

Spirit of Sacrifice

When sacrifice and festivity are inter-twined in our observance of Eid-ul-Azha, there is hardly any scope to be even unwittingly light-hearted about it. It cannot be a one-time eating binge to one's heart's content, what with gastronomical complications at the end of the day. Overdoing will be out of character of the day when millions could be sighing over many a missed meal, and perhaps dreading more to come. That which might emphasise the difference between the rich and the poor is far from Islamic. So, excess is forbidden as something crass and irreligious.

We ask then is it enough to confine our spirit of sacrifice to merely slaughtering animals and distributing their meat, so that the poor can have good food for a few days? We think the message goes much deeper than that. If we cannot for sure make it into a string of festivals for the common people all the year round. But we can at least try earnestly to put a smile on their faces by taking up issues that affect them directly on the front-line of our concerns which seem now almost entirely devoted to ego-centric power politics that is leading us to the blind alley of nowhere. Apparently taking out on national politics on such an occasion may sound a bit out of tune with the occasion but in the essence it is difficult to see how the pressing socio-economic issues will get the urgent attention these merit in the absence of mutual accommodation between our major political parties on the vital issue of breaking the political impasse. They are required to have a breadth of vision to see each other's point of view and make adjustments for give-and-take and live-and-let-live as opposed to the take-it-or-leave-it mindset which is anything but pro-people.

It is obvious that common masses are sacrificing a lot from sunrise to sundown. Their proven survival instincts and daily hard labour in spite of all sorts of insecurity and painful inconvenience they face at home and on the road should put us to shame. These sterling qualities of theirs are now being fallen back on in the latest poverty alleviation strategy seeking to use them as an asset to improve their own lot. Should this not shame us even more?

It is said we are resource-constrained; but we see a lot of wastage of whatever we have. Conspicuous and competitive consumption can be seen across the upper half of the social spectrum where not a few topside ones make a mockery of public poverty. We are aware of a philanthropic tradition in these parts but this surely has lagged behind the acquisition of wealth.

Incentive Price

The government procurement price for a kilogram of paddy has been fixed at Tk. 7.15 and for rice Tk 11.25. Apparently based on a reckoning that the production cost of one kilogram of paddy was Tk 5. Accordingly, a farmer is supposed to make a profit margin of Tk 2.15 per kg, meaning a profit of Tk 90 per 40 kg bag of paddy. This estimate however has been contested by private organisations which hold that the production cost was actually Tk 8.15 for a kilogram of paddy. According to their estimate the procurement price falls short of the production cost by one taka.

We are not in a position to say which of the estimates is correct. But we do understand that the scarcity of fertilizer this year has not only affected production of paddy but also pushed its cost up. If the procurement price is lower than the production cost, the drive for raising a buffer stock of food grains — which the exercise is all about — cannot succeed. It so happens that the government most of the time follows a conservative line while fixing the procurement price. Nothing wrong with it as long as it does not hurt the producers. But in a bad year when the farmers were on the receiving end, they should deserve a preferential treatment. It is on this count that we suggest an incentive price be given to the growers.

Still it may so happen that the farmers will be selling some of their crop at the government fixed price — if it does not review its decision — but only in desperation. That will, in turn defeat the government's purpose of creating a buffer-stock. The hoarders and dishonest traders could take full advantage of the situation. In that case chances are that we may face a food crisis, like the one we have just experienced. Any further inefficient handling of the situation is likely to make the matters worse on the food front. The government should devise a pragmatic plan to help farmers as well as to avert a food crisis.

Aggressive Tigers but ...

Three years have passed since a draft scheme was drawn up to help increase the number of tigers in the Sunderbans. A 10-crore taka project, it envisioned, according to a report, afforestation of 125 square miles in three different locations along with construction of observation towers there. At that time the number of tigers in the Sunderbans was estimated to be no more than 500. Even this number is likely to have decreased further by this time, thanks to poaching and shortage of forage area.

The report mentions that during the same period about 175 people were killed by tigers. Since the report rather sweepingly describes the Royal Bengal Tigers as "mainly man-eaters", the loss of lives of 175 people to the predatory habit of the big cat demands further analysis. That tigers kill people in their desperation for food or from fear of man must be acknowledged. Admittedly, the habitat of tigers has been seriously reduced, depleted, disturbed and threatened.

