

# Increasing women's representation in parliament

## What is the best alternative?

DR. BADIUL ALAM MAJUMDAR

THE cabinet has recently decided to propose a constitutional amendment to increase the number of parliamentary seats from 330 to 345, of which 45 seats would be reserved for women for 10 years. Instead of direct elections of women MPs as demanded by various women's groups and pledged by BNP in its election manifesto, the government proposal instead calls for distribution of these reserved seats among political parties based on their respective strengths in Parliament. The reaction to the government proposal has been sharp and swift, resulting in outright rejection by many stakeholders. This article is intended to evaluate, based on a set of relevant criteria, the government proposal relative to alternatives put forward by others to ensure significant increases in women's participation in Parliament.

### Evaluating alternative proposals

The reservation system of parliamentary seats for women is intended to cause empowerment of women so that their views and interests are adequately reflected in the policymaking and governance structure of the country. Women are half of our population. Therefore, a political system that does not allow for significant and effective representation of women in Parliament can hardly be democratic. Thus any proposal to increase women's seats in Parliament must be judged on the

**There is now a widespread consensus among all concerned on the necessity to substantially increase women's seats in Parliament and hold direct elections for those seats. Major political parties also made such commitments in their election manifestos. However, the ruling BNP broke its own promise, with the justification that holding direct elections for women seats is "impractical" as the women MPs will have multiple constituencies with 13 to 15 lakh voters. Our proposal could be a practical alternative to dispel such concerns. Our proposal is intended to stimulate rigorous and specific discussions about women's representation in Parliament with the intention of reaching a consensus.**

basis of its significance and effectiveness.

Significant and effective participation of women in Parliament can be ensured if the reservation system meets several important criteria. The first criterion is that the system increases the number of women representatives in Parliament in a meaningful way rather than only allow for tokenism such that the women's seats turn into just ornaments, reflecting the "generosity" of the policymakers. Many experts feel that at least a third of the seats should be reserved in order to generate a critical mass of women in Parliament who could become an effective voice.

Secondly, the system must adhere to the democratic principle of direct elections and every member should represent a distinct constituency. Article 65 (2) of our Constitution calls for MPs to be "elected in accordance with law from single territorial constituencies by direct election..." Thus, the basic structure of our Constitution will be compromised without direct elections.

Thirdly, the system should be such that the women MPs are accountable to the people rather than to the party higher ups. Accountability to the people is ensured only when MPs have specific constituencies of their own.

Fourthly, the women MPs must not have overlapping responsibilities. Without specific constituencies of their own, women MPs will have overlapping responsibilities with their male colleagues. In that case, voters will not know whom to hold accountable -- the male MPs or the female MPs.

Fifthly, for women's representation to be effective, women MPs must have equal rights, authority and responsibilities as their male counterparts. If women MPs are not directly elected, they are looked down upon by their male colleagues and excluded from, rather than "included" in, mainstream politics and the decision making process. They are normally relegated to minor, peripheral and symbolic roles, as has happened in the case of women UP members elected from reserved seats.

Sixthly, the system must not

allow connections with party bosses to be the determining factor for nominations, rather allow for women's competence to be the primary consideration. The difficulty with the reservation system is that since the women MPs do not have constituencies of their own, their nomination do not depend on their "electability." In such a situation, "selling" of women's seats in Parliament for money or other considerations cannot be completely ruled out, contributing to further corruption of our political process.

Seventhly, the best alternative for significantly increasing women's seats in Parliament would be to empower and cultivate a new generation of women leaders with strong grassroots connections who can make the reservation system unnecessary in the future. This was a significant drawback of the past reservation system that did not establish a mechanism for the creation of new women leaders capable of competing against men and winning elections.

Finally, the reservation system must not be used as a patronage

tool for bestowing favours to women in the political party or family. The naked patronage system practised in our "winners-take-all" political culture, ignoring all sense of justice and fairness is perhaps the worst form of corruption.

