

Aung Sun Suu Kyi's release

A triumph of the human spirit and people's will

AUNG Sun Suu Kyi has finally been released after 19 months as house arrested prisoner but over a decade in one sort of internment or other in Myanmar. She returned home after what became a political spring that never flowered but showed the colours of democratic aspiration of the people vividly. She has since then faced the wrath of the military rulers of Myanmar with unflinching courage. Her party's electoral victory which was denied, her personal tragedies and the deep sufferings of the people she led never mattered to the junta till time itself caught up with the junta. As they wrestled to remain relevant in a world which was leaving Myanmar swiftly behind, it suddenly became obvious that as long as Suu Kyi remained arrested, the world would not open the doors to that country. In the end the uncompromising rebel had forced the door open with the power of her patience and resilience.

The leader of the Myanmar people is a realist and she didn't hesitate to negotiate with the military rulers but without compromising her principles. This has made her free and open return to public life so significant. She has not gloated in victory but remained dignified and calm amidst the troubled waters of her own land and her own life.

Aung Sun Suu Kyi's capacity to withstand personal suffering is legendary. She lost her father when she was only 2 years old, a father who had led the fight for Burmese independence. Growing up in other lands, she returned at the peak of the democratic movement and though barred from standing in elections herself, her party won overwhelmingly. But instead of handing over power, the military banned her party, imprisoned her and let loose a reign of terror. This leader didn't respond with guns but with a quiet refusal to be vanquished. She lost her husband, missed her children who has spent the last decade without their mother but never gave in.

It's best that the present rulers of Myanmar realise that history has passed them by and their time to return to the barracks has returned again. The time has now come for the Aung Sun Suu Kyi to lead the people. That is a right not just of the frail and victorious politician but a right of the people who voted for her a decade ago and never saw their rights recognised.

And so today, her release is a day to celebrate the enduring power of the human spirit that is personified in name of Aung Sun Suu Kyi.

Men's role in family planning

It's time for an attitudinal change

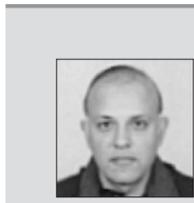
DESPITE some progress made in recent times towards gender equity, our society still remains essentially patriarchal. Men's dominant role in family affairs, including reproductive decision-making, is taken for granted and has never been questioned. In the urban areas, there has been an attitudinal change in this regard all right; however, it remains largely confined to the upper and upper-middle class families. Overall, men still enjoy an arbitrary role in decision-making even when it concerns women's contraceptive use. As a result, policymakers in population and development programmes have so far regarded men as inevitable obstructionists who, if not involved in reproductive decision-making, will defeat women's efforts to regulate fertility.

In other words, family planning and reproductive healthcare programmes have so far been unidirectional. While women have been ensured access to information on reproductive healthcare issues, men have been kept out of the purview of family planning.

In recent times, globally policymakers in population and healthcare programmes have realised the need to integrate men in overall family planning efforts. In 1994 the International Conference on Population and Development adopted a programme of action that stresses the importance of reproductive rights and reproductive health for both men and women. It resolved that the males, just as the females, must have effective access to appropriate information and healthcare services.

However, there has not been much progress in involving men with the family planning and reproductive healthcare process. Social, cultural and religious norms pose the biggest obstacle in this regard. To bring about a change in societal attitude, there cannot be any alternative to awareness building. The government needs to revise its family planning and reproductive healthcare strategy, making room for men. While it effects strategic changes, the non-government organisations, the media and the civil society should take up the responsibility of sensitising society about gender equity in reproductive decision-making.

Can't get away?



K.A.S. MURSHID

TRAGEDY, if I remember my undergraduate lectures in English literature, is a bit like being on a wild horse -- rushing headlong, uncontrollably and inexorably towards the inevitable fall! South Asians in general, and Bengalis in particular appear to be particularly susceptible to its dubious charms. How else can we explain that just when we thought that the bottom was reached we ingenuously discover new depths to aspire to? Consider for example, the happenings in Gujarat and the complexity of the State Government in that sordid and ghastly affair; consider the deal with the devil made by Parvez Musharraf -- "if you keep your mouth shut, dear devil, I will let you look for UBL in northern Pakistan". In my dear homeland, recent events have shown that (a) law and order can and will get worse, (b) corruption can and will get worse, and (c)

politicians can and will get away with their misdeeds! It seems we are wedded to certain habits, traditions and tendencies, and find it difficult to get away from them.

