

The PM's observations

How can mass arrests be justified?

THE prime minister has made an observation to the effect that nobody has been harassed by the law enforcers, who have arrested thousands of young men in the last few days.

With due respect to her, we beg to differ. The observation sounds out of touch with the ground reality. Firstly, the newspaper reports have been rife with information of police excesses committed at different points. The victims' names and addresses have appeared in reports along with their photographs in some cases. An extremely disquieting feature of the mass arrests has been the sub-human conditions many of the detainees, huddled in limited spaces, were put through. It seems coming to Dhaka has become a hazardous proposition for the young men from different parts of the country. None of these things seem to have been taken cognizance of.

Whereas one would have expected the PM to be seized of the allegations and issue orders for an investigation into the reported police excesses so as to prevent recurrence of the unfortunate incidents, her assertion could be regarded as being supportive of what has been happening.

The PM has given us to understand that the government acted on the basis of specific information and documentary evidence that a conspiracy was being hatched to oust it. What we want to emphasise is that if the prior knowledge of the conspiracy was specific, then the counter-action should have been specific, too. Instead, what we have seen is an indiscriminate and massive operation.

The PM has contended that there is documentary evidence suggesting hatching of 'a conspiracy'. Toppling of a government is a reprehensible political agenda and we have vehemently opposed it. Similarly, we decry the massively repressive measures of the government which have rubbed the wrong side of the people's sentiments. It is now the duty of the democratically elected government to share its 'specific information' regarding 'a conspiracy' with the public. People have the right to know what was the pressing need to arrest such a huge number of people, most of whom do not appear to be even remotely connected with politics, let alone politics of conspiracy.

AL meet with Speaker

Return to parliament more impelling than before

IT is noteworthy that the two principal issues that the AL leaders brought up to the Speaker in their meeting with him on Sunday are of an intrinsically constitutional nature. AL opposition to the proposed 14th amendment to the constitution and its demand for the government to step down and call mid-term elections are both matters that touch on the fundamentals of representative democracy. As such, we are at a loss to see why issues that are laden with such constitutional significance should not be brought and debated before the House itself.

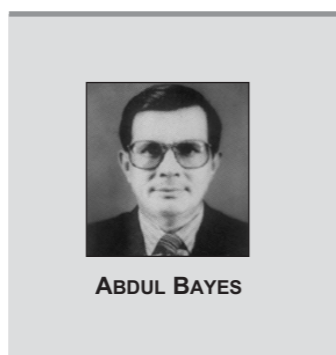
It seems to us that there are two very potent reasons why the opposition must now rejoin parliament. The first is their demand for early polls. If this is the position of the opposition, then they have a duty to take issue with the ruling party. And what could be the best forum to do it than the people's parliament? Perhaps if they were to argue their case in parliament we could judge for ourselves the merits of the matter. As it is, the opposition has been unable to persuasively articulate a reason for their stance to the voters.

The second reason is the recent arms haul in Chittagong. Given the discovery of the vast cache of weapons, it is not too much to say that we have entered into a new and uncertain phase when it comes to matters of national security and political stability. In such a climate, the role of the opposition in parliament is even more crucial. It is now, more than ever, the duty of the opposition to enter parliament to fulfill its role in getting to the bottom of this incident.

Indeed, three SAARC countries, India, Sri Lanka, and Nepal, are now battling insurgencies, and we owe it to them as well, as a member of the SAARC community ourselves, to investigate the matter thoroughly and come up with answers.

None of these important issues that are before us today can be adequately addressed outside parliament. The opposition is free to continue its programme of mobilisation and education of the masses to gain support (such as human chains, public meetings, etc though we maintain our longstanding position against hartals), but at the same time it should pursue a parliamentary strategy as well. The AL owes this much to the people, the outside world, and, ultimately, itself.

Women: Changing roles and realising rights



ABDUL BAYES

RESEARCHES on the roles and the rights of women are not rare now. Since the early 1970s, a large number of research articles have appeared in journals to drive home the points and also to pave ways for policy makers' prescriptions. The role of women's work for gender development and poverty reduction continues to be an important area of investigation. There is the growing notion that the one half (male) needs the other half (females also called better half) to make it full.

