

Caring for the disabled

Fresh resolve needed

As we observed the day of the disabled yesterday we primarily went through a process of self-definition and imaging. How society treats it's lesser endowed souls identifies its ranges of compassion and self-belief. In Bangladesh, where even the fully able in the conventional sense have to endure a rough ride, the disabled are always at the lesser end of understanding and attention. Such days help to change attitudes and ideas and in the end generate a better brand of society that is able to do the extra mile to ensure equal access of all.

In Bangladesh as in most traditional societies, the disabled are outsiders. In societies, where being in the mainstream is often necessary for survival, the disadvantage can therefore be imagined. But advocacy for special treatment has also been on for some time and organized concern has finally begun to happen. One of the pillars of that is the national policy on the disabled that lets other activities flow from it.

A key progress has been the definition and categorization of the disabled and survey that has put a number on the problem. It has assumed, as is done according to international practices, that 10 per cent of the total population is disabled and therefore deserves extra attention. On the basis of that calculation, activities have been planned. Disability runs from the physically disabled to those who are not of the mainstream mentally. But together they constitute a multi-million strong population.

But a point that is often missed is the mental structure of those who are unable to comprehend the special needs and abilities of the conventionally disabled. It has been proven everywhere that the disabled are not only capable of leading productive lives but if not ignored can contribute significantly to society, materially and otherwise. But for that to happen we need to have an open mind. Sadly, the disability of our own prejudices is often overlooked.

The government and a number of NGOs have taken plans to mainstream the disabled into productive activities. Rehabilitation laws and policies have been put in place and some degree of acceptance has begun to manifest itself. But our position must go beyond annual expression of concerns, must go beyond the welfare approach. Its when we recognize that they are part of us and able to serve the community as much as we so-called able are that the ten per cent leftouts will become part of the hundred per cent. That must be the goal.

PSC in a limbo

Let it bounce back to life at once

IT'S a pity that Public Service Commission, the constitutionally designated body for recruitment to the Republic's services on a competitive basis, has remained almost non-functional for the last five months. This statutory organisation's activities came to a virtual halt closely on the heels of BNP's induction into power for lack of requisition of its services. This exceptional step was taken to apparently carry out investigations into allegations of corruption against the PSC which the new government promptly took cognizance of.

One wonders whether a suspension of the PSC's work was unavoidable. A probe could be conducted if there was sufficient ground for it without having the PSC to shutter down. Furthermore, the incumbent PSC chairman having gone on retirement, the post has remained vacant for the last two months. Lately, the post of a member has also fallen vacant.

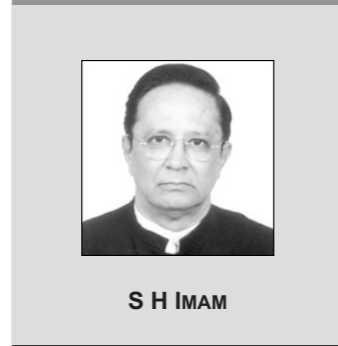
As a result of the Public Service Commission's unceremonious hibernation for nearly two quarters of a year, the fate of nearly 20,000 examinees of different BCS batches hangs in balance. Even the recruitment to non-cadre class I and II services is arranged by the PSC, let alone dealing with matters of promotion to different posts. The PSC now seems confined to some routine matters only.

As it is, we have a degree of sessions jam at the institutions of higher learning. If the PSC does not work for months together then there is bound to be a compound effect in terms of age-barring the students for competitive examinations.

Nobody would like to see the careers of educated young men and women or their chances of early entry into the Republic's services come under clouds.

Let nothing come in the way of the PSC's calendar of activities. Since the former chairman has retired on reaching the age of 65, we must find a helmsman for the organisation first. Other vacancies of the Commission need to be filled up on a priority basis as well. We want the PSC to be revved up and work in full swing.

Dialogue is the only option to pursue



S H IMAM

At the critical turning points, our people and political parties have acquitted themselves admirably well. Between November 3 and 7, 1975 the maturity of our man of the street was proven in one of the most volatile sets of circumstances ever to confront this nation. With no government in sight or palpable to senses and, potential anarchy and subterfuge lurking all around it's the ordinary citizen who emerged as the sole peace-keeper in those three days. Our common people behaved most responsibly at that critical hour with stoic indifference to the volatility that could easily induce people into taking the law in their own hands or settling old scores on a rampage. But good sense prevailed in that stressful situation.

