

Expansion of parliament

The approach is seriously flawed

THE parliament session has begun amidst a predictable opposition boycott. The absence has an extra-bit of critical dimension to it than usual. For, the government could push through a constitutional amendment to expand the size of the parliament.

We had one of the most liberal and democratic constitutions in the world in 1972. Subsequently, it went through a series of mutations in character. The negative tampering with the constitution was manifestly at its worst during the military, semi-military and autocratic regimes. A curious combination of motives -- consolidation, perpetuation and legitimisation -- worked behind altering some of the original principles of the constitution.

But with the restoration of democracy from the autocratic clutches in 1991 one of the lost fundamentals of the constitution, namely, parliamentary democracy, was reinstated through a historic tripartite consensus of the political forces in the country. The reemergence of national consensus on democratic restoration and transition from presidential to parliamentary form of government was a landmark event in our annals of democratic evolution. The renewal of consensus taking place for first time since the liberation of the country and the adoption of the constitution raised the level of our self-esteem. We felt that the earlier disservice to democracy was more than mitigated. Then came the consensual adoption of the caretaker concept for conducting elections through a neutral and non-partisan mechanism.

Such a preciously restored legacy of getting our act together on vital national issues would receive a serious set-back if the government party were to push a constitutional amendment arbitrarily raising the number of JS seats from 300 to 450. It's a very major issue. Where is the government's rationale for setting those numbers? Even the live issue of direct election for women MPs has been side-tracked. How on earth, can the delimitation of constituencies be undertaken *sans* consultation with all stake-holders.

Constitutional amendment is too serious a matter to be bulldozed by a parliamentary majority. The government would be well-advised to go slow, expand the horizon of discourse and engage the opposition and civil society leaders towards reaching a national consensus on the issue. Given the environment of suspicion which our politics is immersed in, the least we need is fuelling it further.

ICC conference

A new directional thrust emphasised

THE international business conference, which began in the city on Saturday, laid much emphasis on restarting the trade talks that could make no headway after the Cancun debacle.

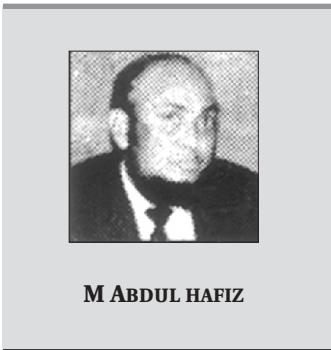
The conference on 'Economic Governance and Challenges of Multilateralism', organised by the International Chamber of Commerce-Bangladesh, saw Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra delivering his keynote speech following its formal inauguration by Bangladesh Prime Minister Khaleda Zia. The two leaders addressed some issues concerning world and regional trade.

The points made by them are important both in the contexts of multilateral trade and expansion of bilateral ties. The Thai prime minister attached great value to cooperation among the Asian countries and offered tariff concessions to Bangladesh on another 101 items - a clear testimony to his conviction carrying much weight when it comes to dealing with regional trade partners. He has also assured his Bangladesh counterpart of cooperation in all other fields where Bangladesh may seek Thai assistance.

So, from the standpoint of bilateralism, Thailand and Bangladesh have made tangible progress. However, the main thrust of the meet was on multilateral trading which had suffered a big setback at Cancun. Our prime minister pointed out certain limitations that the developing countries are beset with in the world of trade. Debt burdens and the failure to attain the desired level of export diversification stand in the way of the developing economies gaining the much-needed momentum. She also referred to market distortions by the rich nations still propping up sectors like agriculture through subsidies. That was indeed the point of discord in Cancun where the developing nations took a firm position against domination of world trade by a few rich nations.

The prime minister has actually raised some issues which were pushed to the fore by coalitions of developing countries in successive trade meets. However, the idea of global trade based on the principle of equality and fair play will never materialise as long as the playing field remains uneven.

