

Where is autonomy?

Circulate draft laws for public opinion

We wish we could greet the cabinet approval of two draft laws seeking autonomy for Bangladesh Television and Bangladesh Betar with unalloyed plaudits. There are quite a few reasons why we cannot. Come as it does at the fag end of the incumbent administration's five-year tenure and, needless to say, in the election year, the move appears more inclined to woo votes in the upcoming general election than anything else. Evidently, the ruling Awami League wants to give the public the impression that it is true to the electoral pledges it made before the 1996 parliamentary polls. In its haste to table the bills at what could be the last session of the seventh Jatiya Sangsad, the government has forgotten that the matter is far too important to be rushed without the benefit of all due consideration paid to it.

The proposed Bangladesh Television Authority Act, 2001 and Bangladesh Television Authority Act, 2001 mark a substantial departure from the recommendations of the Radio-TV Autonomy Commission which the government had instituted in this behalf. The two draft laws actually redefine government control on the state-run electronic media rather than seeking its complete elimination. Let us elaborate. First, according to the draft bills, the government, and not the president, reserves the right to recruit the chairmen and other members to the separate bodies being envisaged to run the affairs of the two electronic media and also to terminate their services whenever it deems right. In fact, it leaves the avenue open for the government to employ its loyalists to the regulatory bodies, thereby exercising indirect control over the two media. However, what sounds repugnant to the principle of autonomy is the provision which calls for airing of news and other programmes in line with a policy to be formulated by none other than the government. Simply put, the draft laws, if enacted, will give enough leverage to the government, whoever it may be, to exercise control over the state-run media.

In a parliament boycotted by the opposition, the ruling party may very well push the twin bills through without any discordant noise. If so happens, BTV and Betar would have anything but autonomy. Therefore, our suggestion is, now that the process is at a preliminary stage, let the draft bills be circulated to elicit public opinion. Before the matter progresses any further, let people from a wide section of the society - intelligentsia, civil society leaders and others have a chance to analyse and evaluate the draft bills and suggest changes before these become law.

Bungling over telephone bills

Crossing all limits

TELEPHONE bills have been held up from the start of this year, with no respite in sight. Approximately 5.5 lakh subscribers have yet to see their bills because of a feud between BTTB and Lithi Enterprises Ltd. (LEL), the private firm responsible for the job.

We have raised this issue before and we do so again. BTTB had no business preventing LEL from completing its contract which ran till January 31st. That it aborted its arrangement with LEL without making alternative arrangement demonstrates its utter callousness for customers' concerns. Failing to find a comparable substitute for the job, BTTB has been able to prepare only some bills for January with the help of BUET. BTTB has accused Lithi of refusing to hand over original data files for bill preparation. Seeking to refute this allegation the managing director of LEL has claimed that the critical data files are already in possession of BTTB. Why is the Ministry silent on this counter allegation by LEL? According to LEL, a section of BTTB employees have been passing on incorrect information to the Ministry of Post and Telecommunications. The Ministry must try to allay suspicions of mischief at once by issuing necessary clarifications on the subject.

It must take steps to put an end to this outrageous delay in delivering bills to the subscribers. We call for an immediate inquiry, followed by requisite action to rectify the problem. Consumers who fail to clear their telephone arrears within three months end up getting their lines disconnected. Who is going to penalise the failure to send bills to telephone users for such a long time? Even if special dispensations are made to allow bills to be paid in installments, the burden on the customer remains immense, not to mention the sheer inconvenience of this inordinate delay. Let the Ministry not brush this failure under the rug any longer.

C:\Compose1\May 2001\8.5.2001\Ed-1+2-8.doc

Parliament's growing irrelevance: Democracy hijacked!

PRAFUL BIDWAI
writes from New Delhi

THE unprecedented shortening of Parliament's Budget session by two weeks is a blow to its very purpose. The Budget session is the longest of its three annual sittings, which usually lasts three months. This session was to have 55 working days. It sat for just 16.