Unless they are disturbed, intimidated or provoked, the graceful animals are quite happy to enjoy the quietude of their forest surroundings. So it is unwise to entirely blame tigers for their recent hostility to man. No doubt the answer to this problem is in developing a tiger sanctuary. The approval for such a project was over due. Since the scheme seeks to leave large swathes of the forest for the animals themselves, there is every likelihood of the maintenance of a natural balance — one that is a prerequisite for sustaining bio-diversity in the forest.

High Time for Legal and Administrative Reforms

To attain long term goals, putting the economy on a track of higher growth and sustainable development, the economic reforms must be backed by commensurate and equally forceful reforms in the nation's administrative, legal and political paraphernalia. Unfortunately, little progress has been made in this direction.

Nation should know it better than Bangladesh that getting economic fundamentals right may be a necessary precondition for economic take off, but most certainly not sufficient for moving the economy to a path of higher growth rates or sustainable development. Years of frustration in translating globally acclaimed macroeconomic stability into significant openings in employment generation, savings and investment rates, trade and commerce must convince almost anybody in the policy making circles that economic reforms alone cannot lead the nation very far.

No doubt, over the last few years sweeping economic reforms have been carried out in the country — regulations and controls on exports and imports have been liberalized significantly, barriers to foreign investment and repatriation of profits have literally been eliminated, tax structures have been streamlined, government's revenue collection mechanisms have been reorganized, and banking and financial sectors have been thoroughly reformed. All these have resulted in remarkable macroeconomic stability — the country's inflation rate was never lower, foreign exchange reserve was never higher, and fiscal and budget deficits were never more manageable.

But ironically there seems to be the end of the story. The economy still revolves around the growth rate of four to five percent, while sustainable economic development of Bangladesh requires an annual growth rate of more than seven percent. Investment — both in the private and public sectors — remains at stagnant levels for years, not exceeding 12 to 13 percent of the GDP. For an early take-off of the economy the rate should be within the range of 18 to 20 percent. Employment is not picking up either. Foreign investment flow remains dismal — the lowest in the whole South Asian region.

Where lies the crux of the paradox? What are the reasons for the mismatch between the macroeconomic stability and microeconomic immobility?

Why an apparently splendid economic policy regime — geared to private sector led economic growth under a democratic government — fails to boost up morale of local entrepreneurs, attract foreign investment, and generate higher rates of growth? Why the economy even fails to make a dent in poverty alleviation — a much avowed and highly publicized goal of the government?

Of course, standpoints of readers in respect to these questions would vary. Few, however, would dispute that major economic reforms have been carried out in the country without commensurate attempts to reform the administrative apparatus, legal frameworks and political paraphernalia. Still fewer will disagree that the country's moth-eaten bureaucracy, out-moded legal structures and traditional political conduct and behaviours are hardly conducive for attaining sustainable development under a free market economic system.

There is no hard and fast rule that economic reforms must be carried out first or reforms in other areas, such as in legal or administrative structures should come next. Bangladesh has carried out far-reaching economic reforms, largely in conformity with global momentum towards market economic principles. Those economic reforms have largely attained their short-term goals — they attained macroeconomic stability, a primary prerequisite for economic take-off.

But to attain long term goals, putting the economy on a track of higher growth and sustainable development, the economic reforms must be backed by commensurate and equally forceful reforms in the nation's administrative, legal and political paraphernalia. Unfortunately, little progress has been made in this direction. In fact, hardly any attempt has been made in Bangladesh to make the ad-

ministrative, legal and political paraphernalia of the country pro-people, cost-effective, action-oriented and private sector-friendly. Worse still, not many, especially in the government circles, seem to be awfully enthusiastic about carrying out far reaching and fundamental reforms in these areas.

Of course, there had been

politically, the nation is still at the rudimentary stage of democratic institutionalization. During the last 23 years, since its independence from Pakistan, the nation experienced martial laws several times and its constitution was abrogated and scrapped repeatedly in this or that pretext. The political system has been switched back and forth between par-

liamentary and presidential systems several times. Major political parties still demonstrate conduct and behaviour — within the party as well as in national affairs — which sharply contradict democratic norms and values. It is time to consolidate fragile democratic system by transforming the constitution into a sacred and dependable document of national hopes and aspirations.



