

PLEASURE IS ALL MINE

Amartya's cheery words



SHAH HUSAIN IMAM

country adding this hinders investment, productivity and sustained growth.

Amartya carefully skirted around it focusing on what he understood best as a welfare economist and sharing his findings with us.

He came to receive Bangla Academy fellowship in the company of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, a co-recipient of the award. In the Bangla Academy function, the Nobel Laureate marveled at the inherent capacity of the Bengali language to be enriched by absorbing words, inflections and mode of expressions from other languages.

Amartya also addressed a programme themed on "40th Anniversary of Bangladesh's Independence: The Vision and the Journey," organised by *The Daily Star*, *Prothom Alo* and CPD on the same day at the National Museum.

A baritone with sparkling words, he took the Dhaka audiences into the deeper recesses of history and analysis of economic theories and trends.

He was interestingly anecdotal whilst speaking on secularism. But in sharing his glimpses of Bangladesh's current socio-economic directions and the prospects these hold out for the country's future he comes through as a serious, authentic analyst that he basically is. Little wonder, the Nobel Laureate endeared himself immensely to Bangladeshis with his simple but profound words.

The distinguished guest shared his sense of history with us by alluding to a secularist streak in Nawab Sirajuddowla. Robert Clive in a duplicitous move wrote a letter to Sirajuddowla recommending four Hindus

and two Muslims, of whom three had already been bribed by him, for consultations with Siraj, pretending to avert a battle. That it was a trap laid by Clive -- he had made all preparations for a war in the meanwhile -- escaped Siraj just as the unequal ratio between Hindus and Muslims in Clive's list of delegation didn't bother him.

Amartya Sen sees Mughal emperor Akbar the Great as the architect of secularism in India. Apart from his one-religion experiment of synthesising religions, Sen thought that Akbar's placing Maan Singh in charge of the huge imperial Mughal army was a paramount example of



PHOTO: AFP

culture practiced during Akbar era.

Further down history's lane, Amartya Sen remembered Sher-e-Bangla A.K. Fazlul Huq. Citing an anecdote about him Sen said, even though Fazlul Huq used to say he was first a Muslim then a Bengali, he generously showered praise on Tapan Roy through a letter on his securing the first position in Matriculation Examination under Calcutta University saying he had done Barisal (from which both hailed) proud.

Secularism in the West is different from what it is in South Asia. In the West it evolved as separation of State from the Church, even though religion of the

creation of Rin Salish Board. He freed the peasantry of the burden of debts by one broad stroke. Apparently taking a cue, Amartya thinks radical land reform should be embraced as key agenda in the whole of South Asia because it is politically important.

Of particular significance is Amartya's pointer to the respect Bangladesh commands today in the world as a success story of brightening socio-economic indicators as compared with her South Asian colleagues. The education and empowerment of women, especially their participation in the garment sector, microcredit based self-employment projects and remittance earnings have impacted enormously the lives of millions in Bangladesh. The children have been the greatest beneficiary of the mother's income.

Amartya suggests that with a robust sense of self-respect, Bangladesh, "a big country," should take leadership role in activities centering around adaptation to and mitigation of global warming. Bangladesh has a strong case on the unassailable moral ground of being the country most vulnerable to climate change with successes under its belt despite daunting odds but now infinitely more threatened by global warming. A large portion of its population risks being thrown up and sideways as its coastline shrinks because of global warming and sea surges.

The fact that even Europe, India and China have a "vested interest" in relation to global warming, Bangladesh, at the vanguard of least developed countries (LDC), has a natural claim to leadership in climatic negotiations.

This rhymes in with what reputed climatologist Saleemul Huq in his yesterday's editorial article in this paper underlines as "a paradigm shift in the definition of climate finance from 'charity' to 'polluter pays'." His recommendations for capacity building to negotiate effectively on behalf of the LDCs merit urgent consideration of the government.

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reposing trust in a person of a different religious persuasion. Akbar's famous *Nabaratna Sabha*, from which he would draw advice on diverse issues ranging from the administrative to the cultural was a composite think-tank. The legendary *Ain-e-Akbar* author Abul Fazal's accounts bear testimony to the non-communal

majority retained a special place in it. In our parts, secularism means equidistance from all religions with equal respect for all faiths. Tolerance and non-discrimination are key to secularism.