These non-original thoughts struck me with sudden force while listening to an artist introducing her work through a slide presentation at the Al Hembra Gallery in Lahore. The first time I came across her name was in fact on a flight from

Bangladesh. Now Salima is no ordinary person: a recently retired Professor of the National College of Arts, a highly respected artist, an excellent art critic and an offspring of the celebrated Urdu poet, Faiz Ahmed Faiz -- I was keen to meet her, and hence the gift... After the usual pleasantries Salima suggested, "If you have time why don't you come to a presentation by Shahzia Sekander at the Al

well but also discussed her work quite ably -- in English (thank God). O.K. I have digressed enough. We were discussing tragedy...

Why did Shahzia disturb me? No, it wasn't quite her subject matter or artistic style. It went slightly deeper. She painted miniatures -- most of the artists in these parts seem to be heavily into miniatures. After her graduation she went off to the US to study and later

However, ultimately she succumbed and found herself firmly back in her own words, in the 'vocabulary of the miniature'. "What a bloody waste", I thought. How much can you do with a static form depicting medieval men, women, peacocks and kings? This, I found truly tragic for here was a great opportunity to get away from the confines of a narrow space and it wasn't taken. Instead we merely

rather than be bothered about innovation and change? Isn't it this inability to get away that ultimately keeps us back? I have often wondered why the clay and paper toys and other artifacts that we find in *melas* (trade fair they call it these days), inevitably have the same shape, size and colour that they had many moons ago when I was a child. It is as if the same master-mould has been passed down from generation to generation with the warning that 'whosoever shall endeavour to change or alter this design will bring on the curse of the Ancients!'

As we get even more inexorably intertwined in the global economy (albeit superficially, at its periphery) our chances of breaking out and away become even more remote. The new international division of labour will keep us forever (or at least longer than you or I would wish) in the familiar role of 'hewers of wood and drawers of water', i.e. in the so-called labour-intensive industries -- while a few chosen ones amongst us will flourish upon achieving Western recognition and approval. I am sorry for sounding so depressive. You can't really blame me, right? After all, I did start out by talking about tragedy, and it is important to end in an appropriate note!

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BETWEEN YOURSELF AND ME

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Karachi to Lahore when my attention was drawn to a rave review in *the Dawn* proclaiming her as an artist who has 'arrived' -- not in Pakistan (that somehow doesn't count very much) but in the WEST, indeed in the US of A. This then was Pakistan's answer to our own Shahabuddin! I had made a mental note to check her out if a suitable opportunity presented itself. Such an opportunity came unexpectedly. I called Salima Hashmi one day to say that I was carrying a small packet for her from a friend in

Hembra? I will be introducing her". I turned up promptly the next day at the appointed hour.

I was very impressed with the ritual aspects of the presentation. There were no Chief Guests, Special Guests, Chairperson and Guests of Honour. Salima gave an excellent introduction for about 15 minutes and then invited Shahzia to talk. Later the artist took some questions from the floor -- all in English, and responded intelligently. Here then was an example of an artist who not only painted

work. It seems she also took with her, her 'miniature' mentality. I am not trying to demean miniatures -- some of her works are truly dazzling and extremely pretty -- but there are limitations to what you can do with that genre. She herself realized these constraints, and it seems she spent a long period of her career experimenting with ways of overcoming these. The result of some of that stuff was promising, managing to get the young artist good reviews in 'Art News' and the 'New York Times'.

ended up glorifying it further to ensure that many future generations will continue to chart out the same well-trodden path. As an aside I should add that Shahzia was introduced as a Pakistani artist who had made it in mainstream America -- a reminder of our slave-like need for Western approval and an inability to make an independent, credible assessment of our own worth. Is it a wonder therefore that lack of originality is an original sin in South Asia; that people prefer to imitate, memorise and copy

Le Pen's policy of fear reshaping European politics



HARUN UR RASHID

ALTHOUGH the French people overwhelmingly rejected the extreme right wing leader Jean-Marie Le Pen in the Presidential election on 5th May, it does not bring comfort to many in Europe and beyond. The very fact Le Pen was able to garner nearly 20 per cent votes from the French people is a matter of great concern. This implies that nearly one in five voters support the values of Le Pen, not that of President Chirac who urged the French people "to unite around essential values" of democracy.