CROSSCURRENTS
by CAF Dowlah

Some sporadic attempts — mainly enkindled or imposed by donor agencies — to reform the administrative system. The fact that government bureaucracy in Bangladesh is out of joint with the realities of the society needs no explanation. Besides a strong allegiance to British colonial tradition, the Bangladesh Civil Service is now engrossed in bitter internal strife. Among others, widely publicized conflicts and tensions between the specialists — members of Prokridhi, and the generalists — members of administrative services, pose serious threats to the viability of the institution. Thorough-going, fundamental and far-reaching reforms of the administrative structures, behaviours and functions are also needed to make the bureaucracy subservient to market economic forces, friendly to business and the private sector, and to ensure their responsibility and accountability under a democratic political system.

To make the administrative system market friendly and democracy driven, the BCS should be thoroughly recast enabling persons of all ages and qualifications to compete for government positions at all levels.

In a market economic environment, all political parties be in power or not — must remain committed to the needs and demands of sustainable economic development. The country's legal system is simply archaic — it has neither the legal framework nor the logistics to meet the challenges of market economic system. It conspicuously lacks adequate legal frameworks for taxation, investment, resolving

liability and presidential systems several times. Major political parties still demonstrate conduct and behaviour — within the party as well as in national affairs — which sharply contradict democratic norms and values. It is time to consolidate fragile democratic system by transforming the constitution into a sacred and dependable document of national hopes and aspirations.

by gearing politics to economic well-being of the nation, and by bringing an end to old-style politics of hartals and agitations. In this fiercely competitive world of today, no nation can afford to stop its wheels of production for days in this or that pretext. The economy cannot be held hostage to politics of nonsense and nuisance.

Of Women's Rights and Status in Islam

by Mohammad Amjad Hossain

There is no discrimination between a husband and a wife in Islam, as Sura-Al-Baqarah makes it amply clear that a husband and a wife are to be treated as each other's garments, which implies that the relationship between a husband and a wife is based on mutual consent, support and protection.

HERE has been an orchestrated vilification campaign in the West on the role of women in Islam. A section of the people in the West seem to have the impression that women in Muslim society are deprived of their due shares and that they live in seclusion. Some of the Westerners hold the view that discriminatory treatment is meted out to women in comparison with men in Muslim society and that a man has the rights to have four wives in Islam.

As a matter of fact, Islam is a religion which has bestowed honour upon women. In the holy Quran the role of women has prominently been mentioned in many places and a special Sura (chapter) has been exclusively devoted to women. Sura Nisa, for example, deals with women exclusively. It also speaks about orphans and widows.

In Islam, marriage is treated as an institution, for it nurtures a family. And women in Islam are not to be married without their consent. The Quran recognizes the rights of women relating to marriage. Verse 24 of Sura Nisa says: "And all married women are forbidden unto you save those (captives) whom your right hands possess. It is a decree of Allah for you. Lawful unto you are all beyond those mentioned, so that ye seek them with your wealth in honest wedlock, not debauchery. And those of whom ye seek content (by marrying them), give unto them their portions as a duty. And there is no sin for you in what ye do by mutual agreement after the duty." The Quran also imposes restrictions on marrying women who are related by blood and step-daughters, who are under the protection of the wife.

No discrimination between men and women is allowed in Islam. It is clearly evident in Sura Al-Mudathir: "Every soul will be in pledge for its deeds" (38). In other words, all are equal before Allah.

An honourable woman is held in high esteem in Islam. Those who accuse honourable woman, but cannot produce at least four witnesses against her should be scourged with eighty stripes, and one should never accept their testimony. They are simply evil-doers according to Sura An-Nur. In Islam, maid servants also deserve respect and sympathetic treatment.

There is no discrimination between a husband and a wife in Islam, as Sura-Al-Baqarah makes it amply clear that a husband and a wife are to be treated as each other's garments, which implies that the relationship between a husband and a wife is based on mutual consent, support and protection. A wife is to be treated gently, "Consort with them in kindness, for if you hate them, it may happen that you hate a ship wherein God has placed much good" (Sura Nisa: 19). Sura Al-Tahrim also wants the husband to please his wife.

Although Islam does not generally encourage divorce, but then, a divorce will be treated in kindness. There is always a provision for reconciliation between a husband and a wife, before a divorce is pronounced. Sura Nisa and Sura Al-Talaq deal with the issue of divorce.

In the Islamic social system, man bears the entire expenditure of the family including the wife. According to Sura Al-Baqarah, the duty of feeding, clothing, nursing mother in a seemingly manner devolves upon the father of the child. A mother should not be

made to suffer because of her child. (Al-Baqarah: 233) In the battle of Uhud, many male members of Muslim society in Arabia lost their lives. As a result, the female members outnumbered the male members, and many orphans and widows were left alone after the devastating war. Against this background, Sura Nisa was revealed in the interest of protecting orphans, widows and prisoners of war (captives).