It was basically a law of nature that superseded political affiliations of people and came into play in that somewhat unique context. People's hearts beat in unison when they face common dangers to their existence

or survival. The political parties, too, at critical junctures, have closed their ranks by a shared perception of threat and challenge posed by totalitarianism to democratic pluralism. Such a copybook explanation of the rarefied positive chemistry may not always work. Even so, as far as the framework of understanding announced on November 19, 1990 by three political alliances (BNP-AL-Left formation) went, it was a marvellous piece of consensus building that

contemporary consumption, which is this that all good things require a degree of collective anxiety and nurture to be preserved and sustained.

In any case, it is this hallmark of consensus-building that proved extremely short-lived. Even though the 19-point package of understanding was essentially designed to sustain democratic culture through a rapid consolidation of the institutions of democracy hitherto thrown into atrophy was given an indecent burial

resolved through a process of dialogue. The examples are the 12th Constitutional Amendment marking the transition of a presidential system into a parliamentary system and the 13th Amendment to the Constitution whereby the non-party caretaker government was introduced to hold national elections.

All this is a kind of process that the ruling party did not initiate of its own volition, they did so largely impelled by circumstances. By that time we had lost many man-hours because

aspect that keeps snowballing all the time) that I made a particular point of recalling some of our brighter moments. Add to this the Communication Minister Nazmul Huda's utterance of the known of the familiar proverb -- 'there is no last word in politics' -- we are hopefully dealing with 'the art of the possible'.

The need for dialogue and quest for consensus however, receded in the background because of a certain sense of invincibility key players in politics appeared to have felt from

polls by skilled and modern pollster groups to assess public mood swings on burning issues could foster a dialogue - friendly environment.

There could be a 'free time' for the opposition in the Parliament and their MPs allowed to head some important parliamentary committees, subject of course to the principle of proportional representation.

We find no earthly reason why the ruling and opposition parties should not be genuinely interested in a dialogue. This is dictated by a pragmatic point of view topped off by a polarisation fatigue from an unabated battle of attrition so far. It will be in their supreme interest, both short and long term, that they get into a talking framework sequentially designed to reach national consensus on portrait and other issues. The list is not too long: electoral reforms with a focus around effective election tribunals, external relations, gas export, foreign aid, financial sector reform, labour reform, decriminalisation of politics and the like. Success on any one of these items could lead to breakthrough in other areas. They will be equal beneficiaries of the consensus so forged, whether they be in the opposition or in the government. Moreover, economy which is the driving force in the present-day world will be saved from the buffeting of confrontational politics.

SH Imam is Associate Editor of The Daily Star.

JUST ANOTHER VIEW

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helped the oust Ershad movement to eventual success. Notably, the document signed on November 19 and the popular upsurge bursting forth in a crescendo to seal Ershad's fate by the first week of December 1990, the connection cannot be glossed over. Even if the motive had been to ensure that none of the alliance partners gained control of the movement separately and hijacked the benefits to itself, there was nothing wrong with the attitude for all practical purposes. In fact, it was pragmatic and healthy thinking. But it does throw up a message for

immediately after the 1990 election. It proved to be a marriage of convenience despite serving a very useful purpose between November 19 and December 6.

It had envisioned vibrant parliament, independent judiciary, autonomous audio-visual media and free press. If that document of consensus were lived up to, we could have averted many of the points of no return we have had to negotiate with at great pains to ourselves.

There have been two concrete instances of highly charged political contentions being ultimately

of political unrest being on a spiral leaving deep scars on our civic and economic lives.

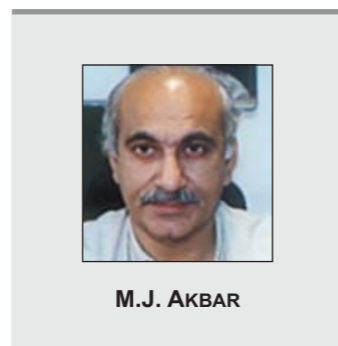
It has been a tragedy of bipartisan politics in a pivotal area of democratic culture that we have always belatedly woken up to the need for dialogue.

This brief resume on consensus building has been inspired by Finance Minister M Saifur Rahman, in a manner of speaking. It is in response to his clarion call to journalists that they highlight the positive side of politics (even though unfortunately it's the negative

time to time. Neither the opposition party's resort to hartal or boycott of parliament nor the ruling party's ruthless resistance to it has adversely affected their electoral fortunes. They come out elected either as the ruling or the opposition party in strength, their respective vote banks by and large behaving in a predictable manner.

