

## Women's Representation in Parliament

THE government is visibly anxious to pilot a bill through the parliament seeking extension of the tenure of 30 reserved seats for women which expires in April, 2001. Since it entails an amendment to the relevant provision of the Constitution, Opposition presence in the JS is necessary to pass it by a two-thirds majority. The government party calls the proposed legislative measure 'crucial' but we would like to term it as an instance of misplaced emphasis. Given the purpose and content of the bill which envisage renewal of a constitutional arrangement that stands overtaken by newer demands for much better representation of women in the parliament, the government is merely putting formality ahead of substance.

The bill in its present form and shape does not respond to the need of the time, and ought to be, therefore, unacceptable to all concerned.

Let's take into cognisance the consensus on two points that have emerged with regard to women's political empowerment through an adequate representation in the parliament: first, a unanimous demand exists for raising their number of seats above the existing 30. As for the desirable number, demands vary ranging from 64, to equate with the number of districts, through 100 as the one-third mark of the total number of seats to 150 out of 300, female population being half the size of the country's population. Only the exact number remains a moot point, otherwise all are agreed that the number of seats will have to be increased. Secondly, there is a strong demand for direct election of women MPs in place of what has been hand-picked selection by the majority party in parliament. Even the small opening that theoretically exists for all members of parliament to elect women MPs the majority party takes it all through its numerical leverage.

The procedure through which the women MPs virtually come to parliament renders them powerless and ineffective. Having little weight to carry in their own right they remain puppets in the majority-flaunting antics of the ruling party.

In this context, it is imperative for the government to rethink its bill-centred position and settle for a result-oriented line of action. Let the government initiate an entirely focused dialogue on women's representation in parliament without tagging it with any other issue whatsoever. What emboldens us to offer this suggestion is the positive indication that the leader of the opposition Begum Zia has lately given about her support for an expanded women's representation in parliament. Mr. Suranjit Sen Gupta could set the ball rolling by pursuing the matter with senior BNP leaders with an eye to staging a formal dialogue exclusively on the subject of women's representation in the JS.

This could be linked up to a national convention in which civil society leaders, representatives of women's rights groups and political party leaders will join issues to reach an operative consensus on the issue. The media and other segments of the civil society stand ready to put pressure at the relevant points for the dialogue and the national convention to take place in close succession.

## Reprieve for a Choking City

WE welcome the introduction of the Bill for Preservation of Playgrounds, Open Spaces, Parks and Natural Water Reservoirs in All Cities, Divisional and District Headquarters, and Municipal Areas, 2000, in the Jatiya Sangsad. In our view, the proposed law, when enacted, holds the promise to put a brake on the alarming pace at which decimation of greenery, dereliction of natural water bodies, encroachment upon open spaces have been taking place across the country for years together.

Needless to say, major cities in the country have grown in an extremely unplanned manner. Much of the blame though falls on myopic urban design, absence of legal support for existing master plans - the Dhaka Master Plan (DMP) for example - has been a major encouragement for declassification of parks, open spaces, playgrounds and water retention tanks. The Town Improvement Act, 1953 is there all right. But, years of enforcement failure has reduced it into an academic piece of paper. If the proposed law is not stringently enforced it will meet the same fate.

The Bill does contain stringent punitive measures for people guilty of deviating from the city master plans. There are provisions for rigorous imprisonment and hefty fines against the perpetrator. The question, however, is: who does the policing? There are the city development authorities and the city corporations, but these don't have any monitoring mechanism in place. On the contrary, corrupt officials in these organisations actually indulge in distortion of the master plan in lieu of monetary and other material gains.

Therefore, alongside enactment of the proposed law, the government must also take steps to get the relevant implementing agencies into order. We have heard of departmental inquisition instituted against some top-ranking Rajuk officials into their alleged acts of corruption. But has there been any punishment meted out to them?

Nevertheless, we hope that the proposed law would bring about refreshing changes in the dreadful urban scenario. There is another point we would like to raise here. Already major distortions to the master plans have taken place. What do we do about them? Shouldn't there be provisions for punishment with retrospective effect?

BEFORE the year ends, India's map will start reflecting new social realities. Backward Bihar will no longer be India's second most populous state. That will be Maharashtra, India's most industrialised state.

Uttar Pradesh, India's largest state, will have become further "Mandalised" with the separation of Uttaranchal, which is 97 per cent "upper caste". And without Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh will cease being India's largest repository of tropical forests or minerals.

