

Recalling Ekushey

There are battles yet to be won

EVERY observance of Ekushey February is a time to reflect on the long road we have travelled since some of our brave young men died in defence of the Bengali language in 1952. The reflection, again, comes in two ways. On the one hand, we go back in time to recreate within our collective consciousness the circumstances that led to the struggle for ensuring a rightful place for our mother tongue. On the other, we try to link that old sense of idealism along with the terrible reality of the supreme sacrifices made by the young to everything we have achieved or failed to come by since 1952. Out of all such reflections, an important message which emerges is that on 21 February 1952 it was a new struggle we launched to defend our cultural heritage as a people. And as the subsequent years till the attainment of liberation were to demonstrate, we did the job remarkably well.

For all our sense of triumph, however, we cannot but acknowledge that many of the dreams Ekushey February helped sprout in us are yet to be realised. In a very broad manner of speaking, Ekushey was a good deal more than a reassertion of linguistic heritage. It was a reminder to every Bengali that his future lay entwined with the democracy he could bring into his everyday life, with the economic well-being he could ensure for himself and his fellow citizens. Ekushey, in that sense, cannot then be a mere mouthing of platitudes. It is especially in these present times, as we prepare for a restoration of civility and national self-esteem through a proper, transparent and fair general election, that the symbolism of Ekushey acquires the necessary resonance. And then comes more. If Ekushey was a resurgence of secular nationalism for the people of this country, it follows that an underlying goal of such nationalism was the creation of an egalitarian society where all citizens would share resources and contribute to the intellectual and material growth of the country. Today, we must ask ourselves if those goals have come to fruition.

The answer is obvious. The road we have traveled all these fifty five years has, for reasons we are only too aware of, lengthened itself. Our aspirations to democracy, our dreams of prosperity and, overall, our goal of carving a respectable niche for ourselves in the global scheme of things are matters that still require our constant attention. Ekushey sends out the thought that when one battle is fought and won, there are many others waiting to be surmounted. Let the old pledge be renewed today as we pay tribute to the martyrs of February 1952.

Terror attack on friendship train

Our heart goes out in sympathy for the victims

IT was one of those things whose evil machinations cannot be even amply conveyed by the use of the word 'heinous'. It was outright devilish. As many as 67 people, mostly Pakistani nationals, were killed when two powerful bombs went off in a Pakistan-bound train. It was a horrific sight to see two bogies of the ill fated train burning while it was moving at a speed of nearly 100km through the countryside.

We in the neighbouring Bangladesh are shocked and join the people all over the world condemning this act of cowardice. It is by such acts that humanity is only diminished. No one with the slightest compunction can attack a train that carried the emblem of friendship between India and Pakistan in their renewed efforts to create peaceful atmosphere along the border.

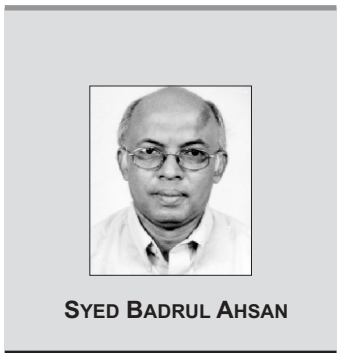
Our sympathies are with the families of those killed and injured. We stand by them at this hour of their grief. The deaths of those dead were twice more tragic since they were on their way to meet their near and dear ones on the other side of the border. God knows, for years or even decades, due to various political standoffs between the two countries, these people could not meet each other.

This terror act also bears special significance since it took place at a time when Pakistan and India were already in the midst of speeding up peace talks between the two.

Today Bangladesh too is faced with terror acts of various dimensions. It is also our view that terrorism can longer be dealt with effectively by a single government or its people. Tackling of cross border terrorism or otherwise would require the resolve, co-operation and firm commitment between countries irrespective of their political philosophies or differences in their state craft. It is, therefore, imperative not only for India and Pakistan but also others in the region to join hands against terrorism. Rather than engaging themselves in pointless blame games they should arrive at a consensus in firming up a common strategy to effectively deal with this ever growing menace against mankind.

When diplomacy stumbles, slips and falls . .

GROUND REALITIES



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

THE caretaker government appears to be reluctant about going for any more contractual appointments in the nation's diplomatic arena.

That seems like a fair enough proposition, given that of late there have been quite a good number of instances where political appointments to some of the more important of our diplomatic missions have not worked to our advantage.