Le Pen's National Front will now be fighting in the Parliamentary election next month and it has a fighting chance of gaining more than 100 seats of the 600-seat Parliament. Some political analysts maintain that Le Pen's party may even hold the balance of power in the next French government.

That an extreme right leader was able to contest the French Presidential election in the second round will have an impact on European politics for years to come. It will provide fodder to the extremist political parties in Europe.

Across Europe we witness that

extremism is creeping slowly and surely in main political stream. In the past few years, voters in several European countries have rallied to far right parties to register their fears about crime, unemployment, immigration, globalisation of economy and the expansion of the European Union. The far right parties have tapped into the mood of a section of low-paid and semi-skilled or unskilled unemployed

the country for crimes and unemployment. After September 11 attacks, a largely illogical fear of Muslims have emerged in Europe as a new ground to be exploited by the far right parties.

Outside France, ultra-right parties seem to enter in the political stream in many countries, such as Portugal, Denmark, Netherlands, Belgium, Norway, Germany and Switzerland. These are all ominous

He placed anti-immigration on socially liberal Dutch agenda and he called Islam "a backward and unenlightened religion".

In Belgium, the right wing party Vlaams Party led by Filip Dewinter gained a third of vote in Antwerp local election in October 2000 and the influence of the party has been growing. In Switzerland, the far right wing party, Swiss People's Party, led by Christoph Blocher,

right wing the Progress Party led by Carl Hagen won 15 per cent of support and joined the ruling centrist-right coalition late last year. Austria's far right party, Freedom Party, founded by Jorg Haider obtained 27 per cent support from the electorate and came into power as minority partner in coalition two years ago with centre-right People's Party.

In Germany Law and Order

an influx of highly skilled immigrants in the next few years if it is to overcome a labour shortage caused by a low birth rate and ageing population. A month ago the German Parliament passed controversial legislation opening up Germany up to skilled immigrant workers for the first time since the 70s.

The mighty rise of far right parties in Europe has torn up the political map across the continent. European voter's turn to the extreme right points out to a loss of faith in democratic values. Hitler got back to political power only with 33 per cent vote. The extent voters are prepared to go has shocked both moderate Europeans and beyond. The trend seems to be a nightmare scenario for the mainstream political parties. In Australia, the right wing party of Pauline Hanson disintegrated because some of its policies including that of asylum seekers have been adopted by the ruling Liberal Party.

A few analysts suggest that for survival, the mainstream parties in Europe may follow Australian Liberal Party strategy and are likely to veer towards right wing policies to attract voters from the far right. This is likely to give rise to, among others, discriminatory attitude towards migrants and more immigration control turning Europe into "a fortress".

Barrister Harun ur Rashid is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

BOTTOM LINE

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voters who do not fully realise the dynamics of change brought by globalisation and modern technology. The mainstream parties on the other hand appear to be oblivious of the seething discontent of a section of voters adversely affected by the change in global economy.

All the far-right parties preach the politics of passion and fear. They advocate easy and attractive solutions to voters, such as reintroduction of death penalty, deporting foreigners, ending entry of migrants and Islam bashing to combat crimes, unemployment and other social ills prevailing in Europe. During hard times the people need 'scapegoats' and the far right parties have cleverly created some "culprits" and pointed fingers to the migrants in

support for liberal democratic values which were dear to Europe since the French revolution in 1789. The slogans of the French revolution -- *Equality, Liberty and Fraternity* -- stressed the inner worth and dignity of all human beings, irrespective of their colour, religion and gender.

In Britain the extreme right wing party -- British National Party led by Nick Griffin -- has been able to secure three seats in the recent local elections. Its influence in rural area may increase in future. In the Netherlands, Mr. Pim Fortuyn, leader of the extreme right party was able to gain a third of vote in recent Rotterdam election. Polls say that he may win 20 per cent of vote in May 15 general election in the country and may emerge as key political force after May elec-

secured 22 per cent of vote at most recent elections. It is the second largest party in Switzerland. Denmark's Danish People's Party led by Pia Kjaersgaard won 22 per cent support in the general elections last November.

