

Women as Equal Partners

A United Nations study once again confirms the long-held notion that women in Bangladesh are at a disadvantage. Their ability to work — and they actually do as much as the men do — has now been recognised but such a recognition is yet to be complementary to the financial reward it should bring for them. This is certainly not the only gross inequality that women here face, in fact discriminations against them start at a very early stage and continue to haunt them to their graves.

It is not for nothing that the UN study has expressed a deep concern about the continual indifference to the potential of half of the country's population. One result of such negligence is quite physically manifest now. The country has been listed as one of the very few in the world to have recorded the death of women at an age lower than that of men. Already the female population has fallen behind the male one — for every 1,000 males there are only 945 females — and if the trend continues, there is every likelihood that the country will end up facing a population imbalance in the future.

Even if that grim scenario can be averted, there is no point relegating women to a secondary role and depriving the country of their full potential. Attitudes still prevail in some segments of our society as if women are a different species from the humans. This is not because people in such communities consider women useless; far from it they make most out of the weaker sex, an exploitation of the extreme type. There is yet another group who perceives equal status of women as a direct threat to their vested interests. So women are subjected to all kinds of discriminations — at the family level, social level and even politico-religious level.

Statistics as provided by the UN study have been long known here too. But the key question is: how to address their problems? That identification of the problems, as is often said, is half of their solution is a poor consolation for the victims. It is not difficult to understand why the regressive forces, with a distorted interpretation of religion have embarked upon a smear campaign against the Non-government Organisations (NGOs) and their female employees in the rural areas. In the process, the question of empowerment of women has been confronting an unexpectedly stubborn challenge now. And, all this at a time when rural women were coming out in their thousands to give their labour for a wage they have never enjoyed before.

While the efforts should have been directed to reducing the existing disparities between men and women in our society, we are now facing a crisis with the potential of wrecking havoc with our social fabric. What we need is to educate people in an effort to remove the gender disparity. The government's policy priority for women is to be viewed as a silver-lining. But it will be of little help unless an enabling environment and a support mechanism can be put in place for implementation of the programmes. Women surely have to match men in education and therefore, initially the programmes have to be geared up to specially cater for the disadvantaged sex in view of the existing wide gap between the literacy rates of the two.

However, there is no denying the fact that the overall educational status of our population has to be improved if a long-term benefit is to be derived. A greater investment must go to the human development sector and only then the narrow mindedness of the male will give way to a liberal and broad outlook in which women are considered an equal partner.

Foreign Trade Rules

In the computation of our export and import trade what we have hardly ever attempted to do is estimate the losses incurred through a plethora of procedural delays. However, regardless of the absence of statistics on such losses, we can safely infer that these have been enormous. On the export side, apart from a loss of business in quantifiable terms, our goodwill has received some setback abroad. The sense of deprivation would be greater if we should add to the total picture the losses we have suffered through production dislocations and the failure to meet buyer specifications. On the import side, various procedural and functional snags inflated the procurement costs with the consumers ultimately having to pay through their noses.

Against this backdrop, we learn that some trade facilitation measures have been suggested by a task force led by the Commerce Secretary. This is going to be an exercise in simplification of the procedures that weave a spider's web around foreign trade. These not only create inordinate delays for the business but spawn many-layered corruption as well. Since the report is under consideration of the government we deem it appropriate at this stage to provide our own input to the process of devising ways out of the mire.

There is no doubt that the convertibility of Taka has made it easier to open a letter of credit nowadays. Even so, the paperwork remains cumbersome there. But it is the release of import and export consignments at and from the ports respectively that presents insurmountable problems. Traders routinely complain of harassment at the hands of the port and customs authorities, appraisers and field inspectors. Whether it is a sample, or a book, or a merchandise, the clearance formalities require 26 signatures on the way up and as many on the way down. There is only a few day's demurrage exemption time which is but a cruel joke for the trader who cannot simply short-circuit those numerous signatures which must adorn his file before he gets the clearance. In-between, his documentation might have been found fault with and queries flung at him on import licence, NOC, etc as he went on greasing the palms at every step of the way. On top of this, as his merchandise would mark time at the silos some of it would invariably be stolen.

