

Parliament Beckons the Opposition

THE four-party opposition alliance seems to be within a striking range of eschewing hartal as the core element of their agitation politics against the government. There are signs of an emerging consensus within the central leadership of the opposition combine that in the present scheme of things they have better things to do than issue hartal call every now and then on the slightest of pretexts. In fact, they have horned in on 'mass contact' as the exact alternative to hartal, which they would like to mainly pursue from this point on.

Although hartal calls were ostensibly designed to mobilise public support these have actually ended up demobilising public support as far as the opposition went. It is heartening to note that the opposition does not want to 'lose its strength by going for hartals on petty issues.' This paper takes particular satisfaction in such a turn of events as we have consistently opposed hartals as it harmed public interest and damaged the economy.

This being an election year, it is only natural that the opposition should like to conserve its energy for electoral preparedness instead of wasting it on hartals. The futility of hartal finds vindication from none other than their callers.

While we compliment them on their appreciation of one particular reality in the shape of recognising the need to abjure the hartal path there is another reality they better not turn a blind eye to. We urge the opposition to go back to parliament if not for anything else than as an electoral strategy.

In the ten months left to the present Jatiya Sangsads at least 3-4 sessions of the parliament are due to be held. For all intents and purposes, these are going to be crucial JS sessions, not only because the ruling party would to try to rush its pending legislative business through but also owing to the important electoral reform agenda that the opposition needs to press through the parliament. For instance, the question pertaining to women's enlarged representation in parliament and reform of the post-election tribunals to yield quick verdicts on electoral disputes need to be disposed of, to say nothing of strengthening the safeguards for free and fair polls.

So overwhelmingly important the potential agenda before the remainder parliamentary sessions are that it would be foolish for the opposition to say, 'Well, we can't join the parliament in the closing months of its existence when we did not do it for the most part of its tenure.'

Deregulate Telecom

WHERE are we on the information superhighway? Surely not amongst the front-liners and, in all likelihood, not amongst the middle-rankers either. What has held us back from surfing on the worldwide wave of information technology? The answer is simple: a shortsighted government with a curiously conservative IT policy. Unfortunately, despite persistent urgings by people like Professor Muhammad Yunus and Jamilur Reza Chowdhury, the people at the helm have failed to show the desired level of activism both in infrastructure development and in encouraging private sector participation. BITB monopoly still continues with a poor telecommunications network offsetting the huge potential IT has on offer for a fantastic economic growth.

The government seems unconvinced that information technology could be more than adequate as an aid to the expansion of our export base. It could only mean that it has its eyes and ears closed to the happenings around the world. Transaction in IT businesses worldwide has gone past the trillion-dollar mark and is growing unceasingly. Indian earning from software export is already in the vicinity of one hundred billion dollars. Pakistan and Sri Lanka are alive to their potential in the field. It seems we have lagged behind by choice.

True, the government has designated our still-nascent IT industry as a thrust sector. Unfortunately, that's about all it has done so far. At crucial times, governments had taken detrimental decisions. Refusal to be linked with deep-sea cable when laid down through the Bay of Bengal, on grounds of national security, has left us without an identity on the worldwide web. Fibre optic technology in telecommunications remains largely an alien concept. Inexplicable policy rigidity has shooed away prospective private sector investment in telecom infrastructure development.

As Professor Yunus has forecast time and again, the country can really turn around and slash poverty by half within 2010, if the government nurtures IT. The first step in that direction would be to incentivise growth of the telecom sector. There are eager entrepreneurs in the private sector who can usher in an era of fabulous advancement in telecommunications. The government should be the facilitator, not the schizophrenic regulator it has been so far.

Trucks and Death

TWO road accidents in Dhaka city on Friday set the alarm bell ringing about heavy-duty vehicular movement inside the metropolis. Three persons were run over by two lorries, a mother and her child at Tikatuli and a female garments worker at Khilgaon. The vehicle at fault was set ablaze by angry mob in the former incident causing serious law and order breakdown in a wide area. The backlash should be taken as an eye-opener to the ugly public mood gruelling road accidents create to the endangerment of public order. The home ministry better take note of it.

Moreover, we have been jolted into the realisation that even in the slow moving traffic of the city, which we had pinned our hopes on as a safeguard against mishaps, terrible accidents can take place. Our attention, in this respect, is drawn to truck movements in the city during daytime. While these vehicles are supposed to enter and leave the metropolitan area during lean traffic hours, their visibility even through peak traffic is pretty pronounced.

Let there be a fresh announcement of daily timetable for truck movement in the city. There should also be an independent investigation into the status of adherence to the existing entry and exit timings of trucks and lorries. The transport and home ministries will have to put their heads together on how best to regulate the movement of trucks in and out of the city. Their loading and off-loading points better be at the outer rim of the metropolis.

Universities: Searching for a Shore

There can be no pride in being a member of a campus (be it VC or teacher or student) which reels under the reign of non-academic pursuits. No nation can survive when its universities begin to bleed. Let us call it a day for our ignorance, lapses and lack of vision that we were subjected to in the past. We should search for the light switch. We should search for the shore. The dream of becoming a 'university person' should not end in a nightmare.

bly, curtail the waiting period of students by more than six months, on average.

However, VCs are also aware of the fact that the end of admission tests does not necessarily lead to the end of the agony that students are fraught with. Classes may not resume soon due to a volley of constraints. The incumbents will have to be provided with accommodation, educational logistics, library facilities etc. Added to this, the process might demand extra shift of classes.

On both the counts, the universities would need to have extra allocation of resources for providing accommodation, transport, incentives to teachers and infrastructural facilities. However, it is the view of the VCs that the incremental benefits to the society would far outweigh the incremental costs, given that the project succeeds.