It is clear that the government proposal is the worst of the six options presented above. It allows an increase in women's seats of only 13 per cent which is not a significant improvement from 9 per cent (30 out of 330) under the previous reservation system. The women MPs will again play symbolic roles and remain as the vote banks of the political parties. The government's proposal lets the party high command make the appointments rather than an election, as demanded by almost everyone concerned. Thus, women in Parliament will be accountable to the party bosses rather than the people, defying the very basic principle of democracy. Their lobbying abilities and connections with the party higher commands will continue to be the primary criteria for such selections. Under the government proposal, the women MPs from the reserved seats will have overlapping responsibilities with unequal rights, authority and responsibilities, and the process will not be inclusive. Another serious flaw with the government proposal is that it will not infuse new blood into women's leadership, making the reservation system necessary forever. Worst of all, it will allow the party higher ups to use the reserved seats as spoils to be distributed among family and friends, making our parliamentary system more ineffective. Given this, we hope the government will reconsider its decision.

In contrast, the rotating system we proposed has many attractive components. Under this system, women's seats in Parliament will no longer serve mere ornamental purposes. More significantly, it will put in place a built-in mechanism for empowering a new generation of women leaders and provide legitimacy by allowing them to be directly elected from a specific constituency. The proposal will allow within three terms the election of at least one woman MP from each constituency, and thus the empowerment of a minimum of 300 women leaders. It will particularly open opportunities for women from the grassroots to express their leadership and be elected on their own in the future, making the reservation system unnecessary in the long-run. The proposed system will also make competence and "electability" of women the primary criteria for

nomination and prevent the seats from being misused as patronage tools. This may in turn reduce political corruption and lessen dynastic influence in our political system.

In summary, the significant and effective participation of women in Parliament will be ensured if the reservation system allows: (a) substantial increases in the number of women's seats in Parliament, (at least by a third); (b) empowerment of a new generation of women leaders with strong grassroots connections which the previous systems failed to achieve; (c) direct elections which will enable women MPs to develop constituencies of their own (democratic principles); (d) no overlapping responsibilities to ensure accountability; (e) inclusion of women in the mainstream political process; (f) competence rather than connection to be the primary determinant for nomination of the women MPs; and (g) prevention of women's seats being misused as patronage tools.

There is now a widespread consensus among all concerned on the necessity to substantially increase women's seats in Parliament and hold direct elections for those seats. Major political parties also made such commitments in their election manifestos. However, the ruling BNP broke its own promise, with the justification that holding direct elections for women seats is "impractical" as the women MPs will have multiple constituencies with 13 to 15 lakh voters. Our proposal could be a practical alternative to dispel such concerns.

Our proposal is intended to stimulate rigorous and specific discussions about women's representation in Parliament with the intention of reaching a consensus. By making this proposal we have taken the risk of being called radical, especially by groups with vested interests. The strongest argument against our proposal is that the male MPs will oppose it for fear of losing their seats in the rotation process. The critics forget that no one is given a permanent lease to stand for election in perpetuity and be elected. Besides, many countries are now working to impose term-limits on legislators and we should seriously consider such rule as well. Even those who are sympathetic to the idea of increased women's representation in Parliament may find our proposal too challenging. Yes, in the present condition having a third of the seats in Parliament reserved for women is unthinkable, like it was to demand voting rights for women at one point. Yet our commitment to the health, wellbeing, dignity and self-reliance of our people demands nothing less than the political empowerment of women. We must not, therefore, shy away from controversy and criticism, for progress of every noble human endeavour is embedded in controversies.

Badiul Alam Majumdar, PhD, is Global Vice President and Country Director, The Hunger Project-Bangladesh.

# On inter-faith dialogue

**In a world, where believers are moving away from the tenets of their respective religions, senseless mayhem and destructions are taking place in the name of religions, dialogues (inter-faith and intra-sect) can help us in comprehending principles of our own faiths, assessing how effectively we put those principles into practice and how we have been created different by the Almighty to accept each other in the unity and serenity of diversity. Godspeed to inter-faith dialogues.**

JEROME SARKAR

It happened to come across a book titled 'Dialogue and Beyond: Christians and Muslims Together on the Way' -- a study published by Lutheran World Federation (LWF), Geneva. It revealed that a number of meetings between Christians and Muslims have already taken place over ten years (1992-2002) with a noble mission to bring about an effective and fruitful cooperation for peaceful co-existence. With interest I perused the Studies and found that the efforts were still on for achieving tangible results.

