

## Why are madrasas turning out militants?

By now accountability should have been fixed and some heads rolled. Ideally, there should be a time-based commission of enquiry to probe what went wrong and why the proliferation of terrorist dens, terror academies, and upsurge of violence and horrific killing missions could not be prevented.

Md. ASADULLAH KHAN

WITH the busting of the JMB dens, there was a feeling of complacency that the country had got rid of the menace of religious extremism. However, the danger of JMB still looms over the country. The truth is that insurgency has often thrived in the country on the misconception that outlawing a subversive organisation will quell rebellion.

It has been revealed in recent weeks that a madrasa-cum-orphanage was built in Bhola, under the banner of London-based NGO Green Crescent, by one Faisal Mostafa, a Bangladeshi but now a resident of London. Instead of being used to impart Islamic education it was used as a terror training camp and ammunition production factory.

Mostafa might have fooled the gullible villagers in and around the madrasa complex, but how could the local administration including the police ignore the evidence of sinister activities going on there in the name of religion.

The orphanage and its adjoining areas were reportedly often visited by people from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and London. The tardiness of the response of the police at Bhola was evident in the setting up of the madrasa, which really worked as an arsenal under cover of philanthropic activities.

The problem is that there is no accountability on part of police, or of the officials in the home ministry, in looking into the activities of such organisations. Even with the arrest of 13 madrasa students in Badurtala madrasa, which was

being used as a terror academy in 2003, who confessed to being members of JMB, the response of the law enforcement agencies was typical. Mysteriously, no formal case was registered.

Barisal has made headlines in regard to upsurge of radical groups. In 2004, 33 persons belonging to radical groups were arrested from a mosque while undergoing military training with dummy rifles at Shialia in Barguna.

In spite of the fact that materials relating to terrorist attacks, leaflets on jihad and maps of important installations in the capital city were recovered from their den, no case was filed against them. Intriguingly, 5 of them were reportedly arrested earlier in Badurtala madrasa case in 2003.

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Unhappily, the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) has its fingers in too many pies, which makes it unwieldy and inef-

fective against terror strikes. Unless tough action is taken at the appropriate time, the MHA will lurch from crisis to crisis and the citizenry will suffer.

Undeniably true, there is need to change the image and status of men in uniform so that they can fight against terror. It would be prudent for the policymakers to realise that the present-day challenges to internal security, especially those posed by JMB and 122 other militant groups, are of such a nature that to meet them effectively the country needs a highly motivated, professionally skilled, and sophisticated police force.

The key to raising preparedness level lies in gathering and sharing of intelligence. What normally happens is that the many organisations involved in intelligence gathering usually refuse to share information. This possibly proved to be a hazard, leading to a catastrophe of monumental proportions in the BDR carnage at Palkhana.

The importance of the local police, especially the constable on field duty, cannot be undermined. He is the most crucial link in the chain since he is the one who has maximum interaction with people. Says an intelligence expert: "The

local police station is the best source of information." And if they fail in their duty the result, as we have seen, is the proliferation of terrorist dens and weapons build-up.

The country, in the last few years, has seen an upsurge of militancy, extremist movements, and fanaticism, that have shaken the foundation of our fledgling democracy. The reforms should have started from the madrasas, where some of these radical Islamic institutions offer religious education almost free to the poorest children, who are the core of the religious parties. This is something the cash-strapped public education system is unable to match.

The madrasas work where the country's education system has failed, but they have brought in the dangerous culture of polarisation in the society. The governments in the earlier days didn't realise the dangers, therefore they couldn't control them.

At the crux of the government's vision of 2021, of a Bangladesh free of religious extremism, is the sweeping reform of the qaumi madrasa education system. It is widely acknowledged that the unchecked mushrooming of these madrasas -- often

affiliated to hard-line organisations and jihadi groups -- has been the major factor in the spread of militancy. Qaumi madrasas, which cater primarily to students from underprivileged economic backgrounds, have been accused of propagating stilted versions of Islam and have been the prime recruiting grounds for militant groups.

The country's intelligence services have been accused of ignoring what has been going on in these religious schools, sidetracking the primary job of education. But what has become alarming for the government in recent years is the fact that a good number of these schools, mostly funded by foreign powers, have been linked to acts of terrorism within the country, challenging the writ of the state.

After recovery of huge cache of arms, weapons, bullets, and bomb-making materials from the so-called madrasa in Bhola, the police has started looking into the activities of some other madrasas and mosques in that region. But if this is done by issuing prior notice, it will serve no purpose.

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## A right can sometimes become a wrong

The judgment opens up an interesting can of minority rights. A large number of madrasas in Bengal have Hindu students. Would the maulvis in the madrasas be within their rights to demand that every girl come in a veil and every boy wear a beard? Should they make it compulsory for non-Muslim students to fast during Ramadan?