A full circle



M ABDUL HAFIZ

BENGAL had been one of the few presidencies the British wanted to nurture as cradle of democracy. Not only did they grant fundamental rights to its people, the British equipped the province with the full compliments befitting a democratic polity. It wasn't without reasons. The very first British domination of Bengal couldn't but expose it to European enlightenment of the day. As a result Bengal was far more ahead of other British Indian provinces in education and political consciousness. By the time partition came in 1947 also socio-economically Bengal was a developing agricultural society in the process of industrialisation; whereas most other British Indian provinces including West Pakistan had then only a pastoral economy and a developing agricultural system at the best. Politically West Pakistani provinces were non-regulatory till 1921 when all powers -- Executive, Magisterial and Judiciary -- were concentrated in the hands of Deputy Commissioners whereas Bengal was a regulated province where the rights of the citizens were legally defined and the restrictions were imposed on the authority.

These politico-economic differences contained seed of future problem and called for a different structure which did not come forth. On the contrary not only our built-in advantages were cruelly scrapped after partition, the new contours were drawn in our political landscape to define new terms of engagements in inter-communal relations in new dispensations as well as new political ethos -- which came to be blatantly authoritarian. It was a cruel irony that we had to fight afresh to re-establish our basic rights that we had voluntarily forfeited by being subsumed to Pakistani polity -- let alone the question of garnering any extra advantage from our superior position. Whether in regaining



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fundamental rights, a fair deal on the question of autonomy or in registering dissent to government decisions it was again a long arduous struggle which took almost entire span of time of our union with Pakistan.

But then it was a political process we could not but go through. Even if it was a mixed bag the achievements were stupendous. We learnt to live through the struggle and in its process we settled many things -- through movements, dialogues or through a process of sheer political interaction. From the beginning Pakistan has been a novel experiment in the history of nation-building which was further compounded by a number of dichotomies. The ruling cliques hailing from West Pakistan, where lay the bulk of bureaucracy and the military, wanted to rule the country by means other than unbridled democracy.

As long as Pakistan remained united the inter-regional friction growing out of the clash of interest could however be resolved. An imperious government that ruled Pakistan immediately after partition could be made to understand the rule of the game in a democratic polity: the election, parliament, political dissent, constitutional opposition, tradeunionism, the right to strike and so on. For a time these institutions did function and democracy with all of its humiliation was flourishing even in a country like Pakistan. After all, a free fair general election of 1970 stood testimony to the fact how democracy was marching forward in Pakistan.

The advent of Bangladesh is considered one of the great political development in this part of the world. But has with that the political process of the country come a full circle? Seldom does a nation retrogress even if it only

crawls forward. But after half a century of our relentless struggle to move forward are we retrograding? We are reopening the settled issues of democratic norms -- the fundamental rights, right to dissent as well as the minorities' right and the right of expression. The newspaper is splashed with the news of vandalism of the party in power or its supporting organs against its political opponents. Isn't it reminiscent of what the Muslim League goons used to do half a century back hounding after nascent opposition of the day and any of their activities? Where are they now? Let's not once again inexorably push the country towards a fascist mould.

It is ridiculous today to debate over the rules, procedures and conventions of our parliamentary proceedings. Apart from the fact that the British gave us many things like self-government institutions and training institutions for higher leadership just on the platter we also with our genius and collective wisdom developed our parliamentary politics. Even during the British time the period between 1937 to 1943 was considered golden time of parliamentary democracy in Bengal. It produced leaders of the stature of Shahid Suhrawardy, A K Fazlul Huq and scores of seasoned parliamentarians with their records of momentous parliamentary speeches.

How were they made possible? It is no mean achievement that we made those great traditions. The question before us today is: shall we break them or rebuild? Democracy will have to be run only on democratic way. Running it any other way will leave in its wake anything but democracy. Let the new turn of the circle bear the stamp of our great democratic tradition.

Brig (ret'd) Hafiz is former DG of BISS.

Why Mumbai? Why not?

NAEEM MOHAIEEMEN
writes from Mumbai

WHY Mumbai? It was a question on many minds last week. Not, why does Mumbai exist? Or, what makes Mumbai run? But rather, why Mumbai as the location for the World Social Forum (WSF)?