Fazlul Huq stands out as a pioneer of land reform for his historic amendment to land tenancy act and

Article 70 is no more welcome

SAQEB MAHBUB

IF one provision of law had to be singled out for its contribution towards holding back our otherwise promising parliamentary democracy, it would most certainly be Article 70 of the Constitution. In line with the culture of our political parties, no party in power or in opposition has ever properly addressed the issue of MPs not being allowed to vote against their own party, as Article 70 stipulates. Consequently, this provision has haunted our parliamentary practice for four decades and promises to continue to do so in the foreseeable future.

Originally designed to prevent MPs from engaging in what is known as "floor-crossing" the barrier is not absolute, in the sense that an MP can still vote against his party, but only at the high cost of losing his Parliament membership and therefore ceasing to be a representative of his people. It is, therefore, hardly surprising that an MP has gone against a party decision in Parliament and sacrificed his membership only once in our 40-year democracy.

In a vibrant democracy, democratic practice or power of the people should not end with the casting of a ballot. But unfortunately for us, as soon as we have elected our representative lawmaker, he is out of our hands and in the clutches of the party that nominated him. No matter how much a particular party decision might affect the interests of his constituents or push the boundaries of his conscience, a lawmaker has no real power to vote against it.

With this arrangement in place, sadly since the very inception of our country, our Parliament is only a rubber stamp to be used at the whim of the party in power. Not only does the opposition never stand a practical chance of winning a vote against the government, no critic inside the ruling party holds any bargaining power against an unreasonable or harmful decision of the government. He is free to speak his mind on the Parliament floor but the freedom ends once the speaker calls for votes.

From that moment onwards, an MP, the representative of the people, must only blindly follow his herd.

This really begs the question -- how effective, if at all, is the Parliament in debating national policy? The government asking the opposition to attend Parliament is a familiar media headline. But sadly, no party in power has taken a principled stance against Article 70, which practically renders the opposition powerless in Parliament. It means they can scream their hearts out but will never be able to vote the government down on an issue no matter how much popular support their cause might have. In a way, our Constitution, through Article 70, reiterates the old Bangla saying: "You're invited to argue with me about who owns the *taal-gachh*, but keep in mind that the

A constitution without Article 70 will at least give us a fighting chance of creating a matured parliamentary system where the government is checked and balanced by its own ranks and the opposition has a genuine say in the law making process of the country.

taal-gachh is mine!"

A couple of recent examples have illustrated the consequences of concentrating power in the hands of party high-ups instead of the elected lawmakers. Sensitive and nationally significant laws have been masterminded in a closed-door party forum and then passed in Parliament hurriedly and amid opposition from the ruling alliance's own ranks. The Constitution (Fifteenth Amendment) Bill 2011 was passed in the face of fierce opposition from Awami League's backbenchers and leftist allies; they had proposed amendments, debated on the floor, but to no avail. Only minutes later, they were all found to go through the "YES" door, silently complying. The Local Government (Amendment) Act 2011, dividing the

Dhaka City Corporation, was passed in four minutes, after a set of amendments to the bill proposed by an independent lawmaker was quickly gunned down by the ruling majority.

Now, although the Article 70-esque method of controlling the Parliament members is foreign to most developed democracies, it features in the constitutions of our close neighbours India and Pakistan. However, unlike our Constitution, the Indian version, in Articles 102(2) and 191(2) and the Tenth Schedule, and the Pakistani version, in Article 63A, only bars a member from voting against a specific direction "issued" by the party. Furthermore, the Indian Constitution allows condonation of the action while the Pakistani Constitution allows a chance of hearing to the member. Unfortunately, none of these flexibilities exist for a Bangladeshi MP. Once the vote has been cast against the nominating party, our Constitution shows him the door.

Recently, the Awami League government passed a minor amendment to Article 70, making it possible for an MP to abstain from voting even when his party decides to vote. But in votes that have followed, most significantly the DCC split vote, this change has hardly seen the light of day in practice.

