

Woman's Security

The very first disquieting thing about physical repression on women is the huge gap between the number of actual occurrences and that of reported incidents. Leaving aside the numerous forlorn cries for justice consigned to oblivion by the *diktat* of the local influential or the gnawing fear for social exposure, even those that come to light are in a state of fuzziness.

Newspapers reported only 718 incidents of torture in 1996 whereas the relevant cell at the Directorate of Women Affairs received 2,983 complaints lodged by victims outstripping the newspaper figure by three times for that year. Notably it is a government body that the woman turned to for relief, albeit under wraps of some privacy, with the newspapers performing as a poor second in the matter of disseminating news of such a dangerous social drift.

Of the 718 newspaper-reported cases only 336 got filed with the police, an abysmally low figure if one were of take into account the number of complaints made with the women's cell of the government directorate which is nearly 3,000. We would like the authorities to publicly state the figure of those who were eventually punished for their crimes. That is sure to be even more disappointing.

The women activist groups, NGOs and legal aid groups are doing a wonderful job by keeping a constant tab on gender-related discrimination and physical torture on women. Their awareness-building efforts and throwing a helpline to the repressed women highly welcome as these are, cannot by themselves bring about the desired results unless the whole community rises as one man to resist the heinous perpetration of crimes by easily identifiable characters in the society.

It does not behove the police who are supposed to be the appointed custodians of the rights of women to be involved even in a single rape case. And there were as many as eight in which they were indicted last year. The Vagrancy Act seems abusive. The police reform remains due even after some warming up to it by the home minister through a series of meetings with the intelligentsia. Let's say again that we would like female-related matters to be handled exclusively by women police.

Early Warning

Celebration of a victory earned through painstaking preparations and hard work for years tends to end up in revelries anywhere in the world. Only more so in a country where the victory-starved people are unwilling to miss the rare opportunity for it. All this is understandable, but on Wednesday, immediately after Bangladesh's comprehensive victory over unfancied Scotland, all hells were let loose.

Alongside innocent and happy celebrations, there came out hordes of revellers who primarily targeted women and young girls as butts of their amusement. There were instances of molestation, tearing of attires and using the occasion as an excuse for forcibly dousing them with coloured water or even throwing colour dusts on to their faces, into their eyes. Protests against such excesses in one case brought death to a young man and in another incident these were met with physical assaults.

A nation must know how far its celebrative indulgence should stretch. Even in an ultimate victory a nation needs to prove its maturity. Because that is how we really prove our worth. To go wild is to disqualify us for the big occasion and achievement.

The lesson from Wednesday's experience is that we do not know how to celebrate in a dignified and sober manner. We have also seen that such joyous occasions are used by unscrupulous elements to harass our women. So our sincere appeal to the authority is that we take adequate preparation in case we win the final match. Meanwhile messages of restraint and sober behaviour must come from all levels of leadership and through our newspaper, radio and television.

Introducing ID Cards

A seven-member team of the Commonwealth Chief Election Officers in Asia while meeting Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina at her office on Wednesday appreciated the country's electoral process. It also put forward a few suggestions to make the election commission more transparent, accountable and effective. The issue of introducing voter identity cards figured prominently. Even before the June 12 election there was a general agreement that the country would introduce the system. Some progress, too, was made in that direction.

However, the system could not be adopted due to time constraint. But at no point was the idea abandoned, although after the election nothing has been heard about it. Why? We certainly do not want to drag the issue to a point where we will once again discover, to our dismay, that we again have no time to go for the system.

Let us start the process well in advance. Since the decision had been made we have to implement it today or tomorrow. If we get on with it now we shall have the double advantage of doing the job properly through checks and cross-checks and also avoid rush and the attendant undesirable expenditure. So we ask the authority to immediately take up the job for its early completion.

Toward Strengthened and Effective Local Governance : Constraints and Opportunities

by Zarina Rahman Khan

Because government officials are the decision-makers and the "providers" in the eyes of the ordinary people too, they are perceived as the "master" — the patrons and the capacity given to them to deliver strengthens this notion. The UP members, on the other hand, are seen as their agents to bargain for, acquire and channel resources to the unions

THIS article brings forth some of the findings of our ongoing research on local governance in Bangladesh sponsored by the Ford Foundation. An important finding of our study with respect to institutional arrangements is that not only is local government far from being decentralized because of the central government's political, administrative and financial controls, but that government officials and officials dominate local level planning and implementation of development projects. The union parishad (UP) has been reduced to playing the role of an implementation agency of the central government and its traditional and important role as an arbitrator of disputes among citizens has been diminished by the growing role of elected members as "brokers" in acquiring developmental projects.

