

Women and Political Parties

WHAT we thought was only our problem, appears now to be a worldwide one. According to a study by the Inter-Parliamentary Union covering 65 countries, both developed and developing, it has been found that 'political parties are the main obstacle for women' in increasing their role in the parliaments. The interesting thing is that as far as depriving women of their rightful place in the supreme legislative body is concerned, there appears to be an undeclared alliance between the countries of the North and South. In no other field are the statistics so similar. Proportion of women in the parliament averaged 15.3 per cent for the Americas, 14.3 for Asia, 13.3 per cent for Europe (without the Nordic countries), 11.1 per cent for Africa, and, as expected, a mere 3.6 per cent for the Arab States. With 30 out of 330 members (and a few directly elected ones), Bangladesh has just a little more than 10 per cent women members in the parliament. Our only redeeming feature is that we are the only country in the world where both the Leader of the House and the Leader of the Opposition are women and have been so for the last nine years. However this fact has not been a great boon for the women politicians in Bangladesh, for neither of the two ladies have done anything to strengthen women's position in our parliament. In fact by nominating personal favourites and not allowing them to participate freely in the affairs of the House, what we have, in the name of women parliamentarians are a few shadowy figures used primarily for hand raising on occasions. Sheikh Hasina's latest move of retaining the system of indirectly electing 30 MPs for the reserved seats has greatly disappointed the women activists of the country. We think both AL and BNP should reach a consensus on the issue of direct election of women MPs. Time has come to make this change.

As the IPU study has revealed, it is the political parties that are obstructing the rise of women leaders in our respective parliaments. This is definitely true for us. Our political parties, especially AL and BNP, must address this issue.

Customs Drama Ends

AS usual, it took intervention and assurance of an institutional inquisition from cabinet ministers to put to an end the strike by the Chittagong customs and excise personnel that had virtually stalled all operations at the Chittagong Airport and the seaport for nearly 48 hours. Indeed, the piece of news comes as a great relief to all, especially the business community; however, in essence, the problem has only been kept in abeyance, rather than resolved. Two key issues arising out of the turmoil have not been addressed altogether: first, whether there should be a code of conduct for the political leaders vis-à-vis their behaviour with the government officials and second, whether the government officials should use such undesirable incidents as pretexts for strikes of such magnitude and economic consequence.

The mayor's behaviour as reported in different news dailies certainly deserves condemnation and makes him liable to formal reprimand from the government. Even if the on-duty customs officials had been negligent to their responsibilities, his intervention, specifically for the way he had done it, was simply unacceptable. The question of jurisdiction aside, his behaviour was unbecoming of a man of his stature. He should come up with a formal apology for his action on the day.

At the same time, the collective response from the customs and excise officials was no less irresponsible, especially since it had a negative impact on the country's economy above anything else. On that count, their reaction, or over-reaction, is not exonerable, either.

The trouble at the Chittagong Customs House in a way endorses our view of establishing an inter-ministerial committee to handle employees' grievances before these turn into crises. Such a body should be authorised to represent the government in any kind of unrest and must be made accessible to the employees, regardless of their professional status, meaning everyone from top-notch executives down to a clerk should be allowed to vent their professional grievances. Also, the body would have to ensure that each and every case is dealt with fairly and expeditiously.

Telewoes

A disconcerting piece of news has appeared in The Daily Star Wednesday citing the woes of about 400 telephone subscribers under Maghbar Exchange for alleged non-payment of bills despite the claim by many subscribers to the contrary. Many claimed that the BTB did not have the minimum courtesy of informing the subscribers even on telephone before snapping their lines. BTB officials however claimed that as the banks did not send them the ledgers showing the names of the subscribers who paid the bills on time they were under rules obliged to disconnect their lines. But this is a situation which is not unknown to the BTB and they should develop their own mechanism to overcome this problem for which the genuine subscribers have to suffer. This arbitrary act of the BTB must be causing lot of suffering to the victims for no fault of theirs.

It is not the duty of a subscriber to visit the BTB everytime with a photocopy of the bill paid, growled a sufferer who claims to be up-to-date on his payment. There are complaints of misbehaviour by the BTB revenue officials with their clients and they are even alleged to have asked for illegal money for updating personal ledger of the user. This is highly immoral and unethical.

The services of the BTB is already under question by the users and we hope it will not make things worse. We strongly recommend that services to the genuine subscribers be restored immediately and minimum decency shown before any such action in any area of the country is taken in future.

