

The return of democrats and some questions



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

CYNICS say that in Bangladesh, the sensible position is pessimism. In such a background it is not surprising to see our voluble elite quite often wishing or predicting a worst case scenario. Many amongst us have a mindset that expects deterioration in everything. Still others would say that at best status quo ante will prevail.

The question is, why and how the aforementioned mindset has developed? There is a considered view that the change on 11th January 2007 has been occasioned by ruling group's visionless, inept and inefficient actions and attitudes. One may also wonder if our ruling class is largely represented by self-seeking and greedy individuals whose primary aim is to remain in power by any means and enjoy its perks and privileges. Have they contributed to a sense of despondency, fatality and helplessness?

Some would say that the personal and coterie interests of powerful groups have taken precedence over national interests and in the process the people don't count. However, people who have not gained from governmental ventures perhaps think and behave differently. Social scientists witness distinct change in the thinking and behaviour of the general masses. Such change appears positive. In other words, at societal level there is a yearning for change, a realization that Bangladesh is our country and we have to do something to better our

STRAIGHT LINE

We have to remember that the choice is between devoting energy and resources for solving people's problems and maintenance of order in society or the use of government machinery to keep rival claimants to power in check. Without doubt, such a scenario amounts to a zero-sum game. So if our politicians and legislators cannot rise above their narrow individual or group interests on account of dynamics of power then the writ of democracy will be weak and irrelevant. The people of Bangladesh do not want that.

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The premonition is, shall we continue to remain positioned on an ominous fault line, that is, a disconnect between the State and society? Such apprehension assumes significance when one sees the widening gulf between the ruling class and the people and the waning of people's confidence in the establishment.

We would do well in remembering that the crisis of governance at several levels during the supposedly democratic rule was caused not by lack of resources but due to the absence of institutions of governance and the lack of accountability. So when the democrats return to power they will have to decide if in order to promote and protect their interests, they should continue to use coercion, bribery and nepotism as policy and go on nourishing a culture of opportunism, deceit, duplicity and plunder. They need to ponder seriously as to the mechanisms of strengthening the political institutions.

Our democrats should engage in self-introspection to find out how regulatory state outfits have shown progressive decay while only succeeding in suppressing political dissent. They need to understand why in Bangladesh we neither had a democratic setup in the conventional sense nor a state which has the capacity to effectively improve the living standards of the people and arrange security. They have to decide about ensuring political stability and creating space to differing groups.

Our elected representatives of the not-too-distant future will have to compensate for the lack of legitimacy of our weaker democratic system and remove the disconnect between the civil society and the ruling establishment. They must not continue with the misconception that brute force, fear, coercion and corruption are the only sustaining factor of the governing system. Our new dispensation must not seek the support of discredited politicians and individuals having criminal record and not indulge in relaxation of rules for furthering a culture of loot and plunder.

Our potential members of parliament will have to appreciate that they will be dressed in brief authority and that they are not supreme. Therefore, they have to ensure the supremacy of the constitution and thus the eternal human freedoms. In doing so, they will respect the people who have given the constitution unto themselves.

It is perhaps time to have some qualifications laid down for members of parliament. It should strike 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 are elected. Up to now we only see some disqualifications. It would be proper to advocate some positive qualifications for aspirants to parliamentary assignments.

Our political predicament is the result of the inability of our political class to keep pace with the

changing times. The main thrust of this class has been towards maintaining the status quo and consequently all our institutions have weakened. Therefore, it is not surprising that three decades after independence we do not see major changes in the mode of governance, all claims and political rhetoric notwithstanding.

The much-maligned British imperial system did provide a framework for reasonably good governance. What we do not admit is that all these years we have not democratized our political institutions, devolve authority at local level and discard the harsh laws that were enacted to control the people. In fact, our belief in democracy or the rule of law has been less than sincere. On one hand, the empowerment of the people in order to enable them to take charge of their destiny has been postponed for a very long time. On the other, the neutrality, independence and non-partisanship of public services have been compromised giving rise to a new culture of political patronage and influence peddling. With the politicization of the bureaucracy, all hopes for improvement have been badly dashed. Our new leaders have to understand this development.

The changing needs of our society have not been taken into account by our political establishment and consequently we can see a paradoxical situation in that while at the grassroots changes have taken place, the superstruc-

ture of the state and its apparatus does not display the supporting dynamism. The intervention has to be of a political nature. Otherwise all the good efforts of philanthropists and NGOs will not succeed to prop up the system. Our new legislators have to remember that our basic problem is that of governance.