This state of affairs creates tension and conflict between local elected bodies and the local bureaucracy, leading to a non-congenial environment for effective local governance. In the absence of a self-governing and financially sound local elected body to plan, run and oversee local governance, the government officials and NGOs play their respective roles in the unions without any accountability to the local populace, who are conditioned to accept whatever is dished out to them. Until the political institutional constraints on UPs are removed through major legal reform, elected councils cannot operate as self-governing, self-sponsoring, and accountable people's bodies.

Turning to the relationships between the UP and the local bureaucracy, including the chief thana executive, our research has found that there is a

power imbalance favouring the officials. According to the legal framework, the local bureaucracy has been given a free hand to exercise its control over local affairs. The thana officials, with whom the UP chairman and members mostly interact, are technically skilled and function on the instructions of the district and central administration. This means they are only accountable to the central authorities which leads them not only to ignore the elected representatives but also to take a condescending attitude towards them. The elected UP members, on the other hand, approach the officials as people's representatives with their mandate but cannot deal confidently with them because they are not 'empowered' to function on equal terms with the bureaucracy or hold it responsible for its actions.

The elected officials are dependent on the bureaucracy for technical inputs as well. For example, one of the important reasons for the inability of the UPs to operate effectively is their administrative limitations. The UP has no support staff excepting the secretary who is recruited, partly salaried, and transferred by the district administration. He, therefore, becomes accountable to the district officials. Since the secretary keeps records and minutes of meetings and prepares the budget proforma and annual reports, the elected representatives become dependent on him for such skills but we often found the UP secretary to be defiant to the chairman and members in obeying instructions.

Even though, technically, the UP has to supervise the role of all developmental agencies which include NGOs working in

the union, in reality it cannot play such a role. This is mainly because, the UP has not been provided with the commensurate authority to hold the NGOs responsible for any irregularity. The UP can only report about any NGO or agencies activities to the higher authority — the thana administration. Such reporting usually falls on deaf ears as the NGOs are in reality accountable only to the NGO Bureau at the national level. Our observation is that the UP, if it is to become a viable local government unit, has to have the dominant role in local governance with the powers and authority to supervise and hold accountable government departments and NGOs functioning in the union.

Because government officials are the decision-makers and the "providers" in the eyes of the ordinary people too, they are perceived as the "master" — the patrons and the capacity given to them to deliver strengthens this notion. The UP members, on the other hand, are seen as their agents to bargain for, acquire and channel resources to the unions. This perception of the people has a deep sociological and psychological impact both on the elected members and government officials. It reinforces the confidence of the bureaucrats while reconfirming the subordinate status of the elected body in the power configuration between the two.

Yet despite the persistence of such a deep rooted colonial practice leading to certain perceptions, our study shows that, in recent years, the relationship between the elected members and the officials has been changing, at least at the behavioural levels. During our intensive interviews with both

types of functionaries we learnt the pattern of decentralization in the upazila parishad requiring thana officials to operate under the elected chairmen and depend on their recommendations for career advancement was indeed a very 'humbling' experience for the officials. While the officials adjusted to their new and reversed roles, the elected chairmen gained considerable confidence and experience and were found to feel the need to equip themselves with detailed information about their constituencies in order to be able to discuss matters on par with the officials in the upazila parishad.

The UP chairman in the union we studied is an ex-upazila chairman and his manner of relating to the upazila officials in his work with them and the cautiously 'respectful' response given to them by the officials illustrate to us the impact of such a development.

This encouraged us to hope that the continuance of such a relationship and its institutionalization through the formation of a truly empowered local government body at the thana level could not but advance the cause of good governance. Mutual trust and respect are the preconditions of a healthy relationship of two groups of functionaries who are at the core of local governance.

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OPINION

Operation Clean-up

A Husnain

measures are taken to throw out the bad eggs. The present regime is no exception, except for some dubious 'neutralisation' exercises. Some visible and popular topics are chosen for public display and continuously blaming the past regime for all the ills of the country.