These are significant changes. More are to come from new regions: Kutch and Saurashtra in the West, Bodoland in the East, Bundelkhand and Harit Pradesh in the North, Malwa and Vidarbha in the Centre, and Telengana and Coorg in the South.

Where should the process stop? Will more states not jeopardise India's unity?

This article argues that we must generally welcome new states as a component of democratisation, but the real issue is how we decentralise decision-making within them.

Regrettably, the NDA government has gone about the job halfheartedly, and ignored downward percolation of decision-making. Part of the reason for this is the BJP's unease with federalism and decentralisation.

Historically, the sangh has always been devoted to "One Nation, One People" centralism. It opposed linguistic states. It contended these would unleash "fissiparous" tendencies and lead to India's disintegration. The sangh and the BJP have since made many opportunistic "adjustments" but without reforming their core ideology.

Secondly, the Vajpayee government did not make a sober calculation of the economic costs of creating new states. These new states would have to create new capitals, secretariats, administrative cadres, and other paraphernalia. The "parent" states too want compensation for revenue loss.

For instance, Jharkhand accounts for two-thirds of Bihar's resources, and more of its natural wealth. The RJD wants a loan waiver of Rs. 30,000 crores and "special assistance" of Rs. 179,000 crores to prevent Bihar from falling prey to a future of baadh, balu aur bhooch (flood, sand and hunger).

Similarly, Chhattisgarh contributes more than two-thirds of Madhya Pradesh's revenue. It has

been the state's industrial heartland and its rice-bowl.

This "compensation" will have to come from the Centre, whose collection of national tax revenue has fallen thanks to its failure to tax the rich to less than 10 per cent of GDP. How will it find the money?

Already, tension has built up over the Eleventh Finance Commission's (EFC) recommendations. Industrialised Maharashtra, Gujarat, Tamil Nadu and Andhra are planning to take the EFC to court for "unfair" treatment. This move runs counter to the spirit of "caring and sharing".

However, federalism, the cultural-political rationale for new states, remains unassailable. For instance, people in the three new states-in-the-making feel culturally alienated because their languages, traditions and customs are undervalued and prevented from flourishing by the linguistic-ethnic majorities of the "parent" states.

Each of the three regions has ecological, agro-climatic and historical-cultural identities. All of them are resource-rich but feel deprived of their due share.

Huge states such as UP are administratively, culturally and politically undesirable. The very size of UP the world's sixth most populous state makes it unwieldy. Even worse, imposition of homogeneous governance and cultural uniformity means that millions of people, for instance, Bhojpuri-speakers (perhaps 20 million), are forced to give up their language and learn "standard" Hindi.

This is not to argue against a single language of administration, but against the smothering of vernacular languages, some (e.g. Braj-bhasha) with a rich literature going back several centuries.

In our system, small entities and cultures get sidelined by large, unitary entities. Thus, when Awadhi, Bhojpuri, Maithili or Chhattisgarhi is replaced, what takes over is a highly Sanskritised, upper caste-oriented and text-bookish Hindi. This is intolerant of idiomatic differences, "local" accents and colourful subaltern expressions that don't fit a sanitised bhadralog lexicon.

This runs counter to democ-

racy and pluralism. Democracy demands decentralisation. The numbers we are dealing with here are huge: 25 million Maithilis, 10 million Chhattisgarhis or five million Uttarakhandis, compared to 8.6 million Swedes, 4.9 million Israelis, or 7.3 million Bolivians. We must not destroy distinctive cultures.

We must make a decisive break with the unitarist practices imposed by the British for administrative convenience, later embodied in the Government of India Act of 1935. There is no reason why we shouldn't have many more states-40, 50, even more. This is perfectly in keeping with the spirit and content of Indianness. A large country like India must be richly federal.

However, decentralisation does not mean devolving power from Lucknow to Nainital, Bhopal to Raipur, from Patna to Ranchi, and then leaving it there in the hands of the regional elite.

Surely, we don't need the transfer of power from the commercial interests of Bhopal to the patronage-based "political families" of Raipur (e.g. the Shuklas) working in league with the

criminalised industrialists of Bhopal who got Shankar Guha Niyogi murdered.

Devolution means going beyond and below those elites and devolving power to the broad masses of people inclusively. Every cook must govern.

More states by themselves cannot bring about healthy development: they are a necessary, not a sufficient, condition. For instance, many people believe that Uttaranchal is the poorest or most backward region of UP. In many ways, it is not.