The fear is that our weak institutions will experience great difficulty in regaining people's confidence. The need is to have a just and transparent system that is accountable to the people. Therefore, our legislators will have to largely ensure that protection of our non-delivering system from all challenges does not become the prime activity of the State. They have to guarantee that power and hunger for more resources does not become an end in itself.

We have to remember that the choice is between devoting energy and resources for solving people's problems and maintenance of order in society or the use of government machinery to keep rival claimants to power in check. Without doubt, such a scenario amounts to a zero-sum game. So if our politicians and legislators cannot rise above their narrow individual or group interests on account of dynamics of power then the writ of democracy will be weak and irrelevant. The people of Bangladesh do not want that.

Muhammad Nurul Huda is a columnist of The Daily Star.

Guru Rabidasji's broad based humanity

MASTER KANAILAL RABIDAS MOHANTO

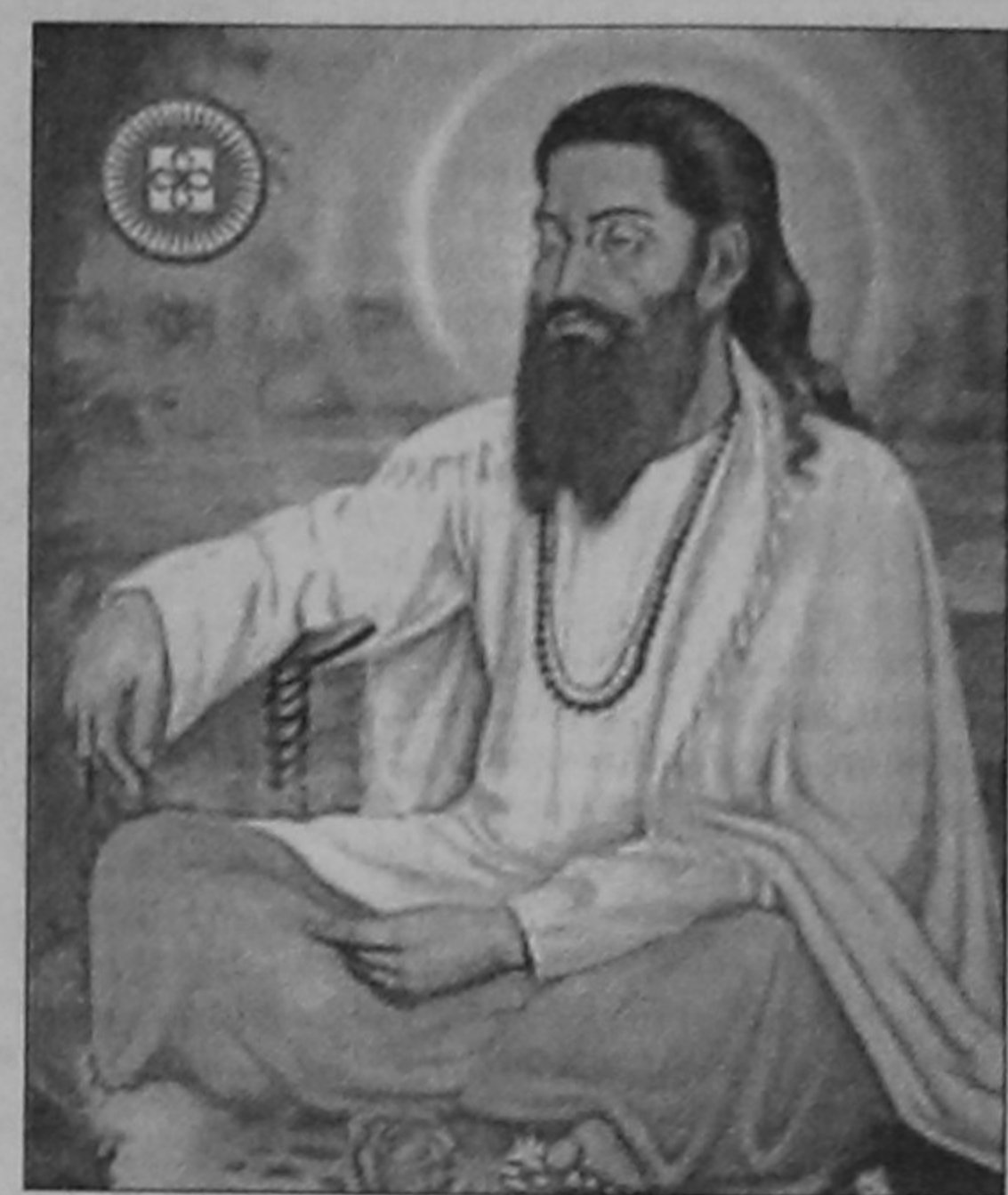
EVERY year, the Rabidas community across the sub-continent celebrate anniversary of birth of their spiritual leader Guru Rabidasji for days together on the occasion of full moon in the month of Magh (this year coinciding February 20-22). Guru Rabidasji was born on this holy full moon of Magh 631 years ago to the cobbler couple Raghuram and Raghurani in Gobardhanpur village of Kashi city in Uttar Pradesh state of India.

