

Code of conduct for lawmakers

High time we have one, not just on paper but in practice

WE are heartened by MP Saber Hossain Chowdhury's placing of a private member's bill in the parliament seeking to formulate a code of conduct for the lawmakers. Even though there is hardly any precedent of enacting a private member's bill in our context, yet this one merits a special consideration in view of the pressing nature of the need for a code of conduct.

It would be designed to ensure high standards of morality and ethics within and outside the parliament in the discharge of their duties. The high point of the bill appears to be the proposed nine-member ethics committee consisting of representatives from all political parties, presumably somewhat in the likeness of Congressional or House of Commons bipartisan committee. Its job would be to investigate allegations against any lawmakers taken cognisance of from time to time.

This is a very timely move given that conduct of many a member of parliament often gave rise to questions of accountability and transparency that could not be dealt with in the absence of code of conduct. Parliament is the highest and the most exalted institution in the country. As the legislative organ of the state and the ultimate watchdog of governance it's regarded as the fountain-head of moral and ethical values of integrity, honesty, fairplay, justice and benevolence. Therefore, if those who constitute its heart and soul should fail to live up to the highest moral and ethical standards enjoined by their very position then they are basically nullifying their very *raison d'être*, let alone demeaning the exalted institution they owe their origin to and betraying their trust as elected public representatives.

They should not be known for their power and pelf or an exhibition of the same or indeed for their feel of power and influence by a disdainful abuse of these but by a visible reflection of intellectual and ethical standards in the totality of their conduct. It is a sad commentary on the part of most members' performance and conduct that they behave as merely partisan automatons and spokesmen. Their manifest purpose seems to be a scramble for the party largesse to corner a share of it. They are more adept in promoting their personal interest and patronising their cronies through different capacities they hold ex-officio or insist on holding rather than concentrating on lawmaking and oversight roles that their position entrusts them with.

So we are all for a code of conduct that is underpinned by an effective and doable *modus operandi* with an in-built mechanism for implementing it. Of course, the best guarantee for an efficacious code of conduct lies in the MPs' own realisation of the need for a binding set of rules and an inner urge to comply with it in their best enlightened interest. Mere adoption of a code and a mechanical going through the motions of it would be adding another frill to the window dressing. The MPs must strive to cultivate the trust and confidence of the people out of a sense of conviction.

Sludge cleaning running into trouble

A temporary setback for lack of planning

EVEN while embarking on a perfectly commendable and highly imperative undertaking we hardly cease to startle potential beneficiaries with an awkward missing link in the exercise messing it up, almost to the point of jeopardising it. The case in point is the BIWTA's temporary suspension of its scooping up of sludge and solid rubbish sheets enveloping the Buriganga river-bed for want of suitable dumping sites. While they earned legitimate praise initially for doing a wonderful ecological job the organisers have had to face a standstill.

It is only after a sizeable quantity of sludge and solid waste -- 2500mt, to be precise -- has been lifted from underneath the river, that the Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA) woke up to the harsh reality of not having made any collateral planning for dumping the waste in a suitable place. It was not as simple as earthwork; for, the solid wastes are toxic and hazardous to health and not disposable at random. That is why the suspension of the operation till such time as they have got some dumping sites.

The story is, Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) refusing to dump the sludge at its already overflowing Amin Bazar dumping ground, a search was undertaken to get an alternative site. Such a location has reportedly been found, according to BIWTA authority, as private landowners "have agreed to take this sludge and soil-mixed garbage to develop their lands".

This means that just as there is toxicity to the rubbish there is also a potential soil fertilising quality. We would regard this as a lay man's point of view unless this is corroborated by scientists and made known to public. Some people seem to have reservations about dumping in private lands. Their apprehensions need to be allayed as the BIWTA and the ward commissioners jointly select safe sites for the dumping.

India, expectations and connectivity

Time has now come for critical decision -- all related to the major element known as 'connectivity'. I believe that it is this platform that will enable Bangladesh to effectively integrate itself within the region and will also provide it with opportunities for reaching its goals of being a lower middle income country by 2021.

MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

OUR efforts in foreign policy have been directed to protecting national interests, sensitising our vulnerabilities arising out of effects of climate change and fostering good relations with our development partners in general and within our neighbouring region in particular. This has persuaded our Prime Minister to undertake several visits abroad and other members of her cabinet to be also pro-active in their engagements in the international multilateral forums.

The past year has also seen expectations grow in Bangladesh about improvement of the multifaceted nature of relations with India and possible solution of outstanding issues. This anticipation has emerged partly because of the traditional ties of friendship that have existed between the ruling Awami League party in Bangladesh and the Congress party of India.

