

Women ward commissioners sidelined

End the tokenism, let them function to their potential

IT is the word-for-word replay of the same old story concerning the women union parishad representatives who had resigned themselves to a second-fiddle role impelled by male domination. This time the female ward commissioners of city corporations are grilling their male counterparts who have been trifling with them. And, the worst part of it is nobody even cares to take note of their plight, not even with the trained eye of the UP experience.

We are on the grievances ventilated in a chorus by 55 amongst 64 female ward commissioners of Dhaka, Khulna, Rajshahi and Chittagong corporations at a city workshop organised -- thanks to them -- by the Nari Udyog Kendra recently. They made their ire known through a press conference on Monday. The litany of complaints reeled off against their male counterparts should basically make the LGRD ministry and top government leaders sit up and take note because it's a policy matter. The list ranges from lack of fixed office space through want of transport to a self-amused non-cooperation from their male colleagues looking upon them as 'adornment'. If the gender discrimination against women that one notices on the general plane is to prevail in an elected local body, that too an urban-based one like a city corporation, pray tell, where do we turn to -- either for reducing male-female hiatus or for reaching high standards in representative management of the metropolitan municipalities?

A flash-back will put us in the perspective about the aspirations and disappointments centring around women's representation at different tiers of the still truncated local government structures. In the first place, we found something to congratulate ourselves on, when at the very least, the windows of union parishads were flung open to female representation up to 33 per cent of the elected office-bearers' strength at the grass-roots level. And, as the elections got underway, rural women came forward in large numbers to participate in them. They stood in the polls with great enthusiasm which in effect ensured a heavy turn-out of female voters. Expectations ran high among most people that the women elected representatives will herald a new participatory development process in rural Bangladesh. But as soon as they took office, they saw to their utter dismay, an outright undermining of their position. They would be given no role with defined powers and functions to go by. They languished on the peripheries of the mainstream decision-making as well as implementation processes.

Nevertheless, on the back of it, and without a lesson learnt to perfect the system, 33 per cent of the ward commissioner posts in the four city corporations were similarly reserved for women without any operational handbook to help them do the job instead of acting it. The elections that followed were marked by their robust participation once again. There was an overflow of self-congratulatory greetings this time as well. All of this was quickly dubbed as the harbinger of a new-age women's representation on the so-called local self-government system.

The women ward commissioners are left high and dry without any job description to guide them. They are told that they will function much the same way that their male counterparts do, because they hold the same position after all. But in reality, they are shortchanged by being confined to the women and child oppression paradigm. The cheating is even greater when the male commissioners wash their hands of the repression affairs even though men are mostly responsible for violence on women and children. Socio-economic development agenda including environment, healthcare, communication *et al* are male preserves!

What basically amounts to rubbishing the commitment to women's empowerment at this vital level is this: although it has been a few months that the DCC budget was announced and the male commissioners have received their financial allocation to the tune of Tk 40 lac each, the female ones cut a sorry figure in luck. But since being elected, their obligations to voters have started playing out; in some cases, the women ward commissioners are spending money from their own wallet to defray some unforeseen expenses.

The most tragic thing about their predicament is they are having to wait out for a role, when ironically because of the practical arithmetic of their reservation quota, each one of them is actually representing three constituencies. Give them a role, therefore, that they so richly deserve. Don't showcase them as an empowerment success when it's the exact opposite of what you claim. God help women representatives.

ETV



HASNAT ABDUL HYE

Like Spielberg's ET the TV channel ETV also suddenly came out of the blue and instantly won the hearts and minds of many, including children, across the country. Its telecast, reached through terrestrial and satellite facilities, made it the only electronic media of its kind in Bangladesh. In spite of its known leanings the channel managed to be objective in its news and views programmes. Besides, there was enough innovation in programme design and their presentation to earn plaudits. Small wonder that its popularity grew steadily both at home and abroad. To many, ETV became a credible alternative channel with real autonomy in its policy. A continuous and long life for the channel was assured by these qualities of performance and organizational ethos buttressed by the fact that it had no resource constraint, having already mobilized adequate fund through syndicated loans and equity finance. When, on 29th August, ETV departed suddenly, like the creature in Spielberg's ET, it not only came as a surprise to the ordinary people, it made many of its admirers sad. Since then emotions have run high and can be expected to continue for quite some time. This is understandable but should not stand in the way of explanation and rational analysis.