The Opposition first disrupted Parliament for 10 days over Tehelka. Then, the Treasury benches took the lead in aborting proceedings. The loss cannot be fairly measured in money (Rs. 11 crores) or in (wasted) time (73 hours 49 minutes).

Only 15 Bills out of the total 43 listed for the session were passed. Among the held-over legislations are Bills to fight corruption: the Lokpal and Central Vigilance Commission Bills.

The Central Electricity Bill, Control of Highways Bill and Convergence Bill were also stalled. The Electricity Bill is meant to discipline poorly performing state boards, the Highways Bill to regulate inter-state highways, and Convergence to integrate telecom, information technology, television, etc.

No less important was the Industrial Disputes amendment. This would have tested the government's claim to "protect" workers while permitting factories employing up to

1,000 people to dismiss them. Also deferred were Bills to prohibit tobacco commercials and promote consumer interests.

Even more serious is the way Parliament dealt with legislation which it did pass. The Railway Budget was approved without discussion. Debate on the Budget's Demands for Grants lasted barely a day and on the Finance Bill only a few hours. Demands for ministries

security were treated shabbily.

This "fast track" approach to legislation isn't explained by lack of time. The government had enough time to write Rs. 1,000 crores tax breaks for high-salaried employees. This was done at the expense of levying a service tax with the annual potential of raising Rs. 40,000 crores (against today's Rs. 1,400 crores).

This is only one aspect of the

Equally deplorable is the government's contempt for Parliamentary Committee reports: from energy to economy, textbooks to telecom, Adivasi rights to consumer protection. Indeed, for the last few years, the government has made a habit of ignoring such *consensual reports*.

As anyone who has watched Parliamentary debates knows, their quality has considerably declined. Today, much of what passes for

lot of time is taken up in procedural matters, stonewalling questions, in raucous exchanges (like between Mr Vajpayee and Ms Gandhi on April 27).

Parliament is becoming less and less relevant in voicing popular concerns. At this rate, this core-institution of democracy could turn lifeless. Some blame for this must, of course, be shared by the Treasury and the Opposition, who

indifferent to the House. He ducks responsibility for his own Cabinet's decisions. Far from being statesman-like, he is a pedestrian, fractious, divisive Parliamentarian.

Under a more able leader, the government would have conceded the demand for a Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC) on Tehelka-related issues. Tehelka produced some undeniable, irrefutable evidence worthy of deeper investigation. The government mulishly rejects the demand.

A government that treats Parliament as an unpleasant reality, a nuisance, something it must face only because it has to, violates the content of democracy. Such a government *rules by stealth*, not by popular mandate with genuine respect for democratic conventions.

It treats democracy only as a system of power, not as accountable government responsive to the people. A government that exercises power for its own sake, which runs scam after scam, and promotes mindlessly right-wing policies to bankrupt the exchequer, presides over a plutocracy, not democracy.

That's the government Mr Vajpayee has given us a darling of Big Business, the Rich and Corrupt, but increasingly hated by the people. Our democracy is being hijacked by moneybags and thugs. It must be rescued.

It treats democracy only as a system of power, not as accountable government responsive to the people. A government that exercises power for its own sake, which runs scam after scam, and promotes mindlessly right-wing policies to bankrupt the exchequer, presides over a plutocracy, not democracy.

such as Home and Defence were guillotined and rammed through.

The supposedly crucial discussion on drought, starvation deaths and the collapsing Public Distribution System saw abysmal participation with less than 30 MPs present.

In some ways, passage of such important business without proper deliberation is worse than a Vote on Account permissible in exceptional circumstances pending fresh elections.

It is an insult to democracy that the Budget sanctioning over Rs. 200,000 crores was railroaded through and that life-and-death issues such as collapse of food

degradation of Parliamentary debate. Others include usurpation of legislative functions, bypassing of the thoughtful recommendations of Parliamentary Committees, and a steep decline in quality of debate.

