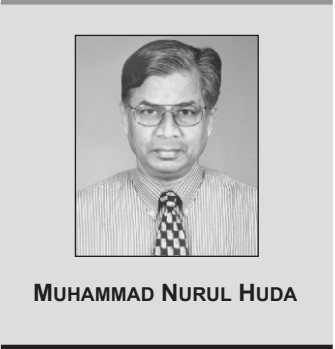


Retiring from politics and all that



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

A highly decorated general of the United States armed forces, who, in his time, might have become a presidential contender, is credited with the famous saying that "old soldiers do not die, they just fade away." On the authority of competent people in the judiciary we have been given to understand that judges in the US, specially those of the Supreme Court, are never considered retired, and that they cease to hold office as and when they themselves find it difficult physically or mentally to faithfully discharge their assigned functions. Reportedly, a near similar scenario is there in respect of the tenure of teachers of higher centres of learning in developed democracies.

The above has been mentioned in order to understand the ramifications of the retirement-related pronouncements of some of our high profile politicians. The subject assumes added significance

STRAIGHT LINE

Running the affairs of state is a solemn and grim business, where we need individuals of true grit. It was indeed pathetic to see occupiers of very high political office enjoying hugely the perks and privileges of power without feeling the burden of responsibilities. Their conspicuous consumption was a rude shock for many. The single-minded pursuit of money by the ruling elite has impoverished the mind of the nation and has also desiccated its heart.

because we were under the mistaken belief that our politicians do not fade away till their last breath, and that, in our parlance, retirement was an unknown word to the worldly-wise practitioners of the art of politics.

A veteran politician, who served creditably under the dictatorial dispensation of General Hussain Mohammad Ershad and later secured a position as minister of a vital sector during Awami League tenure, has declared his decision to retire from politics in the not-too-distant future.

Soon after the announcement, criminal cases relating to his misdeeds as minister were registered. It is not yet known if this gentleman's intention to retire was occasioned by the likely involvement in criminal cases. It remains to be seen if the fact of the retirement intent influences the modus operandi of the investigating agency.

While in power, the supreme leader of a major political party once said that she would like to retire from

active politics after attaining the age of fifty-seven. Years later, she is saying that now, when she is nearing the age of sixty, she does not mind retiring from politics. She has also added that senior political leaders over the age of sixty should be consigned to advisory positions.

A high profile politician, while in custody, has reportedly pleaded to the authority for exempting him from the charges and, in doing so, has also declared his resolve to quit politics.

Cynics say that there are many fence-sitters in the political ranks who are waiting to see the likely retirement advantages. Such elements are closely observing the pace of anti-graft measures to decide if relinquishment or abdication would be a profitable course of action.

Undoubtedly, the scenario is quite unsettling. The question that should bother any right-thinking person is whether politics should be treated like any other occupation or vocation. There is no disputing that

being in politics one delivers public service of a high and very different order. Therefore, why should the thought of apparently premature retirement concern people who are to preside over the destinies of millions of men and women?

Are some politicians contemplating retirement because politics had been a very satisfying means of personal enrichment for them, and that too within a short period? Such an apprehension is suspected to be true for at least some young politicians who, in the last couple of years, have risen from rags to riches.

One such figure who worked in a sensitive post in the chief executive's office during the last political government is now a fugitive from the law. Some glimpses of his illegal acquisitions, as reported in the media, are credible evidence of the abominable low to which politics has descended in Bangladesh.

One may question as to why the idea of retirement should have any relevance to the practitioners of politics. They are of the view that

appointment, suspension and retirement are processes in government service, where appointees carry out the wishes of the political government.

Such appointees come through a constitutionally laid down process of selection and are guided by multiple rules and regulations. They do not act on free will and have to retire at age fifty seven, if not sent home earlier on account of incapacity, to enjoy the pleasure of the appointing authority.

Coming to specifics, one may wonder whether there is a prescribed minimum qualification for those who seek election to parliament. The qualifications of citizenship and age are related to an accident of birth and the result of the inexorable passage of time. Therefore, is it time to advocate some positive qualifications for aspirants to a parliamentary stint?

In our situation one cannot but be struck by the grim irony that the one job for which you need no training or qualification whatsoever is the job of

legislating for, and governing, a large democracy. It is, indeed, strange that to steer the lives and destinies of nearly 150 million people one is not required having any education or training at all.

Discerning observers are of the considered view that it is manifestly anomalous that we should insist upon high qualifications for those who administer or help in administering the law, but none for those who make it, except that they be elected.

