

A Lesson from Manila for Bangladeshi Women MPs; A Need for a Reformist Catholic Church; and Lighter Side of Life at the UN

Where the Tortured Get the Inspiration to Live

Jeff Silverstein writes from London

INCREDIBLE though it may sound, women in the Philippines have only now won certain rights which their sisters in most other developing countries including, I hope, Bangladesh have enjoyed for a long time.

Last month, President Corason Aquino signed into law a bill that removes certain discriminations against the country's female population. For instance, until Ms Aquino made this long overdue move, a married woman was not allowed to borrow money from a bank on her own or apply for a passport without her husband's written permission.

The new act not only does away with these invidious restrictions but also provides for a number of affirmative actions. Now, under the Women in Development and Nation-Building Act, the female population will have, at least in principle, "equal access" to government and non-governmental organisations, and will be admitted to all military schools. At the same time, government agencies are directed to review and revise all regulations and procedures to remove any sex bias. Wait. There's a bit more. Under the Act, a portion of foreign assistance will be diverted to women's organisations to set up income-generating projects, especially in rural areas.

We have quoted from the Act at some length in the hope that a couple of women MPs in Bangladesh whom I know personally (and who, so I hope, read this column) will get together to prepare a private member's bill, along the lines of the Philippines one, for the next Jatiya Sangsad session. When they need more information on the move or the full text of the Act, they can communicate with Senator Santarina Rasul, one of the two authors of the bill.

What more can The Daily Star do to help? Pay for the round-trip to Manila for an interested Bangladeshi woman MP for a briefing from Senator Rasul? Meet the bill for a 30-minute long distance phone call? Organise a seminar in Dhaka and invite the Filipino Senator as a resource person? Well, anything is possible.

What we can guarantee is a front-page report in the Star, with a fairly large heading, when the Bangladeshi version of the "Women in Development and Nation-building Bill" is moved at the Jatiya Sangsad.

needless to say, with the photograph of the proposer.

DESPITE the boost given to their position by the new Act, women in the Philippines continue to face other — and more complicated — problems which cannot be tackled through straight-forward legislations.

In this predominantly Catholic country, the hold of the Church over the nation has made divorces particularly difficult — nearly impossible, without the explicit permission of the Vatican — which means that couples can legally separate, take new spouses to live with, have children but

nevertheless, the situation varies from one couple to another, depending on individual understanding or on the legal and financial safeguards a common law wife secures from her "husband" who, in all probability, maintains a legally married wife and children by her somewhere else. On balance, it is a totally untenable situation.

We felt great admiration for the progressive role played by the Philippines Church during the anti-Marcos movement some six years ago. One only wishes that it would now take up a reformist position on such issues as divorces and family planning. True, without the approval of the Vatican, it can

Philippines? It will be a development worth waiting for.

AS we all know, some from personal experience, that discrimination against women — or what we describe as sex bias — is not confined to developing countries alone. Women in industrialised countries fall victims to practices which are obviously more subtle and, therefore, less open than what one finds in a developing country.

Much has been written critically in both Japan and South Korea about the position of women in these two developed countries. Sadly enough, many women in these nations, not to mention China or Taiwan, put up with some of the existing discriminatory practices as part of their cultural heritage or, to use a less pompous language, a way of life.

A friend of mine, working for an international organisation in Tokyo, found it difficult to stop his Japanese woman assistant, also an executive, from making his morning tea, a job that used to be done by a young boy of the office canteen before the Japanese assistant had arrived.

Then, one day the Japanese woman confided to my friend that in making the morning tea for her male colleague, she was only following an old practice. In many Japanese offices, especially in the private sector, this chore was carried out by women, even if they too were executives like their male colleagues whom they "served". I put it all in past tense in the hope that this practice has now ceased, without causing much damage to

inviolable Japanese heritage.

A staff journal of a UN agency, based in an European capital, once published an imaginary conversation piece on how a secretary, a woman of course, would answer phone calls and how her replies would vary, in tone and contents, if her boss was a man or happened to be another woman. Examples:

Caller, "May I speak to Mr Smith?"
Secretary, "Mr Smith is at a meeting just now. But he will certainly call you back if you please leave your number."