The Budget announced draconian amendments to the Industrial Disputes and Contract Labour Acts. These should have come after the (forthcoming) Indian Labour Conference, and after deliberations leading to a new Bill. But Mr Sinha was in a hurry to please employers with an anti-labour exit policy. Similarly, major changes in education, food distribution, and agriculture policy were adopted without deliberation in the concerned ministries.

discussion in the Lok Sabha or even in the (supposedly more august) Rajya Sabha lacks gravitas or seriousness.

More often than not, our camera-conscious MPs are happy to utter catchy one-liners or make vacuous interventions when not staging walkouts. Even the content of replies to Parliament questions has suffered. Although the government dare not lie on facts, it avoids giving clear answers.

Disgracefully, Parliament now devotes just 14 per cent of its time to legislation, as opposed to 48 per cent in earlier years because it discusses current developments or policies at greater length. Rather, a

behave in confrontationist ways forever stalking each other, attacking each other's integrity, rarely focusing on issues.

However, the government's share of the blame is greater. Today's ruling coalition betrays contempt for Parliament. It shows few signs of internalising the spirit of democracy: honest debate and dialogue on issues of concern to the people.

Mr Atal Behari Vajpayee is the Leader of the House of People. The seriousness with which he deals with its business naturally sets the tone of Parliamentary debate.

Regrettably, Mr Vajpayee's leadership is extremely poor. He is

people's attitude to the Vajpayee government. If the reflection is negative, this will cause strain in the multi-party combine and encourage some allies to quit. In such a situation, the survival of the government may come under strain and early national elections cannot be ruled out. But reasonably good showing by the BJP and allies will certainly not create this problem. For Congress and Sonia Gandhi, the polls are quite significant because positive results would underline the importance of the party and its acceptability among the people.

Crucial test for Indian political parties



ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

IVE Indian states are going to polls to elect assemblies on May 10 and all eyes are set on the outcome of the voting because major political forces of the country have big stakes in the results. For prime minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the main opposition Indian National Congress led by Sonia Gandhi and the leftists whose two main strongholds are in the contest, the balloting will be a crucial test of their popularity. For the BJP, the outcome may influence its fate in ruling the country although it is not a big force to reckon with in any of the states that are going to the polls.

Sonia Gandhi's leadership which had not made much impact so far in the affairs of her organisation will be tested once again through these elections. And finally, the communists are facing the most formidable challenge in spite of remaining in power in West Bengal for 24 years, and while they are also making a desperate bid to continue to govern the southern Kerala state even though their chances there seem slim. And the fourth but not less important is whether the dream of a firebrand woman leader to form the government in West Bengal and become chief minister will materialise this time.

Certainly, Mamta Banerjee is gaining ground but it remains to be seen if that is enough to topple the ruling Left Front. During the long 24 years the state has seen elections several times but the leftists returned to power without any interruption. Definitely, this time the challenge is much bigger and polls

government is still reeling under its impact.

Mamta denounced the scam and pulled out of the government and she believes this step would pay her dividends in the West Bengal polls. Now, the BJP and the "Trinamul", the former allies, are at daggers drawn relationship. On the other hand, the main Congress and the "Trinamul" have formed alliance and Sonia Gandhi and Mamta are campaigning together. They were at loggerheads the other day. The Congress-Trinamul alliance feels it would win most of the 294 seats in the state. The Left Front which controlled 203 seats in the house may suffer a setback but the outcome is unlikely to throw it out of power in the state. Analysts say the front may secure around 150-160 seats, enough to form the government. Chief Minister Buddhadev Bhattacharya is campaigning hard and elderly former chief minister Jyoti Basu is also actively in the electioneering. The BJP is going alone in the state with its small presence and is blaming Mamta Banerjee for "betrayal".