Then should his case be referred to Dhaka, he may go through another round of procrastination and hassle. We are for curtailment of formalities at the port level and a delegation of power from the headquarters to the senior-most officer in the port city. So that most of the cases can be disposed of quickly as well as appropriately without having to make references normally to the national board of revenue. For reasons of check and balance, it may not be possible right-away to provide a green channel for the merchandise, but something close a one-step omnibus service should not be difficult to arrange.

NIGERIA

Will People-power Prevail Against the Power of the Gun?

WHILE we all rejoiced at the happy turn of events in South Africa no one in Bangladesh seemed to pay much attention to Nigeria. In the size of its population it is the largest country in Africa and in terms of natural resources, perhaps the richest. It is a major oil exporter; in fact, oil accounts for over 80 per cent of its export income. But Nigeria is passing through a crisis. A year ago there was a presidential election in the country under the supervision of the armed forces. A rich businessman, Mr. Moshood Abiola won the election but the result was declared void by Nigeria's previous military ruler, General Ibrahim Babangida. The present military ruler, General Sani Abacha seems to be playing the same game and hence the crisis.

On seizing power, Gen. Abacha, following the usual routine, promised to bring democracy swiftly to Nigeria. He even set up a constitutional conference to work out how to do it. However, on the first anniversary of his election victory in June last year Mr. Abiola proclaimed himself the legally elected President of Nigeria. The military rulers reacted predictably by arresting him and putting him on trial for treason. But it was at this stage that the trouble started. Most people in the country believed that Mr. Abiola had won the election fairly and would like to see him assume the office. They resorted to strikes and other forms of protest to oppose the military's designs to thwart their democratic aspirations. Especially for the Yorubas, the tribe in the South

Gen. Abacha seems to have chosen the familiar path of clinging to power by suppressing the popular movement by force of arms. He will perhaps make full use of state funds to cause rift among the different sections of the population in order to weaken the democratic movement.

West to which Mr. Abiola belongs, it was an unacceptable disappointment. This would have been the first time that an Yoruba would have headed the government of Nigeria and they were not prepared to play the military's game. Instead of submitting to the military they decided to fight them. The Yorubas resent the fact that the northern-dominated military clique that has ruled Nigeria for over a decade may never release its grip on power. Nigeria's oil union — the National Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas Workers began their strike on July 4 to pressure the military to step down. The confrontation between the armed forces and the oil union has reached a critical point. The government is reported to be planning to ban the union but the Union leaders are not about to surrender. A Union leader defiantly declared, "We will hit back if they try anything in that direction. It will be the worst the nation has ever seen."

In early August Mr. Abiola was ordered freed on bail by a court but he rejected the terms for his release and is still in custody. The conditions on which the bail was granted were that Mr. Abiola could not address a political rally, could not do anything to undermine Nigeria's peace and stability and could not leave the country without permission.

More serious than the nation-wide riots and strikes provoked by his detention is

the work-stoppage by the oil unions which is already hurting Nigeria's economy. The Washington Post, in an editorial blamed the Nigerian generals for plunging the country into a political and economic crisis and said, "Strikes and protests in Nigeria's cities are a warning to its military rulers that the country's allegiance to democracy remains strong. They are evidence that a rising number of Nigeria's people consider their present government to be illegitimate." The arrest of the winner in the

machine is reportedly churning out claims that the trouble is being stirred up by a few unpatriotic Yorubas who care only for themselves. Commenting on the situation the Economist of London said, "It is an old tactic, but one that has worked before: by turning the Ibos and smaller tribes in the east, where the oil is, against the south-west, it hopes to divide the south and coax the Ibos back to work. It is a desperate tactic from a regime that knows full well the danger of such talk in a coun-

try where friction between the three main tribes and 250 little ones is never far beneath the surface."