Four examples of such efforts as recorded in the book showed that in Germany and England efforts have set a positive trend but in Nigeria and Indonesia, they were yet to overcome the differences and set the things in a right motion. A period of ten years in a history is not much of a long period but for a pilot project, it is definitely a long time.

Nevertheless whatever has been achieved, efforts should continue for the realisation of the cause. In order to bring changes, primarily the change in attitude is the most essential. Towards that end, the following issues may assist us to comprehend a new era of inter-religious harmony and camaraderie instead of age-old animosity: Christianity & Islam originated from the same part of the world: It is well known that the Christians and the Muslims share many common beliefs as both the faiths have originated from the same part of the world. Even they have some common prophets. Moreover, historically and culturally the believers of both the faiths are closely connected. Theologically too they can be correlated. So, open minded and mutually respectful discussions will reveal that the essence of both the religions, basically all the religions of the world, is same in view of that they stand for peace, love, justice, truth, character and co-existence. The differences are prevalent in rites and rituals.

Christian-Muslim Dialogue should be given a chance: In this context, the efforts through inter-religious dialogues will practically bring the believers of both the religions together at the outset and will bear some positive results if they are conducted in proper perspective and direction. Unbiased consideration of the matter will help remove the superficial differences and the unhealthy sense of competitiveness and non-sense enmity.

Dialogue to be based on Ethics and practices, not doctrines: While carrying out the inter-faith dialogue, the religious doctrinal issues should no way come up for discussion. It is comprehensible that the faithful (Christians and Muslims) may never agree on issues of their believed doctrines, but as to issues of ethics and social responsibilities, the followers of both the religions should not have any inhibition to come together. On such issues it is not only desirable but also possible to work together for mutual benefits and peaceful co-existence.

Top to bottom trickle down approach to be adopted in the beginning: Normally the people of top echelons of religious hierarchy can easily influence the people at lower echelons and down to the grassroots level. If leaders of both the faiths, in particular the religious leaders can show mutual respects and take measures to promote relationship, the general members of both the communities will be able to come together soon in brotherly and sisterly love and affection. Common people are by nature simple, loving, peaceful, positively pro-active responsive to rescue somebody in troubles irrespective of cast, creed or religion, and receptive. As such the discussions given a chance, will gather momentum and bear fruitful and comprehensive understanding, growing stronger everyday, if religious clerics take up sincere initiatives.

Frequent Seminars, Symposia, Workshop etc. to be the tools: The participation of general people from both the faiths focusing on practical sides and avoiding theoretical debates on superiority of one faith over the other, will promote mutual understanding and broaden the sense of fraternity.

The interfaith dialogues, communications, seminars, workshops can foster relation of friendship, joy in each other's compassion and fulfillment. This interfaith dialogue is essential in solving practical problems and will open up a door of opportunities for cooperation, mutual trust, respect and tolerance within the framework of the religious diversity. It will churn not only an undisturbed co-existence mode but promote a strong fabric of social bond of growing respect, trust and teamwork. This will gradually instill a sense of goodwill and reverence for each other's faith. Seminars, Symposia, Workshops and so on will serve as tools in the hands of the true visionaries for achieving the religious harmony, which is very much needed today, more than any other time.

Clerics of both the communities to soothe: By the sermons delivered in the Churches and in the Mosques, if religious tolerance is re-iterated, it will effectively enhance interfaith relationship and mutual bond. It is generally seen that the religious leadership that starts from the church/mosque have far greater impact on the common people than any other leadership, particularly in the third world countries like Bangladesh. Good sermons lead the people to the good path and the bad misguide the congregation to violence and destructions.

The sooner the leaders of both the faiths understand the importance of inter-faith dialogue, the earlier the notion for Christian-Muslim peaceful co-existence will emerge and solidify as an epitome on a firm footing and encourage the members of both the communities to take part in humanitarian services as well as in propagating the glory of the Almighty without offending anybody.

