BANGLADESH TURNS 3/ STATE OF SOCIETY & ECONOMY

The confronting of a rise and a decline

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EMARKABLY, over the years two things have happened in Bangladesh. One is the rise in inequality; the other being a parallel and simultaneous decline in patriotism.

Inequality has never been unknown in this land of ours; but what has been achieved in the field since liberation is unprecedented. In the past we have been a patriotic people; time and again we have risen against the state, but not against the people. What is new is that since independence as individuals we have turned against our compatriots, and become selfcentred, if not selfish.

The phenomenal rise and the astonishing fall, however, are not as isolated from each other as they appear to be, for they are both related, integrally, to the thrust of capitalism in our economy as well as society. Capitalist growth in Bandladesh has not, of course. happened according to its classical model, but has, nevertheless, embodied the essence, which is the accumulation of wealth by a section in the community by means which are not morally clean. The plunder by the Bangladeshi rich, however, has not taken place on high seas or far-off shores: it has happened within the country, obliging the unprivileged masses to fall prey to the operation. Consequently, a great disappointment has set in among the common people as well as the thinking section of society who had hoped that independence would liberate them from the exploitation that had prevailed during the rule of the British and that of the

Capitalism has other faces too; there is, for example, the entrepreneurial aspect of it, which enlivens an economy. But those who got rich in the liberated Bangladesh at an unbelievable speed were traders, commissioned agents, indentors, bank defaulters and the like; they had little interest in investment. The riches they acquired were spent in foreign tours, indulgence in luxury and smuggling foreign exchange out of the country. Their trading and plundering activities did not create opportunities for employment, although that was what we needed the most. The only sector which has been producing to its capacity is

scope for employment. New industries are not coming into being both because of infrastructural and bureaucratic hindrances and the flooding of foreign goods, produced cheaply and advertised effectively.

remains, a Unemployment, potent, though not the only factor in the increase of inequality. Even education divided as it is into three distinct and parallel systems, is increasing the socio-economic cleavage instead of bridging it. The minorities in Bangladesh have faced repression: after the last general election their misery took on a fearful character. Gender discrimi-

suffer. We have a long history of patriotic movements. When we fought for Pakistan we did that unitedly with the patriotic zeal of achieving independence. Later, when we fought against the newlyestablished state, we were, certainly united by a spirit of patriotism. The finest hour of our patriotism was undoubtedly the time of the liberation war of 1971. People were prepared to lay down their lives for the cause of the nation, as never

come and go, but inequality contin-

ues to grow, relentlessly though

Patriotism has also continued to

often quietly.

The unprecedented flow of patriotism which was murder and bloodshed perpetrated noticed everywhere in 1971 and had tied the people together in invisible threads of fellow- could not do has been done by our feeling had seemed too strong to be stemmed own selves. And that, too, we did even by the cruellest pressure imaginable of murder and bloodshed perpetrated by the occu- old ideology of patriotism has been pation army. But, alas, it has ceased to flow. What replaced by the new ideology of the enemy could not do has been done by our own indeed, it is as simple as that. Dark selves. And that, too, we did voluntarily.

nation is endemic in both our culture and society; but today girls are doing well in most sectors and in public examinations their performance has been, in some cases. better than that of boys.

Nevertheless, at present women el more insecure than ever before. Teasing, rape, acid-throwing are rampant. Gang-rape we had heard of during the 1971-war; but those were dastardly acts by an occupation army committing genocide. That gang-rape should be practised with bravado by local boys on girls who are really their sisters was inconceivable in those days. And yet that is what is happening now. Women and children are being smuggled out of the country and sold in markets abroad. What is worse, public reactions to these acts of violence are minimal. Helpless women, finding no support any where, not from the state, nor from society or the family, are committing suicide. Many of those who do not go to the final extent of taking their own lives only exist, and do not live Patriarchy had always dominated; it has not ended, despite all the

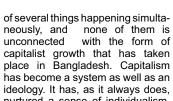
changes that have taken place in

before. There were traitors, too; but they were few, and were looked down upon even by their own kith

It is not only within the country that people felt patriotic. Bengalis everywhere, even those who did not live in or belong to Bangladesh felt proud of their Bengali identity. Some of those who lived abroad came back home and joined the war; others tried to help as best as they could. After liberation many had hoped to be able to serve the new state. Some came, and were disappointed. Those who wanted to invest were not able to do so. Even today non-resident Bangladeshis feel more for their country than those living inside. But their feelings change as soon as they set foot on their liberated land, because of what they see and come to know about.