Caller, "May I speak to Miss Jones?"
Secretary, "Miss Jones is not in her room. In fact, she hasn't been in the whole morning."

Caller, "How and when can I reach Miss Jones?"
Secretary, "No idea at all. Sorry."

Caller, "May I speak to Mr Ahmed?"

Secretary, "Mr Ahmed is out of town. In fact, he is attending a World Bank meeting in Washington. I am sending him a fax today. So, if you leave your number, he will call you back, if you have something important to talk about. He will be very busy during his stay in Washington."

Caller, "Well, then, may I speak to Mrs Thomson?"
Secretary, "Sorry, she is on leave. I believe, she is expecting her third child. She won't be back to work for another month."

And so it goes on.

A woman executive is "out shopping", while her male counterpart is "busy at a meeting"; a woman boss is in the washroom but the male officer is tied up with a visitor; and while the secretary has no idea of the next week's schedule of her woman boss, "there is no problem about getting an appointment with the man she works for."

Here's what we might call the tail piece about women in UN.

After putting in ten years in one job, a woman executive was looking for a promotion in her grade. It went to a younger male colleague who had put in only four years.

The woman went to her boss and asked, "What happened to my ten years?"

"Your ten years" asked the boss. "Your ten years is one year repeated ten times."

A good answer. But, then, you can say that about lots of people in the United Nations system, regardless of their gender.

In the last decade torture has been a feature of life in 96 countries — more than half the countries in the world. Since 1985 a foundation for the care of victims has been operating in London. Last year it tended 1,000 refugees from 35 countries who fled to Britain — and that number is expected to double this year. Many novel methods and treatments are employed to work towards creative rehabilitation. Gemini News Service reports on the remarkable work of the foundation.

EFILER Ocak's torturers were careful not to leave any physical scars, but the mental anguish caused by her ordeal in a Turkish prison is written all over her face.

On February 1981 in the middle of the night, Ocak and her husband, Mahmut, both

That number is expected to double this year as torture continues to be carried out — whether to intimidate political detainees or to punish convicted criminals.

According to human rights groups, the record is damning and shameful. Amnesty International believes torture

Tom Landau, a doctor at the Foundation, who has seen hundreds of Turkish Kurds and documented their injuries, explained: "One of the problems we have here is what we are doing isn't in the textbooks."

There are an enormous number of different methods of torture, some of which produce standard results, many of which produce nothing. This is the essence of torture — to cause as much physical and psychological damage while leaving no scars."

Landau added: "Certain scars are very characteristic, like cigarette burns, or crushing injuries. What we are trying to do is build up a case and corroborate the patient's history (of torture) with the type of findings."

Like many Foundation patients, Ocak is hoping the Home Office will reconsider her application for political asylum after seeing the Foundation's independent medical report documenting her injuries resulting from torture.

She has been refused permanent asylum and instead has been given what is called exceptional leave to remain, meaning that her case must be reviewed annually.

To gain asylum, the British Home Office requires proof that a person is in danger of persecution because of his/her religion, race, political opinion or social group.

Some patients have had to wait for up to two years before the Home Office decides whether they qualify for refugee status. But in several cases, Foundation medical reports have either persuaded the Home Office to grant political asylum or reconsider the application of those facing "removal."

As a result of the Foundation's success, more and more lawyers are referring their clients there as political asylum becomes more difficult to get in Britain.

For many patients, however, the length of the asylum procedure and the uncertainty of their status is like a continuation of the torture. Ocak said: "The Home Office does not believe me. This makes me very angry. I haven't found any happiness in this country, but at least I know the police will not come looking for me at night."

In spite of the extra strain, the Foundation has become something of a family home, offering its patients a feeling of security.

Although no one actually lives at the centre, it helps patients find accommodation and reunite their families. "They must know they are safe and have more than a brief haven here," one Foundation psychiatrist said.