A super human in ability and wit Rabidas mastered the family craft of livelihood in no time. In that old Hindu society cobbler being in the lowest rung of the caste system Sudra were considered untouchables. As such Rabidas was barred from formal learning. But he was blessed with extraordinary wisdom and could unabatedly acquire mastery on scriptures often only by listening in the company of hermits.

He advocated for a broad generous society of equals. His was the voice of dissent against the ills of society i.e. the degrading caste system and oppressive clout of the so called upper class, the Brahmins, the harmful prejudices and darkening deprivation from enlightenment. Soon he emerged as the religious-philosophic leader of his community, the oppressed and deprived lower caste, more specifically the cobbler class. And after him they are called the Rabidas community.

Guru Rabidasji envisioned a human society without any barrier of caste or creed, religious or cultural. To him all were the children of God, there must not be any difference between man and man. His was a non-violent approach to the ultimate truth. He always told his followers to take the path of peace for that is ideal for all human beings. He told them to be compassionate to others, win the enemy within, pursue fellow feeling, not to see sins of others but be a sinless self.

His broad philosophy of life attracted many beyond his community. He became a rescuer of the untouchables and the lower caste. They could gain at least some freedom and enjoy some rights from



then onward in the heavily caste ridden society. With a massive support behind him he could have easily staged a rebellion against the exploiters of caste system. They even wanted to banish him from Kashi. But he chose the non-violent path of persuasion. He asked his followers to be honest and upright and good human beings shunning vices and practising virtues. Because it is humanity that reigns above all in the society. Fame and honour did not motivate him but his belief that it is not caste but action that makes a man known as such, and every one had the right to read the scriptures and be enlightened.

Guru Rabidasji was an embodiment of truth and justice, righteousness and compassion. He taught his disciples to win over falsehood and violence with truth and peace. He inspired, still inspires and will yet inspire humanity and equality among all.

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A new state emerges in Europe

MOHAMMAD AMJAD HOSSAIN

THE unilateral declaration of independence by Kosovo possibly ends speculation but the rise in tension in the Balkans. Both Serbia and Russia opposed the declaration while the United States, Great Britain, France and Germany recognized the newly emerged sovereign and independent Kosovo. Balkan countries such as Romania and Bulgaria have not recognised Kosovo. Neither has China. Possibly Slovakia and Cyprus will also not follow the foot print of big countries in recognising Kosovo. Spain has expressed reservation to recognition to 'separatist group'. Spain has been facing similar situation for a long time from its ETA separatist population whose aims has been to win Basque as their homeland and freedom from Spain. This movement began in 1959.

Kosovo was a province of Serbia-Montenegro. But ruthless oppression and suppression of the majority by minority Serbs strengthened their resolve to become independent. The army crack down by President Slobodan Milosevic on Kosovars in 1996 to 1997 was ruthless which caused death of many ethnic Albanians while 300,000 fled Kosovo, particularly to neighbouring Macedonia, Albania, Greece, Germany and many thousands were displaced within Kosovo itself. A study by Lancet, a British medical journal, revealed 12,000 deaths while the Red Cross reported 3,368 were missing until 2000. The

International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia announced that it had exhumed 2,788 bodies in Kosovo. The effort by Milosevic was seen as ethnic cleansing. Milosevic was put on the dock in the International Criminal Tribunal in The Hague for the crime that he committed in Kosovo.

The majority in Kosovo are Albanian ethnics while Serbs are the minority. The army crack down was so ruthless that Germany decided to change their constitution to participate with NATO troops outside of their territory for the first time since the end of World War II. Possibly three reasons dictated Germany's participation. These are: humanitarian impulses, fostering transatlantic relations and regain the initiative in European policy. I was observing the development from Bonn where I was serving at Bangladesh embassy. German Socialist Party in collusion with the Green Party was in power at that time.

