

Private member's bill

Ruling party must rethink new restriction

THE restriction recently imposed by the ruling BNP on its MPs, requiring them to receive permission from the parliamentary party before placing a private member's bill in parliament, speaks poorly of its intra-party democracy. The ruling party has done all it can to deny the opposition democratic space in parliament, and now it seems as though it would like to do the same to its own party members.

Ruling party MPs are already severely restricted by Article 70 of the constitution which requires them to vote the party line on all matters. In addition to this, the parliamentary standing committees, which are another way for the non-ministerial members of parliament to get their voices heard, are more or less dysfunctional. Now the remaining power of the private members (non-ministers) from the ruling party has been removed.

The private members were elected by the people. They have a responsibility to their electorate and should be accorded the power to place bills as they see fit. The new restriction is a slap in the face of democracy.

In the first place, it shows what little regard the government has for the institution of democracy. Even more tellingly, it shows the low regard in which the government holds its own party colleagues.

We have long been arguing for more democratic space for the opposition. This latest restriction shows that that this is a long way off. Far from opening up to the opposition, the government is taking steps to restrict even its own party members.

This latest restriction is not in the interests of the nation and may well prove counter-productive. It undermines parliament, it shows the undemocratic face of the government, and it surely will lead to cracks in party unity.

The time has come for the government to show us its best face. Restoring the right of ruling party private members to place their bills without restriction would be a wise retraction. As of now, the government looks as undemocratic as its detractors claim, and now some of the detraction is coming from inside the party. It is a telling indictment.

No smoking in public place

Good, but there are other areas to attend to

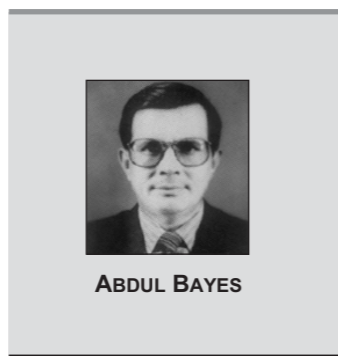
THE government's decision to ban smoking in public places and transports reflects its concern for public health, which is welcome.

It seems though, the focus is on eliminating smoking in public places which no doubt is a source of pollution. However, the decision-makers have to see to it that some other equally or even more potent sources of pollution are removed. We may point out at least three areas where the situation is going from bad to worse. First, a huge number of vehicles are regularly spewing black fumes which is a health hazard of great magnitude. Worse still, many of these ramshackle vehicles belong to different government offices and corporations. One may recall an old adage in this respect and hasten to add that charity begins at home and that the government and public sector corporations should quickly put their own black smoke emitting vehicles off the road to set the right example for the private sector vehicles. Then the large number of lorries plying the city roads at night are also polluting the air to a great extent.

Furthermore, we have a garbage disposal system which is but primitive. Many corners in the city look like an extension of the dustbins nearby, as filth and dirt spill over the roads. This has been identified as one of the reasons behind the spread of many diseases, but things are not improving. The Mayor says that he does not have an adequate number of sweepers at the DCC to smoothly carry out the cleaning operations. That may be true, but cannot be a plea for neglecting the very important job of keeping the city clean. Finally, the problem of industrial effluents being dumped indiscriminately is a serious threat to the environment.

The earlier decisions to ban two-stroke engine vehicles and production of polythene bags were welcomed by all environment-conscious people. The ban on smoking in public places may have been long overdue, but so long as the other major pollutants of environment are not combated we do remain vulnerable to serious health hazards.

Policy frames and poor farms



ABDUL BAYES

THE International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) recently opened its regional office in New Delhi. The creation of such an outfit, as I presume, is to bring the IFPRI business out of Washington and help strengthen the mobilisation of regional intellectual inputs. Supposedly, it is also to set the stage for a continuous dialogue with policy makers and stakeholders of this part of the world in the realm of issues relating to food policy and security. After all, food security for the region can hardly come by in a regime of research environment insulated from farmers most of whom are poor but endowed with potentials. The framers of policies must sit with the farmers of poverty in a bottom up approach of things to happen. Ipso facto, the initiators of such a device of disseminating research outputs (one such is South Asia Initiative, SA) especially Drs Joachim von Braun, Ashok Gulati, PK Joshi and Suresh Babu deserve appreciation for the change in a traditional mind set where Washington had always proposed and the region had to dispose. We can only hope that regional representation in the affairs would duly be respected.

