

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR
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DHAKA THURSDAY OCTOBER 9, 2014

Unelected Zila Parishads

Governance suffers badly

WITH elections pending at Zila Parishad (district council) level for long, these bodies are being run by government-appointed personnel who are not accountable to the electorate. That act has made the bodies unrepresentative as well as ineffective in administration and governance. It has created problems rather than solutions to effective implementation of the annual development plan by impeding "bottom-up" decision-making process in civil administration. From what has been stated by the Local Government, Rural development and Cooperatives (LGRD) minister recently, we understand that the government has no plans to hold district council elections anytime soon.

The fact that these bodies have been running without elected representatives from December 2011, it is little wonder that governance at district level has suffered as decisions are now passed down from the centre, whereas it should have been the other way round. Thus, there is no way to ensure answerability of actions by such unelected councils except to the upper echelons. It deprives local constituents of availing themselves of proper services.

We are not surprised to find that the LGRD ministry is of the opinion that such local administrative bodies are "unnecessary." It has become unnecessary only because the government has chosen to keep them as such. We believe that democracy is only as strong as its institutions, including local elected bodies such as Zila Parishads that form the middle rung of such institutions ideally connected upwards as well as to the grassroots.

We mourn

Matin will live through his legacy

AT the death of Abdul Matin, popularly known as Bhasha (language) Matin, on Wednesday morning, the curtain has been brought down on a living legend of 1952's Language Movement fame. Instantly protesting the then-governor general of Pakistan, Mohammad Ali Jinnah's announcement at the Dhaka University in March 1948 that Urdu, not Bangla, would be the state language, he was among the first few students to raise his voice against it. That first spark of protest ultimately turned into a nationwide movement which finally established Bangla's dignity as a state language through the ultimate sacrifices made by a number of Dhaka University students on February 21 of 1952. From then on Abdul Matin's life became inextricably linked to each and every popular struggle that the common people would wage against the authoritarian rule of the Pakistani regimes until Bangladesh won its independence in 1971.

Though widely known as Bhasha Matin, his role in the greater struggles of the peasantry and the working people towards their economic and social emancipation was of no less significance. He played a major role in forming the then East Pakistan Students Union and launching a progressive student movement. Later on he joined the Left political movement.

Born to be a rebel from his early life, he was among the few of our leaders who never compromised with their ideals. So, despite his lack of material success in life, he left behind a rich legacy of honesty and morality in politics.

'Understanding history'

STRATEGICALLY
SPEAKING



Brig Gen
SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN
ndc, psc (Retd)

AS someone had said, "People have an annoying habit of remembering things they shouldn't." And while it would be very nice if people not only did not remember things they shouldn't it would be even nicer if they didn't commit those resurrected memories of events, places and people to the pages.

While most of us may truly believe in the wise saying that half of writing history is hiding the truth, or, if it may add, hiding a part of it, many may feel obligated enough to posterity to put the matter in black and white, as it is, and not what one has been used to hearing or, in some cases, programmed to hearing.

A fact of history, or writing history to be exact, is that history is never written today. It will always be an exercise of the future by our progeny unburdened by the various colours, which the contemporaneous link of events with the important personalities causes our 'souls to become dyed with the colour of our thoughts.' Writing history can never be a subjective exercise and for which detachment is necessary and which only a separation of time can accord. And when that happens one is able to see things with objectivity that stems from the schism of time levied by the generational gap.

But an unavoidable constraint is imposed by the narratives, stories and romantic tales of a particular period, which form a part of historiography, and which only a diligent student of history will be able to sift and see the chaff from the grains. And this constraint is caused by us being encumbered by what Bertrand Russell ascribes to the, 'multiform of history that those to whom some one of its sides appeals with especial force are in constant danger of forgetting all the others.'

History is a great leveler and no respecter of character. It treats those that participate in creating history, or shaping it, with impartiality. It gives to the devil what is its due as it does to Jesus what is his. And that was very promptly recognised by Churchill who was wise enough not to leave the writing of history of his era to posterity and instead did

the onerous job himself. It is yet early to tell if history has been kind to him, but apparently his countrymen were not, given the way he was shown the door after a great victory in a war which he was instrumental in carving.