On the gritty surface, I cannot think of a more inappropriate venue for the event. Mumbai is the most hyper-capitalist, fast-paced city in India, and in fact, much of South Asia. It is a grimier version of the "Bladerunner" megapolis, only with fewer skyscrapers and no replicants in sight. The World Social Forum, by contrast, is an annual gathering of NGOs, progressive activists, and campaigners against neo-empire. WSF was originally set up to create sustainable development through people-centred and self-reliant progress, as opposed to neo-liberal globalisation. In particular, it was set up as an alternative to the Davos World Economic Forum, IMF, World Bank and the WTO. WSF is not anti-globalisation (as critics would say), but rather it is for more sustainable and humane globalisation. It stands for Participatory Economics (Michael Albert's "Parecon"), not Exploitative Business. Logically, any city can host and benefit from this event. But a city where hotel rooms can run as high as \$800 a night seems an odd host for the 2004 meet.

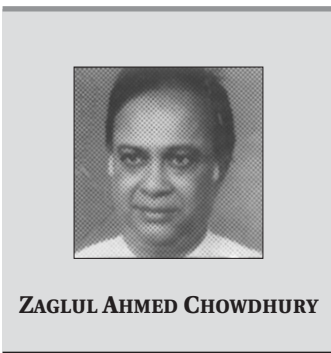
Mumbai is a sprawling city and traffic is the spider-web at its centre. To get from Point A to B can take upwards of two hours. During that journey, I have a lot of time to take in the surroundings. There are some very obvious signs of Transnational Corporations' (TNC) deep reach into the city's commerce centre. From Sansui ("Born in Japan") to Phillips, HSBC to Citibank, Gold Flake to Nescafe ("Jagao, Pilao"), all the big international brands are competing for billboard space. Alongside them, and complicating the narrative of "rapacious" TNCs, are hundreds of Indian or Indian-TNC partnership brands: Orange Cell ("Roam Like Home"), Tata, Four Square Cigarette ("Bombay's #1 brand"), Birla ("Whitest White Cement"), and Style Spa. In a city that is the stronghold of the right-wing Shiv Sena, there are also some business signs proclaiming secular unity. There is "Maharashtra Haj Committee Welcomes Haj Pilgrims", an airline ad that forms the peace symbol and BPL cell phone ads that feature conspicuously Muslim (topi, beard) and Hindu men (tilak) together.

Mumbai was chosen as the location through a complicated series of internal negotiations. For a few years, activists have been pointing out that the WSF can hardly claim "World" in its title if it keeps being held in Brazil and Europe.

Most fascinating of all is the crazy jigsaw of small entrepreneurs. Similar to Hernando De Soto's "Other Path" parallel economies, there are hundreds of small businesses mushrooming on the roadside. There are Kebab Corners (usually run by Muslims) that also sell Chinese food and have a poster of Subhas Bose as their mascot, bathroom fitting stores that call themselves "Wet Concepts", Hotel Babul that sternly warns "Liquor, etc. not allowed", and everywhere are tiny shacks and shops selling Internet, ISD, STD, Fax, Copy, Colour Copy, Photo-- all under one roof. The most unusual sight was the bread van I passed early in the morning. This was the same three-wheel van I remember from my Dhaka youth, but in the Mumbai 2004 version, the bright sign proclaimed: "Mother's Pride" (TM) and they offer a plethora of non-brand products: Chakki Ata, Pure Ghee, Spices, Papad, Basmati Rice, Pickles, Pulses, and Besan. And for those in a rush, the side of the van also offers "Online Shopping: emotherspride.com". Whether anyone would ever buy 40 Rupees of spices off the Internet is a different question, but some fanatical entrepreneurial zeal clearly runs through the Mumbai heartbeat.

