

Dr Muhammad Yunus and his political journey

RIPAN KUMAR BISWAS

EXCEPT a very few skeptics, none will disagree that no other person has been adorned with as many awards and honorary degrees as Dr. Muhammad Yunus, the teacher-turned-banker.

Undoubtedly, Dr. Yunus has become the blue-eyed boy of the corporate world, for his excellent performance and innovations in the field of investment and marketing of finance capital and technology among the poor through micro-credit.

But what will a Nobel laureate look like when he/she is turned into a politician?

Mr. Yunus has expressed his keen desire to enter politics, and many of his well wishers would like to see him in the ring right now. He does have a vast network in rural Bangladesh that has been set up by Grameen Bank.

Dr. Yunus undoubtedly has rapport with foreign leaders. He has a very good contacts with non-resident Bangladeshis, who don't have the right to vote during elections in Bangladesh.

Then how many voters in Bangladesh know him closely if they need to select him or his party in the elections?

The level of popularity of a politician tends to be very volatile, mak-

ing it difficult to sustain the same level of support for any length of time, and the outcome of any election more difficult to predict than before.

People must have noticed in recent months the ups and downs of the popularity of major politicians in Bangladesh.

Before entering into politics, Dr. Muhammad Yunus and all of his well wishers have to keep in mind several questions. Can he reach the rural people as a politician? Will general Bangladeshis be happy to see him as a politician? What do the urban elite think of him?

Will he able to overcome volatile political practices in Bangladesh? Does he think he can be a model as a politician too? What will be the impact if he fails to do well as a politician?

In a relatively young democracy with a highly polarized political system, the general people in Bangladesh aren't aware of the electoral and democratic processes of the country.

According to the Bangladesh Economic Review 2005, Ministry of Finance, the present literacy rate of Bangladesh is 62.66%. Very few of them know how to select the right person for the state.

There are a lot of things, which pollute the politics in Bangladesh.

Religion exerts a powerful influence on politics, and the govern-

ment was sensitive to the Islamic consciousness of its political allies and the majority of its citizens.

The ups and downs in the use of religion, religious identities and religious symbolism in the politics of Bangladesh over the last twenty-five years raises so many questions about true democracy.

NGOs at the grass-roots level have emerged as a modernizing influence in the rural areas, and have often had head-on collisions with the "traditional" spheres such as madrassas (Islamic religious schools).

Ironically madrassas and village Imams have been considered likely catalysts for development in the rural areas.

One of the prime bones of contention between the NGOs and Islamist parties in the rural areas has been the subject of increasing visibility of women in public.

NGOs in Bangladesh have been particularly successful in bringing women into income earning and educational programs.

Village power structures, using Islam as a way of social control, have attacked this phenomenon as being un-Islamic and undesirable for a country like Bangladesh.

The use of muscle power is also not new in elections. Muscle power is crucial in determining the outcome of voting. Muscle power can drive away the campaign workers

from the field.

There are stories where active workers were threatened out of their constituencies and could return home only after the election.

Is it possible for Dr. Yunus to use muscle power in the political combat?

Corruption is endemic in Bangladesh, and greed seems to be limitless. Public service in this social environment has become a victim of deal-making.

In politics, the power of money has assumed an unprecedented level of importance. First and foremost, money is required to build and maintain the muscle power.

Political parties now have student wings, labor wings, ladies wings, youth wings, and so on and so forth.

Even professional associations are aligned to political parties; for example, medical practitioners have separate associations aligned to major political parties. Most parties have their storm-troopers to extend party influence and enforce party discipline.

Within parties, powerful leaders have their own strong-arm supporters to maintain their individual positions in the party. Dr. Yunus may need these wings when he enters politics.

If a nationwide objective, efficient and comprehensive survey is conducted, the actual picture would

be revealed.

This would mean going to a large number of rural voters to see how far corruption, prices of essentials, and the power crisis, are factors for them.

In general, corruption is a huge matter, but if that was so, how could Ershad be a success in Rangpur even after he fell in the face of a mass uprising?