Leadership Crisis : Root Cause of Backwardness

by Dr. Muhammad Masum

The root cause of Bangladesh's backwardness turns out to be the crisis in leadership in every field which, however, is the outcome of failure of the economy and society in nourishing and developing its talents; and in utilizing the developed ones in a befitting manner.

basis of their merit and aptitude, and grouped into three different streams. The brightest boys and girls are marked for providing leadership in all fields, and prepared accordingly through provision of higher education duly supported by appropriate type of secondary education. The mediocre students are prepared for mid level positions in different fields with appropriate types of education and training. The third group, comprising those who are not academically bright but have other interests, are groomed to take up positions of skilled workers in different sectors of the economy with appropriate technical and vocational education followed by rigorous on-the-job training imparted by means of a carefully designed and properly implemented apprenticeship system. German workers, therefore, are possibly the best trained workers in the world. Whatever they produce, because of their high quality, therefore, find ready market world wide, and under the enlightened leadership and efficient management of talented people, the economy runs smoothly. Development and utilization of the country's talents in the most appropriate manner, may thus be considered the key to Germany's emergence as a major economic superpower of the world today.

Let us now turn our attention to Bangladesh.

Is our education, and training

system geared to nourishment and development of our talents? And, does our economy utilize whatever talent we have been able to develop in an appropriate manner? The answers are, surely, no.

Our primary education system has expanded quite fast over the last decade, particularly after enactment of the Compulsory Primary Education Bill in 1991. Despite significant quantitative expansion, quality of education however remains extremely poor. Secondary education, which is mainly provided by the private sector, is rather expensive and is generally out of reach of the poor people. Talent, we believe, is randomly distributed, and many talented persons are born in poor households. In Bangladesh, however, under the existing arrangements, it is almost impossible for the poor meritorious students to pursue higher education and assume leadership in different fields. The vocational education system not only has an extremely narrow base, because of underfunding its quality is also hardly satisfactory. Those who can afford, whether they possess the requisite ability or not, pursue higher education, considerably facilitated by the recent surge in universities in the private sector, and assume leadership positions in various fields. Thus on the one hand, the talents of the poor fail to blossom under the existing system. On the other hand,

many, from the affluent households in particular, with unrestrained access to higher education, are moving to leadership positions, even without having the requisite capability. Thus, Bangladesh, in general, suffers from gross deficiency in the area of leadership in various fields which primarily accounts for her backwardness.

Let us now look at a few vital sectors.

Because of her colonial past, of more than two centuries of British and Pakistani rule, Bangladesh inherited a well entrenched, powerful, bureaucratic system. Although immediately after independence, some efforts were made to utilize talents from outside the bureaucratic system, particularly in the area of national planning, very soon the bureaucracy recovered its lost ground, securing for itself not only all positions in its traditional domain but also in other sectors such as corporations, and other commercial establishments. Leadership positions in various sectors thus went primarily to the bureaucrats. So long the bureaucracy attracted the brightest boys and girls of the country, the possible damages to the economy could be minimized. It is true that during Pakistan period, the elitist nature of the Central Civil Service did in fact attract some of our brightest boys, but those who joined the Provincial Civil Service during Pakistan period, and those who subsequently joined

Bangladesh Civil Service after the country's independence, with a few notable exceptions, were essentially mediocre persons, as Bangladesh Civil Service, because of loss of its elitist character, was no longer in a position to attract bright boys and girls. Following the existing tradition, in course of time, these are the people who have moved to leadership positions in various fields including many commercial establishments, even though, many, serving under them in junior positions in such organizations might, in fact, be superior to them in both intellectual and professional capability.

Universities, by definition are supposed to be centres for excellence. For efficient functioning of the universities in discharging their assigned responsibilities, therefore, leadership of universities should ideally go to those highly talented and distinguished academicians, who, because of their contribution to teaching and research, have already established themselves as academic leaders. Unfortunately, however, the current system of electing the university leadership, as provided by the University Acts of 1973, for several public universities of Bangladesh, virtually rules out any possibility of such people assuming leadership positions in the universities, for the simple reason that excellence and democracy often are not mutually compatible. Excellence by

definition is rare, whereas democracy implies majority rule.

