

Dowry: The crime continues

MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

NOT only in the cities and towns but even in the villages of Bangladesh, terror has come stalking. Now the weapon of fear is not only the gun but a can of petrol or kerosene and a matchbox. A woman on fire has made dowry deaths the most vicious of social crimes. It is an evil prevalent in the society and despite efforts by some activists and women's rights organisation to eliminate this menace, the numbers have continued to climb. In villages marriage was once considered a very sanctified bond united in the worst or best of times, in sickness or in health through the vicissitudes of life. But dowry related deaths have shattered that bond of peaceful and happy relationship. A recent survey by the Bangladesh Human Rights Organisation, and Bangladesh Women Lawyers Association revealed that in 2001, there were 12,500 cases of women repression, in 2002 the figure rose to 18,455 and in the year ending in 2003 the figure climbed to 22,450. The grisly act of a brute and greedy husband in Chapai Nawabganj as reported in the newspapers on December 27 last is a story better not be heard. Having failed to realise a dowry claim of Tk. 20,000/= Shamsher killed her wife Marina just on the 22nd day of their marriage. The most grisly side of the story is that Shamsher hired three other monsters for Tk 300/= and Marina was slaughtered by Shamsher after she was forced to be gangraped by four human monsters including himself.

Reports appearing in local dailies on September 6 last indicated that one housewife at Dupchachia Upazila in the district of Bogra and the other at Jhalakathi Fatema and Sajeda, respectively, aged around 19 years were killed by their in-laws in collusion with their husbands on their inability to meet increasing demands of dowry money. It's the brutality of these crimes that has awakened the country to the beast that runs loose in these greedy monster-turned husbands. Criminologists as well as Crime Assessment Wing of the government and some NGOs assert that crime rate among the youth, especially such deviant young husbands, has gone up by as much as 40 percent. And though crime wave flows across all races,

classes and life styles, the survey makes particular mention of the fact that there is a noticeable increase in the dowry related crimes by young husbands from middle class or upper middle class families. The country wide survey conducted by the Bangladesh Women Lawyers' Association revealed that women repression incidents, mostly dowry related, has increased alarmingly over the last few years.

The killing of an industrialist's daughter at Dhanmondi about a month ago by her husband, still a college student whom the girl herself had chosen to marry, is a pathetic reminder that wealth

was used to perpetuate ostentatious living. With get-rich-quick becoming the new goal of life, dowry became the perfect instrument for upward material mobility. Growing consumerism, flashy life styles and in most cases joblessness and drug addiction are fueling these crimes. If once a bicycle, a wrist watch or a small money for starting a business sufficed for the lower income groups, now a TV, home appliances and a motorbike or scooter other than cash money are the common demand. For the upper, middle class and better educated grooms the demand is soaring. They look for a flat ownership a plot of land at Dhaka or a chunk of share in business. People

in-law Ariful Hossain have since been arrested. Unhappily, there are more stories of dowry harassment that ultimately lead to death than are reported in the newspapers. For women it is a difficult battle to win. They are hand-capped by history, victims of a firmly embedded gender system.

True, increased awakening has led to a growing resistance against dowry demands but consequently resulted in a familial friction. Driven to desperation, Zerin Binte Zahir in a posh flat at Banani, Dhaka committed suicide by hanging herself from the ceiling fan. Zerin, a qualified airline pilot was not allowed by her addict

about dowry prohibition or anti-dowry movement but when it comes to the wedding of their own sons and daughters, most people would do the same thing. P.M.'s D.O. letter to heads of educational institutions will not create any tangible impact unless the political parties have made it mandatory for members to take an oath that they shall neither give nor receive dowry. Shockingly true, down the years the lack of collective political will to curb dowry has become obvious.

The sons of land owners in the Dhaka Metropolitan city, owners of apartment blocks besides the grooms with MBA degrees and computer related degrees and diplomas are considered top-notch catches in the groom bazaar. The rich revel in the exchange of black money but the pressure on other classes to ape them has serious social consequences. In most cases affluent parents think that big dowries will strengthen their daughter's position in the husband's family. But appallingly, should the marriage go wrong, there is no way that this fabulous gifts in the form of cash, jewellery and property can be retrieved.