Eventually this might call for proportional representation to perfect the system. That, however, need not preclude the necessity for optimal utilisation of the present system. Perhaps periodic gall-up

Why Modi deserves Nishan-e-Pakistan



M.J. AKBAR

NARENDRA Modi has done enough by now to win the highest honour that a nation can give. Not our nation. What the chief minister of Gujarat truly deserves is the Nishan-e-Pakistan. There are at least two Indians who, to my knowledge, have received this high honour from Islamabad, the late Morarji Desai and Dilip Kumar. Neither served the interest of Pakistan remotely as much as Modi has done in the last four weeks. For Narendra Modi has been trying to destroy the idea of India as a nation in which every citizen is equal irrespective of his faith. He has provided the evidence that was once offered only as argument.

That is not the only major favour that Narendra Modi has done to Pakistan. Till he started his lynch-mob response to the cruel tragedy of Godhra, all the negative focus of South Asia was concentrated on Pakistan and the state of terror that had been spawned by the state of Pakistan, to use a depressing pun. Narendra Modi has, in a space of days, taken Pakistan off the world's front pages and replaced it with Gujarat. Suddenly, the stories of violence and state-sponsored terror are all coming from Gujarat, each day's tragedy focused through television screens. If President Pervez Musharraf has not yet sent a thank you letter to his benefactor in Ahmedabad, then the President is remiss.

The television camera has existed through all the stages of the Ayodhya movement, from its resurrection by Rajiv Gandhi, misled by Arun Nehru, to the searing Rathayatra of L.K. Advani, to the demolition of the Babri mosque in December 1992, to the riots and bomb blast that followed. But television as a news-force did not. Television news was still what Doodardarshan chose to show you, and it did not choose to show you very much. Zee was still an incipient dream of Subhash Chandra, offering fresh lines in entertainment that would eventually grow with extraordinary speed to become an empire. Star was but a faint glow over a Hong Kong sky, searching for a focus on India. CNN existed, but more in theory than in fact as cable had not yet begun to chain the living room to the box; BBC was still getting its act together. Channels like Aaj Tak and Sahara were not even conceived. E-mail did not exist.

Narendra Modi's Gujarat has happened after the media revolution, when every story can become

world news in a way that is unprecedented. Narendra Modi has shamed India before India and before the world. He has unhinged a crucial element in India's sense of itself as a civilised democracy, and offered every television viewer an image of anarchy wreaking havoc with the wolfish help of a chief minister gone berserk. That image walked across the world, through the clearing house of American media, even as newspaper journalists confirmed its footprints with detail and analysis that created whirlpools of shock.

moorings, and is doing what is necessary to reconsolidate the Hindu vote. The operative word here is "necessary". For that becomes a subjective interpretation.

Cynicism comes naturally to a politician. Perhaps that is a natural defence mechanism in a difficult job. Cynicism is a non-partisan characteristic. Narendra Modi is not a cynical politician. Cynicism implies a degree of indifference, and Modi is not indifferent to anything. He is passionate in whatever he does. But

You do not see this intense, Nazi-type hatred in either the attitude or the behaviour of others from this school; the political stance, even when it is acrid, does not become a personal vendetta against a community. The Gujarat carnage does not stop because Narendra Modi does not have the desire to stop it. In one sense he is helpless, because the vengeful emotion that controls him is far more powerful than any other competing force, even suggestions he may be receiving from his own periodic bouts of good

energy than love; that is one of the tragedies of human existence. Love is warm blood; hatred is cold blood. If you need a vehicle for your hate, Mr Modi, direct it at the evildoers who are guilty; no one will stop you from bringing the guilty of Godhra to justice, and let them rot in their own hell. But to hate the innocent is depravity.

No government can prevent an incident, however evil it might be. Perhaps an instant reaction is also unavoidable. But the margin of error disappears after that. One of the first instructions given to a civil servant during training is how to stop a mob.

BYLINE

No government can prevent an incident, however evil it might be. Perhaps an instant reaction is also unavoidable. But the margin of error disappears after that. One of the first instructions given to a civil servant during training is how to stop a mob. There are instances in Narendra Modi's Gujarat itself where civil servants have done their duty because their conscience was above the signals of hate they were receiving.

The shock was not about the violence itself; no one is so naive as to believe that any society can eliminate the horrors of internecine conflict. The shock was the daily sight and sound of a chief minister justifying lynch mobs, finding excuses for a pogrom and telling blatant lies that were broken up and exposed by reporters.

