

Utility bills

The prospect for one-stop payment welcome

THE finance ministry has okayed the proposal for consumers to pay their utility bills at 187 designated branches of city banks in public and private sectors.

The idea, of course, is to make the task of bill payment a lot easier for the people who have had to undergo the arduous process of queuing up and wasting valuable time for paying bills. Though telephone, water and electricity bills can be paid through banks, the existing arrangements require the subscribers to go to a bank to clear the bill for a particular service and keep on doing so until all the bills are paid. The most striking feature of the new plan will be the one-stop system of payment that will enable the subscribers to pay the bills at a time.

The government move deserves appreciation, though one has the feeling that had it been taken earlier, we would have by now seen it in operation. The plan to expand the facility to other cities is also based on a correct assessment of subscribers' needs.

The subscribers will also have the option to pay the bills online through the ATM and credit cards. This is going to change things in a very perceptible way since the introduction of the latest mode of payment will considerably ease the subscribers' task. What is also very important here is that we have to introduce the electronic systems, which have long replaced the traditional ones in the developed countries. It is a question of not falling behind others.

The government has done what was expected of it. However, it is also necessary to look into other complaints of subscribers apart from the existing cumbersome mode of bill payment. It must not be forgotten that in certain cases the subscribers face trouble due to the irregularities in issuance of bills or the unusual delay in sending them to the subscribers.

The idea of one-stop bill clearance including introduction of electronic payment system is in keeping with management principles of the present era. Now, the government has to see to it that the new system does not fall short of its goal lessening the bill payers' woes. There should not be any glitch in the system.

What an act of savagery

Deterrence called for

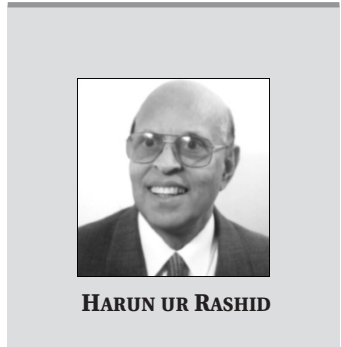
FOR all the violence and brutality making for a diet of misfortune, this one tale of an eight-year-old housemaid has hurt our sensibilities most profoundly. Liza at her age could not have been a juvenile delinquent by any stretch of imagination, yet there she was going through horrific doses of torture and brutalisation for months.

It was worse than mediaeval barbarism, because the girl could not have invited anyone's wrath or resisted it. As if that was not enough, her employer and his spouse held her captive so that she was not seen with injury marks on her person. One wonders, why people given to inhuman dispositions never learn from the ruinous exposures their ilk had suffered beforehand for having tortured their domestic help. Despite revealing media reports and public consternation such an evil persisted much to the detriment of our societal image. Obviously, it has fed on lack of timely detection and eventual punishment.

The malady constitutes violation of both child and human rights. The child repression act should come into play and exemplary punishment meted out to culprits. Daughter of poor parents, her helplessness has been taken advantage of in the most savage manner.

But the community has a role in preempting recurrence of such brutal behaviour on the part of child employers. For, it is worth remembering that not until torture had led to death or to injuries that could no longer be swept under the carpet that people came to know about it all. In Liza's case, another recruit found about her ordeal and decided to report to the police. There must be some way for the neighbours to take note of a child's ordeal so that it can be ended before he or she goes through further traumatising.

Reinforcing protection of human rights



HARUN UR RASHID

DECEMBER 10 was the 55th anniversary of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It was on this day, in 1948, that the Declaration was adopted by the UN General Assembly. Many UN member-countries including Bangladesh observe the day as the "World Human Rights Day" to underscore the importance of human rights for individuals.

Fundamental human rights are inalienable, inherent and inseparable from human beings.

The crying call of the French Revolution (1789) was "Liberty, Equality and Fraternity". Over the years, each concept has been developed into distinct categories of human rights. "Liberty" represents civil and political rights, "Equality" corresponds to economic, social and cultural rights and "Fraternity" is translated into right to development and to protection of environment.