More intriguing, in most cases girls do not have any knowledge or participation in the deal. Dowry is often a monetary deal between two men -- the bride's father and the groom. Despite promulgation of Acid Control Act, 2002 and Dowry Prohibition Act the numbers of dowry related atrocities and deaths are climbing up and it is true, as the P.M. has indicated, a big social movement is a must to stop giving and taking of money. The law may help take temporary punitive action, but later women need real social, financial, moral and ideological support to stand firmly against an age old system that has almost got an unwritten societal sanction. Women face double peril. Inside the barred doors is humiliation, outside awaits public ire. Harassed and tortured women are now going to court or police for protection. But even if appeals for protection are met only scorn greets them when they return home. Despite every stigma, dowry continues to be the signature of marriage. The odd NGO groups, or women activists or Women Lawyers' Association may pursue one or two cases and rehabilitate some tortured women, but appallingly by and large any major success or breakthrough is hardly possible because social intervention is low and ignorance high.

No doubt, the laws remain stringent. But a dowry death is a relatively easier crime than murder to prosecute and so the crime continues. Due to several factors, most go unreported. And in the court, a majority of the victims belong to the under privileged classes and they have hardly any means to fight out the lengthy legal battles. While court appearances and seeking police protection in all these types of torture and violence by husbands appear to be a traumatic experience, most women prefer to sweep their bitter experiences under the carpet. However, the strength must come from the society and the government. Almost all agencies tend to "exploit women's labour without supporting it," maintaining it and enhancing it. In a bid to weed out this menace from the system that scenario must be changed.

MD. ASADULLAH KHAN, formerly a teacher of Physics, is Controller of Examinations, BUET.

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can't buy happiness. Her husband, an addict and a derailed boy, was reportedly pursuing BBA course in Bangalore, India with money provided by his father-in-law. He came back to Dhaka reportedly on a vacation and demanded as usual a hefty sum of money which his wife refused to meet this time. They slept together in the same room on that fateful night and early morning he fled away keeping the room locked. The industrialist's daughter was later found dead in that locked room.

Although many cases of dowry harassment cases were reported of late, a staggering number of such cases were not. Despite all attempts to prevent it, an epidemic appears to be in the making. It is a phenomenon that escapes easy answers due to complex mix of social trends. The sudden affluence, of course of a section of people, that emerged starting from rural areas to the cities in the mid-to-late '80s is the primary factor. The money, as social scientists say, was not channelised productively. Instead of using it to enhance women's education, for instance, it

are inclined to believe that the quantum of dowry may still be higher among the upper classes but 90 percent of the dowry deaths and nearly 80 percent of dowry harassments occur at the middle and lower strata.

