

Gender Equality

At the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) summit in New Delhi all the speakers, including Bangladesh premier Sheikh Hasina, have made a strong plea for gender equality in every sphere of life. Although the focus of this global conference — organised by the 135-nation IPU and the Indian government — has been on the gender issue in the area of politics in particular, the deliberations have naturally touched upon social, legal and economic aspects as well.

We are happy to hear that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has reaffirmed her personal and her party's commitment to an ideal environment where both men and women can realise their potentials in full. The prime minister has proudly cited instances of the glorious role played by some famous women of Bengal in the struggle against foreign rule. The point she seems to make is that women were never shy when it came to the question of national liberation and self-determination. While we fully agree with her on the point of women's courage and sacrifice, we also point at the oppression, religious sanctions and all kinds of discriminations women are being continually subjected to.

Now that Sheikh Hasina is in power, nothing should prevent her from taking steps towards bringing in the gender balance. Only fulfilling the constitutional obligations incumbent upon the premier, and other provisions binding according to international covenants — such as the convention on elimination of all forms of discrimination against women, to which Bangladesh is a signatory — will go a long way in reducing the gender disparities. To our mind, women have proved their worth nowhere so pronouncedly as in the use of micro-credit at the grassroots level. Compared to men these women at the bottom-rung have proved themselves more efficient, productive and diligent in using scarce national resource.

This is tremendously encouraging for our society. The government has to take bold decision and implement them with determination. Under her leadership, let Bangladesh become a leading light as far as gender equality in developing countries is concerned.

English-medium Schools

We understand the government is bracing up to take a role in regard to the rapidly growing English-and mixed-medium private schools. Its plan seems to be two-fold: have a seven-member committee headed by an additional secretary of the Education Ministry go into the operational details of the schools in question and thus get a basis for the formulation of a policy for this stream of education.

While a long-felt public concern is being addressed by the present government, we cannot help advise measured steps in an area which has grown entirely out of its own dynamics. By all means, let the relevant data about such schools be collected, collated and fed into the computer to yield a sound policy frame-work; but the whole exercise should be purely academic without being overbearing and smacking of stepping on some centipedes, as it was.

The Education Ministry must basically realise that the proliferation of English-medium or bilingual schools even to the thana level hardly comes as a tribute to the record of numerical and other inadequacies besetting the government-run schools. Those institutions, especially several English-medium schools in our cities, have been a major source of quality education in the country. They serve a need, fill a vacuum. Armed with top grades attained from these schools at the O and A Level examinations, our boys and girls make it to the prestigious institutions abroad. Therefore, instead of being demanding of or interfering with such forms of schooling, we should be observant and appreciative of the reasons of their success like the flexibility and autonomy they exercised or the latest educational equipment or aids they pressed into service. Let's help replicate these.

Yes, down the road many charlatans have intruded into the trade and opened shops with their arbitrary entry fees and not much of a qualified teaching strength, balanced curriculum or decent accommodation. If a healthy competition is encouraged they will die a natural death.

A Course on Courtesy

For anyone to show courtesy in public is a mind-lifting experience. For the uniformed people, it is a manifest act of valour suffusing a rather mundane but obligatory performance of duty as public servants.

This standard was not held by the BDR jawans numbering more than 90 at the Barisal steamer terminal on 14th February night. They reportedly not only refused to part with any space on Dhaka-bound steamer PS Masud in the face of on-rushing passengers, but also had the temerity of using belts and lathis on some of them. The situation hotted up so much so that the DC and SP had to arrange the BDR personnel's evacuation from the steamer and a separate journey to Dhaka onboard a commandeered launch.

Liveries are given to be put on as an emblem of belonging to a certain professional cadre of pride and prestige not as a sign of arrogance at the drop of a hat — before tax-paying fellow citizens. We are not saying mobbing is praise-worthy; but why whip it up by avoidable acts of indiscretion bristling tempers? A little bit of accommodative spirit to the passengers would have made a huge difference winning them a hearty gratitude of the public. Even a timely approach to the authorities for a mediation could have helped.

We are all in a democracy which demands public-friendly behaviour from the law enforcement personnel. It is time a course on public courtesy was included in their training programme.

Chechnya : Coexistence with Moscow

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The Horizon This Week

Arshad-uz Zaman

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In the meantime Boris Yeltsin had been elected President of Russia. This happened in the second round of balloting when Gen Alexander Lebed brought his powerful support on the side of Yeltsin. Gen Lebed

did a remarkable job of bringing to an end the war in Chechnya. Robust and looking young for his 53 years, he appeared more and more as the dauphin to the aging and seriously ill Yeltsin.

In the tortuous power politics of the Kremlin, Yeltsin, under the prodding of his close aides, has relieved Lebed of his responsibilities. Yet Lebed fought the presidential elections and came a respectable third in the first round. Thanks to the media he stalks the Russian stage. Moscow and for that matter the whole world is watching the health of Boris Yeltsin as a most important event. The reports are far from encouraging.

