

More than a routine visit

Pranab makes a positive impression

INDIAN External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee's whirlwind trip to Dhaka was primarily undertaken to convey the Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's invitation to Chief Adviser of Caretaker Government Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed to the New Delhi Saarc Summit scheduled for April 3 and 4. But it has gone an extra mile signaling that their bilateral relationship would now be placed on an 'irreversible higher trajectory'.

The very fact that Dhaka and New Delhi have agreed to use such spectacular phraseology to mark a visit by Pranab Mukherjee couldn't have been meant as mere rhetoric; for the key words here are 'irreversible' and 'higher trajectory', words that can be tested vis-a-vis actual deeds. We think both countries now believe, given the changing outlook in the region and beyond, that they must come to terms with each other for the greater economic good of the friendly peoples of the two countries. They have tremendous potentialities in the region which can be put to complementary use in advancing each other's development goals.

In this context, we welcome India's announcement of duty-free access to two million pieces of ready-made garments from Bangladesh every year to the Indian market. It's also a heartening disclosure that the issue of restrictions being placed on import of cosmetics from Bangladesh has been thrashed out. This is just a modest beginning in opening up Indian market to Bangladeshi goods having regard to the manifold trade surpluses India has over Bangladesh. There is a vast scope for removal of para-tariff and non-tariff barriers from the Indian side. India as a big market can afford to help Bangladesh in diversifying and expanding her production base by recourse to buyback investments.

It is reassuring to know that the Indian minister has allayed Dhaka's concern over Tipaimukh dam by asserting that Delhi has no intention of diverting waters at Tipaimukh project. We recall India's commitment to consult us before going for the dam. This commitment was not kept.

Our hope is that in the 14th Saarc Summit in New Delhi a definite headway will be made for early and full implementation of Safta for heralding a free trade area in South Asia. The agreement to cooperate on fighting cross-border terrorism is something worth implementing with a higher priority attention. On the sidelines of Saarc, we expect Bangladesh-India relations to go further up in the promised 'trajectory'.

Demand for restoration of NPAW

We fully endorse it

WOMEN and human rights activists have demanded restoration of the National Policy for Advancement of Women (NPAW), which was adopted in 1997 following the Beijing Women Conference and in tune with the UN Convention -- CEDAW. The NPAW was subjected to change by the immediate past government that almost negated or undermined many of the equality principles incorporated in the policy.

The adoption of the NPAW was a major breakthrough as far as establishing the rights of women were concerned, since despite constitutional guarantees social and economic discriminations against women are rampant in society. The new policy had provisions of ensuring equal participation of women in economic activities and recognised in principle equal inheritance rights which would ultimately be the basis for eliminating gender discrimination in various forms. But the BNP-Jamaat government dropped these crucially important principles, which amounted to depriving women of a protective shield as women rights activists very rightly observed.

The point to be noted here is that the policy was formulated when the Awami League was in power and it was tinkered with by the BNP-Jamaat government. It is another sad example of the two rival political parties being unable to come to terms with the plans and policies of their political adversaries, even when they are dealing with important national or social issues that shouldn't be mixed up with politics. Economic and social emancipation of women is a major issue that should be high on the agenda of any government. And whenever some progressive or forward-going move is made by a government, it is incumbent upon its successor to accomplish the mission, instead of scuttling it for purely political reasons. But that has never happened in our context.

The rights of women cannot be established unless there is a clear-cut, well-defined policy in this respect. The NPAW was a good beginning that could be considered a national charter for the economic and social emancipation of women, particularly the underprivileged ones. But the failure of the BNP-Jamaat government to accept it fully has virtually curtailed its effectiveness to a great extent. We hope the policy will be restored in its original form.

The 'flattening' story and the need for good men

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

There is a pressing need for good men in politics. There is a need for cleansing politics of muscle and money power. There are good politicians and good men too in Bangladesh. However, we need to keep in mind that all good politicians must be good men, but all good men do not necessarily make good politicians. It is our hope that Dr. Yunus would be able to personify both.

representatives.

Personal greed can only be satisfied by misdeeds and not honest action. The shameful disclosures of misuse of state property, particularly those that rightfully belong to the needy and amassing of huge landed property by some unscrupulous politicians only suggest the unholy nexus of muscle power and political influence coming to the aid of those that chose to feather their own nest instead of bettering the lot of the people they were chosen to represent them in the parliament.

The revelation is as shocking as they are repugnant and depressing. The gross transgression is symptomatic of the system that has become rotten to the core. It is shocking because many of those parliamentarians, (perhaps it is not the right word to be used to describe the people under discussion; the parliament has been desecrated by their actions) have been caught using relief material for the purpose they were not meant to.