It may be recalled that in 1967 the Ibo tribe of Nigeria, living in the south-eastern part of the country and having most of the oil deposits, declared themselves independent. The break-away state was known as Biafra. The Nigerian civil war was a bitter and brutal struggle which led to the death of nearly a million people, mostly Ibos. But the secessionist attempt failed. The federal government, controlled largely by the northern military establishment, prevailed. A most important factor which may have sealed the fate of Biafra

was its failure to get any external support. Most African states have potential tribal disputes and they are opposed to re-opening the question of state boundaries or the aspiration for independence within state boundaries. Conscious about the sad end of Biafra the Yorubas will probably refrain from any secessionist attempt. However, so far they have succeeded in ensuring that the struggle against the military is seen as a national problem and not a tribal one. It is also perceived as a nation-wide issue which affects all those who value democracy and civilian rule. So far the popular movement against the manoeuvre of Gen. Abacha to hang on to power has not yet taken a tribal character. The government may, of course, continue its machinations to trigger inter-tribe fights but it is doubtful if the military will be able to hide its real intentions and tactics for too long. Nigerians are obviously fed up with the military. Despite its vast natural resources, the country is virtually bankrupt. The military rulers are seen as both corrupt and inefficient. So public support for them is not likely to be forthcoming even if tribal quarrels are fomented by the military intelligence. Many Third World countries have seen how these so-called intelligence agencies meddle in politics, squander state funds and corrupt the political system. All this is usually done in order to justify military inter-

vention. Nigerians, having seen this game for too long, may not bite the bait. Another hopeful sign is that the western countries have so far refused to be drawn into the dispute on the side of the military rulers. A few weeks ago Rev. Jesse Jackson, President Clinton's envoy, led an American delegation to General Abacha with a clear message: Nigeria is heading for disaster and he had better pull back fast. However, in spite of these warnings Gen. Abacha seems to have chosen the familiar path of clinging to power by suppressing the popular movement by force of arms. He will perhaps make full use of state funds to cause rift among the different sections of the population in order to weaken the democratic movement.

ON THE RECORD

by Shah AMS Kibria

presidential election, according to Washington Post, was a reminder to the rest of the world that the military rulers "have repeatedly broken their promises to return Nigeria to elected civilian rule." The nation-wide protests and strikes as well as the hostile international reaction shows that the military rulers may have made a grave miscalculation. How the crisis will be resolved is anybody's guess but the military is certainly going to come out bruised and battered after all this is over.

Facing a crisis that they don't know how to handle, Gen. Abacha has started the age-old tactic of playing the ethnic card. Its information

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It may be recalled that in 1967 the Ibo tribe of Nigeria, living in the south-eastern part of the country and having most of the oil deposits, declared themselves independent. The break-away state was known as Biafra. The Nigerian civil war was a bitter and brutal struggle which led to the death of nearly a million people, mostly Ibos. But the secessionist attempt failed. The federal government, controlled largely by the northern military establishment, prevailed. A most important factor which may have sealed the fate of Biafra

Wealth and its Utilization : Teachings of the Prophet (SM)

by Md. Nazmul Huda Khan

THE code and conduct of life as per the tenets of Allah has always been materialized and propagated through the prophets sent by Him in ages. Prophet Muhammad (SM) is the last and the greatest among the prophets sent by Allah. And through him the 'Deen Islam' has reached its final manifestation.

The prophets, through ages, have been the best examples and epitomes of the conduct and code of life as per the prescription of the Creator. Prophet Muhammad (SM) is the quintessence of the quintessence of the model of preaching and practicing the ideals, that is, 'Uswatun Hasana'.

Islam is the complete code of life and an austere life definitely and naturally falls within its purview. Economy in general and broadly has twin purposes: to earn or gain wealth, and to use and distribute the same. Like the rest of the regulations of Islamic concept of life it is also based on the concept of 'haram' — the illegal and 'halal' — the legal, otherwise can be termed as forbidden and permitted.

