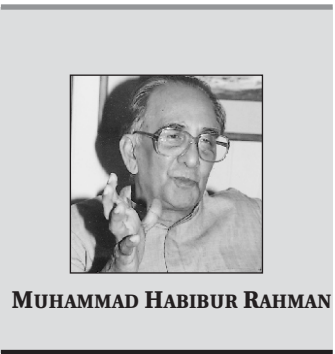


Investing in the children of the Islamic world



MUHAMMAD HABIBUR RAHMAN

SINCE the fall of Baghdad (1258) and the Battle of Lepanto (1571) there has been a lot of soul searching among the Muslims of the world for their backwardness, and several thought provoking suggestions were put forward for improving their conditions.

It has been held that we should give up the sedentary urban life and return to the invigorating *asabiah* comradeship. It has also been suggested that every Muslim should have four wives and desire forty children, ten sons should be dedicated to the cause of jihad. A Muslim can fulfil his jihad duty by the heart, by the tongue, by the hand, and by the sword. The final suggestion is that the Muslims should go nuclear and produce Islamic bomb, the ultimate symbol of political power, security and supremacy.

These half serious and light-hearted descriptions of Muslims do not amuse us.

Bangladesh is a country of lush green and roaring rivers that may not generate the sense of desert *asabiah*. Unlike the wise Chinese we are a little argumentative people. We have restricted polygamy forty-five years ago. In 1972 our country was described as one of the twelve potential nuclear powers. We have, however, long ago ratified the nuclear non-proliferation treaty. As a poor country our aims are rather modest.

I shall dwell on and say a few words on the children's education. On the strength of my middle class background, I have some partisan views on the dissemination of education. I agree wholeheartedly with Horace Mann (1848) that "Education then, beyond all other devices of human origin is a great equaliser of the conditions of men, the balance wheel of the social machinery".

In article 17 of our Constitution it has been laid down that: "The State shall adopt effective measures for the purpose of (a) establishing a uniform, mass-oriented and universal system of education and extending free and compulsory education to all children to such stage as may be determined by law; (b) relating education to the needs of society and producing properly trained and motivated citizens to serve those needs; (c) removing illiteracy within such time as may be determined by law."

In article 25(2) of the Constitution it has, amongst other objectives in its international relations, been provided that, "(2) The State shall endeavour to

consolidate, preserve and strengthen fraternal relations among Muslim countries based on Islamic solidarity."

These constitutional commitments will be my guidelines, and they may appear to you rather relevant for our deliberations on today's subject matter.

However, the greatest obstruction in attaining the millennium development goals is great discrimination between the rich and the poor. In case

the growth of human capital. In the developing countries where adequate attention is not placed on education and training, there is little or no chance for economic development.

It is considered by well-meaning people all over the world that education must be responsive to the specific requirements of the nation, must have relevance to future work and life, and must provide adequate preparation for productive employment.

Let us insist less on uniqueness and distinctiveness when Allah has himself said that He could have made the whole mankind as one single nation, but he has created several nations so that they can interact and learn from each other. No one nation has been given the absolute supremacy to destroy the balance of power among peoples. This tolerant, humane and universal approach will be of great help in keeping peace for future investment for the children in the Islamic countries.



of the death-rate of newly born babies, in case of child death-rate up to 5 years of age, on the question of nutrition of mother and child, and on the question of access to quality primary education and secondary education the discrimination rate is very frustrating. The income disparities are widening. If we fail to remove this gap, 40-50 millions of people will remain poor.

The progresses recently achieved by us in the fields of education, primary and mass education have been acclaimed all over the world.

Budgetary allocations have been increased for the education sector.

The textbooks have reached the doorsteps of students before the start of academic years. The stipend programmes have been expanded. Free education for girls is available up to class twelve. In the future it will extend up to the under-graduate level. The rate of drop-outs in primary education has declined. The number of pupils is on the rise and the proportion of boys and girls is now nearly equal.

In 1960 in his Presidential Address to the American Economic Association, Theodore Schultz made a revolutionary statement that education was a kind of investment by which necessary human capital was built. In 1979 when he was awarded the Nobel Prize he reiterated his views and laid great emphasis on the role of education for

Share of expenditure on education as a percentage of GDP is rather inadequate. The dropout rate in primary school is as high as 56 per cent. Only 2.2 per cent of GNP is spent on education and 39 per cent of it is spent on primary education. There exists an ever-widening, rural-urban difference. For the current expenditure on education, the ultra-poor group constituting about 40 per cent of population receive only 4.3 per cent of benefit in terms of expenditure. The situation is almost same in case of development expenditure on education also.