You can name some of these places. Be it Washington or London, the unhealthy trend which has grown in the past many years of men not in the diplomatic service being sent as ambassadors to the United States, or as high commissioners to the United Kingdom, has quite blunted our efforts to present an urbane view of Bangladesh before the outside world.

But let there be a caveat here. During the period of Awami League government between 1996 and 2001, it was pretty refreshing to note the presence of career diplomats in Washington and London.

And it was refreshing because, for the first time in a very good number of years, the Foreign Office could truly claim that it had regained territory it had lost to men whose prime qualification for the jobs they came by was their proximity to the powers that were.

In the presence of KM Shehabuddin in Washington and AH Mahmood Ali in London, there was a resurgence in diplomacy for a country which had clearly fallen on bad days, in the political sense of the meaning.

In the five years of the BNP-led coalition government, Bangladesh's diplomacy abroad took a bad battering. You only need to reflect on a few salient facts here.

Take the matter of the mission in London, for instance. When the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and its allies returned to power in October 2001, the new government decided that one way of pacifying Sheikh Razzak Ali, the former speaker of the Jatiyo Sangsad who had seen his parliamentary constituency handed over to Ali Asghar Lobi, was to send him off to London as high commissioner.

The rumor was that Ali would be given cabinet rank in his diplomatic job. When that did not happen, he came back home, intending to recapture the ground he had lost in national politics.

And into his place stepped another BNP man, the former bureaucrat Mufazzal Karim. His time in London was as unremarkable as that of Ali.

He was soon to be replaced by another bureaucrat, Sabihuddin Ahmed. The trouble with these three appointments was that in as important a mission as London they did not add substance to Bangladesh's diplomacy.

Besides, when in five years you have as many as three high commissioners making their way to Buckingham Palace to present their credentials to the Queen, you really do not advance the national cause.

In Washington, KM Shehabuddin served the country well in the years when Sheikh Hasina was in office as prime minister. But then came a fallow

period when not much happened; and this was when the superannuated civil servant S. Hasan Ahmed took charge of the embassy in the United States.

His successor Shamsher Mobin Chowdhury has not exactly won high marks for his performance either. And while we are on the subject, let it not be forgotten that the last high commissioner appointed at the London mission by the Awami League government, Giasuddin (and he was part of the diplomatic structure) chose not to return home when asked to, and declined to take up his new responsibilities in Hanoi when the BNP-led government took office.

That again says a good deal about the attitudes some of our diplomats have tended to develop in the course of their stints abroad. But if some diplomats are guilty of placing personal sentiments quite above the call of duty, there have been other people in other areas of administration who have somehow managed, or been given, plum postings abroad.

Until a few years ago, the position of minister (press) was to be spotted only at the missions in Delhi, London and Washington. A fourth was created in New York when, towards the end of the Latifur Rahman caretaker administration in 2001, M. Muhaddes was sent there to take charge as minister (press).

Bangladesh's diplomatic service, if you would care to observe the history it has muddled through in the last many years, has often been treated with cavalier disdain. Urbane diplomats, men and women

who truly could have spoken for the country abroad, were either grounded at home or were asked to man relatively insignificant embassies abroad.

Jamil Majid should have served in New York or London or Washington. He ended his career through a late call of duty in Tokyo. Mohiuddin Ahmed, who served with distinction in London as the war of liberation went on in 1971, saw his career in the foreign service terminated abruptly, even as he served as deputy permanent representative (and acting permanent representative) at the United Nations.

A ruling BNP lawmaker, outraged that Mohiuddin had displayed in his office a photograph of Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia in the company of acting President Shahabuddin Ahmed in December 1990 (the Awami League leader should not have been there in the picture!), went into the business of punishing Mohiuddin through having him called back home and sent out to pasture.

That is one more instance of how we lost a good diplomat to the capriciousness of philistines masquerading as politicians.

And if you are looking for examples of how governments in this country have ruthlessly struck at the core of diplomacy, you only need to remember the Ziaur Rahman regime's handling of the majors and colonels who had murdered Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and the four national leaders in 1975.

Almost all of them were packed off to various Bangladesh missions as diplomats. One of them, Major

Shariful Haq Dalim, even rose to being high commissioner in Kenya, to our everlasting shame.

