

The fundamental right to food

DR. BADIUL ALAM MAJUMDAR

THE dreadful *kartik* is here again bringing with it the frightful *monga*. Newspapers are now full of stories of human suffering. A large segment of the population especially the landless day-labourers in the northern districts are out of work. They have no gainful employment and thus no income. Many are now starving. A near famine-like situation is apparently prevailing in some areas. There are also reports of deaths due to hunger, although the government vehemently denies it.

Like the laws of nature, *monga* is a usual phenomenon in this time of the year -- a period of time which falls in between harvests. This phenomenon has been in existence in some parts of Bangladesh over generations. Its effects are more severe this year due to the after-effects of the devastating floods of last summer and the recent sharp price hikes of many of the bare necessities of life.

The recent floods caused widespread devastation and damage. Based on the information compiled by the Ministry of Food and Disaster Management, the floods killed 747 persons and directly affected 3,63,37,944 individuals or 74,68,128 families in 39 districts. Crops of 27,66,305 acres of land belonging to them were damaged, of which 17,28,129 acres were fully damaged and of 10,38,176 acres partly damaged. Number of houses fully damaged were 8,94,954 and partially damaged were 33,88,992. Many families lost everything and are now in a dire situation.

According to the latest information available from the Ministry of Food and Disaster Management, Tk. 4,24,25,000 as GR (gracious relief) cash, Tk. 60 lakh cash for house repairs and Tk. 24 lakh cash for saris. In addition, 58,723.22 metric tons of GR rice (with an approximate cash value of Tk. 7,04,67,600 at Tk. 12,000 per metric ton), 2,700 pieces of lungis, 7,410 tins of biscuits, and

15,000 bundles of corrugated iron sheets were provided by the government as relief to the flood affected people. The cash relief and the cash value of GR rice is Tk. 12,12,93,000, which comes to less than Tk. 4 per flood affected person or Tk. 17 per family. Furthermore, the Ministry of Agriculture is reported to have initiated a Tk. 163 crore programme to distribute seeds and fertiliser among 26 lakh families, leaving

monga affected people. The prices of many necessities consumed by the common people skyrocketed at the beginning of the holy Ramadan. The price hikes were caused by unscrupulous practices of a section of dishonest traders and toll collections in the transport sector and by the law enforcement agencies. This obviously accentuated the sufferings of the people in the *monga* affected regions.

families. Malnutrition is a silent killer. The immune system of the malnourished persons does not develop fully or function efficiently, and they easily die of diseases like diarrhoea, which is not generally viewed as a killer disease. According to the World Bank and other development partners of Bangladesh, nearly 700 Bangladeshis die of hunger-related causes every day. Based on the

held that right to life includes "means of livelihood, enjoyment of pollution-free water and air, bare necessities of life, facilities of education, development of children, maternity benefit, free movement, maintenance and improvement of health by creating and sustaining conditions congenial to good health and ensuring equality of life consistent with human dignity."

Thus, it is clear that the right to

mid-day meal with minimum content of 300 calories and 8-12 grams of protein each day of school for a minimum of 200 days." The court also gave specific directions pertaining to eight food-related schemes and required the involvement of Gram Panchayat in their implementation.

The court also held that the lack of funds cannot be an excuse -- an excuse frequently used by governments -- for not providing adequate support to people affected by disasters.

The inadequate relief and rehabilitation support of the government not only violates the fundamental rights of the flood and *monga* affected people, it also violates Article 15 and 19 of the Bangladesh Constitution, which are part of the Fundamental Principles of State Policy. These two Articles speak of ensuring the basic necessities of life such as food, clothing, shelter, education and medical care, and equality of opportunity for all.

It is clear that the government is in breach of its constitutional obligations to provide adequate support to the flood and *monga* affected people, as a result of which people are now suffering. We request the authorities to take immediate and urgent measures to remedy this situation. Fortunately, the government is reported to have decided to embark on a Tk. 75 programme for the five districts of greater Rangpur after Eid. While we welcome the decision, we also would like to emphasise the need for a permanent and lasting solution of the *monga* situation and also substantially increase the support to those flood affected people who are in dire needs in other regions of the country.