Market mechanism cannot achieve an adequate allocation of resources in favour of education. Growth in the education sector largely depends upon public investment. Our educational planning is probably the most difficult challenge in our country.

The resources available are limited, but the objectives to be accomplished are numerous and enormous.

It is my considered view that all students should be given the first lesson in their mother tongue and they at first try to know their own country, and then their neighbours, then their Muslim brothers and lastly, though not of the least importance, the rest of the world. It may be inadvisable to inculcate the ideas of *darul Islam* and *darul harb* at the formative stage. We should rather try to foster ideas of *darul aman*, *darul ahad* and *taquia*.

When for fostering international cooperation and effective implementation of the Convention several bodies like the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the International Labour Organisation (ILO), and the local or international bodies representing various religions are working together we should try to work on the basis of *darul ahad* and/or *darus sulh*.

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Rushdie's shattered utopia

YASMEEN MURSHED

I have just finished reading "Shalimar the Clown" by Salman Rushdie (pub: Random House 2005) and I am still jet lagged from the experience. I use the words "jet-lagged" deliberately because with Rushdie every book is a journey -- complete with time travel, long lost tales, and a cacophony of extraordinary events and characters that leave one in a whirl.

I began reading the book with mixed feelings -- anticipation and trepidation in equal parts. Anticipation because reading Rushdie is like sailing on uncharted seas -- anything can, and usually does, happen. One can expect magical sometimes melodramatic lyricism accompanied by violent action not to mention whirlwind changes of locale and ambience.

Trepidation because Rushdie's books are demanding and perhaps Ramadan is not quite the right time to read anything demanding! The power of his language, though long-winded, is unparalleled, but one has to concentrate on his intricate narratives and keep up with the vivid imagery borrowed from many genres and even many languages. Then again, the novel had received mixed reviews -- some literary critics and reviewers warned readers that "this novel is an important book. The status of Salman Rushdie as a writer has hardly waned, despite the disappointments of his last two novels, and his status as a totemic figure for those who support freedom of expression in an increasingly divided world will never wane. This novel has been billed as his response to the threat of fundamentalism; it is hard to imagine a more imposing subject." Therefore suitably impressed and not a little nervous I took a deep breath and began to read.

The story appeared to be simple enough -- The first act is set in 1990s Los Angeles and is about India Ophuls and her father Max, who was once a French resistance fighter and later American ambassador to India. Both father and daughter have lives of glamour in the sensuous city which is a "shadowless lotus-land full of the obscenely young, this California whose body was its temple and whose ignorance was its bliss" where Max lives in a penthouse suite in one of the city's best hotels and India takes boxing lessons at a celebrity gym and is "a woman with whom men wanted to sleep," although her slumber is disturbed by longing for the Kashmiri mother she never knew.

Max is murdered by his chauffeur Shalimar and the narrative moves to an elongated flashback because, as always with Rushdie, the story spans generations and continents, with back-stories and forward jumps, and

of course history lessons as well as analyses of politics and culture. So Rushdie tells us about the history of Kashmir and gives his explanation for the violence that exists there; he recounts the stories of many different characters who have feature parts in this long narrative and he even takes us back to Germany and the French resistance during World War II. All this in page after page of complicated multiple-clause sentences! It is an experience guaranteed to either exhilarate one completely or send one into a sound sleep.

From among all the changes of time and place and multiple characters the reader has to disentangle the love story of Shalimar "the Clown" who is Muslim and Boonyi the daughter of a Hindu pandit. The young lovers, caught in "flagrante delicto," are allowed to marry by the liberated and liberal elders of their remote village in Kashmir. Rushdie would have it that this marriage serves as a symbol of Kashmir's religious tolerance and a taunt to the Indian military guards keeping watch over the town who disapprove of the inter-religious marriage and want Kashmir a strictly Hindustate.

