

## A matter of shame

MPs' behaviour in the House threatens democracy

WE have no words to express our sense of shame at what happened in the Jatiyo Sangsad on Wednesday. That lawmakers can stoop so low as to indulge in a free and uninhibited use of obscene language and extremely objectionable gestures is something no one in any country can imagine. And we who have since before our liberation as a nation have consistently struggled for a decent democratic order and have so often impressed people around the world with our commitment to democracy are today compelled to hang our heads in deep embarrassment owing to what our lawmakers have just done. It is a scandal that blights everything we have long believed in. It undercuts the values we have always held dear.

The people of Bangladesh, whose sense of politics often seems to be on a higher level than that of the men and women who putatively represent them in Parliament, fail to understand why the debate among our politicians must still revolve around dragging the names of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and General Ziaur Rahman totally out of context with the business at hand. Both men have played their roles and have passed on. History has noted their deeds and accorded to them the places they deserve. And no matter how much we battle over their legacies, we can do little to change history. Unfortunately and shockingly, our MPs do not seem to realise this unvarnished truth. When on an occasion where they should be speaking on the president's address to the JS they rake up the past, they remind us with chilling effect that our future is badly and perhaps inextricably imprisoned in our past. And given the near physical violence the MPs of the ruling and opposition parties resorted to together with the verbal abuse they let loose on one another, we have the sorry spectacle of elected politicians going down to the lowest levels of human behaviour. Is this the image of politics we should be conveying to our families, to our children, to people outside our frontiers? Is this the democracy we have, through long periods of dictatorship and bad governance, struggled to establish?

For every nation, an elected legislature is looked upon as an embodiment of the highest aspirations and the noblest values a society can aspire to. The people of a country (and this is an idea which has come down to us from the era of the ancient Greeks) have always placed their faith in their lawmakers where providing good, purposeful leadership is concerned. Every parliament is a living symbol of all the public good that can be attained. It is a place where great debates are organised around ideas that are politically and intellectually sound and that take the long-term future into consideration. None of these thoughts appear to have come to our lawmakers, despite our very recent experience of the struggle we as a nation went through to reshape our politics. We had expected that following the caretaker experience of 2007-2008, our political classes would emerge chastened and enlightened and would together show us a credible vision of the future. Wednesday's descent into horror in the JS has shown us, in stark manner, that no lesson has been learned, that democracy is still a distant dream, that from our politicians we really cannot expect a fulfilment of the goals for which we went to the polls in December 2008.

We appeal to the Leader of the House, to the Leader of the Opposition, to the chief whips of the ruling party and opposition to take the lead in restoring the sanctity of the JS. Unless they do that, the threat of a new darkness overtaking us will soon loom large over Bangladesh.

## A fillip to women entrepreneurship

Still a long way to go

THE reach of micro-credit amongst poor women in rural Bangladesh has been considerable and it has served to alleviate poverty with an added advantage of empowering women to some extent in household situations. If, in addition to this basically livelihood lifeline, women's access to SME can be expanded, they will get a ladder to climb to entrepreneurial ranks in the economy.

Given the pioneering successes of some enterprising women in industry and business despite daunting odds, and also the fact that they are good, responsible managers of money, the government earmarked 10 per cent of SME funds for women. Resultantly, we see more women gaining access to bank loans under a central bank's refinancing scheme. Only two years ago, there was one female SME loanee, but since the inception of the programme in 2004 the number has soared to 498. Statistically this may sound impressive; but quite evidently, this is a long way to go before the banks' SME clientele assumes a size they can be proud of.

Basically, lack of credit has been preventing Bangladeshi women from starting or expanding their businesses. They have been conventionally denied loans for lacking in collateral. But now we believe the banks of their own should come forward to increase their lending to women under different schemes. The seed funds were provided by the central bank, International Development Association (IDA) and Asian Development Bank. Now all that the banks need to do is to build on the core element to facilitate rapid growth in women's participation in trade, commerce and productive sectors.

So, we look forward to a revitalised and liberalised SME scheme under which the banks' preference for lending to the medium enterprises will be somewhat bent towards funding small businesses where, according to a women's forum leader, the need for credit is greater.

