

## Promoting adivasi languages

*Such a move will strengthen cultural heritage*

THE richness of a nation's heritage come from its cultural depth and diversity. As recent history has shown, countries around the globe are preoccupied in reviving the heritage that has made them what they are today. Indeed, with such international organizations as Unesco taking the lead in preserving cultural sites and promoting as well as retrieving nearly lost specimens of heritage, it is important that we in Bangladesh join the enterprise in the interest of our own cultural past. For Bangladesh is a land of rich cultural diversity and is home not only to Bengali-speaking people but also to people belonging to other cultures. We are speaking here, of course, of the indigenous peoples, the adivasi, inhabiting different areas of the country. The adivasi altogether speak as many as thirty languages. In line with the efforts to revive culture that has been going on worldwide, it is today important that we do all we can to keep our indigenous heritage alive. Some of the adivasi languages, as we understand, are facing extinction.

A cornerstone of our political and cultural history is the declaration of 21 February as International Mother Language Day. That clearly means, for us, not only the promotion of Bangla but also of all other languages in the country. It is from such a perspective that we can approach the issue of a preservation of indigenous culture, in that broad sense of the meaning. In other words, we believe ours is or should be an inclusive society. One important way, therefore, in which we could go about ensuring the welfare of the adivasi communities is through helping them in the task of preserving as well as reviving their languages. That can be done through ensuring that at least at the primary level of education, adivasi children are imparted lessons in their own language as a way of ensuring the survival of adivasi tongues. Indeed, suggestions to this effect have already been made. Why not build on them? Once we move in that direction, we can tell ourselves that we are indeed strengthening the roots that bind us, one to the other.

Languages such as the Khumi, Khyang and Pangkho have reached a nadir in the sense that each of them now has fewer than 2,000 speakers. It is clear the adivasi have been compelled by circumstances to move away from their languages owing to an absence of practice. That means if the goal of ensuring education for all by 2015 is to be reached, the focus, a good part of it, must be on those adivasi children who drop out of school because of language problems. Bring them back through instructing them in their own language.

## Threat to Maldives' survival

*What a poignant call attention initiative!*

ALMOST the whole top order of the government of the Maldives was under the sea conducting a cabinet meeting on Saturday. What an exceptional way to highlight to the world the grave threat of global warming that the Maldives face due to the effects of climate change.

Ask any Maldivian as to what is the gravest danger to his survival and without hesitation the reply will be the fear of being submerged due to rise in sea level caused by global warming. The fact is that if the world did not do anything immediately to progressively reduce global warming and offset the impact, it might come to such a pass that many island or low-lying countries would be submerged. Even American and North European cities mightn't be spared the catastrophic impact of climate change.

The show staged by the Maldives' cabinet was an imaginative way to convey a poignant message, which must not be lost on the advanced countries to agree to emission cuts that would keep the temperature from rising above two degrees Celsius.

In view of the forthcoming Copenhagen conference on climate change the need for the affluent countries to atone for the damage to the atmosphere caused by their unbridled consumerist culture must be concretised through substantive commitment to least developed countries that are at the receiving end of the damaging effects of global warming.

We cannot empathise more with the Maldives in their concern for survival. Bangladesh is not much better placed than our island neighbour. We run the risk of having a third of our territory submerged should the increase in the rise in global temperature at the current rate continue at the same scale.

There are two issues that we would like to highlight in this regard. First, we can ill-afford not to suitably replace the Kyoto Protocol and formulate an instrument that would significantly reduce carbon emissions which is primarily responsible for climate change. But equally important is the need to arrive at an agreed level of differentiated emission cuts.

Secondly, those countries that run the greatest risk of suffering the most must be compensated in terms of technology transfer and funding in order that they can not only protect themselves and survive but can also exercise their right to development.

## Nine months of the 9th parliament

Readers who remember the 1971 Liberation War would agree that those nine months seemed never-ending. Good times are said to run fast; so now is right moment to look at how good the time in the House was over the last nine months.