The importance of the initiative was clearly realised by the Indian government. The Prime Minister (PM) of the country, Mr. Manmohan Singh, inaugurated the opening ceremony. In the words of Jamuna Prasad Yadav the driver who took me to the airport from hotel the

Indian PM is "a gentleman sir, an economics man sir, an educated man, sir". A man of Yadavs' heart, Mr. Manmohan Singh reiterated his government's commitment to keep agriculture moving. He lauded the role of IFPRI in the pursuits of poverty reduction through policy analysis. However, the PM also threw a disconcerting note on the distortions prompted by the pressure groups from farm management. Chaired by the famous economist Ishur Ahluwalia, the inaugural function was also

the needs of the poor. And finally, he draws attention to the non-economic factors endangering the objectives of equity and poverty status: "Promoting transparency and accountability, competent public administration, and the rule of law must be at the forefront of development policies".

Ploughs and plates

Montek Ahluwalia, an eminent economist of India and now leading Indian Planning Commission, presided over a technical session. A

facilities, and devising new institutional mechanism so that production of perishable products are propelled.

Smart small!

PK Joshi and others presented a paper on Indian context. In India, contribution of cereals, pulses and oilseeds to agricultural growth dwindled over the decade(s) -- from 55 per cent in 1980s to 49 per cent in 1990s. During the same period of time, the contribution of fruits and vegetables increased from 24 per

processors duly do it. He lamented over the lukewarm attitude of the governments and a lack of inertia in them in lining up farms to forks. Admittedly, the growth of such enterprises with so much high domestic value addition demands a paradigm shift in policies. Another participant, from Bangladesh Dr Shawkat Ali, raised some important conceptual issues that need to be threshed out before embarking on HVA.

The observations from Pakistan side by Drs Sartaz Aziz, M. Qureshi

growingly grooming HVA in their green fields. Of course, beneath the surface, the green revolution paved the ways through increasing land productivity and that should continue to happen. The government should come up heavily with more investments in research, extension and infrastructure developments for the newly emerging crops so that small holders can tide over the wave of globalisation.

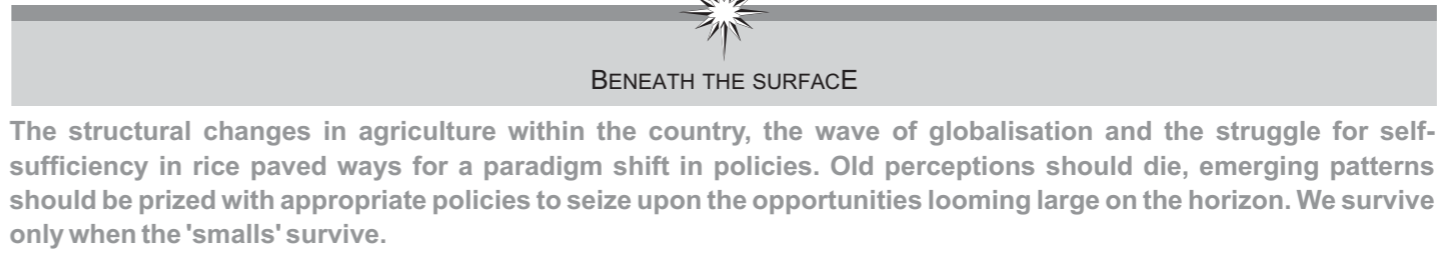
Farmers are not fools!

Mr. Chenglala Reddy is the Honorary Chairman of the Federation of Farmers' Association in Andhra Pradesh. He came to attend the session. The 'sweet' and 'substantial' submissions by the great economists and policy framers could hardly quench his thirst. Finding no floor, he was up on his toes to tell the audience the "tales of the tillers." Yes, India is progressing well with agriculture but, growingly, farmers have been committing suicide in large numbers. How long your research will last sir(s)? We want clear guidelines from you. We, the farmers, are responsive to markets, technology and modern inputs. You advise us not to use pesticides for side effects but you gentlemen swallow antibiotics knowing fully well that they have side effects too. We want more outputs even at some costs. Finally, don't think farmers are fools. Now a days they can change chief ministers and the recent elections are a point towards that".