Woman as a mother enjoys respect and honour in the Islamic social system. Man is enjoined by the Quran to show kindness towards parents, particularly to the mother who bore him in pain, and in pain did she give him birth (Sura Al-Ahqaq). Muhammad (SM) also said: "Paradise lies underneath the feet of mothers". Prophet Muhammad (SM) in his farewell message after performing the Hajj at Arafat also underscored the need for becoming kind to women and also for paying heed to their rights. His last words were: "O people, you have rights over your wives, and your wives have rights over you. -Treat your women with kindness - verily, you have taken them on serenity of God, and made them lawful unto you by the words of God."

Because of wrong interpretations of the Quranic injunction by fanatic, politically motivated religious leaders and also because of the practice of polygamy in many Muslim societies as well as owing to a lack of a sound knowledge of Islam by the Westerners, a number of Islamic ideals and principles have been misunderstood. The myth that a woman does not enjoy proper status in Islam is unfounded and based on a lack of proper knowledge of the Quranic injunction in proper perspective.

One is tempted to conclude by quoting from the speech made by Prince Charles at the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies in October 1993: "Our Judgement on Islam has been grossly distorted by taking the extremes to be the norm. That is a serious mistake. The guiding principle and spirit of Islamic law, taken straight from the Quran, should be those of equity and compassion. We need to study its actual application before we make judgements. We must distinguish between systems of justice as we may see them practised which have been deformed for political reasons into something no longer Islamic."

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To the Editor...

Health-certified cattle
Sir, It is hoped the Vet. Inspectors will be present at the Eid cattle-markets and disallow sale of un-healthy/diseased cattle on this sacred occasion.
M M A
Dhaka

BSCIC vacancy
Sir, Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries Corporation (BSCIC) held written examination on April 5 for 14 posts of assistant extension officer, four posts of field-worker and four other posts under the project 'Women Industrial Entrepreneurship Development Programme'.
The authorities have charged a Postal Order of Tk 30 each candidate for assistant extension officer's post and Tk 20 each for other posts and issued 932 and 1171 admit cards for 14 officers and four field-workers' posts respectively.
But, it was known that the posts of the officers would be filled by the departmental candidates, who are serving as field-workers. The departmental candidates got the questions of the test earlier, it was also alleged.
In February 1994, such a test was held for six posts of extension officer under the same project and a large number of candidates appeared at

the written test. But, it seems very unfortunate that the posts were filled allegedly by relations of the high-ups in authority — a glaring example of nepotism indeed!
If so, as a conscious citizen, I would condemn such a coming of an esteemed body and urge the authorities concerned to take stern action against those responsible for such happenings and pave the way for smooth test and filling the posts by the candidates who really deserve them, so that the people at large also can build up confidence in the organisation.

Popy Sanyal
Sultampur, Naogaon

Art Buchwald's COLUMN

A Star is Born

UNLIKE most of the civilized people in this country I am not down on G Gordon Liddy. As a matter of fact, as an ex-con who committed a crime, was charged as a felon, served four years in the slammer and is now trying to go straight, as a radio talk commentator, he is, I think, a water-gate role model.

What makes this a great story is that Liddy could have easily continued his life of crime, breaking into one water-gate office after another and stealing political files.

But he had a change of heart. One day in the recreation yard of the penitentiary he started talking to another inmate named John.

John asked, "What are you going to do when you get out, Gordon?"

"I have no idea. Breaking and entering is all I know. I can hold my hand over a flame for five minutes, but that doesn't pay well."

"Have you ever thought of going into talk radio?"

"I never considered it. Does it pay as much as breaking into water-gate?"

"Sometimes it's better if you're real nasty and people identify you with the lunatic fringe."

"And it's legal?"

"Guaranteed by the First Amendment. You can even tell people how to kill a B.A.T.F. officer by aiming at his head if he's wearing a bulletproof vest."

"I love it," Liddy said. "I like to offer anti-government advice."

John said, "That's why I'm suggesting it. You've got the loudest mouth in the prison, but you've never used it to make a buck. Gordon, talk radio is bigger than stealing hubcaps. The sicker you are, the more sponsors you get. They pay really big money for looney-tune people who spew poison."

