democracy

Continued from page 4 cation and reciprocation 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. The higher the level of exchange of information, opinion and emotions take place between these cells the better degree of co-ordination and functional smoothness is achieved. Consider an analogy, a musical hall where thousands of instrumentalists have assembled. All of them are masters in their arts. Now, if every one of them starts to play simultaneously a tune to his heart, very melodious but different from all others, or if they part into a number of separate ensembles and start to play different concertos at the same time, in both cases the outcome will in no way be music. It will be mere cacophony, disturbing and maddening noise, nothing else. But all these thousands of musicians can be made to produce superb symphonies if they communicate, agree on a composition and their roles in it, select an able conductor, do

adequate rehearsals, and finally perform. 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. So, let us also start to communicate, deliberate, decide, come to agreements about immediate and long time performances, select worthy conductors, rehearse well and then we also will definitely be able to produce a singularly exemplary political symphony. Because, we have some unique potentials that very few countries have. Ours is a homogeneous people with a single language, race, culture, geographic figures, and predominantly a single religion. What is needed is to exploit and utilise these potentials to our fullest advantage.

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, to get a suitable derivative that can be adopted as our soclo-political model. Many of us were and still are trying to put on the ancient religious armour of Islam, to hide behind an apparently invincible, absolute belief in the unproven paradise of an Islamic state. And disillusioned about both the utopias, many of us have taken to political realism, which does not mean anything, except that one has to act as demanded by his time, his environment, in other words - act according to situation. Most of these so-called realists have eventually turned into mere opportunists, some of them even tending to self-interests at the cost of morality, and no doubt they number the most among our political leaders and intelligentsia, both in national and local levels.

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; all philosophies and ideologies are mere interpretations of it and no single interpretation is good for ever. That it is absolutely lunatic to try to distort reality into the scope of a certain ideal, for reality is infinite and ideals are finite. That there are as many interpretations of reality as many individual beings. So it would be better for them to adopt an inductive process in decision making rather than their previous deductive one. That they have to look for and find out common grounds and agreements with their fellow citizens and make them the basis of their strategies and action plans. Otherwise they will always be considered, as they were considered before, as fanatic, outsider, extremist, orthodox, fundamentalist, sectarian, communal, etc. So they should keep their beliefs to themselves and act based on the empirical facts. To cut a long story short, it is time the idealists grow up from intellectual infancy, from childish fantasy, to practical and dependable adulthood where they no more consider others intellectually inferior simply because they don't share in their beliefs.

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. They have to understand that humanity is a fine bridge between perceivable matter and conceivable idea. To cut off either of these two wings will transform a man into a beast or a fairy. That the ideas of equality, justice, liberty, love and beauty are still as alive as in the time of ancient Athena, in no way obsolete, though nowhere they have been fully achieved, yet they are and were the driving force, the super goals, of human civilisation. As Jesus said to Satan. 'Man does not live by bread alone', so do the millions of poverty-stricken human beings silently cry out to the self indulgent and corrupt politicians and elite that success is not measured by wealth but by welfare. It seems, to most of our political leaders honesty, sympathy and moral uprightness are weaknesses, not virtue. Instead of public support and consent, violence, terrorism, bribery and treachery have become the generators of political power. As per the media reports, from the highest forum of deliberation and debate on national policies and programmes, the Parliament has degraded into a foul gathering of incoherent, and sometimes indecent, ramblings, propaganda, and verbal skirmish; as if practically demonstrating that Lenin was absolutely correct in describing the bourgeois parliaments as pigpens. 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. People want such representatives who can accomplish the task of achieving clear comprehension of the existing conditions and ambitions of our society and then shape action modules to fulfil them in order of priority. To that end, we also were scanning the horizon to find a way. And eventually we came into contact with an idea that has its roots in almost all ancient civilisations, was long been forgotten by us, and now has been resurrected by a group of people led by Harold H. Saunders, former Assistant Secretary of State of the USA and best known for his successful mission in enacting the Middle East peace treaty, who has found its effectiveness and usefulness in actual practice. Saunders says, "An elected government is one half of the democratic equation; the other is citizens as political actors". The idea is of a participatory democracy, named 'Deliberative Democracy'. It is simple but it works. It is to reintroduce the process of systematic public deliberation wherever and whenever it is needed. This way we



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. This is surely one way to end the long and frustrating attempts of development by imitating others' examples and experimenting with hypothetical socio-political doctrines.

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 the context of the views of others. It's neither a new nor a novel idea, rather an age-old tool used by many a rulers, statesmen, and leaders from the ancient to the modern times in finding out the best possible solutions of complicated problems. The oldest document about public deliberation was found in the tomb of Pharaoh Tutankhamen who ruled Egypt in

the 14th century BC. The hieroglyphics script reads Tutankhamen 12 grouped together hundreds of citizens in a hall for public deliberation" 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 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 and opinions about the organisational procedures of the monasteries, etc. The first deliberative council took place in Rajgriha, the Capital of Magadha, just after three months of Buddha's death, attended by five hundred Arhats (Buddhist saints). Dr. Manikuntala Haldar comments, "One other thing that can be observed about the First Synod is its democratic procedures.