So what does business-obsessed Mumbai think of the WSF? For the most part, the city seems oblivious to this major event. For one thing, the WSF is being held in Goregaon, which is on the edge of the city. For another, the city is currently abuzz with Salman Rushdie sightings. Everywhere he goes on his first trip back in a decade, shopping, partying, canoeing, there are sightings of girlfriend Padma Lakshmi to report back on. Then there is Rekha inaugurating the Femina Bridal Show, Jane Fonda performing monologues and the war-glorifying, big-budget blockbuster "LOC Kargill". On the political front, there are big splashy announcements of the Bush-Vajpayee agreement on sharing of nuclear/space technology. And in case I got lulled into dreams of secular utopia, the Maharashtra government just announced a ban on James Laine's book "Shivaji: Hindu King in Islamic India." All

Will the positive developments lead to friendly Indo-Pak ties ?



ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

THE recent happy developments governing the perennially belligerent ties between India and Pakistan have become a matter of discussions not only in the region but also at the larger international arena for the simple reason that a glimmer of hope has arisen on the possibility of a better Indo-Pak relations. An unalloyed optimism exists in many quarters that the two nuclear-powered inimical neighbours may now be able to find common ground to improve their badly ruptured ties. However, this feeling is "cautious" and also "guarded" in the quarters familiar with the character of their bilateral ties -- albeit the positive omens are not being downplayed.

The SAARC summit in Pakistan's capital provided a badly needed dialogue at the level of the top leadership of the two countries on the sidelines of the conference of the seven regional heads of government and the outcome of this contact has remarkably changed the nature of the New Delhi-Islamabad relationship at least for the time being. By describing as "at least for the time being", there is of course no intention whatsoever to overlook the potentials generated by the developments towards a long term friendly ambience but only to stress that such optimism did exist before as well, but unfortunately fell short of expectations resulting in the dismay of those who genuinely look for better relationship between the neighbours, a pre-requisite to a healthy

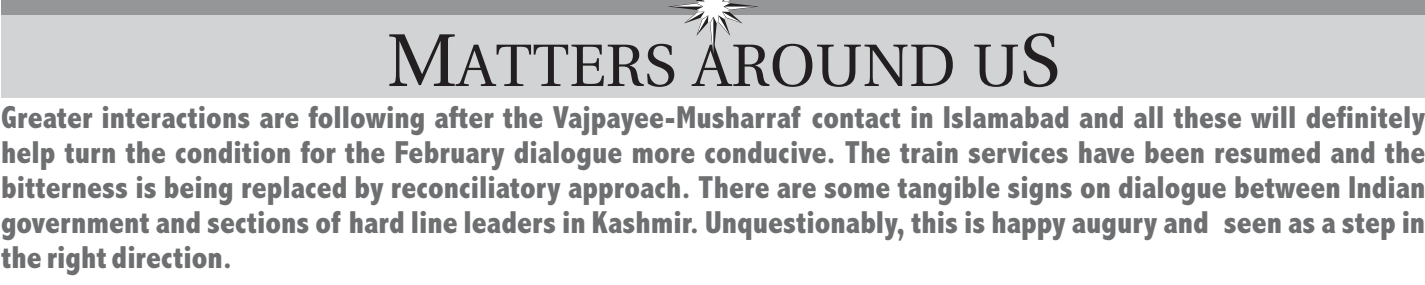
political climate in the south Asian region.

Summits are not uncommon between them and even symbolic gestures in the form of olive branch from one side has mostly been adequately responded by the other in the past. One can recall the "fruit diplomacy" when late Indian prime minister Indira Gandhi and late Pakistan president General Ziaul Huq gifted each other with Indian lovely 'lichis' and Pakistan's famous mangoes. This took place at a time when many of the contacts at bilateral level were not in

painstaking efforts were required for the unexpected development involving nations like the United States and the communist giant China. More recently, Pakistan's present head of state visited India and did not miss the opportunity of having a glimpse of his ancestral house in old Delhi. 1947 partition had resulted in huge migration of people between newly created India and Pakistan and many in both the counties occupying the helm originally belonged to the other side of the fence. Former Indian premier I. K. Gujral is another example as he came from

tatively different for the better as the contacts during the SAARC event spawned more positive results than such summits did before. The 11th SAARC summit in Nepal failed to create any congenial environment between India and Pakistan though it did cast a sobering effect in the bilateral ties to some extent. Since Pakistan was the host of the 12th summit, it understandably took great care in honouring particularly the Indian head of government because of the badly bruised relations. Vajpayee played his part earlier by deciding to travel to Islamabad despite a

the developments. Unquestionably, this has put pressure on both sides to carry forward the positive side while both countries seem convinced their peoples barring the zealots largely favour reconciliation. Two top leaders also appear to be keen to give a push in the peace process as this may also help them domestically. One is seeking to strengthen the power base after accepting some demands like shedding the army uniform next year while the other is facing national elections within few months and is obviously like to be seen as pursuing the path of peace