MOAZZEM HOSSAIN

NINE is a memorable number close to our heart. After nine months of arms struggle, this nation was liberated in 1971 from the brutal Pakistani forces. The next milestone was crossed in 1991 when the nation was liberated for the second time from the hands of the military-civil autocrats. The third milestone was crossed in January 2009, after a two-year pause in democratic governance, when the nation once again embraced democracy via the 9th parliament.

Nine months have elapsed since the government of Sheikh Hasina began its journey with a four-fifths majority in the 9th parliament. This is Sheikh Hasina's second term as prime minister since 1996. It certainly looks like nine months have been whisked away from the life of the 9th parliament. Readers who remember the 1971 Liberation War would agree that those nine months seemed never-ending. Good times are said to run fast; so now is right moment to look at how good the time in the House was over the last nine months.

It certainly has been good for the treasury bench. The opposition, both the leader and her alliance, is certainly in disarray. Today, we are witnessing a kind of repetition of the 8th parliament. Presently, the opposition is out of the House on flimsy grounds. Ours is the only democratic nation where the opposition has no say in deciding who sits where. Today's dispute is about how many opposition MPs sit in the front row; tomorrow it might be about who sits to the immediate

right or left of the opposition leader. Whether we like it or not, this is parliamentary democracy's lowest moment. The opposition has failed to discharge its duties in the House.

Witnessing this over the last nine months, one is now convinced that our politicians have learnt little from the two-year pause in democratic governance (2007-08). In a parliamentary democracy, the parliament is the nucleus of all political activities. When the parliament becomes the home of only the treasury bench, one-eyed democracy is the result. This was why during the 8th parliament, the BNP-Jamaat alliance politicised all governmental apparatuses.

Certainly, such politics cannot sustain under a true democracy; however, it has the power to inflict lasting pain. The costs were so high in 2007-08 that the nation had to go through a prolonged period of caretaker governance. Thousands of politicians took physical and verbal abuse from caretaker authorities, and some even landed in jail for an extended period.

Ordinary voters do not want to see the politics of boycott engulfing the 9th parliament. The treasury bench must realise that boycott makes parliament one sided, even when the opposition has only 10 percent of all members. This contributes to creating an environment where crows eat crows. The outburst from the incumbent speaker on October 11 immediately comes to mind. It was indeed unprecedented that the speaker shamed his House colleagues with language unheard before, even under military-



turned-civil politicians.

Certainly, one understands why this highly regraded speaker of a one-sided house was engulfed by so much anger. It was doubly puzzling to see in a parliamentary democracy a sitting senior minister castigating the speaker of the House in his absence. This has indeed broken all parliamentary etiquettes and norms.

Of course, these are not good indications for democracy to thrive. One must remember that crows generally do not eat crows unless they are desperate. Under the present circumstances, it is possible that with a one-sided House this behaviour will continue. Then, what is the way out?

If one understands this nation's politics and home-grown democracy, there is no easy way out. However, the treasury bench must make the first move to bring back the opposition even if it needs to make some concessions. The present stalemate with the opposition and their demands is so widespread that one or two concessions are

unlikely to appease them. For example, one of their major demands is to stop proceedings against Khaleda Zia's cantonment residence. One wonders what this has to do with the House boycott. The opposition must fight such cases in the court of law if they genuinely believe in the rule of law.

However, the leader of the House and the speaker must look at the opposition's demand on sitting arrangements more closely. They need to extend an olive branch again and open up new avenues to address this issue. Indeed, time is running out fast and some solution must be found to the satisfaction of both sides. If the opposition wants to continue this for an indefinite period to harvest political gains, ordinary voters will eventually figure out what the treasury bench's offer was, thus, negating the opposition's claims. Eventually, the incumbent will become clean in the eyes of ordinary voters.

Dr. Moazzem Hossain is the author of *Democracy's Roller Coaster Ride in Bangladesh*.

