

## To talk is to be

**There is no doubt that talk liberates, but it can also suffocate, and while it may be a necessary condition of democracy, the more of a good thing does not necessarily make it better. What we are getting in quantity and volume, we are probably losing in quality and depth.**

*Be modest in your gait and soft in your speech  
Surely the loudest voice (you hear) is the braying of an ass*  
--(Sura Luqman, Ayat 19)

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God,  
and the Word was God...*

--John 1:1

*I gotta use words when I talk to you  
But if you understand, or if you don't  
That's nothing to me and nothing to you  
We all gotta do what we all gotta do*  
--T.S. Eliot, Sweeney Agonistes

AHRAR AHMAD

APPARENTLY, as far as their love of the spoken word is concerned, Bangladeshis are more inspired by Biblical abstraction and Eliot's doggerel than by Quranic stipulation. The passion for speech and utterance is rooted in our oral tradition and explains the salience of plays, poetry, debate, mobile phones and, of course, the quintessential Bengali indulgence of adda, in our lives. As Amartya Sen has pointed out in his "The Argumentative Indian" the "most terrible" aspect of death for Raja Ram Mohan Roy, a Bengali, is that "others will go on speaking, but you will not be able to argue back."

But over the years there has developed a national epidemic of "talk" that has been infectious and unprecedented. It is no longer restricted to small circles of friends and family, colleagues and cohorts, peer groups and tearoom clusters. It is now approximated at the national level.

Several factors have contributed to this gab-fest -- the proliferation of private TV channels which allow

for ubiquitous and energetic discussion programs; the emergence of an elite chattering class with members who have acquired the status of celebrities and who, therefore, feel free to hold forth on matters personal and public; and the growing presence of a civil society that has helped to move "talk" to the centre-piece of our political dynamic, equating it with issues of transparency, accountability and civic-mindedness.

To "talk" is, presumably, to question, reason, mediate, provoke, share and challenge, and is supposed to facilitate individual empowerment and foster social engagement. It is held up as an indispensable part, indeed as evidence, of our democratic temper and progress. Thus we succumb enthusiastically, and with seeming noble intent, to the seductions of the camera and the podium. Like Haroun in Rushdie's famous fable, we all yearn for, and want to be part of, the exuberant land of "gup" rather than the oppressive world of "chup" where all our stories have been silenced. Confronting Descartes, Marx and Sartre (i.e. denying reason, or

labour, or essence, as markers of identity), Bangladeshis stoutly declare: "To talk is to be."

However, there are reasons to believe that this enthusiasm for "talk" can be counter-productive, and perhaps damaging.

First, it supplants any serious, meaningful, informed analysis for the chatty, transient and cursory. It trivialises the written word (indeed Bangladeshis are notorious for not reading each other's work, unless they are popular novels where the text merely replicates "talk" in a more organised format), and smother research, reflection and judgment.

For example, we can all agree that the Liberation War was the watershed moment in the life of Bangladeshis living today. But, there are only a few academic efforts that have addressed relevant questions with any commitment to empirical, theoretical or methodological rigour. We have essentially turned our liberation war into a mythic narrative, part morality play, part romance, that may help to inspire, but not seek to enlighten. We have sentimentalised our past through "talk" but have not tried to know it through evidence. (The Liberation War Museum is an exception since it has moved from its initial preoccupation with preserving history as artifact to its current agenda of presenting history as education).

Most of the books published on the war (all well meaning, engaging, honest) are usually self-referential, often "golpo" oriented, typically written in an informal style. These memoirists are doing a commendable service, and more should be encouraged.

But, while such accounts can serve as rich sources of raw materials, the building blocks of history, they should not be mistaken for the edifice itself. Even the pursuit of oral history as a valid method in historiography has been attempted only fitfully. We are left with history that is fragmented, diffuse, and casual, rather than history that is objective, verifiable and coherent (or in Popper's terms, entailing a formulation that is capable of disproof).