ETV Limited is a body corporate formed under the Companies Act. It

is a legal entity separate from the licence. In order to operate as an electronic media it needed a licence from the government. This it obtained through purchase from an individual who had got it from the government earlier under an agreement. In point of time ETV Ltd. thus came later on the scene (2000) than the 'licence' obtained by the applicant (1999). ETV started its operation from March, 2000 on the basis of that licence. Everything went on smoothly until the legality of the

seven member full court of the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court chaired by the Chief Justice after hearing the arguments dismissed the review petition. It is reported that on the last day of hearing one of the legal counsels, a leading lawyer of the country, emotionally said: "shortly we are to attend the funeral of a lawyer. Are we to read the last rites of the Constitution and the Supreme Court along with that?" Earlier it was reported in the news paper that another counsel for

about judicial proceedings that it is on incontrovertible evidence that judgements always rest. In the event, the Judges were neither convinced by the evidence produced nor were moved by emotional appeal. As one of them reportedly said, their hands were tied by law.

ETV suffered further setbacks for its last minute act of impetuosity. There must have been great confusion that influenced its action and utterances. It is understandable but

ties or lapses of legality could not have remained undetected over such a time frame. ETV could not also be complacent that the environment in which it was established would continue forever, without any change of milieu. ETV thus has become a victim of either its own naivete or complacency. The end result is the stoppage of a channel that had opened a new horizon in electronic media in Bangladesh and gained in popularity steadily. Its admirers are no less shocked and

will naturally be happy if ETV can obtain a fresh licence but it could not confer BTV that happiness by declaring an illegal licence as valid and legal. For this the court should not be misunderstood. Both the letter and spirit of its judgement show its positive attitude. ETV should feel encouraged by this fact.

Another silver lining is that the government was not a party in the legal case over the licence. In de-linking terrestrial telecasting facility it has merely carried out court's decision. The subsequent seizure of satellite equipment was triggered by the agitated mood of ETV as seen in its press briefing after the court's order and plans to continue with telecasting on the advice of some of its counsels. The government's actions have only been predictable. But the government has another role. It is responsible for and is the main instrument of promoting public interest. It should therefore take a benign view over ETV if it abides by the law and applies for a fresh licence. If all requirements are fulfilled it should grant it a new licence. It should be seen as being magnanimous and sympathetic to institutions that promote public interest. Besides running a popular channel ETV employed thousands of staff and provided scope to many local artists which should be taken into consideration. This will, of course, not require compromise over irregularities done by individuals in connection with the impugned licence. In that respect law should take its own course. De-linking that action from the consideration of the application of a new licence will show the government as being pragmatic and constructive. In Spielberg's ET, smiles that disappeared returned at the end on the faces of children. Viewers of ETV deserve that experience of happy ending. They are not at fault.

Hasnat Abdul Hye is a former secretary, novelist and economist.

The government's actions have only been predictable. But the government has another role. It is responsible for and is the main instrument of promoting public interest. It should therefore take a benign view over ETV if it abides by the law and applies for a fresh licence. If all requirements are fulfilled it should grant it a new licence. It should be seen as being magnanimous and sympathetic to institutions that promote public interest.

'licence' was challenged by three persons through a writ petition in the High Court eleven months ago (2001). Rule Nisi was subsequently issued by the High Court on the basis of this writ petition on 19th September, 2001. ETV sought to defend the legality of the licence through its lawyers. On 27th March, 2002 the High Court declared the licence as illegal and ineffective. ETV then applied for leave to appeal to the Appellate Division which rejected it on 2nd July, 2002 upholding the High Court verdict that the ETV licence was illegal. However, the court stayed the verdict for five weeks and then for three more weeks leaving the scope to file a review petition. Thus enough time was granted to allow ETV to file another petition seeking a review of the rejection of the leave to appeal petition.