The story takes an ominous turn when Boonyi, restless and capricious, starts an affair with the married Max. This betrayal transforms Shalimar from "the sweetest, gentlest and most open of any human being" in the village into a ruthless assassin and as

TALKING BOOKS

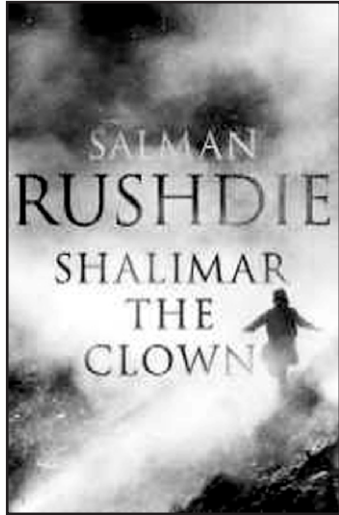
In fact, South Asia and its problems of communal, religious and national differences, particularly the problem of Kashmir, is a many-layered subject, difficult for any writer to portray realistically, therefore while on the level of fiction "Shalimar" succeeds to some extent -- credibility is quite another matter. But then perhaps I am overly critical where Rushdie is concerned.



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he plans his revenge he takes up with the Islamist guerillas who are led by the "Iron Mullah." Boonyi suffers a tragic fate as Max is overcome with guilt and abandons her even though she is pregnant with the child we have already met in the opening chapters, the rather unimaginatively named, India. Finally the action shifts back to modern day USA and the narrative winds down into an expected but nevertheless brutal end.

The story itself is implausible enough to cast a cloud of doubt and misgiving for those of us who like to believe that we know and understand South Asia, but the setting is even more difficult to appreciate. As Rushdie tells it there existed an idyllic situation -- a secular Kashmiri society where the two religions coexisted peacefully and borrowed from one another; the Muslims adapting Hindu gods and superstitions, while the Hindus learnt to include meat in their daily cooking. Rushdie wants us to believe that there is an inherent "Kashmiriyat, Kashmiriness, the belief that at the heart of Kashmiri culture there was a common bond that transcended all other differences." "We are all brothers and sisters here," Shalimar's father says, "There is no Hindu-Muslim issue."

The implausibility of religious coexistence in the torn and fractious land of Kashmir is difficult to swallow especially because, as Rushdie himself writes, the communal violence that

ravages Kashmir is unimaginably brutal: "When it burst out one was not murdered by strangers. It was your neighbours, the people with whom you had shared the high and low points of life, the people with whose children your own children had been playing just yesterday. These were the people in whom the fire of hatred would suddenly light up, who would hammer on your door in the middle of the night with burning torches in their hands." It is this brutality that is more believable than the liberality shown by the village elders in permitting the marriage to take place at all and I could not help but read on with a growing sense of disappointment because ultimately "Shalimar" is a story of loss, of downfall and of tragedy both personal and national and as such has to be "accepted" in order to be enjoyed.

As one reviewer wrote: "Salman Rushdie's literary landscapes are often shattered utopias -- idyllic worlds destroyed by the outside -- and real -- world's intrusion. Often, these lands' downfalls are the result of fervent nationalism, religious fanaticism, and imperialism. Here the utopian land is Kashmir, and its destruction is a result of all of these forces. Its inhabitants too -- for Rushdie's lands are metaphors for his characters -- are raped by Indian soldiers, abused by Muslim extremists, and taken advantage of by American ambassadors. They are tragic figures whose misfortunes take them to extreme -- and often ignoble -- measures."

Was Kashmir ever the Utopia that Rushdie passionately believes it was? My dabbling in South Asian history leads me to believe that "Kashmiriyat" is as much of a myth as the dreams of the viability of an Undivided Bengal; therefore I find it difficult to accept the scenario presented by Rushdie. No doubt, like "Midnight's Children" and "Shame," "Shalimar" is an important novel, especially because it tackles the complex and serious topic of religious and national unrest; but in South Asia, Kashmir features almost daily in the news, thus making our perceptions more factual and, in some cases, even first hand so that we are less willing to accept the author's point of view in its totality.

In fact, South Asia and its problems of communal, religious and national differences, particularly the problem of Kashmir, is a many-layered subject, difficult for any writer to portray realistically, therefore while on the level of fiction "Shalimar" succeeds to some extent -- credibility is quite another matter. But then perhaps I am overly critical where Rushdie is concerned.