But why have the rise the fall taken place? Inequality is understandable; that is what capitalism always produces, and the more unbridled capitalist growth is the greater the rise in inequality? But how does one explain the decline in patriotism?

Patriotism has declined because



ideology. It has, as it always does, nurtured a sense of individualism, which can very well deteriorate into self-centredness, even selfishness. And this is precisely what has happened in Bangladesh. People are getting alienated. The unprecedented flow of

patriotism which was noticed everywhere in 1971 and had tied the people together in invisible threads of fellow-feeling had seemed too strong to be stemmed even by the cruellest pressure imaginable of by the occupation army. But, alas, it has ceased to flow. What the enemy The fact of the matter is that the

putting the self before the country. self-interest has overtaken enlightened self-interest. Enlightened selfinterest teaches the individual the very important lesson that no one can flourish without the help of others, and that when others become hostile the individual flounders and falls. Who could have survived in 1971 if everyone had decided to fend for his himself or herself? The war of liberation is not over, it is on: the only thing that has changed is that the enemy has put on a new disquise.

Privatisation is the order of the day. It is not limited to the sphere of economy only, but has become a part of the prevailing ideology. Industries have been privatised. and many of those handed over to private parties have ceased to be productive, owing to misappropriations of everything including the land-site. Parks, open spaces, even rivers are being taken over by greedy individuals under government patronage. Corruption was never unknown here, but it has become an act of heroism and not of fear or shame, as it used to be before. The police, who are supposed to be protectors of the individual, have become the most corrupt and, therefore, the most fearful institution in the country, and have been responsible, to the greatest extent, for forcing us to be known as the most corrupt country, in the

Bureaucracy has always been heartless; today its members use their power in the most irresponsible manner conceivable. Nor is the judiciary exempt from the charges of manipulation.

Notwithstanding our achievements, which are not unworthy and are spread in many fields of activities at home and abroad, the citizen in Bangladesh feels today more insecure than at times in the past. The days of the war were different, we were then confronting a deadly and cowardly occupation army; that we should feel so insecure today within our liberated country is a matter beyond consolation. Commodification has entered all phases of life -- public, and even private. Education, healthcare, and justice have to be paid for and have, really, become purchasable commodities; which means, among other things, that they are being denied to the less fortunate sections CONTINUED ON PAGE 19

The gender balance of public power is totally skewed, notwithstanding political tokenism of representa-

We won independence to build a just and free society

Why does this goal still elude us?

DR. KAMAL HOSSAIN

FOPLE the world over celebrated with us our victory in 1971 as a victory against injustice and denial of freedom. I well remember on arrival at London Airport from prison in Pakistan in January 1972 with Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, he was greeted by a tall policeman who stood guard outside the VIP room saying: "Sir, we have all been praying for you." Hundreds of school children at a reception in Tokyo in 1973 told us how they had collected money standing on street corners in support of our struggle. I met many young people in New York who came to congratulate us on our entry into the United Nations in 1974 with solidarity badges pinned to their shirts which they had worn in

The image of Bangladesh was of a people that had long struggled for freedom and justice and won it through enormous sacrifices. This struggle for freedom and justice stretches throughout our history. Social forces which were emerging in the eastern part of Bengal that is presently Bangladesh reflected these historical trends. The peasantry as well as the newly educated emerging middle class were inspired by the prospect of a future free from the injustice of a zamindari system and colonial rule which had been imposed by the British. Their broad-based mass movement aimed for freedom from political oppression and economic injustice. The influence of students, in particular in Dhaka University, set the tone for the politics of the forties which was to carry over into the fifties.