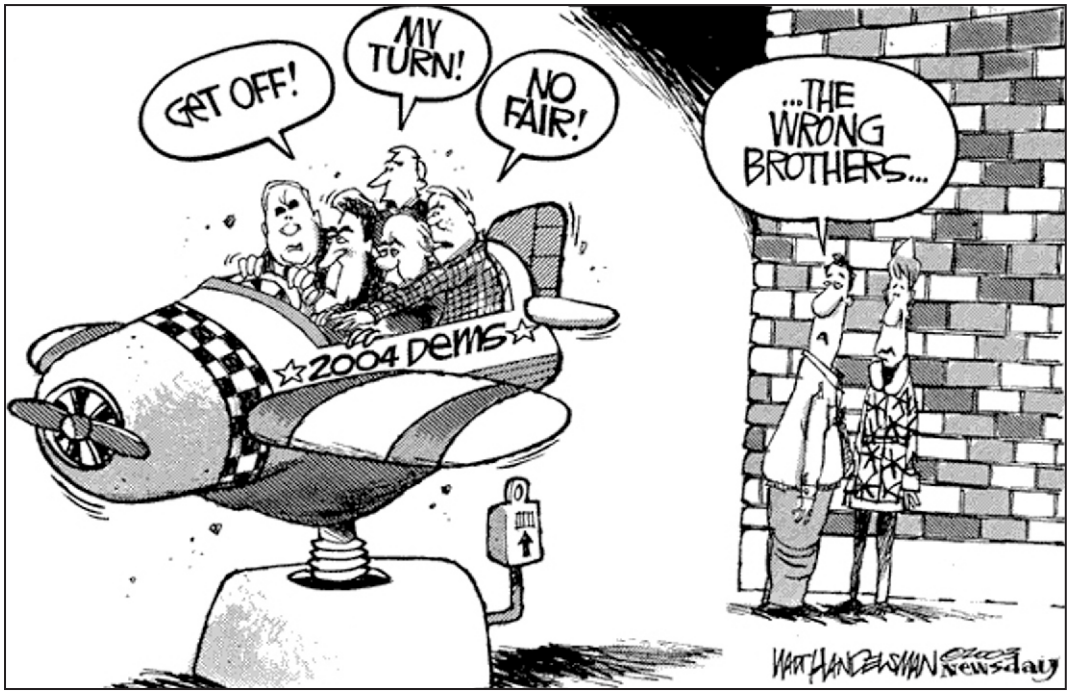
It is hard to believe but harder still to comprehend. Some of these tales are so horrifying. Beauty Akhtar of Dhamraj Upazila was married to Muntaj Ahmed of Arpara village in Manikganj about two and a half years ago. Beauty's father met his son-in-law's dowry demand by paying three lakh taka. But Muntaj's greed was insatiable. He started torturing her for more money and at one stage locked her in a room for three days without food. It so happened that on November 12 last, the entire family including husband, father-in-law, mother-in-law and other in-laws beat her with iron rod in a row. Somehow this incident of torture reached her father and he lodged an FIR Savar thana. As reports go Beauty is recuperating at the Manikganj Hospital and her husband Muntaj Ahmed, father-in-law Ashrafuddin Ahmed and brother-

husband Abbas, a pilot in the Bangladesh Biman, to work as reported in newspaper and suffered brutal torture at his hands, day in and day out. As Zerin got married in consequence of a love affair, she tried to conceal the tales of her torture from her parents.

Mentionably, Nisha Sharma, the daughter of an affluent family in Hyderabad, India, became an overnight celebrity in refusing to marry the man whose family upped its dowry demand. It was the stand that Nisha, an educated girl, took when the price tag for her groom, a software engineer went bigger and bigger. Nisha's decision at the fag end of the increasing amount of dowry is anything but heroic. Her attempt at dissolving the marriage, calling the police and handing over the prospective in-laws has broken the ice. In Bangladesh, women are yet to wake up and take a bold stand against dowry because most women are steeped in poverty often with no education, employment or business to fend for themselves. Sad but true, it typifies the nonchalance to the crime that goes on. The belief that most husbands or their families can get away with such crime is one of the main reasons why torture on wives is so common in the country.

Some recent dowry related harassments and tortures leading to deaths that have created ripples at home and abroad have prompted Prime Minister Khaleda Zia to issue an appeal to all heads of public and private universities and Education Boards to wage a war against dowry in the country. All findings indicate that dowry demands in the country have multiplied tenfold over the last one decade. Precisely speaking, there is a sticky web of issues surrounding it. The much hyped luxury needs of the consumerist society is one. Most upper middle class families due to lack of proper education and culture have realised that this is an easy way to acquire wealth and live comfortably in the society.

Unhappily, there exists a toothless attitude in a majority of modern families who participate in dowry based marriages instead of opposing them. People talk glibly



Of Mughals and White Mughals

BY YASMEEN MURSHED

I must confess that I began William Dalrymple's WHITE MUGHALS: LOVE AND BETRAYAL IN EIGHTEENTH CENTURY INDIA (pub: HarperCollins 2002) with some trepidation, because I had been subtly disappointed by his earlier books THE AGE OF KALI (pub: HarperCollins 1998) and CITY OF DJINNS (pub: HarperCollins 1993). There is no doubt that Mr. Dalrymple writes very well and his imagery is rich, the descriptions replete with detail and vividly expressive; however, he falls into the usual expatriate trap of going for the obviously exotic, risqué and shocking.