Theoretical framework

Drs Mahabub Hossain and Manik Lal Bose talked on: "Nature and impact of women's participation in economic activities in rural Bangladesh: Insights from household survey". This is mostly an empirical paper drawn from a household survey carried out in 1987 and 2000. Paging through the paper, one could glean the dynamics over a period of time.

To start with, the authors invoked the theoretical underpinnings of the issues under consideration. Marxists have distinguished between *productive and reproductive labor*, economists have conceptualised the difference between *market production and subsistence production* and between *wage and non-wage labour*, and sociologists have drawn the curtain between *work at home and outside home*. Neoclassical economic tradition emphasised the activities undertaken for the market and on that count alone, women's activities outside labour market failed to find a berth in economist's

accounting of national income. However, in 1960s, the human capital theorists developed a 'New Household Economics' to impute the value of time spent in household activities. The analyses were used to dig out the male/female division of labour, and members' behaviour in the market. In the 1970s and 1980s, these concepts were applied to further study of labour market from the angle of discrimination and bargaining power of different household members, to understand

activities. On the other hand, males devote less than one-sixth of the time that women put in for domestic activities. The authors are of the view that the decline in labour time during 1987-2000 period by both men and women could be a sign of positive impact of the improvement in economic conditions on leisure. *En passant*, the incidence of poverty in the sample households declined from 59 per cent in 1987 to 43 per cent in 2000. The findings seem to

agriculture by one-third during the period under consideration while increased labour supply to non-agriculture by 42 per cent. Just the reverse has happened in the case of women who have withdrawn some labour from non-agriculture but put in more in agricultural activities. We can presume these women could have come from tenant households. During 1987-2000, women have increased their labour supply to poultry raising, homestead gardening and non-farm services

with women bagging wages which is 42 per cent lower than men and in non-agricultural pursuits, it was 24 per cent lower. Of course, the educational level of the household heads matters in the disparity. Researches have shown that in rural Bangladesh the male-female wage disparity tends to be lower for households with their heads having some education.

Empowerment denied?
Does participation in economic

raising empowerment.

Million dollar question

Any way, more important factors affecting the index is women's age, land ownership and land tenure system, and the level of education. Findings of the study indicate that women are very seldom given the opportunities to express their ideas for execution, which is reflected by the low empowerment indexes. As a result, women's economic and social values are not reflected in the household decision making and leadership....Therefore, the basic questions remain on: "why women's empowerment and their participation in economic activities is very low despite relentless efforts made by government, NGOs and donors? Somehow there are critical shortcomings in the strategy of women development programme and its implementation...."

The last words

We can thus reckon that few factors should be addressed for raising the rate of economic participation of women. First and foremost is the economic growth itself to produce a tight labour market so that wage rate is increased. Second, government should embark upon more infrastructural development especially connecting households with electricity. In Bangladesh, less than one-fifth of the households are reported to have access to electricity. And finally, the supply of credit to poor households should constitute an important plank of policy matters.

The empowerment issue should be addressed mainly through imparting training to women on different economic activities, especially agricultural practices. Meantime, the formal and informal educative schemes should move on.

Abdul Bayes is a Professor of Economics at Jahangirnagar University

BENEATH THE SURFACE

We can reckon that few factors should be addressed for raising the rate of economic participation of women. First and foremost is the economic growth itself to produce a tight labour market so that wage rate is increased. Second, government should embark upon more infrastructural development especially connecting households with electricity. In Bangladesh, less than one-fifth of the households are reported to have access to electricity. And finally, the supply of credit to poor households should constitute an important plank of policy matters.

the dimensions of power and conflict in decision making. The above discourse and debate contributed to recognise the role of women's work in the productive and social sectors. Of late, however, empiricism entered into the discourse that still is plagued with controversies and complexities regarding the nature of work and the functional distribution.

Backward bending supply curve!

The authors observed that total labour hours (average/day) in all kinds of activities, both for males and females, declined between 1987 and 2000. For example, in 1987, adult population of rural areas used to devote 8.55 hours/day compared to 8.07 hours/day in 2000. Most importantly, hours devoted to economic activities -- that tend to fetch economic fortunes--declined from 7.57 hours/day to 6.73 hours/day for males and from 1.86 to 1.79 hours for females during the same period of time. Noticeably women in rural areas put in only one-sixth of the time that males do in economic

accept the hypothesis put forward by Pranab K. Bardhan and M.R. Rowzenzweg long time back: people work harder during subsistence pressure but withdraw some labour when conditions improve (both the seminal works appeared in the *American Economic Review* and during almost the same time, 1978 and 1979). "The substantial reduction in labour supply by women may partly be due to the replacement of the traditional back-breaking home-stead-based processing technologies (such as rice milling by *dheki* and pit looms) by relatively advanced commercial technologies (such as rice huller and the semi-automated looms) and improvement in the quality of housing that requires less time for cleanliness".