Feel the pulse

The structural changes in agriculture within the country, the wave of globalisation and the struggle for self-sufficiency in rice paved ways for a paradigm shift in policies. Old perceptions should die, emerging patterns should be prized with appropriate policies to seize upon the opportunities looming large on the horizon. We survive only when the 'smalls' survive.

Abdul Bayes is a Professor of Economics at Jahangirnagar University



addressed by Joachim von Braun (DG of IFPRI) and Ashok Gulati (Division chief of IFPRI).

Economics and non-economics

Joachim von Braun spoke on the role of IFPRI in South Asia (SA), the Millennium Development Goals and the untapped market opportunities. "Trade liberalisation has the potential to offer tremendous opportunities for SA by opening up lucrative new markets, generating foreign exchange, and stimulating the agricultural sector that provides the majority of world's poor people with their livelihoods. Regrettably, however, international markets remain heavily protected, and developed country markets heavily subsidized. Reducing poverty cannot be accomplished until we assure a fair trade..." He further suggests that the objective of coping with impacts of globalisation per se should not be the perennial issue to ponder with, rather, developing countries should vie for a vocal participation in the process of shaping globalization to

team of IFPRI researchers led by Ashok Gulati provided empirical evidences on the changing agricultural practices, food consumption and marketing chains in this part of the world. As observed, grains and other staple foods have been on a wane both from ploughs and plates. But, at the same time, there has been rise in the importance of high value crops e.g. fruits, vegetables, milk, egg, meat etc. - to farmers. The shift from rice to rich food imposed a change in the retail marketing networks. Rise of super markets and expanded exports of vegetables tended to impart both opportunities and challenges for small farmers in SA. Behind the development, rapid urbanisation and rise in per capita GDP played the major role. In the changing scenario, the government's role should be less than what it was for the green revolution. The ensuing revolution should be backed up by a panoply of policies (not promises alone!) including provisions for credit to small farmers, infrastructure such as roads, electricity and storage

cent to 32 per cent. The authors further observed that the daily net profit of HVA crops was much larger than traditional food crops and thus pointing to potential investment in those crops by the small holders. In fact, small holders perform better than larger ones and the income of contract growers appear to be more than that of non-contract growers. The constraints to the expansion of acreage under these crops are, for example, high transaction costs and high risks. The government, I suppose, has a vital role to play in pushing farmers to the perishable products through an arsenal of investment in research, technology and institutional development.

On line and length

Major General Arjad Khan (Rtd) is an agro-processing entrepreneur of Bangladesh with enviable reputation. A practical friend as he is to poverty-ridden farmers, he saw the activity of processing of agricultural products as the pinnacle of poverty reduction strategy. Neither farmers nor consumers can add substantial value to agro products but the

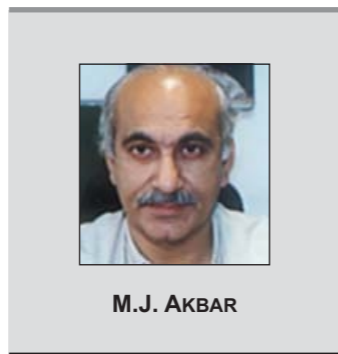
and Sohail Malik were pertinent for policy analysis. We could learn that despite a higher rate of growth in agriculture, Pakistan witnessed a rise in poverty level, possibly, during the last decade and hence agricultural growth and poverty nexus should be cautiously established. They further suggested a bottom up approach to prioritisation of IFPRI researches where discussions and dialogues in each country could recommend a list of such issues.

Professor Vyas of India described how agriculture in India now-a-days is dominated by the poor farms. The same happens in Bangladesh. So, a pro-agricultural growth strategy turns out to be a pro-poor one.

Government investment

It appears then that agriculture in SA had been undergoing a silent revolution. More market oriented, export driven, knowledge intensive. Unlike the green revolution when small farmers were hesitant initially to take up, small farmers of SA are