..... Maha Kassyapa Thera, who presided over that council, directed the proceedings democratically. All the decisions were taken unanimously. Moreover, sticks were used as tokens of vote." (Buddha Dharmer Itihas, Mahabodhi Book Agency, C::,cutta, 1996, P 131-175).

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, presided over by Mahasthabira Rebata, and ran for eight long months. The Third Synod was held 218 years after the death of Buddha during the reign of Emperor Asoka, presided over by Mahasthabira Moggaliputta Tissa, attended by a thousand Arhats for a space of nine months. About the Fourth Council Dr. Nalinaksha Dutt says, "The Buddhist Sangha was then divided into eighteen sects. Venerable Parsva came to Kashmir from the east, and advised King Kanishka to collect all the monks at Kundalavana-vihara (in Kashmir). 500 Arhats, 500 Bodhisattvas and 500 Panditas took part in the deliberation of the Council. An attempt was made to reconcile the conflicting opinions of the different sects and settle once more the Vinaya. Sutra and Abhidharma texts. Bu-ston gives an account similar to the above, adding only that 'after recitation of the texts, it was settled that the texts acknowledged by the eighteen sects were all of them the words of Buddha." (Mahayana Buddhism, Firma KLM Pvt. Ltd., Calcutta, 1976, P-20).

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.

Let us now inquire what standpoint has Islam in this relation. The holy Quran emphasises on deliberation in the form of mutual consultation as a cardinal principle in decision-mal.ing and dispute resolution. In Sura Al Imran Allah advises Prophet Mohammad (PUH) " ..... They would have broken away from about thee: so pass over (Their faults), and ask for (God's) forgiveness for them; and consult them in affairs (of moment). Then, when thou hast taken a decision, put thy trust in God.' -(Al Quran, 3: 159).

And in Sura 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). Commentary: Those who wish to serve God, "Their conduct 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, to preserve the unity of administration." (P 1316).

"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. ..... This principle was applied to its fullest extent by the holy Prophet in his private and public life, and was fully acted upon by the early rulers of Islam. Modern representative government is an attempt - by no means perfect - to apply this principle in State affairs." (P 1317). (Translation and commentary by Abdullah Yusuf Ali, puolished by Shaikh Muhammad Ashraf, Kashmiri Bazar, Lahore.

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. At the tribal stage of political evolution, almost all societies used to have, some of them still have, councils of elders and leaders to deliberate on issues of vital importance in presence of the whole tribe. Even now, in our villages, people meet together to deliberate on important issues, which custom actually goes back as far as political and social history can reach. To make a long story short, deliberation was and is a highly significant tool and means used, consciously chosen or in accord with tradition, by our forefathers to arrive at the best possible courses of actions through sharing each other's views. In principle, these very right and exercise of deliberation are delegated to the political representatives through elections, but in practice without having the desired result. It is so, chiefly because the allegiance of the elected politicians belongs more to the political parties than to their electorates.

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. This is what the philosophers call the subjective perception that culminates into subjective conception, and finally, the subjective truth. The whole intellectual history of the human civilisation can be described as a continuous effort to discard subjective notions in order to arrive at objective truths. All the pure sciences, Mathematics and Logic are the outcome of this collective intellectual drive. But in social sciences, especially in politics, objective truth is much more relative. Here, as Walter Lippman says, "The function of truth is to bring to light the hidden facts, to set them into relation with each other, and make a picture of reality on which man can act."

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. If this can be done, it could be called a truly democratic decision. And how do we arrive from those individual opinions to a conclusion shared by the majority, even by all? The most common practices that we observe in our political arena are debate and propaganda, which, unfortunately, have been transforming into violent confrontations and breeding hatred in the recent past. Debate is all right as long as it concentrates on logic not beliefs, on history not myths, on facts not assumptions. But the essential nature of debate brings in all those negative and unwanted elements of beliefs, myths, assumptions, and even prejudices and lies. For the prime and only aim of debate is to win. It's a process where two opponent sides (as in a judicial trial) try to emphasise and argue the positive points in their favour and to highlight the lacking, the shortcomings, the disadvantages, the negative aspects of the other, to refute and deride even the positive factors of the opposing side in order to win. It is nothing but a logical and, in practice, a rhetorical, warfare. It is all right in courtrooms, where there are wise, cynic, knowledgeable judges and jury to note the best arguments of each side and to arbitrate according to proven and established facts only. Whereas, in politics, the common citizens are generally not that highly informed or especially trained on the issues involved, not used to that much unemotional and abstract logical thinking to distinguish between the facts and the