ETV, through its legal counsels, filed a review petition to the Appellate Division praying for review. The hearing began on 24th August; it took place under a special arrangement although the court was in vacation. A

ETV told the Appellate Division that the bench would feel ashamed if it went through the judgement in the leave to appeal case that was rejected earlier. Another counsel for ETV is also reported to have made emotional references before the court.

Newspaper reports covering the case thus show that the High Court and the Appellate Division gave adequate time and went through a lengthy procedure to allow the counsels of ETV to prove that the allegations of the petitioners in the writ petition was false. A formidable team of lawyers, comprising the senior most legal personalities in the country represented ETV. But they failed to convince the High Court and the Appellate Division of Supreme Court by their arguments and evidence about the legality of the licence used by ETV to operate its programme. Their recourse to emotions was the appeal of last resort, a tactic not uncommon in legal proceedings. But the legal counsels knew it as well as any person knowledgeable

does not justify the failure to be correct. Because it did not stop telecasting on the basis of the court verdict on the licence and was continuing with its satellite programme, some of its equipment have now been seized by the government. ETV could have avoided this development if it was more prudent.

Many will feel sorry for the turn of events leading to the closure of ETV. It was evidently misinformed by the original holder of licence. Now that the licence has turned out to be illegal ETV can claim to be not directly responsible. But it should have got the licence properly scrutinized by legal experts before the purchase. The illegality of the licence must have been of such a gross nature that it was no secret or shrouded in mystery. It was known to the petitioners of the writ and perhaps to others. How could this escape the examination of the legal experts of ETV? They should have realized that once an enterprise like ETV comes into operation it can expect a long lease of life. Gross irregulari-

ties or lapses of legality could not have remained undetected over such a time frame. ETV could not also be complacent that the environment in which it was established would continue forever, without any change of milieu. ETV thus has become a victim of either its own naivete or complacency. The end result is the stoppage of a channel that had opened a new horizon in electronic media in Bangladesh and gained in popularity steadily. Its admirers are no less shocked and

disappointed than it is over the closure. All may not be over yet. ETV as a company, still exists. It has the skilled manpower, a group of dedicated field staff, the experience of the past, the finances of investors and the goodwill of its viewers. But it does not have a valid licence to operate. This is the most important and essential pre-condition for its active life. Without licence ETV will remain comatose. There is however a silver lining in the dark cloud. As of now there is no legal restraint on the company to apply for a new licence. The verdict of the Appellate Division has observed that "our judgement will have no bearing in considering the application by the ETV for a fresh licence" from the Bangladesh Telecommunications Regulatory Commission (BTRC), "which is free to decide the application in accordance with law" (The Daily Star). It is evident that the court has not only taken a legal stand regarding the defunct licence but has at the same time shown its sympathy for ETV. It

Chicken or egg?



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

HE coughed for a long time until his stomach started to hurt and it seemed to him that his guts were already swollen and numb. The chickens and hens were creaking next to him, tied in their legs in groups of four, like slaves hauled from the Slave Coast of Africa. The nervous fowls, fidgeting on the pavement heated by a scorching sun, fluttered their wings whenever a passing car honked, or someone talked loud in the spasmodic crowd. He looked at his wares with a mesmerizing gaze, and asked himself which of the two had come first: chicken or egg.

A column of tickling sensations heaved to his throat, and he coughed again. The fowls creaked as if to express their displeasure with his obnoxious coughing, which, the doctor said, was a result of alternating exposures to heat and cold. He sweats in the sun and gets wet in the rain, and feels like a puppet of nature, manipulated by the whims of fate.

He resents hawking those inno-

cent birds, which end up in the stomachs of voracious men. From time to time he wonders why it was his fate to be engaged in such a peculiar trade, providing protein to more fortunate men to ensure carbohydrates on his plate. He doesn't consume his own merchandise unless it is apparent that a fowl is almost dead or about to die.

The birds were panting in the heat; their beaks open while

ination, the pedestrian concluded with a coroner's confidence that the chickens were not young and would taste like boiled rubber once cooked.