The UN Charter affirms promotion of human rights not only in the preamble but also in Articles 1, 55 and 56. The language used in the Charter pre-supposes the existence of human rights prior to the Charter. Consistent with the provisions of the Charter, it was decided that a Declaration of Human Rights was to be prepared and the chairperson of the preparatory body was none other than Eleanor Roosevelt, wife of US President Roosevelt. She put all her time and energy to prepare a draft

of Universal Declaration of Human Rights and finally on 10th December, 1948, it was adopted by the General Assembly of the UN.

Core elements of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

The Declaration sets out a list of rights for every person, irrespective of birth, gender, race, colour and nationality. Article 1 lays down the philosophy upon which the

rights and articles 28 to 30 recognise that everyone is entitled to a social order in which human rights may be realised.

Many countries have incorporated in their Constitutions human rights of the Declaration as fundamental rights of their citizens. For instance, Part III of the Bangladesh Constitution provides a set of fundamental rights (Articles 26 to 43) similar to those in the Declaration, and Article 44 deals with enforcement

immediate implementation of civil and political rights by state within its territory (Article 2 of the Covenant). On the other hand, the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural rights requires states to take steps with a view to achieving progressively the full realisation of economic, social and cultural rights subject to their resources. (Article 2 of the Covenant).

This means that the enjoyment of civil and political rights does not depend on availability of resources

violates human rights, the Commission censures the country. The US routinely attempts to bring to the Commission year after year China and Cuba for their violation of human rights but it has not been able to adopt any negative resolution because majority of 53-member-countries do not support the US move.

The UN office of High Commissioner for Human Rights is another mechanism by the UN for investigation of human rights

international level are intimately connected. States are required to provide adequate redress for those whose human rights have been violated. In a sense if domestic system fails, international mechanisms operate to reinforce protection of human rights.

No country can afford to deny fundamental human rights to its citizens because international public policy requires that states respect human rights for individuals. If they do not, sanctions may be imposed by the UN and in extreme cases the UN may intervene to safeguard human rights for individuals. For instance, NATO attacked former Yugoslavia in 1999 to save Kosovo-Albanians from alleged genocide under Serbia's regime of former President Milosevic.

Conclusion

Sovereignty of states is not unlimited and is subject to international law. International community will intervene if domestic system is found wanting to redress human rights abuses. From this perspective, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is a pioneering document as it now constitutes a part of customary international law.

There is a view that the manner in which political and economic rights are implemented is flawed. It has been argued that the West prefers political rights to economic rights of persons. To developing countries, alleviation of poverty is the "mother" of human rights. In an environment of extreme poverty, political rights of poor people may not mean much. This brings to mind what Dr. Samuel Johnson (1709-1984) wrote to Boswell: "Poverty is a great enemy to human happiness; it certainly destroys liberty, and it makes other virtues impracticable".

Barrister Harun ur Rashid is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

BOTTOM LINE

No country can afford to deny fundamental human rights to its citizens because international public policy requires that states respect human rights for individuals. Sovereignty of states is not unlimited and is subject to international law. International community will intervene if domestic system is found wanting to redress human rights abuses. From this perspective, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is a pioneering document as it now constitutes a part of customary international law.

Declaration is based and it reads: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights". The Article defines the basic assumptions of human rights: (a) the right to liberty and equality is every human being's birth right and cannot be denied, (b) human being is different from other creatures on Earth and therefore is entitled to dignity.

Although the Declaration was not adopted in a legally binding form, it is considered as a "Charter of Mankind". Many legal authors claim that the Declaration has become a part of customary international law and every country must now adhere to the rights set out in the Declaration.

The Declaration contains 30 Articles. Article 3, the corner-stone of the Declaration, proclaims the right to life, liberty and security of person, a right essential to the enjoyment of all other rights. Articles 4 to 21 set out civil and political rights, Articles 23 to 27 economic, social and cultural

of fundamental rights by the High Court under its constitutional powers. Furthermore Article 25.1 of the Bangladesh Constitution stipulates that Bangladesh shall base its international relations on the principles of respect "for international law and the principles enunciated in the UN Charter". The phrase "international law" is interpreted to include customary international law.