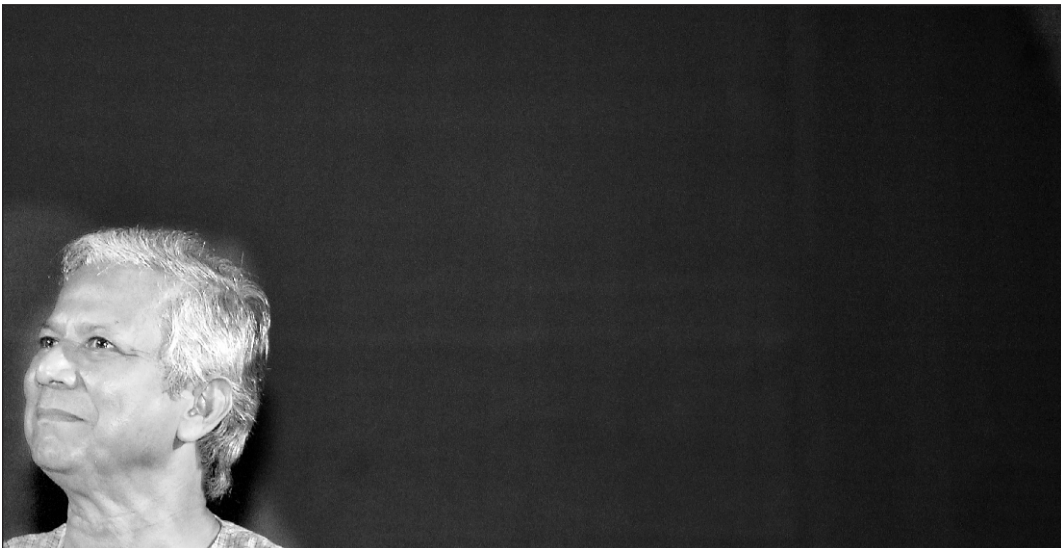
Awami League chief Sheikh Hasina, herself, was defeated from a constituency in Rangpur, which happens to be her husband's hometown. She lost that constituency due to the popularity of the last dictator-president of Bangladesh, General H.M Ershad.

However, to do well in politics, having Nobel prize, and getting Nobel prize for being a good politician may not be same, especially in Bangladesh.

Imran Khan, one of the best all-rounders in the history of cricket, has entered politics in Pakistan and set up his own party, Tehreek-a-Insaf (Campaign for Justice).

Although Imran Khan himself is the chairman, the party is still struggling in politics, and in the two elections it participated in it could not get even one seat in the first, and won a single seat in the next election, that seat was of Imran himself.

We can hardly forget the iron lady of Myanmar, Aung San Suu



Kyi, the Nobel Peace Prize winner in 1991, held under house arrest in Myanmar for pro-democracy movement.

The 61-year-old political prisoner still continues to denounce oppression and human rights violations and encourages peaceful protest across the country.

As every case is different, Dr. Muhammad Yunus might not be proved a failure in the field of politics.

But people naturally don't react positively if someone becomes second from first. And those politicians became first from second.

In Bangladesh, Grameen banks have side-stepped the local power structure and provided a mechanism for the poor to take responsibility for their own socio-economic development.

Since a Grameen Bank is part of village life in Bangladesh, the villagers and their children do not starve anymore, their houses keep them out of the monsoon, the women have more than one sari.

But is it enough to make them cast their votes in favor of Dr. Yunus?

Everyone in Bangladesh feels that terrorism, bureaucracy and

corruption are the major obstacles to clean politics.

If that is so, then how does a corrupt person become an MP again and again? How do radical fundamentalists become ministers? How can a dictator change the shape of democracy?

There is a big gap between a potential good politician and a real politician in Bangladesh. People of Bangladesh are more likely to see Dr. Muhammad Yunus as a political institution, not as a politician.

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Everyone needs a love bond

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MAXIMIZING profit and not ruining investment are the hard and fast rules of business. It sounds weird using love in the context of business and management, but should it be?

In the traditional business world it may sound silly, but things are changing. People are, most certainly, now seeking more meaning from their work and from their lives. Customers want transparency and availability of information, demanding that organizations behave more responsibly and sensitively with them.

Perhaps for this reason, relationship marketing, societal marketing and customer care concepts have evolved, because the traditionally selfish character of corporations and organizations, and the way they conduct business, caused an increasing number of people to get fed up.

In business and organizations, love means genuine compassion for humankind, with all that this implies. Love in business and work means making decisions and conducting oneself in a way that cares for people and the world we live in.

Love and compassion became unfashionable in corporations in some ways. In the 20th century, business was largely concerned with "left-side brain" perspectives, for example: performance management, critical reasoning, total quality, strategic planning, financial results, profit, etc.

Historically, men dominated the business landscape and still do so today, to an extent. Men are generally more prone towards left-side-brain thinking and working. Not surprisingly, male-oriented ideas and priorities -- especially dispassionate left-side-brain factors -- have tended to dominate business and organizations.

Conversely, love and compassion are generally perceived to be female traits. Men are less likely than women to demonstrate loving, compassionate behavior because of cultural and social expectations. But it does not mean that men are

ruthless.