The first of his books that I read, The Age of Kali is compiled from a series of previously published travel articles written for newspapers and magazines about his travels to several regions of India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Unfortunately, the individuals he chooses to profile are eccentric characters such as the Sikh rock star who pretends to be Madonna's friend, a woman writer of risqué novels and the fierce gun-toting tribesmen of the frontier of Pakistan, to mention just a few. The best piece is about the Tamil Tigers, getting access to whom was quite daring and courageous, but it is marred by his portrayal of the guerrillas one-dimensionally as ranting, ruthless and fanatical and repeatedly referring to the physical attributes of the female members of the group, which offended my feminine sensibilities considerably.

The City of Djinns is a tribute to Delhi, where he lived for four years and altogether a better book

because it succeeds in capturing the quintessential spirit of the city. The adventures he and his wife, who has illustrated the book with humor and charm, had as newcomers to Indian society are well told and provide some interesting insights.

Although these past experiences made me wary of plunging into White Mughals, I was well rewarded because it is one of the more captivating books that I have read recently.

matronly Juliet and a gross, hard-drinking Romeo enduring, unloved and unloving, into old age.)

Dalrymple describes the intriguing world where East and West meet with meticulous research as he reconstructs the story of James and Khair and the seduction and betrayal that follows. Indeed there are so many unexpected twists to the tale that the seduction is as much on the part of the demure, fifteen year old

the climate. Many of them took to the eastern way of life with gusto even converting to Indian religions, eating local food and of course marrying local women. These "White Mughals" responded to their sojourn in India by slowly shedding their Britishness like unwanted skin and adopting the ways of the Mughal governing class that they came to replace. That this was a fairly common, even widespread practice, is borne out by the fact that almost a third of the wills

moment in both Pakistan and India an astonishing outpouring of fiction. It will be looked on as the most fertile period of South Asian writing, but it's always fiction. There's no comparable renaissance in non-fiction in either country. There are no great biographies being written. In Britain at the moment, serious, well researched non-fiction books such as Anthony Beaver's book on Stalingrad -- now coming on for two million copies -- are doing every bit as well as any fiction.

"It would be very difficult now as a 'gora' to be writing a novel set in Pakistan or in India, because there's so much fabulous stuff coming out from the people who are closer to the material. There's no Paul Scotts any more or Ruth Praver Jhabvalas, all the fiction coming out of India is by Indians.

"I think fiction has now been reclaimed by the 'desis', but there still is room in non-fiction, it is wide open. The book I'm writing right now is about Bahadur Shah Zafar and the end of Mughal Delhi. This is one of the great turning points in Indian history..."

After the delight of White Mughals I am sure that readers of this genre will look forward eagerly to the publication of Dalrymple's next book.

Yasmeen Murshed is a full-time bookworm and a part-time educationist. She is also the founder of Scholastica School.

TALKING BOOKS

"I think fiction has now been reclaimed by the 'desis', but there still is room in non-fiction, it is wide open. The book I'm writing right now is about Bahadur Shah Zafar and the end of Mughal Delhi. This is one of the great turning points in Indian history..."

It tells of the eighteenth century romance between James Kirkpatrick, who was a young man in the service of the East India Company, and the even younger Khairunnessa a noblewoman under the protection of the Hyderabad royal family.

Writing about one of the least well known, but unexpectedly well documented periods of the history of the British in India, Dalrymple has unearthed a classic -- a story that all true romantics will enjoy and cherish. It is doubly satisfying because it is indubitably both true and poignant and ends as all great romantic tragedies do in betrayal and death. (Could we enjoy Romeo and Juliet as much if all ended happily ever after? It would be much too difficult to accept coming unexpectedly across a

Muslim "princess" as it is on the part of the idealistic, Indophile James.

Underlying the familiar tale of love and loss there is a far more intriguing story of the Indian conquest of the British imagination. A conquest that was soon to be relegated only to poetry (remember "Pale Hands along the Shalimar" etc.), and deliberately excised from the British public consciousness after the advent of the "memsahibs" in India and the Victorian prudishness that was soon to overcome a more liberal approach to the cultures of the east.

