

STRAIGHT LINE



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

THE utterance of clearly unprintable words by members of parliament not only saddens but also disappoints

because the august house of lawmaking is a place of dignified business by elected representatives of the people. So when parliamentarians stoop low there is cause for concern. Is it time, therefore, to make concerted efforts to restore politics to its edifying status?

The question is whether our people who gave unto themselves the constitution shall not have the ability to keep it. Shall our politicians fail to display the wisdom to cherish our heroic democratic heritage? And shall our people suffer and endure in patience without perceiving their real potential?

Sadly, the spirit of moderation is lacking in both parliament and outside. We are witnessing a temper which presses a partisan advantage to its bitter end and does not respect and understand the other side. We are oblivious of the fact that democracy depends upon habits of consent and compromise that are attributes of mature political societies. If the spirit of moderation does not prevail our society will degenerate into division and hatred will replace goodwill.

We have to remember that maintenance of standards of decency dictated by a high moral sense is impossible unless we have a sense of discipline. A democracy without discipline is a democracy without future. Undisciplined demagoguery is fatal. Our actions, therefore, have to be limited by the rule of law and decency.

Politics must not belittle greatness and corrupt goodness. The politician should not be the sordid amalgam of lack of intellect with lack of character and lack of knowledge. Our democracy needs to have an aristocracy of talent,

knowledge and of character. This aristocracy has to take to public life.

Standards of ethics and decency in public life are less easy to enforce by law than by public opinion. Obedience to the values which is enforced not by the machinery of criminal justice but by the national ethos is the ultimate guarantee of a clean public life. For the rebirth of morality in our politics, the period of gestation will prove lengthy and the delivery promises to be painful but one cannot dedicate life to a greater cause.

Our politicians must not have any pretensions to infallibility and should not appear to be under a promise never to become wiser. The compul-

sive citizens?

The important question is, shall we maintain discipline or shall we witness the mindless hartals when government ceased to govern, mobocracy displaced democracy and townships were paralysed by groups of men who regarded themselves above the law? We have to learn to ensure the rule of law while providing liberty under law. It has to be demonstrated that liberty is not an "optional extra" in a democracy and that human rights are not a luxury intended merely for the elite and the affluent.

Politically speaking, a democratic nation will progress when knowledge and power will be combined in the

one. While things at government level are deteriorating or stagnating, at societal level there is a yearning for change -- a realisation that this is our own country and we have to do something to improve it.

To the discerning eye there would appear an unfortunate disconnection between the state and society. There is a wide and growing gulf between the ruling elite and the people.

The elected government has to ensure that power and hunger for more resources does not become an end in itself. Protecting the status quo from all challenges shall not become the prime activity of the government. Devoting the energy and resources of the establishment for solving people's problems and maintenance of order in the society should be the main focus of rulers as against the use of government machinery to keep the rival claimants to power in check.

Cynical observers of the current Bangladeshi political scene entertain grave doubts about a real change in the style and substance of politics insofar as desirable democratic governance scenario is concerned. Their continued pessimism is not without ground as hapless Bangladeshis sadly watch their guardians unmoved despite the combined onslaught of logic and reason, law and fact.

Politically speaking, the current scene is not the first instance when otherwise responsible people have talked irreverently and irreverently. The tragedy is that we are forgetting that democracy, with freedom of opinion and opposition, is not the normal way of organising society but is a rare human achievement. In our environment, many citizens may appear un-dimensional but our political leaders have no excuse for being so perilously un-dimensional. They have to act as catalyst. The responsibilities which today lie on their shoulders are far greater than at any earlier time in our history.

The writer is a columnist of *The Daily Star*.

Politics need to be edifying

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sions of the party system could be understood and the grievous toll it takes of a member's independence, individual judgment and freedom of action could be appreciated. The system, however, brings about coherence and unity of purpose in the actual working of democracy.

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Would it be an impracticality to hope that our democratic society will harbour a certain extravagance of objectives so that real and potential leaders wander beyond the safe provision of personal gratification? Shall we see group cohesiveness and work and achievement? Will our democracy involve the cooperation of all percep-

same set of individuals. As in the past, we will face a grave crisis when some will have knowledge and others have power. We have to remember that people will be very soon disillusioned with democracy unless it results in rule by meritocracy.