There is no denying that a law-giver requires intellectual equipment but also, even more than that, the capacity to take a balanced view of things, to act independently and, above all, to be true to the fundamental values in life.

A relevant question is whether we are electing 300 predominantly development executives in the name of parliamentary election? The concern is, why do a large number of politicians want to have a finger in every pie, whether local or national? The cynics say that we are, in fact, electing lean and hungry folk only to witness physically enlarged, goody in girth, politicians in a few years time. It is time to clearly lay down the parameters for the job of lawmaker.

It may also be the time to strengthen the local government, now that we have an extended caretaker government that has, supposedly, no narrow or partisan interests. This is urgently necessary to control the ever-increasing greed

and lust of less than conscientious politicians. Greater concentration of power at one point is undoubtedly bad for the political health.

Politicians will perhaps not contemplate retirement, not to speak of premature departure if, by means of legal and institutional measures, we can make life difficult for the corrupt ones. We have to ensure that such elements do not get time to relax, and are subjected to real inconveniences in displaying their ill-gotten worldly possessions. The politicians can be kept on track if statutory measures are taken to guard against their becoming unbridled promoters/distributors of favours. This is crucial to stop favour-seeking satellites from hovering around the so-called power points. The cost of being corrupt in politics has to be very high.

It is time for our society to ensure that the political scene is not dominated by people whose real sources of income cannot be ascertained. For most people, politics must not turn into a fulltime occupation, and prominence in public life should be accorded only after some positive record of public service.

The villains cannot be upstaged in our political history. A sense of propriety in public life has to be retained. Administrative and financial accountability should be considered as solemn, serious, and sacred in affairs of the state.

On the subject of retirement or otherwise from politics, we may benefit from the neighbouring West

Bengal experience, where the 93-year-old veteran Jyoti Basu's counsels continue to prove salutary. It was only the other day that the West Bengal government, passing through difficult times following the multiple deaths in Nandigram, solicited Mr. Basu's intervention, and the latter succeeded in mollifying a firebrand Momota Banerjee, obviously to the relief of an exasperated establishment.

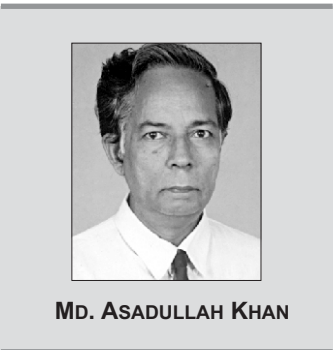
However, to reach the status of Jyoti Basu our politicians would require years of training and discipline in the political arena. In the meantime, our politicians can make themselves likeable by demonstrating integrity, moderation and maturity in public discourses.

Running the affairs of state is a solemn and grim business, where we need individuals of true grit. It was indeed pathetic to see occupiers of very high political office enjoying hugely the perks and privileges of power without feeling the burden of responsibilities. Their conspicuous consumption was a rude shock for many. The single-minded pursuit of money by the ruling elite has impoverished the mind of the nation and has also desiccated its heart.

Unless the process is reversed by well-meaning sustainable interventions, corrupt politicians may have to face unpleasantly enforced premature retirements. Wiping the dirt from the art of politics brooks no further delay.

Muhammad Nurul Huda is a DS columnist.

Educating women imperative for development



MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

BITTER TRUTH

A somewhat happy glimmer is that the poorest in the villages are getting the message about the importance of education. But the increasing motivation of parents to educate children hasn't been matched by a corresponding improvement in schooling facilities. Parents in the rural areas are rather more inclined to put the male child onto school. Moreover societal, cultural and religious values in the country appear to be loaded against female education. Statistics reveal that forty percent of all girls are engaged in household work compared to a

THE portrait of the country that leaders envisioned and the pledges they made to the people during all these years have burst into an illusion. In stark contrast to the development of growth phenomenon manifest in the emergence of high-rise buildings, shopping malls and luxury cars in the cities, villages in Bangladesh till now are portraits of human misery. It is hard for younger generations, especially women folk, in the rural Bangladesh to concentrate on any ambitious project and carve out a future for them. They can't feel good about their country while still secretly longing for a change. Women till now are the most deprived and neglected segment in the society.

Despite the policy framework of the past government in the 'Bangladesh Action Plan for SAARC Decade of the Girl Child' towards improving the conditions of girls and raising the status of women, hardly anything tangible has been achieved. Shockingly true, the action plan that sought to establish pragmatic efforts focused on the girl child and ensure integration of the women folk within the development activities of various social development agencies has fallen through.