As Dalrymple describes it, in the early years of the British presence in India it was common for the colonists to adopt eastern dress which was certainly more suited to

of the period show the Sahebs leaving all their possessions to their Indian wives.

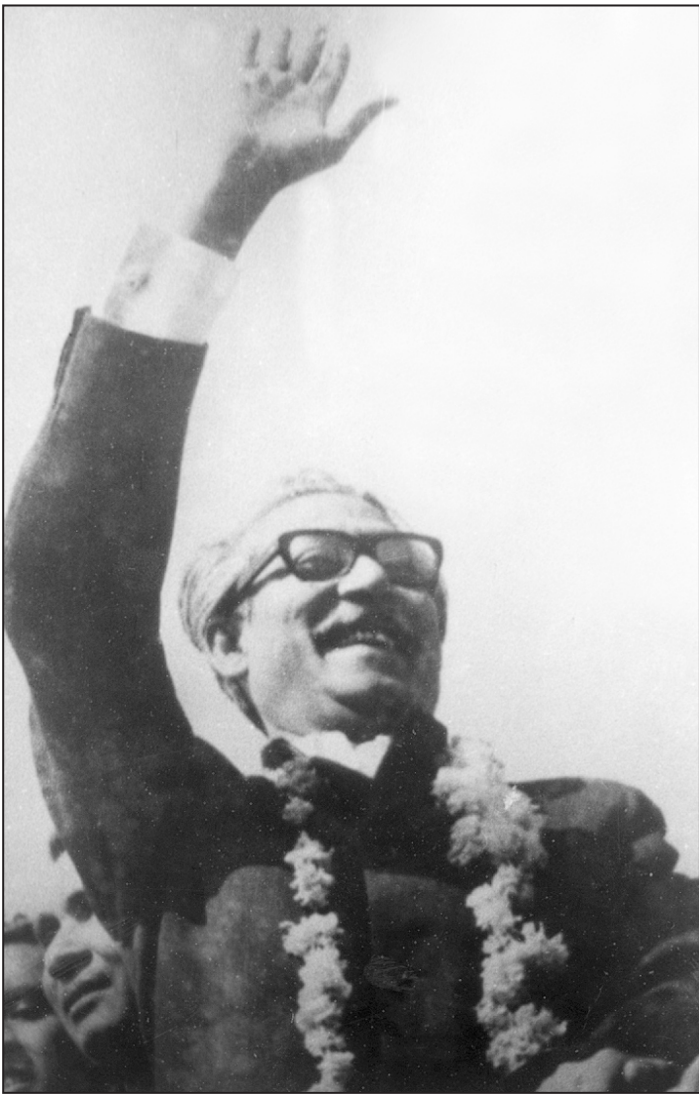
Kirkpatrick himself didn't have it easy because he chose, it seems from Dalrymple's account, the wrong time to go native, when the imperial conquerors and administrators from Britain, who increasingly replaced the old-style traders and soldiers, were seeking a new, hard basis for British power in India. The old close relations with Indians were supplanted by a policy of racial exclusion and arrogance whereas the earlier time had been far more hybrid, and with far less clearly defined ethnic, national and religious borders.

When asked why he chose this particular subject to write about, during a recent interview, Dalrymple said, "You have at the

Recalling the hero's home-coming

"Today I am free to share the unbounded joy of freedom"

--Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, January 8, 1972



M. SHAFIULLAH

BENGALÉES -- men, women and children observed fast to invoke mercy of Almighty for the safety of Bangabandhu in the newly laid out Pakistani capital. Their land was liberated through the surrender of the occupation Pakistani forces on 16 December 1971, but the architect of the new nation was languishing in the notorious Mianwali condemned cell in Pakistan. Their apprehension hit the highest at the stony silence of the defeated military junta to appeal of the world leaders for personal safety of Sheikh Mujib. Although a sizable Pakistani territories in the western front came under Indian command and more were likely to fall, Mrs Indira Gandhi declared unilateral ceasefire at her midnight address to Parliament on 16 December 1971. The Indian Prime Minister concluded her brief speech with a fervent appeal to Pakistani leadership to spare the life of the supreme leader of the new nation and his safe return to Bangladesh without delay. But no word was forthcoming from the military headquarters in Rawalpindi. All appeared to have fallen on deaf ears.