It is awkward to admit that even after 36 years of independence we have little consensus about some basic information relating to those turbulent times. Some of the figures popularly bandied about are considered "soft" at best (based on political/emotional claims rather than scholarly/academic estimates), and distract from, and sometimes even cloud, the real calculus of suffering and sacrifice that the people had to endure. It is a telling commentary on our intellectual condition that one of the few issues about our liberation that has exercised our minds and passions, at least publicly, has dealt with the question about who actually declared independence (note again, the concern with the spoken word, and hence with the people that have uttered them).

Second, this devotion to "talk" also indicates an obsession with personalities, and privileges those who can use manipulative and frothy language to advance their political interests. Thinkers, activists, visionaries and idealists not given to oratorical flamboyance are usually ignored and marginalised. When politics becomes "performance" defined by verbal gymnastics, it ensures that some of our most brilliant and dedicated individuals will be condemned to struggle in the political wilderness, while glib sophists will command national attention.

It should also be pointed out that political leadership, alliances,

and programs are so freighted with "talk" and so devoid of "substance," that there is an ephemeral and unreal quality to our political system. Instead of being driven by ideology, conviction or long-term vision, politics gives way to the slippery, contingent and conspiracy-laden world of speculation and rumours; allows our politicians to seamlessly, and apparently without embarrassment, shift positions and parties with cynical opportunism and short-term expediency (no principles are at stake, and their rhetorical tropes need only minor adjustments); and generates a numbing cacophony of platitudes and self-serving bluster. Perhaps we need a little child who will someday simply point out: "Look, behind their mumbo jumbo, they are all the same, and they are all naked."

Third, "talk" generates an enormous wastage of time and energy, and provides the illusion of addressing an issue without doing anything about it. Consider the number of meetings, seminars, conferences, symposia, conclaves, workshops, forums, discussion sessions, conventions, summits, roundtables, and public events through which opinions on various issues are vociferously presented. The resources in terms of the number of people/days that go into organising them must be formidable, the consequences, except in a few instances, perhaps less so. During the Pakistani regime (which took its cue from British colonial traditions), the answer to most problems was to form a committee that, would, in due course, issue a report that nobody would read. Today, our answer is a public forum or a television show that nobody will remember.

Some of these programs may, indeed be relevant and provocative with scholars and professionals addressing questions over which they have some experience and authority. One wishes that there

could be more of these presentations. However, and unfortunately, most of these events tend to resonate with a cliché-ridden script that is predictable and eminently banal; many become obligatory exercises in political correctness with no follow up; and some depend on contributors (the overly extended high mandarins of our "talkocracy" who are, with a few notable and genuine exceptions, tend to be public personalities rather than public intellectuals) coveted more for their perceived power and social eminence than the expertise and knowledge they can bring to an issue.

Even foreigners in the country, particularly those representing Western countries, interests or institutions, get in on the act. They are prize catches for these public platforms or for TV interviews and, reeking of "Orientalist" otherness, they take advantage of our economic vulnerabilities and colonised mentalities to dispense praise, advice and warnings with a patronising swagger in their tone. It is possible that their willing participation in this milieu of noise and posture is simply a response to the old dictum "when in Rome..." However, what is striking, and decidedly unusual, is that even foreign diplomats, who are normally expected to ply their craft in discreet reticence, enjoy a bustling and valuable presence in the political and cultural landscape of the country.

So pervasive is this dependence on "talk" that even our print media buttresses this self-perpetuating cycle and tends to feature these public "talk" events prominently as its main "news" stories. It should be noted, in some amusement if not irony, that print journalists are so affected by this verbal mode of communication, and are so convinced that what they write will not be read, that they, in fact, interview each other on television in incestuous self-validation. In effect, they



Tea stalls still remain a great place for people to chitchat.

become complicit in their own professional devaluation.

There is no doubt that talk liberates, but it can also suffocate, and while it may be a necessary condition of democracy, the more of a good thing does not necessarily make it better. What we are getting in quantity and volume, we are probably losing in quality and depth. In fact the reckless abandon with which "talk" is practiced actually serves to cheapen the national discourse rather than elevate it, provokes a public idiom that is simplistic and narcissistic, and sustains a political culture fraught with exaggeration, ambiguity and vocalised clutter. (It should also be pointed out that this poses a post-modernist's

nightmare because, after all, how would one deconstruct a text, or explore its semiotics, when it is essentially composed of hot air?)