The way our political leadership has been captured by a few families for historical reasons, and also by people with black money and muscle power, despite the fact that politics ultimately dominates every thing, it has failed to attract and retain genuinely talented people, as they see no future for themselves in moving to the top leadership positions. A few so called intellectuals are observed to engage themselves in active politics in favour of political parties of their choice, operating from bases of their own, but they do so primarily for personal gains and not for any ideological reasons. This, in my opinion, is abuse of talent.

The picture is no different in the sphere of business and industry. Leadership positions here have been assumed by many, who, under the protection of the party in power, out of personal greed, did not even bother to attempt to kill the goose that laid the golden eggs — the share market and the banking system — causing thereby immense harm to business and industry in particular, and the economy in general.

The root cause of Bangladesh's backwardness thus turns out to be the crisis in leadership in every field which, however, is the outcome of failure of the economy and society in nourishing and developing its talents; and in utilizing the developed ones in a befitting manner.

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Public Safety Act: Facing a New Controversy

by A R Shamsul Islam

Only the hands of those who are sick to see the emergence of a well-integrated, democratic, prosperous Bangladesh will be strengthened if the misunderstanding between the head of the state and that of the government keeps on continuing.

WHEREAS the old controversy if the Public Safety Bill (PSB) can be termed as a money bill has remained unsettled, a new and rather festering controversy has shot up if the President certified the PSB as a money bill.

The controversy was initiated by the Prime Minister himself. In the recently-held 'Face the People' programme on the BTV the PM was asked by a questioner if she had presurised the President to put his assent to the PSB. The PM denied the allegation. Instead she alleged the opposition political parties' representatives and some lawyers who met the President put pressure on him by saying him to withhold his assent to the bill. This was enough to end her reply. Unfortunately the PM rattled further to assert that the President himself certified the PSB as a money bill. Thus was created another controversy destined for a chain reaction.

Why did the PM go to elongate her answer in that fashion? Maybe it was due to her habit of over-talking. Or maybe she tried to impress upon that the PSB was really a money bill and it was certified so by no less a person than President Shahabuddin himself who is a former Chief Justice of the Supreme Court and known as an eminent jurist. Anyway we like to believe that no malice worked up in her reply.

Unfortunately the post-PSB press releases from the Bangabhaban and the Ministry of Law and Parliamentary Affairs do not render to be comforting to the public.

There came a press release

from the Bangabhaban that the President had not recommended the PSB as a money bill. The Ministry of Law and Parliamentary Affairs issued a press release that the President misquoted the Rule 34 as Rules of Business. Rule 34 deals with the caretaker government and not money bill. It is serial-34 of the schedule-IV of the Rules of Business that speaks about money bill. It is to be noted that this misquoting, if any, did not affect the substance of the rule in question.

According to Article 82 of the constitution no money bill or any bill involved in the expenditure of public money can be submitted to the Parliament without the recommendations of the President. The summary of the PSB routed through the Home Minister and the PM was endorsed by the President. He, however, commented on the summary that the Secretary should know as per Rule 34 (Rules of Business) that a money bill shall be put up through the Ministry of Finance. The photocopy of this summary came up in a national daily.

It transpires that for the purpose of tabling in the Parliament, all kinds of bills, do not require prior recommendations from the President. Money bills and bills involving expenditures of public money are required to obtain recommendations from the President

for placing them in the National Assembly.

It is the responsibility of the government to correctly classify if a bill is a money bill or not. It is the exclusive right of the Speaker to certify whether a bill is a money bill. No court of law is empowered to dispute his decision.

All bills need to obtain assent of the President to become a law. When placed before the President for obtaining his assent, a money bill must enclose a certificate of the Speaker identifying it as a money bill under his own signature. This certificate is final. According to a handout of the Bangabhaban the PSB did have that certificate of the Speaker attached to it.

Why did a delegation of ministers headed by the PM rush to the President on the fifteenth day of the submission of the PSB to the Bangabhaban? If that remained unsigned by the President after the passage of fifteen days it would have automatically become a law. The general belief is that the President had decided to send back the bill in the nick of which time the PM had interfered and persuaded the President to sign the bill giving assurance that some amendments, in the light of the suggestions of the President like removing stringency of the bail during pendency of the appeal etc would be brought

about by separate ordinances. After a few days a news item was flashed through the print media that the Law Ministry personnel met the President with drafts of proposed amendments to the PSB highlighting that the President expressed satisfaction over the drafts adding some more points for incorporation in the amendments. However those drafts have not been put through for enactment as yet.