In a world, where believers are moving away from the tenets of their respective religions, senseless mayhem and destructions are taking place in the name of religions, dialogues (inter-faith and intra-sect) can help us in comprehending principles of our own faiths, assessing how effectively we put those principles into practice and how we have been created different by the Almighty to accept each other in the unity and serenity of diversity. Godspeed to inter-faith dialogues.

Based on the criteria discussed above, an evaluation of the alternative proposals for women's representation in Parliament is presented below:

### Analysis of Alternative Proposals for Women's Representation in Parliament

Alternative Proposals	Increased representation	Direct election	Accountability	Overlap ping representation	Inclusive	Empowering New grassroots leadership	Competence or Connection	Patronage tool
1. GOVERNMENT - Increase parliamentary seats to 345, of which 45 reserved for women. - Women's seats allotted to parties based on their strengths in Parliament	45 of 345 or 13%	No	Totally to the party high command	Yes	No	No	Connection	Yes
2. AWAMI LEAGUE - Increase women's seats to 60 - Each woman MP to be directly elected from 5 general seats.	60 of 360 or 17%	Yes	To the people	Yes	No	Yes/No, in a limited way	Both	Yes, to a limited extent
3. MAHILA PARISHAD - Increase parliamentary seats to 450, of which 150 reserved for women - Each woman MP to be elected from 3 general seats	150 of 450 or 33%	Yes	To the people	Yes	No	Yes/No, in a moderate way	Both	Yes, to a limited extent
4. WOMEN FOR WOMEN - Fixed one-third parliamentary seats reserved permanently for women	100 of 300 or 33%	Yes	To the people	No	Yes	Yes/No, in a moderate way	Competence	No
5. THE HUNGER PROJECT - Under a rotational system one-third seats reserved for women in the first term, other two-thirds seats open - A second third reserved for women in the second term, other two-third seats open - The remaining third reserved for women in the third term, other two-third seats open - The rotation continues until it is deemed necessary	100 of 300 or 33%	Yes	To the people	No	Yes	Yes	Competence	No
6. OTHERS - Require political parties to nominate women in 25-33% constituencies	Uncertain	Yes	To the people	No	Yes	Yes	Competence	No

# Arresting unemployment

## Non-formal education for the youth

DR. M ASHRAF ALI

IT is rightly said that the future of a country belongs to the youth. For Bangladesh a statement like this carries enormous significance when we consider the fact that in the population of Bangladesh there is a preponderance of youth. More than 30 per cent of the total population of the country belongs to this age group ranging from 6-21 years who would number more than 30 million.

With the vigour and vitality that is characteristic of the youth, this group of Bangladesh manpower possesses the potentials for making meaningful and significant contributions to all the fields of development in the country. Unfortunately, due to various reasons the desirable contribution has not been forthcoming from the youth of the country. The reasons are many. First, due to lack of education among the rural youths who constitute a vast number, the necessary awareness and readiness are lacking among them. The educated youth, although a microscopic minority compared to the youths who are illiterate, suffer from a sort of inertia and directionlessness for doing something for the country. The irrelevant nature of the curriculum of higher as well as secondary education is mainly responsible for failure to give a direction to the educated youth. The problem of educated unemployment is another cause for creating widespread frustration and hopelessness among the youth for

whom the future holds nothing to look forward to.

Needless to say that this situation can be potentially dangerous for a country like ours faced with multifarious problems some of which are really formidable to attempt to solve. If this is the situation of the educated youth, the condition of the illiterate rural youth is even worse.

There may be non-believers but

Bangladesh. Illiteracy among the youth

Age Group	Percentage
5-9	87.8
10-14	64.6
15-19	63.2
20-24	67.6

Source: NFRHRD, Dhaka, 1981

Any one looking at the above statistics must feel disturbed at the magnitude of the problem of lack of

education among the youth. This is very important for ensuring the functionality and relevance of the curriculum and the learning materials prepared for them.

However, it is suggested that any non-formal education programme designed to benefit the rural and educationally disadvantaged youth should have two basic objectives: (1) to provide them functional educa-

tion through village games and sports, etc.

(b) School equivalence or "second chance" education programme for those who are relatively young so that they may be able to enter the formal education stream at a suitable stage depending on the achievement of the participants.