After so many years of democracy and with the presence of a strong bi-partisan political system, unfounded fears of "floor-crossing" are hardly any justification for holding back MPs from doing what they are mandated to do. It seems likely that without a wholesale scrapping of the provision and addressing the issue head-on, the opportunity will go missing for a vibrant parliamentary culture. A constitution without Article 70 will at least give us a fighting chance of creating a matured parliamentary system where the government is checked and balanced by its own ranks and the opposition has a genuine say in the law making process of the country.

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In Memoriam

Dr. Jalal Alamgir: A generation of new heroes

ZAFAR SOBHAN

WHAT a tragedy for us all that not four months after a road accident took the lives of Tareque Masud and Mishuk Munier that we are once again burying one of Bangladesh's finest sons. It almost seems too much that in addition to all the travails we must suffer that at the same time we keep losing the best and the brightest of a new generation of Bangladeshis.

Dr. Jalal Alamgir was one of a new generation of Bangladeshis striding forth onto the world stage with confidence and assurance and who were destined to help transform the image of the country in the eyes of the world. A tenured professor of political science at UMass Boston by the age of 40, who had completed his PhD from Brown University in four years, Jalal was a rising academic superstar whose incisive thinking and insightful analysis had won him respect and renown, both within his field and among readers of the *Huffington Post*, *Foreign Policy* and *The Nation*, among other top-drawer publications clamouring for his services.

As a member of the Drishtipat Writers Collective, some of his most valuable work had to do with Bangladesh, indeed at the time of his death, he was putting the finishing touches on a co-edited book on Bangladesh's foreign policy. I remember my satisfaction on learning his plans for a dissection of Sharmila Bose's revisionist history of 1971, to add his voice to the academic case against her. We couldn't have had a better advocate, and with Jalal on the case, I knew that our intellectual history was in safe hands.

Not that you'd have ever guessed that Jalal was a heavyweight intellectual other than in the evidence of his obvious intelligence and ready wit. He was otherwise incredibly modest and unassuming, light-hearted and fun-loving, immediately likeable. No one ever guessed at college that his father was a powerful politician back in Bangladesh, and his august father was astonished to find him surviving on a shoestring in a tiny apartment with no heat when he went to visit his son at Brown in the middle of a Rhode Island winter, because he didn't want to trouble his old man for money.

Perhaps the most revealing and important testaments are the ones pouring in from his students for whom he was a much-loved

teacher who inspired them and changed the way they looked at the world. It's wonderful to see how much he meant to so many people and how many lives he touched. His rate my professors ranking is off the charts. Of course it is. With his patience, kindness and easy friendliness, together with his razor-sharp mind and ability to explain things simply, Jalal was the perfect teacher.

At the end of the day we can't lose sight of the human scale of the tragedy. Jalal wasn't just a hero who belonged to us all, more importantly he was a friend, a son, a brother, and most importantly a husband, and it is those who knew him closest and loved him best who will miss him the most. Not because he was a star and they are proud of him, although he was and they are, but because he was theirs and he loved them and they loved him, and now he's gone.

No one will miss him more than his beautiful and equally brilliant wife and soul-mate Fazeela Morshed whose loss the rest of us cannot imagine. They were perfect for each other, a matched pair. Growing up in Dhaka in the 1980s, Fazeela had been the great beauty of our youth, with legions of admirers, but when she showed up from Boston with Jalal on her arm years later, everyone had to admit that the game was up, and fold their hand, she'd found her perfect man.

The story of this new generation of Bangladeshis contains a disquieting number of untimely deaths of brilliant and talented young men and women who never had the chance to fulfill their potential, their lives cut cruelly short by providence.

This generation doesn't have a liberation war and we don't have martyrs who gave their lives in battle for the birth of the nation, but we do have young men and women who were a pride to the nation and we owe it to them no less than an earlier generation owes it to the martyrs to turn this country into something. We have a new generation of Bangladeshi hero. They may not have died heroically, but they lived heroically, and that's what counts.

The rest of us must soldier on, taking courage from the example of our fallen brothers and sisters. We need to keep their dreams alive. We need to honour their memory by continuing to fight the good fight. We owe their memory at least that much.

The writer is a Dhaka-based editor and columnist.