M.J. AKBAR

I don't suppose the Christian principal of Nirmala Convent Higher Secondary School has looked at a picture of Jesus Christ lately, although it should be on more than one wall of the institution. If he had, he would have noticed that Jesus had a beard.

The iconic prophets of the Old Testament certainly wore beards, at least according to the version of Moses popularised for the world by Cecil B. De Mille and Hollywood: Charlton Heston was given one as he brought the laws of God carved on stone from Mount Sinai. Not all prophets had beards; Solomon had one, but David seems to have shaved regularly.

There is nothing specifically religious about a beard in Judaism, Christianity, or Islam. A beard is not a Quranic injunction, or a fundamental commandment of the faith. But some Muslims wear it out of admiration for, and in imitation of, their prophet, whom they adore as the true exemplar of humanity. There are those who keep it as a mark of identity, or even an assertion. Other Muslims keep their chins hirsute out of personal preference; perhaps the jawline is worth hiding from public view.

Out of the six great Mughal emperors, Babar had a nicely cut beard; Humayun's was more wispy (if the vague image I have of him is right); Akbar staked his visual reputation on the luxury of his moustache, as did his son Jehangir; Shahjahan

had an immaculate beard which was clearly dressed by a superb royal barber; and only Aurangzeb had a beard that seemed straight out of a need for piety.

When the principal of Nirmala Convent forbade a student, Mohammad Salim, from coming to school with a beard, he was clearly objecting to what he considered was Salim's aggressive assertion of a Muslim identity in a Christian school. He was, as the Supreme Court judgment confirmed, within the law. Article 30 of the constitution gives a minority institution the right to determine the culture of its institutions.

Would this decision have become news if Justice Markandeya Katju had said nothing while dismissing the special leave petition in the case of Mohammad Salim versus Principal, Nirmala Convent Higher Secondary School?

Salim's appeal was framed around Article 25, the right to practice his faith. Justice Katju justified the decision by saying: "We don't want to have Talibanism in the country. Tomorrow a girl student may come and say she wants to wear a burqa -- can we allow it?"

It was not a jocular aside made in an unguarded moment. It indicated the thinking behind the judgment. It is a bit of a mystery why he equated a beard with the Taliban: every Taliban might have a beard, but every Muslim with a beard is not a Taliban. Indeed, every terrorist does not appear with a beard attached, as the

incidents in Mumbai last year indicated.

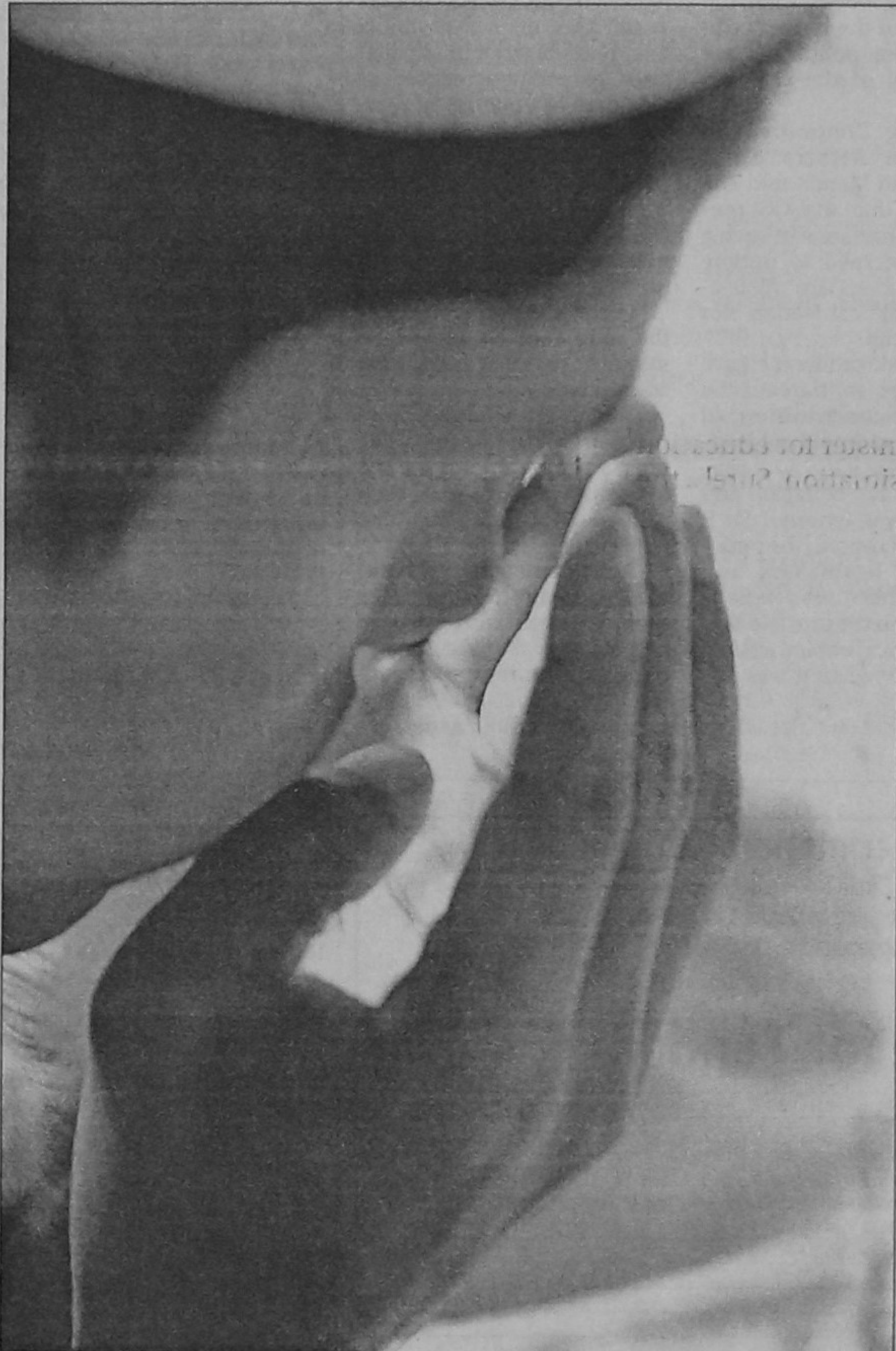
The judgment opens up an interesting can of minority rights. A large number of madrasas in Bengal have Hindu students. Would the maulvis in the madrasas be within their rights to demand that every girl come in a veil and every boy wear a beard? Should they make it compulsory for non-Muslim students to fast during Ramadan?