Garhwal and Kumaon have a smaller proportion (39 per cent) of people living in poverty, compared to western UP's 42 per cent and Bundelkhand's 62. But Uttaranchal is certainly an instance of maldevelopment, disruption of ecology and imposition of large dams where mini- and micro-hydel barrages are needed.

This holds a larger lesson. To be relevant to people, development schemes have to start from below and address real needs. Only then will we have authentic decentralisation.

Ultimately, people-oriented decentralisation alone can empower the wretched of the Indian earth. Only thus can every cook, every impoverished Adivasi, every industrial worker, govern. Are our rulers ready for this?

## The More States the Merrier?

Praful Bidwai writes from New Delhi

# India Needs Radical Devolution

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## 1971 War Crimes Why Only Apology, and Not Trial?

by Ekram Kabir

It's the responsibility of the people of Pakistan—who are prudent enough to understand and have foresight—to pressurise and convince their government to make arrangements for trials of the guilty generals, of course, from the Bangladesh point of view.

when he went back to Pakistan. And then he had the nerve to enter politics by joining JUP (Jamate Ulema Pakistan). The other malefactor, the cruellest among the lot, who goes by the name of Tikka Khan was also awarded by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto; Tikka later became Bhutto's party general-secretary and even the governor of Punjab. This was the treatment that was meted out to the top-most miscreants of history.

Pakistani military never felt sorry for the crime they committed in Bangladesh. But there is news that may bring some comfort to the aching hearts of the Bengalis. The Joint Action Committee for Peoples Rights - an action alliance of 36 NGOs and political parties based in Lahore - has demanded from the military government to formally seek apologies from the Bangladeshi masses. This is to accept the atrocities committed by the Pakistani military officials during Bangladesh's independence struggle. A resolution in this regard was unanimously approved by over 200 activists present in a seminar held at Lahore Press Club on the theme of "Hamoodur Rahman Report and Tasks for Justice" on 21st August. Speakers focused on the HRC report and pointed out that the content of the report has revealed for the first time, in Pakistan, the real nature of the military atrocities committed against the Bangladeshi masses. It is now clear to Pakistani people that military officials carried out unprecedented atrocities of various kinds during those nine months of 1971.

Asma Jehangir, former chairperson of Pakistan's Human

Rights Commission, told a motivated audience that it is the duty of progressive forces to demand that justice be done. "It is late but still those who had raped the Bangladeshi women should be brought to the court of justice...one general Rahim has made public statement that his name should be cleared. He has the right but give us the permission to bring those raped women to Pakistan as witness and they will recognise the animals."

But, the Pak army clique never acknowledged or apologised for their wrongdoing in 1971. The "Butcher of Balochistan" (Tikka Khan), who later became better known to Bengalis as the "Butcher of Bangladesh" refused to admit in an interview some time back that they had committed any genocide in Bangladesh. On the other hand, a civilian like Nawaz Sharif, the deposed prime minister, hit the hornet's nest when he talked about the brutality committed by a section of Pak army in erstwhile East Pakistan while he was visiting Bangladesh in 1997. He also promised to Bangladesh people that an apology from Pakistan for the wrongdoing of 1971 would be forthcoming. However, when he reached Islamabad, the army brasses somehow silenced Nawaz. It's apparent that the defence outfit of Pakistan is still caustic about their ignominious defeat in the hands of Mukti Bahini and Indian soldiers. Every time they think about this, they feel tormented about the surrender. That's probably the reason why the military backed off every time there was any initiative steps in Pakistan's civic circle to offer apology to Bangladeshi masses.

The apology issue has been

debated in Pakistani print media many a time, citing the example of seeking forgiveness by some nations which felt they had exceeded the bounds of morality towards others. Many a commentator in Pakistan felt that, with a shared past, an apology would be an act of goodwill and grace. The former Speaker of Pakistan's National Assembly, Illahi Buksh Soomro, said, as reported on September 10, 1999 in India World, Islamabad would "some day" apologise to Bangladesh for the genocide in the erstwhile East Pakistan by the then military junta. Soomro, who was in Dhaka to attend the Asian Parliamentary Conference last year said that Pakistan should apologise to Bangladesh for the crime against humanity, as Japan had offered apology to Korea for similar offences committed during the Second World War. "But still it would take time. Did not Japan take a lot of time to do so?" he maintained.