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 argument culture urges us to approach the world - and the people in it - in an adversarial frame of mind. It rests on the assumption that opposition is the best way to get anything done. The best way to discuss an idea is to set up a debate; the best way to cover news is to find spokespeople who express the most extreme, polarized views and present them as 'both sides'; the best way to settle disputes is litigation that pits one party against the other; the best way to begin an essay is to attack someone; and the best

way to show you're really thinking is to criticize." On the other hand, deliberation is a process where nobody is opponent to none. Individuals have different views of a subject that contradict one another in some parts but also are partly similar. Through deliberations, people share each other's views. find out the similarities to identify some common grounds that everybody agrees with. "Deliberation tends to change first opinions into more shared and reflective public judgement about how we should act. We discover what we share, despite what we don't agree about. Deliberative forums create public knowledge (new information about the public) and a public voice (a shared sense of concern)." -(International Deliberative Democracy Workshop <IDDW> 1999, P 1-3) So, this is a case where every one wins.

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. ..... They really operate in a circular fashion - not just in a linear way - and the multiple actors and influences in this political process of continuous interactions actually give it a multi-dimensional quality." - (A Citizen's Political Process, by Harold H. Saunders and Ramon Daubon, IDDW 1999, P 1)

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. Seeing a connection between personal interests and the larger" social context. "the citizen reaches out to other citizens whose interest may also be hurt. A group of citizens with comparable concerns decides to come together to talk about a problems that affects them so seriously.

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

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. They find a common ground from which they can move to action. A common ground that provides the starting point for defining the broad direction in which they want to move together to create a situation all can live with.

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, list those steps along with the name of the actors who will take charge in accomplishing specific tasks. As steps accumulate, a sense of momentum is generated by the interactive quality of the sequence. The product of this work is called a 'scenario'

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. Though the idea is not new, though it dates back to the farthest end of history, yet we have lost the tradition and practice of it over the years. Our aim is to reintroduce and to reinforce this simple but effective exercise to strengthen our delicate democracy. For it really works, it works wonders and is possibly the only solution for which our strife-ridden political arena has long been waiting. If properly acted on, the outcome can be revolutionary. For, exercise of deliberation means augmented participation of citizens in planning, in decision making and then controlling the execution by following up.

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. It is more realistic to suggest, that the ways people act after deliberation will fall along a

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. Still others may cause their own organisations to act in ways that will complement the actions of other organisations in moving toward a common end but without direct collaboration. These 'complementary actions,' as we call them, result from knowledge gleaned in deliberation and can help generate momentum toward a common

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 1)

#### 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. Evaluating the broad choices to get to these technical options, however, may require deliberation.

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. Debate can settle where to build a bridge. Deliberation determines whether or not a bridge should be built and, if so, for what purposes." - (IDDW

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. On the other hand, there are also a lot of 'diabetic' cases where the patients and physicians have a number of options to deliberate on and choose from. For instance, deliberative process and forums will now be most useful in settling the contemporary debates on transit or transhipment facilities to the neighbouring countries, what to do with our gas and possible oil reserves, how to prevent and control the quickening spread of drug addiction, abuse and oppression of women, increasing volume of violence, crime and corruption, environmental hazards,

legitimacy of hartal, slum eviction, participatory planning, etc. Again, in polities 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. This intermediate stage is named 'sustained dialogue', meaning a sequence of dialogue sessions by which the hostility can be minimised and a suitable deliberative atmosphere and attitude is attained at the end. In Bangladesh, in most cases, we don't think there is really any essential need for a stage of sustained dialogue, though in some cases we may have to have it. For example, whether or not transhipment facilities should be given to the neighbouring states can be deliberated straight away, but the question of who did first proclaim the independence of

Bangladesh might require a sustained dialogue. It will not be irrelevant to make another point here. We have a form of attempts 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. In these discussions, there usually is a keynote paper, followed by a group of selected speakers. This routine makes that paper and the opinions of the speakers dominating by setting the colour and focus of the convention, and alienates the rest of the participants by minimising their importance. But in deliberation proper there should not be any preference or privilege enjoyed by anyone. A moderator will be there without any right of expressing his opinion. This implied equality and opportunity of spontaneous participation offered to all enhance and enrich the outcome which round table discussions fail to achieve simply for depending on an identified few.

#### 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. We have to accept this fact that no one single political party, institution, group, theory, doctrine or any other entity can supply us with all the answers to our problems and needs or, for that matter, act as an omniscient God. We should bear with our inherent limitation that we don't know everything, that we can't know everything. From this rather negative first principle we can start to find out what exactly do we know, what do I know, you know, he knows, and they know. This probe into knowledge will at least bring forth the targeted result, which is what all of us do agree on. Once we can come to a single common agreement among ourselves, we have successfully launched the process of deliberation.

