

Collapsing Ramparts of Secularism?

by M. Rashiduzzaman

The Bengali nationalism became the new secular anchor for post-independent Bangladesh; this was the politically correct and logical choice since former East Pakistan broke away from Pakistan, based on the separate Muslim nationalism. But the distinctive Muslim imagination continued in Bangladesh as the pre-1971 inheritance that did not take long to resurface in politics.

The ramparts that protected Western secularism are caving in, but it's not exactly a victory of zealotry — the legal underpinning of the church-state segregation is now yielding to the growing realization that religion deserved an equal treatment like other identities manifesting themselves in public life. Of late one phenomenon has struck me in the United States of America: all the prominent presidential hopefuls are competing with each other for their respective closeness to Jesus or Christ. I believe it started with George W. Bush, Jr., the Republican frontrunner when he claimed that Jesus Christ was his "greatest political influence" and then all the other major candidates, Republicans and Democrats, followed the suit by claiming their various degrees of proximity to God. More importantly, those who want to dismantle the church-state division are, with some help from the judiciary, getting much bolder — for most observers, the days of uncompromising segregation between religion and politics may soon be over in the United States. One US Senator has recently declared that secularism in schools had gone too far, and he wanted the Ten Commandments to be taught in the classrooms.

According to a recent *New York Times Magazine* article that scanned the collapsing wall of secularism, the American Supreme Court is on the verge of replacing the old church-state disconnection with the newfound principle of "equal treatment for religion". Such unprecedented legal restriction of complete religion-state disunion, coming from the highest judicial pedestal, will

deeply affect the US politics and society for years to come. But globally, it will also shake up the already shaken secular presuppositions, and may even spur religious orthodox among certain groups in different parts of the world. The old divide between the secularists and advocates of religion in American public life is now taking a new turn — the anti-secularists are in a triumphant mood while the defenders of separation between religion and politics are now grudgingly accepting the new reality. The BJP and its supporting organizations of Hindu nationalism in India are the major players in Indian politics, and the secular groups and individuals there know it well that the juggernaut was unstoppable — it is changing the political landscape by proposing that the state employees should be allowed to join the extremist RSS.

But there are other trends, which may give the secularists some comfort that their cause was not entirely lost — Iran for the first time since the Islamic revolution is sending a clear signal that it wants to soften the stiff rules of the Islamic state. In the Western countries, where religion has gained strength, numerous people sought alternative route to God — people are not always excited about the highly institutionalized religion. However, that's not much of a relief for the secularists. They are caught between the old religious establishments that stretch into politics and the cults some of which in recent years became the killing fields of their devotees. Even if we discount the Western readiness to discredit the post-Shah regime in Iran, there is alien-

ation between the young and the religious elite, and the Ayatollah-controlled political leadership is losing its earlier grip. If Iran and the United States transmit two different messages on religion and politics, Indonesia possibly sends a third message — Abdurrahman Wahid, a moderate Islamic leader, trusted by the minorities, is fighting the parochial violence between the Muslims and the Christian minority. Of course, the Taliban in Afghanistan represent an extreme blending of Islam with politics — most Muslim-majority countries disown their brand of an Islamic state, and inside Afghanistan, the dissenting voice against religious bigotry is being heard.

While the politicians do not hesitate to tilt towards religious evangelism in the United States, the intellectual community still emphasizes the importance of secularism in a liberal democracy. But such exhortation has lost its old appeal. The new anti-secular voice is rather subtle, often flowing through the terrain of civil society; yet it is a compelling message. It recognizes that human beings have different layers of identity, including the panoply of religious passions. You cannot legally discriminate one against the other, especially by denying religious assertions in public life. That has become the

catalytic argument rippling against the old wall between religion and politics. It is the tumult of church-state cases and the increasing flexibility of judicial interpretation, not the religious extremist groups that eroded the strict separation between religion and politics.

Slowly and steadily, special reports and scholarly studies are unveiling that the old doctrine separating church and state is heading for an unprecedented paradigm shift, unthinkable even a few years back. But there is an air of uncertainty about the new development. Neither the politicians nor the intellectuals, so far, explained what would happen to the non-Christian minorities in a polity no longer shielded by the strict norms of church-state separation. If there is a prayer in the school, which religious faith will it represent? What kind of religious cosmology will be taught in the school? Will there be explicit or implicit restriction on the immigration of the non-Christians? Some of the anxieties heard! It is usually women, prominently, who resist any strong switch to the Christian evangelism in the United States, but the Jews are now hoping that they would have much to fear from the Christian majority, assumed to be more liberal and accommodating to them than ever before.