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outside its coverage 48,68,128 affected families.

It is clear that the programmes initiated by the government to directly assist the flood affected people are inadequate at best. The Parliamentary Standing Committee for the Ministry of Agriculture has already expressed its dissatisfaction about the government's post-flood rehabilitation initiatives. In view of the government's step-motherly response toward the flood affected people, it is not surprising that the effects of *monga* are more severe and deadly this year.

The government is now trying to deal with the *monga* situation with additional relief efforts. So far the flood relief included 3,630 metric tons of rice for food for works programme, 2,996 metric tons as test relief, Tk. 4,57,09,609 as money for works programme. Furthermore, 10 kgs of rice each month for three months are being provided for 8,75,000 VGF cards, the total of which would come to 2,62,50,000 metric tons. In spite of such relief efforts, the people in the *monga* affected areas are reported to be still suffering.

The spiraling prices of basic necessities in recent weeks only worsened the sufferings of the

The privileged class of Bangladesh has always benefited at the cost of the disadvantaged. In fact, our country is run in the interests of the powerful and the privileged. As a result, over the years the rich have become increasingly richer and the marginalised increasingly deprived. According to government statistics, the share of the national income of the richest 5 percent of the families of Bangladesh increased from 18.85 percent in 1991-92 to 23.62 percent in 1995-96 and then to 30.66 percent in 2000. During the same time period, the share of the national income of the 5 percent of the poorest families declined from 1.03 percent to 0.88 percent and then to 0.67 percent. Such disparity continues unabated, representing a "gift" of democracy to the poor of this country! The parsimonious decisions of our policymakers during the recent floods represent yet another example of discrimination against the poorer segment of the society.

The discrimination against the less privileged has a price. Many of the deprived suffer from malnutrition. Nearly 50 percent of our children below the age of 5 suffer from malnutrition, which is among the highest in the world. Most, if not all, of these children are from poor

information of the World Food Programme, worldwide nearly 24,000 people die of such causes on a daily basis. The apparent causes of these deaths are various diseases, but the real reasons are chronic persistent hunger. Thus, although some of the recent deaths in *monga*-affected regions may be due to certain visible diseases, the actual causes may be the deprivation-related chronic malnutrition.

The discrimination against, and deprivation of, the poor not only represent a flagrant cruelty to them, but also a disgraceful robbing of their constitutionally mandated rights, enshrined in Articles 31 and 32.

Article 31 of the Bangladesh Constitution states: "[N]o action detrimental to the life, liberty, body, reputation or property of any person shall be taken except in accordance with law."

Article 32 states: "No person shall be deprived of life or personal liberty save in accordance with law."

Thus, the right to life is a fundamental right which cannot be abridged even by legislative actions and it is enforceable in court. Its sweep is also wide and far-reaching. In *Dr. Mohiuddin Farooque vs. Bangladesh*, the High Court Division

food is recognised as a fundamental right by our courts.

A recent Indian case on the issue of the right to food for the drought affected people of Rajasthan is relevant for the flood and *monga* affected people of Bangladesh.

In 2001, the People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCI) filed a public interest litigation before the Supreme Court of India against the Government of India, the Food Corporation of India (FCI), and six state governments with the allegations of inadequate drought relief in Rajasthan. The case was later extended to the larger issue of chronic hunger, with all states and union territories as respondents. Although the court has not yet given its final judgment, it accepted the interpretations of the right to life clause of the Indian constitution given in earlier court decisions, and appointed two commissioners to ensure their implementation.

For example, the court ordered on November 28, 2001 that: "We direct the State Governments/Union Territories to implement the Mid-Day Meal Scheme by providing every child in every Government and Government assisted Primary Schools with a prepared

Is Hindutva phase over?