London diary



M.J. AKBAR

"KKOI gal hai." I do not understand the mysteries of free association, but this quote kept wandering through my mind as I savoured, long-distance, yet another century by Virender Sehraw. The author of the quote is a federal minister of Pakistan who had best remain nameless during this great outbreak of peace between Delhi and Islamabad. He was discussing President Pervez Musharraf's famous dictum that the future of his country lay in "enlightened moderation." Our minister, not too familiar with the complexities of English syntax, sat the phrase on his head and when queried, replied, "Enlightened moderation ... moderate enlightenment ... ikkoi gal hai (it's the same thing)." That's the great beauty of Sehraw's batting: whether he opens his innings with a six or completes a century with a six, it's one and the same thing. It is a happy state of mind that stretches, in varying degrees, across the great river-fed plains from Peshawar to the outskirts of Delhi. This mindset definitely changes once it crosses the border: Delhi is a city where craft is the operating element in statecraft. The state can go hang itself as long as the craft is brilliant. The plains of Punjab on the other hand

breed a cheerful mix of talent and sincerity, both natural elements, that cut across creed. When Sehraw suggests that it is mother's milk that makes him hit sixes, he is being truthful rather than sentimental. Nothing could be more natural than mother's milk, the dominant life-metaphor for strength, purity, and every moral virtue. Intelligence, in this syndrome, is subservient to sincerity. Sehraw's problems arise when his sincerity is placed in direct conflict with his talent, generally on

new law is a provision by which a suspect can be detained without trial on the orders of a politician, rather than a judge. This is effective denial of habeas corpus. And it was this that persuaded a vital pillar of the British establishment, the Lords, to return the bill thrice and force the longest confrontation between the two Houses in a hundred years.

The Conservatives, the Liberal Democrats, and a section of Labour MPs took a stand against Blair's harangue and threats that he would

terror campaign in the seventies and eighties, when multi-storeyed buildings were bombed to smithereens, and in a famous incident at Brighton, most of the Thatcher government nearly blown up, no one attempted to remove habeas corpus from the British citizen's bill of rights. And out of the 17 men convicted under the current anti-terror laws, only three are Muslims.

The big show of the moment is a splendid exhibition at the Royal Academy on Piccadilly on an

A famous schoolboy question, once put to me at lunch by the headmaster of a grand British school who confused my surname with knowledge, is: Why didn't the Turks increase the range of their guns before their famed and failed assaults on Venice, capital of the Austro-Hungarian empire and the bulwark of Europe against the East? It struck me that the answer might lie not in the range of guns but in the books before me. Battles are won by the supremacy of guns, but empire

broad-based knowledge and conquered the world, Turkey lost the knowledge edge, and lost the world.

A curious reverse process has begun. Tabloids and television control information at mass levels in a country like Britain, and knowledge is once again, albeit slowly, becoming an elitist fact, returning to the pinnacle of the pyramid after seeping towards the base for four centuries. The new elite may be determined by merit rather than class, but it is still narrow. A paradox of democracy encourages this process. Politicians who want re-election have a vested interest in mass ignorance: the truth about Iraq, for instance, might become injurious to their health. Dumbing down in print media and phobia-promotion in television suits them very well. Good journalism -- there is still a lot of it about, I am happy to report -- irritates them, and they seek to drown it with the bad.

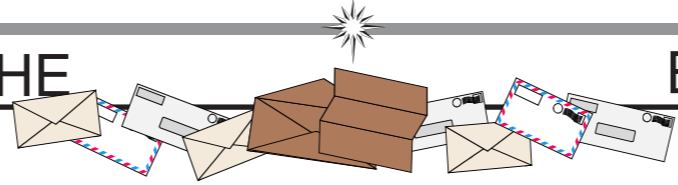
How stupid can television get? Surfing channels through an idle phase in the hotel room, I discovered a new low amid the Lowest Common Denominators of modern television on a music programme called B4. An anchor offered high rewards to anyone who correctly answered this question. "Which of these three married Bruce Willis: Demi Moore, Roger Moore, or Michael Moore?" No prizes from this column for the correct answer, even in an era of gay marriages.

As for Britain's glorious tabloid journalism, the last word must remain with the everlasting Hilair Belloc:

You cannot hope to bribe or twist, Thank God, the British journalist. But given what he will do, Unbribed, there is no reason to.

MJ Akbar is Chief Editor of the Asian Age.

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.

Supreme sacrifice

The whole country is in extreme shock at the tragic death of nine Bangladeshi UN peacekeepers. They came under a fierce attack--the deadliest and worst ever on UN forces by local militias in the north-east part of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). For the first time, patrol teams were caught in an ambush that resulted in the murder of nine Bangladeshi peacekeepers. Two platoons of troops were part of a company protecting a camp for internally displaced people to ensure their security but it is unfortunate that the soldiers were not secure enough to protect themselves from such a criminal attack. The area is known to be a centre of ethnic violence, and attacks of such types are always expected. This incident gives rise to some critical questions that need to be answered properly with explanations.