## Nowhere in no man's land

At least Tiger Woods had the decency to take responsibility for his mistakes. We have seen nothing of that sort. Not even an iota of hesitation or compunction when most of those dragged to jail after 1/11, were quick to brag about their innocence.

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GATORADE has dropped Tiger Woods. The sports drink manufacturer doesn't want the all-time golfing great as spokesperson, because "it no longer sees a role for him in its marketing efforts." In plain English, the name Tiger Woods has become dud. So has the face Tiger Woods ever since the scandal arose that he slept with women other than his wife. Once both name and face were cash cows. Now they are threat to bottom line.

Others sensed it much earlier. AT&T and Accenture turned tail on Woods. Procter & Gamble and Swiss watchmaker Tag Heuer "de-emphasised" him in their marketing campaigns. It means they were worried that using him in their ads could hurt their business.

The Boston Globe reports that Gillette benched Tiger Woods in order to preserve its "clean-cut" image. The razor was afraid of being nicked by the face. But then other sponsors dumped him out of the same fear. Already, the sports icon has caused \$12 billion worth of damage.

It's amazing that a man cheating on his wife should have adverse impact on business. How does it make Gatorade less quenching for drinkers if Tiger Woods is unfaithful to his wife? Why should it affect the safety of Gillette razors if its pitchman was having a romp in the hay?

If anything, it shows that in the civilised world man is still inescapably linked to his manners. Wood's infidelity hasn't affected his performance on the golf course. The golf star hasn't failed to show up for the game. His effortless mastery on the golf course was undiminished even though he was busy in bed.

Then what is so bad about what he has done? The bad thing is that he got caught. Nobody would have bothered if what hap-

pened in Vegas also stayed in Vegas. Woods would be still speaking for Gatorade, lending his face to Gillette and flaunting a Tag Heuer on his wrist in many commercials.

He was doing all of these during the interregnum of his conduct. Between the first woman he exploited and the last woman who exposed him, Woods was juggling with both worlds. He was being all things to all men, and that was fine. Trouble started when he tried being all things to all women. His stars nosedived.

It's Greek tragedy that a respectable man should turn into ribald laughter. And scandals are when mischievous people run out of luck. Tiger Woods built that luck stroke-by-stroke, hole-by-hole, and then he gave it away by what is lamented as the most common flaw in golf. He couldn't stop coming over the top.

So, he offered his apology to all his stakeholders, his wife, friends and the public, for what he himself termed as "irresponsible and selfish behaviour." Bingo! This is where he hits the bull's eye. All irresponsible people are selfish and all selfish people are irresponsible. All wrongdoings emanate from this reversible malady when minds, devoid of consideration for others, engage in self-seeking behaviours.

That's when Tiger Woods reminds of 1/11. We thought this nation had set out to seek out the self-seekers. We thought we could weed out the Badboys of Bangladesh and clean up this country for a fresh start. People were whisked to prison. Tons of techniques applied, not an ounce of confession squeezed out of anyone.

I am not trying to force a square peg into a round hole. But when it comes to apology, Tiger Woods comes in stark contrast with what happened in our neck of the woods. Nobody has apologised in this country. Nobody has confessed or shown any sign of guilt or remorse.

Instead, everything fast-forwarded has



Are our politicians men enough to apologise?

been rewinded. People who were convicted returned with conviction. The chairman of a commercial bank, sentenced to 13 years in jail, was absconding. He came back to the country last year and regained his post. Only lately he surrendered to a court and has been sent to prison. Others like him are roaming free as if nothing has happened.

At least Tiger Woods had the decency to take responsibility for his mistakes. We have seen nothing of that sort. Not even an iota of hesitation or compunction when most of those dragged to jail after 1/11, were quick to brag about their innocence. Our minds exist in the no man's land

where nobody has been found guilty and nobody has been proven innocent. A golfer couldn't live in that bleak nowhere, and he embraced truth before it hurt him more. He knew what we don't. The longer it waits, the harder it falls.

Business has dropped Tiger Woods over loss of face, but we have made loss of face our national business. What goes around comes around. But we proved to be an indulgent exception. What goes around only moves on, as if there's no tomorrow.