(c) Providing opportunities for skill learning leading to gainful

employment for increased personal income through self-employment projects for the youths who are landless and small farmers. Such programmes may include HYV rice cultivation, vegetable growing, poultry and goat breeding, pisciculture, small and cottage industry products, handicrafts, etc.

(d) Providing opportunities for work and entertainment for the youths by organising recreational and community development projects through formation of youth clubs in the village.

(e) Promotion of cooperatives by village youth groups. These cooperatives may be organised in agriculture, fisheries, marketing, poultry and livestock breeding, etc.

(f) Increasing the employment prospects of the rural youth by

**It should be carefully noted that non-formal education programmes for the youth suggested above have to be truly integrated in order to achieve positive outcomes. The various components of a programme, for example, numeracy and literacy, agriculture, fisheries, poultry breeding etc. should not be treated in isolation, they should be integrated in the total curricula for non-formal education.**

it has been proved beyond doubt that minimum of education and awareness among the people is a pre-condition for economic development of a country. It has been said many times over that the value of education to the individual and ultimately to the society can be immeasurable. On the other hand, the deprivation of education can create innumerable problems for the society as well as for the individual. Perhaps this is one reason for our failure to make a breakthrough in our vital national development programmes, such as, increased food production, family planning, health and sanitation programmes and education, mainly primary and basic education. The following table provides an idea about the magnitude of illiteracy among the youth in

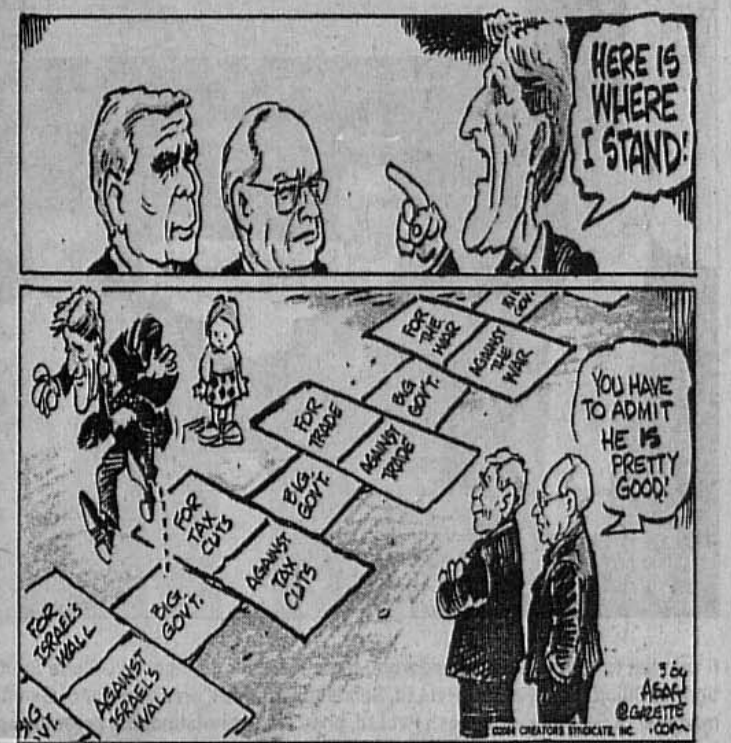
education among the young people. If the only hopes and aspirations of a country, the youths live in total darkness due to lack of education, what the future can hold for such a country? It is high time to think seriously about education for this vast number of young people who are facing many problems due to lack of education. Of course it is not possible to educate all of them through formal schooling but they may be provided the minimum of general and vocational education through the non-formal way which is to be tailored according to the age and characteristic of each age group.

### Some suggestions

It is necessary to identify the needs of the youth groups before any non-formal education programme can

be designed for them. This is very important for ensuring the functionality and relevance of the curriculum and the learning materials prepared for them.

More specifically, the following may be the types of non-formal education programmes for the young people without education: (a) Consciousness raising through functional education for the illiterate and the semi-illiterate youths. It should provide literacy and numeracy, personal and community health, nutrition practices, agricultural and community development practices, recreation



Dr. M Ashraf Ali is professor and Director, IER, Dhaka University.