KULDIP NAYYAR
writes from New Delhi

I cannot make out why the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) is seen to be going back to its Hindutva agenda. The party never departed from it. Whether it is the demolition of the Babri masjid or the massacre in Gujarat, the message was the same: Hindu fanaticism would not allow pluralism to flourish in India. Liberals like Chandrababu Naidu of the Telugu Desam and George Fernandes of the Samata Party must have been conscious of it. But since they wanted to enjoy power, they had to hug the BJP. One got from New Delhi all the food grains and funds it could for Andhra Pradesh. The other became Defence Minister. Ram Vilas Paswan and Ajit Singh, who cried hoarse in the name of secularism, too joined hands with the ruling BJP because it meant cabinet berths.

The Hindu intelligentsia generally saw with dismay what the BJP was doing to education, information and culture to further parochialism. But the party meant power those days -- and a source of patronage. Some of the top intellectuals could not resist the temptation. Even Hindutva was rationalised. The media gave all the atten-

tion to the BJP's philosophy as if it was an ideology like capitalism and communism. Never was the party's fascist face exposed, not even the pogrom of Gujarat chief minister Narendra Modi, who was singled out for attack, but not the entire leadership, which only shrugged its shoulders by describing the carnage as shameful.

By visiting the RSS headquarters, L.K. Advani, soon after becoming the BJP chief, has done nothing new to evoke comments like "the

wants the Buddhists, the Sikhs, and the Jains to come back to the fold of Hinduism. But he does not say a word about the plight of dalits who are Hindus: They constitute some 20 per cent of the Hindu population and face the same type of discrimination and scorn which they did hundreds of years ago.

In the RSS scheme of things, prejudice against Muslims -- 14 per cent of the electorate -- does not lessen a bit. Urdu is hated because it is linked with Muslims. The RSS

party. Now it is discarding the saffron cover to be acceptable to the powers that be. It knows how to move with the times.

The Congress does not trust it but enjoys the sight of its kowtowing. The party knows that its front-runners are great fixers. It likes their resourcefulness. What the Congress does not seem to realise is that they are forced to approach the party because there is a renewed faith in secularism throughout the country. Both the general election

because his fight was to save democracy. The old Jana Sangh reaped advantage because it too looked accepting Janata Party's ethos.

The BJP cadres may feel happy that Advani who built the party from scratch in 1979 is again at the helm of the party's affairs. But the scenario was different then. Once the Janata Party disintegrated, the BJP was the only all-India option available in the Hindi belt. The BJP harnessed the discontent over

moded. The revival of Ram Mandir movement will disgust the youth.

It is possible that Advani may enforce discipline within the party. Vankar, Naidu, as BJP president, could not stop Uma-Bharti from her tricolour yatra -- a farce -- nor could he dissuade Pramod Mahajan, one of the general-secretaries, from becoming part and parcel of the Shiv Sena which said that it did not want north Indians and Muslims in Maharashtra.

However, the exit of Naidu may revive the old allegation that the BJP is a north Indian party. Whatever it has built in Karnataka -- the only state in the south -- is in danger. I wonder if Advani can stop the party's downhill journey. The BJP has to consider its policy de novo. By inducting a Muslim here and a Sikh there, the party cannot become acceptable.

The BJP would have to prove that its nationalism is not a cover for Hindu chauvinism. Advani does not fill the bill, nor does his attack on liberalism help in any way. The new climate in the country suggests that the people are distancing themselves from extremists and fanatics. The country is back on the road to secularism. The BJP will have a hard time to recover from the reverses it has suffered in the Lok Sabha and Maharashtra elections. Advani's claim to come back to power soon seems only wishful thinking or a straw to which his party men can cling in the sea of disappointments.

Kuldip Nayyar is an eminent Indian columnist.

BETWEEN THE LINES

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return of Hindutva. The BJP was always in spirit at Nagpur and guided from there. RSS pracharaks (preachers) were members of parliament on the BJP ticket. A few were even ministers. Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee would take pride in saying abroad that he was a swayamsevak. Advani may have tried to add a bit of drama by taking along Varun, Sanjay Gandhi's son, to the RSS headquarters. But it does not mean anything. The Nehru dynasty counts, but not if it professes a wrong ideology. Nehru's sway was because of his secular and liberal views.