This country is presently in the spell of various writers recounting events of not too distant a past. New narratives have emerged giving subjective accounts of how things should have gone and how our course of history might have taken a different direction had our uncontested leader acted in a particular type of way in March of 1971.

Several recent publications, one in particular, have created a furore in this country. And this book deals with the events of the Liberation War, with matters leading up to the War, and of matters during the War. And any book that deals with an issue such as the Liberation War is bound to raise some hackles because it may speak on things about which we have been attuned to hearing a very different version. And the reactions have been predictable, driven by the heart and not the head.

One wonders if there has been an informed reaction, let alone debate, on the recently published book by the former Deputy Chief of the Liberation Forces. He has offered his views on certain 'actions' and 'inactions' by Bangabandhu whose outcome, according to him, have been harmful for us.

The writer has the benefit of hindsight and 43 years of cogitation on the decision of Bangabandhu on a matter where the lead figure had only a few hours to decide on a course of actions with so many imponderables at that very crucial juncture of our history. Alas! Bangabandhu is not alive to let us have the benefit of his wisdom on the rationale of his actions, whereas we have had all the time to carry out inquest on his actions.

However, if true history has to be written by our progeny then all the events and views must be recorded and be allowed "to speak for themselves -- if they can find tongue." And as Russell has also said with regard to writing history, "all facts are important as an ideal towards which research can gradually approximate." And contentious views should be argued out only through logic and counter-arguments and counter facts, leaving it to the future chroniclers of our history to determine which view stands the test of strict scrutiny and becomes the acme of truth.

The writer is Editor, OP-Ed and Defence & Strategic Affairs, *The Daily Star*.

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An Indian-American circus

PRAFUL
BIDWAI
COLUMN



PRAFUL BIDWAI

IN September every year, leaders of 190-plus nations, big or small, get a chance to make speeches at the United Nations General Assembly, which is usually attended by nobody except their diplomats and journalists. Their "patriotic" media dutifully reports their speeches. The world ignores them. So does the UN!

Prime Minister Narendra Modi played out this charade when he spoke at a General Assembly hall which was two-thirds empty. He said nothing substantive. Yet the Indian media, in full attendance, spent hours analysing it.

The same was true of Mr. Modi's Madison Square Garden event, for which the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh mobilised 19,000 people, each of whom paid \$5,000-\$10,000. Most were non-resident Indians (NRI), who are culturally insecure and divided. They long for the country they have left behind and try to manufacture its images through arcane rituals and obscurantist practices, which resident Indians discarded long ago.

This was a real American-Indian circus, dominated by a rowdy crowd which chanted "Har har Modi" and assaulted a TV anchor for asking routine questions.

Underscoring his bilateral talks in Washington, Mr. Modi declared his visit "very successful and satisfactory." He said President Obama's interaction with him -- he threw a dinner for him with 20 guests, and took him on a tour of the King Memorial -- gave the relationship a "new dimension."

Much was also made of their joint editorial for *The Washington Post*. But there's nothing unique about this. Such joint articles are a standard practice even with leaders of smaller countries.

In 2009, Manmohan Singh was given much more lavish treatment, including a dinner with 300 guests. As *The New York Times* put it, Mr. Obama wanted to spotlight his "hopes for working with Mr. Modi while not lavishing the full measure of White House pageantry on a leader who until recently was barred from entering the US ..."

The joint Modi-Obama "vision statement" is full of inanities such as working together "for the benefit of the world," and "reducing the salience of nuclear weapons" -- when both states are building up or modernising their nuclear arsenals.

True, a number of India-US agreements were initiated: renewing a 10-year defence cooperation framework, promoting investment, development of "smart cities," visa-on-arrival for US citizens beginning 2015, arms sales, cooperation in science and technology, and renewable energy.

But this happened in all recent visits of Indian prime ministers to the US. Such discrete agreements don't add up to a breakthrough. Besides, renewable energy isn't a forte of the US; its economy is addicted to fossil fuels and it's a laggard in green technologies.

