

DHAKA MONDAY FEBRUARY 23, 2009

Bid farewell to confrontation

DR. SYED ANWAR HUSAIN

BACK in December 2000 I was in Kathmandu participating in the Second SAARC writers' Conference. During one of the sessions a Nepalese friend sitting by my side shoved into my hand a small book, and requested me to browse through the same at my free time. I did what I had been asked to by my good friend during my freest time back at hotel late in the evening. The book was an anthology of Nepali poems, rendered in English, which I read through with interest and sometimes excitement depending on the themes and appeal of the language. But I read and had to reread the poem titled "Political Proximity: Locusts or Bees" by Kedar Man Bayathit. The following lines were the source of my excitement:

"In the above context whose politics do you think can be compared to the politics in your country the one followed by locusts or the other belonging to the bees?"

The poet imagines two types of politics represented by these two insect species. As is generally known, locusts destroy standing crops, but bees build beehive full of such resource as honey. The poet compares politics of his country to what locusts do; but he envisages the politics of bees.

I do not know of any distinguished poet of ours having written a poem overlaid with such a political theme; although there is no dearth of political poems, and some of which are no less exciting than that of the distinguished Nepali poet's. But if asked as to what type of politics we would desire we would say in one voice that it is the politics of bees, as we have grown accustomed to the politics of locusts. As it is, such an endemic locust type of politics is the fall-out of our divisive and confrontational politics. Such a type of politics destroys everything, including politics itself, but fails to build anything substantial. This has been our disquieting legacy over the last thirtyeight years. But one might be quick in coming up with huge statistical data and indicators to drive home the point of apparently impressive growth in many sectors. No doubt, these are impressive, but growth does not mean development. Development means growth with equity; and this is exactly what has eluded Bangladesh so far. As there is the primacy of the political, our politics of locusts and its producers have to bear the burden of responsibility for whatever is amiss or remiss in our political track record.

Lord Tweedsmuir (1875-1940), the Scottish author (and governor general of Canada 1935-40) who had a good deal of interest in politics had this to say to those members of the British public who had tasted bad in the constant bickerings between the Conservative Party and the Labour Party (and the Liberal Party had lost its strength and vitality after 1906): "Politics is still the greatest and the most honorable adventure."

Of course, the British public proved to be difficult takers of such a divisive politics. Had it not been for the overwhelming impact of Edmund Burke's (1729-1797) writings and oratory by the third quarter of the eighteenth century in favour of party politics the fate of political parties in Britain would have been uncertain. So Burke's spadework done years before made Tweedsmuir a successful seller of politics. But by the 1920s and 1930s Britain had grown accustomed to divided politics along party and thus ideological lines.

Ours is a politics which, in common with other former colonies in the Third World, has roots in the colonial heritage. In concept, construct and modalities this politics is of Western origin. Pre-colonial South Asia had politics of palace and nobility, which was entirely a different kind from that of the politics of the colonial period and its carry-over in the post-colonial period. But the paradox is that the paradigm of politics that we work within is borrowed from the west, albeit without the spirit underlying the same; and this is perhaps the explanation for our dysfunctional politics. In the Western democratic milieu political parties, although instruments of political division, are

engaged in, as the American political scientist Seymour Martin Lipset indicates, "institutionalised competition". The race for power does involve competition, and which takes place as per rules of the game called institutionalised competition. This does not, however, mean that the Western democracy is without any weakness. Weaknesses do galore, but which are yet to make the Western politics as dysfunctional as that of ours. In our case, the democratic norm of institutionalised competition has turned out to be institutionalised confrontation.

At this stage we may now return to the quoted saying of Lord Tweedsmuir in order to indicate its relevance to our context. In view of the dysfunctional politics that we have our politics has certainly remained the "greatest adventure"; but it remains open to question whether this is still the "most honourable" one.