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

Iraq quagmire: Bush's dilemma

MOHAMMAD AMJAD HOSSAIN

WITH the rise in number of deaths of American soldiers in Iraq, there has been mounting pressure on Bush administration to pull out troops from Iraq. The death toll passed 2000 mark early this month. Several thousands have been wounded, many of them may not be able to have active life. The two schools of thought have emerged on the withdrawal of troops. Pro-administration group is of the opinion that total withdrawal of troops at this stage tantamounts to surrender to "terrorists", and Iraqi administration would face serious turmoil in the absence of well-organised police and military forces. President Bush's recent rhetoric is that when Iraqis themselves would be able to take over responsibility American troops would be withdrawn. In this context Bush administration has been arguing that progress has been made in training Iraqi police and military forces. But it has been at snail space as of now as can be seen from the assessment of American top Commander in Iraq, Gen. George Casey, who said, "Just one of the 120 US trained Iraqi army and police battalions was able to operate without US forces". It seems that the way the progress is being made in training Iraqi military and police, it will be a long drawn process.

By now 30,000 Iraqis may have lost their lives in the on-going war which began with the invasion in March, 2003. Figure could be much higher. Pentagon recently gave another account of killing or wounding of Iraqis by insurgents. That figure is around 26,000. In this both American troops and so-called insurgents are involved.

The issue of going to war against Iraq is drawing attention again as a result of investigation leading to leak of the name of under cover agent of CIA. The grand jury investigation indicted Scooter Libby, Chief of Staff of the Vice-President Dick Cheney on perjury, false statement and obstruction of justice. This matter is likely to get further attention as prosecutors move toward public trial.

As the death toll of American

"Hardcore repression -- which means Guantanamo, Abu Ghraib, anti-terrorist legislation that infringes on civil liberties -- only serve to encourage the new Jihad generation. Only two developments might prevent another bombing in another European capital, and the spread of delocalised, apocalyptic Islamist ideology: the US leaving Iraq and a decent, internationally-accepted agreement between Israelis and Palestinians. That's it -- or Jihad, and blowback, will go on forever"



soldiers continues to rise, the tax payers bear greater burden of the costs in Iraq war. It cost more than \$ 251 billion as of October. This figure is based on the research done by Congressional Research Service. It means a person contributed more than \$892 dollars to this nonsensical war.

There is growing discontent among the general Americans and they began questioning the real motive of Bush administration to go to war in Iraq which is costing billion of dollars and lives of American soldiers, apart from the massive public debt. The cost of this war is the visible erosion of American image; the breeding of a new generation of terrorists; and morally weakening of American power and will to face serious threat elsewhere. What is most interesting to witness is that the support for this war is declining rapidly as days pass by which is contrary to either Korean or Vietnam wars in

mid 50's. Bush administration's frequent change in rhetoric did not bring any change in the minds of Americans except hard core Republicans. Professor of Political Science John Mueller of Ohio State University in an article in *Foreign Affairs* said that "... support has declined far more quickly than it did during either the Korean War or the Vietnam War. And if history is any indication, there is little the Bush administration can do to reverse this decline."

In respect of insurgency in Iraq, Bush administration has also been playing a game. Initially, Bush administration depicted insurgent as comprising Saddam Hussein's Fidayeen. Secondly, they describe insurgents as the followers of former Baath Party and army personnel. And thirdly, the notion of foreign fighters was added to this kind of rhetoric. The use of this terminology intends to include Syria and Iran in the extended war of Bush

administration. The same game of regime change may be replayed here. Therefore, the situation is likely to be complicated further by this extended war, if it happens.

What actually made Bush administration to jump on the assassination of Rafik al-Hariri, former Prime Minister of Lebanon to conduct investigation and blame Syria for it is to drag Syria into the dispute to find a pretext to attack.

Against the volatile situation in Iraq, South Korea, a close ally of the United States decided to withdraw one third of its 1000 soldiers from Iraq while Italy has dramatically announced to withdraw its troops soon from Iraq.

If Bush administration does not listen to friendly advice and continues to stay in Iraq, according to its strategy, the situation is likely to get worse in future. The bottom line of insurgents' objective appears to drag on the syndrome and the United States should pull out from Iraq in a disgraceful manner as she did in Vietnam or as the Soviet Union did in Afghanistan. Quoting Washington Post-ABC news poll, the *Washington Post* reported on November 4, 2005 that "for the first time in his presidency, a majority of Americans question the integrity of President Bush amid growing concerns about the overall direction of the country on the economy, Iraq and even the war on terrorism".