It seems that every action in pursuit of acquisition of illegal wealth was made legitimate and

everything in Bangladesh was up for grabs for a particular species of Bangladeshis. From illegally occupying government land to doling out lands of housing projects to party men, to using relief materials to adorn their houses, and even feeding the horses with energy biscuits meant for the disaster affected people, was valid. Even a madrasa was allegedly commandeered by a Maulana who is heading a religious political party. It is not as if they were in need of the things that were recovered from their possession. They were motivated by a peculiar psyche, which made the abnormal appear normal; actions that are universally abhorrent became the order of the day.

The utter disregard for law as well the total absence of self-respect is so evident in the actions of these people that only reinforce the civil society demand for "good men" in politics.

Thus the public cannot be blamed for seeking alternatives to this unethical lot collectively. Neither can one be blamed for putting oneself up as a prospective alternative and jumping into the

cauldron of Bangladesh politics. Whether that is a viable alternative is quite another matter, but joining politics is everybody's fundamental right and not the exclusive preserve of a particular group.

While on the issue of joining politics I am reminded of a picture I saw several years ago of a young man in some county in England going from door to door seeking votes -- for a local council seat. The young man's name, if I my memory serves me right, was John Wilson, the grandson of the famous British Prime Minister Harold Wilson. What is the relation of that picture with our politics you may ask? Quite a lot, actually. Note that the young man was seeking a representative public office from the very grassroots level. In spite of being the grandson of an illustrious politician he did not think it his birthright to seek the parliamentary seat of his grandfather but decided to start from the very beginning, as any well-intentioned budding politicians would do and ought to do. Not so in Bangladesh.

There are basically three ways one could join politics in our coun-

Cardinal sins of Dr. Yunus (or for whom the bell tolls)

If one wants to nitpick and look minutely with a microscope into the nitty-gritty, I am sure one can detect blemishes and possible anomalies. I believe that a China-style double digit economic growth is the main driving force for effective poverty reduction with micro-credit playing a potent ancillary part. But I am not going to pull my thinning hair to foist my viewpoint over the recognized success of Prof. Yunus.

OMAR KHASRU

ACCORDING to entrenched, self-seeking and egotistical practicing partisan politicians and their crony columnist lackeys, Dr. Mohammad Yunus, the solitary Nobel laureate in the history of Bangladesh, has so far committed two cardinal sins. The first is that he was awarded the prestigious and most illustrious prize by the Nobel Committee. And the second peccadillo is his audacity and guts to express a desire to enter politics.

Typical grown-up Bangladeshis love to discuss, dissect, disparage, delve into and pontificate about politics and sports. But "power politics" after all is the exclusive passion, profession, possession, preoccupation, fixation and domain of established and ingrained politicians. How dare a rank outsider, even with the utmost education and knowledge, exalted accomplishments and name recognition, courage, honour and decency enter the arena and try to grab attention, authority, vote, validity, and veracity. They will not

share their allegorically fenced off and lifetime leased arena with anyone else, however renowned, respectable and eminent the person may be.

But let me go back to the Dr. Yunus's cardinal sin paradigm with strictly a commoner's rational view. After Prof. Yunus was awarded the Nobel prize, the unrestrained joy and uninhibited pride that the populace spontaneously felt was profound and poignant. The micro-credit program, pioneered by him and admired and replicated in the rest of the world has played a symbolic role in alleviating poverty and, equally important, in financially empowering vulnerable and powerless poor rural women.

If one wants to nitpick and look minutely with a microscope into the nitty-gritty, I am sure one can detect blemishes and possible anomalies. I believe that a China-style double digit economic growth is the main driving force for effective poverty reduction with micro-credit playing a potent ancillary part. But I am not going to pull my thinning hair to foist my viewpoint over the recognized success of

Prof. Yunus.

Moreover, a Nobel laureate need not be perfect or his program all encompassing. The recipient merely needs to be a unique and leading innovator, a pioneer if you like, and the work needs to be significant and beneficial. I think Dr. Yunus and his micro-credit program meets these prerequisites. The Nobel Peace Prize 2006 has been jointly awarded to a supremely deserving person and his socially conscious organization.

As if receiving the Nobel prize was not enough trouble, Prof. Yunus made a few generic comments about the existing characteristics of politics and the quality of politicians. It was as if he threw a lighted matchstick on a stack of dynamites. Politicians of both leading strands threw a major tantrum and poured extreme vitriol on him.