President is more or less a figure-head. One President himself uttered that according to the constitution of Bangladesh the President had no power other than visiting a graveyard reading holy scriptures and sighting the moon on the eve of religious festivals. Maybe it contains as much satire as cruel truth. In fact, in Parliamentary form of government, the President stands out as a titular head. Still he holds some unique symbolic values to understand and appreciate which long-standing tradition for respecting democratic values is needed.

In our neighbouring country India the President is held in high esteem by the governmental head. This is enjoined as much by a love of decorum as by a force of necessity. Despite office of the President having such a gamut of privilege and prestige there has arisen a demand, time and again, that the

President of India be given more powers by amending the constitution.

Ours is, so to say, an infant democracy. We suffered long under overt and covert military and quasi-military rules. We are probably miles away from learning to obey democratic norms and practices. We have seen the plight and helplessness of some of the former Presidents like Justice Sayem and Abdur Rahman Biswas. They had to act as mere pawns in the hands of their Premiers who made no secret of holding them with scant respect and minimum importance.

Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed is of a different mould. He did not consent to become the President. He was aware of the lack of power and prestige that the chair of the President was handicapped with. He could probably foresee the unfair tactics that may be played up on the mantle of Presidency by the governmental head. He might have feared that his independent, upright, honest frame of mind was enough to put him at loggerheads with the government's wishes sometimes designed to promote party interests in preference to the weal of the people. When the PM's emissaries met the retired Chief Justice Shahabuddin with a proposal to grace the Presidency he politely declined. It took the PM herself to

go personally to his residence to win his consent probably under some holy understanding.

The opposition political parties are eager to exploit the situation. As soon as the President assented to the PSB they condemned him, in a chorus, as partisan demeaning his high office and pusillanimous to combat the pressure tactics of the PM. A section of the opposition led by notorious political turncoats have launched a wild propaganda that the government has an evil design to bully the President in to submitting resignation with an ulterior motive of replacing him by a hand-picked, docile one always on his toes to go by her commands. And rumour-mongers have exerted themselves.

When the PM successfully persuaded Justice Shahabuddin to become the President she was widely acclaimed almost by all circles. She showed her statesmanlike sagacity in doing this. She cannot risk to lose him at the end of the tenure of her government by displaying a reverse unstatesmanlike obstinacy and intolerance.

The most vital question is who will be the chief beneficiary in case an undue gap is created between the President and the PM? Certainly not the protagonists of democracy. The dividends will be reaped by the undemocratic forces that are at work to destroy the country. Only the hands of those who are sick to see the emergence of a well-integrated, democratic, prosperous Bangladesh will be strengthened if the misunderstanding between the head of the state and that of the government keeps on continuing.

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

"Abduction at gun point alleged"

Sir, As a life member and well-wisher of the Bangladesh Association for Aged People and Institute of Geriatric Medicine (BAAIGM), I am very much shocked to learn the news of abduction of Dr. K. M. Rashid, the acting Secretary General of the BAAIGM published in the DS on 5 March, 2000.

Today, the BAAIGM has grown into a very large institution having 42 district branches. The institution provides health and medical facilities for the aged in its 4 storied hospital building and 5 storied aged home, training to the doctors and social workers, and organises seminars for the district organisers. The institution carries out this colossal task with the help of some devoted social workers and with the financial support from the government and the donors.

However, I have observed that some of the BAAIGM members in connivance with some of the staff have formed a vested interest group since the last election of the office bearers that was held in March 1999. This group often adopts dishonest practices. As more funds are now available, their interest has grown stronger. In this circumstances, the crucial issue is whether the institution should become a place for criminal ac-

tivities of the kind reported in the DS in stead of providing service and care to the aged people? As the government is a major financier, it should immediately carry out an inquiry regarding the incident and punish the culprits as soon as possible.

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Sir, The news item 'Abduction at gun point alleged' published in the DS issue of 5th of March 2000 has shaken me thoroughly. It is unthinkable that a person like Dr. K. M. Rashid, who worked in the different parts of the world as a WHO adviser for nearly 19 years, and after retirement from the international agency is now rendering voluntary services for the welfare of the community including teaching at the medical institutions (undergraduate and post-graduate levels) was subjected to such assault and humiliation.

Since the annual general meeting of BAAIGM was approaching and the Secretary General of the association was not attending the meetings of Executive Committee, the Joint Secretary General was authorised by the EC to carry out the functions and responsibilities of the Secretary General so that

the AGM could be held on time.