Barring politics of a few exceptional personalities, politics in general of Bangladesh does not qualify to be honourable; and to be most honourable our politics needs, to undergo a miraculous paradigm shift. Such a paradigm shift may be preceded by something like an expiatory purification in a purgatory like process. There may be a few explanatory words on such a process, to which we will return later.

How the misperceived and misapplied Western model of democracy

Pluralism is meant for a fair political game as per rules, and also giving people choice out of options and alternatives as far as their present and future political course is concerned. In a sense, pluralism facilitates a dialectical process in politics for resolving stand-off or conflicts. Pluralism does not mean sheer competition to the extent of confrontation. In fact, the basic norm for the functioning of pluralism in a democratic socio-political milieu is what Voltaire has reminded us of: "I detest what you say, but will defend to death your right to say so." This is how democracy begins at the personal level within the societal context. Transferred into the national political milieu such an attitude facilitates the practice of pluralism. A continuation of pluralism is political divisions, ideological and otherwise. But such a division loses its democratic content and spirit when these divisions fracture the political society into 'us' and 'they'; and thus engenders a confrontational spirit across the divisions. Such fractures are mostly responsible for our meaningless political fracas and skirmishes with spillover negative impact across the nation.

In such a context the question of appropriateness of the Western paradigm of democracy appears to be relevant. But many would argue that this is an archaic issue and the resultant debate obsolete. Such an argument has its obvious logic; but at the same time,

poignant question. But as the English weekly of London Economist has already cautioned us of a bad start. We could, at best, keep our fingers crossed and wait to hope for the best. As I write about such a qualified optimism as to our democratic future a couplet of the nineteenth century Bangali poet Girish Chandra Sen crosses my mind, and my own English rendering of the same (as I have not come across any English version of his poems) would be: "The waves of woe rise and fall in the sea of life / Hope is the only raft in such a sea." So let us be optimistic.

But optimism, qualified or contrived, does not give us the mental peace that grows out of a satisfied mind. The unsatisfactory track record so far of our democracy robs our mind off the peace we are entitled to. Such a mental disquiet impels us to look deep into what has really gone wrong in our democratic performance, and why we are not being able to have unqualified optimism even after such hard earned satisfactory democratic election.

To start finding out answers to such questions let us first return to the already raised issue of appropriateness of the Western model of democracy to the Bangladesh peculiarities. Let me refer to the Gandhian concept of democracy for driving home my own point of view. Gandhi confessed that he was "a born democrat." But he made no secret of his own paradigm of democracy, which ran counter to the

political philosophy was autonomy assertion vis-a-vis Western dominance. This did not mean total rejection of the West or everything Western, but adaptation of the same to the local peculiarities. The first generation African nationalist leaders and intellectuals did the same thing when they adapted socialism to African tradition and crafted the hybrid African socialism in the 1960s, which was very different from socialism elsewhere. Their successors did the same thing in the 1990s when they came up with the model of African democracy. That both African socialism and African democracy failed to mature has been mostly because of the conspiracy of the global masters who had stakes in Africa's dependency status. But ingenuity and innovativeness of the African leaders remain commendable. Unfortunately, we have not had any such endeavour for commendation. We may be politically decolonised (that too in a very limited sense), but remain intellectually colonised. But we need intellectual autonomy and independence to make democracy functional and functioning in our context.

The circumstantial imperative is to produce an indigenous version of the foreign thing called democracy. Apparently, this might be a tall order, but certainly doable. But we need right brains under right leadership. We have both, but not in the right place. We have mostly wrong brains



spawns dysfunctional politics is what concerns us most. Another question of no less concern, but rarely addressed in Bangladesh, which is found to occupy imagination of thinking minds in many parts of the Third world, is to what extent the Western paradigm of democracy fits into the Bangladesh environment. It sounds quite pompous when we are found to smugly claim that ours is the Westminster (very few politicians can pronounce this word correctly) type of democracy.