His assertion that politicians want to capture power because of money would seem like a universal truth and a tautological statement. But politicians on either side of the aisle, who disagree on everything

else, unanimously took exception to that. In a phony, pathetic, ridiculous and vain bid to assert purity of character, and emphasize moral, ethical and unblemished incorruptible manners, they made pompous, conceited and sanctimonious comments which neither convinced nor impressed anybody.

That was before Dr. Yunus declared his intention to actually enter active politics. This "affront" and unwarranted encroachment on their cozy comfort zone and restricted metaphoric private elite beachfront property the politicians will simply not stand for.

This became evident when Shaikh Hasina fired the first salvo on February 17 and launched a broadside of verbal abuse against him. She alluded to Dr. Yunus and Grameen Bank as interest-earners and equated the misdeeds of bribe takers and corrupt elements with the interest earnings of Grameen Bank. This of course is an apt example of platitude and hyperbole of the worst kind and Shaikh Hasina is usually considered a champion and supreme practitioner of clichés and hackneyed phrases.

Awami League leaders own private banks that earn interest. Interest earning is the main business of banks and other financial institutions. Does Sheikh Hasina also think that the business activity of Mercantile Bank is same as politi-

ty. One is the easy but costly way, buying your seat. And there are the party leaders who are only too willing to oblige. No wonder that we had almost sixty percent members in the eighth parliament who were businessmen. And then there is the law of primogeniture that we follow in Bangladesh, even if we had seen the last of kingship many many centuries ago. In Bangladesh the responsibility to represent the people devolves almost as a rule on the son or the daughter or the wife of the ex-parliamentarian. One inherits one's father's or husband's seat. In this matter the situation is rather poignant in that hardly have we seen a father or a husband retiring from politics. In all cases the vacancy has occurred through deaths, in most cases unnatural. In how many cases can we find the new incumbent not the next senior-most party man in the constituency but invariably the son or the wife or daughter of the deceased? And, of course, the third way is entering laterally. And a Nobel laureate is as eminently qualified as any to join laterally.

If Dr. Yunus has decided to join politics it is out of his desire and the people's demand to see a change in our political culture. He has taken a bold step and has risked more than his personal credibility. However, it is not enough to float a party, it is more important to see that it gestates and survives. Endurance is a forte that intending politicians would do well to acquire, if they do not already

possess it.

However, if it is new culture in our politics that we want to inculcate, the first practice that I as a citizen would like to see is inner party democracy, where decision would emerge from consensus opinion and not thrust upon from the top. In this regard I must say I have been somewhat disappointed by what I have seen so far in respect of the proposed party. Dr. Yunus is perhaps moving faster than he should. Hardly had he made his intention to join politics public when he confirmed his definitive intention of doing so, and came out with the possible name of the party very soon after. All this even before the final decision had been made to start a new party. The party has to be a philosophy based and plan oriented and not personality centered. The motive force must be seen to have come from within rather than been infused from outside.

There is a pressing need for good men in politics. There is a need for cleansing politics of muscle and money power. There are good politicians and good men too in Bangladesh. However, we need to keep in mind that all good politicians must be good men, but all good men do not necessarily make good politicians. It is our hope that Dr. Yunus would be able to personify both.

The author is Editor, Defence and Strategic Affairs, The Daily Star.

The right to know

The weightier challenge for him will rightly be for his innovativeness, what he has to offer as a national agenda for empowering Bangladesh. It is believed that the CTG is resolved to address the issues of rule of law, transparency and good governance. That will leave the elected government with the issues of poverty alleviation, cutting down unemployment and of reducing the ever-increasing gap between the rich and the poor. It is his field and he will be expected to deliver.

SYED MAQSUD JAMIL

NAGORIK Shakti or People's Power is here! Professor Yunus has launched his political party. He should be commended for his forthright decision. It is an honourable course of action. All the more because of his recent diatribe against the impious power play of our two major political alliances. The stinging remarks he made were of an aggrieved citizen. But it was a palpable hit. The remarks came from a Nobel laureate and from the chief of a development bank that earned both plaudits and flak. It made Dr. Yunus a combatant in the fray. He had to get into the ring and he has finally got into it.

Thankfully he did not walk away, neither did he neglect his duties in the niche of his profile. It would have been a loss to the nation had his credibility and profile been compromised because of his lack of concern. He has proved that he is a man of conviction not a mere loose cannon. It is common man's gain that at last citizens' voice has found a befitting and honourable advocate. Professor Yunus has won the primaries.