Is it possible to have just one day when our "power elite" will shy away from the podium and the camera (courtship of the media is one thing, promiscuity is another), one day when no public sessions will be organised, no leaders will be interviewed, no press conferences will be covered, no speeches will be reported, and no participants will sit around long rectangular tables in solemn devotion to an empty ritual?

Well, let's talk.

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## Early lifting of emergency

**The apprehension of the CTG about a return of retaliatory politics may not be totally unfounded. However, possibility of a return to the situation before 1/11 is dim as much has been changed in the Bangladesh political scenario during the last eight months.**

A.B.M.S. ZAHUR

FOR the last eight months we have heard constantly about free, fair and credible election for establishing democracy in Bangladesh in which honest and committed people will be allowed to contest.

Correct voter list will be prepared under the direct supervision of army. To reduce the chance of vote rigging the voters will be given ID cards. These may be considered good for a least developed country like Bangladesh. For improved voting we have re-organised the Election Commission and replaced all the members of the last commission because of their reported partisan attitude.

We have accepted that the new EC is more efficient and is capable of coping with the huge task of completing the election in 18 months. The main tasks of the EC are preparation of voter list, voter ID cards, arranging adequate

number of polling booths, appointing officers and others concerned with election, and ensuring safety and security of the voters, (both inside and outside the polling booths) so that maximum number of voters can participate in the election.

Out of these works so far only 10% of the voter list is complete and 90% of the list is to be completed in around eleven months. Both the CA and EC have repeatedly stated completion of all works related to election by end 2008. Let us hope that the CTG will be able to fulfill its commitment.

Despite high reputation of sincerity and honesty we are little puzzled by the CEC for his inconsistent statements recently during his visits to Chittagong and Tangail. Before his visit to Chittagong we had clear impression that emergency would be lifted by December 2007 to enable EC to hold election of municipalities and sub-districts in free political atmosphere. Now

we hear that emergency may continue till the national election.

In Tangail the CEC has stated that the reporters have misquoted his statement of Chittagong. His present stand is that he is in favour of lifting emergency at least two months ahead of local bodies' elections. Later EC has again expressed his hope for lifting emergency by December 2007. It would be desirable if CEC give a clear and firm statement about his opinion on continuation of emergency.

Though we are not very happy about repeated statements of the law adviser about his apprehension for creation of a chaotic condition by political parties as bad as it existed before 1/11 we cannot treat his statements lightly because of recent Dhaka University campus incident, clear violation of the emergency by Hizb-ut-Tahrir, and possibility of rallies by major political parties for release of their top leaders. It may be relevant to point out that in spite of violation of

emergency, the HuT followers were treated softly by the authorities.

Though we believe that CTG is serious about holding election by 2008, however we are not clear as to why it is so much afraid of lifting the emergency. It knows well that without lifting emergency well ahead of election there cannot be enough of interactions among political parties, people to people and people and the party. Public meetings are to be held, parties will have to drum up support for their parties, the contestants will have to be introduced before the public and some parties may like to form alliances as political strategy. To hold meetings the parties will have to be arranged for rallies, street meetings, etc. The parties interested in reform may go for council meetings to elect their new leaders.

Instead of showing intermittent uncertainties about lifting emergency what is needed is firm decision about lifting. It may have to take risk of skirmishes among parties, groups or individual contestants. The law enforcing bodies should be alert. The relevant rules should be cautiously but firmly applied and neutrality may never be compromised. With no political interference police force is competent enough to control any political violence. The possibility of resurgence of pseudo-Islamic militants may have to be closely watched.

We hear (not distinctly) that efforts are on for joint action (may be agitation) by the BNP and AL for release of their leaders from jails. What is needed is to start proceedings by the ACC for completing their charge sheets at the earliest to save the CTG from any possible embarrassment in future. The major political parties, on the other hand, may refrain from starting any movement without a thorough introspection because of the following points:

- Whether there is enough ground for release of the leaders. Whether the involvement of the leaders in the cases is really detrimental to the interest of the party or involvement is due to purely personal benefit or benefit of members of their families.
- Whether planned agitation in the country or outside will delay the election. In case of delay whether they may lose or gain voters due to such activities.
- How much money may be spent on their activists when they have been restricted to spend money from their political funds.