While Dr. Rashid was working in his office he was attacked by 5/6 armed goons who physically tortured him on gun point and dragged him to the ground floor, pushed him inside his car and ordered him not to come back to BAAIGM again. Dr. Rashid sustained injuries on his body for which he is undergoing medical check-up.

Since the government has invested so much money and efforts for the development of this national level organisation for the aged, I would like to request the authorities concerned to identify those who are behind this heinous and barbaric act, take appropriate action against them and save the institution from ruin.

Tayaba Khatun
Life member & member, EC,
BAAIGM

Mosquitoes don't travel!

Sir, "Mosquitoes come from outside Dhaka" was the front-page headline in The Daily Star of 2 March 2000. But as far as I know, the mosquitoes live within a couple of hundred yards of their place of birth, and their life span is only a few days.

Perhaps the scientists might tell us more about this troublesome insect, which the mayors, politicians, and the benign governments in the tropical countries cannot eradicate even after spending millions in projects through decades. The environmentalists say it is an environmental problem, and the doctors claim it is a public health problem; and the malaria patients curse all the sources and efforts indicated above.

As an unkind cut, can we transfer poverty from the human to the mosquitoes (economic deprivation), while we continue to donate our blood to these tiny toll collectors? On the other hand, the mosquitoes are truly democratic, and they spare none in their non-discriminatory behaviour. They would make ideal field workers, if equipped with public health syringes for immunisation under so many projects, sponsored by the governments and the UN agencies.

A Z
Dhaka

The internal gamesmanship

Sir, Reading (DS Feb 29) the incisive commentaries of veteran Edward Said is refreshing. His commentaries are different from the run-of-the-mill stuff, dominated and infiltrated, by the Western media hype. The hypnotic hold of the mighty power of communication is de-laying the solution in Palestine! This is the outlook when looking away from the nuts and bolts of negotiations.

Edward Said had been bold enough to question the integrity of Yaseer Arafat, and indirectly suspects that he has some microscopic impurity in being a Western stooge; and is rather insensitive and sidetracking the core issue in this Palestine dispute, namely, the ultimate return of the four and half million refugees. The legal and political debates have lasted too long in the divide-and-rule policy.

Palestine is basically a religious issue looking for a political solution. This is not an exception: there are many religious and ethnic issues

throughout the world spread over the pages of history. What is secular about history? It is a loaded question which cannot be dismissed in one sentence.

The political leaders have to deliver, or be prepared for change of leadership. They are willing, but they always stretch the time a little longer, for internal consolidation. That is the political bug, and this virus causes havoc in the emerging countries (including Bangladesh).

In our SAARC region, there are lessons to learn from the two decades of the Palestine conflict; starting with the Kashmir dispute which is holding up the economic growth of this rich region inhabited by the poor. Similarly, the distant vision is lacking in Sri Lanka, remembering that the tigers in the forest also are cunning enough — for self-survival. In Bangladesh, it is all too simple — internal strife, with common goals!

A Hussain
Dhaka

Diversify the NGO activities

Sir, More than 20,000 NGOs are working in Bangladesh, focussing almost totally on rural development projects in various fields. With increasing development projects, the government departments need a helping hand of the NGOs (say five to ten per cent of the NGOs) as a field partner in 'small field projects in the urban areas. There are several fields for consideration.

1) The SMEs (small and medium industries sector) may be assisted by some NGOs located in the districts in HRD and QC areas, as also trans r of

technology to the cottage industries located in the urban zone.

2) Urban slum rehabilitation activities.

3) Orientation courses in basic English, including spoken English, in all the district headquarters, for enhanced HR development. Some big local NGOs who are operating a large number of primary schools can participate in this programme.

4) Driving and traffic lessons for the drivers of cycle rickshaws, autorickshaws, bus conductors, cart pullers; engg/mechanical apprentices; night guards and security staff (basic); small workshops (cottage industry).

Abul M Ahmad
Dhaka

Learn English before trying to teach Bangla

Sir, The pitiable condition of English language in Bangladesh cannot be overemphasised. Recently, from a news item (DS, March 5) it has been learnt that the Students' Anti Smoking Committee and the Poverty and Hunger Alleviation Society have jointly launched a programme 'to teach Bangla to foreign nationals working in Bangladesh through English'. As if this is not enough, the news item goes on to report that a book has also been written for this purpose entitled 'Foreign Nationals' favourite Word Note and Spelling Bangla Language Translation into English to Bangla'.

Should not the educators try learning English first?

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