Islam does not permit a life 'do whatever you like' as the Epicureans. Islamic basic principle of life is to guarantee a system of life which is capable of bringing greater and comprehensive welfare to the people and the society, that is to harvest universal benefits. Allah has bestowed that benefit through His great friend — Habibullah — Prophet

Muhammad (SM) for the whole humanity.

Accountability

Accountability is incarnate in the genesis of Islam. Muslims have to be accountable for all their activities to Allah on the 'Day of Final Judgement' — the 'Akherat'. As per the Hadith in the Tirmidhi Sharif, written by the great disciple of the Prophet (SM), Hazrat Abdullah Ibn Masood, Hazrat Muhammad (SM) said, "No son of Adam would be able to go one step forward without answering five questions on the 'Day of the Final Judgement': (a) how he lead his life; (b) how he passed his youth; (c) how he earned his property and wealth; (d) how he expended and utilized his wealth and property; and (e) how he utilized his knowledge."

Out of the five questions two are directly related to the subject under discussion. One is how one earned his wealth and property and the other is 'how one expended and utilized his property. Islam does not permit gaining wealth by any means and also discard use of wealth at one's sweet will, beyond the norms and rules prescribed for the purpose.

Islamic concept of economy is 'embodies in two cardinal principles: One, all resources in between the sky and the earth belong absolutely to Allah alone and to no individual or to state. An individual or a group or a state when owns the property he or they are only the custodians of the property

or resources; and two, every creation of Allah has the right on all the resources and properties that exist on the earth — to the more comprehensive, in the whole of the universe — for the subsistence and survival. Thus Islamic economic system guarantees rights to property not only to man but to the whole creation of Allah. So, gain, use and distribution of property and resources in Islamic economic system have to be done within the code set forth.

The Best Means

According to the Islamic concept for earning property and wealth, labour is the best means. The Prophet (SM) said, "He who earns through labour is the friend of Allah". Inheritance is another legal way of gaining wealth. It deserves clarification that although Islam does not admit absolute ownership of property to individual or to state but gives the right of custodianship of property, an individual's or the state's resources have to be best utilized for the maximum benefit of the creations of Allah.

As professions, agriculture, trade and commerce and industry have not only been permitted in Islam but also highly encouraged. Besides, gaining of wealth through exchanges, gifts, victory in war i.e., 'ganimat', and as donation or 'zakaat', if one is fit for that, are considered legal in Islam. The earnings which are

'haram' in Islam are: through taking interest, bribe, through gambling, theft and dacoity, hoarding and over profiteering, adultery and giving less in weight, selling forbidden items like pork, wine, and through forbidden profession like prostitution and palmistry etc. Acceptance of gift although legal in Islam but sometime this permission is being manipulated and high positioned officials are being bribed in the name of gifts. The Prophet (SM) pronounced strong warning against such type of gift acceptance.

Primary Responsibility

About distribution, utilization and use of wealth and resources too Islam has given definite principle. Every individual's primary responsibility is to cater to the need, of course optimum need, of his family members. When an individual will have excess to his need, that is, if an individual accumulates wealth and attains the stature of 'Athey Nisab', then he must pay 'zakaat'. The Prophet (SM) himself never accumulated wealth. Even when he was the ruler of Medina, many a time he did not have a parcel of food for his family. He used to donate whatever he had instantly. Expenditure for buying forbidden goods and forbidden activities has been restricted, that is made 'haram'. Luxury and wastage are also made 'haram'. The Prophet (SM) himself led the simplest and humblest life.

Being hungry himself he tried his best to collect food for others.

The excess resources of an individual or even of a state have to be utilized for the benefit of the rest who are less privileged, in distress and deserve help. As custodians of Allah's resources none have the right to expend lavishly at sweet will when others are in distress. In Surah Al Bakara Verse No. 219 of the Holy Quran it is said, "They ask thee how much they are to spend; Say: what is beyond your needs." "Thus doth Allah make clear to you His signs: in order that you may consider." This clearly says how much to be donated and how much to be expended and for what purpose.