The apprehension of the CTG about a return of retaliatory politics may not be totally unfounded. However, possibility of a return to the situation before 1/11 is dim as much has been changed in the Bangladesh political scenario during the last eight months. In fact, the number of people who want that the CTG may continue beyond the end of next year because of its good governance is not small.

Whatever pitfalls there may be, democracy is considered by the people as their own government in which they may freely choose their leaders and their country is much more respected internationally than any other government.

As such, only democracy may suit the people of Bangladesh. To bring democracy, emergency will have to be lifted at the earliest. Start of political activities may result in political meetings and skirmishes among political groups and activists.

It is the law enforcement agencies which should be fully alert to tackle such situations. For the successful completion of the tenure of CTG, the best option would be to lift emergency as quickly as possible.

The writer is a former joint secretary.

## Friends and neighbours

**As I write these words, the saffron is mixing with blood. Go home or we will shoot, warns the junta. Perhaps the monks will make a last stand. Or perhaps they will be beaten into submission. Or worse. During the 1988 uprising, more than 3,000 people were killed by the government. This time it may be worse.**

S. M. ABDUR RAHMAN

IT's funny how when we want to, we can make lightning-fast decisions. When it came to the submarine cable, we waited almost a decade to climb on that platform. We dithered about Tata's proposal for so long, Ratan-dada got bored and went off and invested in Africa instead (apparently a distance of a continent is better than our red tape). Trans-Asian Highway we have been hearing of for years, but nothing has happened, doesn't look like anything will happen. Lot of people mistake this for a tough negotiating stance with India, but it isn't -- it's just incompetence.

But it's funny, when we want to, we can do things really, really fast. For example, did you even know we were negotiating to build a highway between Bangladesh and Burma (Myanmar)? I didn't. And then one day, suddenly there was a quiet little announcement that the deal had been signed. Bangladesh will construct 16-mile road including 14 miles inside Burma in the first phase. It will link Guandhum in Cox's Bazar with Baulibazar.

Did you know that until recently we were planning to host one of Myanmar's top generals for a state visit to Bangladesh? A senior member of Burma's ruling regime, the State Peace and Development Committee (SPDC) was scheduled to lead a high-profile delegation, hold official talks with the chief adviser and attend a state banquet on September 10.

I didn't know any of this. Not that is, until I read the news that his trip had been cancelled. Things must be a bit busy at home. There's a saffron revolution. Monks to beat, people to arrest, tear gas to lob, rubber bullets to fire.

In the last few days, Myanmar is suddenly in everybody's consciousness. The sight of silent processions by monks, and then those same monks being beaten within an inch of their life. I imagine even some of our government officials are embarrassed about their

loving embrace of Myanmar in recent times.

But all this is not new. Myanmar has been under a military dictator-

ship for two decades. Shouldn't our government have already known they were dealing with a totalitarian dictatorship? After Nelson Mandela, the most famous political prisoner of recent times is Aung San Suu Kyi.

She is the only Nobel laureate in recent history where even that lofty award did not pressure the regime to release her. If anything it increased their determination to keep her under permanent lockdown. Her dying husband had one wish -- to visit his wife. The Burmese junta refused his visa. International condemnations followed, but the junta did not care.

Since 1990, when Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) received 80% of the popular vote, the military junta has gone into overdrive to suppress the democracy movement. The NLD's top leadership has been in jail for almost a decade, and repressive measures target the universities and all other gathering locations.

Forced labour practices recall the worst excesses of the Stalinist gulags and armed suppression of ethnic minorities has spilled over into our borders as thousands of Rohingya refugees come to Chittagong to escape tyranny.

For two decades, the Burmese junta has been a human rights pariah -- with condemnation ranging from hundreds of global college campuses, to Nobel laureates Desmond Tutu and Vaclav Havel. But each attempt to bring censure in the UN has been vetoed by Burma allies Russia and China (both countries with a shining record on human rights).

As I write these words, the saffron is mixing with blood. Go home or we will shoot, warns the junta. Perhaps the monks will make a last stand. Or perhaps they will be beaten into submission. Or worse. During the 1988 uprising, more than 3,000 people were killed by the government. This time it may be worse.