I would hope not. Hindu children in Muslim-run institutions come for an education in the three Rs, reading, writing, and arithmetic, not in the fourth R, religion. Does the Supreme Court verdict mean that a Sikh child can be forced to shave if he joins a Catholic school?

It is curious how the most intelligent, balanced and learned among us succumb to stereotypes when faced with another's faith. Perhaps this story of a lecture I gave at Warsaw University might be instructive. It was around the time when the French government had stirred a huge controversy by banning the headscarf in state schools on the grounds that France was a secular nation and no symbol of religious identity could be permitted in a state school. The ban, incidentally, did not extend to wearing "small" crosses on a chain on the rather specious excuse that they were symbols of tradition rather than faith.

There are no mosques in Warsaw for the good reason that there are hardly any indigenous Muslims in Poland. There was surprise, therefore, when I mentioned that I had seen a woman wearing a hijab on my way to the University. Who? I had seen a Catholic nun, I explained. No one had ever viewed the nun's dress as a form of hijab and abaya. The amazement widened to disbelief when I pointed out that the Virgin Mary, Jesus's mother, would never have got admission in France's state schools. There is no image, statue or painting, in which she does not have her head covered.

India's definition of secularism is very



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different from Europe's. Between Voltaire and Karl Marx, a huge swathe of Eurasia from the shores of the Atlantic to the edge of the Pacific, has separated state from faith. But Indians are not obliged to set aside their faith identities when they go to a government office or a state school. A Sikh can wear his turban, a Muslim may fast during Ramadan, a Brahmin wear his caste thread. Religion is private space. The only requirement is that no religion can impose its will on another. Indian secularism gives a Hindu the right to be pro-Hindu, but not the liberty to be anti-Muslim. And vice versa.

Defiant can be counter-productive. Common sense suggests where limits can be drawn. Where an individual's identity is not intrusive, or an assault on the social good, there is little harm in permitting leeway. One of the more welcome facts about South India is the rising number of quality educational institutions financed with charity donations by Muslims. They stress vocational skills and are therefore in demand. A sizeable percentage of the students are non-Muslim, which is an extremely positive development. But it would take just one incident of a principal of a Muslim institution objecting to a Brahmin's sacred thread or sandal paste on the forehead for a positive to become a negative. He would be within his legal right to do so; but he would not be in his right mind.

Postscript: As I finished this column the story of a girl being lashed mercilessly by fundamentalists in Pakistan appeared on television. I could not bear to watch or hear the screams of the young woman, who was being held down by her elder relatives while the punishment was being administered: is this brutality, this atrocity, this barbarism the final fate of Pakistan?

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## A slap for democracy?

One of the major pre-conditions for true democracy is empowering and strengthening local government. The relationship between central and local government must be congenial and indeed, national development is not likely to succeed without a genuine partnership between the two. Without empowering local government, the achievement of such genuine partnership is quite impossible.

