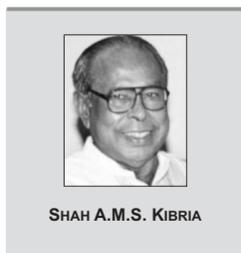


Why should I go to the Parliament?



SHAH A.M.S. KIBRIA

THE people of Bangladesh passionately desire to live under a democratic system of government. They have fought against military dictators who usurped power from democratically elected governments and eventually ousted them. During my entire adult life I have firmly believed in the democratic system. It may have its shortcomings but given the alternatives available to us it is doubtless the best system. The Parliament can, under this system, ensure transparency and accountability. It is out of this conviction that I took part in the October 1 general election and was elected a member of the Parliament. However, after my recent experience in the Parliament, a very disturbing question has come up in my mind: Why should I go to the Parliament? Who will gain what by my presence there? The question is basically addressed to myself but perhaps I can put this question to the respected leaders of our civil society as well. It may also be put to the distinguished editors and columnists of the national dailies, particularly those who claim to be neutral. I might also address this question to some of our foreign friends -- the envoys of a number of friendly countries. After the election some of these respected envoys repeatedly urged upon me to advise our party

leader to join the Parliament. No doubt they had the best interests of Bangladesh in their mind. They told me that despite our depleted strength in the House, we could play a significant role as the Opposition by articulating the nation's problems and concerns and pointing out the mistakes of the government. They argued that the acceptance of minority status gracefully after losing the election was the essence of democracy. Some respected editors and columnists, who are held in high regard by me, have been vociferous defenders of democracy and basic rights of the citizens. They criticized the Awami League relentlessly for failing in its duty by not attending the Parliament in the initial months. Many of them commented editorially that the Awami League was guilty of neglecting the people's interests. They pointed out that the Opposition members were duty bound to speak in the Parliament on behalf of the people. Civil society leaders joined in this chorus of criticism of the Awami League. Many of them were supporters of the Awami League while others were neutral. They all felt that the primary duty of the Opposition was to speak up on national issues and that it must be done in the Parliament. If the government had launched a campaign of brutal repression of the members and supporters of Awami League and the minorities, that was an additional reason for us to go to the Parliament in order to speak on such repressive measures. They all told me that the Parliament and not the street was the right place for me to make my points on these misdeeds of the government. In all these words of wisdom and advice the key word was that the Opposition must "speak" on behalf of these aggrieved sections of the society. I must say that I was deeply

moved by the concern of these highly respected groups of people. Their eagerness to send us to the Parliament in order to speak on different critical issues seemed to be echoed by the common people as well. Indeed, it was evident within the first few months that the giant-sized BNP-Jamaat government had started to fumble and stumble. Widespread terrorism and extortion under the ruling party's patronage leading to the rapid deterioration of law and order, a spiraling rise in

ment? Yes, by going to the House when it is in session and signing the attendance register I will protect my membership as well as pay and allowances but will I achieve anything else? The burning national issues that are crying for attention in the House cannot be discussed there. At the Business Advisory Committee meeting the Awami League members proposed a number of issues to be included in the agenda. These are issues that the people at all levels are inter-

est in and are talking about. Law and order, including death while in the custody of the military, price rises, arrest and detention of some fellow members of the Parliament, the wheat scandal, the seed scandal, the jet fuel scandal are all serious issues that demand urgent attention. To the utter surprise and disappointment of the Opposition and presumably of the entire nation, the Prime Minister summarily rejected the inclusion of all these items in the agenda of the current session.

own needs, not for the public interest. Perhaps there are too many awkward questions that could be asked, too many untruths that would need to be spoken by the members of the BNP-Jamaat Government in response. Certainly the issues of the day demand protracted discussion and deliberation but perhaps the current government does not have the patience (or the courage) to face the Opposition in open debate. In this regard it is instructive to note that the last session of

been no explanation for the quick release of some BNP leaders from military and police custody while no one from the Opposition have had such good luck. Will no one be charged in the court of law for what really are murders? People are at a loss to understand why practically no Jamaat and Shibir members have been taken into custody by the armed forces. The Parliament is the right place for discussing such troubling questions. My foreign friends tell me that in their countries they discuss such difficult political or constitutional issues in the Parliament. But here in Bangladesh the government of Begum Khaleda Zia refused to give any answers to these questions and refused to allow any discussion on them in the parliament. This, in essence, is the reason for my frustration as a member of parliament. I have not been given any opportunity to speak on issues of national importance.