Can our government continue to be friendly with a regime like this?

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## Calling Miss Manners

DANIEL W. DREZNER

IMAGINE for a second that the United States opposed the leading candidate to head a prominent international organisation. Now imagine that in an effort to block that candidate, the United States decides to put its own candidate forward. To ensure that the candidate doesn't look like a complete toady, it would make some sense to propose a non-American. However, it would also make sense, at the very least, to make sure that the candidate's home country was on board with the idea. If there was no prior consultation, well, then the United States would look pretty incompetent -- not to mention rude.

This is precisely what Russia did last month in proposing former Czech premier and central banker Josef Toman to become the next head of the International Monetary Fund. They did it without consulting the Czechs, who had already endorsed the

European Union's preferred candidate, former French finance minister Dominique Strauss-Kahn.

The Russians claimed they had consulted with developing nations about their proposed choice, but press reports suggest that many of them were taken by surprise at Moscow's gambit. Large developing countries, including Brazil, Argentina and India, backed Strauss-Kahn.

This action comes on the heels of a year in which Vladimir Putin and his subordinates have seemingly gone out of their way to provoke the United States and Europe.

Miss Manners might need to write an advice book for diplomats, because there's been a lot of rude behaviour in world politics as of late. The aftermath of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's trip to America has prompted an interesting debate over who was rude to whom in New York City.

Some have accused Columbia University President Lee Bollinger

to be out of line for exhorting the president of Iran as a "cruel and petty dictator." At the same time, Ahmadinejad's pre-emptory dismissal of the UN Security Council's concerns about Iran's nuclear program was equally counterproductive, angering members of the contact group charged with resolving the nuclear deadlock.

Of course, Ahmadinejad was merely following in the footsteps of Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez. At last year's opening of the UN General Assembly, Chávez called Mr. Bush a "devil" and claimed that he could still smell the sulphur from Bush's prior appearance.

The speech helped to sabotage Chávez's quest for a rotating Security Council seat for his country. Even China has had its diplomatic stumbles this year. Despite claims about the rise of Chinese "soft power," it has experienced some nasty blowback from its aggressive investments in Africa

and its inadequate consumer regulation at home.

The uprising of the monks in Myanmar also caught China short -- a replay of Beijing's slow response after the 2005 tsunami.

The funny thing is that buried within these diplomatic faux pas, the leaders of Russia, Iran and Venezuela are trying to make a valid point. For decades, the United States and European Union countries have exercised a duopoly of control over key international organisations.

That might have been appropriate in an earlier era, but the emergence of resource and industrial powers from what used to be called the Third World makes these arrangements look increasingly anachronistic.

As these countries acquire greater power, however, they will also need to figure out how to exercise their voice without antagonising the rest of the world. This is the very definition of "statecraft," a term that Dennis Ross is seeking to revive in his

latest book, "Statecraft." The word does not mean that a government shrinks from advancing its interests but that it does so in a way that is designed not to anger or provoke.

Regrettably, the Bush administration set a bad example on this score in its first term. Allies (except for Tony Blair) routinely carped about being out of the loop of American decision-making. Face-to-face consultations between high-ranking US officials and allies practically disappeared.

Colin Powell was the least travelled secretary of state in 30 years; Bush was the least travelled president in 40 years. In his first three years of office, Vice President Cheney travelled abroad only once.

It would be a cruel irony indeed if rising powers learned the wrong lessons from Bush's mistakes. The United States has received more flak for its diplomatic mistakes than other countries because the glare of the spotlight is at its harshest for the hegemon.

As these countries acquire more

power, however, they will also garner more attention. So far, their behaviour is worrisome. Russia, for example, has had some prior experience with being a great power. Their current diplomatic style, however, makes the Bush administration's first term look like a paragon of propriety and decorum.

Power and interest drive most of what happens in world politics. Diplomatic style does matter on the margins, however. And if these recent events are what passes as diplomacy from rising powers, then world politics is going to start looking like a bad episode of reality television. "The Real World: Turtle Bay" might make for good entertainment, but it's going to be a lousy way to address global problems.

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