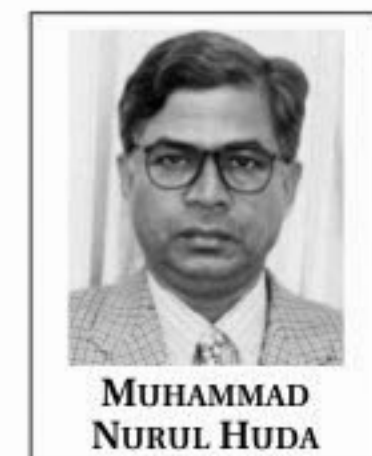


STRAIGHT LINE

The irreplaceable intangibles



MUHAMMAD
NURUL HUDA

DISCERNING observers tend to agree that Bangladeshis gave unto themselves a very lofty constitution but could not muster the ability to keep it; they inherited a rich heritage, but lacked in the wisdom to cherish it. Consequently, Bangladeshis are suffering and enduring in patience without the perception of their innate strength.

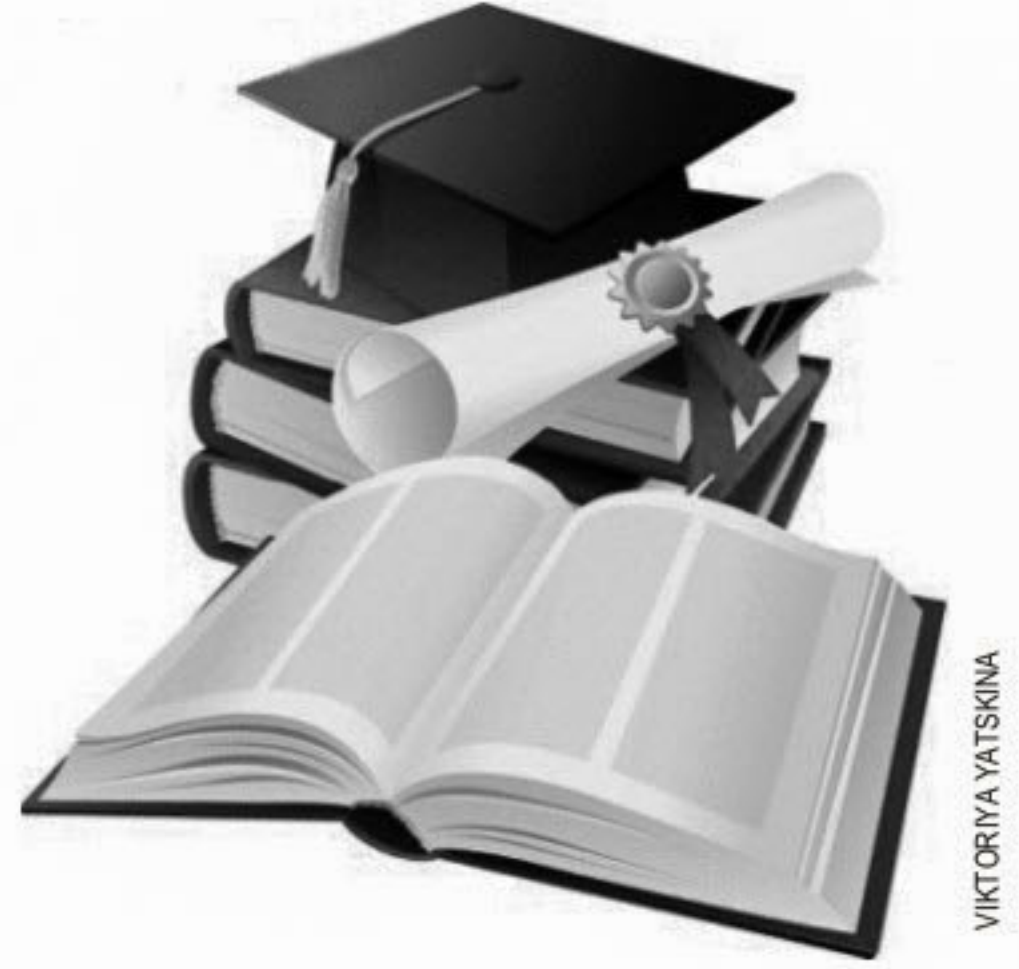
There is no denying that no period in the history of our republic is of more educative value than 1975 to 1990. If we cannot remember the past we would be condemned to repeat it. Freedoms were suspended for a long time and what happened earlier can recur again.

