

Noorjahan, Once Again

The death of yet another Noorjahan — it is a coincidence that this woman from Faridpur was named the same as the one from Sylhet — in a most gruesome manner rivalling that of her namesake has passed relatively quietly and uneventfully. If the earlier death in a bizarre situation has caused stormy protests across the country, this one should have set into motion revulsion and anger — beyond just the shock such incidents are bound to produce — more widely and intensely. Neither has happened except that Bangladesh Mahila Parishad has recorded its protest by condemning the incident. But the fact that the men who wield power in villages dared give the verdict in favour of killing Noorjahan by burning after having her tied to a wooden pole indicates that society has refused to learn any lesson from the earlier death at Kamalgonj.

There is, in fact, no difference between the ways of punishment meted out by the village headmen from Sylhet and Faridpur to the two Noorjahans. The throwing of 101 stones at a woman planted waist-deep in the dug-out ground is as chillingly inhuman as tying one with a wooden pole before setting her on fire. The ghastly murder in public moreover has been committed, surprisingly, in the name of a trial for transgression. In the case of the death of Noorjahan from Sylhet, as we all know now, she did no wrong whatsoever to embrace the fate she was forced to, and in the latter case from Shreepur, Faridpur, the victim has been charged with adultery. We are not in a position either to prove or disprove the veracity of the charge, what we however can definitely say is that it was none of the powerful men's business to take law in their hands, and least of all to pronounce the weird judgement — one that takes us back to the dark Middle age.

Kamalgonj and Shreepur may be alike and different in very many ways but the way both have brought to light the darker side of this nation and put the country to shame is quite the same. The symptom is even more dangerous in that the law of the land has been doubly undermined: first by defiance to it and then by not proving equal to the task of leaving a deterrence on further recurrence of the shameful tragedy. The ultimate loser will be the nation like it was when acid throwing grew in a menacing proportion across the country. The government, after all, has a role to play specially when such extremely deplorable incidents occur. If the incident is at its ugliest, there must also be exemplary way of dealing with it; so that none dare take the law of the land for a ride. An erring member of society must be taken to court for whatever verdict befits the crime committed.

Two things are worth noting here: the Noorjahans are from poor class of society and then they are women who are in general subjected to discrimination of all kinds. The difference however between the crimes, where women are the victims, common in our society and such public trial condemning the offender to capital punishment is quite clear. If the perpetrators of such individual crimes are taken care of by the country's laws these so-called guardians of society often prone to distorting the teachings of the holy book must be meted out more stringent punishment. They not only corrupt society by wrong interpretation of the religion but also make a mockery of the country's statute book. Unless they are put in their proper place — it should be nothing other than dungeon — democratic values and human rights will continue to suffer.

The Kamalgonj incident has left a deep scar in the minds of people who believe in individual freedom and social liberty. Whether the national psyche will be equally hurt and also bleed by the second tragic incident of the type, will decide how best to mould our future society. Let the response be up to the mark.

Better Deal for Ethnic People

The London-based human rights organisation Amnesty International (AI) has singled out more than 70 countries for their poor records on guaranteeing human rights for the ethnic communities and indigenous people. That the ethnic races in as developed a country as the United States and as poor and struggling a nation as Vietnam or Bangladesh are equally at risk of human rights violation brings to the fore a much-maligned defect not only in the system of governance but also, in general, in the present civilization. These people are made the prime target for human rights abuses, because the socio-political system has fallen far short of addressing the special needs of these communities. Isolated cases of attacks and atrocities on indigenous people could very well be explained away as unfortunate incidents which are only a necessary evil part of life.

However, this is not the case in the 70 countries specifically mentioned in the AI report. The racial and ethnic hatred is far too deep-rooted and malignant to be cured by the application of any strait-jacket formula. Like democracy — and more properly in the absence of democratic values — it too is a state of mind made all the worse by the avaricious consumerism of the time. The AI report released on Wednesday last has pieced together some of the incidents of human rights violation involving the ethnic people. In all the cases, without exception, the cause for maltreatment of the ethnic minorities has been found to be none other than grabbing their property — movable or immovable. What is even more shameful is the fact that the state itself or its machinery either abet the crime or instigate the loathsome practice.