The two core issues namely elimination of social injustice and economic exploitation of the girl child could only be tackled through motivation, policy guidelines and bold leadership exercised at the government level. Women seem to

be discriminated against in the society in ever greater proportions. And the genesis of discrimination and cruelty against women can be traced to the explicable attitude of social apathy inherent in the male population. Though the constitution provides for gender equality, people in the country have been governed by personal family custom and rules that fail to give women their due.

Unfortunately, people have watched during the last few years, unending political feuds and a mad race for power again by the party that was in power through politicisation of the administration and different vital agencies of the government through corrupt practices never conceived in the earlier days. These damaging policies stifled all nation building activities and pragmatic planning. Because of the politicians' failure to lead the nation and give proper policy directions to people, the country has, of late, been a hot bed of chaos. In large part, this desperate situation was brought about by venal politicians. In their quest for public office and payoffs of power, they inflamed passions and used every cynical trick to promote personal gain. Without hesitation, they divided this country along class and extremist lines. They exploited and manipulated all the societal and structural weaknesses inherent in a developing society.

Social fissures which statesmen would normally attempt to bridge

have been deepened by politicians seeking short term advantage. Precisely speaking, politics in this country has become a profitable playground of the worst and the dimmest men whose vision doesn't extend beyond their pockets. Bangabandhu or Zia for the two mainstream political parties have become merely political mascots; their idealism and work ethos are today slogans for vote-mongers.

With terrorism, killings, hijacking, drug addiction, trafficking in women and children on the rise, people were sick of the government and politicians. Shockingly true, till now the energy, imagination, genius and full potential of our young men and women could not be fruitfully channelised to take the country forward. True, with firm commitment and policies in halting the trafficking of women for forced labour, domestic servitude and sex exploitation, the edifice of a prosperous society could be built. Because when women are guaranteed basic human and labour rights, whole families and communities benefit.

More so, when women gain the knowledge and power to make their own choices, society is better able to break the chains of poverty. Most women in the country are unwanted and struggling to stay alive suffering all kinds of humiliation and torture. A recent World Bank report on women's health in the country concludes that poverty and deeply etched social attitudes have pro-

duced a kind of hidden holocaust for the country's female population.

Shockingly true, despite a growing consensus on the importance of women's work, gender disparities and inequality of opportunity and treatment persist. Too many girls in the country are denied the right to go to school and too many women to take a job for which they receive equal pay. Too many are concentrated in the informal work sector, underemployed or unemployed. Scores are barred from accessing loans or credit or exercising the most basic of legal rights. That means when the male member either husband or father in a family dies or becomes disabled due to disease or accident, the whole family lands in a sea of calamity and distress.

The country now bears the brunt of depriving women their right to education. The neglect of educating girls is doubly alarming because education almost always leads to a drop in infant mortality and to a reduced birthrate. This is evident from the fact that rapid improvements in women's literacy in the southern state of Tamil Nadu in India in the past several years has quickly brought about this virtuous circle. That only justifies the assertion that no society liberates itself that treats its women badly.

Without a shadow of doubt, this sub-continent, especially our country suffers inexorably because of its flawed and discriminatory education

system. Emancipation of the women folk from the shackles of poverty, discrimination and humiliation within the four walls of the house or outside underscores the need for education that ultimately leads to development. While speaking in a seminar on population control arranged by the Ministry of Health and Family Planning last week, Hon'ble Chief Adviser of the CTG stressed the need for limiting population to ensure uniform distribution of the fruits of development in all sections of the society. That "development is the best contraceptive" thesis faces an uphill test in poor rural Bangladesh where birth rate is the highest and children are viewed as a source of family wealth.

The country has always had problems -- in multitudes. To-day, the emphasis is on its potential: a 140 million people need education, more electricity, roads, health care, sanitation and other gadgets towards lessening their plight. Hundreds of thousands of potential youths mostly disillusioned are wandering the streets of cities and villages in search of work. And if only the political climate improves, it might usher in a boom that will lift the entire country.

But no boom can be sustained if problems like educating the masses especially women, providing such basic necessities as food, inoculations for the young and water that does not make people sick are not solved.

Two essential ingredients, health and education that can only help create and sustain a stable economy continue to be neglected in the country. The literacy rate signifying the level of education is an indicator of the progress the country would achieve. The literate politically demanding masses of Kerala in India have proven that solutions are not only in the books but feasible on the ground. Sri Lanka boasts high life expectancy and 90 percent literacy rates.