I would like to conclude this piece by quoting Pepe Escobar, who said in a signed article, *Blowback*: "Hardcore repression -- which means Guantanamo, Abu Ghraib, anti-terrorist legislation that infringes on civil liberties -- only serve to encourage the new Jihad generation. Only two developments might prevent another bombing in another European capital, and the spread of delocalised, apocalyptic Islamist ideology: the US leaving Iraq and a decent, internationally-accepted agreement between Israelis and Palestinians. That's it -- or Jihad, and blowback, will go on forever". (*Asia Times*, Hong Kong, July 12, 2005)

Mohammad Amjad Hossain, a former Bangladeshi diplomat, lives in Virginia

We don't have AIDS, but we suffer, too

KERREL MCKAY

I was 9 years old when I found out my father was ill. It was 1994, but I can remember my mother's words as if it were yesterday: "Kerrel, I don't want you to take food from your father, because him have the AIDS. Be very careful when you are around him."

AIDS wasn't something we talked about in Jamaica when I was growing up. What I knew about AIDS could be summed up like this: If you were HIV-positive, you were going to die. You were going to suffer before you died. And you didn't expect anyone to treat you well, either.

From then on, I knew that this would be a family secret. My parents were not together anymore, and my dad lived alone. For a while he could take care of himself. But when I was 12, his condition worsened. My father's other children lived far away, so it fell to me to look after him.

I tended to his every need. After school, I would cook, clean, shop for groceries and take my dad to the doctor. We couldn't afford all the necessary medication for him, and because Dad was unable to work, I had no money for school supplies and often couldn't even buy food for dinner. I would sit in class feeling completely lost, the teacher's words muffled as I tried to figure out how I was going to manage.

I did not share my burden with anyone. I had seen how people reacted to AIDS. Kids taunted and teased classmates who had parents

When adults decide how to tackle the world's AIDS crisis, the way it affects children must become part of their thinking. Children need medicine, health care and psychological support. They need help caring for their sick parents so they can continue to go to school. They need the care and stability of a strong family. And they need the education and services that will enable them to protect themselves from HIV.

with the disease. And even adults could be cruel. When my father was moved to the hospital, the nurses, who were not well educated about the virus and believed they could become infected easily, neglected to bathe him and would leave his food on the bedside table even though he was too weak to feed himself.

I had known from day one that he was going to die, but after so many years of keeping his condition a secret, I was completely unprepared when he reached his final days. All the questions I never asked, all the pain I felt, were bottled up inside. I couldn't bear the thought of watching him die or even hearing about his death. So I decided to kill myself first.

Despondent, I called a woman at the nonprofit Jamaica AIDS Support who had helped get my father into a caring hospice. That bleak day, she kept me on the phone for hours, and she left me with a sense of hope.

I was so lucky to find someone who cared. She saved my life. The most important thing I learned from her was this: I am not alone. In

Jamaica, in the Caribbean, throughout the world, there are millions like me who first lose their childhood to a parent's illness and then lose their parent to AIDS.

Worldwide, there are 15 million children who have lost at least one parent to AIDS. Eighty percent of them are in sub-Saharan Africa; the rest are scattered all over the world, including my native Jamaica. Millions more children are living in the shadow of AIDS, forced to skip school to tend to sick parents, left to scrounge for food and medicine and grow up without parental protection, guidance and love. Most of these children are cared for by already overburdened relatives. Rarely do they get any outside help. I was fortunate enough to get counseling, but in this I was an anomaly. According to UNICEF, less than 10 percent of children affected by AIDS receive any public support or services.

My father's illness taught me all too well that young people must learn how to protect themselves

from HIV. To do my part, I created a youth branch of my local Portland Parish AIDS Committee. The members of the group use drama, song and dance to educate their peers and adults about AIDS. We've even hosted a workshop with some of the nurses at the hospital where my father was treated. And every third Saturday, we choose a particular community to visit, walking to houses, parks and bars to talk honestly about HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases. Young people are often too embarrassed to go looking for information, so we bring it to them.

When adults decide how to tackle the world's AIDS crisis, the way it affects children must become part of their thinking. The needs of young people must be addressed in national plans and budgets aimed at the AIDS pandemic. Children need medicine, health care and psychological support. They need help caring for their sick parents so they can continue to go to school. They need the care and stability of a strong family. And they need the education and services that will enable them to protect themselves from HIV.

I was 15 when my father died on February 27, 2000. He took his secret to the grave, having never spoken about AIDS to anyone, even me. He didn't want to call attention to AIDS. I do.

Kerrel McKay, an HIV/AIDS outreach officer for the Jamaican Ministry of Health, lives in Jamaica.

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