The question is, are we witnessing a degeneration of conscience and if our malady getting prone to aggravation? It would appear that single-minded pursuit of money by many has narrowed the mind, contracted the imagination and damaged the heart. Are not the black money and pervasive corruption scaring? What is the way out?

Upon examination and analysis we find it distressing to realize that despite immense intelligence and skills, we are not endowed with a sense of public duty, discipline or dedication. We display a lack of a sense of fairness and lack of the sense of moderation. Unfortunately, the outraging of the constitution, however shamelessly, has not been a punishable crime.

We seemed to have lost sight of the fact that the constitution is not

If we want to sustain ourselves in adversity and progress towards prosperity, we have to ensure that ignorance, incompetence and dishonesty are definite disqualifications for high office. The guardians must be dedicated persons who can strike a chord in the hearts of our trusting millions and lead by the example of their lives.



VICTORIA WATSON

intended merely to enable politicians to play their unending game of power. This document is meant to hold the country together. However, our follies and misfortunes are not going to be for ever. The optimist would like to believe that in the affairs of nations, tides ebb and flow.

We can no longer countenance a situation wherein most citizens will display scant concern for public good and far too few would be interested in public welfare. The attitude to encroachments on or destruction of public property has to change. The multiple encroachments that are suffocating our cities are not evoking sufficient remedial action. This has to stop and we must imbibe a sense of pride in our city, country and our history.

We cannot afford to be as careless about public property as we are careful about our own property. Humanitarianism must be distinguished from miscarriage of mercy and therefore, public interest would urgently require the promotion of law and order. The problem is for the

whole society. Thus along with governmental response, the private initiative of the citizens would go a long way towards counteracting the deficiencies of the government.

The leadership deficits in different spheres of national life cannot be made up without institution building. This is paramount because when a republic is born, it is the leaders who produce the institutions and thereafter, it is the institutions which would produce the leaders. The quality of the institutions would undoubtedly determine the quality of life in Bangladesh.

The foregoing is significant because people have risen to great heights when they had the benefit of public-spirited leaders. History shows that establishments were destroyed by abasement and corruption was the greatest solvent of public institutions. We also find that eloquence flourished most when public affairs were in the worst condition.

The staying power of democracy varies from country to country. The timing of political breakdown depends largely upon the strength of

political institutions. Collapse will not overtake us if our political institutions acquire durability through experience and tradition. We cannot, however, afford to have fragile institutions along with a mentality that is intent upon bending the constitution to any whim or caprice of the ruling class.

If we want to sustain ourselves in adversity and progress towards prosperity, we have to ensure that ignorance, incompetence and dishonesty are definite disqualifications for high office. The guardians must be dedicated persons who can strike a chord in the hearts of our trusting millions and lead by the example of their lives.

Our leaders should venture to create an environment wherein every class of citizens puts the nation above the party and the group. It is time for our electorate to realize that the destiny of the country is in their hands and that there is no substitute for knowledge and integrity in public life. There is no gain in attempting to cure the patient's fever by cooling the thermometer.

The writer is a columnist for The Daily Star.

MPs' tirade against ministers

PM should also heed public criticism

A number of ruling party MPs grilled some ministers at a parliamentary party meeting on Thursday. They accused them of unsatisfactory performance and their 'attitude' to MPs adding that if these should continue popular expectations would remain unfulfilled. The MPs' criticism was practically reduced to complaints of behaviour rather than any objective assessment of ministerial performances.

As it is, the MPs' observations needed to be taken with a pinch of salt because they have their axes to grind. Already, they have proved meddlesome in local government affairs with a given prerogative which has seriously impaired autonomy of the local bodies.

The MPs approach ministers and their deputies mostly for favours, either personal in nature, or for their coterie of supporters. To confuse these with service to general public or mitigating grievances of the poor, vulnerable and needy would be a downright blunder. Of course, the MPs and amenable ministers or state ministers would like to claim their efforts to have been entirely driven by impersonal or public-spirited motives. In reality, it is the nurturing of constituency with favours that is where there can be a conflict of interest between an MP and a minister or state minister. To be sure, there are ministers and their deputies who value reputation, credibility and professionalism above petty-minded expediency. It is this group who enjoy public esteem across the board.

So, whose criticism the prime minister should be paying heed to -- that of self-seeking insiders or the oft-expressed critical public opinion on a whole lot of messed up affairs voiced through media or other different forums?