Russia has welcomed the

emergence of Aslan Maskhadov as a valid partner for talks. Maskhadov has garnered nearly 65 per cent of votes and his nearest rival is many percentage points behind. The polls were held in a truly peaceful atmosphere and the poll watchers mainly from the European Union have highly praised the manner the election was held. Maskhadov thus emerges as the undisputed leader of the Chechens. He has been a General in the army and should be ideally suited to carry out negotiations.

There is tough bargaining ahead for the two parties. Chechnya declared her independence shortly before the break up of the Soviet Union. She fought a bitter 21 month war with the Russian troops and held more than her own. She has seen her capital Grozny literally razed to the ground by Russian bombardment.

The people of Chechnya has given carte blanche to Maskhadov to deal with the situation. There is not much leeway for Maskhadov. He cannot

compromise on the question of independence. Since war is out as a means of settlement, the two sides will necessarily go for negotiated political solution.

For Moscow the situation is complicated due to the fact that recognition as a separate independent State would open the floodgates of other ethnic populations living close to Chechnya in the Caucasus. Thus the holding operation of Moscow practiced since 1991 would evaporate.

Painstakingly Russia has built up the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) with headquarters in Moscow. They have held regular meetings at Summit level and Moscow has managed to recover some lost ground.

The situation is further complicated by the grave illness of Boris Yeltsin. There is neither the tradition nor practice of delegation of authority in the Kremlin. Yet the decision about Chechnya, with its far-reaching consequences will have to be faced. As the world moves towards the 21st century, Chechnya will point towards either coexistence or separation of the Caucasus from the Russian Federation.

For Instituting a National Revival

If Bangladesh has to chart out a path towards development, the government must think of enhancing the present four per cent growth rate to speed up reform, suggests Md Asadullah Khan

PRIIME Minister Sheikh Hasina while meeting a delegation of the population Council in her secretariat office on 21 January last sounded some policy guidelines for her government in an effort to put the economy on an even keel. True, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, serves a citizenry profoundly weary of economic hard times and people are hardly interested in anything that does not contribute to their well-being. Evidences are galore that the country's poverty-reduction schemes rarely reached the really poor any mentionable result. Huge amounts of foreign currency received either as loan or grants have been channelled in projects that have benefited only a handful of party people keeping the vast populace below poverty line. Because of the emergence of a dynamic middle class who have witnessed shocking disparity of incomes between the haves and the have-nots, deep rooted antagonisms have now surfaced.

All told, unless there is well-designed reforms package that engages efforts in areas like education, population control, health care and job creation no government how much democratic it proclaims itself, can achieve the desired goal. Prime Minister has indicated to the council that her government is working towards formulating a national population plan targeting illiteracy as the key factor for the backwardness of the country. Without expansion of educational programme that relates to population planning, all developmental efforts will wither out. The country has

long experienced birth rates that add more than 2.4 million annually to its population. Government as well as people in the country are aware that family planning, still a controversial issue, needs to be energetically reactivated if the demographic numbers are not to overwhelm limited resources available for economic development.

Unwanted babies often become uncared for children. The country's streets are teeming with boys and girls whose battle for a decent life was lost the day they were born. The Prime Minister has stressed the need for women's education and asserted that women's rights that has undergone shocking deterioration must be established in all spheres of life. Reports carried by the press reveal that women in the country are still being subjected to barbaric punishments for faults that are not theirs and mostly in situation when they are trying to chart out a future for themselves through self-employment opportunities. In an emerging democracy, it is the women who are most often the well springs of development. Understandably, with women remaining steeped in ignorance, cultural and social taboos and away from the light of education, the children in the family have no hope of growing into a potential work force.

People in the country are wary of their exhausting expe-

riences in their day to day life. People did not have yearnings for more than "Dal-Bhat". But this "Masur Dal" that is still selling at forty eight taka per Kg has become almost a luxury for the vast populace. On the other hand, people have to contend with the grim fact that foreign debt is climbing, infant mortality is unacceptably high, nutritional standards are inadequate and unemployment, especially in the cities already overburdened by jobless youths, is spawning dangerous social tensions.

If the country has to chart out a path towards development, it must think of enhancing the present 4 per cent growth rate to speed up reform. It must build a rational agro-based business, must draw people from all places linking them to the greater world with roads, networking them with modern communication gadgets. A country like Bangladesh needs an upheaval. What is needed now is that the country must open to foreign investors and must chop away its plugging bureaucracy as John Major, British Prime Minister, asserted during his visit to Bangladesh. Prime Minister definitely wants to cut the red tape as the country inches open to foreign investors. In bid to analyse the nagging delay in the implementation of projects, it is necessary that the country's bureaucracy should be exposed

to critical analysis about their role in different stages of work.

But however gloomy the situation is, the country's vast human capital and new-found prospects of gas and coal etc. are readily available for a national revival if there is enlightened leadership and a situation shorn of squabbles and intra-party feuds.

