

Working of JS standing committees

Ministries should help them play their oversight role

THE chiefs of the parliamentary standing committees have made it known that they are not happy with the role of the ministries insofar as compliance with their recommendations is concerned. They have decided to take up the matter with the prime minister and let her know the difficulties that the committees are facing in performing the job assigned to them.

Now, the committee system, the cornerstone of an accountable and answerable parliamentary democracy, is supposed to oversee the performance of the executive branch. They may summon government functionaries or ask them to produce documents before a committee if and when they deem such action necessary. The purpose is to ensure accountability and transparency -- two vital ingredients of good governance. But the point to be noted here is that overseeing should not be of an interventionist kind. On the other hand, the ministries' job is to extend all kinds of cooperation and support to the committees. They must not miss the point that such oversight by the committees will help enhance the ministries' credibility in the public eye.

However, it seems the system is not working as smoothly as one would have expected it to. The ministries and other government agencies are not taking the committees' recommendations seriously enough. One instance should help make the point clear. The chairman of the committee on the communications ministry has stated that the minister concerned questioned the very jurisdiction of the committee when it asked the ministry to produce certain documents. Similarly, government officials do not feel obliged to appear as witness before any committee. But the committees cannot do much to have such non-compliance redressed.

It has been reported that the committee chiefs are going to tell the prime minister that the rules of procedure may have to be amended to enable the committees function purposefully. We believe they have a good point since the ministries of their own are not being adequately responsive to most of the recommendations made by the committees over the last 18 months.

The system must be made to work, and there are best practices to take the cue from as to how such committees work in established democracies. The deficit of the spirit of accommodation and cooperation between the ministries and the parliamentary standing committees will have to be mitigated. In fact, they should be complementary and cooperative with each other for the sake of good, accountable and transparent governance. As the ministries acknowledge their responsibilities so also the committees should give no impression of being interfering and interventionist.

IRRI's positive role felicitated

More research and investment needed to meet challenges in food sector

WITH the help of the Philippine-based International Rice Research Institute (IRRI), scientists of Bangladesh Rice Research Institute (BRRI) have developed new varieties of high yielding and stress-tolerant rice. While appreciating such contribution of IRRI since its inception 50 years ago to Bangladesh's endeavour at attaining self-sufficiency in food production, prime minister Sheikh Hasina asked it to continue with its support so that Bangladesh can also produce salinity-resistant High Yielding Variety of Rice (HYV). However, the Director general of IRRI, who is now on a visit to Bangladesh, has coincidentally disclosed that his scientists have already developed two varieties of rice, one of which can resist both salinity and submergence, while the other that can resist submergence and drought. Or in other words, these varieties of rice are able to resist the climate change-induced conditions, which are emerging as the biggest challenge before Bangladesh's agriculture.

We commend the scientists of IRRI for their great contribution towards revolutionising our crop production, especially of rice, which supplies 80 per cent of the population's calorie need.

The good news is that scientists at BRRI, with IRRI's support, have meanwhile developed two new varieties of rice (BR-51 and BR-52) which can survive with their yields unaffected even when submerged by flood.

What is further reassuring to know is that the scientists at IRRI are working to develop another variety of rice that will have all the three traits, that is, the capability to fight salinity, submergence and drought all together. We hope, like before, scientists will succeed in their latest enterprise, too, and help countries like Bangladesh to face the challenges in their crop production posed by climate change.

These are certainly pieces of information that embolden us to meet the goal of attaining self-sufficiency in food by 2013.

However, the efforts of our scientists and farmers will not end with meeting 2013's goal of food self-sufficiency. For apart from climate change, population, another problem that is also staring Bangladesh in the face, will cross the 180 million mark by 2025. To feed these extra millions, we will have to increase rice production manifold.

But to make that endeavour a success, the government as well as private investors will have to invest in agricultural research in a big way to draw a greater number of young researchers in this field.

This calls for the agricultural scientists and the farmers to work in close cooperation to develop and adapt newer high yielding varieties of rice that will help meet Bangladesh's future challenges in maintaining self-sufficiency in food.



Linking up with the world.