From the sayings of Hazrat Abu Sayeed Khudri (R) in the Muslim Sharif it is known that the Prophet said, "He who has excess virtue should give that to one (that is Punnya) who is in want of that. This example of the 'Hadith' for redistribution of wealth bears a far reaching significance in social life.

State Property

Like individual property, about state property too, Islam has definite principle and direction. During the time of Prophet (SM), grazing lands, ponds and water resources and mining fields were not given to the private ownership. In modern days too some of the areas of state economy and production are kept earmarked for public sector and

not allowed to private sector for the greater benefit of the people. Islam never allows illegal and atrocious gain of property by the state. The concept of Islamic economy is to bring greater welfare of the people, that is the fruits of state economy should bring universal welfare and the state should endeavour for economic emancipation of all citizens.

When the Prophet Muhammad (SM) was the ruler of Medina, he made a proclamation, "The man who will die leaving behind property his family members will be the legal heirs. And if anybody dies leaving behind helpless dependent his responsibility is mine". Narrated by Hazrat Zuber (R) in the Muslim Sharif, the 'Hadith' exemplifies that the Prophet initiated the concept of welfare state in the early 7th century which, even in the modern century, is considered to be impossible.

The Islamic economic concept epitomizes that the rich and the affluent should expend their excess wealth for the welfare of the havenots and the distressed as well as the rich nations also should divert their excess wealth and resources for the benefit of the poor nations. Because Allah is the absolute owner of all the resources between the earth and the sky. All creation of Allah and not the man alone has the right to these resources. This is the sine qua non of the principle of Islamic economic concept.

—PID Future

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Specialist doctors

Sir, There was a front page report in a vernacular daily in the middle of last month regarding medical advice of the specialist doctors. It was reported that no rules were observed by the specialist doctors in recommending their patients to have medical treatment abroad. It was also reported that officials of the Ministry of Health and Directorate of Health Services were trying to find out those specialists in order to punish them.

This is a dangerous attitude. This definitely curtails the freedom of specialist doctors to give the best possible medical advice to their patients. The universal rule for the doctors is to advise medical treatment to the patients exactly the same as they would give for themselves or their families for the same diseases. There can't be any rule above this. There can't be any double standard. The medical specialists and the high officials of the ministry themselves allegedly go to London, Singapore or USA to have the coronary bypass surgery. At the same time they have to advise their patients to do the bypass or similar other surgery in Bangladesh. That should not be the case. There must be com-

plete freedom for a specialist doctor to give the best medical advice to his particular patient. The patient must have complete freedom to choose the best possible treatment anywhere in the world.

We are supposed to live in a free country where market economy is being advocated by the government and the foreign aid agencies. There has been numerous warnings by the World Bank, UNDP etc. on controlled economy, too many regulations and redtapism. I think the high officials of the ministry and the directorate should, instead, give attention to improve the standard of the medical treatment and medical education in the country.

Medical colleges remain closed for months together due to political rivalry amongst students. Many valuable equipment and instruments get damaged in the store because of lack of maintenance and accountability. The hospitals are never kept clean and tidy, though there are more employees on the pay roll than are actually required. Sometimes life-saving vaccines, serums and drugs are not available in the peripheral hospitals. It takes weeks or months to complete the formalities for the patients to go abroad by the DG Health Office.

By this time patient's condition goes beyond recovery.

It has also been reported that some specialists allegedly accept commissions from the foreign medical centres for recommending patients to them. This is highly unethical. If there are adequate proofs their cases should be reported to the Medical and Dental Council. And the council should take appropriate action against those specialists. The universities, college of physicians and surgeons should be more careful, thorough and judicious before offering specialist qualifications to the doctors.