Needless to say that such biased attitude towards the vulnerable indigenous people make them still more vulnerable and the basic principles of equality of all humans suffer. That more indigenous people than their proportion would have allowed find their places in jails and harassed by police, as reported by the AI, is a proof of the demeaning process they are forced to go through. All governments may have their penchant for highly prizing the civil liberty and creating equal opportunities for all people, but the fact remains that the discrimination the indigenous people are subjected to creates various social tensions and stresses hampering the national progress.

It is this realisation that has prompted some governments to adopt special policies and programmes for improving the condition of the backward communities. The extra cost is worth paying. Bangladesh is not free from this problem and therefore the compulsion to bring the various tribal people into the social mainstream should be met by appropriate policies and plans.

Bosnia-Herzegovina: Who is Responsible for the Genocide?

BOSNIA has broken many of our illusions. A gruesome drama is being enacted in the heart of Europe while the rest of the world is watching. The great nations of Europe seem to have been paralysed. What could possibly be the reason for such strange inaction?

In the name of "ethnic cleansing" a calculated campaign of rape, pillage and killing has been launched by the Serbians. The whole world had been watching with horror the Serbian plan to wipe out the Muslims of Bosnia. Yet, all these atrocities have failed to stir the Europeans into action. One wonders if it is a case of vicarious revenge for the bloody nose that the Turks gave them centuries ago. Or, do we see a recrudescence of the Crusades? I have never understood how they can justify their connivance at the genocide in Bosnia unless we assume that they are applying different set of standards for Muslims. Their actions and reactions give the impression that the Serbian plan for "ethnic cleansing" has their support. Indeed they have turned the UN into an instrument in their hands for helping the Serbians in achieving their military objectives. Given the record of the European states so far one must dismiss all the expressions of concern and sympathy as feigned. One cannot escape the conclusion that they do not mean what they say. Hypocrisy and double standard are the words that come to mind in judging their words and deeds.

The Vance-Owen plan for Bosnia consecrates aggression and ethnic purge as acceptable international conduct. The plan aims at creating ten autonomous provinces, each dominated by an ethnic group. The central government, under those circumstances, will be an object of ridicule. The pockets under the dominant influence of the Serbs and Croats will inevitably gravitate towards Serbia and Croatia.

The Bosnian Muslims are in such desperate situation that they have been obliged to accept even this plan of a moth-eaten Bosnia. Croats have also accepted the plan but the Bosnian Serbs have rejected the plan. Obviously they hope to capture the whole country by completing their genocidal campaign to exterminate the Muslims. Why should they accept less? William Pfaff, a noted American columnist, writing in the International Herald Tribune, has pointed the finger at the UN as the

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principal agency responsible for the appeasement of the Serbian aggressors. The UN Security Council, with three veto-wielding members from Europe, is certainly not representing world conscience when it pursues peace in Yugoslavia by demanding that the victim of aggression, the Bosnian government, halt its resistance to what is being done to its people. One is naturally reminded of the appeasement of the Nazis by the British and the French when they served an ultimatum on Czechoslovakia's President Eduard Benes asking him to yield to Hitler's demands. History had proved this action to have been a mistake but in those days there were some reasons for believing that peace could be preserved by yielding to these Nazi demands. Besides, Germany was rapidly re-arming whereas neither Britain nor France were prepared for war.

But in the Bosnian situation one cannot advance any reason whatsoever to justify the policy of appeasing aggressors by the international community. Serbia is not Hitler's Germany. It is a minor power with a total regular armed force of 135,000. Many are poorly trained conscripts. Even neutral Switzerland can mobilize five times that number of soldiers. The Serbian militia in Bosnia, according to press reports, are well armed and fanatical but undisciplined and

unprofessional. Defying all canons of morality and international norms, Serbia has invaded Bosnia-Herzegovina and the Serbian-occupied parts of Croatia, brutally expelling or murdering the inhabitants. Serbia demands that the world accept what it has done. The Vance-Owen plan does that, with minor variations. The European countries did not act to halt aggression, as far as one can understand from the public statement of their leaders.

American reaction to this issues has raised a glimmer of hope that at least one nation may yet demonstrate the moral courage to stand up against the genocide in Bosnia. Public statements by President Clinton encourage one to believe that, unlike the Europeans who are motivated by racial and religious prejudice, Americans are looking at the Bosnian question from a humanitarian point of view. President Clinton has already

introduced a new note of urgency and seriousness by resolving to take military action to stop the Serbian aggression. No one can predict what will eventually happen but the young president has given some indication that he is conscious of the humanitarian tradition of his nation.