You tend to wonder how the governments of the countries these murderers were sent to could have accepted them when they knew full well what terrible crimes they had committed back home.

If Zia made diplomats of assassins, General Ershad did a more refined thing. He made it possible for retired as well as serving military officers to make a lateral entry into the Foreign Service.

That was how men like Mir Shawkat Ali, Abdur Rahman and a bevy of others found themselves transformed into diplomats. More intriguingly, Ershad sent his brother-in-law, AHG Mohiuddin, as permanent representative to the United Nations.

But let us walk back to that contract question. Yes, we have had some refined diplomats such as Jahangir Sadat in France. Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury was a good presence in New York before coming back home to be foreign affairs advisor.

Outside the clear parameters of the diplomatic service, though, there have been individuals who have served the national cause abroad fairly well. Both Khan Shamsur Rahman and Syed Najmuddin Hashim served with distinction in Moscow. M.R. Siddiqui, appointed ambassador to Washington only days before Bangabandhu died, nevertheless made the best of a bad situation in the post-August 1975 period.

AZM Obaidullah Khan was a sophisticated presence as ambassador in Washington. At other levels, especially in the position of ministers at the embassies, there have been a good number of men who have done a creditable job. You can think of Syed Nooruddin, who served as minister (press) in Washington in the early 1970s.

There are some distinctly positive things, which just might emerge from some contractual appointments to the diplomatic

service. Or call them political appointments.

What does happen to be the bigger reality is that sometimes men and women of huge ability, but not in the diplomatic service, can do a wonderful job of speaking for their country abroad.

The culture exponent Girish Karnad served a productive stint as minister at the Indian high commission in London, adding newer refinement to an already vibrant diplomatic presence in Britain.

The Pakistani journalist Maleeha Lodhi has already done an enviable job as top diplomat in such high profile places as London and Washington. In the 1960s, John Kenneth Galbraith was a symbol of American intellectual culture in Delhi.

In the 1970s it was Daniel Patrick Moynihan's turn to do that job. The cerebral Adlai Stevenson was an enlightening presence at the United Nations for four years till his death in 1965. Our very own academic A.R. Mallik injected a new intellectual dimension to Bangladesh's diplomacy when he served as high commissioner to India.

And so, to this question relating to contractual appointments in Bangladesh's diplomatic structure, the response is both a yes and a no. Yes, we will uphold the larger interest of the Foreign Service through warding off all moves to undercut its morale through parochial political infiltration.

And no, we do not subscribe to the notion that some of the best and the brightest outside the charmed circles of diplomacy not be asked to speak in defence of the nation's political and cultural heritage in the councils of the world.

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Why "Yunus samarthak goshthi?"

MRIDUL CHOWDHURY

OVER the course of the last few decades we have grown so used to seeing Bangladeshi politics turn into a hotbed of corruption, terrorism and power play that we, particularly the young generation, have developed a strong distaste for politics and politicians in general.

At such a time, by announcing his intent to form a political party, Dr Yunus, the unquestionable national hero and pride of our time has brought back hope and has perhaps changed the way we will look at the role of politics in Bangladesh.

Even if his party cannot win in the upcoming elections, he will have produced a political platform that has the potential to change the Bangladeshi political scenario once and for all.

If we cannot make use of this historic opportunity, presented by the recent caretaker government, to build a sustainable political process of representation, the country, sooner or later, is sure to again slip into the grips of questionable national heroes (whether self-proclaimed or not), no matter what positive developments we see in the short-run.

It is sure to offer a chance for those who want to contribute to positive change through involvement in constructive politics, but have never found a meaningful space in the existing political scene, which is mostly controlled by corruption, terrorism and cronyism.

And, perhaps as a result of Dr Yunus's entry into politics, the culture of developmental politics will gradually take root in Bangladesh.

Having said that, I should also point out that perhaps one of the biggest sources of weaknesses in

our political process is our inherent attitude of hero-worshipping when it comes to politics.

All the political parties, which have governed the country since its formation, find their legitimacy and strength around certain personalities.

This has greatly contributed towards creating a culture of non-representational politics at all levels, where local voices have hardly found a way of reaching national political podiums, and internal party dynamics has been centered around a very few selected groups of elite closest to

those personalities and their immediate family members.

We certainly hope that Dr Yunus, with all his wisdom and intellect, will not follow the same trend and build a party that draws its legitimacy from his own personality -- no matter how well intentioned and honest he himself may be.