Demystifying Digital Bangladesh

Whether we support it or reject it, "Digital Bangladesh" is an innovative idea. It is a Bangladeshi version of the Information Society, a society where information creation, processing and dissemination are principal economic activities.

A.J.M. SHAFIUL ALAM BHUIYAN

"DIGITAL Bangladesh" has been a buzzword in the policy arena since the AL-led coalition government came to power. We heard many times that the government wants to build a digital Bangladesh by the year 2021. It is the official goal of the government. But the idea of "Digital Bangladesh" has so far remained obscure to many people.

As an academic with specialisation on internet governance and ICT policies, I think it is my moral obligation to shed some light on the concept so that people can make judgments about the government's goal.

What does "Digital Bangladesh" entail as a concept? I have reviewed the relevant government documents to understand the concept but failed to learn much about it. The most articulate definition of "Digital Bangladesh" provided by the government, is available from the website of the Board of Investment at the Prime Minister's Office.

It says: "Digital Bangladesh" does not only mean the broad use of computers, perhaps it means the effective and useful use of technology in terms of implementing the promises in education, health, job placement, poverty reduction, etc." This definition does not signify the speciality of the concept.

Whether we support it or reject it, "Digital Bangladesh" is an innovative idea. It is a

Bangladeshi version of the Information Society, a society where information creation, processing and dissemination are principal economic activities. If we trace the intellectual genealogy of the Information Society concept, we can reveal the innovativeness of "Digital Bangladesh."

It was American economist Fritz Machlup who began to notice a change in American society in the late 1960s. He observed that American society was transforming from an industrial society to a service society where knowledge or information works began to replace manufacturing works as the principal economic activity.

Following Machlup, another American scholar Marc Porat conducted a survey to understand the contribution of information related works to the US economy and found evidence in favour of Machlup.

After Porat, American sociologist Daniel Bell, a controversial figure in western sociological thought for his blind adherence to the principles of free market capitalism, came up with his book *The Post Industrial Society* in the early 1970s.

In this book, Bell presented a linear model of social progress by saying that American society transformed from an industrial society to a post-industrial society where information works make the core of economic activities. Bell concluded that social progress now depended on a soci-

ety's ability to create, process, and disseminate information and maintain control over information processes.

Bell's other objective was to take a shot at Marxism to undermine it as a philosophy for guiding social change by showing that industrial societies were transforming into post-industrial societies or information societies based on technologies.

After Bell's intervention, American policy makers became convinced that the US had become an information society. Information technologies, especially the computer, began to be treated as the engines of economic growth.

By the 1970s the US had automated its production facilities by utilising computing technologies, and began to lead the world in information and communication technologies (ICTs). The Clinton-Gore administration implemented projects to build national and global information highways based on computers and the internet.

Following America's lead, countries like France and the UK began to use ICTs to transform their societies into information societies. By the 1990s the western world turned into information societies, while the developing world largely remained untouched by this development. Many developing countries began to aspire to build information societies but lacked technologies and capital.

On behalf of the developing countries, Tunisia proposed to the United Nations (UN) to organise a summit to devise strategies to help developing countries and facilitate socio-economic development by harnessing the power of ICTs. A UN summit -- the World Summit on Information Society (WSIS) -- took place in two phases

in Geneva and Tunis between 2002 and 2005.

The then Bangladesh Prime Minister Khaleda Zia attended the Geneva meeting, while the science and technology minister of her cabinet Abdul Moeen Khan attended the Tunis meeting.

At this summit, academics, civil society members, businessmen and policy makers from all over the world agreed that information and communication technologies had the potential to facilitate development when they were judiciously used. All the countries attending the summit made commitments to build information societies across the world by cashing in on the potential of ICT.

But Khaleda Zia's government and the following military-backed caretaker government hardly took any initiative to build Bangladesh as an information society. However, Sheikh Hasina realised the potential of ICT and her alliance government floated the idea of Digital Bangladesh, a Bangladeshi version of the information society. Other countries, including India, Sri Lanka, Brazil, Iran, and Tunisia, are also in the process of developing their versions of the Information Society.

If Bangladesh wants to prosper in the 21st century, it has no other alternative but to move toward Digital Bangladesh. However, this is an enormous task. It requires universal access to ICT, ICT-friendly infrastructures, and trained human resources for socio-economic development.