A somewhat happy glimmer is that the poorest in the villages are getting the message about the importance of education. But the increasing motivation of parents to educate children hasn't been matched by a corresponding improvement in schooling facilities. Parents in the rural areas are rather more inclined to put the male child onto school. Moreover societal, cultural and religious values in the country appear to be loaded against female education. Statistics reveal that forty percent of all girls are engaged in household work compared to a negligible number of boys. In spite of several laws restricting child labour, labour participation of girls (10-14 years) has increased, while the participation of boys has declined.

Moreover, disadvantages facing the girl child are compounded by an apparently increasing incidence of violence against girls and women such as abduction, rape, acid throwing, assault, kidnapping and immoral trafficking. Despite existence of laws and stringent penalties, social attitudes towards women's status seem to permit these behavioural aberrations. The contemporary situation of inadequate social opportunities for both adolescent boys and girls to develop normal patterns of work and behaviour leads to large scale migration of adolescent girls to cities and towns in search of a living, aggravating the problems.

The country is replete with instances of torture, violence and

humiliation perpetrated on women even on just reported and unproven cases of moral transgression or adultery. Some years back, Noorjahan, a married woman in the district of Sylhet, accused by a local Imam of adultery, was half buried and then stoned. The intention was to humiliate her, but out of total shock, Noorjahan later committed suicide by swallowing poison. Kadabanu of Rangpur district was buried to her waist outside her home and pelted with old shoes for a similar transgression. As already mentioned, women traditionally are placed in the distant second position after men.

Lives of women are still mired in distress and unending social barriers. Now self-styled religious leaders in the villages have been issuing "fatwas" that it is degrading for Muslim women to be engaged in work outside her house without observing "Purdah". On the strength of that "fatwa", thousands of schools were vandalised and at least 60 of them set afire since 1995 and the trend still continues. Several women in different villages of

Bogra, Rangpur and Sylhet and Khulna were divorced by their husbands for working and taking loans from different NGOs or accepting health services.

Girls any way, would be discouraged from school so that they could be married off at the earliest for there to be one mouth less to feed. And for one more woman to be available for breeding purposes these unfortunate families may have some extra hands to make their living easier.

Hopefully, democracy too is playing a key role by giving women the vote and making national interest, not gender, the main determinant of who gets to run governments. Similarly free enterprise is helping the female cause by making quality, productivity and profits paramount in business decisions. This important message must get to our leaders. They must realise that without educating men about women, the social barriers would be harder to remove.

Md. Asadullah Khan is a former teacher of physics and Controller of Examinations, BUET.



Society must ensure her education

'HUNGERFREE' CAMPAIGN IN GENEVA

'Stop monga' in Bangladesh

AFM SHAHIDUR RAHMAN, SAJID HASAN, MUNNI HUQ, TANYA HUQ SHAHRIAR, AUDITY FALGUNI

"Hunger is exclusion exclusion from the land, from income, jobs, wages, life and citizenship. When a person gets to the point of not having anything to eat, it is because all the rest has been denied. This is a modern form of exile. It is death in life."

-- Josue de Castro, Economist and Brazilian diplomat

POVERTY and hunger are inseparable Siamese twins. Hunger is manifested in a number of forms; foremost are the malnutrition, violence; however, joblessness and prolonged working hours are the reasons of hunger. Hunger is also intertwined with malnutrition. Against the backdrop of 854 million hungry people in the world, the number of hungry population in Bangladesh alone as 30 million. Twenty-four humans die every minute from hunger; and a staggering 16,000 children die every day.

Of the hungry people of the world 80 percent live in the rural areas, of

them 70 percent are women. Surprisingly women produce 80 percent of the world's food but only 10 percent of them enjoy their right to own and control land. Statistics also says, the number of death related to malnourishment is far more than the combined number of deaths from AIDS, malaria and TB. Malnourishment as a symptom of hunger is most commonly observed in Asia, particularly in India and China where 363 million malnourished people struggle to survive.

A 35 years experience of ActionAid in working to fight poverty shows that hunger is more than a normative phenomenon, it is a result of historical injustice and denial of rights resulted in the human degradation and barrier to access the fruits of justice. It considers the entire issue as a result of politics and power tilted against the poor. This anti poverty international organization has launched a 5-year global "Hungerfree" campaign in Geneva this July. It targets the respective governments and the rich of the world to remind of their promises for halving the number of the famished by 2015 as set forth in the Millennium Development Goal.