He has been in business long enough not to give in to a buyer's onslaught. He knows certain amount of coquetry goes into a bargain. The buyer pretends he doesn't like the commodity, yet he spends time to pare down the price. The

chicken, because it doesn't fetch them a profit. He swears in the name of Allah, his parents and everything holy on earth, and between lies makes his money.

His father taught him a trade secret, when he was a boy, and followed him on the streets of Dhaka and guarded the fowls while his father indulged in siesta. There are three chickens in every bargain, his father said, the buyer, the seller and

ing his children and wife. There was something stupid about the whole thing he said, but it nevertheless was the strength, which guided man through his life.

He coughed in the manner of a hysteric and his body shook like twigs in the storm. The noise on the street had escalated with the heat as the sun poised in the mid-sky, as though a wary traveler was about to make up his mind. The chickens and

ishment of men, their flesh torn and bones crushed to satisfy the ravenous hunger of these large animals.

It seemed to him that he was going to die like his father as the tremors of coughing hit him again. He held his belly with both hands as if to prevent it from exploding under the havoc of violent jolts. How much he despised this recurring cure of chicken and egg, this endless repetition, perpetuated in the throes of life imitating itself!

He wished he could sell the remaining fowls and go home to lie down in bed. He felt very exhausted in the heat, and the impact of coughing had made him weak. His eyes diluted, his body loosened, and the crowd on the street slowly went out of focus. In the haze of heat, it appeared to him that the street was full of giant chickens, walking upright on their feet.

When he woke up, the chickens and hens were pecking on the pavement. He took out some rice from his pouch and sprinkled in front of those birds, because he realized they were hungry. He stared at them with a mesmerizing gaze, and a peculiar sadness wrenched inside his heart. None of them would live to lay eggs, and countless eggs and chickens would perish with them.

Hypocrisy of man! He exclaimed. One of the unresolved mysteries, which fail his intelligence, is whether chicken came first or the egg. Yet he gobbles up both without qualms, so that he can have the nourishment to sustain that intelligence.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

CROSS TALK

The chickens and hens were pecking on the pavement. He took out some rice from his pouch and sprinkled in front of those birds, because he realized they were hungry. He stared at them with a mesmerizing gaze, and a peculiar sadness wrenched inside his heart. None of them would live to lay eggs, and countless eggs and chickens would perish with them...Hypocrisy of man! He exclaimed.

tongues flickered like blades of grass quivering in the wind. A musty smell drifted in the air, the combination of miasma of chicken drops and odor of tender flesh steaming under feathers. He feels sorry for himself and the birds, because together they are locked in an unbreakable cycle of destiny in which one must perish so that another goes on.

A pedestrian stopped in front of him and asked for the price of his chicken. He picked up a bundle of four and held them upside down like a bunch of grapes. The pedestrian's clumsy hand reached for the crotch of every chicken and examined the clitoris-like cartilage sticking out of its abdomen. At the end of his exam-

seller desperately needs the cash, but he hangs tight as if he couldn't lower the price even if he had to wait until the end of the world.

He looked at the chickens and hens, which were huddled on the pavement like a consignment of slaves on the floor of a ship. Suddenly he felt guilty for them as though he was trafficking living creatures for a sordid trade. He has been buying and selling them throughout his life.

He goes from village to village and tells the farmers that folks in the city don't like to eat chicken because it's so expensive. He tells the same story to the buyers with a different twist; the farmers don't like to raise

the chicken itself. The buyer is afraid of being cleaned up by the seller, the seller fears the buyer would squeeze him dry, and all that time the poor chicken thinks it is going to die.

Before his father died, he told him that the entire mystery of life revolved within the bargaining skills of buyers and sellers. Death buys and life sells, while man is the chicken that worries all the time. Fate picks up the group, father, mother, brother, sister, husband, wife, etc. and then love ties them together, all suffering in hardships, yet none trying to escape leaving others behind. That is why, his father said, he never thought of abandon-

hens were drowsy by now, the dry spell of hot summer bringing them temporary relief from the fear of death that haunted them ever since they had sprung out of the shells of hatched eggs. He stared at the birds and wished he knew which of the two, chicken or egg, came first.