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The rise and fall of Emperor Pawarus

Sharad Pawar is the first Union minister publicly to admit he has passed his sell-by date. But at least he spent a lot of time in the store. If the younger lot doesn't watch out, they will putrefy in the warehouse.

M.J. AKBAR

SENSIBLE Roman emperors feared but two eventualities; barbarians at the gate, and a shortage of corn in Rome, citadel of free citizens and heart of empire. While generals were dispatched to deal with the former, the emperor treated the availability of food as a personal responsibility. A hungry populace could be dangerous to the emperor's health.

In 23 BC, the divine Augustus enhanced his godly reputation during a food crisis by purchasing grain with his private wealth and distributing it to a quarter million Romans. In 19 AD, his successor Tiberius, clearly a more mature economist than his populist predecessor, calmed food riots with a price freeze, and compensated merchants with a subsidy.

There is no known instance of an Emperor Sharadus Pawarus throwing his arms up in his toga in the middle of a corn calamity and letting it be known that he was a bit tired of distribution hassles and his time would be far better spent as Caesar of

ICC (Imperial Coliseum Circus).

This, particularly now that the punters had displayed a pronounced eagerness to pay inflated prices for a seat at a shortened form of gladiatorial gore, in which one side had to die within 20 bouts while vestal non-virgins cheered each slash with an acrobatic "rahhrahh" and sponsors offered to arrange a vestal meeting at a suitable price.

Abdication of responsibility while clinging to power does not suggest the happiest of analogies. Such indifference during this summer of discontent is a symptom of complacency that descends easily on those blessed with re-election, particularly when anaesthetised by the image of high growth.

Pawar and Murlu Deora can shrug and carry on. Elections are four years away, and when the sun rises on that May morning in 2014, the price of fuel and food might be the last thing on the electorate's mind. Why worry about judgment until face to face with Providence?

Roman emperors were less smug. Theoretically, they held their jobs till death; in practical terms, death was only a short

stab away. The emperor knew that you cannot rule unless you are able to govern. Curiously, democracy seems to have legitimised the opposite.

If you want a contemporary instance of being in office without being in power, check out Srinagar. Is there anything in common between the fuel-protest bandh in Delhi and the curfew in Kashmir? The circumstances are different, but the complaint is the same; the government has gone deaf.

Governments seem unaware of a dangerous phenomenon called buyers' remorse. Voters may not have the luxury of returning what they have purchased to the store, but their remorse can suck credibility out of authority.

German chancellor Angela Merkel was re-elected last October in an election that broke the back of the opposition. In nine months, the back is healed, and Merkel's united front is in a clinic; 77% of Germans believe that she has lost control. That is the key to authority; are you in control of events, or do events control you?

In 1971, Indira Gandhi won the most astonishing endorsement in our electoral history; by December that year, she led the nation to military victory over Pakistan and was declared a veritable goddess. By the summer of 1973, the charismatic George Fernandes had halted the nation in a railway strike, and Jayaprakash Narayan was

stirring from retirement.

Inflation -- the supply of corn, if you wish -- was the principal reason for buyers' remorse. The government limped towards Emergency, gulled by the belief that it had destroyed the opposition. The most dangerous opposition is not that of political parties, but of people.

Nearly four decades later, we have terrorists at the gate, a crisis in the kitchen, Naxalites in the courtyard and the hedge dividing us from Pakistan is on fire. Nero may not be the emperor, but he does have the agriculture and food supplies portfolio.

Sharad Pawar is the first Union minister publicly to admit he has passed his sell-by date. But at least he spent a lot of time in the store. If the younger lot doesn't watch out, they will putrefy in the warehouse.

Contemporary India is beginning to resemble a multiplex in a contentious marketplace, with different simultaneous movies: a violent drama in Kashmir; a stodgy farce in Delhi; an oily family soap opera in Tamil Nadu and a buttered one in Punjab; a B-film in Maharashtra; a tragic and tiring re-run in Gujarat; a faux David-Goliath mythological in Bengal; tales without a script in the northeast, while in some parts of the country the caretakers have simply turned off the lights and gone to sleep. Who cares?

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