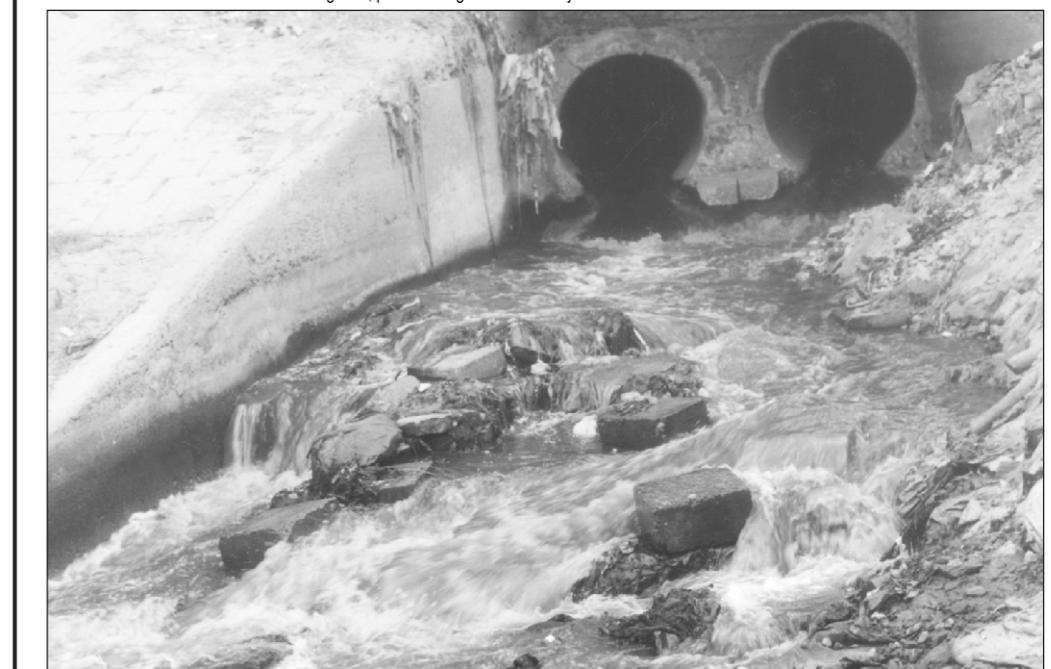
In the Tamil Nadu, the ruling DMK, an ally of the BJP at the centre, is fighting a grim battle to remain in power. Here, the Congress of Sonia Gandhi has allied with AIADMK, the party of Jayaram Jayalalitha, and is poised to win elections. However, Jayalalitha has been barred from contesting the polls because of her earlier conviction in a corruption case and this has boosted the chances of the DMK which was still finding itself on slippery ground. In Kerala, the Congress is better placed in alliance with the Muslim League and several other parties while the ruling left democratic front led by the communists is facing a tough situation. The Congress and its allies are poised to wrest power here unless last-minute developments favour the ruling front. In Assam, the ruling Gana Parishad in collusion with the BJP faces difficult challenge from the Congress. The elections in Pondicherry offers little interest.

The BJP which is now the largest political party of India is not a strong

force in any of the five states but it has a big stake because the outcome will determine how the electorates view the party after heading a coalition at the centre for 18 months. This test is particularly relevant after the Vajpayee government is believed to be losing popularity following the "Tehelka" disclosures. The performance of the BJP and its allies in the polls will reflect

PHOTORIAL

Readers are invited to send in exclusive pictures, colour or black and white, of editorial value, with all relevant information including date, place and significance of subject matter. Pictures received will not be returned.



Water runs wild

Dirty and filthy water from WASA's sewerage lines is flowing forcefully into the river Buriganga and polluting one of the major waterways and the lifeline of Dhaka. Together with the foul sewerage water, polythene bags and garbage also clog the pipes, increasing pollution. It seems that we have decided to destroy the Buriganga in every possible way. But do we ever stop to think what would be our state if the river were to really die?