Where unloving, dispassionate behavior exists in a business leader, whatever its cause, this unavoidably sets the tone for the whole organization to be unloving and uncaring, and devoid of spiritual awareness.

If this situation is replicated across very large organizations, as arguably it has been during the 20th century, then inevitably business, and work as a whole, tends to be characterized in the same way -- as unloving and uncaring, and certainly not spiritual.

However, unloving, uncaring methods, which tend to predominate in organizations and to be passed on through successive leadership generations, are not the entire, and only, way to run a business or organization.

Reward systems, and training and development methodologies, have been correspondingly dispassionate. Not surprisingly, therefore, ideas about loving people, being compassionate, are unlikely to appear in much management training manuals or training courses.

Workers and organizations in recent times are finding ways to be simply aligned with some of humankind's most basic needs -- to be loved, and to find our own purpose and meaningful connections in life -- which often brings us full circle to loving and helping others.

Now, leaders need to care properly for the people and the future of the planet, not just to make a profit and to extract personal gain. And, so, businesses and corporations are beginning to realize that genuinely caring for people everywhere is actually quite a sensible thing to do.

It is now, more than ever, necessary for corporations to make room for love and compassion -- to care for people and the world -- alongside the need to make a profit.

Love in business is becoming a popular concept. Some interpretations have a compassionate foundation; others are quite rightly incorporated within wider issues of corporate social responsibility and ethical business. Other ideas

approach the concept from the environmental angle, or sustainability, or "fair trade."

Barbara Heyn, a Cincinnati-based consultant, who helps organizations develop relationships and capabilities among people and teams, particularly in response to challenges of globalization and cultural diversity, sees love in organizations from the perspective of feminine instincts and behavior.

This is not to say that men are useless at it; not at all: men, like women, can actually do anything they put their minds to. Everyone can.

The concept of "feminine spirit" emphasizes that the biggest challenges in modern work and organizations respond to what we traditionally consider to be "female" strengths and styles.

Globalization is creating some new organizational challenges: Managing and developing global teams -- which require far more sensitive treatment than traditional localized structures.

Approaching cultural diversity as strength, not a hindrance -- which requires great perception, awareness and openness to possibilities. And creating inclusive responsible plans, and making ethical decisions -- which requires a strong sense of what is right and good, including compassion, humanity, and spiritual connection.

Most of them are traditional female territory, but must now be part of the male world too, because these are the big issues facing all managers, leaders and organizations today.

As such, this is a call for everyone in management and business to be more loving and spiritual -- to be more sensitive and understanding and compassionate.

In fact, love flows naturally when you create a space for it. People are naturally inclined to good. It's the business world that makes us resistant and skeptical.

Love can be used as a catalyst in business growth by viewing colleagues as potential allies rather than threats, finding ways to connect personally with others on an honest human level, asking sensi-

tive questions and identifying common areas of interest, and proactively looking for opportunities to help team members in a meaningful way.

For the managers intuition is invaluable, especially in dealing with people. This might be developed by, first of all, accepting that we have it, and then by practicing paying attention to our feelings. However, trusting intuition is a wonderful way to enhance decision-making skills.

Maslow's hierarchy suggests that people must satisfy five groups of needs -- in order, physiological, security, belongingness i.e. love, esteem, and self actualization. Without love other needs cannot be achieved. Today, the corporate world is paying great attention to satisfying this need, not only in their employees but also in their consumers, forming a triangular love bond to instigate business growth.

Mobile-phone operators and banks, especially, have the propensity to build up this long lasting relationship for their business categories. However, pharmaceutical companies have a great opportunity to build up this loving relationship with consumers because they are directly related to health care though, in our country, they feel happy to butter up doctors for business growth, but they do not know that love can do something.

Maybe love does have a place in business after all. Maybe more and more of us will have the courage to begin to talk about what really matters to us about work and our relationships with each other, and to push back the sterile language of business that we have been trained to accept. Maybe we will realize that accepting love in the workplace will remind us of the original purpose of work -- not to maximize shareholder value but to come together to do good things, to help each other and, hopefully, to make the world a better place.

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PRANAB BARDHAN

DESPITE the hype in the international media about India's global integration, economic reform has been halting and hesitant. Many cheerleaders of reform, among corporate tycoons and financial columnists, are unaware how unpopular reform is, rightly or wrongly, among the general public in India.

In the National Election Survey 2004, more than two-thirds of the about 23,000 sample respondents who had any opinion on the subject said that the reforms benefitted only the rich, or no one at all.