The overarching goal of a political party should be to create a platform for fair and objective representation of people from all corners of a country so that it goes beyond national personalities and stands the test of time and change

of leadership.

Dr Yunus's recent move to form "Yunus *samarthak goshthi*," or "Yunus supporters' groups," at village and ward-level to gain support for his as yet non-existent party certainly points to the fact that he may be in the process of building another personality-centric party.

He is still officially in the process of gathering people's feedback on whether he should form a party or not; he has also not yet laid down any ideological basis on which his party will be formed, except that it will be free of corruption -- which is not really a political ideology by itself.

And, yet, he is already mobilizing grass-root level support around himself, not around the concept of a new political party or any ideology.

If Dr Yunus does end up creating yet another heavily central-

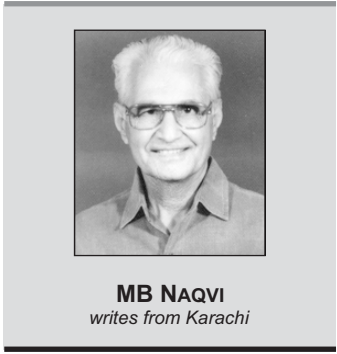
ized, personality-based political party, he will have contributed little to changing the very core of what is wrong with our politics.

Corruption and terrorism in politics are not causes but symptoms of the weak political mechanism in our country -- just removing the symptoms is not likely to lead to a sustainable change towards constructive and representational politics.

If we cannot make use of this historic opportunity, presented by the recent caretaker government, to build a sustainable political process of representation, the country, sooner or later, is sure to again slip into the grips of questionable national heroes (whether self-proclaimed or not), no matter what positive developments we see in the short-run.

Mridul Chowdhury is a graduate student at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government.

Who to vote for and why?



MB NAQVI
writes from Karachi

ELECTION campaigning has begun. Everyone has to choose which party to vote for. This should be examined carefully in the light of the problems facing Pakistan.

The army's domination of Pakistan state and politics is the biggest problem. The criterion for public policy-making has become the army's corporate interests.

The democracy being advertised by the military is deceptive. It is a military regime masquerading as a democracy. It is a one-man show.

Unless the army is ousted from politics, democratic governance, vital for tackling the myriad problems facing Pakistan, will continue eluding us.

Who can the forget poverty of, and squalor around, a third of Pakistanis? Unemployment -- structural, seasonal and tempo-

PLAIN WORDS

It is remarkable that there is no left-of-centre or left party. True, a large number of left groups exist as a statistic. In terms of influence, there is little to note. Abid Hasan Manto has been forming a left alliance of all the small groups and individuals. It needs to provide a manifesto of how it would solve the issues enumerated here.

rary -- is widespread. Democracy and Pakistan economy have supposedly taken off.

But they enrich only 10 to 15 percent of the people. The rest face problems in making two ends meet.

Apart from the masses' poverty, and prosperity of just 15 percent, proper education and healthcare are not available to most Pakistanis.

Haphazardly throwing some money at these problems does not expand and improve social infrastructure. What is needed is well-conceived economic plans to be executed by professionals for achieving intended results.

The need of the hour is for the parties and candidates to propose concrete ideas on the kind of development they aim at.

It does not signify whether poverty is 23 percent or 33 percent or 43 per cent. Sure, determine it.

For the whole answer, look at how large sections live in unhygienic conditions in ramshackle

houses, with uncertain incomes, while prices go on spiraling.

The first priority has to be development. But what kind of development is needed? The benefits of development have to be distributed more equitably.

Indeed, those who are below the poverty line must be brought above it within a specified time, without forgetting to reduce the miseries of those who are just above the poverty line.

Poverty has to be eliminated, not alleviated, by ensuring jobs or some social security. This is the touchstone for judging all parties.

Islamabad's foreign policy also is controversial, while the national horizon remains clouded. Afghanistan's troubles have traveled to Pakistan's western regions, particularly to FATA and Balochistan.

Also on the horizon is a possible war against Iran. Should that happen, as Prime Minister Aziz has said: "It would be disastrous

for the region." Pakistanis need to adopt a position on the geo-strategic aims of the US in Asia. That will determine what we do about them.

Should Pakistan remain a non-Nato ally of the US, and a participant in the terror war? It is a fateful question. Can an alternative political leadership not suggest ways of withdrawing from that high-risk course?