But not beyond home

The authors observed that women's role have been revolving round home-stead-based activities. Only 23 per cent of the total labour for women was on account of economic activities compared to 83 per cent for men. There is another difference between men and women. Men have reduced their labour supply to

but reduced labour on crop production, animal husbandry and cottage industries.

It appears that the most significant factor influencing women's participation in economic activities is the wage rate. A tight labour market fueling wage rate could possibly attract women to economic jobs. The development of infrastructure, especially of electricity, seems to emerge as the second important variable affecting women's participation in economic activities. And also, association with NGOs could affect women's participation in economic activities. Interestingly, Hossain and Manik observed that religion does not significantly affect women's participation while admitting that it is an unexpected result in the context of Bangladesh.

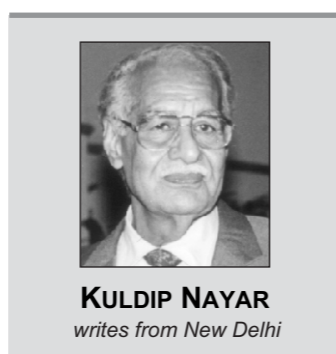
Disdainful discrimination

There is considerable disparity in wage earnings between men and women. In 2000, women received, on average, USD 1.07/day compared to USD 1.39/day for men. i.e. about 30 per cent less. In agricultural activities, the disparity is observed to be more pronounced

activities imply more empowerment for women? The authors measured empowerment index on the basis of decision making with regard to a number of variables and analysed the association with women's economic participation. The value of the index was observed to be low and its association with economic activities weak. But even then, women's economic involvement influences empowerment positively in the agricultural sector but negatively in the non-agricultural sector.

My recent visits in rural areas gave me the impression that women of poor and tenant families are relatively more empowered as far as agricultural activities are concerned. Of course, this could be due to the training on agricultural practices imparted by the Poverty Elimination Through Rice Research Project (PETRRRA) on a number of grounds e.g. crop management practices, seed health etc. Trained women tend to convey the knowledge to their husbands who, again, rely on them for the outputs in the fields. Thus training to women could be an important means of

Too close for comfort



KULDEEP NAYAR

writes from New Delhi

THE first opinion poll gave the BJP and its allies 335 in the 545-member Lok Sabha. Although the Prime Minister himself said that it was "on the higher side," his party leaders and the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) constituents continued to ride high. Exit polls have brought them down to earth, but only a bit. They still expect to win hands down and are talking about a sweep in Karnataka and Maharashtra, the two states which are with the Congress.

This may or may not happen. But successive opinion polls conducted by various agencies and newspapers have been showing the narrowing down of the margin between the alliance headed by the BJP and the one led by the Congress. The BJP one is still ahead, though the difference of over 100 predicted by the first opinion poll two months ago has drastically come down. In the last Lok Sabha, the BJP combination had 304 seats. The average of exit polls carried out now is between 260 and 280. Whatever else it may indicate, it projects a closer contest than anticipated. Such a scenario has its own problems. Instability is only one of them.

The Prime Minister probably had

that in mind when he appealed to people at an election rally to make up their mind and return one party because "there may be an international crisis." He may be right but his deputy L.K. Advani, sticks to the coalition politics. Both want to have the cake and eat it too. It is too early to say that the minorities have voted for the BJP, as the party claims. All exit polls put together do not touch more than 0.06 per cent of India's 165 million voters. If the minorities have voted for the BJP, it

continues to influence the electorate. Atal Behari Vajpayee's positive statements on India-Pakistan relations have not given him any extra advantage because every political party is saying that India should have better relations with its neighbours. Pakistan is not an issue, nor Kashmir.

It is, however, a coincidence but a telling one. India has deepened its democratic polity by holding the 14th free election. Pakistan, on the other hand, has institutionalised the

democracy -- something which his predecessor General Ayub Khan had also advocated -- to ensure that the country "does not go off the track."