STAR PHOTO: AKM MOHSIN

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR



EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

Bangladeshis unite

Now we, Bangladeshis, have to be united. Let us please break up every single relation with the political parties in Bangladesh because they are messing up our country. Pakistan could not destroy us so the Indians cannot do anything. We are Muslims and Allah will help us.

I am living in the US but I love my Bangladesh and after completing my studies I will come back to my country. I appreciate those soldiers who are fighting against the Indians and want to send my sympathies and respect to those families who have suffered a lot in this crisis. Good luck to Bangladesh and the BDR.

Mohd. Faisal Razzak
New York, United States

Mighty and minnow

Since a relatively powerful India had handicapped Bangladesh for quite a long time, the current problem with India is not a surprising issue. India, being stronger in military power and technology, has always exploited Bangladesh. As we can't threaten them using our strength, entangled mazes like Farakka still exist. Although we know what they are

doing is not right, we can't really do much about it besides discussing their meanness.

All our major political leaders promised to take care of those unresolved unlawful Indian invasions; yet, there has been no progress at all. As they are too focused on making their own fortunes, one does not expect much from them. But somehow we have to come up with a strategy to overcome our "neighbourhood" crisis.

We Bangladeshis are forgetting that our highest advantage is our unity. Because of our small territory, we speak just one language; we don't really expect to advance one district over the other like Indian states do. We could take advantage of their political and cultural instability. To accomplish something we have to unite together and fight for it, even if it means a war literally. We will win, as we will be fighting for our natural rights and they will be fighting for aggression.

In case we lose, what have we really got to lose? We're dying economically, socially, and morally by accepting their tyranny anyway. We have to put an end to the matter to save our farmers, workers, and traders. Things are getting worse

every day. Someday we'll see that they are building army barracks inside Bangladesh for their security purposes.

Our government should try to take a major organised step to overcome this major barrier to our progress. If one of the political parties acts accordingly, I would consider them to be more democratic than the others and hence a party which we could rely on to form our government. I apologise if I have offended Indian citizens. I don't mean any disrespect to them personally, except for what their political leaders are doing.

Masud
Wichita, USA

Government's job

The border incidents happened as a consequence of not implementing the Mujib-Indira agreement. The Bangladesh government should take the matter seriously and prepare for the worst situation. The government should work for peace, but it shouldn't sacrifice our land and freedom. We deserve a relationship of equal status with our all neighbours. The government must handle the situation politically and we want concerned ministers to

handle the matter not the foreign secretary. It is the prime duty of the elected government to secure the life of the people.

Nadir uz Zaman
New Elephant Road, Dhaka

Mental disorder

According to WHO's statistics "as many as 132 million people suffer from mental disorder in Bangladesh and out of that about 1.20 million people's condition is serious." The country has only 65 psychiatrists that is one for every 19 lakh people, too insufficient to deal with the alarming mental health problem. For about 140 million people there is only one mental hospital with 400 beds and the hospital itself is in the grip of mental distortion and does not run smoothly.

In our society mental patients are treated as mad people in general. They are always neglected. The experts have opined that the causes of mental disorder are poverty, unemployment, social imbalance, injustice, ignorance and above all absence of a good social environment. If these problems are treated with due care and solved accordingly, it will improve the state of

mentally disordered people. But it is not an easy task.

In that case we can go forward in solving these problems in two ways. Firstly, the government should chalk out a long-term strategic plan for combating the aforementioned problems. Secondly, adequate treatment facilities should be ensured for the patients. These people are a part of our society and we cannot lead a peaceful life by brushing them aside.

M.H. Baria
Khulna

Draft development strategy

While going through a back issue of The Daily Star (February 3, 2001), I came across a report on the Draft Development Strategy on use of surface and ground water prepared by consultant M/s. Mot Halcrow. I must thank the government for having this study done as