Since January 2009, we have had visits to Bangladesh of the former Indian Foreign Minister (presently Finance Minister) and their Foreign Secretaries (both past and current). This has been reciprocated by visits to Delhi by some of our senior parliamentarians, bureaucrats and also the Foreign Minister. Our Prime Minister has also had a bilateral meeting with her Indian counterpart in Sharm al Sheikh, Egypt during the last Non-aligned Summit Conference. The contact process has now reached summation with the visit of Prime Minister to Delhi.

The past few months have witnessed great interest in both the print as well as the electronic media about this visit as well as the scope of future relations between India and Bangladesh. Controversy generated earlier because of Indian plans to construct the Tipaimukh dam also added politicisation to the scenario. The opposition led by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party,

as has been their custom with regard to anything Indian and consistent with their mind-set, overlooked the bigger picture and threatened mass political agitation on the streets if 'the country's interests' were compromised. It has been an example of irresponsibility at its best. This approach has been difficult to understand given the fact that we have a functioning parliamentary system which pre-supposes discussion and debate within the Jatiya Sangsad.

I believe that time has arrived for the political parties to acknowledge that there is a dynamics associated with globalisation -- a stable, working relationship with one's neighbours. In our case that includes India and Myanmar. We also have to realise that Bangladesh is part of a sub-region and an important stakeholder in the future success of South Asia as a region.

Some maintain that they do not dispute the above thesis but that they are concerned about the successful resolution of the outstanding issues that are bedeviling relations with India. In this context they point fingers inter alia towards the consequences of iniquitous water management, non-completion of border demarcation, killing of unarmed civilian Bangladeshis at the border by the Indian Border Security Force and the continued imbalance in bilateral trade resulting out of Indian non-tariff barriers. They also refer to the anxiety that has beset our strategic security interests pertaining to exploitation of resources in our continuous maritime territory.

Well, things have now moved forward with this latest visit of our Prime Minister to India -- her first since her current assumption of power. During her first tenure in office as Prime Minister from 1996 to 2001, her efforts led to success in creating an agreed paradigm in water sharing at Farakka. Unfortunately, the follow-up mechanism with regard to the water sharing

agreement has failed to function as anticipated after 2001. This has been partially due to lack of appropriate engagement between the BNP-led Bangladesh government and the subsequent non-elected caretaker government in Dhaka with their counterpart in Delhi.

Both Bangladesh and India have moved on over the last decade. Bangladesh has faced many downturns, but has been able to recover from these vicissitudes. This has been largely possible because of its private sector and its migrant workers. Their efforts have enabled us to replicate success in different sectors.

Time has now come for critical decision -- all related to the major element known as 'connectivity'. I believe that it is this platform that will enable Bangladesh to effectively integrate itself within the region and will also provide it with opportunities for reaching its goals of being a lower middle income country by 2021 and also a part of the digitalised world.

It is this implication that has motivated our government to undertake its current constructive foreign policy mindset towards our neighbours -- Bhutan, Nepal, India and Myanmar and underline not only the importance of regional growth through connectivity but also to take all possible steps to contain militancy and terrorism. Consistent with this, it has been indicated that there should be more serious efforts for effective and equitable sub-regional water and environmental management. It has also been stated that there is need for a common counter-terrorism strategy and the creation of a South Asian task force.

Consequently, one needs to view the achievements of this latest visit of our Prime Minister to India dispassionately and with care.

Bangladesh and India have signed three accords and two memorandums. They underscore the commitment of both countries for mutual action against crime and terrorism. That will include mutual transfer of sentenced persons and combating international terrorism, organised crime and illegal drug trafficking. Special attention was also given towards cooperation in power and energy and also facilitating cultural exchanges. In addition the Prime Minister, quite rightly has stressed the agrarian nature of the Bangladesh economy and the need for

guaranteed normal flow (a 'fair share') of water not only in the Ganges and Teesta but also in all the trans-boundary rivers (coming in from India) throughout the year. We have also urged on the need to undertake necessary measures (through the promotion of institutional mechanisms) for reducing our trade deficit with India and to have a constructive engagement with regard to the resolution of all the complex outstanding bilateral issues.

In turn, we have been assured by the Indian Prime Minister and his colleagues in the Finance and Foreign Ministries, that India, as a 'friend', will not take steps that might impede water flow, will engage in greater connectivity through an institutional process, will provide assistance towards infrastructure growth and also try to promote a regional approach to some of the emerging areas of concern within South Asia. A significant 'credit line' has also been announced in favour of Bangladesh.

The Prime Minister's personal contribution towards efforts to consolidate democracy and eradicate poverty has also been recognized through the awards of the special prize.

This visit has assumed special significance because it has opened the doors and windows that were required to improve the mind-set and also to bridge differences in respective perceptions. This has been a good first step towards the right direction.