### Gender

## The millennium is ours

Continued from page 6 men fell asleep. This is very, obliterated the records. symbolic and indicative of women's empowerment.

century women fought against movement is only against violences such as rape, killing, wife battering, acid throwing etc. But the history shows com-

have ignored, suppressed and

For us, the twentieth century began with Rokeya Shakhawat Over the entire span of the Hussain and closed with Jahanara Imam and Sufia Kamal. colonialism, participated in the They have opened up new possilanguage movement and the bilities and new politics for the movement for democracy. Usu- women of Bangladesh. Jahaally people think that women's nara Imam by her politics of courage and protest has taught us that war criminals must be tried to reinstate human integrity and values. Sufia Kamal pletely different picture. The will remain legendary personmajor movements in the his- ality of our country. She was tory of this region could not important not because she was take place without women's leading the women's moveparticipation. Male historians ment, but by her simplicity, in-

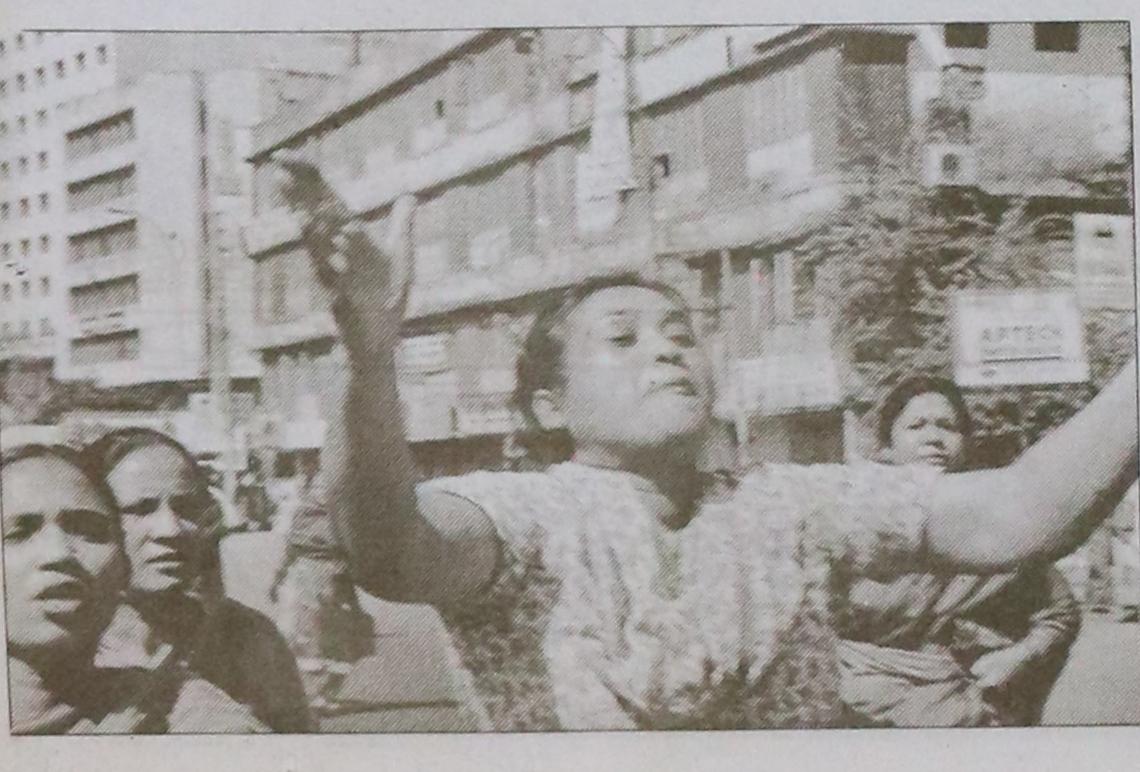
nocence and her politics of responsibility. She took responsibility in every movement that was necessity of the time. She felt that Pakistan was a necessity because of the historical contradiction between two religious communities of the subcontinent. Again, she took responsibility for the liberation of Bangladesh from Pakistan. It was clear to her that the people of Bangladesh can not live under the military-bureaucratic state of Pakistan. She was brilliantly different from both the so-called "Bangladeshi" and "Bengali" nationalists in her political practice. On other so-

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. It was Sufia Kamal who thought it was criminal for some people to spend so much money on a piece of cloth when people are dying of hunger and no piece of cloths to wrap their bodies. Sufia Kamal has shown us the path to fight against injustice.

The future for us, therefore, means how we read our past histories and interpret it for our present struggle. I believe that this millen-

nium will be ours.

the witch-hunting to wife burning, batterviolence against women and subjuknowledge and feminine politics.



We have survived ing and all forms of gation. 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