An east African who was caught up in a web of tribal and political tension and tortured for months on end, said: "Physically and mentally I was a broken man when I arrived in Britain. The Foundation has given me the inspiration to live."

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MY WORLD

S.M. Ali

eventually face enormous and often heart-breaking social and family problems. The practice is too widespread, involving thousands of families, to get much attention from the society. Having known many such cases in the Philippines, during my stay in Manila in the late seventies, I am aware of the affect of such a situation on children who are sometimes unsure about their own family names, not to mention their inheritance. About the position of what is called the "common law wife" and of her long-term security, the less said the bet-

ter, the better. It can follow the example of a number of South American Catholic countries where the Church has been relatively independent on social issues, often to the dismay of the Pope.

Being Catholic, successive Filipino presidents, including Ms Aquino, have been somewhat defensive in their relationship with the Church. Will it make much difference if the next president is Fidel Ramos, a Protestant? Will a wind of change then start blowing through the Church in the

hardly do much on its own. However, it can follow the example of a number of South American Catholic countries where the Church has been relatively independent on social issues, often to the dismay of the Pope.

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Will any of these women MPs at the Jatiya Sangsad move a bill to give our female population a stronger role in development and get a frontpage story in The Daily Star?

STORIES OF SCHOOLS

THIS bright little book that tells the stories of eight successful primary schools of Bangladesh should be highly appreciated both for its form and content. The author and his sponsors, the Directorate of primary education and UNICEF, deserve our special thanks for presenting to the readers such a well-intentioned book just at the moment when the government has launched the programme of Compulsory Primary Education (CPE).

The author has selected eight primary schools from various parts of the country in widely varying geographical settings. At the one extreme, there is the story of one school in a thickly populated area of metropolitan Dhaka, mostly inhabited by a middle and upper middle class population, while, at the other extreme, there is the account of another school in a tribal village in the hill district of Bangladesh where most people live below the poverty level. But in spite of outward differences, all the schools described in the book have some specialities of their own which distinguish them from others of their kind.

The purpose behind narrating the stories of these schools is to show how the combined efforts of the community and the teachers have enabled these schools to grow and develop, improve steadily the standard of education and reduce the rate of dropout. All the schools described in this book are government schools. But the funds provided by the Government have not been adequate to meet all the requirements of a growing school striving to maintain a desirable standard. Every school, as a rule, has a Managing Committee (SMC) and a Parent-Teachers Association (PTA) respectively to manage the affairs of the school and to look after its welfare. Whatever success the schools have been able to achieve is due greatly to the efforts of these two committees. In most cases, however, the initiatives taken by generous and dedicated individuals have worked as the main driving force behind these efforts. Donations of land, building

materials and money from the local community and benevolent organizations collected in various ways have supplied

Local youths have also been encouraged to work as part-time teachers and as substitutes for absentee teachers.

country especially in Bangladesh. The author must be congratulated for undertaking the work and the sponsoring agencies



mented the Government grant to make up the inadequacy of funds. Efforts have been made to draw children from the entire community and to retain them in the school. Special help has been given to the poor. The schools have engaged themselves in various income-earning projects like poultry farms, vegetable gardens and, wherever possible, cooperative stores.

The teachers also have played a great role in raising the standard of education in these schools. Their efforts have been directed in various creative ways to build improved laboratories and mini-libraries and to organize various co-curricular activities which have attracted students to schools. They have also helped students by giving them free coaching beyond school hours. In many cases, teacher have been selected for appointment from the local community and their emotional attachment to their schools have inspired them to put in some extra labour for the benefit of the students.

BOOKS

AMADER SKUL (OUR SCHOOL): By Mahfuz Ullah. Published by the Directorate of Primary Education, Bangladesh, with the assistance of UNICEF, October 1991.

Reviewed by Dr. Abu Hamid Latif, Professor, Institute of Education and Research, Dhaka University.

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Tadziki Academy of Science. I was intrigued indeed that Buddhism had travelled so far north and west.

The "Walking Buddha" came from Thailand. It was 220 cm. of the 14 century A.D., of bronze. It was a gorgeous manifestation of the Sukhothi School of Art.