But other religious minorities, particularly the non-white immigrants of the last two decades are not yet culturally integrated as the Jews are in the United States — they are waiting for the twilight zone hoping that the mainstream Christian-majority would be more tolerant and less abrasive to those who don't belong to the Judeo-Christian ancestry.

I haven't heard any howling protests against George Bush, Al Gore and other leading presidential candidates for unabashedly using the Jesus-card in what is acclaimed as a secular democracy. More and more politicians are favouring mandatory prayer in the public schools. Pat Robertson's (also Jerry Falwell and several others) influence in politics is well-permeated, but neither his nor Pat Buchanan's presidential ambition will be fulfilled — the secularists brag about it, and rightly so. But the very fact that George Bush and other prominent politicians claim to be born again Christians and consider it a political capital dent the American secular process. Few leaders and spin-doctors dare to condemn such politicians who display their blatant religiosity in politics, with impunity, and few of them expect to dump politicized Christianity in an otherwise secular democracy. To the Western ob-

servers, it is a threat to secularism when, in a Third World country, religious sentiments flower in politics. But when the evangelical groups barge into American politics, it is accepted only as a change in the legal and political culture in the country — not a serious breach of secular democracy!

There are strong indications that the Western governments, with help from their Third World validators, use secularism as a tool to contain Islamic manifestation in politics that has been anti-colonial and opposed to the Western hegemony. The battle between secularism and Islam became the clash of civilizations, as Samuel Huntington warned. In most conflicts between the secular forces and the Islamic militants, the Western countries side with the former. But now Western secularism itself is changing its posture to religion (mainly Christianity) — now the West has less credibility when it flaunts secular presumptions before the developing countries still teetering between religion and non-religious inclinations in politics.

The Bangladeshi secularists and the Bengali nationalists are not yet ready to acknowledge that the old separation of religion and state is being chipped away, not only in the Western nations, but also in the neighbouring ones. To them,

the non-secularists symbolize the reactionary forces in Bangladesh. The worst problem of the secularists is their hubris, not the Islamic militancy itself — Bangladesh did not recently have any widespread, sustained and violent fanaticism except periodic and isolated incidents mainly in the rural areas. Such stories get immediate media coverage and NGO attention. The word "secularism" bestows an instant class and gravity among the liberal intellectuals, but regrettably, there is no informed and larger debate on secularism and the global repositioning of religion in the political arena. Much of the dispute arises from the secularists' panic about political Islam.

So far, the fear of Islamic extremism in Bangladesh has been grossly exaggerated. The Jangama is expected to have more influence in the future coalitions with major parties, but it may still be many handshakes away from real power. Most mainstream Bangladeshi intellectuals anxiously demonstrate their secular correctness, because, generally speaking, that is also politically correct to do so. Disappointingly, they display a blithe indifference to what is happening in the political world outside Bangladesh — the emerging coexistence of secularism and politically inclined religious expressions is not ringing a bell to them. Not yet!

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nationalism. But the distinctive Muslim imagination continued in Bangladesh as the pre-1971 inheritance that did not take long to resurface in politics. The Muslim consciousness has become the come back identity in spite of the persistent opposition from the secular establishments and their intellectual upholders.

To the secular nationalists, the claims of Muslim nationalism in Bangladesh tantamount to religious bigotry. But the centrist leaders and those who are skeptic or opposed to secularism in Bangladesh see a political future in (Muslim) identity politics — majority of the Muslim voters do support the center-right parties, put together. Even the ruling Awami League lowered its earlier secular trajectory in 1995-1996; it angered its liberal cohorts. In an age of multiculturalism, people identify themselves by race, language, history, gender, and many Bangladeshis even identify themselves by districts, dialect, regions and even subdivisions. The majority of Bangladeshis are Muslims, and to the ordinary Muslims, secularism, as an explicit political bent, is still cherished by a network of Westernized and influential people, supported by the religious minorities.

Be that as it may, the secularists in Bangladesh are yet to accept the new dynamic that is demolishing the wall between religion and politics — they are yet to be convinced that the Muslim identity seekers and the Islamic extremists are not the same.