If the hopes and aspirations of the country's 120 million people are to be fulfilled, a new agenda of action, in line with what the Prime Minister expressed, pointing at "illiteracy" as the core problem, has to be instituted urgently and work must be channelled in that direction with a determined effort. Looking back to the educational scene we see that the state of primary education in the country presents a dismal look. Classes are being held in the open while most schools have no permanent buildings and are functioning just on a make-shift basis, without benches and other educational inputs. Reports reveal that there are about 52 thousand primary schools and 16 thousand Madrasahs in the country. Most revealing, the present government's avowed desire to establish one primary school in every village adds a new dimension of importance that the government attaches to literacy movement in the country. But the point remains that with teachers not properly groomed

to shoulder this gigantic responsibility and most often remaining absent from the job on different pretexts, can this literacy movement attain the desired momentum?

Sadly true, poverty situation in the country has been cited as the main hurdle to advancement of the cause of literacy movement. Strikingly true, rapid population growth and poverty situation in the country are closely related. Children in the poor families, are not encouraged to go to schools and rather per force have to help their families to keep to whole family alive. Official statistics reveal that the rate of population growth in the country stands at 1.8 at present but this figure is hardly true in the rural areas and villages. There more children mean more helping hands. This spiralling demographic index has been putting enormous pressure on the limited land and other facilities and this translates into diminishing resources for development and a deteriorating quality of life in the country. Rapid population growth has begun to cause permanent damage to the environment in the form of deforestation, less land area per person, dumping of toxic wastes into rivers and streams and poisoning of farm land with pesticides. This damage will accelerate as the population swells, triggering increased social unrest.

In overhauling the economy in order to generate more productivity and a more balanced distribution of wealth, the Prime Minister has emphasized to turn this burgeoning population into a productive force and an effective national asset. That would call for speeding up the development works freeing the economy of licence and permits — that suffocating system of controls which have long stymied the country's march to the cherished goal of development. In India, ex-Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao now has to face court cases for his alleged involvement in Lakhshmi Pathak cheating case and for charges of forgery and bribery in two other cases. Pertinently, CBI raids on the homes of former telecommunications minister in Rao government that yielded an unprecedented cash haul to the tune of Rs. 2.42 crore has not raised any controversy there. In the same manner Jayalalitha, the former Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu has been put under arrest for abuse of authority and malfeasance. Keeping such cases in close view, people here also feel that nobody in the country, whatever his or her social or political standing might be, seem above law. When that spirit guides the nation, then and then only can the country reach the desired goal.

OPINION

"Enlistment for Approving Building Plans"

Munir

I feel thankful to The Daily Star for the publication of the item under the above caption, on the 4th of February '97, and encouraged by its contents that professionals and conscious individuals are viewing the issue with due seriousness. May I add a few points to the observations published on 30.01.97.

The practice by quacks should not initiate a curb on the practice by doctors, or should it? Then why this axe on engineers and architects?

As the lawyer cannot enforce that the client follow his advice, the doctor cannot enforce that patients take all tests and the prescribed medicine, so the engineer/architect cannot enforce that soil test is done, constructions supervised or built according to design/drawings.

RAJUK should bring to book (blacklist) those professionals whose designs have failed (if any), and take action against OWNERS of unauthorised constructions.

I am hopeful that good sense will prevail and IEB, IAB and BACE should jointly impress upon the relevant authorities the fallacy of this unjustified move by RAJUK and this step-motherly attitude towards a limited faction of professionals.

I am sure RAJUK's move is well-intended, however its apprehension is misplaced, and appeal that in all fairness they reconsider/amend their requirement for enlistment of engineers, architects and consulting firms, and allow them the freedom of professional practice like all other professionals and in all other free countries.

Dear Sir, On the Eid morning, while returning from the Eid jamaat and going towards Green Road through Dhammardi Road #6, I found one gentleman while entering a house being saluted smartly by the police guards in that house (an apartment block). My son, who was accompanying me, informed that the gentleman was a minister.

He was walking alongside all others mingling with the commoners! I was pleasantly surprised and remembered another incident years back when I was told later that a gentleman in the underground compartment was a minister of that country. I would never forget that moment when the great Rotarian — more than six-feet tall, smiling happily — ornamented me with the Paul Harris Pin.

While visiting USA my husband and I called him from New York and he invited us to visit him in Mount Vernon, Illinois, and we could not resist seeing him. When we reached St. Louis Railway Station, he was there, a little paler and slimmer than we first saw him. He explained he was suffering from cancer and has been operated upon recently but feeling fine. We felt embarrassed and admonished him for taking this trouble of driving the car to the station. He just laughed and said he had to welcome his friends personally who has come all the way to visit him from Bangladesh. We stayed with him for a week and was amazed to see his involvement in various sectors of the community, in business,

Walking with commoners...

Sir, Thanks are due for the editorial and comments on the front page with photo — "City's air thick, suffocating" — on the 27th January 1997.

I was in Rajshahi from August '93 to December '96 and often visited Dhaka but not in the present state of environment as stated in your paper. It is really a pain for us that our city authority is doing nothing. It is not unlikely that Dhaka will become a dustbin in near future.

Our city Mayor, Home Minister and Finance Minister should visit roads, markets and other places to witness what was stated in The Daily Star.

M Ali

Kilgaon, Dhaka

"Whither Dhaka?"

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