It is a matter of disappointment that the Russians, the erstwhile champions of decolonization and human rights, have chosen to play a racist role in supporting their fellow Slavs in Yugoslavia. We all know that they have abandoned socialism but have they also given up basic human values? What do the British, the French, the Germans, the Americans and the Italians expect us to think about their commitment to human rights? What is Israel's policy on the tragedy? Are we not witnessing a new holocaust in Bosnia in which a brutal aggressor is determined to wipe out a whole nation from the face of the earth? Why do they take up the cause of the victims of the current holocaust?

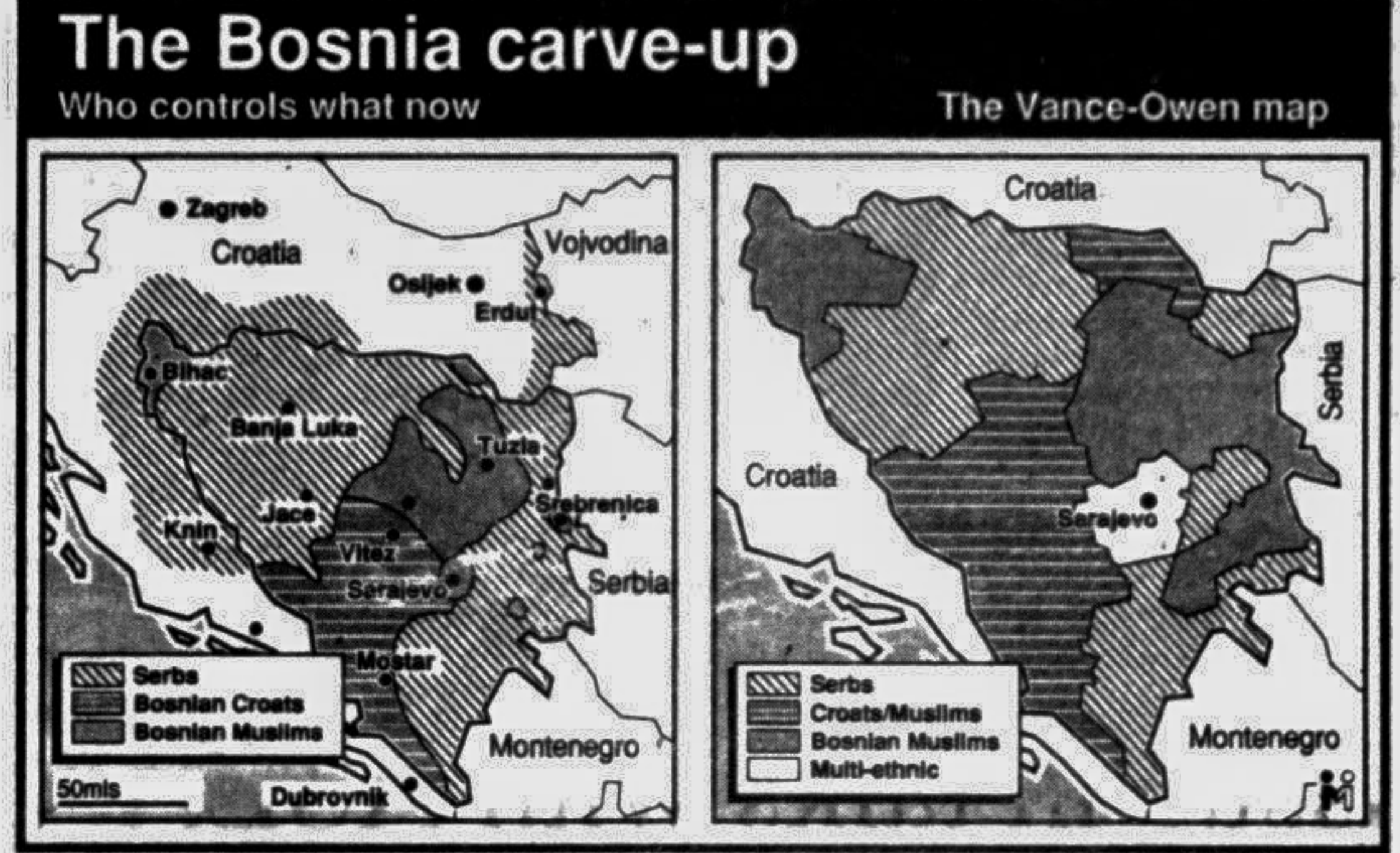
The UN is soon going to hold in Vienna a World Conference on Human Rights. The western nations usually sit in these conferences with a magnifying glass to detect violations of human rights by the Third World countries. I admire them for pursuing this great cause. There is certainly a crying need for national and international action to protect human rights everywhere in the world. The world will be a better place to live if the 1948 Declaration of Universal Human Rights is fully implemented by all. But are these great nations upholding the human rights of the men, women and children being killed or the women being raped? Outrage was expressed at the massacre of Muslims and the rape of the women but the action taken, one noted with dismay, was in support of the aggressors. The UN peace keepers were used to ensure that the Bosnians remain unarmed so that the Serbians, armed to the teeth, could carry out their planned "ethnic cleansing".