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Education is Prerequisite to Women's Emancipation

by Md. Asadullah Khan

Bangladesh has attracted hundreds of foreign aid agencies, charitable groups and other non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Many of these organisations concentrate on improving the lives of women. . . But lives of women are still mired in distress and unending social barriers.

The portrait of a country people envisioned 30 years ago is fading fast. Precisely speaking, villages in Bangladesh till now are portraits of human misery. It is hard for our teenagers to concentrate on any ambitious project and carve out a future for them. They can't feel good about their country while still secretly longing for a change. Women till now are the most deprived and neglected section in the society in Bangladesh.

Despite the avowed policy and commitment of the government in the Bangladesh Action Plan for SAARC Decade of the Girl Child towards improving the conditions of the girl child and raising the status of women, hardly anything tangible has been achieved. Shockingly true, the action plan that sought to establish pragmatic efforts focused on the girl child and ensure integration of the women folk within the development activities of various social development agencies has fallen through.

The two core issues namely elimination of social injustice and economic exploitation of the girl child could only be tackled through motivation, policy guidelines and bold leadership exercised at the government level. Women seem to be discriminated against in the society in ever greater proportions. And the genesis of discrimination and cruelty against women can be traced to the explicable attitude of social apathy inherent in the male population of the sub-continent. Speaking about Bangladesh, though the constitution provides for equality between sexes with proper protection for women and children, people still have been governed by personal family customs and rules that fall to give women due.

Unfortunately, people have been watching during the last few years, unending political feuds and a mad race for power between the leading political parties that has stifled all nation building activities and pragmatic planning. Because of the politician's failure to lead the nation and give proper policy directions to people, the country has, of late, been a hotbed of chaos. With terrorism, killings, hijacking, drug addiction, trafficking in women and children on the rise, people are sick of the government and politicians of all colours. Shockingly true, till now the energy, imagination, talent and potential of our

young men and women could not be fruitfully channelised to take the country forward. True, with firm commitment and policies towards halting the trafficking of women for forced labour, domestic servitude and sex exploitation, the edifice of a prosperous society could be built. Because when women are guaranteed basic human and labour rights, the whole family and the community benefit. More so, when women gain the knowledge and power to make their own choices, society is better able to break the chains of poverty.

Despite a growing consensus on the importance of women's work, gender disparities and inequality of opportunity and treatment persist. Too many women in the country are denied the right to go to school to learn to read, to be qualified to take a job for which they receive equal pay. Too many are concentrated in the informal work sector, underemployed or unemployed. Scores are barred from access to loans or credit or exercising the most basic of the legal rights. That means when the male member either husband or father in a family dies or becomes disabled due to disease or accident, the whole family lands in a sea of calamity and distress.

Let us recall the time when we grew up with such goals and thinking either at home or in school about the price of austerity, sacrifice, suffering and deprivation. We grew up thinking it was noble being less than affluent. Almighty Allah loved the poor. The rich, thundered our elders, went to hell. That notion dissuaded us from taking any positive attitude towards life, especially so in case of giving education and improving the status of women.

Because of such notions held fast by a large section of our populace, the picture of Bangladesh now is pretty dismal. Women are the most neglected element in the Bangladesh society till now. Look at the petty construction workers majority of whom are now women. These hapless women, some with babies on their backs have been swarming over the numerous buildings now under construction in different areas of the big cities like Dhaka, Chittagong and Khulna, hauling bricks on their heads to soaring heights. And workers whether male or female are using primitive tools and earning a pittance. Since the year Bangladesh was born through the sacrifice of 30

lakhs lives—men, women and children — the population of 75 million at the time of liberation has now become almost 125 million. But these growing numbers did not get the directions they needed. The country now bears the brunt of depriving women their right to education. The neglect in educating girls is doubly alarming because education almost always leads to a drop in infant mortality and a reduced birthrate. This is evident from the fact that rapid improvement in women's literacy in the southern state of Tamil Nadu in India in the past several years has quickly brought about this virtuous circle. Mentionably Kerala's per capita income is \$156, but the literacy level is an impressive 90 per cent. And because of the high literacy rate this state has been able to solve problems that seem so intractable elsewhere in the sub-continent. Kerala's life expectancy and infant mortality rival those in the West. That only justifies the assertion that no society liberates itself that treats its women badly. Mentionably the female literacy rate in India is 36 per cent, in Pakistan it's 23 per cent and in Bangladesh it's 22 per cent compared to 43 per cent of men.