Emotion ran high among the stranded Bengalee community in Islamabad. Many questions were haunting their fragile mind. Was Sheikh Mujib alive? Did the humiliated Pakistani military leaders took revenge by executing him already? If he was alive would he be allowed to travel to the land he struggled throughout his life to liberate? Those were the most anxious moments until one foggy morning in January 1972 when a Radio Pakistan special bulletin removed the heavy blanket

from every heart. During the almost year-long struggle for freedom in East Pakistan that was the only news item that the listeners believed to be true. The broadcast said Sheikh Mujib had left Pakistan on a special PIA flight that morning. The day was 8 January 1972. That was the other day that the captive souls in Islamabad cherished to the brim after 16 December 1971.

The occasion called for distribution of sweets, rejoice and thanksgiving. But no! With one hundred thousand prisoners-of-war at the hands of Bangladesh-India Joint Command in the Eastern Front, every Pakistani home was either seething in anger or was in mourning. Like proverbial "clusters of bamboos in the storm", Bengalees thought it was wise to bend low to allow the raging storm to pass without harming their heads. Radio Pakistan broadcast did not mention the destination of Sheikh Mujib or the PIA flight. New Delhi occupied the centre piece of all speculations. Anxious mind and nervous fingers were moving from one broadcasting station to another to find out direction of the most precious cargo on board the flight.

Time was hanging heavy. Minute seemed to be hour and hour a day. But then to hear the roaring tiger on BBC, "Today I am free to share the unbounded joy of freedom with my fellow countrymen. We have earned our freedom in an epic struggle. The ultimate achievement of the struggle is the creation of the independent, sovereign Bangladesh." Bangabandhu had landed at Heathrow Airport and was addressing the world press in London. Because of time difference of about five hours between

Islamabad and London it was still morning hours of 8 January in London. The other captive who flew into freedom with him was his constitutional expert young Dr. Kamal Hossain. The two were brought together before boarding the PIA flight at Rawalpindi after nine months of solitary confinement at different locations.

Bagabandhu reached the safest place and the worst was over. His fellow countrymen at home and abroad were blessed to know that he was alive so long, but under what conditions of life? In his opening statement to the press he said of it, "My people have declared me President while I was a prisoner in a condemned cell awaiting the execution of a sentence of hanging." People of Bangladesh [East Pakistan] were officially called from 1972 ignoring biting Islamabad cold clustered around radio sets to swallow what their leader was saying in London. Equally eager was the world to hear what the leader of the newly created State would say. His live voice on BBC and other world media came on to say, "I would like to thank all those freedom-loving states who have supported our national liberation struggle." But the statesman restrained from condemning those countries and leaders who opposed the liberation war of Bangladesh and actively abetted Pakistani military junta with weapons to kill three million people. Instead he said, "I now appeal to all states to extend recognition to the People's Republic of Bangladesh, to enter into diplomatic relations with and to support her immediate admission to the United Nations."

Life long struggle to realise what was due to his people, preparing them for ultimate fight through his historic declaration of 7th March 1971, "the struggle this time is the struggle for emancipation, the struggle this time is the struggle for Independence" and brash with death awaiting execution turned Sheikh Mujib into a messiah for his people. It was he who could only afford to state in an unambiguous term to the friends and foes of the new state, "I re-assert that the existence of the People's Republic of Bangladesh is an unchallengeable reality and that our future relations with any state must be based on this fundamental reality."

Bangabandhu was still far away from liberated soil and was getting impatient to leave London. Instead of a waiting Air India flight, he preferred a special aircraft offered by the British government and left London on 9 January 1972. He made a stop-over at the Palam Airport in New Delhi. For, in his words, "This is the least I could do to pay a personal tribute to the best friends of my people -- the people of India and to your government under the leadership of your magnificent Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi who is not only a leader of men, but also of mankind. You all have worked so untiringly and sacrificed so gallantly in making this journey possible. This is a journey from darkness to light, from captivity to freedom, from desolation to hope."