NATO launched attack on Kosovo and Belgrade between March and June, 1999 during which Yugoslav targets were attacked while the Kosovo liberation army (KLA) guerrilla continued battle against Yugoslav forces. NATO did not hesitate to bomb Belgrade, capital of Serbia-Montenegro. Yugoslav troops were finally pulled out of Kosovo. Since June, 1999 Kosovo was under the protection of the United Nations peace keeping forces and NATO.

This unilateral declaration of independence was questioned by Serbia in the Security Council

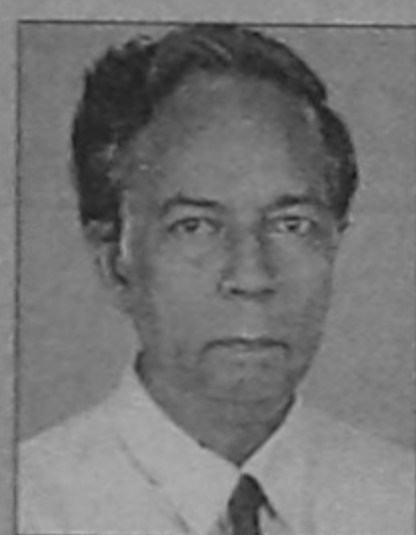
where the matter is under discussion for a long time. Serbia wanted to declare the call inappropriate and illegal. If this matter is referred to the Security Council it would be vetoed by Russia and China. The same situation arose when NATO decided to attack Yugoslavia in 1999. The resolution of the Security Council was vetoed by Russia. On humanitarian grounds NATO carried out the operations in Kosovo and Belgrade without the backing of the Security Council. The legitimacy of bombing in Kosovo and Belgrade had been the subject of criticism, but the human cleansing of ethnic Albanians in Kosovo was justified to carry out such operation.

Meanwhile, minority Serbs in Kosovo have declared they will not follow the declaration because much of northern part is entirely dominated by Serbs. A Serbian Deputy Minister for Kosovo is reported to have said that all political and diplomatic means will be applied to keep Kosovo within Serbia. US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in a statement said: we invite Serbia's leaders to work together with the United States and our partners to accomplish shared goals. Serbia has called back its Ambassador from the United States in protest of recognition of Kosovo.

The question now arises whether the tiny state in Europe will survive the onslaught of Serbia, Russia and some others in the international arena.

Mohammad Amjad Hossain, a former Bangladesh diplomat, writes from Virginia

Education is prerequisite to women's emancipation



MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

UNDER pressure from activists -- and to help win over female voters -- successive governments in the past tried to enforce laws to protect women. In 1995 as the acid attacks spiralled, the Parliament passed the Women and Child Repression Control Act, stipulating death sentence as maximum penalty for such assaults. Sadly true, laws are enacted in the Parliament but never enforced in the houses and streets of the country. In the meantime the plight of the women in the country has gone appallingly bad. With the Chief Adviser making a disclosure in the 11th national conference 2008 of Bangladesh Mahila Parishad on January 17 last in the city that the government would announce a women development policy soon to ensure gender equality in society (The Daily Star, Jan 18), there is a flicker of hope again in their.

The portrait of the country people envisioned 37 years ago with women having equal rights and opportunities is yet to be materialized. Till now they are perhaps the most deprived and neglected section of the society. Most women in the country have little support from either parents, or husbands or in-laws or society at large. A World Bank report on women's health in the recent past concludes that poverty and deeply etched social attitudes have produced a kind of hidden holocaust of the country's female population. The closest thing to a single culprit is the dowry system, which makes a daughter a family burden and a son, who collects the dowry, an asset. But there are other factors, including the illiteracy or the low level of education in the villages.

It is always hard to comprehend violence -- the anger, jealousy or

BITTER TRUTH

The country now bears the brunt of depriving women their right to education. It has been said before but it needs to be repeated ad nauseam that literacy is the key to development, healthcare and jobs. Above all, it is the key to population control. It has been proved over and over that literate women tend to have fewer babies. In village after village it is the poorest, most illiterate women who have the most babies. There is something sickening about the country going into the 21st century with the largest number of illiterate people.

plain sadism -- that can drive people to commit acts of unimaginable horror. How, for instance, are we to understand the evil spite of a group of miscreants led by Abdur Razaq, who crept into Taslima Khatun's (26) house at Ganeshpur village of Kaliganj upazila in the Satkhira district in the middle of night, poured acid on Taslima and three of her family members and walked away as she woke screaming. All because she refused to sleep with him as reported in the Daily Star on February 12 last. A report published in a Bangla daily on February 14 last indicated that Nilufa Begum, a young estranged housewife at Gournadi, Barsal became a victim of acid attack by none else than her husband Babul Mridha after continuing an abusive relationship for ten years all because Nilufa filed a torture case against her husband.