It was decided soon after the adoption of the Declaration that the human rights enshrined in it should be codified in binding legal conventions. In 1966, two Covenants were adopted by the UN: one was International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the other International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

Many legal experts find a difference on the nature of implementation of rights from the language employed in the two Covenants. The Covenant on Civil and Political Rights provides for

of a state while the enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights is subject to the resources available to a state. This implies that the first set of rights is unfettered while the second set is conditional. However many Human Rights experts do not agree with the distinction between the two. They argue that the qualitative status of rights of the two Covenants are equal and are two sides of the same coin.

UN mechanism for protection of human rights

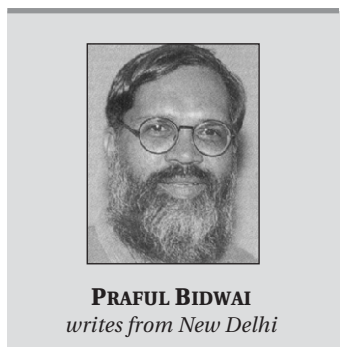
To monitor the compliance of human rights, the UN Commission of Human Rights has been established. It consists of 53 member-states (Bangladesh has been a member for several times) elected by the Economic and Social Council. The Commission holds annual sessions in Geneva for about six to eight weeks and examines human rights record of member-countries. If a country

abuses. The High Commissioner is appointed by the UN Secretary General for a term of four years. The first High Commissioner was the former Irish President (a Barrister and a Professor of Law), Mary Robinson who visited about 60 countries including Chechnya, Kosovo and East Timor. The visit to Chechnya in 2000 captured media attention and she reportedly said that "the sheer scale of human rights abuses is very worrying and devastating".

The Second High Commissioner was the Brazilian national, Sergio de Mello who was deputed as the Special Envoy of the UN Secretary General in Iraq for three months. He was killed this year in a bomb blast at the UN Office in Baghdad. The Secretary General has yet to appoint another High Commissioner for Human Rights.

The respect for human rights has now become a concern for international community. It is noted that the protection of human rights at both the national and

Behind the saffron surge: Anti-incumbency or Hindutva?



PRAFUL BIDWAI
writes from New Delhi

THE five Assembly election results represent a handsome gain for the BJP and a setback for the Congress, barring in Delhi. For the first time, the BJP has wrested power in three states together. Its victory in Madhya Pradesh was widely expected.

What was unexpected (Mr Vajpayee's term), indeed astounding, was the BJP's majority in the Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh Assemblies. Most polls went wrong here.

Equally remarkable was the collapse of the Congress's Advaisi (Scheduled Tribes) and Dalit (Scheduled Castes) bastions in MP, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh. The states together have 99 constituencies reserved for Scheduled Tribes. The BJP won 77 of these, the Congress only 16. The BJP also increased its Dalit votes in MP and Rajasthan.

The results will affect the balance between secular and communal forces in the run-up to next year's Lok Sabha elections. The saffron surge cannot be

arrested unless secular parties confront the BJP programmatically and comprehensively -- not just on Hindutva.

What explains the BJP's showing? MP is a straightforward case. There, the difference in the Congress-BJP vote-share was under 2 percent in 1998. Anti-incumbency, and dissatisfaction with the state of *bijli, sadak* and *paani* (the new "BSP") produced a 9 percent anti-Congress vote-

Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh results can't be explained in terms of "development". Mr Ashok Gehlot, with his excellent drought management and creation of 7 million-days' employment, was strong on development. As were Mr Ajit Jogi's road-building and school programmes.

Detailed analysis by Dr Yogendra Yadav at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, suggests that a higher percentage

manned by bureaucrats willing to "guide" them with election voting machines.

The Congress showed itself lacking in unity, energy and tact.

The BJP's micro-management paid off in the campaign's final phase, through a 4 percent vote-swing. In Rajasthan, the BJP through a pollster's leak identified 39 "marginal" constituencies. It lavished resources upon them, and propped up "independents".

The BJP's Hindutva connections were on full display at swearing-in ceremonies.