Without a shadow of doubt, this sub-continent suffers inexorably because of its flawed and discriminatory education system. This country has always had problems — in multitudes. To-day, the emphasis is on its potential; a 126 million people who need education, more electricity, roads, healthcare, sanitation and other facilities towards reducing the plight of the people. Hundreds of thousands of potential workers, mostly disillusioned, are wandering the streets of cities and villages in search of work. Foreign investors in a range of industries from garments, shoe making, textile and software manufacturing, medical equipment and telecommunication are watching closely the investment climate vis-a-vis the political climate in Bangladesh. If the political climate improves, it might usher in a boom that will lift the entire country. The reform might unleash the entrepreneurial drive in the country not only for men but

women as well.

But no boom can be sustained if problems like education of the masses especially women, prominently, basic necessities as food, inoculations for the young and water that does not make people sick are not solved. On those vital issues the country's report card is still very bleak. It is worth noting the study published in 1997 by the Human Development Centre, an Islamabad-based think-tank backed by the United Nations Development Programme, that says that South Asia including Bangladesh has become the poorest, most illiterate and malnourished region in the world. According to the report, nearly two-thirds of South Asia's children are under-nourished, compared with 38 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa. It is the only region in the world where there are fewer women alive than men, the result of wilful neglect of women's health. Two essential ingredients, health and education, that can only help create and sustain a stable economy, continue to be neglected in the whole sub-continent. Mentionably, two-thirds of Pakistan's 130 million people are illiterate as are half of India's 929 million.

China's literacy rate at the moment is about 80 per cent, while in Bangladesh it is about 35 per cent now. The literacy rate signifying the level of education is an indicator of the progress the country would achieve. The literate politically demanding masses of Kerala in India have proven that solutions are not only in the books but feasible on the ground. Sri Lanka boasts a high life expectancy and 90 per cent literacy rate, in Bangladesh remarkable changes have come about in recent years. Primary education became compulsory. More children are now going to school but the enrollment of girls remain poor at about 10 per cent compared to 23 per cent of boys. Shockingly, three out of 1000 women are professionally employed and there are equally enormous number of dropouts. Government attempted to get certain percentage of the population onto school rolls but did little else. School buildings are ramshackle thatched huts in

most places with no benches for the students to sit on. Many of the schools were staffed by only one or two teachers. Absenteeism was chronic and teachers often were not in attendance. And those who were on the job were either hardly competent or even rarely instructed. In many places qualified teachers were not recruited and rather the post of teachers were often filled up by politician's friends or cronies whose only interest was collecting salaries.

A somewhat happy glimmer is that the poorest in the rustic villages are getting the message about the importance of education. But the increasing motivation of parents to educate children hasn't been matched by a corresponding improvement in schooling facilities. Parents in the rural areas are rather more inclined to put the male child onto school. Moreover, societal, cultural and religious values in the country appear to be loaded against female education. Statistics reveal that forty per cent of all girls are engaged in household work compared to a negligible number of boys. In spite of several laws restricting child labour, labour participation of girls (10-14 years) has increased, while the participation of boys has declined. Moreover, disadvantages facing the girl child are compounded by an apparently increasing incidence of violence against girls and women such as abduction, rape, acid throwing, physical assault, kidnapping and immoral trafficking. In one such incidence in the recent past, Mumtaz, a housewife in the Dhaka city was allegedly killed by her husband on her refusal to pay dowry money. In another incidence, Ayesha Siddiqi Shelly, wife of a Dhaka University teacher Dr. Ferdous Hasan, was severely assaulted on her refusal to bring five lakh taka from her parents.

Despite existence of laws and stringent penalties, social attitudes towards women's status seem to permit these behavioural aberrations. The contemporary situation of inadequate social opportunities for both adolescent boys and girls to develop normal patterns of work and behaviour leads to large scale migration of adolescent girls to cities and towns in search of livelihood aggravating the problems.