Mr. Modi's visit failed to rekindle a closer, qualitatively new relationship with the US -- or as some wide-eyed admirers of America put it, "romance." Two major thorny issues remain unaddressed: actualisation of the US-India

nuclear deal through reactor imports, and India's position on trade-related and intellectual property rights (IPR) issues in World Trade Organisation negotiations.

Six years after the nuclear deal was finalised by the International Atomic Energy Agency and the Nuclear Suppliers' Group, not one reactor contract has materialised with the US, France or Russia. This is partly because reactor manufacturers are loath to work under the Indian nuclear liability law, which extends liability to suppliers in certain cases while holding the operator primarily responsible for damages in case of accidents.

Yet it is hard to see how the Modi government can change the law, which is the result of an all-party consensus. Nor can US nuclear manufacturers, who depend on a Japanese company for a critical component of all large reactors, make do without Japan's signature of an agreement similar to the US-India deal. This hasn't materialised.

To indicate its "flexibility" on IPRs just before Mr. Modi's visit, the Indian government suddenly reduced the range of drugs subjected to price control by the National Pharmaceutical Pricing Authority, including widely prescribed medicines for diabetes, cancer, tuberculosis, cardiac disease and HIV-AIDS.

This move was clearly meant to favour US corporations and prepare the way for a change in India's IPR regime. It will raise the prices of these essential medicines and harm the interests of millions of Indians. But deplorable as this is, it's unlikely to satisfy the US which

wants comprehensive concessions from India on a gamut of trade-related issues, including artificially freezing the prices of food procured for India's public distribution system at their level in the mid-1980s.

The US was keen on roping India into its so-called war on the Islamic State of Syria and the Levant (IS), an organisation for whose birth the West bears some responsibility. India did not join the 70-nation coalition. This isn't an act of wisdom, but reflects unrefined pragmatism: it's easy to see that IS won't be destroyed by aerial strikes alone.

Where Washington has succeeded is in getting India closer to a "China containment" strategy. Thus the India-US joint statement specifically mentions the situation in the South China Sea, and expresses concern over the "rising tensions over maritime territorial disputes," obviously referring to Chinese territorial claims.

This is the first time that India has taken a position so close to that of the US. This does not bode well for the future.

There is of course much talk of closer Indo-US cooperation against terrorism and cutting off financial and tactical support to al-Qaeda, IS, the Haqqani network and Dawood Ibrahim. But nobody should have illusions that the US will help India cope with the specific terrorist threats it faces -- even as it extracts an Indian commitment to help fight the terrorism that menaces the US.

The US is not known for equal or symmetrical relationships even with its own allies. There is only one finger on the gun that Nato wields, and that is American.

The primary purpose of Mr. Modi's foreign policy hyper-activism, of which his US visit is part, may have more to do with winning personal legitimation from the West than with substance.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Odious Latif Siddique

Latif Siddique's arrogant, derogatory and objectionable remarks about our religion, particularly Hajj are totally unacceptable. We do not expect this from a cabinet minister. I wonder what kind of people our PM has chosen for her cabinet. Some of them are tarnishing the image of the government.

We should respect each other's religions and beliefs. Only sacking him from the cabinet is not enough. He needs to be punished.

Md. Anwar Hossain
Uttara, Dhaka

Disastrous DU admission test results

After the disastrous result of this year's DU admission tests, a number of write-ups appeared in this newspaper. Almost all of them attributed the catastrophe to the deterioration of the quality of education except for our honourable education minister. He made an outburst against the DU authorities for intentionally setting harder questions in the admission tests!

If this is the reaction of a minister who is responsible for the overall education system of Bangladesh, then further breakdown in our education sector is not far.

Md. Sanaullah
Department of World Religions and Culture
University of Dhaka

Right decision by PM

Immediately after independence, none but Bangabandhu himself had to intervene to vacate the paternal house and land property of ex-president justice Abu Sayeed Chowdhury, which had been grabbed by Abdul Latif Siddique in Tangail. Arrogant Latif Siddique is unabashed in his appalling record of corrupt practices, misuse of power and willful outbursts. Unfortunately, in spite of his multifarious misdeeds, he has been nurtured by Awami League for a pretty long time. So Latif even dared to hurt the religious sentiments of millions of countrymen.