The fifties saw a widespread social awakening shared both by the growing urban educated groups as well as the rural masses. Even before the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was formally adopted in 1948, an early discourse on human rights grew out of the assertions of rights expressed by conscious sections of society, in particular students, young teachers and professionals, many of whom were entering into the stream of democratic politics. The gross injustice of denying the status of state language to the language of the Bangali majority was powerfully protested and gave to the nascent nationalist movement its first martyrs in 1952. The popular upsurge of 1954 in which a university student defeated the sitting Chief Minister in the provincial elections showed how the moral convictions of the majority of the people, most of them forming the rural poor, could triumph over the power of the ruling elite. The pervaded society. The ruling elite who were perceived as denying the rights of ordinary people and were seen to be unjust were progressively isolated and weakened. What was even more remarkable was that Bangali Muslims demonstrated that their vote in 1946 should not be treated as being a reflection of communalism but as an expression of their striving for freedom and justice. This was confirmed by the adoption of the joint electorate system in the fifties.

In 1958 martial law and military

rule had been imposed to suppress what was a powerful popular movement for freedom and justice. The shared commitment among the urban middle class, the growing numbers of university students and the rural masses through the sixties challenged authoritarian military rule. The universities became centres from where the core values of freedom and justice were propa-

minds of people at large who saw themselves as engaged in a just The status quo, namely, the

military-dominated authoritarian rule and the social and economic injustice which it imposed was vigorously challenged. While the political leadership and activists bore the brunt of the repression, the overwhelming majority of citizens

The election of 1970 was fauly a victory for the forces which stood for freedom and justice and for a noncommunal nationalism against those who had tried to use religion to divide those forces in an unsuccessful attempt to save the authoritarian rulers and their proteges.

The protest by Dhaka University students against martial law was expressed in their refusal to accept degrees from the Chancellor who was the provincial Governor seen as an illegitimate appointee of the military rulers. The best and the brightest risked their future careers. Their careers would indeed have been destroyed but for a landmark court judgement which held their expulsion to be illegal. Lawyers and the courts became actively involved in the movement. The "intellectuals" consisting mainly of professionals, teachers, economists, journalists, contributed to the mass awak-Economic injustices ening. reflected in disparity between regions and between persons, the concentration of wealth in 22 families, mostly from the western wing, were convincingly demonstrated to be intolerable. The leading Bangla newspaper Ittefag was closed down and its editor imprisoned. Soon afterwards, the daily Sangbad was also closed down. The closure was successfully challenged in the courts. As repression intensified and the political leadership was threatened with treason trials and thousands were detained without trial, the movement gained strength

were drawn into the movement. The proteges and clients of the authoritarian rulers, the nouveaux riche of the period as beneficiaries of military rule were looked down upon as self-seeking opportunists. Social forces isolated them. The legitimacy of the popular movement was derived from its principled commitment to human rights and the rule of law. It was therefore believed that a democratic system based on one-person-one-vote would contribute to the building of a free and just society. The election of 1970 was truly a victory for the forces which stood for freedom and justice and for a non-communal nationalism against those who had tried to use religion to divide those forces in an unsuccessful attempt to save the authoritarian rulers and their proteges.

The move to deny these election results provoked a nation-wide demonstration of people's power and strength derived from its moral basis. The non-cooperation movement launched in March 1971 effectively paralyzed the military government which, with all its arms and state resources, became confined to the cantonments. Power truly belonged to the people till on

was unleashed upon them. This prompted the declaration of independence and the launching of an armed struggle in which countless lives were sacrificed in order to achieve the victory which created Bangladesh.

Immediately following liberation,

the blueprint for a free and just society was elaborated in the Constitution. It was possible to frame and adopt the Constitution in the first year because of the overwhelming popular unity and consensus in support of its core values:recognition that power belongs to the people, that State power must be exercised subject to limits imposed by the Constitution. The most important limit was that State power must respect the rule of law, fundamental human rights (civil and political and economic, social and cultural), independence of the judiciary (including the separation of the judiciary from the executive). freedom of religion and a commitment to a non-communal society in which religion would not be abused as an instrument of discrimination or for political gain. I believe this consensus is the product of our long struggle and a heritage of generations who have gone before us and indeed of the legacy left to us by the thousands of martyrs who fought and died so that succeeding generations could live in freedom and with dignity in a just society.