As if death, arson and revenge were not enough, Narendra Modi laced each day with another mental and emotional shock that pandered to the worst aspects of inhuman nature. He valued tragedy on different scales, offering what might be called a two-price theory for death: a Hindu life was worth twice the life of a Muslim. Even to write this seems obscene. Man has not been fortunate enough to create equality among the living but at least there used to be some comfort taken in the fact that death left us all equal. Even that has changed. No responsible Indian has ever thought in this manner through all the horrors that we have witnessed in our nation since its bloodied birth. No Indian can. No Indian will, for such thinking lies outside the ethos, culture and civilisation of my India. Modi belongs to a political party, the BJP, which calls itself more Indian than any other: I doubt if any such communal valuation ever occurred to Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee or home minister Lal Krishna Advani or human resources minister Murli Manohar Joshi, to name the triumvirate at the top of this political hierarchy. Less dramatic perhaps, but of a piece with the twisted thinking that dominates Modi's politics, are the lies that he has been using ad lib and at random and to everyone, including his own leaders about matters such as relief and rehabilitation.

What is it that makes Narendra Modi do what he has done? It cannot be politics alone. He is not the first Indian politician to have played politics with communal riots. That list is long and cuts across political parties. The conventional idea is that he was handed Gujarat at a time when the BJP had lost its

his preferred passion is hatred. This is what makes him unique: he actually uses hatred as a political weapon, and employs both subtle and crude means to provoke a similar passion among others. You can see the difference in his eyes; there is gloat floating in them. This is why it is especially dangerous to leave power in the hands of a man like him. It is almost implicit that anyone who has been soaked in the RSS version of Indian history has acquired a deep sense of grievance against Muslims, but Modi is not the only graduate from the RSS school.

sense. The desire to "punish" Muslims just a little more, to "teach them one last lesson" in some unknown village, to spread the political poison to yet another corner before supplies are curtailed becomes irresistible. Where murder has been prevented by the arrival of civil society, pettiness takes over. Officers who have done their duty and shown that there is an India that can keep hold of its values through the haze of blood are transferred. Relief to refugee camps is held back so that hunger may revive dried tears.

Hatred generates far greater

instructions given to a civil servant during training is how to stop a mob. There are instances in Narendra Modi's Gujarat itself where civil servants have done their duty because their conscience was above the signals of hate they were receiving.

One serious difficulty about using hate as policy is that at some point it begins to consume the perpetrator. Maybe Narendra Modi does not understand this, heady as he is with life-and-death power; what is surprising is that Mr Vajpayee refuses to see what is obvious. He is of

OPINION

Harsh assertion in Far Eastern Economic Review

OMAR KHASRU

I find the basic premise of the 4 April 2002 Bertil Lintner's poorly written, shallow and self-indulgent article (Bangladesh: A Cocoon of Terror), the cover story in the Hong Kong-based Far Eastern Economic Review, extremely objectionable. It mainly consists of airy-fairy anecdotal tidbits, hollow bluster of fringe elements and sanctimonious utterances of left-over left-wingers. It is full of malicious and mendacious assertions and accounts. I strenuously object to the unsound theory, irrational observations and illogical conclusions with preconceived, unproven, and scurrilous notions.

If you follow the absurd, outlandish and untenable line of reasoning of Mr Lintner you can assert that the US is full of fundamentalists. The pronouncements and proclamations by evangelical preachers in late night TV would have you believe it is about to undergo a fundamentalist Christian revolution. The enlightened and knowledgeable people how that is not gonna happen, and treat the fringe groups with benign neglect. The tall talk, bluster and grandiose claims of the publicity hungry small and insignificant fundamentalist groups

far outweigh their popular appeal or importance. The author seems to have fallen in the trap of their claims, unless his intent was malevolent and motivated to begin with.

The vote that the Islamic parties garner has steadily declined over the years and was around four per cent in the last general election. The BNP electoral alliance with Jamaat does not automatically lead to the unreliable, inane and uncorroborated conclusion that the sky is falling, the wolf is here and Bangladesh is about to become a cocoon of fundamentalist terror. Several European liberal parties have had electoral alliance with extremist parties without long-term deleterious effect on liberty or human rights.

After the fantasy, conjecture and speculative but damaging and detestable sophistry of Bertil Lintner, let me point out some pertinent facts about Bangladesh. It is a Muslim majority country with a liberal bent. Most people are religious but not fanatical. Hindus are the largest religious minority. While a raging communal riot in the neighbouring Hindu majority India has resulted in 770 gruesome Muslim deaths, relative communal harmony exists in Bangladesh. Both the Government and the people

have taken customary hard-line stance against communal disturbances and retribution against the Hindu minority. This secular and tolerant attitude is a source of great pride.