Greater interactions are following after the Vajpayee-Musharraf contact in Islamabad and all these will definitely help turn the condition for the February dialogue more conducive. The train services have been resumed and the bitterness is being replaced by reconciliatory approach. There are some tangible signs on dialogue between Indian government and sections of hard line leaders in Kashmir. Unquestionably, this is happy augury and seen as a step in the right direction.

good shape. Both met violent deaths while very much in power with absolute authority but the "fruit diplomacy" is very much in the minds of those who watched it. However, the delicious fruits could not take the sensitive bilateral ties too far as the positive ingredients created by the developments turned bitter in quick time. The Pakistani president once caused a surprise by travelling to New Delhi in short notice and visited his alma mater -- the St. Stephen College -- and many Indians welcomed him heartily despite he being a military dictator. Things momentarily looked better although none should have seriously felt that these gestures could lead to a qualitatively satisfactory stage.

But this is also true that at times matters which otherwise may look small can significantly contribute to breakthrough in the cumbersome diplomatic tangles and the "ping pong" diplomacy is a reminder although long backstage

Jhelum of West Punjab in Pakistan.

But the "Agra" summit between Indian premier Vajpayee and Pakistan president Musharraf failed to produce results even though hype and expectation centering the occasion had raised some hopes. Earlier, the Nawaz Sharif-Vajpayee summit in Lahore caught international attention as it was seen as a breakthrough in the icy bilateral ties but the euphoria disappeared much sooner than many had expected and two sides were virtually locked in a war situation over Kargil. As such, contacts at high level do produce some sobriety in complicated and even tension-ridden ties but what is important is how long can it last and how far can it go. Earlier, too contacts at high level and even at formal summits, which were so assiduously staged, culminated in pious hopes but mostly only to be belied.

This time, however, the developments have been somewhat quali-

security concern caused by a second attempt on the life of the president of the host nation just ahead of the event. This decision of New Delhi in itself was a move in right direction as the condition was not used by India at a pretext to stay away. Both sides seemed sincere in making moves towards betterment of the ties. Had there been no SAARC summit, the positive environment raising hopes for a thaw in their relations would not have come today. True, situation began to look for the better for sometime past starting with the restoration of the ambassador-level diplomatic ties followed by a series of smaller steps but it was the highest level contact that really substantially broke the stand off. Because, it facilitated a high level dialogue in the month of February.

As the two nations are approaching the talks, hopes naturally soared for productive parleys and this has received further impetus by support of outside world including powerful nations welcoming

as this may pay dividends in the polls. Gen. Musharraf may also be in the defensive as former premier Nawaz Sharif has accused him of being responsible for souring ties with India through the Kargil adventure and it is possible that Musharraf may now try to project himself as not rabidly anti-Indian by adopting postures favourable to peace. And for Vajpayee, despite existence of staunch anti-Pakistan quarters in his ruling BJP, an image of helping reduce tensions with Pakistan will come as a further shot in his arms in the twilight of his long political career.

But there cannot be any illusion that their real bone of contention is "Kashmir" in which two have almost diametrically opposite positions, which is an emotive issue for both and governments in New Delhi and Islamabad have compulsions in dealing with the vexed problem. Arguably, saner sections in both countries hold the view that stubbornness on the "Kashmir" issue only helps defying

a settlement and matters cannot go any far unless both sides demonstrate spirit of accommodation. The shifting of hitherto held positions is difficult but not impossible and bold leadership can accomplish the task howsoever sensitive and difficult it is. Islamabad has indicated that a settlement of the tangle can also be explored outside the old UN resolution, which remains the basis of Pakistan's stand of solving the problem. Indeed, it is heartening when viewed from the point of realistic approach even though the matter is still not clear what could be the shape of the options. New Delhi, although maintaining that "Kashmir" is its integral part, has shown willingness to discuss the matter a long with other issues. Two sides seem to be coming out from the intransigence.