Today, thirty years later, we must do soul-searching to answer why the goal of a free and just society has eluded us. I suggest it is because self-serving predatory groups have emerged in society and seek to pursue their selfish ends by undermining the core values of our society. Nothing is sacred to them.

The amassing of black money through corruption, the patronage of armed groups in order to support their pursuit of wealth and power has led to an erosion of moral values to the extent that securing power or riches by any means has created a sick society

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Violation of human rights: Excesses continue

Independence, yes! But liberation? A woman's view

HAMEEDA HOSSAIN

ETWEEN the first attack by the Pakistan military on 25 March and the recent spate of violence, lie 30 years of vast structural and systemic changes in Bangladesh. It is customary to commemorate a national anniversary with euphoric rhetoric of progress and advancement. Without a doubt, women have seen dynamic changes in the pattern of their life and livelihoods. But if the struggle for liberation, in which women played an equal part, aspired for equality, freedom and justice, how far have we moved along the road?

Prevailing inequality: It's hard to make a meal

How have constitutional and international guarantees of equality, in the public sphere only, been translated into opportunities for women's advancement in education, health and employment? Do women have a freedom of choice to realize their personal and public aspirations or are we cloistered within social constraints of customary practices, family honour and state controls?

Economic opportunities were identified in the aftermath of the war as a means to engineer a change in This came in women's lives. response to the need of thousands of widows and others affected by the war for survival. Strategies for subsistence led them into the market, and over the last three decades women have used the opportunities for credit and employment to maintain their families. Current estimates suggest that approximately nine million women, out of a total of

11 million have access to microcredit. This means roughly 50 per cent of adult women receive small loans in Bangladesh.

peted to project gender equality in Bangladesh. But calculations of total credit in the country indicate that women fall way below the mark. By December 2000, the outstanding loans, in the formal banking sector was Taka 653 billion, as compared to Taka 22 billion in micro-credit. Large loans were distributed for capital investment by men. (The proportion of women in managementÊÊÊis a mere 4.9 per cent, whereas women in professional/technicalEprofessions are 34.7 per cent.) Large loans to men were justified, (even in the knowledge of large scale defaults in this sector) because men are projected as 'entrepreneurs', building the nation on industry and trade, while women are relegated to small scale production and petty trade, which as little place in global markets.

What is often forgotten is that women's work has sustained the national economy. As a result garment manufacturers whose main job is to manage orders and send goods abroad sit in parliament and in key decision making positions, but over 3 million women garment manufacturers whose labour makes it possible for exports to finance the national economy have not even been given space to talk about the urgency of installing safety and health measures in their factories, even though their lives are endangered and production impeded. A

tion in state institutions and rhetoric borrowed from international declarations. In their personal lives, These figures are often trumwomen become victims of a political and social order that refuses to recognize the principles of justice. The prevalence of domestic violence, particularly marital violence, across all classes, ethnic groups and generations is well documented in the media. But is there any serious attempt at legislating domestic violence as a crime, at instituting preventive and protective measures, or sensitizing law enforcement

> glaring example of the inequalities in production relations based on gender was the urgency with which government aides discussed support to the industry following the drop in import orders from the US, but had no concern for the many women who were laid off, sometimes without compensation or wage dues. The BGMEA made it known that approximately 400 factories were affected by the slump in orders, and used women's employment to plead for renewal of the orders from their buyers, but did little to ensure compensation or social benefits for women workers. Their silent exit from the work scene and their move to the end of the bread line has gone unnoticed in policy forums.

agencies to act in response to cries for help?

