

Powerless protectors

Special cells against women abuse reel under logistic inadequacy

ON the International Women's Day this year, at a meeting with women from different strata of the society, Prime Minister Khaleda Zia disclosed that the government was formulating a stringent law against repression on women that will provide for special tribunals to ensure quick justice. Indeed something needed to be done especially when, according to police annual report, 37 women and children become victims of violence everyday. Unfortunately though, the incumbent government, like its predecessors, seems to have read the situation wrong. It has failed to realise that law alone without effective enforcement cannot root out the malady from the society. The four-party alliance government appears oblivious of the reality that a law is as good as its enforcement. It seems to have preferred to ignore the fact that its record until now has been pathetic on the enforcement count.

The sad saga of sustained failure has gone on and on. Every government in recent history has made promises to root out repression on women from society once and for all and formulated stringent laws they deemed necessary to tackle the malaise. Every time, for lack of effective enforcement, the laws stumbled and fell at the starting block.

Such predilection to formulation of new laws with an unmatched attention to the enforcement aspect is all too evident in the sorry state of the special cells under the Department of Women's Affairs. All the posts of female magistrates and police inspectors at these cells, six of them, which were commissioned in 1986 to provide legal assistance to women who fall prey to different forms of repression, have been vacant for a long, long time. As a result, the usual pace of work at these cells has slowed down to a crawl. The cells have so far done a fair job, disposing of 13,647 cases since its inception. However, the cruel reality is, almost double the number lies pending. When the cells should have been functioning at full force, they are retarded by logistic and legal shortcomings.

We appreciate the prime minister's determination to tackle repression on women with an iron hand. However, we feel the government's attention is misplaced. Before rushing into formulation of new laws, it should take into account its enforcement and support mechanisms. No doubt, there are a lot of loopholes to plug.

Bank note forgery

Stamp it out before it's a scourge

IT is bit of a chilling news, if not a panicky one rightaway. But this has the potential to burrow a hole in public trust about the highest denomination legal tender. That several counterfeit Taka 500 note have been detected by some banks in the metropolis as people went to deposit their money with them speaks of a surveillance faultline. There is a possibility that some banks may have been passing on those notes to clients -- wittingly or unwittingly one has no way of knowing it at this instant. But this sounded plausible from someone's complaint carried in our report on the subject yesterday. He said something to the effect that the bank was not taking back the counterfeit note earlier received by him as he presumably encashed a cheque. Maybe the central bank would like to clarify this point.

What really got our hackles up is the near-perfect-looking features of the fake note that are extremely difficult to distinguish from those of the genuine legal tender. The hall-mark of the genuine bill is that the numeral 500 on its upper left side optically changes from the silvery to the light green. The high quality print and the holographic thread used in the counterfeit note defy identification by the teller's counting machine. Only a microscopic part by part look at the note will reveal the slender colour fraud.

It is reassuring that Bangladesh Bank is about to launch a media campaign to make the people aware of what to look for in the legal tender of Taka 500 and 100 denominations. Since the contemplated new security features would take sometime to materialise, the training of the public eye will be an important immediate step. The basic imperative however is to track down the sources of the rather sophisticated clandestine manufacturing process with its borrowed technology props and give a punishment to the operators that will deter them for a life-time. Meanwhile, of course, all the counterfeit notes need to be mopped up and destroyed.

Kibria's open letter

The Awami League has responded to Mr Faezul Huq's article through a letter by Mr SAMS Kibria. Mr Kibria spoke at length about the qualities and competence of his leader and her proven calibre as a Head of Government.

I am glad that Mr Kibria has such confidence in his leader but does he really think that the people of this country agree with him? For example, when he says "Her (Sheikh Hasina) five years as Prime Minister will go down in the history of Bangladesh as the golden years with peace and prosperity as well as rapid reduction in poverty," does he expect anyone to buy that? If the last five years were the 'golden years', I have to say that I am worried about the future of my country. Without launching into an attack of

Mr Kibria, his leader or his party, I would like to say to him, sir, it has been almost six months since your party's miserable defeat in the polls, please wake up and smell the coffee. Get on with your job as the official Opposition and for God's sake, join the Parliament. You forfeit your credibility otherwise.