But the present situation (in fact, crisis) is not rosy for the politicians. The political control may go out of hand at any moment (invisibly, without any coup), with the alarming breakdown of the control of the law and order situation (the gun-killing in the PWD office is one danger signal).

Some of the controlling tools and mechanisms have already passed into non-political hands or sectors. This dispersal and dilution of control is already working in an environ-

ment where respect for authority has been eroded due to recurring political street movements. If the politicians are not yet dismayed, let them live in their own paradise!

Look at the bureaucracy or the civil service. It is divided and polarised. Hence the delay in the movement of files, decision-making, nepotism, and passing of the buck; — all these because the loyalty is divided; giving rise to the 'sabotage' syndrome. Reason: polarisation from the traditional neutral stand, the hall mark of the civil service. How the politicians are going to solve this problem, from the bottom upwards (ref. Sharier Khan's commentary, DS April 4)? After a 16-year gap, the political leaders have to improve their public image. It does not come easily, based simply on charisma!

The financial and share markets are in a shambles, with the loan-default culture in open defiance. It is hoped that the SEC's tough legal stand will not resemble tourist trips. The financial leak in the SOEs (state-owned enterprises) appears to be beyond solution, due to sensitive human problems of the political kind. Where are the discussions in the JS (there is nothing called 'mud-solutions')?

The telecom, broadcasting, and the power and natural resources sectors are moving at snail's pace due to human systems loss. New heads have been attached to old bodies (institutions) — a mechanical operation on live organs! The foreign policy is divided, and never debated in the JS. The sub-regional concept is a new concept, but the United States is not going to let India enjoy the cake (the Delta Plan).

Can someone explain that there is a system in the madness, which the man-in-the-street can understand, and explain to other low-brows?

To the Editor...

Victory celebration with colour

Sir, I wept like a child when our boys won the cricket match against Scotland in Malaysia but never thought that my tears of joy would turn into tears of anguish.

All of us wanted to share the joyous occasion with the people of Bangladesh who I thought would be dancing, singing, parading with procession with proud slogans and other innovative ways for our heroes. But never I imagined the way some section of people celebrated the victory.

They were sprinkling and pouring coloured water on everybody irrespective of age and gender. I saw small children returning from school (wearing may be their only set of uniform) with their mothers by rickshaws completely drenched with coloured water, baffled and hurt, and some of them were crying because water went into their eyes and mouth. I saw some elderly lady being harassed and embarrassed by their wet cloths coloured with obnoxious colours. I saw some uncivilised young men pulling down some young women from their cars and pouring water on them.

Near Chadni Chowk from the gallery of upper story's unruly and irresponsible people were splashing unclear water on the passersby, and police and other members of law-enforcing agencies were standing and enjoying uncivilised manner of the young people. Most of the rickshaw-pullers' shirts were spilt with coloured water. The plastic covers used by the passengers to cover were forcibly taken away so that nobody could cover their cloths.

What a shame! What type of enjoyment it was! How the cars were spoiled and damaged during the celebration! Many people's enjoyment was curtailed and spoiled by the imbalanced and unruly behaviour of the young people towards the public. Balance in behaviour is a manifestation of culture and tradition of a nation.

We should never get swayed away by emotion so much that people are to be hurt, confronted

with loss of property and even lives. Yet everybody enjoy according to their free will. But at the same time, we should learn to behave ourselves properly. Let us learn to show respect to elderly people and care for the children. In no way the children should be frustrated by the behaviour of their seniors. Our today's behaviour would mould the character of our future citizens.

We wish and pray for the success in the final cricket match and would hope that we would celebrate the victory in an appropriate manner so that all of us can enjoy it properly. May Allah help us in our future endeavour to become the champion.

Munira Khan
Dhaka

Hall of Fame

Sir, The Suhrawardy Udyan is being designed as a mirror of the nations. How about having a Hall of Fame there?

The technicalities may be sorted out by the national leaders on the basis of consensus.

A Husnain
Dhaka

Pollution control

Sir, Dhaka city has no clean air for a long time. The traffic problems added by smokes from automobiles have made our lives miserable followed by discharges from factories, situated in the city area.