One of the major objectives of the campaign will be to ensure 100 days legally guaranteed work scheme during the lean season to the poorest with a minimum wage that will cover the basic needs of a household a day. By the end of 2007, there will be another component: introduction of appropriate technology on fish-rice-jute cultivation for the marginal farmers.

The campaign sets to initiate work in all 42 countries where the organization works. The campaign was launched just before the ECOSOC meeting in Geneva. That governments around the world are failing in their duty to respect, protect and fulfil people's right to food was maintained by Chief Executive of Action Aid Ramesh Singh in UN who said, "Seven years ago when governments promised to halve hunger there were 800 million hungry people across the globe -- now there are 854 million people going hungry." The campaign also demands a different response from states -- legally enforceable standards like dignified work for the poor to end hunger.

Hunger is a result of not having access to food though there is enough food to feed the entire 6.5 billion souls of the planet. But the

fact is, people cannot access food just because they cannot buy food; and they cannot buy food because they do not have work to earn the money. So the real problem is rooted in the problem of distribution of world's wealth and subsequently, in the access to food. This global campaign is demanding actions from governments, intergovernmental organisations and corporations to end hunger-related deaths by providing appropriate and sustainable access to food. AAI will draw attention of the people on 'what is being done' and more importantly, 'what is not being done by political leaders worldwide' with the help of this campaign.

This year being the mid-way point of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) set in 2000, its launching is coincided with the mid-term evaluation of the MDGs. The

UN Economic, Cultural and Social Council (ECOSOC) sat in Geneva to review the progress towards the MDGs.

Six countries affected by hunger will be reporting to this meeting on their efforts to improve food security over the last seven years. They are Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Cambodia, Ghana, Cape Verde and Barbados. The new global campaign "End Hunger" combines a three-pronged strategy to pressure the governments on the issues like respecting, protecting and fulfilling the right to food, strengthening corporate regulations and expose companies when they exploit poor people and giving poor women access to land so that their right to land is protected and they can control the food they grow.

End Monga: Bangladesh focus Hunger and famine-like situation

prevails in north-western regions particularly during the lean season as the poorest do not have access to livelihoods and work. Monga, seasonal chronic food shortage among the absolute poor in the selected northern district of Bangladesh, is one of the major indicators how acute poverty exists in the country. Starting from mid September to the end of November, Monga coincides with man's harvesting cycle. During the interim period, there are no alternative economic activities left for the rural people living in the area. They are mainly sharecroppers, day-labourers in agriculture and petty traders. During these months, these people from Nilphamari, Kurigram, Lalmonirhat, Rangpur, Jamalpur and Sherpur districts face serious liquidity shortage as the economic activity is lowest in the area.

The dire condition of agro-product based industries like Jute, Cotton, Sugar or Paper in North Bengal, low price for agro products, denial of state to particular land use pattern amongst the indigenous people like the Santals, Oraons, Munda, and Mahali, forced sale of land by marginal peoples, poor wage in agricultural forms and scarcity of work are the causes of Monga. There has been a major change in the agro-industry dependency in North Bengal over the last two decades. Structural adjustment has led to the closure of agro based industries which has resulted in creation of industrial unemployment on one hand and turning the land into mono-crop on the other. Thus, the grim situation of both agriculture and industrialisation has marked the characteristics of North Bengal economy with unemployment and hardcore poverty.

The over-all context of Monga has led AAB to initiate a campaign to end Monga from the coming August. One of the major objectives of the campaign will be to ensure 100 days legally guaranteed work scheme during the lean season to the poor-

est with a minimum wage that will cover the basic needs of a household a day. By the end of 2007, there will be another component: introduction of appropriate technology on fish-rice-jute cultivation for the marginal farmers. It will also introduce school feeding for primary school children where procurement of and preparation of the meal will be done by the people affected by hunger. This will generate greater value for the small producers and demonstrate to the government how school meal can both create opportunities and feed children.

It will also collect alternative statistics of the area to learn about hunger situation in those districts. This will result in tracking government and non-government welfare mechanisms in the area which will reveal the system loss. Its partners will hold public hearings and people's audit to make the institutions accountable in delivering the government programmes. There will also be tri-partite work with local government to make the institutions accessible for the poor people. This will, probably, find a way to reach the stakeholders.

The writers work for Action Aid Bangladesh.