

PLEASURE IS ALL MINE

Maturity, if not statesmanship ...



SHAH HUSAIN IMAM

THE comical irony of our politics is something of a stand-out. We are second to none perhaps in

making issues out of non-issues and non-issues out of issues. In the process, political dynamics are caught up in circles as the garrulity of talks in constant motion tends to show a lack of creativity. We cannot simply think or work ourselves out of the box.

We find an issue casting spell on us, and as though hypnotised, the whole nation is possessed by the beckoning tune of the Pied Piper of Hamelin -- headed for an enveloping disaster. It is a metaphor for the ruling party by turn.

That said, we appear to be in a relative clearing at the moment. Opposition leader Begum Khaleda Zia has clarified her stance on the caretaker issue last evening. It is as well that she has done it. Even the BNP's position, though originally somewhat clearer than the Awami League's, nonetheless has had an ambiguity about it. The fuzziness came from Begum Zia's aides not being as emphatic as their leader. Their pattern of emphasis was different from hers.

Actually, BNP so far has been more reactive than proactive to a question that remains open. In fact, wide open as an option that all parties are agreeable to, namely that of keeping interim caretaker system for two years subject to

mutually acceptable reform.

But now Begum Zia has taken an emphatic position. She has given to understand that she is ready to go to parliament, even hold talks with the ruling party (to alter the caretaker arrangement) if only the Awami League makes a pronouncement that it would not do away with the caretaker system.

Awami League may have an apprehension that if it accedes to her request for an outright announcement on the question, Begum Zia might put forward other demands. For, in the perception of

major political parties. His suggestion was to constitute an interim council of advisers comprising five members each from BNP and Awami League. They will take decisions on a consensual basis to hold elections with a lame-duck PM on watch of the president. BNP, then the ruling party, had agreed while Awami League in the opposition rejected the proposal. This may happen in the reverse now.

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BNP, AL has opened up other issues in the wake of court verdicts on constitutional amendments. So, both parties need to get their focus right and on one particular agenda.

Begum Zia has again reiterated her objection to the retired Chief Justice Khairul Haque becoming chief adviser to the next caretaker government. This is practically a non-issue considering commonality of views, across party lines, on the need to reform the caretaker system. Besides, there is an aperture in the court verdict for a disconnect between the caretaker system and the judiciary.

For the AL's part, it has been waffling from time to time. First, the AL chief said (which she still per-

sists in) that after the court verdict on CTG there was no scope for retaining it. Then she asked the BNP to come out with a formula to the parliament for amending the caretaker system. Since her rule is associated with the revival of the issue the onus is on her to initiate a discussion by placing her points on the table.

One of the brainwaves making the rounds is the 1995 proposal of Sir Ninian, a former Commonwealth Secretary General, who came over to Dhaka to help unlock the horns between the two

principles underpinnings of free, fair and credible election would have to come from a fully independent and thoroughly empowered Election Commission. The separate existence of the Election Commission vis-a-vis any ministry has been reasonably advanced with authority vesting in the CEC to sign contracts without taking any ministerial route for an approval. The Election Commission has been authorised to raise a cadre of 500 of its own officials to act as assistant presiding officers. Having a separate secretariat for the EC seems to be only a matter of time.

Meanwhile, the Election Commission has prepared draft bills on constituency delimitation (including rules thereto) law, election campaign expenditure (public fund) law, and appointment of CEC and Election Commissioner Law, 2011. Several of their proposals with suitable amendments as suggested by political parties, civil society and the media do merit consideration of the government.

The EC has also demonstrated locally manufactured electronic voting machine (EVM) technology to a broad segment of professional leaders and groups. Some of the political parties and media representatives have recommended a gradualist approach with the EVM's adoption in the local government elections at this stage. Thereafter, by perfecting it drawing on the experience gathered, the EC can employ the device for the national elections. Only Bangladesh and Pakistan are left to use the EVM.

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Towards a knowledge society

ALAMGIR KHAN

KNOWLEDGE is power -- is a very old maxim. But until now there often existed a gap between knowledge and power. The person or community with knowledge may have existed without any power and again, the person or community with power may have existed without adequate knowledge. The gap has begun to be bridged nowadays.