The country is replete with instances of torture, violence and humiliation perpetrated on women even on just reported and unproven cases of moral transgression — adultery. Some years back, Noorjahan, a married woman from the district of Sylhet, accused by a local Imam of adultery, was half buried and then stoned. The intention was to humiliate her. Out of total shock, Noorjahan later committed suicide by swallowing poison. Kadabhanu of Rangpur district was buried to her waist outside her home and pelted with old shoes for a similar alleged transgression. As already mentioned, women traditionally are placed in the distant second position after child labour, about the poverty and ill health that results, outside organizations and, in some cases, individuals have sought to improve the condition of women. But the change of old ways and customs has brought about a violent resistance from a section of so-called religious leaders.

Many such stories are not reported in the newspapers because of the sense of humiliation and stigma it leaves on the victim and her family. Tusi, a young girl in the Kalabagan area of Dhaka city who suffered repeated assaults and beating by her engineer husband for her inability to meet his dowry demand had to get a divorce. Tusi, an educated girl with a two-year-old baby and now on a job

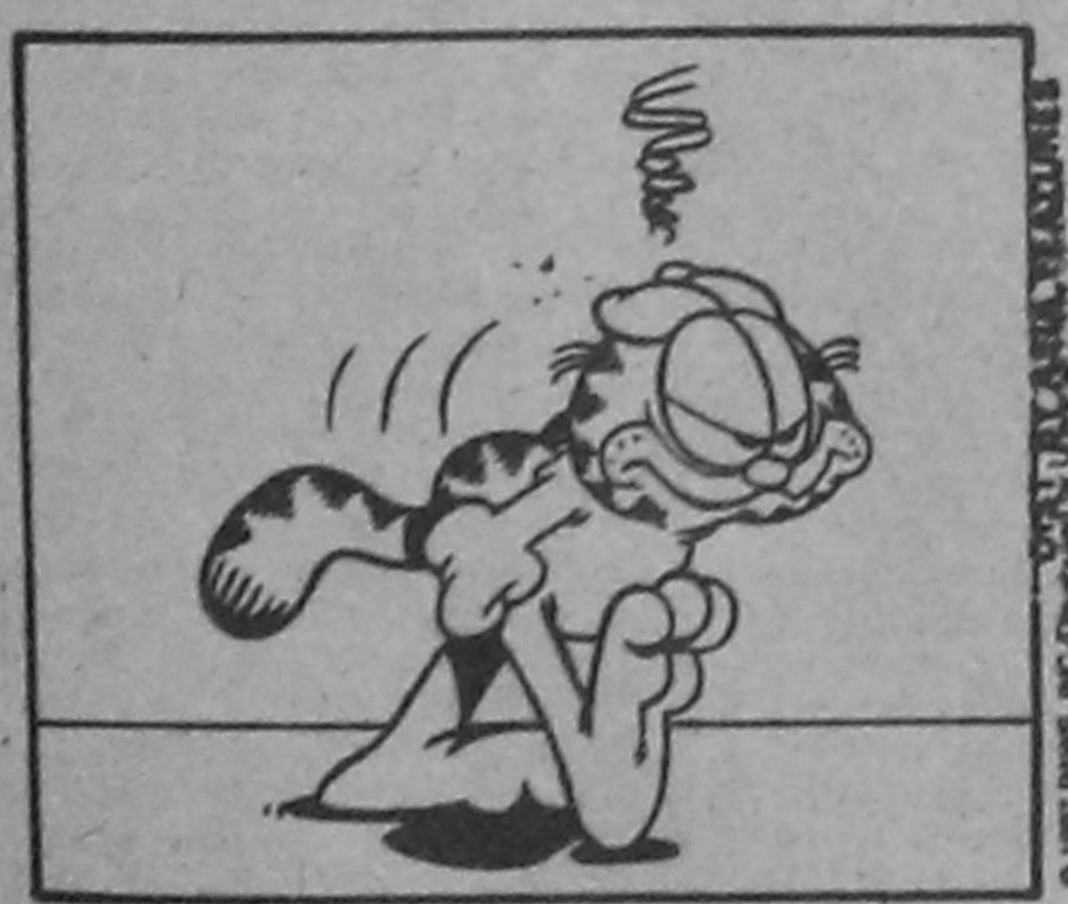
possibly do in order for the family to get one meal a day. In all likelihood, the children would not be going to school. More than that, girls anyway would be discouraged from going to school so that they could be married off at the earliest for there to be one mouth less to feed. And for one more woman to be available for breeding purposes so that these unfortunate families may have some extra hands to make their living easier.

