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Secularism to pluralism and beyond

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WE have undeniably opened a new chapter in our national history. In the early readings of this chapter citizens are still sufficiently buoyant to expect that the leaders that they have elected to office will be able to take the bold and necessary steps to help this nation of ours, derailed so many times from its core, to make its way back to its founding principles of democracy, socialism and pluralism. For the Government the room for error of judgment is little and, as ever, the trick remains in navigating the cross-roads of choices between myopic, petty politics and keeping promises to the nation. For this Government the task is even more onerous as the promises they are pledge-bound to keep are those that define who we are as a nation.

The recent resolution unanimously passed in Parliament calling on the government to ensure immediate trial of the war criminals is a momentously positive sign of a nation trying to correct the misguided trajectories in its path to its core values. This is a very important first step in healing the open wounds of a people long denied recognition of its own tragedy. However, I would like to propose that as we go deeper into the process of correcting injustices and seeking just retribution we must also broaden our horizons further and take up the larger exercise of healing fissures amongst ourselves as a citizenry. Let us not only limit ourselves to the immediate mission of bringing to justice the Jamaat-e-Islami as a political entity and the war criminals as individuals for their roles in our liberation war. The road to social justice is much longer. We need to repair the damage of four decades of exposure to propagators of an intolerant, ghetto-driven and supremely egotistic ideology which has held all religious, cultural or different propositions other than their own to be epistemologically illegitimate. Let us begin the conversation of how we can bring back to the table of citizenship all those who have been denied their rightful place on it. I propose we start by revisiting our Constitution.

Out of the four pillars of the Bangladesh Constitution that define our character and the principles we



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ভাষ্টি গোল নাহি হবে - ফকির লালন শাহ

stand for, democracy, socialism and nationalism have each in their own ways been battered and challenged. But it has been the high ideal of secularism that has suffered the most direct onslaught time and again, not least through the unforgivable act of its deletion from the Constitution. Reinstatement of the provision of secularism in the Constitution as an immediate corrective measure is vital. I would like to caution however, that such reinstatement would only be a necessary but not sufficient first step in the larger scheme of nation building. Secularism is but an enabler towards the more wholesome exercise of pluralism. It is the first step in a process that goes beyond mere tolerance of differences and pushes us towards an active knowledge and embracement of our differences.

The notion of secularism globally has taken on a much fuller meaning today than when we espoused the uniquely Sub-continental understanding of the term to mean equal distance from and equal respect to all religions. We need to move beyond a rudimentary philosophy of 'live and let live' to an active encouragement of plurality. In other words, given our historical baggage on communal politics, while secularism should and must be espoused by the State as a principle of governance, we the citizens must make an active attempt to open up spaces to cultivate a truly pluralistic existence for ourselves. Our national and geo-political reality today requires us to embrace tools of inclusion and inculcate an active engagement with diversity whether on lines of religion, culture, ideology, class, hierarchies or

narratives. It demands for us to move beyond a sterile understanding of equi-distance, a principle which ultimately works to further entrench lines of distinction while doing little to pick up the threads of a common humanity.

Another important step in our pluralist exercise should be to take a very close look at the various channels of information that influence our opinions, and form the minds of young citizens. We can critically look at the educational materials in schools and institutions of learning. A methodical uprooting of divisive messages that contaminate young minds, must be followed by an active infusion of an appreciation of diversity. There needs to be a systematic flow of messages of interdependence and cooperation as integral to national and community develop-

ment. We must take up a national challenge to celebrate differences across and within cultures, religions and ideological camps without abandoning the things we consider essential. Alongside this exercise we need to take up once and for all the task of putting up a pedagogical challenge to the Maududian philosophy that has infected the thinking of generations since the 1940's and encouraged anti-development, unconstitutional forces to relegate women, religious and cultural minorities to second class citizenship. But for all of this to happen, we each need to pick ourselves up, put our best foot forward and join in our nation's healing march forward.

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Can Speaker be his own man?

MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

THE primacy of institution building in our fledgling democracy could hardly be overemphasised. In fact, the country's march towards fuller democracy has stumbled in such destabilising frequency that the significance of build-

ing and nurturing parliamentary institutions has receded into the background, if not perilously lost sight of. Now that a fresh democratic journey has commenced with high hopes for qualitative improvements in all segments of national life, one can reasonably expect that the institutional reforms of our legislative organ would receive serious attention.

Concerned citizens and optimists would like to believe that the apex institution of Speaker of the Parliament should be sufficiently strengthened and restored to its rightful dignity. Since our Parliamentary democracy is patterned on the Westminster model, it would be pertinent to have a close look at the office of Speaker of the House of Commons.

"The Speaker of the House of Commons is the representative of the House itself in its powers, proceedings and dignity..... As a symbol of his authority he is accompanied by the Royal Mace which is borne before him when entering and leaving the chamber and upon State occasions by the Serjeant at Arms attending the House of Commons, and is placed upon the table when he is in the chair".

Coming to specifics, it may be noted that in the House of Commons, in debate all speeches are addressed to the Speaker and he calls upon Members to speak - a choice which is not open to dispute. "When he rises to preserve order or to give a ruling on a doubtful point he must always be heard in silence and no Member may stand when the Speaker is on his feet". "Reflections upon the character or actions of the Speaker may be punished as breaches of privilege". Further, "His action cannot be criticized incidentally in debate or upon any form of proceeding except a substantive motion".

One can thus see that the office of Speaker of the House of Commons is placed on a very high pedestal. However, one must hasten to add that the "confidence in the impartiality of the Speaker is an indispensable condition of the successful working of procedure" there. In England many conventions exist which have as their object not only to ensure the impartiality of the Speaker but also to ensure that his impartiality is generally recognized.

In England, the "Speaker's rulings, whether given in public or in private, constitute precedents by which subse-

quent Speakers, Members, and Officers are guided. Such precedents are collected and in course of time may be formulated as principles, or rules of practice. It is largely by this method that the modern practice of the House of Commons has been developed".

It may further be noted that in case of dissolution of the House, the then Speaker shall be deemed to be the Speaker until a Speaker shall be chosen by the new Parliament.

At home things are very disconcertingly different from what they are in the distant shores. The Speaker's office in our parlance has undergone considerable strains and stresses. Our Speakers have not been able to inspire the confidence of all sections of the House; and to carry them in the common objective of orderly conduct of the proceedings. No political party has been wholly free from the guilt of gross misconduct in one parliament or the other.

To discerning observers it would appear that the practical difficulty that our Speaker faces consists in the fact that his long association with his own political party does not actually permit him to shape off the relationship with his party just after he has been elected to

the high office of the Speaker of the House. Told differently, the Parliamentary system in our country has not yet matured. The emotional attachment to Speaker's party asserts itself

Critics say that the apparent neutrality of our Speakers have rather served the party ends than the institutional interests of our Parliamentary system. Further, the Speakers by the fact of their associations with their parties become ambitions to seek the pleasure of the party High Commands with a view to getting coveted berths. It is, therefore, necessary to analyze the root causes as to why our Speakers are unable to inspire the confidence of all sections of the House.

A considered view is that in order for the Speaker to be regarded as the accredited representative of the House, he has to formally denounce membership of the party to which he belonged. One has to remember that the principle in Great Britain - once a Speaker always a Speaker - has no relevance in our political system. Our Speaker, upon his elevation does not sever all his connections with the party.

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