Prof. Abdullah A Haroon
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Islam and blasphemy

Sir, May I have the privilege to appreciate Engg. Md. Saifur Rahman whose views on Islam and blasphemy on 25-7-1994 in this daily has, I feel, encouraged and assured many Muslims who have now started to realise as to what Islam really says about blasphemy.

Referring to the Holy Quran, which is our code of life, Allah has repeatedly said even to our beloved Prophet (SA) that "you are only a warner unto him who fears it". Who dares to deny this?

replying 'Allah-Ho-Akbar' (God is Great). This only signifies the basic point — the fame and name of Allah is more significant and that a Muslim is only allowed to protest in a peaceful manner.

The Holy Quran also instructs us not to even call names to the false gods the unbelievers create. One has to have a clear concept that Islam is a religion of peace and tolerance and the duty of a proper Muslim is to follow the rules and regulations laid down in the Holy Quran. And the love for our beloved Prophet (SA) can only be proved by not doing and saying anything he has not done or said.

What we could now do most is constantly pray to Allah to guide all of us in the right path. I am positive that the God Almighty will be more pleased and reward us by getting rid of those who speak ill of Allah and his Prophet (SA).

Siddique Rahim
Katalgony, Chittagong

Steel industry

Sir, Newspapers often publish reports of performances of sector corporations, alongwith notable performances of enterprises, based on reports supplied by public relations wing of the corporations. Only the other day at full column was devoted to the performances of Bangladesh Chemical Industries Corporation (BCIC) and it appears that BCIC has produced at least 7 per cent more goods in 93-94 compared to 92-93. But as a shareholder of Magura Paper Mills Ltd., I would like to point out that Magura Paper Mills

shares and debentures were issued in Dec 90-January 91 during the period of the caretaker government. While Magura Paper Mills is a joint venture enterprise of the Govt of Bangladesh and People's Republic of China, BCIC looks after the interest of Bangladesh Govt as BCIC has more than four decades of experience in paper industry. Unfortunately debenture holders have not received any interest during the past three years while the fate of the joint venture is unknown.

Only recently your correspondent Mr. Sohel Manzur published a front page story on Chittagong Steel Mills but the information given was not totally correct. He maintained about massive restructuring programme of the steel mills along with capital restructuring modern management techniques etc. I would like to mention here that the steel mills has borrowed at least Tk 270.00 crore as of date from various banks, the average loss during the past three years exceeds Tk 60.00 crore per year. The average sale volume has been hardly Tk 53.00 crore per year during the past three years compared to Tk 21.00 crore salary wages bill annually.

Under the above circumstances I am tempted to know how the steel mills could be made viable in the context of such a huge bank loan and low sale volume! The Industries Minister is however, very much hopeful.

It would be worthwhile to mention here that Hadeed, the steel enterprise of Saudi Arabia's heavy industries corporation, produced 2.4 million

tons steel in 1993 and stood at the 75th position among the largest steel making enterprises of the world. In our next door neighbour India, Tata produced 2.5 million tons in 1993 and stood at 75th position. Hadeed of Saudi Arabia started steel production hardly a decade ago whereas our Steel Mills, started production in 1967. It is evident from records that average steel production during 78-79, 79-80 and 80-81 was in excess of 130, 170 tons per year compared to 16,500 tons per year during the past three years, 91-94, though steel production was only 6000 tons in 93-94. The average sale value was Tk 195.00 crore during the years 87-88 and 88-89 when the unitwise sale price was low compared to the price today.

In the light of the above facts and figures, it is quite questionable what restructuring is conceived by the top policy planners when GATT stipulates that in a free market, producers would have to strive to become more efficient costwise to lower priced imports. Imposition of duties taxes etc, for indefinite protectionism is not permissible as per GATT agreement signed on 15th April '94 in Morocco. It is time for the politicians whether in the ruling party or in the opposition to decide the issue. Politicians fashionably cite their reluctance to close plants but is it justice in the context of national interest and total justice to all.

Sadiq Alee
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