Democratic politics has from its inception been a pluralist construct, and, as such, competitive. The corollaries of this construct are pluralist ideas and policies for getting to power; and also pluralist ideas and competition for delivering public welfare. But an aberration of such a construct as obtaining in the Bangladesh scenario, is competition plus confrontation for getting to power, and competitive resilience to stay put in power. Although politics as a process is an art of compromise for the greater interest of country and people, there are leaders known for their combative uncompromising attitude (for the sake of party and personal interest); they are indeed endowed with such honorific titles as the uncompromising leader. But rhetorics do pour in abundance justifying that such a stance of leader/leaders is for the sake of country and people. Little do these politicking souls realise that such a stance goes against the very spirit of politics and that of democracy.

it must be accepted that democracy has had its chequered career, and travelled a very bumpy road in this country. The track-record so far is not a democracy with a sure and stable basis. It would thus be wrong to call Bangladesh a democracy, but it is certainly fair to call it a democratising country. The institutionalisation of democracy is a long drawn out process and defies quick fixes. Even then we have to be sure of a perfect beginning at one point, and this is what we are yet to be sure of. Back in 1972, we did have a promising beginning; but after some time, everything relating to the progress of the democratisation process seemed to have gone awry. And, then, we have had at least two more new democratic beginnings, in 1991 and 2008. The latter beginning was most tortuous and tormenting, as it had to be preceded by the two year long spadework by a constitutionally questionable caretaker administration (the constitutional spell for such an administration is ninety days). The election was unprecedented for the peace and calm in which it was held, the percentage of voter turnout, and, finally, the absolute majority garnered by the winning combine called Mohajote. The election was also remarkable as it dealt a crushing blow to the anti-liberation and obscurantist political elements. But what about the prospect of a pluralist democracy that rises above political divisiveness? Well, it would be too early to make any specific comment by way of answering this

Western model, but which was in congruence with the peculiarities of his India. He rejected the Western democracy for its two outstanding negative features. First, corruption and hypocrisy go hand in hand in such a democracy. Second, such a democracy, if applied in India, would be an imposition from without. He insisted that the Indian democracy must "come from within." His alternative paradigm of democracy was "complete identification with the poorest of mankind, longing to live no better than they, and a corresponding conscious effort to approach that level to the best of one's ability..." Such a concept of democracy might appear to many to be abstract or abstruse. But Gandhi did have strong fact based logic to sound opposition to the Western democracy. The modern Western democracy had its beginnings under the aegis and sponsorship of the nouveau riche middle class. As this was the entrepreneurial class hypocrisy and corruption became concomitant features of Western democracy, and this was why Gandhi was mainly opposed to this democracy and its importation into India. On the contrary, his was a construct of democracy that had both top down and bottom up structural features in tune with the tradition handed down through ages.

It would be a facile generalisation to call Gandhi anti-modern, anti-West, and even xenophobic; he was, in fact, an autonomist. The core of his

and wrong leaders in the right places. Wrong brains and leadership make right places wrong and deliver wrong goods to the detriment of national interest. The imperative is to devise the right strategy to respond to this challenge. Experience suggests that the present politics and whatever sham democracy we have does not put right brains and leadership in right places.

To turn political divisiveness into political pluralism is the job of the right type of political leadership. If political divisiveness culminates into political confrontation to the detriment of democratic functioning we have to admit that this is because of wrong leadership working in tandem with wrong brains.

Pluralism as a democratic phenomenon suffers a severe setback in a political milieu wherein the rule is winner takes all. In fact, this is nothing but majoritarian arrogance, something like an anathema to the democratic spirit. In a democratic governance system it is not only the party / parties in power that governs; the opposition party / parties also have share in governance. In Britain, for example, the opposition in parliament is officially called 'Her Majesty's Opposition' in tandem with 'His Majesty's Government.' I think both government and opposition of ours have a good deal to learn from this original Westminster model.

Dr. Syed Anwar Husain is Professor, Department of History, University of Dhaka.

Pluralism as a democratic phenomenon suffers a severe setback in a political milieu wherein the rule is winner takes all. In fact, this is nothing but majoritarian arrogance, something like an anathema to the democratic spirit.