ence. I expected the civil society leaders to speak up when the Prime Minister refused to allow a debate on these burning issues. I also expected the distinguished editors and columnists to wield their powerful pens to expose the hypocrisy of this repressive regime. I expected that they would launch a powerful press campaign to include these subjects in the parliament's agenda in order to make it a meaningful session. Given their incessant advice to the Opposition to go to the House to 'speak' on different issues of national significance, their silence is rather disappointing. Did some telephone calls cause such a change of heart? As regards our civil society, I don't see them or hear them much these days. Some of them must have remembered the motto, "See no evil, hear no evil". I have not seen many public statements by the venerable leaders of our civil society criticizing such blatant attempts by the BNP-Jamaat government to disallow discussion on the break down of law and order or death in military custody or corruption or arrest of members of Parliament.

I realize that one must not yield to pessimism and despair. The intellectuals of this country may yet speak up. At least I am confident that they will not fail to join those of us in the Parliament who have been rudely disappointed by the ruling party by turning the Parliament into a pliant instrument for keeping up a façade of democracy. In reality the BNP-Jamaat alliance is running the government as autocrats have done in the past -- by trampling under foot the rights of the people. If I cannot speak on such issues, why should I be sitting there?

prices of daily necessities of life such as rice, oil, salt, lentils and spices and corruption in the government are all important issues that needed to be raised and discussed in the Parliament. Awami League leadership certainly paid due attention to these words of advice. Despite reservations about the BNP and Jamaat's commitment to democratic norms and values, the Bangladesh Awami League decided to join the Parliament at the Budget session in June last year. As a member elected to the Parliament for the first time I also went to the House with a lot of hope. However, my experience in the House over the last six months has led me to ask the question that is the title of this article. Is my question only a rhetorical one? Actually no. There is no hidden meaning in it. It is a simple and straight-forward question. What is the use of my going to the Parli-

ament lasted only for a grand total of four days! The government's eagerness to shorten the session is another indication of their reluctance to face the Opposition in the House. Let us look more closely at the latest session of the Parliament. The public expected a full explanation from the government about the arrest of three members of Parliament. There were no specific charges against them. There was no such statement from the Prime Minister. Nor did she inform the Parliament under what circumstance and under what law the armed forces were deployed for tasks that are normally performed by the civil administration. The public wants to know who is responsible for the deaths in military custody? Are the people to believe in the fairy tales about the so-called 'heart failures'? So far there has

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Shah A.M.S. Kibria is an Awami League MP and former Finance Minister.

Theatre today

SARA ZAKER

WHEN I sit in front of the mirror to do my make up right before the performance on stage, the smell of pancake and compact and pomade and coconut oil binds me up and links me onto the experiences, nostalgia and memories of some thirty years of stage. I have the privilege of belonging to a very successful group -- Nagorik Natya Sampradaya -- that has brought milestone productions such as Dewan Gazi, Shaat Manusher Khojey, Nuruldeen, Irshaa, Achalayatan and Raktakarabi, to name only a few, to stage. Albeit dynamics of relationship with one's own group -- like an old marriage -- has its own charms as well as trials and tribulations. Today on Group Theatre Day I will like to critically review how the practice of "group theatre" in Bangladesh has affected individuals and theatre per se. In the post '71 years, when we started discovering the magic of theatre, we embraced all the forms of theatre that was available to us. The theatre of our land has a rich history of a thousand years of indigenous theatre and it also has an inherited tradition of the European proscenium form brought in by the English when they ruled the land for two hundred years. The theatre practice, as it gathered strength in the post liberation years, embraced both these traditions of theatre. With no holds barred on experiments with playwrights and forms, the Dhaka stage witnessed motley of work in the scheme of theatre practice. The one thing, though, that remained constant was the structure or the modus operandi of theatre. The theatre people of the post '71 years, chose to do theatre in the structure

and ideals of Group Theatre. (The exponents of Group Theatre were the village inhabitants of Manhattan, New York who involved themselves with theatre of socialist ideals in the turn of the century). The basic concept of Group Theatre as in the early seventies so also in the present day comes with the ideology that theatre should serve to shape the society and the nation. And essentially with this ideology comes the main theme that theatre will not be practiced with profit motive. The other details of group theatre are as given below:

- 1) It follows the rule that the same group of people will continue to be together and form a repertoire of plays for the group.
- 2) The same group of people will, through consensus, decide which script and director the group will take on for its next production.
- 3) It is also the norm for an actor or actress to perform only for his/her group.
- 4) The director sometimes takes liberty to work for some other groups but one may generally say that a group possessively holds on to its own director and allows little scope for him/her to venture out.
- 5) Some groups have their very own playwright and the group has the advantage of maiden staging of a play that may be written by him/her.