Sadhus and Ram Janmabhoomi stalwarts, including VHP vice-president Giriraj Kishore and Nriya Gopal Das, blessed Ms Bharati under the approving gaze of Messrs L.K. Advani and M.M. Joshi amidst *Jai-Shri-Ram* chants. And who should be by Ms Rajee's side in Jaipur but Mr Narendra Modi himself?

narrowly upper-caste, its ideology elitist. Its dependence upon the *sangh* is unchanged.

The BJP hasn't abandoned Hindutva. It has only changed ways of using it. It remains dedicated to transforming India into a Hindu nation.

The Congress party is shell-shocked. It was complacent and failed to build tactical alliances with the BSP, NCP and other secular parties. Nor did its cadres go out and mobilise people.

With alliances, the Congress would have won in Chhattisgarh, and come within striking distance of the BJP in Rajasthan (in a hung Assembly). And it would have greatly limited its losses in MP.

The Congress has failed to cultivate second-rank national-level leaders. The way it has treated Ms Siela Dixit is disgraceful.

The Congress is in deep leadership crisis. It doesn't offer an alternative vision to BJP-style chauvinist nationalism. Unless it projects alternatives on this, on globalisation and privatisation, and on Hindutva, it cannot counter the BJP.

This calls for radical change. The Congress must move Leftwards and build a broad coalition of progressive forces. This alone can effectively challenge Hindutva. That's the highest priority today.

We must not allow loony Hindutva with its ugly and sectarian agendas to succeed. In the next election we must send the BJP packing.

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

UGC's clarification

The University Grants Commission of Bangladesh (UGC) would like to clarify its position against what is written in the Daily Star. The UGC like the Daily Star holds the same view that recruitment in the universities should be non-partisan and above politics.

On behalf of the UGC, we would like to differ with some of the comments made in your editorial against the UGC. For example, "it moved slowly and many vacancies were left unfilled" the statement made by the Daily Star is not true. As a matter of fact, for filling vacant positions the university does not require to take permission from the UGC. The university ordinance of 1973 has authorized the syndicate of the universities to do the needful in this respect. The present government after the assumption of power, sent a circular, advising all the government, semi-government and public corporations to seek permission from the honorable Prime Minister's office before advertising the vacant posts. This was done with a view to rationalizing recruitment in public organizations. As such new recruitment in the universities falls under the purview of the circular. The circular is applicable to all

public organizations, so it is nothing specific only for the universities.

So, the complaints against the UGC that it moved so slowly and many vacancies were left unfilled in the UGC do not arise at all. Only in the case of creation of new posts, the universities approach through the UGC and UGC decides these cases promptly in its normal procedures.

The Daily Star has mentioned that "if the UGC is underperforming then it can be reformed." For your kind information, the UGC is not underperforming at all you will be glad to know that the UGC in recent times has taken up a number of very important measures for establishing financial, administrative and academic disciplines in the universities and also to improve the standard and quality of higher education in Bangladesh. **Md. Shamsul Alam**
Deputy Director (R&P)

Taslina's untenable case

Taslina Nasrin is a so-called woman activist and a male writer is trying to attract the attention of the electronic and print media. Her latest publication 'Ka' is full of

vulgarism which can only be termed obscene literature. It does not show her writing skills. Such tendencies are not new for her, though, as she has mastered the art of fattening fame and money.

'Ka' consists of gaudy illustrations of sexual relationship involving intellectuals close to her both in Bangladesh and West Bengal ('Dhikhandita', Indian version). Even the respected intellectuals, who extended their moral and logistic support to the writer when 'Lajja' was published, could not escape her defamatory scheme. She has depicted the whole male community in the context of female anatomy. Now the question is why she has done so? Going through this process, she is trying to induce moral degradation of the readers and gain publicity.

Some woman activists shed tears by superimposing Taslima on the same plane as Humayun Azad. I don't know why they are doing so. Description provided in Azad's book 'Nari' of female body is mostly educative based on medical science. Hence, it is quite irrelevant to compare him with Taslima.

When Taslima talks about 'sexual excesses' committed

against her, the question arises, is she a minor girl not capable of identifying what is sexual harassment and what is not? If she was sexually assaulted by any intellectual, why didn't she seek legal action? Is this the character of a woman activist?