My reply was: The armed forces in Pakistan had walked in whenever they had felt like. Nothing had stopped them. Then why have the Council? He argued that the armed forces had to have some legal authority to associate themselves with the governance. He cited the example of Turkey that had the

interference have been of no avail. The government, although embarrassed, seems to have no other option.

After four decades of military rule, Islamabad has come to develop a culture where America, although hated, is feared and followed. Whichever the government, whether Benazir Bhutto's or Nawaz Sharif's, it has not been able to resist the pressure which the State Department or the Pentagon has exerted.

elections, allowing the participation of both Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif. The present National Assembly, it is an open secret, does not represent the free will of people.

India, however, engrossed in elections, cannot feel happy over the constitution of the National Security Council. It strengthens the hold of the armed forces and gives legal status to the service chiefs in the governance of Pakistan. It may make the journey towards democratic change in the country still more difficult.

Some people in Pakistan or, for that matter, in India have often wondered how democratic India is. One thing sure is that the armed forces are apolitical. But to the dismay of many, caste and communal considerations have come into play to affect free and fair voting. Money too has an important role. The death of 21 women for free saris in Lucknow after the Prime Minister's rally says it all.

What is increasingly disturbing is the insensitivity of political parties to the country's real problems: poverty, unemployment and increasing cost of living. These have been either glossed over or buried beneath slogans like 'India Shining' or 'feel good' factor. The voters need to be motivated, not enticed. Mahatma Gandhi, much less his message of simplicity and self-sufficiency, has hardly mattered to political parties in India. In contrast, the parties like the African National Congress in South Africa profusely displayed posters with his photo and the slogan: 'Whom would Gandhi have voted for?' It has a message which the Congress, much less the BJP, has not understood.

Kuldeep Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.

BETWEEN THE LINES

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should get more than 250 seats on its own. But it seems that the party may not cross the present tally of 182.

My feeling is that the slogan, 'India Shining', undoubtedly an advertisement coup, has worked against the BJP, although the party has gone to town with it. The other side seems to have come up with facts and figures to prove that the sheen did not go beyond some cities and the upper middle class. Unemployment and the rising cost of living have affected the voters more than what was the BJP's estimate.

The BJP slogan of 'development' does not appear to have evoked much response. It is not so much the lack of NDA's credibility as of the traditional hold of caste which

military rule. Pakistan's National Assembly has passed the bill which has given legal entity to the National Security Council, an apex body, to decide on matters of national importance. The chiefs of staff of the army, navy and the air force and the joint chiefs of the staff committee are its members, apart from the President, the Prime Minister and chief ministers of Punjab, Sind, the NWFP and Baluchistan, the opposition leader in the National Assembly as well as the Senate.

I recall my discussion on the Security Council proposal with the late Martial Law Administrator General Zia-ul-Haq who was its father. He said that unlike India which had 'developed' democratic traditions, Pakistan required 'guided

national Security Council at the top.

In Pakistan it may be different. Parliament at Istanbul opposed its Security Council's decision to let the American forces to travel through Turkey to reach Iraq quickly. Ultimately, they had to take the sea route. Somehow, I do not see Pakistan's parliament acting in a similar manner if a comparable situation arose. After Washington's recent punitive action in northwestern Pakistan on its own initiative, it is difficult to say that Islamabad can follow Istanbul's example.

America has used Pakistan in the manner it has wanted to in the name of punishing the Al-Qaeda or tracing the terrorists who it believes were behind the 9/11 attacks. Protests in Pakistan's tribal areas against the

Nonetheless, there is some truth in the assessment that Pakistan had no go except to side with America when the latter decided to attack Afghanistan. The alternative could have been Pakistan's own destruction. But it did not have to go to the extent of accepting the NATO-like status, a relic of the cold war. There was no threat from the Indian side, particularly after the joint statement by Vajpayee and President General Pervez Musharraf.