In Europe, if a vehicle discharges black fumes, heavy fines are imposed. The exhaust pipes there do not emit black fumes as prescribed by the law. They use top-class gasolines.

The land is polluted because of open drains, dirt and dusts accelerated by accumulated garbage here and there. Many people excrete and urinate in drains and some other spaces. Slums create polluted water, which the inhabitants in those shockingly use.

There should be measures to

contain pollution. It is the duty of the Ministry of Environment in co-operation with the Dhaka City Corporation, NGOs, civic-minded members of the public in containing the pollutants.

The environment-related education is very important along with community health education, which offers the public the awareness on the ill effects of pollution. The role of NGOs alone in this field, however, is limited.

May I suggest that like in England an Environment Council should be established in Bangladesh?

Dr Syed Ala-ud-Din
Dhaka

The looming crisis

Sir, BNP is acting in a strange way. AL is reacting in stranger manner. Various incidents are worrying us — internecine fighting at the DU, killings in Feni and many more.

Unfavourable and threatening comments by the opposition about water-sharing agreement, transit etc., are pushing the country to a dangerous precipice. Statesmenlike stand is not in evidence. The opposition are only calculating the gains that will accrue from the fall of the government. And why not! It will be a sweet revenge! Damn the impoverished millions!

The PM who was reasonable in several earlier decisions gave an unacceptable statement that SPA was a necessity. And some opposition politicians were held under this act.

Few BNP leaders approached the President on this issue. A similar situation arose during the earlier crisis when BNP was in power. The then President failed, or could not rise above the cloud of being a party-man. But President Shahabuddin has no such cloud.

The gas prospect and the Production Sharing Contracts (initiated much earlier) may bring prosperity to the country which can benefit the BNP when they will be in power.

One worried citizen
Dhaka-1205.

Dhaka Day by Day

The Charm of Aboriginal Art

by Fayza Haq



Twenty-eight prints, the works of seven Aboriginal artists were recently exhibited at the Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy.

For forty thousand years the Aboriginal people have lived in Australia. In 1788 with Europeans landing in Australia, the people were stripped of their traditional sources of food and what followed was also a break-up of the clan group. They were deprived of their land and culture. The modern Aboriginal Land Rights began only in 1960s.

Today, when the Aborigines paint on their bodies, barks or canvas, they are not painting for profit or fun. The paintings are to show their links with their country. The paintings are a political act. In the 70s the Labour Government eventually



established a department of Aboriginal Affairs, to decide how the land should be given back to the people.

The artists underwent a change and extended their work to print-making, video and photography. Print-making facilities were established in schools and commercial print workshops. The desire to preserve and promote their visual culture made Aboriginal people take to print-making. These prints have contributed to the increasing self-determination of the Aboriginal people.

In Bede Tungulalim's 'Man hunting dugong' the fish-like being is decorated with bold geometric patterns with triangles, squares and parallel lines. The human beings are smaller in size and sketched in with simple lines. Subtle strokes bring in the sky behind and the river in front. This wood-cut is done in dramatic black and

white. Bede's 'Kite hunting lizard' has beautiful motifs on the kite's outstretched wings. Dots, scallops and triangles complete the large bird. In the grip of the bird is the dead swinging lizard. His 'Untitled' has snakes, lizards, newts and the large mountain bear like animal form a neat pattern.

Pooraar's 'Final showdown' has a giant lizard fighting with a snake. The atmosphere of the woods and scrubland is beautifully invoked. The patterns on the bodies of the snake and lizard were remarkably realistic. His 'Turtle and lizard' have the two together as if one was astride on the other. The geometrical patterns on the reptiles almost dazzle the eyes.

In Jimmy Pike's print of the dancing golden lizards, the desert at the back are done with green, pink and mauve lines on a collection of mounds of sand. His 'Thunderstorm' is a recreation of a near abstract idea translated into multicoloured zigzags, parallel lines and scallops. The vibrant colours and lively lines conjure up the scene of a thunderstorm with dramatic effect.

Sally Morgan's 'Man and ducks' is a dazzling piece depicting men as almost black and white reptiles while orang ducks with multicoloured wings stand between them, larger than life. Green spiky leaves and pebbles border the picture in blue background. Her 'Corroboree spirit' have flying humans all over a dotted sky. The humans have motifs on their arms, legs and bodies.

