

Housing for the Poor

The Dhaka City Corporation has earmarked an amount of ten crore Taka in its budget for the current financial year for financing housing projects for low income people in the metropolis.

Meanwhile, the draft of the proposed national housing policy is getting a final shape. Addressing a two-day seminar on the housing policy held here last week, Works Minister Rafiqul Islam Mia said that under the new dispensation, the government's main job would be to create an environment conducive programme for the development of housing sector.

This approach looks basically right. Even now, ninety per cent of urban housing and nearly all rural housing is provided by the private sector.

Inadequacy of shelter for the populace is such a gigantic problem in this country that it is more than doubtful if, left on their own, resources of the private sector or the banking system, can finance housing development which could create a real impact even in the medium term.

World Bank affiliate International Finance Corporation (IFC) had shown some interest in participation in financing housing development.

The nature and trend of urbanization in the country present an even more baffling issue. People migrate from rural areas to cities and towns in search of jobs, higher income — of a better life.

Faced with the problem of a rapidly swelling population in the island of Java and the capital Jakarta, Indonesia is said to have embarked on a policy of shifting people to its sparsely populated islands, providing attractive resettlement benefits to the emigrants.

A national housing policy is hardly the instrument to tackle overcrowding in Dhaka or any other city. However, it can bring the issue into a sharper focus, seeking an integrated approach for easing the problem.

Manhandling Teachers
The surge of violence that overtook the newest university in the land in the past few days does not seem to be an isolated and localised event. It points to a chain — from Rajshahi to Chittagong — and now to Kushtia.

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Biblical wisdom laid it so well — as you will sow so will you reap — our first democratically elected government after so many years did not move in time to contain the organised hoodlums seizing the Rajshahi and Chittagong universities.

Bullying on such a scale and holding entire campuses in hostage in such a manner are things that directly spawn incidents of Fatikhkhari and the Feni type — in the former case three invigilators were injured by examinees, eyes of one of them were gouged out and in the latter, seven invigilators were beaten up and three of them thrown into a pond.

Perhaps we all are parties in our own fashion to the nurturing of a veritable Frankenstein. The Government because it is charged with the well-being of the body politic of this nation, must rise from the seemingly self-imposed slumber first of all. Or the consequences would go past mending before long.

Syed Shahabuddin, a professional diplomat, served in the Indian Foreign Ministry up to 1978, and later he was made Ambassador to Algeria for some time.

Shahabuddin is from Bihar, and at the invitation of Chandrasekhar, he joined active politics. Winning a seat in the elections he became an MP from Bihar. In 1991 he lost this seat to M J Akbar.

At present Syed Shahabuddin is an active leader of the Babri Mosque Movement Committee in India.

The Daily Star (DS) — How do you see the future of India, especially in terms of Hindu-Muslim relations?

Syed Shahabuddin (S) — I think there is a dominant feeling among both the Hindu and the Muslim masses, that whatever may be the tensions of the moment there is no alternative to peaceful co-existence. That the Muslims cannot simply be wished away. They cannot be driven across the border or thrown into the sea.

I think between the Muslims, feeling of accommodation, and the Hindus, feeling of acceptance, a way can be found to avoid a total divide, a total alienation.

But there are forces in this country — and I would like to call them marginal forces — both among the Hindus and the Muslims, who are extremists, who see things in terms of black and white, in terms of 'we and they'.

DS — How do you judge the present situation?

S — You know about the murderous events of Bombay and Surat, where hundreds of Muslims were killed. It was a great human tragedy. But one must also remember that while the Bombay and Surat killings were taking place, hundreds and thousands of other places Hindus and Muslims were living peace with one another.

During the last decade and half, certain forces that were off stage but always there — including during the freedom struggle — have come on stage, and are trying to dominate the national politics.

So the key question to me is, why is this upsurge at this historical moment? It is my view that Muslims are not the primary target of this rising Hindu chauvinism.

The national reality is that the Hindu communal upsurge is directed against Hindu masses.

The entire theory of Hindu consolidation is primarily a political manoeuvre to maintain the status quo. To maintain the dominance of Hindu society by the 15 per cent high caste, and to silence the rising voices of protests, rising claims for social justice.

The high caste Hindus are using their very last weapon, that of communalism, to get the Hindu masses behind them, to consolidate the masses in the name of Hindu religion, Hindu culture, Hindu history, by arousing passion against the Muslims.

This they are doing by depicting the Muslims as historic adversaries, by recalling real and imaginary grievances from the past, by presenting the Muslims as the demons. 'Look, India has enemies all round, India has enemies within — the fifth column — the historic adversaries right amidst you, getting millions of petro-dollars to convert India into an Islamic state, getting funds from across the borders to create a new Pakistan inside India. Muslims are not adopting family planning and are procreating like rabbits with the intention of creating a demographic majority' — all this nonsense is being propagated relentlessly to inject into the Hindu mind a sense of fear.

So that out of that fear they will come together, get consolidated behind the caste Hindu leadership and allow the vested interest to continue to dominate and prevent the people from demanding a change.