The task, therefore, is to transform our apathetic and lethargic democracy into an anticipatory and participatory one. An anticipatory democracy would foresee the issues ahead and equip itself well to meet them; and a participatory democracy will be one in which the people are not content merely to vote at the time of elections but participate in the continuous process which goes to the making of decisions and the formulation of policies.

If one cares to find out one will see that a phenomenal change has taken place during the last ten or fifteen years in the thinking and behaviour of the general masses. And it is a positive

Military conflicts in South Asia

JEHANGIR KARAMAT and SHASHI TYAGI

THOUGH India-Pakistan relations are going through a relatively calm phase, things can change quickly. We must therefore take advantage of the present atmosphere to lock in beneficial patterns of behaviour.

One area where we believe that progress can be made is on the question of military confidence-building measures (CBM). The idea behind CBMs is well-tested; military establishments agree to avoid actions which are threatening to the other side as a means to help avoid unintended conflicts. Of course, CBMs are not a panacea; if people want to have a conflict CBMs will not prevent it. But CBMs do provide a mechanism whereby states which want to avoid a conflict through accident or misperception can develop ways to help do so.

India and Pakistan have developed extensive CBMs over the years. Often, they have been developed in response to specific problems. There is nothing wrong with this. But we believe that it is time to develop a framework of such measures which can help to more systematically address some of the key issues the two sides face.

That is why we have been participating in a series of meetings involving senior, retired officers from both sides, which is reviewing existing CBMs and suggesting new ones. The process is being organised by the University of Ottawa and the Atlantic Council. We have met twice so far, in Dubai and Bangkok.

Over the course of our meetings, we agreed that most existing CBMs are sound and useful, but we noted a tendency for them to fall into disuse over time. Moreover, some existing CBMs have become dated because of new

technologies and doctrines.

Thought must be given to ways in which these CBMs can be updated, and we have made suggestions to the two governments.

Beyond the existing CBMs, however, there is a pressing need to re-conceptualise the way the two sides approach this topic. In particular, the ad hoc manner in which CBMs have been negotiated to address particular issues must give way to frameworks of CBMs.

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steps that can be taken to prevent a crisis from spinning out of control. There was consensus that an interlocking network of CBMs should be developed which, in the event of a crisis, would:

- Require a political commitment that the two sides' diplomats and officials come together at the outset of the crisis for discussions on how to resolve it (all too often in South Asia, when a crisis erupts we respond by suspending diplomatic contacts when we should be doing exactly the reverse);

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Doctrines are evolving in ways which compress the time available for diplomacy and the all-pervasive media reality of South Asia could also push the two sides towards an early resort to force in a future crisis.

This is a profoundly dangerous situation. It was therefore agreed at our Bangkok meeting that a useful area for CBMs is the elaboration of a framework for crisis management to provide the two sides with agreed

- Require that in times of crisis both sides should take no military actions which could be construed as preparations for an offensive, and adhere to existing CBMs;
- Discussions should begin on new CBMs relevant in these circumstances.

Beyond crisis management, it was agreed by consensus in Bangkok that a CBM should be agreed whereby both sides, including their respective military establishments, should regularly meet to discuss their respective concepts and doctrines with a view to elaborating measures to build confidence in the nuclear and conventional fields.

Also in Bangkok, we intensively

discussed the disputes over the Siachen Glacier and the Sir Creek boundary. We will be discussing these further at our next meeting.

Finally, we discussed the question of terror and its impact on stability.

Though terror is not a military issue per se, we do believe that intelligence-sharing is a key issue. Some suggested developing a list of terror groups which both sides wish to see stopped, leading to the sharing of information on these groups and cooperation on investigations. Other suggestions included:

- Revival of an effective joint anti-terror mechanism at a higher level;
- Hotlines between the interior ministries on terror issues;
- An effort to revive the Saarc mandated Integrated Regional Database on terror;
- Discussions between respective officials on national experiences on such matters as legal frameworks to deal with terror;
- Greater maritime cooperation on terror at sea; and
- Exchanges of views between the immigration, border services and customs authorities.