The record of the Islamic states does not fill the Muslims around the world with pride. The Organization of Islamic Countries has held a number of meetings and passed many resolutions. Very recently one was held in Karachi but no one seems to have taken any notice of its outcome. Neither the Serbians nor the Bosnians nor even the UN considered the resolutions of the meeting to be a relevant factor. Clearly there is no commitment to the concept of Islamic solidarity and I believe the rest of the world knows it and that is why these resolutions are ignored. Many of these countries have large and well-equipped armed forces but not a single nation volunteered to send their contingents to the aid of Bosnian Muslims. The record of the Islamic countries should be an object lesson and an eye-opener to those who talk of an Islamic world. This is a mere illusion without any substance. The Islamic states have left the task of saving the Bosnian Muslims to the United States of America. As I write this article there is a debate going on in America about the action to be taken to stop the genocide. Meanwhile the Bosnian Serbs have shown their true colour by rejecting the Vance-Owen plan. Obviously they are not interested in peace of justice; they want to destroy the Bosnian Muslims in order to take over the whole country. Under the circumstances, the only option open now to the Americans to save the Muslims is the military one.

ON THE RECORD by Shah AMS Kibria

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Widespread Racism Hurts Aborigines

Vincent W. Stove writes from Sydney

Institutionalised racism exists in Australia's police forces, backed by judicial racism in the courts and approved and supported by apathetic white Australians

rate of other Australians. According to the report, they are incarcerated under cruel, inhuman and degrading conditions much worse than those reserved for white Australian prisoners.

The report resulted from an Australia-wide fact-finding tour by three Amnesty investigators last year. The investigators observed that the Australian criminal justice system appeared to be weighted against Aborigines and that Aborigines are being denied the right to be treated with humanity and respect.

The report drew attention to the puzzling fact that no legal action has been taken against any prison or police officials regarding the tragic deaths of some 99 Aborigines in custody. These deaths had been the subject of an investigation by the Australian government.

The appalling treatment of Aborigines by police, the courts and the prison system is, even more worthy of censure because Australia officially supports the International

Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. While it is generally agreed that all within the country's various police forces, justice systems and prisons are not racists, it is also acknowledged that racists are unduly tolerated and most acts of racism are overlooked.

There is an enormous communications gap between the Aboriginal community and the people (almost exclusively white) in charge of the police, the justice system and prisons. The gap has existed since the earliest days of British colonial rule and it will not be bridged this century, judging by the current rate of progress.

Although they comprise only 1.5 per cent of the country's population, the indigenous people are subjected to an inordinate degree of police surveillance and harassment.

They are arrested to a greater degree than white Australians, and the police use greater violence, abuse and humiliation in the pursuit, arrest and detention processes.

It has been alleged that conditions in some prisons in

which some Aborigines have been detained breached international torture convention provisions forbidding "cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment." The conditions have been described as filthy, with mud, slush and excrement covering the floors of cells which have no sewerage or running water.

The report of a National Inquiry into Racial Violence released two years ago stated that police tortured young Aborigines to confess to crimes they did not commit. They were threatened with police dogs.

The report stated that young Aboriginal girls were frequently raped or threatened with rape. Police drew guns and even fired them to intimidate Aborigines. The times in Australia when blacks were killed like animals for sport may have passed, but the persecution persists.

With only a few exceptions, the Australian media generally ignores all but the most negative images and stories relating to indigenous people.

And during the recent national election campaign the welfare and issues of indigenous people were virtually ignored. The plight of Aborigines was over-looked as politicians sought to outdo each other in offering bribes to the white

community.