Another good thing is that he has not been seen to hitch his wagon to someone else's cart, as the now defunct Bikalpa Dhara and recently launched Liberal Democratic Party has done. They have shot themselves in the feet as a possible third force by joining the grand

alliance. It is not in question that they wanted to have a piece of the cake a share of power. The same thing goes for the general's party. Well! For that matter there is nothing wrong in wanting to have a share of governance so long one does not team up with those that muddled up the process.

Bikalpa Dhara or Liberal Democratic Party is the result of falling out, plainly a splinter party. It was less a matter of conviction than getting the chance to even the score with BNP. Conviction was never the shining armour of the general and his band of kleptocrats. Basically an inferior clone of BNP, they never had an agenda or the following for a genuine third force. In this regard

Professor Yunus has a point to score. He has upheld the strength of his conviction by announcing to field candidates for all the 300 seats. His Nagorik Shakti has all the good reasons of holding out the promise of a genuine third force.

Precisely there are three political options in this country. Of these, the Awami League and the BNP are centrist parties and the other, the Jamat-e-Islami is a religion based one. The Jamat is quite a departure from the mainstream and is basically clannish in structure. For them to be a popular option can only follow a national change of heart of a major nature. Presently they are sought for tilting the scale and are never in the reckoning as a major contender.

The Awami League and the BNP are principally dynastic parties cashing on the legacy of their patron saints. Without this legacy the bond within these parties is fragile and certainly vulnerable to fissiparous tendencies. That is why their present leaders are in the limelight. They evoke a sense of fidelity to the

legacy. It is this dark thought that leads the ladies to groom their sons for succession to the leadership. Understandably the dynastic trait will always remain strong. In this regard the rise of the professor may at long last be able to cut the umbilical cord. Dr. Yunus therefore offers a worthy choice of a new beginning.

The major allegation against the Awami League and BNP is that they do not practice democracy within the party. Dissent is treated as a rebellious conduct and as a disruptive tendency. It is natural in a setting where "duty shall have dread to speak When power to flattery bows." The dissenters are generally cowed down, ostracized, and finally part in bitterness and calumny. It is the personality cult that sits as the judge. A good conduct is to submit to the leader.

Here is a catch with Professor Yunus. He sits so high on the pedestal with his mantle of Nobel Prize that is likely to make him a godly person within his party. It is likely his men will cheer, swear, chant and charge by his name. That may bring the scourge.

One may naturally want to know more about Nagorik Shakti as the game gets going. To begin with it is pertinent to know how the "shakti" of his Nagorik Shakti is going to be organized? How it is going to be mobilized to build a political institution? The most facile thing will be to rush to the observation that it is going to be the political wing of the business behemoth Grameen Bank. The inheritance may as well handicap it because of the unfavourable observation that is stubbornly sticking to its profit motive. Business more appropriately big business is made of sterner stuff. Politics, that too in Bangladesh is altogether a different ball game. It is, as we know is a brawl of banal nature. So, when the slugging starts it can be hot going for the Grameen tag. The professor as we have seen knows it. He has most wisely declared his intention of resigning from his rank in Grameen once he is fully into the politics.

There are three more relevant questions to ask. Should we think that Nagorik Shakti is going

to own and ride the vehicle of reforms done by the caretaker government? Professor Yunus has earned name for his innovativeness. The general expectation will therefore want to know what he can offer in terms of an invigorating prescription for economic management and good governance. Last but not the least one cannot discount the presence of misgivings about his close ties with foreign conglomerates. It is reported that Telenor has registered a significant profit through Grameen Phone. Besides French Danone is also coming. There are grounds to judge him by his association with foreign big business.

The national politics is in incriminating circumstances. Indeed the professor has chosen an opportune time to appear in national politics with the platform of Mr. Clean. It is in the natural order of things that one can choose one's time. But the trophy of steering ahead against the wind belongs to the Awami League and the BNP. While he can be seen as the Crown Prince of Reforms.

The weightier challenge for him will rightly be for his innovativeness, what he has to offer as a national agenda for empowering Bangladesh. It is believed that the CTG is resolved to address the issues of rule of law, transparency and good governance. That will leave the elected government with the issues of poverty alleviation, cutting down unemployment and of reducing the ever-increasing gap between the rich and the poor. It is his field and he will be expected to deliver. As for his association with foreign big business he will do well to appear as a citizen politician and let Grameen to run on its own.

With Professor Yunus's entry into politics the best of Bangladesh will be put to test. That he surely knows. He is a Nobel laureate. It is a matter of living up to the standard and a question of vindicating national honour. Therefore he cannot and should not fail.

Syed Maqsud Jamil is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.