Now the bad news according to a United Nations study is that women have to wait until 25th century — some say 2490, to be precise — before they can achieve parity with men in the top echelons of corporate power. The prediction may seem like a male chauvinist's wishful thinking but in fact women are going nowhere fast in the business world. Encouragingly, women have been elected heads of Asian governments but none have achieved it without a father's or a husband's prominent name. The bullet that claimed Solomon Bandarnaike's life in 1959 started a chain of events that led to his widow Srimavo becoming Sri Lanka's Prime Minister. Other widows and daughters have followed her: Indira Gandhi, Benazir Bhutto, Corazon Aquino, Khaleida Zia, Sheikh Hasina and Bandarnaike's daughter Chandrika Kumaratunga.

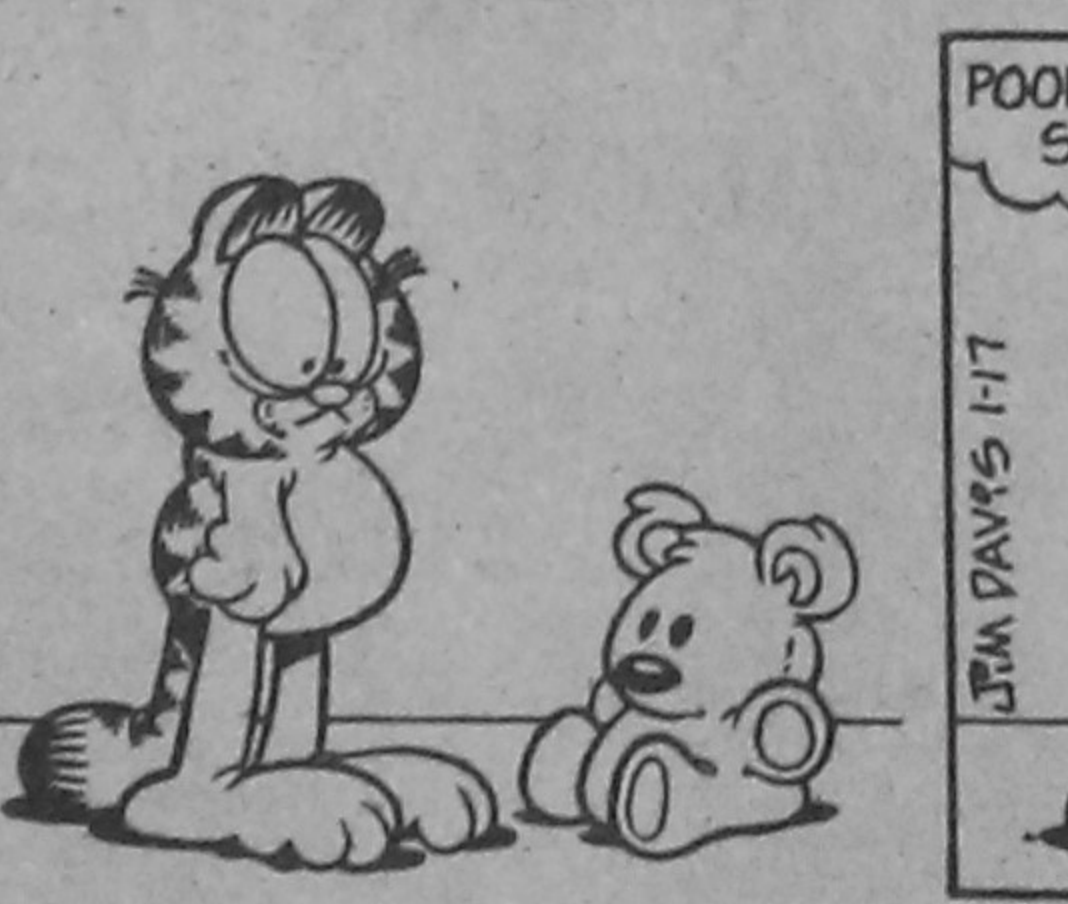
Hopefully, democracy too is playing a key role by giving women the vote and making national interest, not gender, the main determinant of who gets to run government. Similarly, free enterprise is helping the female cause by making quality, productivity and profits paramount in business decisions. In a ruthlessly competitive world, companies can't shed the female talent of the world's talent. And this important message must get to our Bangladeshi leaders. They must realize that without educating men about women, the social barriers would be harder to remove.

The author is Controller of Examinations, BUET.

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