The world is rapidly moving towards a knowledge-based society. Societies everywhere have begun passing through its door. This does not mean that other societies, from slavery to industrial, will cease to exist at once. They will yet exist for many years in one or other form. But knowledge is becoming dominant among all the factors that play a key role in social progress.

An industrial society is more likely to embrace it before others, but the door to knowledge society is open to all. Many developed countries have already stepped through this door. But it is more urgent for undeveloped countries to go through this archway. Of all the ways, it is the shortest, quickest and easiest way to development. However, this shortest, quickest and easiest way also demands extensive effort from policymakers, politicians and people.

Undeveloped countries like Bangladesh lag behind in many, but not all, aspects. They have some potential, like natural resources, human population, etc. Yet the resources are wasted thanks to one weakness, and that is lack of knowledge, which is vital for making use of those abundant resources and even turning a burden like overpopulation into a resource.

All this depends on only thing, knowledge. Knowledge that is not piled into the hands of a few corrupt, rich, privileged and selfish people, but which belongs to every human being on this land. Education is the vehicle for creating this knowledge resource, which is weightless, borderless, ever-growing through more dissemination, and yet the most valuable and powerful resource on earth.

A former president of Bangladesh used to say that ten crore Bengalis have 20 crore hands, and he urged his subjects to work with these hands for progress. But it was only a political, also on the verge of poetical, rhetoric, which has not been much useful in making our progress possible. The hands that have been sewing clothes day and night, and those that went abroad for work made a big contribution in the progress. But only hands themselves can do nothing if there is nothing for them to work on.

To make progress a new slogan is urgently needed: One hundred sixty million people have one hundred sixty million brains. In the digital language prevalent nowadays, there are one hundred sixty million most powerful computers on their shoulders, yet they are underused. It is not the fault of the most powerful computers (brains) on our shoulders that they are underused, as it cannot be the fault of any computer in any office if it is underused.



JAMES BAIGRIE

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Like in any office or company, it is because of the inefficiency of the management that the most powerful computers on earth are littered around without any function. Science says that a human brain is much more powerful than any computer ever built by mankind. To bring these 160 million super computers into full use, the management has to either make a new plan, which is often impossible for any old fashioned management, or the old management has to be replaced with a new one. In a state, the people who are its ultimate owners can do it, and they often do so.

Sixty million super computers will never want any change, many will even oppose any attempt for change, because they are the beneficiaries of the status quo. But they can be tackled in a soft way and hard way by dealing with their software and hardware. One hundred million people in favour of the change, each with one super computer on his/her shoulder, must not want to rust through under-use; they must want a change, even if with some damage to their hardware.

Anything in the world is possible if 100 million human brains want to do it and are in harmony in their desire. Change of the management of the state is a must for making possible the full use of every person's potential. A computer works best if it is maintained well, serviced regularly and continuously updated with new programmes. Only the brains of the sons and daughters of the managers and rulers are not the best computers taking lease of talent from Allah. Every child, including the unwanted child of a beggar woman in a corner of any street or railway side anywhere in the country, is capable of the same mental capacity if nourished and nurtured adequately. Then this will make no one poor, but everyone rich and happy and good.

A knowledge society is possible only if we "let a hundred flowers blossom," otherwise it is not.

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NARRI: A national platform for disaster risk reduction

M. MIZANUR RAHMAN

ALTHOUGH the Americas were gravely affected by natural disasters in 2010, especially in terms of fatalities, the number of disaster victims remained by far the highest in Asia. As much as 89.2% of global disaster victims in 2010 were from Asia, compared to 5.6% from the Americas (ADSR, 2010). Realising this, six international NGOs in Bangladesh (ActionAid, Concern Universal, Concern Worldwide, Islamic Relief Worldwide, Oxfam-GB and Plan Bangladesh) with two technical partners (HelpAge International and Handicap International) have come up with a consortium named National Alliance for Response and Risk Reduction Initiatives (NARRI) with the financial assistance of the European Commission Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection to have a better output of the intervention by a good coordination among the partners and economies of scale. This initiative will also ensure that there is no overlap or duplication of any activity.

The initiative has been developed as a result of increasing recognition among member organisations that there was considerable additional programme impact that could be gained by working together more closely, resulting in better and more durable programme outcomes. In addition, working as a consortium offers economies of scale and a more effective scale of delivery, while reducing the administration costs incurred by donors.