And on 10 January 1972 his Odyssey was over. The father of the nation embraced the blood soaked liberated soil of the country of his life-long dream which accorded him a mammoth hero's welcome in the shining Dhaka afternoon.

Former Ambassador M. Shafiullah was stranded in Islamabad and returned home in mid-1972.

Third force in politics

SHEIKH NAHID NEAZY

THE sudden emergence of the Third Force in the country's political arena, thought to be an alternative to the existing major parties, which have already been proved unsuccessful in running the country since the historical upsurge against the despotic rule of the then President Ershad, has confused the people of the country as they do not yet know much about whether Professor Badruddoza Chowdhury is going to float a political party or a national platform, based on an integrated consensus, involving the members of the civil society. Even Prof. Badruddoza did not yet reveal his philosophy or objective and the party's political strategy or motive before the nation or the media. The deliberations made by him over the past few weeks as reported by the media have raised some baffling questions among the people. Prof. Badruddoza, at the fourth founding anniversary of Bangladesh Krishak Sramik Janata League of Kader Siddiqui recently held in the city, urged the people to unite and launch a resolute movement against all sorts of violence and corruption, establish their constitutional rights, alleviate poverty, uphold the august constitution and establish or bring back the rule of law, a democratic atmosphere and a functional parliament. Dr. Kamal Hossain, welcomed by all for his outspoken approach in politics, and the former president Abdur Rahman Biswas, whose presence on this platform has been controversial and uncalled for, were also on the same podium to help the countrymen achieve the confidence to realise their constitutional rights with their strength of unity.

Now the main question is -- what is the motive of the much-talked about Third Force? If it is a political party what is its symbol? Besides, it did not unveil its political commitment to ensuring the establishment of the rule of law and to the security of the people. So if it turns out to be a political party it has to be politically well-organised standing as an alternative force to fight violence and widespread corruption. If it is a platform involving the civil society then it is just nothing new, I think, to the people as the civil society has been existing for a long time in the country, and it is frequently founding holding seminar, symposium or round-table meetings on various national issues across the country in making the people conscious about their constitutional rights and in helping them to unite to move forward to combat rampant violence or pervasive corruption by so-called rulers and their patronised of armed groups. But we did not see the civil society acting as a pressure group to push the government, by staging a strong demonstration, to arrive at a decision on

any national issue of importance, ie the export of gas, the separation of judiciary and the independence of Anti-corruption Commission, etc.

The people of the country, presently, seem to have lost faith in the prevailing political activism and also have been tired of watching the deceptive activities of the politicians, hearing their demagogue, observing their double standard and seeing the breach of promise, uttered in the manifesto before election. People now want to get rid of the deception of current politics being displayed by the politicians and of the widespread nepotism of the ruling party in every sector. Even they do not want to see any new presentation of the existing political trend.

Prof. Badruddoza Chowdhury was the key man in organising the Bangladesh Nationalist Party. In addition, while he was in power he did not try to make any change in his party, nor did he call upon the people to unite against the misuse of the government. Rather, since the day he left the coveted seat of the president he, appearing as a savior of the nation, has started talking about the constitutional rights of the people. The whole situation grew so confusing that the people are in dilemma whether they should rely on the so-called third force or reject its maiden approach. Unlike Prof. Badruddoza, Dr. Kamal Hossain seems to be active to voice his commitment to the betterment of the people, to upholding the constitution and establishing the rule of law in the state. But, unfortunately, he has so far failed to acquire a positive response from the people, although he has his own political party. May be it is his political fiasco or the people's failure of choosing the right person in the election.

Actually people now want an alternative force that will, virtually, show to them the right path of making a unified effort to come out of the vicious circle of the prevailing confrontational politics. So if Badruddoza's third force can, eventually, turn out to be the real one in the political arena, for which the nation has been waiting for long, it has to clear its political stand or motive and also has to ensure the establishment of the constitutional rights of the people, the independence of judiciary, the installation of Ombudsman, the independence of the Election Commission, the appearance of an Independent Human Rights Commission and of an Independent Anti-corruption Commission. Otherwise, this so-called "Third Force" should not come out of the political womb just to add to the number of the political parties of the same sort.

Sheikh Nahid Neazy is a freelance writer.