The price spiral in the essentials market, the growing sense of public insecurity in the face of a surge in criminality topped off by impunity and lethal abuse of power, occasional financial hiccups, excessive foreign jaunts with no commensurate dividends, poor service delivery tainted by corruption and absenteeism are the elements of ministerial performances that have drawn most public criticism. The prime minister needs to be responsive to demands for mitigation, because at the end of the day, it is her performance and credibility that will have to stand public scrutiny.

Upazila parishad disempowered

A key issue raised

DEPUTY Speaker Col (ret'd) Shawkat Ali has brought into sharp focus a matter of vital importance so far as effective functioning of the chairmen and vice-chairmen of the upazila parishads goes. Regrettably, their role has been substantially stifled through a delegation of authority to the upazila nirbahi officers. This is in addition to the preponderance of the MPs at that level in an advisory capacity which is but of a binding nature.

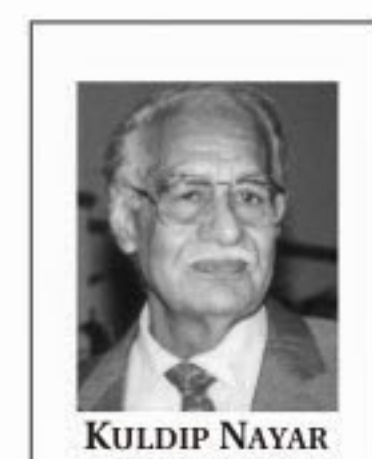
The Deputy Speaker taking part in a national level discourse on 'decentralisation of finance: past, present and future' held in the city made two very cogent points. First, he spoke of an acute deficit in people's control of and their participation in local development works. He thought that such involvement of local communities would have to be provided for systemically rather than being left to occasional verbal commitments. While endorsing his view we would urge the fullest use of the RTI instrument by the people of upazila constituencies. The first prerequisite for grassroots participation is that the people are informed about the allocation, utilisation of development funds and physical targets of projects to be met within stated timeframes.

Each upzila level government agency should be equipped to furnish data on demand. Importantly, it must be made obligatory for the agencies to be responsive to public queries and demand for information. Actually, there has been a longstanding demand for the government departments at the local level to display charts on any development programme or project on a periodic basis.

The second point that the Deputy Speaker made is equally important, if not more. He has asked for empowering local government institutions with delegated financial authority. Without this, a local government institution such as the upazila parishad, which operates in the closest proximity to the people, will be simply unable to deliver goods to the people. The matter deserves to be taken up in parliament

BETWEEN THE LINES

How to remove mistrust?



KULDIP NAYYAR

ONE sounds ancient while discussing the resumption of any dialogue between India and Pakistan. Not many people can even

recall when the two sat across the table. And when was there any serious effort for rapprochement? The meeting of the two home secretaries later in the month, it is feared, may turn out to be yet another exercise which the two sides are essaying under foreign pressure. Seldom have they gone beyond dotting the I's and crossing the T's.

I have heard that President Asif Zardari told some members of civil society he invited to go on reminding him on improving relations with India. That was one year ago. In comparison, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has been more forthcoming. At Jammu earlier this month he said that he wanted good relations with Pakistan and would be willing to discuss any problem, including Kashmir.

Still the relationship has stayed frozen in mistrust or, as one Pakistani diplomat said: "We are prisoners of history." The two countries have gone so apart over the last six and a half decades since partition that they are indeed different countries, with different priorities and different preferences. Still they can find a common ground because the deadlock between them is hurting both and deepening suspicion.

New Delhi has admitted that it could not stop talking to a neighbouring country. The stance is understandable after the 26/11 terrorist attack on Mumbai. Yet the meeting between the two foreign secretaries at Delhi should not have ended in a fiasco. The two prime ministers at Sharm e-Sheikh in Egypt had decided to ford the water of mistakes and mishaps that had taken place. But this did not seem to have had much effect.

Even now former diplomats and foreign office bureaucrats, who have

met in the last two months at Singapore, Dubai and Delhi, have talked only on terrorism. My information is that both sides said their piece and did not agree to anything specific. Most of them are hawks anyway and did their worst to spoil relations between the two countries when they were in service. The two governments picked them up at their own expenses to sustain what is known as the second channel to give people false hopes.

My worry is that their discussion is going to be the agenda for the two home secretaries, and the same biased approach would form the basis on which their foreign ministers would hold discussion. (I hope by then President Zardari would have appointed a full-fledged foreign minister.)

I still don't see the environs of a sustained, fruitful discussion.