When the "same group of people" form the crux of the structure in a Group Theatre, it offers many advantages.

The same group of people came together, in the first place, because they had the same theatre ideals or the same political ideals or the same kind of philosophy about life. For example, one group may believe in doing the narrative form of theatre, some other group may believe in

With capitalist free market economy overtaking every other strain of Art, it is important for theatre practice to survive. It is important because the practice of theatre and other forms of performing art has built a whole new community of people who form and maintain the secular fabric of the society. These people of the group theatre have contributed in making this world more beautiful and less strife ridden. It has formed a fabric of the performing world where essentially a woman is not a commodity as we are so accustomed to see in the tinsel world and in the world of commerce.



Celebrating the Group Theatre Day

experimenting with the entire gamut of theatre that the world has to offer, another may believe that plays should be contemporary and should reflect the politics of the day and still others may believe it should essentially depict the class struggle within

society. Thus Group Theatre offers its members the comfort zone of working with his or her own ideology of theatre, life or his/her own political belief. Many a times, indirectly or even overtly a group may orient its new members to the ideology that it

believes in. To an individual, this ideological harmony puts him in a one less situation that could have been otherwise conflicting.

With Nagorik I have felt very comfortable in working with a group who may be easily described as

"liberal". I have never cowered to fan my feminist views since any view may be expressed in my group. In Nagorik we do not learn to appreciate one form of theatre over other. We see the entire gamut of theatre as the rich reservoir. So, Nagorik, my group, is like my home where I can't be.

However with so many years of practice, the concept of group theatre has shown me its downsides as well. I believe the people of the performing worlds can only grow so long as they are up against challenges. The very concept of group bars its individual members to meet up to a challenge in the sense that the group has a smaller world to choose from, be it in histrionics or direction or in writing of play. Therefore I ask myself, does the practice of Group Theatre allow me to expand my horizon? Thankfully, the greater electronic and mass media--that is the world beyond the group--has put us individuals in a bigger platform wherein to test our merit in the larger scheme of things. Had it been left in the hands of the group

this scope to test oneself in the world beyond would have been difficult. Group theatre is also self limiting in this modern age where we still hold on to the notion that we will do professional theatre by selling tickets but the overriding principle will be -- it has to be a "not for profit" venture. There was time when commercial interests would have marred the cause of theatre as an Art form. In Calcutta where Commercial Theatre was competitor in the early 40's and Art Theatre was losing out to commercial exploits, the Group Theatre with its non profit motives served a greater purpose. In the early seventies too in Bangladesh, it would have been difficult for us to maintain our own niche had we not described ourselves in the socialist "not for profit ideals". Now, with the changing times that position does not hold any longer. With capitalist free market economy overtaking every other strain of Art, it is important for theatre practice to survive. It is important because the practice of theatre and other forms of performing art has built a whole new community of people who form and maintain the secular fabric of the society. These people of the group theatre have contributed in making this world more beautiful and less strife ridden. It has formed a fabric of the performing world where essentially a woman is not a commodity as we are so accustomed to see in the tinsel world and in the world of commerce. With the changing economics the voluntary status of theatre gives it less

strength than other professions that gainfully employ their people.

1) Can we then look at practice of theatre that can run as a Company and generate enough money for the group to run on its own fuel?

2) Can this group theatre turned company theatre then allow members move from one company to another?

3) Can these groups / companies have the option of auditioning from many actors and actresses?

4) Can we forget about having to continue with same group of people year in and year out?

5) Can we form a cycle of activities in our theatre practice that will keep us self-financed and not make us rely on generous individuals for their office space or residence or the TSC for kindly providing us rooms (now withdrawn) for rehearsals?

In the near future we do not see any hope of state patronage to theatre. It has not happened in last thirty years and we see no reason to have a patronage now. We the theatre professionals will have to survive in this world that is red in tooth and claw. We have to see that the strong individuals that this world has created do not fade out. We have to see that strong women inhabit the world who know where they stand and are not devoured by the big bad wolves of the under-world. We have to build a strong universe and we have to survive.