Another jeopardizing jam that public universities are grappling with is called the session jam. The extent of the jam varies from university to university. For example, in Jahangirnagar University, Masters' students of 1997 have just completed their examinations. Roughly, the jam is of three years. In few of the universities, there is no such jam or that is insignificant, but in some cases

it is of more than two years. Invariably, the cost of graduation in those 'unfortunate' universities is almost twice as high as it is in the 'fortunate' ones. If an industry tends to face a unit cost of production that goes up very high, can that industry survive? Universities are also industries

lenges lest they lose the chair. Because the challenges could warrant a lot of, albeit painful, changes in the behavioural pattern of academics; (b) Allegedly, some teachers do not value their jobs properly. There are complaints that they do not take classes and tutorial examination regularly and do not submit

authorities, given commitments, can do something regarding inside factors, the outside factors remain beyond the bound of their control. So what is needed is a tripartite agreement among politicians, university authorities and student bodies to deal with the jeopardizing session jam. The university authorities should do their part of the job. For example, they should (a) reformulate examination system through discussion in academic council; (b) introduce a system of accountability through regular monitoring that would require VCs to sit regularly with Chairpersons and Deans to evaluate the progress; (c) reward the leaders in the academic fields (departments or individuals) while punishing the laggards. This means that as far as session jam is concerned, a discriminatory policy in terms of resources allocation could be considered.

Public universities nowadays are criticised for growing terrorism besides session jam. Terrorist activities in campus, however, have been on a wane, as is revealed by available research reports. And given anti-terrorism stances of concerned quarters, hopefully, the extent of terrorism can be axed considerably. Session jam needs to be wiped out to put universities in the good book of society. These two vices (terrorism

and session jam), reinforcing each other at times, tend to put the 'autonomy' issue into serious question. We should prove that the autonomy of universities (vide Act 73) has given us ample scope to move forward, not backward. Universities should remain autonomous in determining the modus operandi of reaching manpower targets set by the government in the realm of higher education. Autonomy has to lead to more transparent, accountable and pragmatic policies. Otherwise, a time may come when universities would cease to be autonomous, not by choice but by force. Let us prove ourselves worthy of the trusts that society puts on us.

As President of the Association of Universities of Bangladesh (AUB) the author would appeal to politicians (in or out of government) to help us keep campus free from violence. University administration needs to be assured of their 'non-support' to terrorists. On the other hand, appeals also go to learned colleagues and fellow students and others to keep up the sanctity of these highest citadels of learning. There can be no pride in being a member of a campus (be it VC or teacher or student) which reels under the reign of non-academic pursuits. No nation can survive when its universities begin to bleed. Let us call it a day for our ignorance, lapses and lack of vision that we were subjected to in the past. We should search for the light switch. We should search for the shore. The dream of becoming a 'university person' should not end in a nightmare.

The Minister's concern, seemingly, sounded a wake-up call. Why should educational institutions fail to find ways and means to put students on board in time? To this effect, the Association of the Universities of Bangladesh (AUB) represented by all VCs of public universities 'decided to draw up a quick but coordinated admission schedule. This has been done to override overlaps so that candidates could have choices. The admission tests thus would begin in October and end in the 1st week of December. That would, possibly,

produce an output called

graduates. The graduates have a market where employers would like to see young and cost-effective graduates. Nowhere in the world, perhaps, session jams are so gigantic as in Bangladesh.

There are both inside and

outside factors contributing to

session jam. Among inside factors are: (a) Absence of true

realisation among the actors

within the university that how

much and how far the jam is

jeopardizing. Every one

advertently or inadvertently

seems to take it as almost a way of

life in public universities. Authori-

ties, on the other hand, tend to

be reluctant to take up the chal-

lenge lest they lose the chair.

Because the challenges could

warrant a lot of, albeit painful,

changes in the behavioural pat-

tern of academics; (b) Allegedly,

some teachers do not value their

jobs properly. There are com-

plaints that they do not take

classes and tutorial examination

regularly and do not submit

examination scripts in due time.

These famous 'fries' as they are

known nowadays frisk and fritter

to see students roaming in

'varandhas' requesting them for

taking class; (c) The system of

external examiners also add

some strain to the jam. Some of

the examiners make delay in the

delivery of scripts. There are

more inside factors but scarcity of

space do not allow that to be

discussed here.

On the external front, national

political programmes have an

impact on the speed of academic

movements. Strikes, hartals,

clashes among student organiza-

tions and other elements also

gear up the jam. While university

authorities, given commitments

, can do something regarding

inside factors, the outside factors

remain beyond the bound of their

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The first function needs a core

coalition of classes within the

Congress support-base. This

broke down when the Dalits and

Muslims moved away. They are

yet to return to it in large num-

bers.

The Congress's national pres-

ence has been eroded by regional

parties. Its primary membership

has shrunk by more than one-

third in three years. The fall has

been steep (up to 60 percent) in

UP, Bihar, Gujarat and Kerala.

True, this is not an authentic

index of party base; it reflects low

cadre enthusiasm. But the num-

bers don't speak of great vigour in

the party.

The Congress' future depends

in no small measure upon the

'vision' factor. The party is no

longer seen as representing a

progressive vision that appeals to

the masses. It is not narrow-

minded, communal, obscurant-

ist, jingoistic or shamelessly pro-

rich like the BJP. But it hasn't

demarcated itself sharply from

the BJP with a people-oriented,

forward-looking, modern vision.

Unless this changes, the Con-

gress' future loses its recent gains

in popular support, morale,

mobilising ability, even votes. It