Given the Pakistan's persistent reality of civil-military relations, there may not be any miracle - as most in Bangladesh may expect - as far as atonement or apology from the government of Pakistan is concerned. A Pak minister has already ruled out the possibility to officially hand over the HRC report to Bangladesh government. So, it would be too much to ask for when cantonments in Pakistan are again thriving, with its military at the helms of state affairs. They may also be other reasons why they don't want to offer an apology. That Bangladesh may ask for the pre-1971 share of assets is another worry for them.

Now, what if Pakistan really does offer apology to the masses

of Bangladesh? What will change between these two countries? Will Bengalis develop a softer attitude towards the Pakistani nation? Will the mental gap between the two peoples reduce to any extent? Given the rigid political environment in the region, will Bangladesh diplomatically benefit and be more powerful?

And what would happen to the auxiliary forces of brute Pakistani army that helped them in their killing spree during the nine months of 1971? It is well known that there were a good number of people, in their bid to prevent Bangladesh from being an independent country - formed killer-organisations like Razakars, Al-Badr, Peace Committees, etc. They mostly were from Jamat-e-Islami and Muslim League, the two political parties that did not support the independent Bangladesh movement from the day one. Tikka Khan reiterated this in his interview, which was republished on March 26, 2000 in News From Bangladesh, an online publication. The followers of Golam Azam and the likes, and Muslim Leaguers - who lent their support to the Pakistani generals perhaps are still not sorry for the crimes they committed in 1971. They might have been socially and politically rehabilitated by some self-seeking leaders in independent Bangladesh, but that doesn't mean the masses have forgiven them for their criminal misconducts during the war.

Now, if the government of Pakistan officially offers apology to Bangladesh then these cohorts of Pak army in 1971 may find an opportunity to escape penalty. If that happens, it will be difficult for Bangladesh government to try them (there is an act - Interna-

tional Crime (Tribunals) Act 1973 - under which they can be taken to court) which has been the demand of the masses since independence. But unfortunately no one in Dhaka's progressive circles and corridors of power seem sure as to when and how actions against these criminals will be taken. Although it is government's duty to seek justice, yet the sad testament since 1971 has been that no one in the administration even wants to talk about it.

Then again, if Pakistan apologised what would that mean? Bangladesh, in a manner of routine protocol, would accept it. And that would carry the risk to forgive the tyrants of '71, and they would remain unpunished as they are. On the other hand, even if authorities in Bangladesh do accept their confession, will it be possible for the people to forgive them without seeing them prosecuted? An apology would certainly be comforting - and would signify that Pakistanis are remorseful - but the emotional impairment in Bangladesh is too painful to simply pardon them from their hearts. This is a reality that Pakistanis will have to bear with. The burden of the crime is theirs. Therefore, if Bangladesh wants Pakistan to hand over all the planners of the genocide and if that hurts the Pak ego then the World Court should be involved in taking custody of these war criminals. Nothing short of a fair justice at War Crime Tribunals would conciliate the Bengali mind. Pakistan should realise it.

It's the responsibility of the people of Pakistan - who are prudent enough to understand and have foresight - to pressurise and convince their government to make arrangements for trials of the guilty generals, of course, from the Bangladesh point of view. Otherwise the people of Pakistan will have to live with the blood stained hands of their forefathers. Their collective guilt will always haunt them, if they let the war criminals walk free.

## 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

### No Bangladeshi immigrant in India

Sir, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's assertion about the non-existence of Bangladeshi immigrants in India must put an end to rabid Indian propaganda about the influx of illegal immigrants from Bangladesh to India. Our PM in her recent interview to CNN made it categorically clear that there were no illegal Bangladeshi immigrants in India. Therefore, it is about time that the Indian media put an end to this propaganda about Bangladeshi immigrants.

The question about the common currency and lifting of tariff restrictions could take place within the framework of SAARC and not bilaterally as regarding these issues the question of state sovereignty is concerned.

Al-Haj S. M. Khalid Chowdhury  
Dhaka

### In defence of Khulna Mayor

Sir, Before coming to the point, I want to make it clear that I am neither pro-BNP or pro-Awami League, and also that I have no idea whether the allegations

against the Khulna Mayor are true or not, or whether they are mainly intended to malign the Mayor. But with reference to the article in The Daily Star of September 1, with the title Khulna Mayor in the dock I just want to state that the drainage system in Khulna, having been relentlessly worked upon for the last few years, has come out absolutely successful. No matter how heavy the downpour may be, rendering the streets virtually rivers, within a short time, i.e. an hour or even less after the rains have stopped, the water drains off smoothly into the Rupsha river, and the streets become dry and viable for traffic again.