Pathetically true, scores of women in Bangladesh are attacked in this manner every year. There occur about 200 acid attacks every year, according to Bangladesh National Women Lawyers' Association which provides legal aid to the victims. A report published in a Bangla daily on February 19 last indicated that when Hasina Begum, just in her teens, refused to respond to the sexual advances by the boy servant in her house and informed her family about his vile motive the boy servant, poured acid on her face and different parts of her body. For three years and a half, the police could not arrest the perpetrator but as the harrowing tale of her suffering was published in the media, the police nabbed the perpetrator in just 24 hours! Hasina narrated the tortuous experiences of her family in police station and court during all these years in a workshop arranged by the Acid Survivors Foundation at the Brac Centre on February 18

last.

It was revealed in the workshop that there were 1090 acid terrorism cases in 18 districts in the country during 2007 but the courts could deliver verdict in only 89 cases and in most of the cases the perpetrators numbering about 377 escaped scot-free. With 781 cases withdrawn through reconciliation or compromise settlement, 315 cases have been dismissed for want of adequate evidence and loopholes in the investigation. Often the perpetrators are spurned suitors who feel that, if they cannot have the women they desire, they must mangle them so badly that they have no takers. Others use acid -- most people do not know where this is available despite the restriction imposed on its sale -- against women as punishment in property feuds, or because a bride did not bring enough dowry. These men are driven by revenge, and it seems as if throwing acid has become a common thing or fun for them.

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 highest level of the government. 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 inexplicable attitude of social apathy inherent in the male population. Though the constitution provides for equality between sexes with proper protection for women and children, the score card is dismal. While the Chief Adviser of the CTG has reiterated his intention to declare Women Development Policy and Citizenship Act that will ensure equal representation of women in running the statecraft in the

National Conference of the Mahila Parishad, there are hurdles on the way that the Chief Adviser must have envisioned.

The fact is that formulation of policy guidelines unless implemented in practice will never bring about emancipation of the women folk in the country. Pathetically true, people are still governed by family customs and rules that fail to give women their due. Undeniably true, economic progress and change in traditional attitudes will be needed to halt the degradation of women. Even more important is education, as female literacy rises, birthrates drop, life-spans increase, and the status of women is enhanced.

Unfortunately, people watched unending political feuds and a mad race for either clinging to power or going to power between the two leading political parties that has stifled all nation building activities and pragmatic planning. Because of the politician's failure to lead the nation and give proper policy directions, the country has, of late, been a hotbed of chaos. With terrorism, killing, hijacking, abduction, drug addiction and trafficking of women and children on the rise, people were sick of the government and politicians of all hues. True, with firm commitment, and policies towards halting the trafficking of women for forced labour, domestic servitude and sex exploitation, the edifice of a happy and prosperous society could be built. Because when women are guaranteed basic human and labour rights, the whole family and the community 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.

Despite a growing consensus on the importance of women's work, gender disparities and inequality of opportunity and

treatment persist. Too many women in the country are denied the right to go to school to learn to read, to be qualified to take a job for which they may receive equal pay. Too many are concentrated in the informal work sector, underemployed or unemployed. Happily, the Chief Adviser while inaugurating the second National SME (small and medium enterprise) Women Entrepreneurs Conference 2008 at a hotel in Dhaka recently (The Daily Star, February 14, 2008) has asked the banks and financial institutions to ease lending system, waive collaterals and lower lending rates for women entrepreneurs. But the fact remains that scores are still barred from access to loans or credit or exercising the most basic of legal rights.

The country now bears the brunt of depriving women their right to education. It has been said before but it needs to be repeated ad nauseam that literacy is the key to development, healthcare and jobs. Above all, it is the key to population control. It has been proved over and over that literate women tend to have fewer babies. As I traveled through the far flung areas of Satkhira, I watched in horror the extent of our population problem. In village after village it is the poorest, most illiterate women who have the most babies. As I watched their living conditions, what struck me was that the conditions in which these women and children live are worse than where the village animals live. There is something sickening about the country going into the 21st century with the largest number of illiterate people. Isn't it possible to shame our leaders and policy planners into doing something?

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Protesters demanding statehood for Kosovo