Shameran Abed
New York, USA

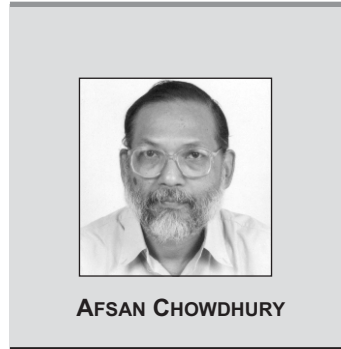
Laws aplenty

That legislators the world over are fundamentally the same species is amply proved every time one sees the Prime Minister, ministers, the opposition leader or even mere parliamentarians trying to fix every social problem by wanting a new law.

Don't like student politics? Pass a law to ban it. Hate hartals? Pass a

"By the rivers of Dhaka, I sat down and wept"

When children die



WHEN we fail with children we truly fail. It isn't just our future that we kill and brutalise, but ourselves too. We become insects on the wall eating our own, unable to protect them as hunger overwhelms us. Every time a child fails to experience a normal life, we become murderers of childhood. In Dhaka, amidst the race of joyous chariots of success, we don't even bother to see the small discarded bodies left behind by the wheels of our progress. I have been investigating the situation of children and conflict in Dhaka and realise that we are nonchalant butchers of our own kind.

Rahim is a hired killer. For Tk 5,000, he will kill anyone. It's surprising how quickly he admits that. Maybe he trusts me because I have reached him through a friend who also is in the trade. I give him a 100-taka note and discuss his life. Things are good but also very dangerous, he says. There have been deaths and more are coming.

"So many people want to join the profession but there is no desire to learn. As if they can just get up and throw bombs. You have to know." He talks with the typical veteran's tongue about the ability of the "next generation". He is barely sixteen. How young are the next generation of hired killers?

"In which city do you stay man?"

Hey, *piccchi*, your bearded friend may get lost. Help him cross the road." He dissolves in his own laughter.

Children too are killers in this town.

I have been tracking the bomb factories of Dhaka for long. Not all are small and some of them often employ children. It's not a 9-to-5 job but a desperate low-paid job, which is a neighbour of death. It makes the term hazardous labour meaning-

screaming at his juniors, especially the green ones.

"You swines, get ready, get ready. Once they come, they will chew you up. Get the bloody guns ready... get the teargas shells ready... get ready..." I wondered how many times he had said the same before. The green recruits were sweating.

Suddenly a bomb went off hitting the walls of Pir Yemeni Market and the next moment all hell broke loose.

Who threw the bomb and why?

not big or dangerous ones. Small chips and all that. Most of the pickets were children and we were not taking them seriously. An older policeman was complaining to me.

"See that boy, he always mocks me. He hates me. I am an old, bearded *murubbi*. He has no respect for my age. See what he does."

As if on cue, the boy lifted his *lungi* up past his waist and did a jiggle like a Bollywood hero, his whatever for all to see. Soon the

When you can't give them time and space to play, the only thing they can do is lift their *lungi* to show everything to the state.

Children learn easily and they learn to be violent easily too. I was once mugged in Addis Ababa in Ethiopia soon after the war was over in the early nineties. It was a strange liberation war with tribes participating a bit like present Afghanistan - and each tribe controlling parts of the city. Airport belonged to one

there was no disagreement about the fact that the horrendous policies of the politicians had let Ethiopia down.

I brought back a cross of beaten silver and filigree work. It said so much about what happened to the children of Solomon.

There is so much of interest about Afghanistan, Palestine and so many places and so little about Bangladesh's children drifting on a boat in a bitter sea. There is so much of interest in making Arabic compulsory but little to ensure that majority of children go to school. Our passions are only about our dreams and ourselves. We can't dream about our children's dreams. We would rather swallow them then see them with open eyes read a book. Our schools are dying and the dead bodies are lining up the avenues of our indifference.

The boy sat on the floor next to a bed at the Dhaka Medical College Hospital. The child who lay on the bed had just died. He had no hands, no face to speak of. They couldn't identify the child. In death he had become anonymous and just a child. The bomb that he was making blew up and he too blew up with that. The boy who was arrested from the same building had been hired that day. He sat next, he was a criminal, his life was over too.