She may prove her allegation providing sufficient evidence before the court and the door of legal procedure is always open to her. Instead of acting smartly, she takes the other way to fulfill her selfish desire of slandering the intellectuals. My concluding words to Taslima are: please think rationally, write something more substantial.

Md. Al Amin Sagar
LLB(Hons) 1st year,
Dhaka University

How to approach politics?

In the LDCs, the majority of the voters live in the villages, and most are illiterate or live below the poverty level. Hence the politicians take advantage of the situation. There is a labour shortage in the political workers' market, as the impoverished farmers cannot be commissioned to multiply omissions.

The major political parties adopt the bull-doing attitude in their political philosophy and approach claiming patriotic fervour. This comes partly from the feudal system, and partly from the rare opportunities to misuse power on behalf of the people; as protests are contemptuously brushed aside through thundering oratory.

The devil knows the other devils, who are playing in the uneven fields. It is not true that democratic politics is a leveler there are too many peaks and bumps; and black holes and comets. We have camel-hump politics, and the pace is as slow. We are delatc people, and can surmise that there are no tides in the political canals. The political rivers have dried up, as seen under the Hardinge Bridge, where the mighty Ganges has ceased to flow.

They have not started riding the bandwagon. This introduces ad hocism and non-transparency, and the distant goals are eclipsed. The horizon is myopic, as also it is curved and dips below the eye level.

It is the hurricane-lamp analogy less attention to the dark areas outside the dimly lighted perimeter. Myopic politics takes hold, and later it is found difficult to shake off the lethargy of this

negative attitude towards men and mice.

The lighthouse (not searchlight) of the leaders do not reach out enough to assist the ship of the state. Light, more light, not non-transparency. Political batteries have to be replaced periodically but we have rechargeable politicians with outdated MTBF (mean time between failures).

The initial phase after liberation or independence set the tone of the national development strategy by the politicians, who run the country through the party manifestoes. Consensus is usually rare at the beginning, and the breeze of autocracy is aromatic, enough for flirting with indiscretions at higher levels.

This is the pattern in most of the developing countries, as also seen in Africa and South America. The Indian subcontinent has almost passed through the same symptoms; as it is seen today in other parts of Asia such as Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Pakistan. Problem-solving appears to be easier than coming down to normal routine working level. The latter silent performance is due to fine-tuning. The bug is the huge gap between the voters and the politicians, or the elected

representatives. The latter start misusing it, in or out of power. The gap is not decreasing, hence corrupt practices take root, flowering into a culture.

We are struck up with the cleansing of the political culture (Dhaka city is a mirror reflection). The evolutionary mode of politics does not work in this nation, hence alternative means have to be reviewed by the non-political leaders. But patience and tolerance are always short of demand; hence the vicious cycles continue to control the wobbly destiny of the new nation.

Bangladesh is the victim of bipolar political culture and that too due to the successive assassination of two leaders in power. Without these killings the course of politics would have changed in Dhaka. But that is our lot the stains have to be removed by posterity, to atone for the sins of omissions and commissions.

There is a far deeper damage to politics the politicians are out of tune with the parliament. The outside third forces to remedy this deficiency is not strong enough due to the partisan intellectual field. We are spirited enough, but the strength and binding force of neutral assessment are missing.

We cannot stand on our own feet individually.

Don't blame the rickshaw drivers it is the political drivers, who have jammed the conscience of the society. Money cannot buy discipline, nor tolls dilute goals.

AlifZabr
Dhaka

US Ambassador

It appears from his approach that the new US Ambassador to Bangladesh, Harry K. Thomas, is getting accustomed to Bangladeshi culture and he is doing very well.

He is, no doubt, a true gentleman who values other people's culture and sentiments. While wishing Thomas a success, I would like to request him to extend his good office to expand US assistance towards strengthening the educational system at university level and in establishing links between American and Bangladeshi universities including Sher-e-Bangla Agricultural University. **Prof. M. Zahidul Haque**
Director, Outreach Program
Dhaka-1207