## The Russian factor in a grand bargain

The European debate on Russia has been rendered even more complex by President Obama, who has called for collaborative ties between more sensitive Nato and Russia despite the latter's suspicious over the US's revamped BMD (Ballistic Missile Defence) shield.

M. ABDUL HAFIZ

THE 27-nation bloc of the European Union is indeed uncertain about how to deal with Moscow as a resurgent Russia casts its long shadow over the continent. Hardliners like Angela Merkel of Germany and Nicolas Sarkozy of France, with eyes on their dependence on Russia's gas supplies, instinctively reel themselves back from being stringent and are unwilling to let relations with Moscow become too sour.

However much the Europeans try to give the bloc's foreign relations a cosmopolitan flavour, their often volatile ties with Russia looms large on the horizon. Dealing with an assertive, self confident and energy-rich Russia is proving difficult even for the Obama administration. Only the former communist East European members of EU are in favour of going roughshod with Russia -- although such views are drowned by the protests of more circumspect and polished West European countries.

The European debate on Russia has been rendered even more complex by President Obama, who has called for collaborative ties between more sensitive Nato and Russia despite the latter's suspicious over the US's revamped BMD (Ballistic Missile Defence) shield. Anders Fogh Rasmussen, the new Nato secretary-general, also wants to improve relations with the alliance's former cold war adversary. At a recent parley in Washington President Obama and Mr Rasmussen, a former Danish prime minister, agreed that increased engagement with Russia was a priority for Nato.

In the meantime, the US president stunned many in Europe by announcing that Washington wanted to scrap the Bush-era missile defence plan for Europe. Bush's initiative was bitterly opposed by Moscow, which claimed that the deployment of ground-based interceptors in Poland and a radar site in Czech Republic, as envisaged in the missile defence shield for Europe, threatened Russian security. The revamped plan, according to the Obama administra-

tion, is designed to address more immediate threats from Iran, and would involve deploying US ships with missile interceptors and, in the second phase, fielding a land-based defence system.

Moscow first reacted to the shift favourably. But Russian officials now say that their strategic nuclear weapons could be threatened by the revised plan. It is, however, Poland and Czech Republic that are shaken most by the change in US's BMD policy. Obama's announcement also reinforces the notion that Eastern Europe, once the at the core of American foreign policy, is no more so in Washington's focus -- compared with her problems in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran and North Korea. The concern in the former communist states where fear of Russia is ingrained by centuries of war and occupation is that the US is becoming soft on Russia because the West cannot tackle Iran and other global challenges without the veto-wielding Russia -- and also China.

As far as relations with Russia are concerned, Europe is usually led by Washington and Brussels. An independent European attitude -- though less obvious -- may prompt it to change on its own, as it is doing now, in putting its relations with Russia back on track following the diplomatic chill as a result of the Russia-Georgia conflict and Europe's role in that in the summer of 2008. Significantly, a report from the EU-funded independent international fact finding mission released recently refused to put the

blame for the conflict on Moscow, saying instead that "the conflict is rooted in a profusion of causes."

Historical tensions and overreaction on the part of both Russia and Georgia contributed to the five-day conflict last summer, the report underlined. "There is no way to assign overall responsibility for the conflict to one side alone," the study insisted. The report bore fruit beyond measure. The Kremlin said that it was ready to restore cooperation with Nato, which was suspended after the war. Rasmussen is expected to visit Moscow soon to further cement the relationship. In a rare gesture, the Nato chief said that Russia should "make its voice heard" in the Western alliance's new security strategy currently under discussion in Nato capitals.

Though a warming of Nato-Russia relations will not be without hitches, at least with regard to further eastward expansion of Nato to include former Soviet neighbours such as Ukraine and Georgia, Moscow's opposition is rather obsessive. It would be interesting to watch the bargaining game between the West, which needs Russia for a stable world, and a resurgent Russia holding all the bargaining chips. Would it, therefore, be putting in place just a revamped BMD shield in place, or courting a Russia on whose injury a lot of salt had been sprinkled after the fall of the Soviet Union!