"Who's he?"

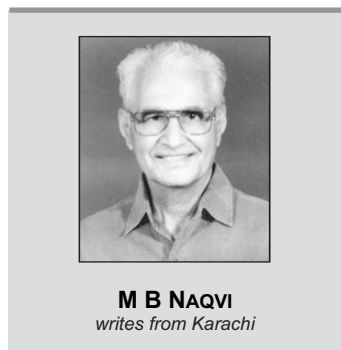
"Tokai, sir. *Piccchi*, sir. Bicchu, sir. They are killers."

I walked away from the corpse covered in a dirty sheet. I was glad they had done it. Or I would have had to see the crime of my own hands.

In the distance near the Doel Chattera somebody was giving a speech. It wasn't about this dead boy.

Afsan Chowdhury is a Senior Assistant Editor of The Daily Star.

Attacking the roots of South Asian communalism



THE current wave of communal riots in India has caused concern here and have concentrated the minds of thinking Pakistanis. Reactions to these riots conform, by and large, to the usual pattern. The more chauvinistic and more self-consciously Muslim sections continue to exhibit the old communal antipathy of India in general and Hindus in particular; their reactions can be summed up in a few words: 'didn't we tell you that the Indian Hindus are at heart the enemies of the Muslims and whenever they get a chance they fly at the Muslims throat'. There are others, mainly left-inclined liberals, who repeat their old mantra: the Hindu-Muslim problem was the creation of the British imperialists and their nefarious schemes are still unfolding. Thus the concrete issues of today are not receiving the purposeful attention that they deserve.

If anyone is really interested in resolving this age-old Hindu-Muslim struggle -- originally for favours, jobs and a share in running the state apparatus under the British -- they should accept what has happened in history as given facts. Basic policies for removing old distortions should be based on facts as well as be informed with values. Thus the hard reality of the Hindu-Muslim problem in the Subcontinent has to be accepted as the starting point and a given fact. First, it needs to be analysed with a view to working out a solution that has eluded so far. A commonly shared basis for a friendly and cooperative coexistence between these two communities is to be sought.

indeed even the term community needs an inquiry. It is an obviously urgent task for the Indian leaders and intelligentsia. But Pakistanis

too, as successors to what were historically the Indians, would necessarily have a role in the endeavour.

The earlier Indian nationalists and left-inclined liberals were not wrong in tracing communalism to the British. The issue actually was created by the introduction of the term 'community' for political purposes of initial British administrations. Earlier throughout Indian history, there were no politically-recognised differences among

als. Its growth in importance clearly owed itself to the British ways of governing India.

What was the common identity among the inhabitants of historical India? It was the fact of living safely in the areas denoted by Hindustan and it was based of course on their common humanity, together with uncountable ethnic commonalities. The precise question to be asked today is: Can we get back to those commonalities none of them could have gone away and find a resolu-

political Hindu community as a homogenised non-denominational and non-caste entity and Muslims as a simple non-sectarian and non-caste Muslim community. Early social differentiation between nobles and the others were also politically important for a Millenium and that differentiation actually overrode religious distinctions. Common Hindus and common Muslims were regularly lumped together throughout Indian history except later -- during British admin-

resolving India's persistent problem and this can go on to resolve inter state confrontation, which incidentally would resolve many of Pakistan's domestic problems. Even Bangladesh may thereby be able to evolve a truly common nationalism for all Bangladeshis to fit the new state.

But the reassessing of 1947 is not the same thing as wanting to undo it, as noted. What has happened is a given fact of life. History had created two nation states, now

opposite directions. International politics also intervened to divide them. And yet fundamental bases for India and Pakistan friendship and cooperation have continued to exist just as they do for Hindus and Muslim 'communities' inside several states. If only the divisive politics and conflicting foreign policies can be reversed or at least contained, the thousand and one commonalities can still be relied upon to bring the 'communities' closer together. The point is that this can wonderfully help to counter the purely communal politics in both Pakistan and India. The only problem is how to go about it? It requires some kind of a political framework.