Liddy said, "Does the prison hold any courses in radio broadcasting?"

John replied, "No, but you can listen to some of the right-wing announcers, and you'll see that it's a piece of cake. The best ones are the call-in shows because the kooks do your work for you and all you have to do is sit there and say yeh, yeh, yeh."

"I've made up my mind. I'm going to give up my life of crime and talk into a microphone instead," Liddy said. "I can't wait to tell my parole board."

"Good for you. Someday the guys in this place will be able to boast to their families, 'I was locked up with G. Gordon Liddy, and I had got my own talk show. I'd be as rich as he is right now.'"

The word got out that Liddy was considering talk radio as a career, and many station owners were visiting the prison trying to persuade him to go on the air.

Liddy treated them all with contempt. This made him even more desirable since a truly contemptible announcer was hard to come by.

The rest is history. He finally landed a syndicated show and started taking calls from all over the country. On his first program, the moment he began to tell listeners how to shoot a federal agent with a semiautomatic — a star was born.

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It's June — when Bachelors Watch their Backs

Rahul Bedi writes from Patna, India

The murder of newborn girl babies is becoming more common in India's Bihar state, according to a shocking new report. And a Gemini News Service correspondent looking at the allegations found another unusual practice — the kidnapping of prospective grooms.

FEMALE infanticide is rampant in the east Indian state of Bihar where thousands of newborn girls are killed every year by parents who consider them a social and economic liability.

Though originally prevalent amongst the upper castes (a caste is hereditary class), the practice has now spread even to lower castes.

According to Aditi, a non-government organisation based in Bihar's capital Patna, 1,200 baby girls are killed every year in Kathihar district alone, usually by traditional midwives.

The distasteful act of killing the babies and disposing off their bodies is carried out by the midwives, mostly poor women, under pressure from the parents.

According to the report, based on interviews with scores of midwives, mothers are unwilling to kill their children but are forced into murdering by their husbands in Bihar's male-dominated society.

State officials privately admit to knowing about the female infanticide, but say that no report is lodged or action taken because it has acquired social sanction over the years.

One midwife confessed she was forced to kill several girls born to land-owning families in Kathihar district by stuffing their mouths with salt or fertilizer. All died within an hour and the bodies were either buried by her or thrown in the nearest river.

She was paid 25 rupees for the deed, the report said. "I do it out of fear," she admitted.

Bal Mahila Kalyan (Female Child Sacrifice), an organisation in Kathihar working to prevent female infanticide, surveyed three midwives, each of whom admitted to killing at least three female babies a month.

Bihar is amongst the poorest, most violent and caste-ridden of India's 25 states where women are treated virtually like second-class citizens.

But during the "marriage season" in June and December bachelors, too, are on the receiving end, when hundreds are kidnapped and forcibly married to strangers.

According to officials, more than 1,000 such marriages take place across Bihar every year and, over time, have acquired social acceptability.

Social workers say excessive dowry demands by grooms, often continuing for years after marriage, are forcing parents to resort to enforced alliances.

Basing their requirements on caste and community, a parent of modest means targets a suitable male in the vicinity.

Based on the prospective groom's status, a marriage fee is negotiated with specialist bachelor kidnapping squads which guarantee "delivery" within the week.

Also assured is a compliant groom, usually beaten senseless by "groom contractors" who have been known to shadow their victims for days, at times snatching them off buses and trains in broad daylight. The most favoured are

those in government service followed by bank and public sector company employees.

Local politicians, too, have been known to play a role in these forced marriages.

One legislator from Purnea in north Bihar "helped" a friend by marrying off his daughter to a public sector company executive after organising his abduction. The legislator was present at the wedding to bless the couple.

Although unlawful and capable of being annulled, Bihar's feudal society treats the couple as married, effectively making it almost impossible for the groom to "escape" or re-marry.

Officials in Patna cannot recall any marriages being rescinded. The police are not interested in investigating complaints of abduction and forced marriages and have not interfered in the handful of complaints lodged over the years.

"No-one ever gets punished," says a Patna police officer, declining to be identified. He also admitted that police rarely help retrieve grooms from their abductors even if they know about it before the wedding ceremony.

Ultimately, however, official apathy to the enforced marriages and Bihar's peculiar social and caste mores lead the victim and his family to compromise and accept the bride as part of the family.

But she is rarely looked on kindly, adding to her woes of being a woman in a totally male-dominated society.

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