Much has been spoken and written about the prospect of a new generation of Australians — a better informed and more tolerant generation — emerging from the present education system. But there is little evidence to support such optimism. Racism is still rife in schools.

Many Aboriginal children are so disheartened and depressed by the insults and mental and physical violence to which they are subjected that they frequently do not attend classes and leave school as soon as they can.

Some observers believe the problem of racism is increasing rather than diminishing throughout the education system. They describe this trend as a serious obstacle to reconciliation and social harmony.

But a big plus for Australia in this year of indigenous people as the naming of Aboriginal singer Mandawuy Yunupingu as Australian of the Year. When he received the award, the lead singer of the pop group Yothu Yindi, said he hoped it would help build unity between black and white Australians.

When the award attracted criticism from racists, Mr Yunupingu commented that he felt "sorry for people that are backward thinkers."

— Deptineus Asia

To the Editor...

Closing the gender gap

Sir, International Women's Day has awakened the womenfolk in Bangladesh where woman workforce has grown stronger manifold in relation to change in population-employment characteristics over the last decade.

Compared to the mah's roleplay in the free-market world of late 20th century, women have made all-out progress more than ever before. The gender gap has been shrinking remarkably in all types of activities — up in space to down under sea — against records of inability, inequality, injustice, indifference, and so forth.

Also, the records reveal the gradual advances of the 'weaker sex' in different modes of livelihood alongside all other involvements either professionally or voluntarily.

As is the fact, the monopoly of male domination has been stripped down strikingly this century by the merits of feminine individuality both singularly and collectively that can be worth a dedication as the Century of Women or Century of Equal Sex or Century of Closing Gender Gap.

Heartening to notice the vigorous awareness about the essentiality of sharing the living among the species irrespective of identification — physical, social, national, or global — is unquestionably encouraging to the development of quality of life on earth.

Woman as the life-support to man being only housewife is no longer the second-in-command in today's robotic society, as their head-to-head competition for everything has been gaining momentum with implementation of equal rights.

Undeniably, the truth about the pioneering or leading con-

tribution of many progressive women like the man-of-the-hour has not been treated truthfully as yet.

For a just interdependence between the sexes toward better dwelling, UN Declaration of Human Rights has to be the sacred document of productive co-relations, since mere ceremony annually can not deliver the aspired fruits without rigorous labour within a target period.

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"Zakat Fund"

Sir, Congratulations to Mr Mottus Samad Chowdhury, Asstt Manager, Phulthota Tea Estate, Sylhet for the thoughtful write up on "Zakat Fund" published on March 28, 1993, in The Daily Star. However, some of the observations are as under:

Mr Chowdhury as an assistant manager of a tea estate has lot of experience about the tea gardens. Therefore, he could work out a blue print to develop a new tea industry where more and more needy people could be employed to earn their bread, and out of the profit of the industry multi-storied, flat system buildings may be built for all the needy employees starting from the lowest rung of employment. Thereafter he may submit the plan to the government to avail the Zakat Fund money.

Mr Chowdhury is certainly aware of the following points: "low cost houses" is a meaningless slogan, since the prices of the materials in the markets will be the same when used for the multi-storied buildings; "low cost houses" require more landed space, while the same space could be used for many people when multi-storied

building is built; the effects of low cost houses are (i) mostly not good for health (ii) when the people are provided with low cost houses and/or anything for which they did not have to work, they usually develop a psychological "inertia" which is neither good for their own development nor does it bring any good to the nation.

Should Mr Chowdhury go for any project with the money from the Zakat Fund, it requires proper accounting system, audit and publication of the reports with a copy to each and every source wherefrom the fund had been received against the receipt number and date. This is too much of occupation but every essential, and Mr Chowdhury ought to be aware of the basic factors of this point, otherwise all his good wishes may end in the haphazard manner.

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Computer in banks

Sir, There are so many scheduled banks in our country which make transactions of lakhs of Takas everyday. Staff of the banks are to handle that with adequate care and caution. They are maintaining the accounts in various types of books of account which is an intricate and also hazardous system. Few of the branches of the various banks in our country initiate computer system for accounting. But undoubtedly this is a commendable system.

Staff, account-holder and all other relevant persons are immensely benefited by computer system. Under the prevailing situation, we earnestly request the relevant authorities for initiating computer system in all the branches of the scheduled banks for smooth and expeditious work. Md Iqbal Paliz (Shapori) Nayagram, Beani Bazar, Sylhet