The SAARC, in combination with France and Germany-like reconciliation processes between the peoples of India and Pakistan, would provide an excellent framework at two levels -- inter-state and domestic within each. It would obviously include all states of the region. Within this set of frameworks, the accent will necessarily be on commonalities and the need for developing them further while differences will naturally be sidelined. The question is can the current India-Pakistan impasse permit it and how to go about it.

The word impasse itself suggests that both countries are in a state of paralysing deadlock. Indo-Pakistan politics collide and without reversing or changing these policies, there is no peaceful option open to them. Either they go to war, with all its attendant horrors, or both have to reverse some and amend other policies. That is about the major policy orientations in the two largest states of SAARC. If there is an obvious need to do it, it has to be done quickly. The best course is for both to revise their policies by themselves in consultation with each other and begin talking with a view to creating or improving the kind of frameworks suggested here. Otherwise the only power that can get a hearing in both capitals will be the US. But then the US will come with its own agenda. The purely subcontinental agenda might get downgraded, may be distorted.

MB Naqvi is a leading columnist in Pakistan.

PLAIN WORDS

A people-to-people reconciliation between Pakistan and India -that must also include the people of Bangladesh and Sri Lankacan create a whole new dispensation in which the communal politics can be contained and countered, both inside each South Asian state and among the states of the region.

the people under any Indian ruler, Muslim or Hindu; indeed the religion of the ruler was clearly a matter of historical accident and was automatically accepted by all as making no difference. In early times, there were no political identities that corresponded to the Hindu and Muslim terminology. Thus the Hindu and Muslim communities in today's sense did quite not exist before the arrival of the British.

The communal identities that underlies the Hindu-Muslim problem actually came into being during the Colonial period by way of initial measure to associate the Indians in the governance of their country by way of giving them jobs and some participation in the political processes in the Colonial dispensation. Indeed, even the term 'Hindu', as denoting a given community was an invention for day-to-day use. Historically, it could be said to have been invented by foreign invaders, beginning with Alexander, to describe the people living in areas around the river Indus that is Hind. In Persian usage the word used was Hindi for both Muslim and the so-called Hindus which was the same Greek Indus and Indic. For political purposes, the Hindu and Muslim identities indubitably arose during the British period for mainly political purposes; earlier the people lived together without this clear distinction, with religion being a strictly private and accidental factor, though very important to individu-

tion to the identity problem.

Two separate tasks become relevant. One is to reassess the 1947 Settlement of the Hindu-Muslim problem through the creation of two nation-states, India and Pakistan, without this being a plea to undo it. It is a call to face facts as they are. Secondly there is the proposition that without a people-to-people reconciliation between the two states such as the French and Germans have effected after the Second World War

the larger problem of the Hindu-Muslim co-existence in peace, friendly cooperation and the common endeavour of making progress both at inter-state and within each major state cannot be achieved. That is the way to resolve the Pakistan-India cold war rivalry as to make all Indians be just good Indians. Indeed, all states of South Asia, integral parts of historical India, need effective reconciliation between communities in the domestic sphere and in their inter-state relationship with their neighbours.

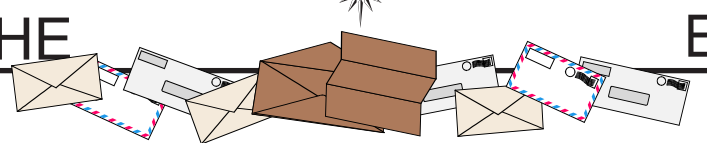
It is not such a new idea, though. There may be superficial reluctance to include Pakistan in what are certainly India's domestic matters. That is a formalist objection based on a nation-state being the be all and end all in itself. The fact of the matter is that religious identities in a personal sense, per se, are age-old, of course. But they do not coincide with the India's

istration. Religion in point of fact was less important than class distinctions in Medieval India. That long precedent shows it can be done again.