The RSS remains couched in its middle ages thinking which takes pride in the pre-eminence of one religion. RSS chief Sudarshan

chief is critical of the two-lakh jobs the BJP had promised the Urdu teachers during the Lok Sabha polls. "Did it ever occur to them that Urdu is the language promoting civilisation of the country," says Sudarshan. One thing basic about fanatics is that they live in a world of their own and do not mind derision of the public.

Advani tells all about the BJP's new policy -- and thinking -- after talking to the RSS chief for an hour and a half. He says the BJP will be back in line with the Sangh ideology. Where did it go in the first instance? It has been through and through the Hindutva standard-bearer. The BJP has not changed. The so-called secular middle class has. First it was aligning with the

and the state polls in Maharashtra have shown that the parivar brand of Hinduism does not sell. On the other hand, the Gujarat happenings have consolidated the Muslim support behind the Congress. The demolition of the Babri masjid intensified the Muslims hatred against the BJP. But they stayed distant from the Congress at that time because its Prime Minister Narasimha Rao looked a conniver in their eyes.

The BJP should know that it got credibility after Mahatma Gandhi's assassination only when Jayaprakash Narayan, a Gandhian, took it under his wings to fight Mrs. Indira Gandhi's authoritarianism. He had doubts about its credentials but had no option except to trust it

misperformance of the Congress. Regional parties were keen to share power at the centre. The BJP took the initiative something which the Congress refused to do. The BJP also looked cleaner when it was out of power but once in government, its ministers were found as corrupt as ministers in the earlier regimes.

The BJP's problems may not lessen even when it has a youthful head as its president. It is true that the 50 per cent of the one billion population in India is under the age of 25. But it is equally true that young boys and girls are more interested in their career than in the BJP's ideology. Many of them have taken to modern ideas and culture and find Hindutva out-

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

Freedom, Ethics, and Stereotypes

In both eastern and western countries, we need to understand the concept of freedom. I would like to mention three important writers who help us to understand the concept of freedom. First of all, Liz Lochhead wrote the best poem on women: The Complete Alternative History of the World. I would also like to mention my favourite writer in Bangladesh, Mr. Ahmed Ahsanuzzaman. No Noras in Bangla Literature (Khuina), and Md. Badrul Ahsan. Helen Reddy also wrote an important song, I am Woman. Prof. Aziz Hibri wrote about Islam and the rights of women. When I was attending Graduate School at the university, I had written many papers and I studied several courses on Critical Theory and Creative Writing. Some of the major papers that I wrote were "Marriage as a Playing Field to Discover the Dialectics of Self and

Other." One of the interesting books was by Charles S. Woodruff: Marriage as it is, and Marriage as it Should Be; Boston: Bula Marsh, (1862). I am writing this letter because I (FM Chaudhury) would like to explain the meaning of freedom and how we can overcome women's stereotypes. My friends and I, we would like to present some important resources and ideas to understand the meaning of freedom and humanism. Md. Badrul Ahsan has written many articles on women. We would also like to say that Mr. Sharifuzzaman Sohel's letter (October 20, 2004) is unclear about the concept of freedom. First of all, we would like to mention that there are many people and writers who are clear about the differences between cultural constructs (stereotypes) and freedom. Mr. Sohel is observing his one-sided views (a) Pornography and prostitution and (b) "This is women's freedom?". This is a very narrow-minded/myopic concept of free-