Bandik Marika's 'Wawak ga yulawa' has vegetable marrows with their leaves forming a soothing pattern in black and white. Her 'Miyapunn ga munukuy guymala' has fish-tortoise, sun and leaves forming an ethereal design.

Ellen Jose's 'The boulders' has a collection of stones with interwoven fish, tortoise and water waves.

Robert Campbell's 'The hunter' brings in the subject and his surroundings with tiny dots, simple zigzags and straight lines in black and white.

The exhibition is to recognise and encourage the talent of Aboriginal artists in representing their culture to an international audience.

The display was organised by the Australian High Commission and the Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy.

Recalling Begum Shamsun

Nahar Mahmood

by Prof Roushan Ara Hoque

YESTERDAY, April 10, was the occasion of 33rd anniversary of death of Begum Shamsun Nahar Mahmood. She was the first 'Woman's Messenger' of World Women's Fraternity from this part of the world now called Bangladesh. As an ardent follower and dedicated torch-bearer of Begum Rokeya's women-empowerment movement she had played an important role for over half a century for the liberation of Bengalee Muslim women from the bondage of religious superstition and traditional conservatism. As a recognition of her contribution she had been honoured in 1996 with the Begum Rokeya Award-1995 by the Government of Bangladesh.

Born in 1908 in a conservative but educated family of Noakhali, she had been deprived of schooling after class VI, but passed the Matriculation examination as a private candidate securing star marks. After marriage, with the cooperation of her husband, Dr Wahid Uddin Mahmood, she had completed her MA in 1942 and joined Lady Brabourne College in Calcutta as a Lecturer. She took it as her mission of life to liberate her ill-fated sisters from the bondage of superstition and conservatism and to help them to be educated and conscious of their rights.

Begum Shamsun Nahar was a sincere torch-bearer of Begum Rokeya's mission. After the death of Begum Rokeya in 1932 she was overwhelmed with grief and wrote the first authentic biography of Rokeya (*Rokeya Jibani*). Nazrul was her well-wisher and he dedicated his famous book 'Sindhu Hindol' in the name of her and her brother Habibullah Bazar. She had also written a book on him entitled 'Nazrulke Zemon Dekhechhi'. She was Editor of three progressive journals, *Naaraj*, *Probud* and *Atmashakti*.

Begum Shamsun Nahar was more reputed as a 'Messenger of World Women's Fraternity' and as an emancipator of women.



After the passing of India Act 1935 she tried to get equal voting rights for women. In the International Conference held at Calcutta in 1942 she had represented the Muslim women of Bengal and delivered a speech which was highly appreciated by the government. Being impressed by the spirit of her dedication the government honoured her with the title of MBE (Member of the British Empire). She was the only woman recipient of this title in this sub-continent.

After partition, Begum Shamsun Nahar Mahmood left her job and came to Dhaka, and

devoted herself to the cause of women of this part of the sub-continent. She was a member of the Advisory Board of Education, Text Book Board, governing body member of many government and non-govt. schools, Dhaka Teachers' Training College. She was also member of UNESCO, Provincial Red-Cross Society, Advisor of Radio Pakistan, Dhaka Centre; Bangla Bhasha Reforms Committee, Eden Girls' College and many other social and educational organisations. As a dedicated member of APWA (All Pakistan Women's Association) she had tried to involve women of all sections of society in developmental works of the state.

In 1952, Begum Shamsun Nahar Mahmood, as member of a goodwill mission visited Turkey and many Middle-Eastern countries virtually establishing solidarity and fraternity among all Muslim women. For this mission she became well reputed as a 'Messenger of World Peace'. In 1955 she again led a delegation to the International Silver Jubilee Celebration of the Conference of Women held at Colombo. Her recorded speech was played over and over through radio as 'Message of World Women's Solidarity'.

In 1956, Begum Shamsun Nahar Mahmood had travelled the United States and Europe for over four months and gathered practical knowledge about their education, social welfare and health system to implement what was good for her countrywomen. She was a member of Pakistan National Assembly, and while attending its session in March, '64 she became ill and came back to Dhaka. On 10th April, she had breathed her last at the age of only 56, perhaps leaving many of her missions unaccomplished. At her sad demise the women of this part of the world had lost one forerunner of their liberation. But her contribution will always inspire them to achieve equality of rights and complete emancipation.