L Rafique  
Khulna

### After sales service

Sir, It is very unfortunate that the culture of after sales service is yet to be developed in our country even in the case of world renowned company like Ericsson mobile phone. Users of the small Ericsson T-28 model phone are now facing difficulty as the phone tends to go out of order suddenly. The designated service engineer here said that the prob-

lem of T-28 set is not reparable in Bangladesh. The chips of the set that usually goes out of order is not replaceable. I found a number of sufferers roaming helplessly in the service center. I used the set only one and a half month and already the problem has continued. The price of T-28 set has come down to Tk 19,900 from Tk 42,000 of distributor price. If the set is not reparable then why Ericsson Company is selling it here? How long the consumers would continue to suffer and remain as the victims?

Yunus Ali Sheikh  
90/3 Boro Moghbazar, Dhaka

### Tragic

Sir, We are deeply shocked at the news of death of twelve garment workers in Dhaka and nine construction workers and two engineers at port city Chittagang (DS, August 28). These two incidents, occurring in a single day, can best be described as terrible massacres, although they were not pre-planned. We hope that from now on the government and the owners of the factories would take necessary measures so that such incidents do not occur in the future.

However in our view, these unfortunate and tragic incidents could have been avoided only if the respective authorities had been a bit sincere and cautious. That is why it would be improper to describe these incidents as 'just accidents'. The government also cannot avoid responsibility. They have never paid due attention to the needs of the workers.

Despite the fact that the garment sector continues to be the largest foreign exchange earner, the plight of the workers remains unchanged.

We urge the government to enact laws protecting the rights of the individual workers. We also demand that the persons responsible for the loss of so many human lives are brought to justice and the relatives of the victims duly compensated.

Suapan Chakma  
Mohammadpur, Dhaka

### Result of SSC and HSC

Sir, This year's SSC and HSC results are disappointing and uninspiring. In the SSC examination about sixty per cent examinees have failed and in the HSC more than sixty per cent have not come out successful.

It has been argued that both the learners and the teachers could not adopt themselves with the new syllabuses and that is why this year's result has been so disappointing. There is no denying that many students try to pass examinations depending on guidebooks or ready-made notes and many have a tendency to earn only certificates by adopting unfair means. But main thing is that most of the schools and the colleges of our country do not have well-trained and qualified teachers. In our educational institutions, classes are irregular and students do not enjoy much facilities.

Students are forced to go to

coaching centres or to private batches of their teachers. Thus receiving education at the SSC and HSC levels has become quite expensive. Finding no other alternative, poor students have to study by themselves depending on notebooks etc.

In a word, the existing educational system of Bangladesh has not at all improved compared to developed countries. And it is high time we do something to save our education sector.

Md Masum Billah  
First Year English (Honours)  
Dhaka Commerce College

### Election prospects

Sir, The ruling regime has several areas to ponder on if it wishes to return to power next year.

The integrated relation with India has to be untangled and placed on a transparent and clear footing, understandable to the most humble voter, and acceptable to the majority of the electorate.

The huge trade deficit with India, and the booming smuggling trade has to be taken care of. No Bangladeshi wishes that India grab BD as huge market of 130 million consumers (now a \$3-5b market). The government's lame stand is noticeable.

The secularism stand will link AL with India, and the party will lose Muslim votes (9 out of ten are Muslims) to the opposition alliance.

Violence within the party will have a telling effect locally. Others cannot break up the mighty AL, but the disintegration may

start within. The first phase is on, as per media reports.

The toll collection syndicates indirectly controlled by political godfathers will be thinking about their future earnings, and may change alliance at the last moment, if they sense AL would not win.

The Muslim world's attitude towards AL is neither sure nor clear, although the latter might be paying lip service to Islam. This is a Foreign Affairs ploy; as also BD's relation with Myanmar, vis-à-vis the continued Rohingya impasse, and putting pressure on India to ease transit to the sub-Himalayan states for trade. This is no-go situation as India is putting pressure for transit facilities through Bangladesh. Our docile Foreign Office must have counter-move contingency plans. Can we afford to go on a diplomatic offensive, with the polls round the corner?

How to combat the situation from possible infiltration of highly trained and experienced Muslim insurgents into BD by vested groups? AL's relations with the other political parties in the country is more on contemptuous hate basis. The isolation of AL is getting bigger and bigger day by day. Are they being cornered into stalemate situation? Desperate last-minute moves won't provide instant solutions. AL has to think about situations which are outside its direct control. Barking orders would be a futile exercise.

Interested Voter  
Dhaka