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## The Indian PM's high-wire politics

The biggest risk is here: Dr. Singh has moved far ahead of Indian public opinion in his peace gambit. This is in direct contrast to the Indo-US nuclear deal, when middle-class opinion was cheering on the deal at each stage of negotiations.

national agenda that he is most interested in. This is not quite the kitchen cabinet of the Indira Gandhi days, when a core group of personal favourites functioned as a super cabinet, arguing the merits and demerits of a particular policy before it was presented to an obedient full cabinet.

The prime minister's men do not inter-

upset because he was denied the status of a minister of state. Ministers have become so devalued in the last decade that this is the least of a prime minister's problems.

He can get any status for whomsoever he likes. The substantive disagreement lay in the fact that Shyam Saran was not made NSA because the prime minister decided that Shivshankar Menon was, intellectually and temperamentally, closer to his line of thinking on Pakistan.

Dr. Singh knows he is taking huge risks. He has deliberately underplayed hard evidence from Indian intelligence that Pak-based, anti-Indian terrorist organisations continue to get active support from the Pak military, and that they are not non-state actors. Pakistan's army chief, Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, has reiterated, in his latest doctrine, that India remains the pre-eminent threat to Pakistan, implicitly justifying the military's support for the second arm of his country's response to India, the terrorist network. Elements of Pakistan's political class have not helped Delhi by immature grandstanding, describing India's return to the talking table as a victory for Islamabad. This obviously grates on Indians.

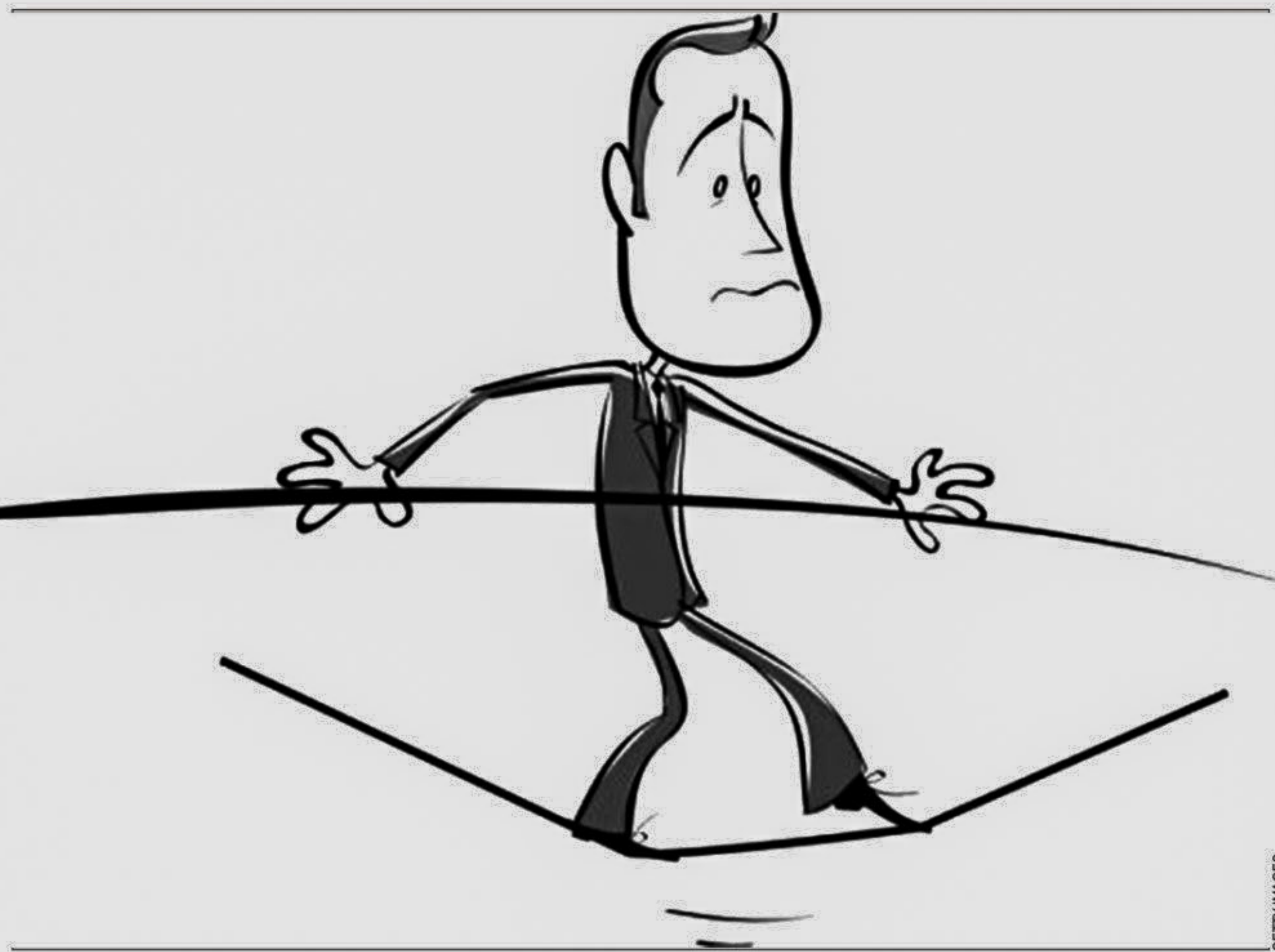
The biggest risk is here: Dr. Singh has moved far ahead of Indian public opinion in his peace gambit. This is in direct contrast to the Indo-US nuclear deal, when middle-class opinion was cheering on the deal at each stage of negotiations. The middle class that wanted a closer relationship with America is not equally eager to buy the American prescription for peace on the subcontinent, of which these talks are the opening move.