As I see it, the battle in India is not between the Hindus and the Muslims, but between status quo and anti-status quo. It is quite another matter that the forces of status quo have a Hindu face, belonging to high caste, and use the Hindu religion to fight the masses. It just happens to be so in the present context of events. Muslims are only a convenient scapegoat.

DS — So your answer to the question 'why now', is that it is the Hindu vested classes' response to the mass upsurge against exploitation. It is the ruling classes' ideological offensive against demands for social justice and a restructuring of the present society. Who represents the rising force for social justice?

S — I would say the Janata Dal, to which I belong. Eighty five per cent of the people of India are suppressed by the 15 per cent high caste Hindus. However, all the forces of social justice do not operate through the Janata Dal. Our greatest success lies in 'Mandalising' all political parties (referring to the Mandal Commission Report which was adopted by the government of Janata Dal of Prime Minister VP Singh).

Lower caste demands represent the inexorable force of social justice. But let us not underestimate our enemy. The RSS, which has never allowed anybody other than Bhramins to its hierarchy, is putting up backward classes in the leadership of its front organisation.

DS — Please explain.

S — RSS has about 25 front organisations, of national stature, in every walk of life — youth, student, women, kishan, worker — every branch

and networks that they can reach crores of people very quickly. To give you one example, immediately after the demolition of Babri mosque, VHP was able to collect crores of signatures demanding a Ram temple at Ayodhya.

The media has also been very planfully penetrated by them. If there is a political force in this country which understands the importance and the effective role of modern communication, which has understood not just the power of the pen, but power of the radio and that of the TV and the video, it is the Sangh Parivar. The amount of things they are able to produce and print is enormous.

They are able to do this because all Marwari business families, without any significant exception, support the forces of Hindu fundamentalism. Therefore, they have no dearth of money or of workers. Compared to this, the Muslim community is nowhere in the picture.

DS — What is the nature and content of the thrust of Hindu propaganda against the Muslims?

S — Once I told Mr Vajpayee, I don't believe in pan-Islamism. But it seems that you do. The ideology of Hindutva puts all Muslims into one category — meaning that if Muslims in UAE, or Muslims in Pakistan, or the Muslims in Bangladesh should break some temples, then we the Muslims of India must pay for them. So the Muslims of UAE, Pakistan and of Bangladesh are one and the same. Not only that, if the Muslims did something a 1000 years ago then the Indian Muslims of the present generation must pay for them.

Interview with Syed Shahabuddin

'The conflict is between the Caste Hindus and the Hindu Masses'

by Mahfuz Anam

When I went to Manipur recently after the carnage, I was informed that propaganda had been going on for years: don't trust the Muslims, don't give them jobs, buy or sell to them, don't employ Muslim rickshaw pullers to send your daughter home, don't rent them your house, even if that means it stays empty.

DS — I repeat, are the Muslim masses listening to your message?

S — By and large, among the Muslims, while they have a lot of grievances, there is a growing realisation of two things: one, that we have to accommodate ourselves to the social realities of India; two, that we are not the only oppressed people in India; and we cannot win our battle alone.

DS — I admire your faith in democracy and rationality. But isn't reality proving somewhat different?

S — In the short term, yes. There is one danger. If the Muslims play communal politics, and don't join the common struggle, and then when the Hindu communal forces

win, we will be targeted. The power struggle is between the high caste Hindus and the Sudras, who are leading the untouchables and the Adibasis. In that struggle, if the Muslims are on the side of the Sudras, then we will share in the spoils of victory. But if we are on the sidelines as the Hindu oppressed classes fight for their rights, then if and when they will win, they will not share the fruits of victory with us! This is our chance to shatter the myths created by Hindu communalists.

DS — Looking back over the past forty years, would you say that the Muslims of India did not play the right role to become part of mainstream Indian society?

S — I have divided the history of post-independence Indian Muslims into two periods, with the birth of Bangladesh as the dividing point. The year of your victory over Pakistan marks a psychological watershed for the Indian Muslims. Between '47 and '71 there was a continuous flow of talents from India to Pakistan. There was always the thought among us that if nothing happens here, then I will go to Pakistan. Not necessarily to stay there, but to use Pakistan as a stepping stone to go West, to the US or Europe, or also to the Gulf States. If a community is always trying to escape, then can it ever develop strength? Can it ever stand on its own feet? Can it ever have the determination to fight against adverse circumstances?

DS — What happened in '71?

S — In 1971 that door was suddenly closed — physically and, more importantly, psychologically. A growing feeling came about, about asserting ourselves in this country. Of course by then 25 years had passed, and a younger generation, who had never raised slogans demanding Pakistan, had come of age. It carried no chip on its shoulder and had not committed the 'original sin' — for which, by the way, the RSS has never forgiven us, till today.

This generation of young people who were coming to

fringe. But you must understand that people who have seen their families butchered and their houses burnt down, will find it extremely difficult to accept this analysis which is essentially a long term view of things. As human beings, these people are taken up too much by the question of revenge and retribution. The rumours of the growing militancy among the Muslims cannot be ignored and indeed, if the Muslims are pushed back to the wall, and if the process of reconciliation and understanding takes too long, one cannot rule out the possibility of militancy penetrating the Muslim masses.

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