Given time and space, one can refute much of Mr Lintner's vague and trivial points, full of drivel and embellishment. The donor countries, for example, expressed concern about the grievous law and order situation in the country. They made no connection of fundamentalism with high profile crimes. The description of Awami League, the party that suffered humiliating defeat in the last general election, as left wing secular party and the ruling BNP as conservative is laughable in addition to being outright baffle. There is no ideological divide, nor was there any significant difference in the election manifesto of the two parties. Bangladesh is the rare moderate Muslim majority country where the transfer of power through democratic means has become a norm, rather than an exception or an entirely forbidden practice. Women vote in large numbers, about 75 per cent of the eligible female voters cast their ballots in the last election. The voters rejected Awami League because of unfettered corruption,

and unremitting terrorism by party hacks and henchmen, with active patronage and corroboration by godfathers and party leaders. The party did not promote left leaning honest governance.

About 60 per cent Bangladeshi women work outside the home, same proportion as that in the US. The precursor and a potent catalyst for social uplift and economic progress are education and financial autonomy of women. Working enlightened and conscious women are also a powerful restrictive impediment against the influence of fundamentalism.

Bangladesh has many negative attributes. The law and order situation is atrocious. It is the most densely populated country with environmental degradation and levels of pollution in big cities the worst in the world. It, however, is not a fundamentalist country, and there is no real evidence that it is about to become one. Any claim to the contrary is a bunch of poppycock and gibberish. The allegation is intellectually dishonest and an affront to religious tolerance and secular attitude of vast majority of Bangladeshis. Mr Lintner ought to be ashamed of himself for the spiteful and spurious attempt to stigmatize this country.

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

Proposed Bill on Liberation War

There are several points to be made about this proposed Bill but in this letter I want to comment on the statement of the Minister for Liberation Affairs. One rationale he put forward for this was, and I quote from *The Daily Star* report "The Minister blamed the previous Awami League government for allowing a handful of people to use such organisations for their vested interests" The inevitable accusations of corruption followed.

The Awami League won 298 seats out of the 300 seats it contested in the then East Pakistan. Following the War of Liberation in 1971 the Awami League formed the first government of Bangladesh in 1972. They were in power till August 1975. From that date to June 1996, for 21 years, successive regimes mentioned the Awami League only to hold it responsible for all the ills that the country was suffering. During that period there was no mention of Bangabandhu's or the Awami League's political contribution. Programmes on December 16th and March 26th came and went. The Liberation War was discussed

without mention of the role of the Awami League. It was quite a feat of suppression. This omission did not, however, seem to bother the self-appointed custodians of our history. It would appear that the existence of the various foundations did not need supervision so long as they were low key about what establishments are pleased to call sensitive matters. What has upset things is that during the last five years the Awami League was able to restore the balance. A whole new generation - born between 1975 and 1996 - has been able to hear its name mentioned without being reviled. The *genii* is now out of the bottle. So

'damage control' is needed. The excuse is that the Minister wishes to stop the vested interests using these organisations, institutes and foundations. The reality is that he and his ilk wish to control the truth.

It is too much to hope that the present government will try to stand on its own feet and face being evaluated on its record when they did not do so for the long period when the Awami League was out of the running. There are those who say that Sheikh Hasina went overboard during the last five years in her attempts to bring back Bangabandhu's name into the history books. One would have

more respect for those officials had they, in the 21 years of official silence, ever protested the distortion of history that was taking place

Salma Sobhan Dhaka

Canadian Minister

I was glad to see the Canadian Minister visiting Dhaka. But was this like one of those UN Conferences where nothing is achieved or did the Minister take a good look at what's happening to this country and made the necessary harsh comments?

He should've, among other things, looked at the evidence of state sponsored terrorism with the

nominations handed out for the Ward Commissioner elections, the failure of the parliamentary system of government in Bangladesh and the long list of people charged with sedition.

Bastiat Dhaka

Listed terrorists

Bangladesh is probably the only country in the world where one can use the phrase "listed terrorist" with a straight face. Sort of like a listed contractor?

Where are those noisy NGOs now when criminals are openly contesting City Corporation elec-

tions? Why is Transparency International silent? Isn't it their job to try and publicise this malpractice?

After the general elections when the minority communities were being oppressed, we had no end of NGOs running about taking pictures, writing reports and giving interviews to the BBC. But when it comes to the real grunt work of protecting democracy from criminals, they are silent.

In my *naiveté* I had imagined that Human Rights included protection from terrorist running our city. Obviously the NGOs, the hypocritical donors and the civic community care only about things like minori-

ties, Islamic fundamentalists and what have you.

Dorji Dhaka

Say "NO" to hartal

The government should take the Awami League to court for calling hartal on April 6, disregarding the interest of the country. Democracy becomes anarchy when it starts to interfere with the welfare of the nation.

There are less destructive ways of making a point than calling hartal.

Concerned, on e-mail