Both governments however need now to move forward with transparency and expeditiously. It will require sustained political will and an inter-active engagement. We have to remember that there are sensitive areas that will need prioritisation. For example, the first step could be re-stating of the understanding that any one caught attempting to cross the border will be arrested and not fatally shot. The second step could relate to the completion of the demarcation of the residual length of the land boundary (6.2 km). The third could be the resolution of the enclave question. These are achievable without delay. That would also greatly contribute to the process of consolidating friendship between us and India. All other measures will follow. That will also negate the unfortunate trend of unhelpful politicisation.

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In search of peace

Sheikh Hasina's visit and the Indo-Pak meet should make people in South Asia think what miracle can take place if all the countries were to pool their resources. They do not have to give up their separate identity or sovereignty. They have to only shed distrust and suspicion to build the region for the common good.

KULDIP NAYAR

IT was a welcome coincidence that both Bangladesh and Pakistan figured in the discussions at New Delhi this week. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was on her first official visit after a landslide victory last year. Top Pakistan lawyers, academicians and human rights activists sat in the Capital with their counterparts to find "A Road to Peace" after the governments at Delhi and Islamabad had failed to resolve their problems in the last 60 years or so.

One thing common between the meetings, held at separate places and at different levels, was the search for peace. Both have succeeded in the sense that they have taken certain decisions which, if implemented, will yield untold benefits. The difference -- a big one -- was while the governments of Bangladesh and India signed several agreements to restart on a path to peace and friendship after a dreary journey, India and Pakistan have gone still further apart.

The Manmohan Singh government was at pains to accommodate Sheikh Hasina to register that India had opened all its doors to cultivate at least one of its estranged neighbours. On the other hand, New Delhi hardly took notice of the three-day Indo-Pak meeting right under its nose. The media, generally influenced by the establishment, was slightly better. That shows the difference between official and non-official initiatives, notwithstanding the fact that both represent the

peoples' aspirations. In third world countries, nothing moves without official nod.

Sheikh Hasina's visit, which took place after one year of her rule, has come at a time when she has assessed her country's needs and India's capacity to meet them. She did not demand anything but it was apparent that if her government could not lift her people economically, she would slide still more on the popularity graph, already down from 83 per cent to 67 per cent as a recent survey of a Bengali daily at Dhaka shows. The Indo-Pak meet also felt the time was ripe for the two countries to start talking. In fact, its plea gives New Delhi an opportunity to think over its stand which has become counter-productive.

Sheikh Hasina's biggest contribution to Bangladesh is the strength she has given to democratic and secular forces -- the plank on which she fought election and won three-fourths seats in Jatiya Sangsad (parliament). India too has, in turn, gained. Lessening of fundamentalism in a neighbouring country helps. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has in Sheikh Hasina a prime minister who will not allow its soil to be used by anti-India groups which have taken refuge in Bangladesh. When Dhaka handed over to Delhi the ULFA (United Liberation Front of Asom) leaders, the insurgents from Assam, it was turning of a new leaf in relations.

In fact, during the talks between Manmohan Singh and Sheikh Hasina, when

the latter took a principled stand and assured him that no terrorists would be allowed to function from her country, the entire scenario changed. She had a long list of demands. But even before she could read the first line, Manmohan Singh reportedly said that she did not have to ask for anything. Whatever is the need of Bangladesh, India will go to the farthest extent to meet it. The proposed \$600 million credit to Dhaka was doubled. India gave an undertaking that it would not take any step on the Tipaimukh Hydro Electric project without the consent of Bangladesh where it had become a controversial issue. Nor did New Delhi ask for any transit facility which again was a sensitive issue with Dhaka.

The resolve to eliminate terrorism is what the region wants, from Kabul to Dhaka. Islamabad would like New Delhi to join the operation but India is in no mood to listen to Pakistan's argument for the resumption of a composite dialogue. The 26/11 carnage, even though 13 months old, is still fresh in the minds of people.

The Indo-Pak meet has also appreciated the point and has suggested a bilateral and regional approach to combat the menace. It would be better if Manmohan Singh and Sheikh Hasina were to integrate their efforts with the ones initiated by Pakistan Prime Minister Yousuf Reza Gilani and Afghanistan President Karzai. It would also take the wind out of Pakistan's sails and would have no defence left on withdrawal of its forces from the eastern border along India and putting them on the western tribal areas for a meaningful fight against the Taliban.

The Pakistani speakers were frank enough to admit the havoc the terrorists were creating in their country. One of them said that anyone leaving the house was not sure whether he would return alive. Islamabad needs to be retrieved. It does not mean that India will be less anxious in having Pakistan pursue its effort to book the

perpetrators of 26/11. But it does mean that New Delhi's frozen attitude would melt so that the two countries can meet across the table once again. Disappointment in Pakistan over the 'no' to talks should not make President Asif Zardari indulge in jingoism and say that they would wage a thousand-year war against India. He may want to bolster himself politically. But his rhetoric may make him more dependable on the army which has been the biggest factor in Pakistan.