Brig (retd) Hafiz is former DG of BISS.

## End of democracy or rebirth of pluralism?

Many observers feared the possible coalition between Indonesian Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's Democratic Party and former president Megawati Soekarnoputri's Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P) and Golkar would kill the country's young democracy.

AHMAD JUNAIDI

MANY observers feared the possible coalition between Indonesian Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's Democratic Party and former president Megawati Soekarnoputri's Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P) and Golkar would kill the country's young democracy. The appointment of Megawati's husband Taufik Kiemas as the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR) chairman, which was supported by the Democratic Party (PD), displayed signs of such political cooperation.

Similarly, the newly elected Golkar chairman Aburizal Bakrie did not refuse to collaborate with the president's party.

The cooperation of the three largest parties is largely believed to diminish the checks and balances of the government -- a fundamental aspect of democracy -- due to the absence of an opposition party that was earlier played by the PDI-P, although many legislators have individually been more outspoken than their parties.

The cooperation of the three nationalist-secular parties, however, will raise hope for another important aspect of democracy: a respect for pluralism and the protection of minorities that some believe were disregarded during the President's first term.

A substantive democracy needs to respect civil liberties, which among others includes the freedom of religion.

The endorsement of the anti-pornography law and sharia-inspired bylaws in regions, including the recent stoning bylaw for adulterers in Aceh, highlighted the government's failure to maintain pluralism.

The burning and closing down of churches and mosques belonging to the Ahmadiyah Islamic sect are evidence of the failure of the state to protect its minorities.

Syaiful Mujani and Ihsan Ali Fauzi in the recent book *Gerakan Kebebasan Sipil* (Civil Liberty Movement) published a survey on how several regencies and municipalities, such as Padang in West Sumatra,

Pandeglang in Banten and Bulukumba in South Sulawesi, tried to control the moral and fashion choices of their residents through such bylaws.

Many of the regulations targeted women, including banning them from going out at midnight and obliging them to wear a jilbab, or veil, on certain days.

The regulations are problematic because they do not just discriminate against non-Muslims, but also against other Muslims that disagree with such interpretations of Islam.

In a democracy, a regulation should be applicable to all, not just certain religious groups. In a soccer game, all players wear shorts -- of course the colours are diverse, which demonstrates the plurality of the teams. The laws of the game are applicable to all teams and players.

A referee issues yellow or red cards based on the grade of violations committed by the players regardless of their backgrounds.

Using the analogy of a soccer game, certain Muslims here want to score as many goals as possible by using laws that favour them and discriminate against others.

The referee (or the state in a democracy), who should remain neutral, has also taken sides with certain groups that claim to represent the majority of players (or citizens).

We all know that sharia-inspired laws were suggested mostly by lawmakers from Golkar, not the Islamist Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) -- except for the current

controversial ban on karaoke in Depok.

The lawmakers did this in return for securing votes from the Muslim community in this year's elections.

In fact, Golkar's vote decreased from being the largest party in the 2004 legislative elections to third in the recent elections.

The election of Aburizal, including the inclusion of the young intellectual Rizal Mallarangeng on the board of Golkar, will bring energy back to Indonesian pluralism as stated in his acceptance speech at the end of the party congress in Pekanbaru earlier this week.

Apart from Golkar, we need a strong pluralist commitment from the PDI-P lawmakers, not just their intellectual ability, to maintain the country's safety for everyone.

We want the country to mature into a modern country along with "the rise of the rest" countries described by Fareed Zakaria in *The Post American World*. We don't want Indonesia to be continuously categorised as a messy country that could turn into a failed state.

The cooperation of the three nationalist parties will ease tension among religious followers. The opposition role can be filled by individual politicians, as seen previously, along with civil society organisations and the media.