His father had also thought of the same question, and died without an answer. In the end the old man used to mumble that it didn't matter which came first because nothing would have changed the sufferings of chickens on earth. A throbbing, scurrying emblem of life would be captured and sold like slaves from Africa, its existence justified by nothing more than the appetite and nour-

OPINION

Student politics: Is tempest looming overhead?

KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

MANY minds are agitated over the senseless and mindless killings of the very young by murderers who are also barely out of their teens; over four and half thousand women raped last year (DS 17th August) by rapists mostly twenty something; apex educational institution under seizure following mid-night raid on a girls' hostel by the law enforcement people; another just opened after a long closure caused by the totally unnecessary death of an innocent student caught unaware in the cross-fire of the turf war between two so-called student groups. The list is endless...In the backdrop of litany of social aberrations Cicerian precept of the safety of the people being the highest law has fallen into disuse. Of greater relevance is, perhaps, the fact that law is the expression of the strongest for the time being and therefore has no fixity. Incessant assault on the intelligence and intellect of the people by successive regimes have led us up the Russellian path to discard 'naïve realism' (the doctrine that things are what they seem) and accept Cartesian dialectics of first person claim to knowledge (*An Enquiry into Meaning and Truth* - Bertrand Russell). In our case the unending corrosion of social values resulting to everything remotely civilized was not an inevitable passenger of our independence train. After all many countries in the past became inde-

pendent either with the acquiescence of their colonial masters or through armed revolt (as in the case of Bangladesh). But not all have been assailed by such rapid decay of values that their pungent smell has made living difficult for the living.

Responsibility has to be shared by all -- the successive regimes and the people who continue to elect one failed government after another. Augustus Ceasar once boasted that he found a Rome of bricks and left it of marbles. But one of his later day detractors felt that Augustus would have fared much better if he had found law dear and left it cheap, found it in a sealed book and left it a living letter, found it the patrimony of the rich and left it the inheritance of the poor (Henry Peter Brougham Nieman Reports, 1956). We in Bangladesh cannot even in our wildest dream imagine that Tony Blair's wife can be fined for travelling without a ticket (she had no time to buy the ticket as the train was pulling out of the platform) or that Chancellor Schroeder's driver can be asked by a traffic policeman to move the car as it was parked in a no parking zone (the Chancellor was reportedly having dinner at a Berlin restaurant at that time with some of his friends). The basic point is that all are equal in the eye of the law and are treated equally -- essential ingredients in the coherence and cohesiveness of a society -- and not the comical regal manner

with which favours are doled out to the loyalists. Keith Griffin sees inequality undermining the legitimacy of the political regime. He argues that inequality, and the aversion to the ruthlessness that often are required to sustain it, weaken the rule of law, sever the bonds of trust that enable a society to function properly and destroy social solidarity necessary for a society to

the country called for a moratorium on student politics to stop campus violence. Last week an Expert Committee on Education Reform recommended to keep educational institutions free from student politics. Encouraged by BUET's decision the government reportedly is considering blanket moratorium on student politics in all government and private colleges. If the government

quality and their sons and daughters should have taken up the oars of family responsibility. The litany of crimes committed by these people is endless, the saga too despicable to be repeated, the train too horrific to be revisited.

Undeniably the student community in Bangladesh (as elsewhere) played commendable role at critical

ing at the degenerate and suicidal path chosen by some so-called students who would have been the rightful inheritors of the societal bequest.

Bangladeshis who are on the wrong side of fifty years of age would recall the American students' organization called Students for Democratic Society (SDS). Better

Students do take up cause of national and international importance. But rarely in the educational history of the world student politics has reached such debasement as in Bangladesh.

operate as an effective state (*Culture and Economic Growth* by Keith Griffin - Global Futures 2000). Do we rest our oars and sail no more in our quest for truth beyond blaming the government of the moment? Or do we settle on banning student politics (which amazingly has opponents in the name of safeguarding civil rights, civil liberties, right of dissent etc)? Or do we, in desperation, go Thoreau's way to resist civil government?

Judicial Probe body report into the girls' hostel incident has reportedly indicted the Dhaka University administration's unguardian like actions and the teacher-student political divide for the unparalleled infamy which occurred.