Without going into details, it is possible to conclude that moves can be launched for substantive reduction of tensions by creating a condition that the contentious issue is not beyond settlement. No doubt, it will be a height of folly to expect that "Kashmir" can be resolved without going through a long and difficult process but the process can begin and both sides must seize the current opportunity of good phase being more pragmatic to improve the overall climate. The positive ambience must not be lost as this time the conditions appear better than before.

Greater interactions are following after the Vajpayee-Musharraf contact in Islamabad and all these will definitely help turn the condition for the February dialogue more conducive. The train services have been resumed and the bitterness is being replaced by reconciliatory approach. There are some tangible signs on dialogue between Indian government and sections of hard line leaders in Kashmir. Unquestionably, this is happy augury and seen as a step in the right direction.

Zaglul Ahmed Chowdhury is a senior journalist.

The boon and bane of TV programmes

ABU IMRAN

TELEVISION has now become almost inseparable part of life. It is a great source of knowledge, information, entertainment and the like. Despite its valuable contribution to life, people globally are now thinking towards its curtailment. But why it's so, is a good question. And it is not that people in the conservative east are only worrying about it, but surprisingly the people in the west are on the fore-front.

According to a write-up published in a local daily in its issue of December 2, 2003 by Mr. Shah Abdul Hannan, the international Islamic thinker, came across a book while in England, wherein the author had advocated six major reasons why TV should be banned. The Shah Saheb had elaborated and discussed the issue in details and came up with a balanced view and suggestion. I like to share his views with the readers.

As said, TV has positive sides.

But its negative sides are too strong to be ignored. The first and foremost thing is that though TV has programmes like news and views, IEM (information, education and motivation) subjects but now it's seen that it has become more a source of entertainment based on events like dance, drama, songs, crime, violence, sex etc. Further, because of the nature of the programmes people particularly the young are affected negatively which in turn has a corrupting effect in the

society. A story goes about a toddler who took his father's gun and shot at his friend (a toddler too). Asked about the reason, he told that the latter had refused a chocolate to him. It is a story more likely to be true since the children learn and imitate quickly. This episode was similar to that of a scene in one of the Indian movies where in a character had shot dead a man as he (the deceased) protested some of the excesses of the former. The ground however was too flimsy

for the character to shoot dead the other poor fellow. On the moral count too, the TV has no less corrupting effect. Most of the foreign films and drama serials have themes based on sex, violence, immorality etc. And on these people spend around 5-6 hours a day which could otherwise be used in gainful pursuits. The children also enjoy their own programmes like cartoons, sports, etc. but often for longer hours. In one case a child did not go for home-coaching since the

study time collided with that of his favourite TV programme. So the children enjoy TV even at the cost of their studies. For all such negative impact of Television, the anti-TV campaigners strongly argue to ban TV. But the Shah Saheb in his article came up with a balanced view and suggested not a ban but an arrangement whereby people could make a judicious use of television. They should use television less and less, save time and use for productive purposes.

If they do so, they may set example and then they can influence the young people to follow them in this noble work of employing the valuable time in gainful pursuits. This will be something like stop smoking first and then ask others to quit or limit smoking. It is said that the incidence of smoking in the west has considerably gone down. This could become possible because of taking anti-smoking measures vigorously as a social movement.

Accordingly, limiting the use of TV has to be taken as social movement. Vigorous campaigning through available media -- print, bill-board, rallies, meetings, seminars symposia etc. -- has to be launched. To start with, foreign channels have to be banned as done in some other countries and local TV programmes improved consistent with quality, culture, moral, religious values and hopes and aspiration of people.