Thus the bases for common identities have existed in centuries of happy co-existence and have continued to exist; the commonalities, cultural, multiple ethnic and economic, are all there. The precise problem is that of accommodating the basically political identities of the 'communities' that have always generated dislike, often descending into hatred as a result of competition for shares in running the state and seeking its favours. That applies as much to India's domestic life as to India-Pakistan cold war rivalry. The recommended idea is primarily political that gives a lot more importance to the existing commonalities and downgrades the importance of the differences. It is entirely possible to reconcile the Hindus and Muslims because the bases for discord and enmity as well as of understanding, friendship and fraternity simultaneously exist. A people-to-people reconciliation between Pakistan and India that must also include the people of Bangladesh and Sri Lanka can create a whole new dispensation in which the communal politics can be contained and countered, both inside each South Asian state and among the states of the region. Only, it is necessary to see the utility of this approach for first

three, with their many vested interests. Undoing them will be fiercely resisted and trying to do that may not be a workable, or desirable, policy. That reassessment is necessary as a starting point for tackling the present day issues. Insofar as it has not worked, corrective action has to be undertaken with vision, imagination and courage, avoiding what went wrong. The question whether it has worked as intended or was hoped is easy to resolve. It was primarily billed to resolve the old and persistent Hindu-Muslim problem of British Indian Empire. Does the pattern of events since 1947 suggest that it has solved that problem? It has not. Ergo, corrective action is necessary. What was implied in the 1947 settlement was close cooperation between the then two new states which was a vital ingredient of the scheme. Due to the heightened communal passions at the time, world's largest-scale communal killings took place along with the biggest ethnic cleansing. That was not a one off eruption; the problem of communal hatred has persisted. Pakistan-India confrontations have in fact exacerbated it. There have been hundreds of 'riots' -- killing sprees really -- have taken place in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. These developments have killed that particular ingredient's potential. More so, the dynamics and the pattern of 'riots' and the legacies of the communal flare ups, combined with inter-state disputes, have made India and Pakistan move in

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR



EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

us why we should trust him with this new law and court when he and his predecessors could not handle the hundreds on the book already?

ES
Missouri, USA

We want a change

With very high hopes the people gave their verdict in favour of BNP led 4-party alliance in the 1st October 2001 elections. We thought by now Khaleda Zia had learned a lot and would run the administration more efficiently than before. But I am sorry to say that Khaleda Zia is following the same path and making the same mistakes, which she made when she was elected the Prime Minister in 1991 elections.

The size of the cabinet has increased manifold, but not the quality, which is more important. The performances of the Ministries

of Home, Science and Technology and the T&T which includes the IT sector are very poor. Please do not blame the past government all the time for all the misdeeds. Do not repeat the same old song time and again that we heard from 1996 to 2001. We want to see new and fresh juice in a new bottle, and not old the juice in a brand new bottle.

Iqbal Ahmed
New Eskaton Rd, Dhaka

A formula to overcome political problems

Here's a thought about how to resolve our country's seemingly intractable problems. In my opinion it is the dynastic nature of our politics that is hurting us the most.

How about this: The Military

takes over in a coup. The immediate past members of the Non Party Caretaker Government are restored. Within 90 days there is a referendum to elect the leaders of



New formula for old politics?

AL, BNP and JP, specifically excluding the present incumbents and their relatives.

90 days after that we have new national elections and a new parliament is elected. Every candidate would have to sign a legally binding contract, promising to abide within

certain constitutional norms. Similarly the Civil Service would sign a Code of Conduct with a frame of reference to exclude them for political interference and placing restrictions on ex-members joining politics.

Within this time, with the assistance of our development partners, an agenda is prepared for the country. Specifically, setting a time frame for denationalisation of all SOEs, the free floating of the taka and a coherent defence plan taking into account the actual strategic needs of the country, reforms of the police and the legal system etc.

At the end of this time, say about a year, the men in uniform return to their barracks after handing power back to the elected government.

I would also suggest a blanket pardon for all crimes that have been committed by our public servants to

prevent further acts of revenge as we are seeing now. The present leaders of JP, AL and BNP are exiled to a country of their choice and forbidden to return to Bangladesh.

This plan I think might strike a healthy balance between democracy and a fresh start. What do you say?

Bastiat
Dhaka

Response by Rezwana Chowdhury Bannya

Rezwana chowdhury Bannya has responded to the criticism and comments made by the readers. It will be published in full on tomorrow's (13.03.02) issue.