All of these steps will not end the difficult situation which exists between India and Pakistan. Much larger questions will have to be addressed for that. But these steps, if taken in a good spirit and diligently implemented, have the potential to help transform the atmosphere between the two countries and also to prevent future crises from spinning out of control. In our region, this would be a significant contribution indeed.

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On the heels of losing a winnable game

The lessons to carve the coveted niche

THE way the Asian cup cricket finals championship eluded us, both by a wafer thin margin of loss as well as anti-climacterically has had a powerful impact on the people's mind. The sense of national involvement in the event was total, the longing for victory irrepressible and emotion and passion ran so high that these would take a long time living down.

Before the euphoria over Bangladesh cricket coming of age settles down we must begin to take up the task of appropriately strategizing the shaping of our cricketing destiny. The consistent cricket Tigers played aroused a patriotic fervour not previously experienced. Imagine how much our patriotism would be enhanced if our wins far outstrip defeats and we make winning into a habit. More so, if we can play competitive cricket at par with other world sides, even clinch the top honours on a regular basis.

Sports, especially cricket, has great potential to do us pride. The iron is hot, ready to be moulded in the desired shape. We have enough inputs to analyze our weaknesses that were exposed in the Asian cup finals. We began with a bang, losing way in the middle and the tail-enders despite occasional flashes didn't chip in when it was most needed. At one point, 18 balls were wasted without a run on the board. This only added to the lethal harm of 19 runs we had conceded to Pakistan in the last over. At another point, the equation was nine runs to six balls. Why on earth, when we had three wickets in hand we did not go for the kill?

Stuart Law, the new coach, has our full measure of compliments for having coached the Tigers into a newly spirited side. We await his wizardry to fill in the faultlines in our cricket team with earnest and professional cooperation from the BCB.

Let's make cricketing promotion into a movement all over the country involving schools, colleges and other educational institutions from the divisional through the districts to the upazila levels in the endeavour. Many private companies, banks and financial institutions and above all the whole industry and corporate sectors can sponsor cricketing championships at different levels, thereby contributing to a steady uplift of the game.

Putting an end to launch disasters

Implement probe committee's recommendations

THE probe committee formed to investigate the Munshiganj launch tragedy in its report says the cap-sized launch was overloaded to the point that it failed to maintain its balance when a sand-laden vessel hit it. Although it was carrying only 15 passengers above the limit, it was overloaded with goods estimated at 15.26 tonnes beyond its capacity. We wonder how such blatant violation of rules can take place when the Department of Shipping is there to regulate and check these illegal activities.

Shockingly, the Department of Shipping has only five officials to verify fitness and other related requirements for nearly 12,300 vessels of which 2,188 are passenger carriers. The overall picture is more ominous. A news item in this daily on Thursday reveals there is a huge number of unregistered vessels in a total of 35,000.

More worrying is that since 2001 there have been 477 accidents in waterways passenger carriers, including boats and trawlers, which caused no less than 2,687 deaths and left 700 people missing. However, despite the formation of probe committees after every massive launch accident, no progress has been made in trying and punishing those responsible. Nor has any recommendation by the probe committees been properly heeded.

Launches are one of the easiest as well as cheapest modes of transportation in our country. But owing to inadequate monitoring of the regulating body and its extreme shortage of manpower, recurrence of tragic accidents is claiming hundreds of lives every year. Therefore, we want the shipping ministry to take this matter very seriously and take stringent actions so as to prevent all unfit vessels from plying and all fit ones from being overloaded. All passenger carriers should also be provided with lifebuoys and life jackets.

The said probe report has provided some recommendations that include mandatory registration for all cargo vessels and implementation of a law to stop sand-laden vessels plying at night. A strong river police force seems

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

March 24

1401 Turko-Mongol emperor Timur sacks Damascus.

1999 Kosovo War: NATO commences air bombardment against Yugoslavia, marking the first time NATO has attacked a sovereign country.

2003 The Arab League votes 21-1 in favor of a resolution demanding the immediate and unconditional removal of U.S. and British soldiers from Iraq.

2008 Bhutan officially becomes a democracy, with its first ever general election.