It is not certain that Pakistan will buy it either, because the tail at the end of the dog is that Pakistan might have to dilute its deep friendship with China, which does not fit into the US-Pak strategic paradigm.

America would be much happier with a US-Pak-India relationship, built on a shared perception of regional threats. Senator John Kerry has described the resumption of the Indo-Pak dialogue as "critical to the United States," and suggested that the Indian initiative is an extension of the new India-US relationship. More specifically, the US believes that India-Pak cooperation is essential to victory against the Taliban in Pakistan and Afghanistan. However, Senator Kerry might have to convince General Kayani first.

Perhaps Dr. Singh is depending on the United States to tweak an ear or twist an arm in Islamabad at the appropriate moment, as he tries to woo Pakistan, by diluting the status of Kashmir's relationship with India. This is high-wire politics. We shall watch with some hope and greater apprehension.

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M.J. AKBAR

IT is perfectly understandable. Denied any flexibility in manoeuvring members of his cabinet, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh is doing the best he can by reinventing his personal cabinet, a collection of personally chosen eminent personae given assignments from the PM's priority list.

Dr. Singh can do nothing to cabinet colleagues because the current law of coalition politics says that once you are seated in a particular chair, only an election defeat can drag you out of it. Competence, performance or even interest in your job has nothing to do with your continuance. DMK supremo's son Alagiri has zero interest in his cabinet job, and does not care who

knows this. His real ambition is to succeed his father as chief minister of Tamil Nadu, a legacy currently assigned to his brother Stalin.

A cabinet member is meant to be part of a team, and implement a collective decision, even if he is personally opposed to it. His politicisation of an important pre-budget decision, to lift a key fertiliser subsidy, would have been sufficient for dismissal in any normal cabinet system of governance. The prime minister could do nothing about it since the DMK functions as an autonomous ally.

Gradually, through a creep-and-collect process, the prime minister has used his rights of appointment to his personal office to create a parallel mini-administration that can address those aspects of the

vene, or interfere, in ministries outside their domain, as the kitchen cabinet would. But, if the prime minister has made any project his own, then the relevant ministry has to understand that there is a higher authority, and it is called the PMO.

The two most high-profile members of Dr. Singh's office in his first five years, National Security Adviser M.K. Narayanan and former foreign secretary Shyam Saran, have both lost their positions because of the prime minister's increasingly evident desire for some solution to the Kashmir problem. Shyam Saran was an indirect casualty, but a casualty nevertheless.

No one resigns from the PMO unless it has been made apparent that the terms of relationship have changed. The media has been fed the perception that Saran was