Some of the far right parties have joined the governments. In Portugal, the right wing party, Popular Party of Paulo Portas won more than 8 per cent of vote in last month general elections and Mr. Portas is now a Minister in the Social Democrat led government. The extreme right wing parties -- Northern League of Umberto Bossi and Northern Alliance of Gianfranco Fini of Italy -- have gained 10 per cent support and went into coalition government last May with Silvio Berlusconi's centre-right party Forza Italia. Norway's

Party of Ronald Schill won about 20 per cent vote in Hamburg state elections last year. It helped set anti-immigration agenda used by opposition leader Edmund Stoiber against centre-left government of Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder. It is reported that the result of the success of Le Pen played into hands of Mr. Stoiber who has spoken out against Germany opening its doors to more immigrants.

In a poll published in the business daily *Handelsblatt* on 2nd May, 46 per cent of Germans said they were against allowing in more immigrants and 36-41 per cent in the east Germany thought there were too many immigrants in the country already. Germany faces a messy situation, since the industry chiefs warn that the country needs

OPINION

Metropolitan government: Some comments

M. HAFIZUDDIN KHAN

THE Ex-Mayor of DCC has repeatedly attributed all his failures to the absence of a metropolitan government structure for Dhaka city. It is not clear to us why he could not sell his idea to the then government in power formed by the party of which he was one of the stalwarts. The newly elected Mayor has loudly supported the concept of Metropolitan Government and has already committed publicly that he would put his effort towards establishing the Metropolitan Government.

Without entering into the debate whether we really need a metropolitan government for Dhaka city in order to come out of the present plight in respect of basic civic services relating to disposal of solid waste, management of sewerage, provision of utilities, management of traffic and maintenance of law and order, I wonder what were the bottlenecks for which the DCC could not function efficiently in the following areas which constitute some of its compulsory responsibilities:

1) Disposal of solid waste: For discharging the duty of solid waste disposal DCC does not need any additional power and authority nor

does it need to coordinate with any other agency of the Government. Having exclusive jurisdiction the DCC is wholly and solely responsible to arrange for disposal of solid waste and it has got all the logistics needed to do the job. Its manpower for conservancy duty is, I am sure, adequate, if not much more than what it actually needed. The Dhakaites have a right to know for what fault of other agencies of the Government the DCC could not function efficiently in this area or what kind of additional empowerment the DCC needs in this respect.

2) Mosquito control: The same question can be raised here also. There was no dearth of manpower and there was no reason for the DCC to face shortage of fund to launch a mosquito eradication programme. If the DCC had really suffered from lack of fund for this programme, did it make any serious attempt to obtain subvention from the Government or is there any instance that the DCC's request for subvention for mosquito control project was turned down by the Government? It should also be examined how the DCC will be more efficient in controlling mosquito in case it is upgraded in to the Metropolitan Government. The mosquito control

apparatus will remain the same and it will not acquire any magic lamp to augment its wherewithal for the programme. Further it is not known if the DCC has ever monitored what kind of insecticide the mosquito control staffs were spraying and why there was no improvement in the situation.

In this connection I should narrate a very interesting experience of mine. The DCC staff working in my locality almost regularly sprayed insecticide around my house but there was no visible sign that the menace was being controlled. On enquiry he frankly admitted that the medicine that he had been spraying was nothing but a placebo, and if I would agree to pay him Tk 20 for each operation he would spray the real insecticide. To test the veracity of his statement I paid him the amount he demanded and at that time the spray really worked.

3) Maintenance of roads: The DCC has miserably failed to maintain the roads under its jurisdiction. Now which factor is responsible for this totally unsatisfactory situation? How a Metropolitan Government will bring an improvement in the situation? What power and authority the DCC is lacking in for maintenance of roads? If it is a

question of money how the fund position will improve with the establishment of the Metropolitan Government? It is widely believed that the DCC is not at all prudent in managing its finance specially because of prevalence of very widespread corruption therein. The DCC might say that digging of roads is a major cause for ill-maintenance of roads. But cutting of roads needs prior approval of the DCC and the cost of repair of roads so cut by various utility providers and individuals for obtaining service connections is realised by DCC in advance before permission for digging of road is accorded. Moreover the amount demanded by the DCC is exorbitantly high and not negotiable. Why then the DCC should fail in repairing the roads dug by utility providers and individuals?