Also from the Far East was the standing Avalokitesvara, now in Paris. It was a statue of an ascetic of 10th century A.D. and it was of the Bantay Smei style of Khmer Art.

Another absorbing display was the "Future Buddha" shown as cutting his hair. It was 11th to 12th century in situ and 110 cm. Here the figure was seated, in the adamant pose, with his body slightly bent in cutting his hair with a sword. It was from the Anand Temple in Burma.

From Burma also came the delineation of eight great events in Buddha's life from Upali, Burma. It was of the 11th to 12th century A.D. and was 12.7 cm in height. It was at the Pagan Museum. The small highly carved statue was directly inspired by the eastern Indian school of Pala Art.

Another interesting and delightful piece was the depiction of Buddha on Kanishka relic casket. From Shah-Ji-ki-Dehri, Peshawar, Pakistan, it was in bronze and 19.3 cm and

for encouraging such a venture. It is expected that this collaborative partnership will be an exemplar for producing such useful materials on different aspects of education. We wish a wide circulation of the book among the public, particularly among those who are actively concerned with the running of primary schools — education officials, teachers, guardians and members of the school committees.

The column WRITE TO MITA is held up for next week due to unavoidable circumstances.

The Impact of Buddha

of the 2nd century A.D. It is now found at the Peshawar Museum. The picture portrayed a relic casket with a lid, with Buddha seated on a lotus pedestal. At the side there were two other wall paintings from the same place, one depicting the life story of Buddha in blue, red and green. The last showed Buddha preaching in

brown and blue. Added to the depiction of statues, relics and paintings were the photographs of the Buddhist architecture in Mongolia, Tibet, Nepal, Vietnam, Thailand, Kampuchea, Indonesia, Burma, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh.



Some other exhibits at the poster display

die, flanked by the Sun god and the Moon god.

The delineation of a wall painting from China showed flying "devta" or "apsara" in burnt stucco. There were two other wall paintings from the same place, one depicting the life story of Buddha in blue, red and green. The last showed Buddha preaching in

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Talking to Mr Borua, chief editor of the BISS, and an enlightened Buddhist, about his opinion of the exhibition and to learn more about the Buddhist culture in Bangladesh, I gathered that Sir Mortimer Wheeler, looking at the Mahavira at Paharpur had said that it was "the excitement of a vote of discovery". According to a historian, a temple Borbodora in Java, Indonesia, is based on this 8th century monastery. I learnt from Mr. Borua that UNESCO is working at Paharpur and at Khulna, Japan, and has given a sizeable grant for this too.

Discussing the Mainamati Salvan Vihara which is on a 11 mile long range of hillocks, Mr. Borua said that many of the sites had not been excavated as yet in that area. He was referring to the Triratna Stupa and the Ananda Vihara. I learnt that while the Mainamati excavations began in the 50's the Paharpur excavation was being done by the British in the pre-

partition time. As for Mahasthan, which is a confluence of many cultures, as Mr Borua explained, of Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam, the sight is 2000 years old. He regretted that the Pandit Vihara in Chittagong was one of the biggest Buddhist universities of ancient times and has not yet been excavated.

Talking about the Buddhist community in Bangladesh he explained that they were mainly concentrated in five districts — Chittagong, Chittagong Hill Tracts, Comilla, parts of Noakhali and Patuakhali. Mr Borua said that many were the descendants of the 16th century Burmese of the Arakanese system. He said that there were 500 Buddhist temples in Bangladesh, with three in Dhaka alone. He said that the sacred ashes of Atish Dipankar Srijnmal a Bengali saint and philosopher of 10th century AD who lived in Tibet for 13 years are at the Kamalapur temple. It was gift from the people of China.

About the Shilpakala Academy expose Mr. Borua commented that it showed well how the Buddhist Art had been assimilated in the local style in different parts of Asia and it showed the rich diversity of Buddhist images. "The Pakistani Buddha image had the Graeco-Roman beauty while the Chinese and Burmese images were quite different."