Can all this have a silver lining? Now that the National Security Council is in its place to safeguard the interest of the armed forces, can the levers of democracy be allowed to operate? Musharraf should have no hesitation in holding fresh

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



Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

Sugar industry

The sugar mills are one of the most important agro-based industries which need to be boosted with the patronage of the government. The profit margin in this sector, unlike other agricultural enterprises, is very meagre. That is why the profit mongering investors do not go for investment in this sector. The point is very clear, as the private investors have not come up in this sector like other sectors since independence. For example, it may be cited that a mini sugar mill was set up at Charchat in Rajshahi, but it is not running smoothly. The deficiencies of the sugar industry may be attributed to the following reasons:

Firstly, sugar cane is a long-term crop which generally requires eighteen months to grow from plantation to harvesting.

Secondly, the profit margin in

plantation as well as in crushing mills is not attractive.

Thirdly, the variety constraint leads to low recovery of sugar from sugar cane in our country.

Fourthly, the introduction of sugar cane varieties by the national research centre at Iswardi has not been that successful. These varieties are vulnerable to pests.

Fifthly, by-products of sugar cane industries are not being used in a lucrative way like other advanced countries.

We are very much worried about the fate of the sugar industry as the government has invested a huge amount of money in this sector. These industries saved a lot of foreign exchange and, in fact, helped to use the so-called barren land of northern and southern Bengal. Mechanised cultivation has to be re-introduced to give

impetus to the marginal sugar cane growers. Incentive should be given to the growers, who grow inter-crops specially onion and pulse etc. along with sugar cane. Employees in the sugar mills should be asked to produce sugar cane in their own fields for the sake of their services and for over-all development of these industries. Variety constraint must be overcome with the assistance of sugar cane experts. If necessary help may be sought in this respect from the neighbouring countries. The rate of per acre yield is not promising. So improvement in this area is a must through adoption of some technological devices. This is the only industry which is giving employment to a large group of people, irrespective of disciplines, especially the agricultural graduates. As a result, the agricultural graduates are

contributing much to the rural economy, as most of the sugar mills are located in the remotest places of the country. As such, the benefits of the sugar industry have to be assessed in the light of sugar, molasses, animal feed, forest and fish production and overall development of human resources.

Haroon-ur-Rashid
Mohammadpur, Dhaka

'Lalmoni Express'

I had an opportunity to enjoy a train journey from Lalmonirhat to Dhaka by 'Lalmoni Express'. Train journey is always enjoyable and comfortable to journey-loving people. I am no exception. This train has opened a new horizon of communication to North Bengal people. It is a gorgeous one. North Bengal has always been neglected not only the

region but its people too. Anyway, it is a big gift for North Bengal people. I believe they are very happy to have this opportunity, though it takes much more time than a bus journey.

Md. Shafiquee
Karatia, Tangail

Hats off to Spanish PM

We thank and congratulate Spain's Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero for withdrawing Spanish troops from Iraq which was his campaign pledge to the nation. He promised to bring back the 1300 soldiers home by June 30, 2004, when their mandate expires, if the United Nations failed to take political and military control of Iraq.

It is heartening to know that there are persons who keep their words and give importance to the promises made to the nation. The Spanish people are very lucky to have a person of that character as their prime minister. The latest poll reveals that 72 per cent of the Spaniards want the soldiers to come back home.

How happy we would have been if we had leaders like that who keep promises made during the election campaign and the welfare of the people counts above everything else to them. But it is only a wishful thinking, we may not be that lucky, the politicians of our country have failed to give us even a glimmer of hope.

Nurjahan
Chittagong

Fighting for admission!

After passing the HSC examinations, most of the students want to get themselves admitted to any public medical college or engineering university, and so on. But seats in these institutions are limited and the numbers of the students are much more than the number of the seats. So the students have to sit for a tough admission test. It is like a fight. It is such a competitive examination that even a fraction of a number is very important. So getting a chance has become a matter of luck. I think our present system of admission test is not correct. Most of the institutions take admission test on MCQ questions. The answers to the questions are set in such a way that sometimes the students become confused and they cannot answer correctly. Sometimes, if luck

favours, the answer of a student may be correct, although he does not know the correct answer. He answers the question only on assumption. Besides, most of universities take admission tests on many subjects. Suppose, a student wants to study English, but he has to appear in exams on Bengali, general knowledge and some other subjects. Why is it necessary? I do not understand it. I think the admission test should be taken subject-wise.

Due to the limited number of seats and the system of admission test, many students do not get the chance of studying in a public institution. So the number of seats should be increased and the system of admission test must be changed.

Saima Ahmed
Dept. of English IUC, Chittagong.