Zardari and his country have to show determination to punish the 26/11 terrorists. New Delhi too must prove to Pakistan that perpetrators of the blasts that killed some 42 Pakistanis in Samjhauta Express will not be spared.

Meetings between secretaries, then ministers and the two prime ministers have taken place many a time before. They do not mean anything by themselves. Some of the agreements already initialled, like Sir Creeks and Siachin Glacier, should be signed and made public to give confidence to the peoples.

That India should have terrorism on the top of the list is natural because it has suffered twice, first when Parliament House was attacked in 2001 and the second when the terrorists stuck at Mumbai in 2008. Yet, after expressing its fears, New Delhi should talk on other subjects which Islamabad considers important.

The problem the two countries will face is how to deal with the opposi-

tion within their own borders. Religious parties with similar credentials are the biggest hindrance. They have no specific issue to pursue. They are just opposed to any improvement of relations between India and Pakistan. They see the other as enemy. Both countries have to present them with a fait accompli. Any argument with them will be a waste of time and effort.

In India, the Sangh Parivar and the like-minded Shiv Sena may block any step taken to span the distance. Yet there is a strong pro-Atal Bihari Vajpayee group within the BJP which can be swung in favour of a settlement. After all, the real initiative came when Vajpayee was the prime minister.

L.K.Advani is a hard core person. But his favourable observations on Quaid-e-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah shows that he can be brought round.

As regards Pakistan, the Lashkar-e-Toiba and some religious parties have vehemently criticised any rapprochement with New Delhi. In fact, one group has declared war against India.

I envisage real opposition from the army. Although former foreign minister Khurshid Kasuri, while in Delhi, assured that the army was on board when there was a near settlement, Pervez Musharraf was the then army chief apart from being the president. General Ashfaq Parvez Kiyani, Chief of Army Staff, transmits different messages. One is that he is anti-India because of Kashmir and the second is that he does not like India's activities in Afghanistan. Both have the same message of being anti-India.

I wonder if all this is true. There would have been no talks if the army

was against the dialogue. The disconcerting part is that the army has not reacted to the murder of two liberals, Punjab Governor Salman Taseer and Minority Affairs Minister Bhatti. The explanation given to me is that any condemnation would have divided the army. Kiyani has reportedly told western diplomats at Islamabad that there were too many soldiers in the ranks who sympathised with the killers. Biased General Zia-Ul Haq is responsible for this development. He introduced religiosity in the armed forces.

America too cannot escape the blame. During the cold war against the Soviet Union, Washington constituted a force of fundamentalists to bleed Moscow in Afghanistan. The Taliban grew from that force with American equipment and support. Pakistan is a victim of Washington's foolhardy policies. And now it is seeking negotiations with the Frankenstein they had created in the Taliban.

New Delhi and Islamabad can join hands to fight the Taliban. It is in the interest of both. But the premise for such a proposition is built in on mutual faith. Can this deficit be made up when the two home secretaries meet? President Zardari was right about "incendiary environment" in his country when he talked to a western diplomat. Yet Pakistan can have an ally in facing it squarely if his government instills confidence in India. To begin with, Zardari and his country have to show determination to punish the 26/11 terrorists. New Delhi too must prove to Pakistan that perpetrators of the blasts that killed some 42 Pakistanis in Samjhauta Express will not be spared.

However, it is intriguing to see an advertisement in the Pakistan media to demand death sentence to the killers of Samjhauta train blasts. There is nothing to suggest that the government is not pursuing the case diligently. In fact, the Hindu fundamentalists are unhappy. The habit of accusation is the main reason for the mistrust.

The writer is an eminent Indian columnist.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

March 12

1912

The Girl Guides (later renamed the Girl Scouts of the USA) are founded in the United States.

1918

Moscow becomes the capital of Russia again after Saint Petersburg held this status for 215 years.

1930

Mahatma Gandhi leads a 200-mile march, known as the Dandi March, to the sea in defiance of British opposition, to protest the British monopoly on salt.

1933

Great Depression: Franklin D. Roosevelt addresses the nation for the first time as President of the United States. This was also the first of his "fireside chats".

1947

The Truman Doctrine is proclaimed to help stem the spread of Communism.

1966

Suharto takes over from Sukarno to become President of Indonesia.

1993

Several bombs explode in Bombay (Mumbai), India, killing about 300 and injuring hundreds more.

1993

North Korea nuclear weapons program: North Korea says that it plans to withdraw from the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty and refuses to allow inspectors access to its nuclear sites.