It is strange that Islamabad has not yet understood how the system works at New Delhi. Otherwise, Pakistan would not have overreacted to the statement by chief of the army staff General Deepak Kapoor that India may have to prepare for war against China and Pakistan. However irresponsible the statement, it does not pose any threat to Pakistan. Defence Minister A.K. Anthony scoffed at Islamabad's reaction.

General Kapoor is not General Pervez Kayani. The systems in the two countries are different. General Kapoor or the army has no say in India's political affairs. He is due to retire after serving his tenure. The government will soon be naming his successor. Making a mountain out of a molehill gives the impression as if Pakistan is trying to score a point, however weak and farfetched. What all this boils down to is the unending mistrust. Until it is replaced by confidence, the two sides have to see that they do not present an exaggerated picture, indulge in accusations or imagine something which has no basis.

Sheikh Hasina's visit and the Indo-Pak meet should make people in South Asia think what miracle can take place if all the countries were to pool their resources. They do not have to give up their separate identity or sovereignty. They have to only shed distrust and suspicion to build the region for the common good.

Kuldip Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.

Time to establish a knowledge commission

MOHAMMAD MIZANUR RAHMAN

A few months ago, former Indian President eminent scientist Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam visited Bangladesh as a convocation speaker for UITS. Dr. Kalam delivered his lecture, "The 21st century university education is about developing enlightened citizenship for a knowledge-based society for peace and prosperity of nations, the world and also university has to be the incubator of world knowledge powerhouse." At a time of unprecedented and dynamic global change, with the world economy effectively amid significant re-balancing between east and west, knowledge, together with imagination, creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship are of premium importance to nations, governments, organisations, communities and people everywhere.

The 21st century will be the knowledge century, but what exactly do we mean by this? I believe that it implies that its "brainpower" will determine a nation's place in the present world, not its military power or economic power. Brainpower should of course be reflected in a country's economic competitiveness, as well as military prowess. More importantly, it should be reflected in,

what Amartya Sen has called, "human capabilities." Human capability is a function of the well-being of people and the investment we make in human capital formation. A nation's ability to make the best use of its brainpower will shape its place in the present century. Global approaches to creating more knowledge-based societies must surely be a crucial part of our plans and actions. Nowadays, science and technology is the best road for economic development. All activities depend on knowledge and the application of that knowledge.

The Bangladesh government should establish a knowledge commission. The time has come to create a second wave of institution building and of excellence in the fields of education, research and capability building in Bangladesh so that we are better prepared for the 21st century. In fact, a knowledge commission will act as the mandate to guide policy and direct reforms, focusing on key areas such as education, science and technology, agriculture, industry, e-governance and research-based working-knowledge-related issues etc. Easy access to knowledge, creation and preservation of knowledge systems, dissemination of knowledge and better knowledge services should be core concerns of the commission.

There are other elements of a knowledge economy, beyond universities, colleges and schools. Public libraries are an extremely important element for the foundation of a knowledge economy. Think tanks and specialised institutions are equally important, especially in facilitating informed policy-making. Also important is the University Grants Commission, or other institutions dealing with certification and regulation of academic institutions and programs. The ability of a nation to use and create knowledge capital determines its capacity to empower and enable its citizens by increasing human capabilities.

In the next few decades, Bangladesh will have the world's largest group of young people. Following a knowledge-oriented paradigm of development would enable Bangladesh to leverage this demographic advantage since a knowledge-driven generation is an asset. Denied this investment, it will become a social and economic liability. Hence, we must invest in building the knowledge base of our coming generation.

The task is at many levels, from primary schools to higher education and research institutions of national excellence. At all levels, there is a need to improve access and excellence. There are, of course, fiscal and

administrative challenges to be tackled, and intellectual and leadership issues to be addressed. At the bottom of the knowledge pyramid, the challenge is to improve access to primary education. At the top is the need to make our higher education institutions and research, world-class. A genuine funds constraint exists in the public sector, which is being neutralised only in part by the private sector. Together, the public and private sectors are not able to cope with the demand for higher and professional education. However, there is an additional problem at the top of the pyramid, namely, that of quality. Our universities and centres of excellence are falling behind the world's best, both in terms of human capital and physical infrastructure. In this context, we have to work together for good governance and the development of a knowledge-based society and economy. Otherwise, we will not achieve our goals of the 21st century.

We look forward to our government effectively building a knowledge commission to strengthen the knowledge base of our country.

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