

Children in hazardous occupation

What the law can't do, awareness can

OUT of a total of 74 lakh engaged in child labour all over the country as many as 13 lakh children are trying to make a living out of most hazardous occupation such as work in motor garages and workshops that include welding shops, too. They are mostly concentrated in and around the capital city. Boys and girls are often required to work from 7am through 7pm and that too without pay at least initially. The employers justify non-payment of remuneration on the ground that these children are receiving hands-on training free of charge. Payment of remuneration will be considered only after completion of the "apprenticeship" that may take at least as long as a year.

According to a joint survey conducted by Unicef and ILO, children in Bangladesh are involved in 49 categories of hazardous work. It is interesting to note that Bangladesh has identified only 21 categories as hazardous for children.

It is of some consolation however that the draft policy document covering this issue that was prepared by the Ministry of Labour and Employment as early as June last year will be presented before the Council of Advisers next month for approval. The draft document contains a proposal that no one below the age of 18 is to be engaged in any occupation perceived to be hazardous for children. It is worthwhile to note that such work is banned by virtue of the Workers' Compensation Act, 1923, the Children's Employment Act, 1938 and the Child Rights Convention of the UN.

Be that as it may, it must be said, that child labour situation with its various compulsive factors and dimensions in Bangladesh could neither be regulated nor improved upon through legislation, enactment or declarations. Side by side with laws and regulatory measures, we need to implement more and more forward looking projects like the "basic education for hard-to-reach urban working children" that aims at imparting skill to as many as two lakh children between the age 10 and 14 to help them earn a living with a certain level of dignity eventually. On the other hand, alongside such projects, we need to build comprehensive social awareness, understanding and appreciation of the stakes involved in child labour.

The ILO convention 2001 relating to the most degrading forms of child labour has been ratified by us, but we are yet to live up to it. So, the sensitisation programme should be targeted to the employers as well.

We have already neglected our children, for too long, particularly those belonging to the poor and the disadvantaged segments. There should be synchronised efforts by the government, NGOs and the media to address the issues of child labour based on awareness building across the country.

Events in Turkey

Maintaining political stability is important

POLITICS in Turkey these days is in a state of ferment. For once in a long time, the question of secularism has come up in a country now governed by Islamists, of the mild sort. Briefly, this is the story: millions of Turks came out on the streets in Ankara and Istanbul to protest moves by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan to be a candidate for the presidency as President Necdet Sezer's term reaches an end. Their fear was Erdogan would take Turkey towards an Islamist orientation and thus upset the political order left in place by the state's founder Kamal Ataturk. The prime minister was then forced to nominate his foreign minister, Abdullah Gul, for the presidency. Mr. Gul failed to get elected on the first ballot. And then the Constitutional Court annulled the vote itself, a move Mr. Erdogan swiftly denounced.

All of this raises the very important question of Turkey's place in the world. In these past few years, the Erdogan government has provided stability to the country and at the same time has convinced the European Union that Ankara deserves to be considered for membership in it. He has made sure that his Islamist leanings do not come in the way of governance, though there are good reasons to think that his being in power has emboldened a large section of Turks into thinking that their country needs to move into an Islamic direction. That was enough to alarm the military, which has traditionally been the guarantor of Turkey's secularism. The last time the army moved in to ensure the continuity of secular democracy was when it forced the Islamist Necmettin Erbakan from prime ministerial office. Erdogan has turned out to be different from Erbakan, if only for strategic reasons. He has little record of trying to undermine the existing foundations of the state. That of course did not stop the soldiers from worrying. They made sure, through a clear behind the scenes role in the demonstrations against the prime minister, that enough voices were raised for secularism in order for Erdogan to back down.

Now that the prime minister has suggested new elections as a way of getting Turkey out of its crisis, it will be interesting to see how the secular opposition and the military respond. It will be unfortunate if Turkey is pushed into uncertainty after all these years of political and economic stability.

The enormity of our political reforms



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

THE desire and demand for substantive political reforms and, thus, a healthy and clean body-politics is understood and appreciated. The question is, do we have a clear grasp of the enormity of the task ahead? The suspicion is that many of us do not realize how deeply mired we are in irregularities. In other words, have we ventured to ascertain whether disobedience to law has become a way of life for the dominant section of the population? Have we institutionally and, therefore, culturally internalized many vices?

There is no denying that in Bangladesh we have scant concern for public good, and far too few citizens are

interested in public welfare. Discharging the statutory duty of protecting national assets has not received any priority.

Our legal system has been forced into making life too easy for criminals and too difficult for law-abiding citizens. The once regular and now intermittent killing of persons, often in broad daylight, by state agencies under the garb of so-called crossfire arouses as little public attention as the going down of the sun in the evening.

Our politicians are largely preoccupied in maintaining a system, which is

poisoned by collective bad faith and polluted by individual avarice. They are

served by deception and craftiness, instead of vision and imagination, while our political institutions have not acquired durability through age and tradition.

Additionally, our economic growth does not make up for the weaknesses of the political institutions. The danger is that we do not have a resilient economy, but are burdened with the handicap of fragile institutions and a constitution, which is looked upon by politicians as being so pliant that it can be bent to any whim or caprice of the ruling clan.

The spirit of moderation has not prevailed in our political discourses and, as a result, our society had degenerated

into divisions and hatred has replaced goodwill. We do not realize that we need to do away with that temper which presses a partisan advantage to its bitter end, which does not respect and understand the other side. We are yet to witness the practice of consent and compromise that are attributes of mature political societies.

Our first task is to have leadership at all levels, from the prime minister's to the Union Council's. True leadership is the exact opposite of the concentration of all power and decision making authority in one individual.

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