dom. Secondly, Mr. Sohel must ask, what does the word freedom mean? And thirdly, are people or Bangladeshi people free from stereotypical views? What is freedom? Md. Badrul Ahsan quotes Christopherson "Freedom is that which you've got, when you've got nothing more to lose." Md. Badrul Ahsan and Ahmed Ahsanuzzaman (Khuina) are our favourite writers in Bangladesh. Ahmed Ahsanuzzaman wrote the best paper on Observations of Cultural Constructs of Women in Bengali Literature (No Noras in Bangla Literature). We must read the best literature, and writers, and understand the meaning and truth about freedom. Md. Badrul Ahsan has written a variety of articles, including several articles on the harassment and suffering of a number of women. Henrik Ibsen creates the picture of Nora in A Doll's House. Ahmed Ahsanuzzaman makes the best observations about the images of oppressed women in Sharat Chandra, Nazrul, and Tagore. He

even shows and explains how these writers presented women as submissive, oppressed and stereotypical, instead of presenting them in a positive way. A man should love a woman like the song, "I'm going to keep on loving you", (Reo-Speedwagon) instead of thinking "I'm going to keep on dominating you". Billy Joel also wrote a song about women "Always a Woman to Me". We really appreciate Md. Badrul Ahsan, Ahmed Ahsanuzzaman, and Liz Lochhead.

Fraulein M Chaudhury, Estelle Mahnuma, Suchitra S. Sufia, M. Shahi
Dhaka

Fatima's story

I just read the article "Creeping towards disability..." on the online edition of DS. Naturally I was very shocked after seeing the picture of poor Fatima. Is there nothing we can do to help her? Creating funds

for her through your paper & other sister concerns (The same you did for Amit)? Is it possible to send her to neighbouring countries (like India, Thailand or Singapore) for treatment? I have heard, there are lots of charitable organisations (i.e. different Christian charities). Can't they be contacted? How can people like me help in this cause, if we want to?

I am in the PhD program in Carnegie Mellon University. As a student, I don't have much means to help this poor, little girl financially even though I really want to. But I will be more than happy to contribute something and assist any initiative to rehabilitate or cure this unfortunate soul. It's our disgrace as a society that we are letting people go free after committing such heinous crime & it's also our responsibility to stand beside Fatima. I thank you and your staffs for printing such true stories in the newspaper & really hope, together

we can do something for our little Fatima.
Faheem Hussain
On-line

Rapid success of RAB

The RAB team is doing a splendid job all over Bangladesh. And now it has been proved that it needs the co-operation of the government as well as the citizens of a country to banish terrorism from the country. There is no way to stop terrorism in Bangladesh without the judicious use of a law enforcing agency like the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB). It is a great relief for the citizens of Bangladesh who are generally peace loving. Now people want to see the RAB as real servicemen as they are doing now. The government should retain control so that they may not use their powers unnecessarily.
Muftah Wali
Department of English
Jahangirnagar University

"Dissent under threat"

I read your very well written editorial "Dissent under threat" with interest. It is totally unacceptable what the ruling party goons have done to the Bikalpadhara and Gono Oikkyo Jote Meeting to which you have referred. There is no doubt that the meeting was derailed by the pro-BNP elements following a well-written script that leaves no doubt about premeditation. There is equally no doubt, as you have pointed out, that the meeting in question was organised to express dissent in the most democratic and peaceful way. These facts make it imperative for the BNP leadership, the prime minister included, to take note of this editorial and set into motion corrective steps. It is sad that the BNP goons are acting this way under the watch of the party which led our democratic struggle against Ershad's dictatorship in the 1980s when goons of the party in power at the time did exactly what these BNP goons are doing

now. The BNP leadership should know that the tactics of these people who are trying to stifle democratic dissent this way cannot succeed for the same reasons it did not succeed when Ershad tried the same. In fact, wherever this has been tried, the result has been the reverse; the dissent far from dissipating, has emerged stronger. With the main opposition the Awami League now favouring constitutional politics, the BNP needs to play the role of the facilitator in making the democratic process stronger by encouraging legitimate dissent like the one the Bikalpadhara was engaged in. The BNP goons have been acting in a manner detrimental to conducting politics in a peaceful way for a long time. They are not aware that what they do only makes it difficult for the government to conduct its business properly and affects their interest more than those whose voices they try to stifle.
Shahjan Ahmed
Dhanmondi RA