According to Global Assessment report (2009), about 2 crore people of Bangladesh live with the risk of floods and, in the country ranking, it is in the most vulnerable situation among 162 countries. The international database EM-DAT shows that, from 1980 to 2010, there were 234 natural disasters, and the number of people annually affected by natural disasters was almost 1.5 crore on average. Experts claim that our poverty reduction strategies or initiatives are failing mostly because of natural disasters.

Bangladesh faced 219 natural disasters, taking 191,343 lives -- averaging highest on the world mortality risk index at 6,598 people per year according to United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR). While the number of deaths from natural disasters as well as the damage to livestock has decreased, the economic losses have been huge, amounting to \$16 billion. Sidr alone caused loss of \$2 billion as well as a 2.8% loss to our annual GDP. The total number of lives affected over the years is estimated to be around 30 million (The Daily Star).

The consortium has adopted a five year action plan. To achieve it,

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the project DIPECHO-VI now aims to see a "Disaster Resilient Future: Mobilising communities and institutions for effective risk reduction." DIPECHO-VI wants to support and complement strategies that enable local communities and institutions to better prepare for, mitigate, and respond adequately to natural disasters by enhancing their capacities to cope and respond, thereby increasing their resilience and reducing vulnerability. All the six consortium members have a long history of working in disaster risk reduction in Bangladesh, and the integration of two technical partners has given it the potentiality to ensure the inclusion of two of the most important cross-cutting issues -- the elderly and people with disability.

Though the people of Bangladesh are very familiar with rural hazards, urban hazards like earthquake are of no less concern. DIPECHO-VI has taken this into consideration and some of the organisations under NARRI consortium are working to address the urban hazards basically by raising awareness among city dwellers regarding

earthquake, flash flood, fire outbreak etc.

Though there is a global consensus that no disaster is natural disaster and all are man made, humans still cannot control them. So, these international organisations have come under the same platform, recognising that people can at least save some of their assets and lives during and after disasters by being better informed, more aware and better prepared.

Many people are annually affected by different disasters and fall below the poverty line but, more importantly, the government does not have any scope to relocate these people to safer areas. Different

studies have shown that only a slight increase in people's awareness and capacity level can decrease their vulnerability. So, increasing mass awareness and capacity have become the main focus of NARRI.

Over the years there has been an exponential increase in human and material losses from disasters. The rise in the frequency of natural disasters and their consequences is related to the rise in the vulnerability of people all over the world. Noteworthy also is the recognition that this increase in vulnerability is not uniform. There are large variations across regions, nations, provinces, cities, communities, socio-economic classes, castes and even genders.

Fredrick Cuny (1983, 14), in his much acclaimed book "Disasters and Development," cites a classic example. An earthquake of magnitude 6.4 occurred in San Fernando, California in 1971. In a city of over seven million people, only fifty-eight deaths were reported. Two years later, a similar earthquake, registering a magnitude of 6.2 on the Richter scale, occurred in

Managua, Nicaragua. It reduced the centre of the city to rubble and killed over six thousand people. Similar patterns can be seen in other recent disasters. From the realisation that people's vulnerability is a key factor determining the impact of disasters on them, emphasis shifted to using "vulnerability analysis" as a tool in disaster management.

In recent years, a more comprehensive approach, that of disaster risk management, has emerged. This approach has three distinct but interrelated components -- hazard assessment, vulnerability analysis and enhancement of management capacity -- and is more closely integrated with the ongoing development processes.

Countries that have invested in strengthening their disaster management capacities have experienced a steady decline in mortality risk. In Bangladesh, reducing disaster risk is primarily not only social but also political as the state is the supreme agent of development here. In the policy formulation and implementation level, government needs to be more sincere and conscious so that Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) can be integrated in every developmental policy of the government and households can ensure their own DRR plan at the family level.

NARRI will come up with trained volunteers and skilled community-based organisations which can be of great help during emergencies. But the limited duration of the project cannot ensure the sustainability of these volunteer groups though these international organisations are determined to see the groups effective even after the project ends. This gives scope for the government to work and give sustainability to the community-based DRR initiatives. If the wide coverage of the government and the efficiency of these international NGOs can be incorporated together, it will be possible to have a better equipped population to cope with disasters.

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