I strongly believe, therefore, that in order for the Group Theatre to survive, Group Theatre has to change.

New Pax Americana?

BILLY AHMED

P NAC may be unfamiliar to most of us. It is said to be a secret blueprint for US global domination. President Bush and his cabinet were charting a premeditated attack on Iraq for 'regime change'. The blueprint for the creation of a global Pax Americana was drawn up for Dick Cheney (now vice-president), Donald Rumsfeld (defence secretary), Paul Wolfowitz (Rumsfeld's deputy), George W Bush's younger brother Jeb and Lewis Libby (Cheney's chief of staff). The document, entitled Rebuilding America's Defenses: Strategies, Forces and Resources for a New Century, written in September 2000 by the neo-conservative think-tank Project for the New American Century (PNAC) was uncovered by the *Sunday Herald*.

It says "The United States has for decade's sought to play a more permanent role in Gulf regional security." While the unresolved conflict with Iraq provides the immediate justification, the need for a substantial American force's presence in the Gulf transcends the issue of the regime of Saddam Hussein.

The PNAC document (supports) a blueprint for maintaining global US pre-eminence, precluding the

rise of a great power rival, and shaping the international security order in line with American principles and interests. This 'American grand strategy' must be advanced for 'as far into the future as possible', the report says. It also calls for the US to 'fight and decisively win multiple, simultaneous major theatre wars' as a 'core mission'.

The report describes American

political leadership rather than that of the United Nations;

-reveals worries in the administration that Europe could rival the USA;

-says 'even should Saddam pass from the scene' bases in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait will remain permanently -- despite domestic opposition in the Gulf regimes to the stationing of US troops -- as Iran

weapons of mass destruction, the US may consider developing biological weapons -- which the nation has banned -- in decades to come. It says: "New methods of attacks -- electronic, biological -- will be more widely available...combat likely will take place in new dimensions, in space, cyberspace, and perhaps the world of microbes...advanced forms of biological warfare that can

in love with idea of war, men like Cheney, who were draft-dodgers in the Vietnam War.

The regime change cannot be totally ignored when *New York Times* writers David E. Sanger and Eric Schmitt claim that: "Iraq would be governed by an American military commander -- perhaps Gen. Tommy R. Franks, commander of United States forces in the Persian Gulf or one of his subordinates -- who would assume the role that Gen. Douglas MacArthur served in Japan after its surrender in 1945".

Further, this new plan dose nothing to calm Arab, Russian, and European fears that this pre-emptive war presided by US with its bosom ally Tony Blair has nothing to do with the freeing the Iraqi people, and everything to do with securing Iraq's high grade, exploited oil and gas reserve.

A lady member of the UN Weapons Inspection team from International Atomic Energy said on arrival in Iraq to the waiting media, that though Iraq has given full assurance to cooperate but 'we are full of suspicion' (BBC News) -- with a mindset of suspicion -- will the inspection be fair or it is a prelude drill for war on Iraq?

American bully and influence of power appears to push the cradle of civilization near to destruction.

Billy Ahmed is a researcher.

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armed forces abroad as 'the cavalry on the new American frontier'. The PNAC blueprint supports an earlier document written by Wolfowitz and Libby that said the US must 'discourage advanced industrial nations from challenging our leadership or even aspiring to a larger regional or global role'.

The PNAC report also: -refers to key allies such as the UK as 'the most effective and efficient means of exercising American global leadership';

-describes peace-keeping missions as 'demanding American

may well prove as large a threat to US interests as Iraq has';

-spotlights China for 'regime change' saying 'it is time to increase the presence of American forces in southeast Asia'; This, it says, may lead to 'American and allied power providing the spur to the process of democratization in China';

-calls for the creation of 'US Space Force', to dominate space, and the total control of cyberspace to prevent 'enemies' using the internet against the US;

-hints that, despite threatening war against Iraq for developing

'target' specific genotypes may transform biological warfare from the realm of terror to a politically useful tool';

-and pinpoints North Korea, Libya, Syria and Iran as dangerous regimes and says their existence justifies the creation of a 'world-wide command-and-control system'.

One of the leading rebel voices against war with Iraq, Tam Dalyell, the Labour MP of the House of Commons said: This is garbage from right-wing-tanks stuffed with chicken-hawks men who have never seen the horror of war but are