Let others have this honour. Pakistan should be content to focus on and look into its own problems, and set its own house in order so that those people who are in need are benefited.

Another problem is headaches. All Muslim League governments since 1949 have relied on Islamic rhetoric. They wanted an Islamic state that would also be modern while contributing toward Ummah's progress.

This prospect excited Islamic scholars: some came forward with concepts of an Islamic state or,

nizam-e-Islam. Today, there is an alliance of six religious parties, with MMA selling the idea. It seeks vote in Islam's name.

Should Pakistanis vote for the Islamic state because they are mostly Muslims? And would not an Islamic state, or nizam-e-Islam, be a copy of Mullah Muhammad Umar's caliphate in Afghanistan.

Will watering it down suffice? No modern person, Muslim or not, is likely to opt for that.

Today, the most powerful party, the Pakistan military, is represented by President General Pervez Musharraf. He has collected a band of renegades and turncoats from other parties and calls it Muslim League (Q).

What the latter wants is to re-elect Gen Pervez Musharraf, still on active service, through the existing assemblies. For the rest, its programme is to carry on what Mr. Shaukat Aziz began as finance minister.

If Pakistanis are satisfied with what he has achieved, PML (Q) candidates in large numbers will be returned.

What about the two major opposition parties: Benazir Bhutto's PPP and Mian Nawaz Sharif's PML (N)? The larger Benazir PPP may get more votes because it can still cash in on the memory of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and

the party that the PPP was.

This memory has not vanished, though it has faded for many. It is a different kettle of fish now. It is more pro-American than General Musharraf, if that is possible.

Coming to power again, it will pursue Shaukat Aziz's policies, perhaps a little less coherently. What its social policies will be is foreseeable.

It is feudal in outlook; will accommodate all the moneybags; and let the common man's exploitation go on as hitherto.

Perhaps its rhetoric of democracy and people's power would be a shade shriller than that of PML (Q) or even PML (N), though it will happily give the army what it wants.

Nawaz Sharif's PML (N) is intensely anti-Musharraf, and gives an erroneous impression of being anti-army. It is not anti-army. It will render unto Caesar what is Caesar's, so long as the Caesar is not Gen Musharraf.

In economic policies it do not differ much from PML (Q)'s. Its foreign policy would also be more or less the same as PML (Q)'s, or Musharraf's.

In short, there is not much difference between any of the three major parties over what matters.

The issue of democracy needs special treatment. The democracies Pakistan has seen were in

1947, after 1971, and post-1988 era.

These were over-centralized governments that claimed to be federal. The federation was, however, defective.

The provincial governments are more or less powerless, dependent on the centre for money and on major policies. All significant decisions were made by the center's top men.

Consequently, three separate regional or ethnic nationalisms have flourished: there is the Pushtoon nationalism in NWFP in two versions: the secular Pushtoon nationalism of ANP, PMAP and others, and the Pushtoon nationalism of various Islamic militants and the Taliban themselves. The latter has mixed Islam with a dash of Pushtoon nationalism.

Balochistan sports three nationalisms: first is the secular Baloch nationalism, totally unloyal. The murder of Akbar Bugti and the manner of it have given a boost to its insurgency.

The second is Taliban and is what it is in NWFP. The third is the purely secular Pushtoon nationalism of Mehmood Achakzai's party.

On the whole, Balochistan is in the grip of two low level but continuous insurgencies, the potential of which is generally underrated by

Islamabad.

The background is widespread poverty. Few see Pakistan's innumerable problems being solved soon.

The army's control of the state structure exacerbates every alarming problem. Militarised governance is the worst way of tackling

- Major structural problems,
- Ideology's ugly progeny, terrorism,
- Ethnic rebellion-in-the-making in Sindh, and steady, if also low-level, insurgency in Balochistan, and
- Increasing lawlessness almost everywhere.

If Pakistanis let the army rule indefinitely, the future of Pakistan will be dark indeed.

It is remarkable that there is no left-of-centre or left party. True, a large number of left groups exist as a statistic. In terms of influence, there is little to note.

Abid Hasan Manto has been forming a left alliance of all the small groups and individuals. Will he be able to muster a force that can be an alternative leadership?

It needs to provide a manifesto of how it would solve the issues enumerated here.

MB Naqvi is a leading Pakistani columnist.