Politicians are, of course, too savvy not to notice this. Even the ruling parties over the last decade that supported reforms played them down during election time. Any party that initiates some reforms is quick to oppose them once out of power.

This duplicity is currently on display within the left. In the states where they hold power, they are often driven by the inexorable logic of fiscal near-bankruptcy and competition for investment to be pro-reform; but in Delhi their leaders regularly indulge in ideological grandstanding.

Opposition is not confined to the left. The recent reversal of a cabinet decision for privatization was under pressure from a non-left regional party.

Trade unions of the right as well as left parties are opposed to privatization and labour reform. The Gandhians are vocal against the lifting of the policy of reservation, which currently limits more than 500 products -- from bicycle parts to electronic equipment -- exclusively for the small-scale industries.

In the National Election Survey, respondents were asked about reduction in the size of government employees; among the poor, low-caste and indigenous respondents who had an opinion, the majority was opposed to such reduction.

Once the newly emergent, hitherto subordinate, social groups, often represented by primarily

caste-based or regional parties, capture state power and reserved jobs, they are not keen to give up the loaves and fishes of office or reduce the role of the public sector.

Of course, politicians have also done a poor job of explaining reforms to the common people.

If it was clear that electricity reform, which may involve a higher price, implies a higher capacity of the public utility to provide less erratic power supply, or that deregulation means loosening the grip of corrupt inspectors over small enterprises, some opposition could decline.

What financial columnists call anti-reform populism is actually a product of the manifold inequalities and conflicts of Indian society.

Data on inequality of household wealth distribution and that between the educated and uneducated classes, along with the prevailing caste and other social inequalities, suggest that India is one of the most unequal countries in the world.

Severe educational inequality, worse in India than in Brazil, for example, makes it harder for many to absorb shocks in the industrial labour market, since education and training could provide some means of flexibility in adapting to market changes.

China, for example, was able to weather the disruptions and hardships of restructuring under a more intense process of global integration during the 1980s and 1990s due to its minimum rural safety net.

This security was largely made possible by an egalitarian distribution of land-collectivization rights that followed the de-collectivization of 1978.

In most parts of India, the poor have no similar rural safety net. So the resistance to the competitive process that market reform entails is that much stiffer in India.

In general, because of social heterogeneity and economic inequality, the social and political environment in India is conflict-ridden, and it is difficult in this environment to build consensus and organize collective action

toward long-term reform and cooperative problem-solving efforts.

When groups don't trust one another in the sharing of costs and benefits of long-run reform, there is the inevitable tendency to go for the "bird-in-hand" short-run subsidies and government handouts, which pile up as an enormous fiscal burden.

Few politicians dare oppose the continuing serious under-pricing of water and electricity, the over-manning of the public payroll, and a long-standing refusal to tax the wealthiest farmers. Economic nationalism of the right as well as the left parties has long resisted the inflow of large-scale foreign investment in India which, despite some increase in the last few years, remains a small fraction of that in China.

The fear in India -- sometimes stoked by domestic companies keen on averting competition -- is of large global companies manipulating venal Indian politicians and generally compromising political sovereignty.

This is in line with the old "dependency theory" of development sociology, where underdevelopment is explained by foreign capital sapping the strength of domestic capital and the state.

Ironically, China has turned "dependency theory" upside down. The regime seems more confident of controlling foreign, rather than domestic, private capital, and the latter is still discriminated against in terms of credit allocation and expansion of production outside local areas.

Issues of fiscal and trade policy, financial markets, and capital-account convertibility, preoccupy any discussion of economic reform.

Reform would gain popularity if it were equally and simultaneously concerned with reform in the appalling governance structure for the delivery of basic social and infrastructural services to the poor in large parts of the country -- in education, health, drinking water, irrigation and more.

In the euphoria because of the high growth rates of recent years one should not forget, for example,

that the atrocious condition in India's health sector is worse than in even some African countries -- for example, the percentage of underweight children in India is not just five times that in China, it is worse than most African countries.

Resistance to market reforms also comes from environmentalists and those concerned with the rights of urban squatters, the indigenous, and other marginalized people. Markets, and development in general, have become identified with the uprooting of the livelihoods of the poorest people and despoliation of the environment.

The record of resettlement and rehabilitation of people displaced by roads or dams or mining projects is dismal in India (it is of course, worse in China), and the recent history of such projects is replete with arbitrary land acquisitions, contractor fraud and broken promises to the poor.

The pro-reform people usually do not engage in the arguments about the narrowness of the development goals being pursued, except by just referring to the standard trickle-down process of growth. There are serious differences on the empirical judgment on the adequacy of growth trickle-down.