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THIS is ridiculous. This contradicts the spirit of our constitution. Above all, this implicitly opposes the electoral manifesto of the government. This manifesto pledged to bring a positive change in the country by strengthening the local government and democratic ethos.

Yes, I am pointing at the proposed Upazila Act. The recommendation of the parliamentary standing committee on LGRD ministry concerning Upazila Parishad (UP) has frustrated all who are hoping to see Bangladesh on true democratic footing.

This is true that UP Act 1998 was introduced during the period of AL government under the premiership of Sheikh

Hasina. It was unfortunate that apart from the promulgation of the act, nothing had been done to revive local government and UPs in more than 15 years.

However, following the directive of the last caretaker government, election to the UPs was held in January this year. It may be noted that the CTG first amended the UP Act 1998, in an ordinance scrapping the controversial provision of the act that made it mandatory for the UPs to follow suggestions of local MPs as advisors. However, without ratifying this ordinance, the newly installed Parliament sent this to the concerned parliamentary body.

We believed that in the new context of the politics, upholding the spirit of the call for a change, the outcome of the recommendation of the standing com-

mittee would be pro-people and would strengthen our fragile democracy. Contrary to people's expectation, however, the recommendation is quite frustrating.

As reported in a national daily, according to clauses 1 and 2 of Article 25 of the bill, MPs will be advisors of their respective UPs and their advices should be treated as mandatory as ascribed in the original UP Act 1998. Besides, as per these clauses UPs must not communicate with the government directly without prior notice to the concerned MPs.

Moreover, the clause 27 (kha) of the bill dictates that after each session of the UP, minutes of the session must be submitted to their respective MPs within 14 days. In essence, instead of nurturing democracy, the standing committee is trying to make UPs fully accountable to their respective MPs. This, in turn, will promote the autocracy in the psyche of the respective MPs in the UP.

So, no doubt, this bill is a severe slap for democracy. If the bill is introduced as law with its controversial clauses, then it will definitely jeopardise our venture towards democracy. Moreover, in the worst case, a gridlock situation may arise due to power struggle between UP chairman and MP.

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true democracy is empowering and strengthening local government. The relationship between central and local government must be congenial and indeed, national development is not likely to succeed without a genuine partnership between the two. Without empowering local government, the achievement of such genuine partnership is quite impossible.

The national parliament is the part of the central government and so it is imperative to formulate relationship criteria with MPs and the local governments of their respective constituencies. For this, at first we need to draw a boundary between the roles of both MPs and local government in light of constitution.

According to Article 65(1) of the constitution, MPs are vested with legislative powers of the Republic and so their supreme obligation is to formulate, modify various legislations with a view to administering country in righteous ways following the people's aspiration as the Article 7(1) confirms that all powers in the republic belong to the people.

According to Article 59(1), the local government bodies in every administrative unit of the republic are the major actors of all sorts of local development works. Yes, the parliament has some-

thing to do for the local government and this is also defined in our constitution.

Article 60 clearly states: "Parliament shall, by law, confer powers on the local government bodies, including power to impose taxes for local purposes, to prepare their budgets and to maintain funds." So the parliament is constitutionally bound to provide UP with full autonomy.

Instead of working at the policy level, MPs in the past involved themselves in local development works which ultimately led them to be involved in all-pervasive financial corruption. For them, the major motivation for becoming MPs was to be a millionaire within the shortest possible time at the cost of public funds. Consequently, the nation observed the influence of black money in the electoral races. Due to this paradigm shift of politicians' psyche, the parliament became ineffective and democracy was at a stake.

As we are following the Westminster style parliamentary system, we should consider the roles of MPs in the British parliament. British MPs split their time between working in parliament itself, working in the constituency that elected them, and working for their political parties in their constituencies, MPs often hold a "surgery" in their office,

where local people can come along to discuss any matter that concerns them. MPs also attend functions, visit schools and businesses and generally try to meet as many people as possible. This gives MPs further insight and context into issues they may discuss when they return to Westminster. As in Britain, our MPs should also play vital roles both in the parliament and their respective constituencies.

For this, government may allocate offices for the MPs in their constituencies so that they can keep in close touch with the people at grass-roots level with a view to assessing the opinions of the people regarding laws to be introduced and other government policies. Besides, MPs should monitor different activities of the local government bodies from a distance just to ensure that they follow the Parliament adopted policies justifiably.

Finally, as a conscious citizen of the country, I would like to draw the attention of the honourable prime minister in this respect. We strongly believe that the prime minister is determined to bring a positive change in the country. And so as the leader of the house, she will not allow this bill to be introduced as law without scrapping its controversial clauses.

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