The Israelis are armed to the teeth and the Palestinians have nothing to defend themselves with. It is an un-equal, one sided fight. Whatever small territory was apportioned to the Palestinians out of their ancient homeland of Palestine, taking advantage of their weaknesses, has frequently been encroached upon by the Israelis to build settlements for regular in-flow of Jews invited from around the globe. Frustrated Palestinians have no strength to fight the Jews, who have a militarily strong state, and are supported by the world powers. Such frustration and hurt emotions have driven some of them to undertake suicide attacks, the only weapon left to them to hurt the Israelis.

The Jews are historically shrewd, enterprising, selfish, rich but miser of heart and help. It is money that has all along been driving them blind of others' dues.

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Painful picture of Palestine

R D QURESHI

THE horror-scenes of Israeli atrocities on the Palestinians as portrayed on TV screens these days are unbearable to any person of some conscience. The retaliatory mass killings and destructions undertaken by the Israelis are publicly declared to be a measure to deter the Palestinians from their suicide missions into Israeli territories.

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The Jew was personified by Shakespeare in Shylock, the money-lender, in his 'Merchant of Venice', about four hundred years back, depicting the Jew as selfish and cruel. About their cruelty, an anti-zionist Jew, Israel Shahak says "Israelis today are not bashing their religion on the ethics of justice. They do not accept the Old Testament as it is written. Rather religious Jews turn to the Talmud. And the Talmud teaches that a Jew can kill a non-Jew with impunity. (Grace Halsell's 'What Christians Don't Know about Israel?' reprinted in the Muslim World League Journal, Oct. 2001). The shrewd Jews of the USA have captured all the key machinery of that country including politics, economy and the media. Grace Halsell, an American Christian, has stated in her aforesaid article that "American Jews sympathetic to Israel dominate key positions in all areas of our government where decisions are made regarding the Middle East." Again, "Former President Bill Clinton supported, as most members of Congress support, Israel and they know why. US Jews sympathetic to the Israel donate lavishly to their campaign coffers..."

Grace Halsell has quoted in her article an Israeli journalist saying "We believe with absolute certitude that right now with the White House in our hands, the Senate in our hands and the *New York Times* in

our hands, the lives of others do not count the same way as our own."

The Jews have a somewhat small nation-state of Israel. But they do have a world-wide nation of dedicated Zionists. Their love for and loyalty to Israel is superior to that of the countries they live in. Hate generated world-wide against the Jews, mainly for their greed for money and selfishness, accelerated in the last century and culminated in Germany in the forties. The cruel genocide presided over by Hitler was the ugly out-burst of that hate. But things changed after World War II. The Jews got their state Israel, sponsored by Britain and later fostered by USA. Israel is the whip of oil-hungry west to keep the oil-rich Arab states under constant pressure. Israelis have the upper hand and the Palestinians are no match for them. Yasser Arafat has no alternative to making compromises even on legitimate claims.

The Palestinians are supposed to know much more about these Jews. Even so, Chairman Yasser Arafat appears to have made great mistakes in handling things with the Israelis. In the brighter days of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations while Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres, and later Ehud Barak, were at the helm of affairs of the State of Israel and when a State of Palestine was at the door-step of Arafat, he failed to strike a deal, even if it

was not totally satisfactory. If he could strike that deal, the State of Palestine would have taken shape, attained full membership of the United Nations and formal recognition of countries around the world, including neighbouring Arab countries. Having attained that position, it could have a protective umbrella against any possible threat from Israel. The image of Yasser Arafat would have brightened as a world leader like Nelson Mandela and secured for him a place in history. Instead, Chairman Arafat took an uncompromising stand that prompted the Jews to choose hardliner Benjamin Netanyahu, and after a short-break, still harder Ariel Sharon, the killer, to deal with Arafat.

The situation reminds us of the Battle of Kurukshetra narrated in the great epic 'Mahabharata'. The Kurus and the Pandavas fought that battle for land, the kingdom. The Kurus, who proclaimed not to spare a piece of land as tiny as the tip of a needle, lost the battle and their lives.

A thick cloud over Palestine has darkened the whole scenario and there does not appear any hope of a sunshine in the days to come. If the situation prolongs, the fate of the Palestinians and that of Yasser Arafat will become more and more uncertain.