At last, PM has taken a laudable decision. This type of exemplary punishment can restrain some garrulous lawmakers and public representatives from making provocative remarks.

Tabibul Islam
Stage-drama worker
Dhanmondi, Dhaka

Comments on commentary, "Two PMs and their diaspora," published on October 3, 2014

Binodbangali

For any public servant, displaying decency in his or her interaction with the public is very important. And in selecting someone to hold a significant public position, it is a routine protocol in every country to check the background of the individual who is being considered for a position. The problem is that in Bangladesh, unfortunately, one can get any position as long as he or she has the blessing of the party.

Sujaul Khan

Fantastic piece! We could have been a nation of giants by now, but we are dwarfed by leadership fit only for cretins.

Akhtar Hossain

This is an awesome piece. Loved the comparison of the speeches delivered by Modi and our PM at the UN General Assembly. This tells what you need in a leader. I know this will fall on deaf ears. I am happy newspapers like yours have the courage to highlight what is wrong and what needs to be done to fix the problem.

"No place for him in cabinet, party" (October 3, 2014)

Zerosopher

This is not the first time from this party member. This shows the kind of leadership they're raising and the kind of bankrupt philosophy they hold.

"You are out of order Mr. Minister" (October 2, 2014)

S.M. Iftekhar Ahmed

Excellent article. It is clearly evident that this man is not in the least bit fit to be a cabinet minister. Unfortunately, this has become a land where there is no accountability so some people continue to act in the most irresponsible manner.

"Question on question papers?" (October 1, 2014)

Nawfal Talukdhara

In order to improve our education system, we need to invest more in primary and secondary education. We need to train our teachers properly.

Waste is not waste

RIDWAN QUAIIUM

HUMAN-WASTE is found around rail-tracks, canals, rivers and in many other places in our country. This is polluting the environment, spreading diseases and also degrading quality of life. During Qurban Eid, cattle manure creates an unhealthy atmosphere.

At the Bugesera prison and in ten other correctional facilities in Rwanda, the inmates' human-waste is used to produce biogas, which is used as the source of energy in the prisons. The government of Rwanda plans to expand the human-waste energy to schools and hospitals as well.

Traditionally, cow manure has been used as fertilizer in Bangladesh and in many countries, but in countries such as India, Pakistan and Denmark it is also used today as energy by converting it into biogas. In fact, the Danish government wants up to 50% of livestock manure to be converted into biogas.

There is an acute shortage of energy in our country both for electricity and for gas. This is hampering the country's economy as many factories are sitting idle due to lack of energy. Daily life of the people in the country is also being hampered due to the lack of uninterrupted supply of electricity and gas.

The main sources of energy for electricity in our country are natural gas, petroleum oil, hydropower and coal. Petroleum oil is not good for the environment and, most importantly, the country has to spend a huge amount of financial resources to import it.

Considering the future of the country, energy security, the economy and also the environment rather than continuously depending on nonrenewable energy supplies which are also bad for the environment, we should focus on using renewable and clean energy such as biogas produced from human-waste, cattle manure and other animal waste.

Some households in Savar have set up biogas plants in their backyard. They are using human-waste and cattle waste to produce biogas for cooking, and also to power generators which are used to operate electrical appliances in their households. The families say that biogas is much cleaner compared to other types of gases they have used.

The Asian Development Bank will provide financial assistance to set up fifty fiber gas based biogas plants in the country. To promote the use of biogas the government and the NGOs needs to set up facilities to collect openly found human-waste, animal waste and also waste from households, and install biogas plants to produce energy from these wastes. This energy can be used to produce electricity and gas for households in both rural and urban areas. Use of biogas as source of energy will keep the environment clean and increase the energy supply of the country, ensuring sustainable growth and development of the country.

The writer is a Transportation Engineer working in Thailand.