Social indicators show some improvement in recent years. The population sex ratio has gone up, and adult literacy levels are now stated at 40.1 for women and 49.5 per cent for men. With the increase in female enrollment into primary schools to 76 per cent, there is reason to believe that we are advancing towards equality in this

sector. However, the slide downwards in female/male ratios higher education does not indicate that education is considered as essential to women's advancement, or that women are perceived as professions. The state and multilateral agencies have deliberately pursued their agency for change through use of contraceptive use, But the reasons for a large numbers of women succumbing to maternal mortality are yet to be addressed by our health facilities

Women's place in political decision making is equally fraught with prejudice. The initial constitutional guarantee of 15 reserved seats has become a millstone to ensure that women never progress beyond a backwater vote bank for male members of Parliament. In spite of an active women's movement that had worked out different proportions for women's representation through direct elections to Parliament, and to which the political parties had conceded in their 2001 manifestos, we are still to see a bill for direct elections of women to reserved seats. Instead the Treasury Bench

is supposed to be considering a bill to raise the number of reserved seats to 62, but all of them to be selected by members of the Parliament. Which would only bring a bigger majority for the BNP and a sprinkling of seats for their allies. This bill is not likely to see the entry into the legislative process of women who have been active participants in the women's movement for change. What is being proposed is a vote bank which may be created by recruiting family members. Sisters, mothers, wives of present ministers and members of Parliament will no doubt be the chief beneficiaries. What crumbs would this leave for women?

As it is, representation of women has fallen from 2 per cent to1 per cent from the last to the present Parliament. In the Cabinet, there is a steeper fall. In the last Cabinet the representation of women was 16.7 per cent, but this time with the enlarged Cabinet, only 6.7 per cent are women. It is no wonder that women's demand for legal reform of personal laws has remained on the backburner for the last thirty years; that when issues of concern to women such as violence are raised, they are usually met with derision by the members in the House; that charges of sexual harassment of Bandhan led a member of Parliament to target women in general rather than indict the perpetrators, or that Shimi's suicide instigated by sexual harassment will never be discussed in Parliament

The adoption of yet another Act prescribing capital punishment for acid burns shows that no serious assessment is made of the effectiveness of law enforcement and social attitudes to violence. Since rigorous punishment was already prescribed in the Nari Nirjaton Daman Ain 2000, the present Act may be no more than a public relations exercise. Why not act more seriously to enforce the law relating to sales of acid and even more important to change the social

relations of power. The gender balance of public power is totally skewed, notwithstanding political tokenism of representation in state institutions and

rhetoric borrowed from international declarations. In their personal lives women become victims of a political and social order that refuses to recognize the principles of justice. The prevalence of domestic violence, particularly marital violence, across all classes, ethnic groups and generations is well documented in the media. But is there any serious attempt at legislating domestic violence as a crime, at instituting preventive and protective measures, or sensitizing enforcement agencies to act in response to cries for help? Personal laws that dictate inequality in marriage, divorce, inheritance, contribute to social chaos created through polygamy or dowry demand. But we remain firm in retaining archaic laws, even if it leads to homelessness and npoverisation of women.

Women seek their rights as a matter of social justice, but there is an attempt at political suppression in the name of state, religion, community and family. Last year when the High Court ruled against fatwas, that instigated violence, an appeal was filed against the judgment in the Supreme Court. And street power was brought into action in contempt of the Court on the grounds that the judgment would hurt the religious sentiment of some people. It is ironic that religious sentiments are not hurt when men instigate or witness violence against women and others through fatwas, but only when they are used to assert control through misinterpretation of religious doctrines and in violation of existing

Women's personal lives are increasingly becoming subject to political controls and politically instigated violence. Accounts by victims and witnesses to the post election violence have illustrated the fragility of the lives of Hindu women who became targets or had to take cover in paddy fields to avoid

be increasingly used as territory for gang fights. Only last week the Feni administration was reported to have passed an order not to allow young people, under 18 years, out of their homes in the evening. Where are the young street children expected to go, and the men and women who work overtime, or who may just want to be out. Under what law is the freedom of movement being vio-No doubt conservative opinion will see this as a step to prevent violence, but how will this deter domestic violence? The police are expected to maintain rule of law and peace, by taking action against perpetrators, not by incar-

rape. Recent newspaper reports of

suicides by young women following

gang rape, harassment or murder

are proof that women's bodies will

cerating innocent people. Therefore the women's struggle must move beyond the personal to the political, beyond asking for inclusion into an unjust order to remaking an order for social and gender justice and peaceful resolu-

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