In particular, employment growth at the low-skill levels has been disappointing so far, and to blame this on the restrictive labour laws, applicable to the large factory sector, is asking the tail to wag too large a dog, particularly in a country where more than 80 percent of workers, even in the non-agricultural sector, work in informal activities where labour laws do not apply.

The opposition to economic reform thus reflects not just the lingering nostalgia for old-style Fabian socialism that the financial press likes to lampoon. The roots go much deeper, into the various distributive conflicts throughout Indian society.

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Dr Yunus's open letter: My response

TAJ HASHMI

SINCE Dr Muhammad Yunus has written an open letter to all Bangladeshi nationals, I assume both at home and abroad, I am writing this in response to his letter seeking our opinion on whether he should join politics and float his own political party.

It would be audacity on my part to dissuade him from joining politics or organizing his own political party. Not only is he entitled to do so, but also because of his enviable credentials.

He is most definitely a very competent person, a wonderful organizer, entrepreneur par-excel-

lence, and above all, renowned and influential both within and outside Bangladesh.

Despite my serious reservations about micro-credit, the honest professor's pet project, being glorified and touted as "micro-finance" by mega agents of finance capital as the panacea for poverty, I would have welcomed Dr Yunus in the arena of Bangladesh politics as the country badly needs honest and sincere people at the helm of statecraft.

I have absolutely no reservations about his lack of political experience. He would be most definitely a million times better than both the experienced and inexperienced crooked ones running the polity since 1971. My only reserva-

tion is about his would be political associates.

I am sure, immediately after his joining politics and floating his own political party, scores of politicians, intellectuals, retired civil and military bureaucrats and members of the civil society would be joining him, apparently with a view to creating a corruption free Bangladesh.

I am, however, very skeptical about the intrinsic quality of most politicians and retired bureaucrats, who would outnumber intellectuals and members of the civil society in your political party.

You will have to be extremely lucky to get even ten percent of honest, sincere and patriotic elements in the politician-civil-military-

bureaucrat nexus. And, as you know, due to various socio-economic reasons, intellectuals and so-called civil society members no longer represent people with impeccable character, honesty and integrity.

Many (if not most) of them represent and support this or that political party, mainly for the wrong reasons.

So, what I apprehend will happen is that within a few months of floating your political party, mainly with politicians and retired bureaucrats (at least 90 percent of them are corrupt or potentially corrupt), your party will not be any different from party X or party Y.

And you will lose your popularity, your image will be tarnished,

and you will soon be turned into another member of the club run by people with insatiable greed, and the desire to rob the country through the game of politics.

If you believe that free and fair elections and democracy can get rid of corruption, inefficiency, and the perpetual state of chaos which often drags the country to the verge of total anarchy, I have nothing to say.

Personally, I do not believe that democratically elected governments run by corrupt and inefficient politicians who will always remain dominant in any elected government would bring peace, progress and prosperity to Bangladesh.

As we are witnessing today, even the un-elected, non-political

caretaker government under Dr Fakhruddin cannot contain corruption despite all its efforts and good intentions.

You would simply be another failure in this regard if you try to right the wrong through so-called democracy or by floating a political party.

Since the bulk of the population is not averse to electing thieves, robbers, murderers and godfathers, and has no qualms about selling its votes to them, how do you think you will ever win elections to form a government with honest and efficient people?

Eventually, I am afraid Dr Yunus, you would have to accommodate known criminals, bank defaulters, murderers, smugglers and godfa-

thers (too many and too risky to name them) in your party.

I have got two suggestions for you: a) create a pressure group with intellectuals, students and working class people so that the present caretaker government takes drastic action against all the corrupt elements, arrests hundreds of raghabs, boals and rui-kattas, beyond this paltry number of twenty-odd politicians; and b) ask the government to appoint you as the chairman of the Anti-Corruption Commission.

You once envied Justice Sultanuddin on his becoming the chairman of the Anti-Corruption Commission in 2005. You thought that containing and eliminating corruption in Bangladesh was the

easiest job on earth.

I still remember your figurative expression that "one needs to lie down under the tree and corrupt elements, like ripe fruit, would drop into one's mouth." Please take over as the chairman of the ACC.

If you want, I can write an open letter to President Iajuddin Ahmed and Dr Fakhruddin Ahmed to appoint you as the chairman of the Anti-Corruption Commission. If you can eliminate corruption at every level, Bangladesh will not need a government by a Nobel Laureate like yourself for prosperity, growth and development.

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