Recently Bangladesh Engineering University slapped a ban on student politics. In the last parliamentary session the Prime Minister of

can carry it through then the Prime Minister would rightly deserve the gratitude of the entire nation. Far too long Bangladesh society has remained captive to a band of so-called students who have criminalised the entire education system. Far too long they have enjoyed immunity from prosecution for criminal misdeeds and protection of their godfathers. Far too long innocent by-standers have been killed and property damaged because of their delinquency. Far too long these so-called students have vandalized the intellect of the people secure in the knowledge of societal charity of silence. Far too long many guardians had to bear the unbearable burden of supporting their off-springs' stay at the educational institutions when they rightfully should have spent the twilight years of their life in peace and tran-

junctions of our history: 1952 Language Movement was spearheaded by the students; consequently 21st February has become an integral part of our national psyche. Students agitated against the dictatorial rule of General Ayub Khan, which rolled into the great political movement of late sixties, War of Liberation, and ultimately the emergence of Bangladesh as a free, independent and sovereign nation. But on all these occasions the nation called upon the students to go beyond their call of duty, to walk the extra mile because the students with their youthful exuberance, their fearless courage, their indomitable will could do what others could not. These glorious deeds had nothing to do with tender snatching, extortion, and other criminal acts raping the attention of a benumbed society helplessly look-

known for its activism of the Vietnam War SDS promoted the principles of participatory democracy instead of representative democracy; held economic inequality, nuclear arms race, racism and political apathy for their corrosive effects on American society. SDS saw inconsistency in American belief that all men are created equal and the fact that blacks and minorities were incessantly being discriminated against. Increasing factionalism and winding down of the Vietnam War led to the dissolution of SDS which became defunct in the mid-seventies. The European SDS -- the Socialist Students' League -- born in then West Berlin in 1967 in the backdrop of Vietnam War, military regime in Greece, assassinating of Martin Luther King Jr and the student revolt in France. SDS was Marxist in inspiration but sought

freedom from the entrenched bureaucrats of the Soviet bloc who had a stranglehold on power. SDS opposed then West German government's efforts to enact Emergency Law (agreed upon by the USA, Britain and France as former occupying powers) enabling the government during war or natural disaster related emergencies to suspend Parliament, intercept mails and tap phones. Student protest in 1975 in Malaysia led to the legislature passing amendments to the Universities and Colleges Act of 1971 making it a crime for students to join any political party or trade union without the permission of the university authorities, and infraction of this law stipulated permanent expulsion from the university, incarceration and fine. The world is fully aware of the students' revolt following the military coup in Burma in 1988 and its brutal suppression as of the Tianmen Square student demonstration of 1989. Point being made here is that students, at critical juncture of a nation's history, rose up to face specific challenges but nowhere were they tied to the apron string of political parties who with careless abandon played on the greed and avarice of the students for their own selfish ends.

Student governments do exist. Consisting of elected students and some faculty members the body acts as a channel of communication between the students and the administrative entity. These bodies limit their activities to educational, disciplinary and extra-curricular

activities. There are also Fraternities and Sororities of various types which basically recognize academic excellence of its members. As mentioned earlier in this article students do take up cause of national and international importance. But rarely in the educational history of the world student politics has reached such debasement as in Bangladesh. Lenin saw no morals in politics, only expedience. Thomas Jefferson advised everyone he loved not to get involved in politics. Benjamin Derail saw no honor in politics. Yet all of them were icons and would always remain so. In today's post-Westphalian world where inter-dependence based on multilateralism and international regimes are getting increasing global attention, the abyssal depth of moral and intellectual poverty into which our student politics have fallen, can not but be of great concern to any thinking citizen. One hopes for the sake of future generations the governmental plan to ban student politics will be implemented without fear or favour of the crowd and the government will not attempt to supplant one group of criminals with another. If honestly done then Bangladesh government would have removed another blemish from our polity as it did by stopping the financial hemorrhage by closing down a state owned enterprise.

Kazi Anwarul Masud is a retired Secretary to the Bangladesh government and former ambassador.