To what extent was the UN aware of the situation in those areas? How were the UN peacekeepers being briefed about the existing state of affairs? Was there any precaution taken for such hostilities, and if yes, what could have been their plan to combat such confrontation and finally why was the gun-battle one sided? Did the booby trap come into play? The attack seemed to be a very well executed ambush. It does prove that militias are strong and in a position to get involved in combat. According to several sources it is believed that the ambush was a premeditated and direct response to halt the peacekeepers' advancement. The area is a stronghold of several ethnic and political militias who are involved in looting the belongings of locals, murder and many illegal activities. Bangladeshi soldiers have been part of the UN

peacekeeping (MONUC) mission since 1999 along with troops from Pakistan, Morocco and Nepal. A contingent of 1,300 troops has been working there since deployment in Congo.

Their contributions and heroic effort have given them the highest honor. They never stepped back in the face of extreme hostility and moved forward to establish peace with great determination. They have sacrificed their lives, putting Bangladesh in an honourable position. We pray for the departed souls and hope the Almighty will give their family members the strength to absorb the shock of this tragic incident.

It has been a legendary end to a heroic effort. **Shafiqat Rama Sayed**
Dept. of economics and social science
Brac University

Introduce 'FAR'

In response to the news "Five satellite cities to be developed" published on 28 February, 2005, we urge the government to stop thinking of "plot-based housing" under the satellite cities schemes for Savar, Keraniganj and Gazipur.

We definitely appreciate the move in the prevailing situation where 2 lakh families will find decent homes on government

land. But we don't agree with making it a conventional plot development project (3, 5 and 7 kathas), because of the fact that it will create another slum like area without sufficient open spaces. It is necessary to recognise that very few of the urbanites (especially middle income brackets) would like to have plot ownership, rather most of them will like to have flat ownership, which is a trend that the government should examine closely.

Otherwise, one day the so-called 'plot' will become a multi-storied apartment house, and the result will be concrete blocks with no open space that is essential for a good environment. We should not follow the bad examples of 'Dhanmondi' or 'Gulshan', where plot-based apartment blocks are emerging fast, removing the green patches.

We would like to reiterate the need for open spaces for a sustainable urban habitat. We would like the Ministry of Land and the Public Works Department to study the series of discussions and meetings held between RAJUK and the Institute of Architects, BAPA (Bangladesh Paribesh Andolan), REHAB and other eminent architects and environmentalists, where we have observed a wonderful proposal being advanced for introducing 'FAR

(Floor Areas Ratio)'. We have noticed that only FAR can give a habitable open and built ratio by creating collective housing on a land through consolidating small plots and generating more open spaces for community use. It is practically possible to house 2 lakh family in the designated areas if we give the development work to a number of developers to build and sell flats under the private sector participation scheme. Details of FAR exercise are readily available with IAB (Institute of Architects), REHAB or RAJUK. If we could equate how much built areas the government is going to create for 2 lakh families, then we can easily make an alternative FAR proposal for bigger plots and create room for open spaces around the built form. We urge the government to reconsider the whole project by

"not opting for plots" and creating opportunities for introducing 'FAR'. Only then can we have a sustainable development scheme, which the government is apparently not aware of! **Dr. Q M Mahtab-uz-Zaman**
Assistant Professor
Department of Architecture
BRAC University

Neglected women

The development of a country entirely depends on better participation of womenfolk in all spheres of national life. But in Bangladesh women are still far from being integrated into this process. It is obviously a prime reason why our country is lagging behind in almost every sector. Freedom of women is undeniable and inevitable to ensure their wide participation. With a view to ascertaining their involvement, proper evaluation of

their capability is a crying need. But it is a tragedy that women of our country have to struggle for establishing their right of expression in their family and social lives. Moreover, they face many pitfalls in their daily life. They become the victims of acid terrorism and prurience.

Besides, religious bigotry and prejudices are barriers for women. Dowry, a ruthless custom of our society, destroys many dreams. After considering the present social and economic standings of our women, it seems we are still in the dark of the Middle Age.

Women have an immense power to lead the society towards progress. But our society is not creating the opportunities that they need to exploit their potential.

Golam Rosul Maruf
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