

## We need to get our facts straight

**Our statistics should not hide the vital aspects of food security. All plans and projections will go astray if we do not construct them on a solid foundation of quality statistics. We will only enter the trapdoor to perpetual uncertainty and see our plans upended more frequently than we can sustain if we elect to deceive ourselves with sub-standard statistics.**

SAADAT HUSAIN

FOOD security is crucial for the survival of any country. Political, economic and social stability is jeopardised if food security is brought to the precipice. Starvation, death, and disorder follow. Governments, therefore, need to attach topmost priority to food security. Bangladesh witnessed meltdown of food security many times before liberation of the country. Soon after liberation, the country was hit by a catastrophic famine in 1974. The death toll released officially was 27,000; the actual figure was reportedly much higher. Despite a good harvest in 1973-74 food security collapsed and people suffered terribly. Food production was around 10 million tons, while the population was 75 million in 1971-72. There was no food crisis and people were well-fed, by and large. The crisis started in 1973, though there was no crop failure that year or in the preceding one. The situation turned precipitous in 1974-75, a period marked by

excessive rains and floods.

Cereal crop loss due to rains and floods and the actual requirement of food were not worked out precisely. Food aid was inadequate, or import under food aid program could not be effected. We still do not know what precisely was the food gap during that catastrophe. More than three decades have elapsed since then, but we are still working in a cavalier fashion with our food statistics. There is lot of noise with figures relating to production, consumption and import requirement of cereal crops. The Ministry of Agriculture compiles district-wise production figures of cereal crops. If we go by their statistics, the country is at least self-sufficient in food, if not in surplus. So where does the deficit come from? Either the production figure is wrong or the presumed consumption per capita is misconceived, or the presumption of 10% seed, feed and wastage (SFW), is far from reality. There has not been any study on any of these areas, and no

attempt has been made to reconcile the figures released by different ministries and agencies. We are still groping in the dark, as we have been since liberation.

Lack of rigour has restrained Bangladesh's effort to reach a decent level of perfection in areas where it is a desideratum for survival. Information collection and processing on food security is clearly identified as such an area. Consumption per capita needs to be determined reliably, through an empirical survey using a large representative sample. Per capita food consumption has for too long been worked out on the basis of casual empiricism or impressionistic assertion. The figure has been revised upward from time to time based on impressionistic observation, though the actual figure may be far from the assumed figure.

In this context, we may draw an example from the structure of the sugar market in the country. A couple of decades back, the country's sugar consumption was barely 200-300,000 tons a year.

Incredible as it may sound, the figure has shot up to 1.2 million tons -- a figure that appears to be highly counter-intuitive. As a result, the country has to import about a million tons of sugar a year.

The use of urea also registered sharp rise during the last decade; it is about 2.6 million tons a year. The country has to import about one million tons of urea to meet the local demand, because it is now being used in fishery, animal husbandry, and in the industrial sector. It is likely that cereal crops also have diversified uses, which has spurred a sharp rise in demand.

The output of cereal crops needs to be more reliably estimated by improving the quality of data. The methodology of the survey has to be agreed upon by an expert group, and data has to be collected by persons trained for the purpose.

Marketable surplus has to be separated from the total output. The producers might hide information in this regard, but an astutely designed questionnaire may resolve the problem to an acceptable level of satisfaction. One can only surmise that with increased per capita income and improved quality of life, producers earmark a much higher portion of their produce for consumption and for emergencies.



The result: marketable surplus might not have increased *pari passu* with increase in production. We, therefore, do not see a high flow of food grains in the market. Our estimate of SFW at 10% of the output has to be revised. 1% increase in SFW means diversion of 275,000 tons from the production basket. Disinformation on this count also has serious implications for food security planning. The production figures need to be subjected to intensive scrutiny for validation. Production of wheat has plummeted, crowded out by other crops. Rice production has not increased as was

expected a few years back. One should not be surprised if it is found that paddy land is being used for other crops. Production of some non-traditional farm products and fruits has markedly increased. These are high value-added crops, and farmers are switching over from low value-added crops to those. This is inevitable in an emerging economy. Instead of obfuscating the problem of real food shortage through disinformation and lame excuses, we should carry out a rigorous empirical study on farm production, including food crops, fruits and flowers to ascer-



tain where we actually stand. If the increase in the production of other crops has come at the cost of food crops, appropriate action will be needed to adjust to this transition. Other crops may not only have taken land from the food crops, they might also have taken the entrepreneurial resources of the more able farmers, leaving them to work on a neglected land. If that be true, we have to first see the pattern of crop diversification and decide about the appropriate mix of crops. It is said that statistics are like a bikini: what they reveal is suggestive, but what they conceal is

vital. Our statistics should not hide the vital aspects of food security. All plans and projections will go astray if we do not construct them on a solid foundation of quality statistics. We will only enter the trapdoor to perpetual uncertainty and see our plans upended more frequently than we can sustain if we elect to deceive ourselves with sub-standard statistics. Lack of correct information and insidious disinformation must not be allowed to frustrate the country's food security plan. Dr. Saadat Husain is Chairman, Public Service Commission.

## EID-E-MILADUNNABI

### The greatest champion of women's rights

**Had the holy Prophet of Islam done nothing more, his claim to be a benefactor of mankind would have certainly been indisputable. Pierre Crabite very rightly declares: "Muhammad, thirteen hundred years ago, assured to the mothers, wives and daughters of Islam a rank and dignity not yet generally assured to women by the laws of the West... Muhammad was probably the greatest champion of women's rights the world has ever seen."**

SYED ASHRAF ALI

THE first person to advocate effectively the cause of women in history was, as it happens, a man, born not in Europe or America, not in the modern age, but in Arabia, in the sixth century. The first person to effectively champion and establish the rights and privileges of women was indeed the holy Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). It was the holy Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) who was the first to assert that he is the best among human beings who behaves best with his wife. He also declared in unambiguous terms that Heaven lies not at the feet of the father or husband, it lies at the feet of the mother.

What is more, the Holy Quran denounces in unequivocal terms the heinous attitude of those who hate or dislike female children: "When news is brought to one of them, of the birth of a female child, his face darkens, and he is filled with inward grief. With shame does he hide himself from his people, because of the bad news he has had! Shall he retain it on sufferance and contempt, or bury it in the dust? Ah!

what an evil (choice) they decide on!" (Sura Nahl, 16:59-61). The Holy Quran states: "Men are protectors and maintainers of women, because God has given the one more strength than the other, and because they support them from them from their means." (Sura Nisaa, 4:34).

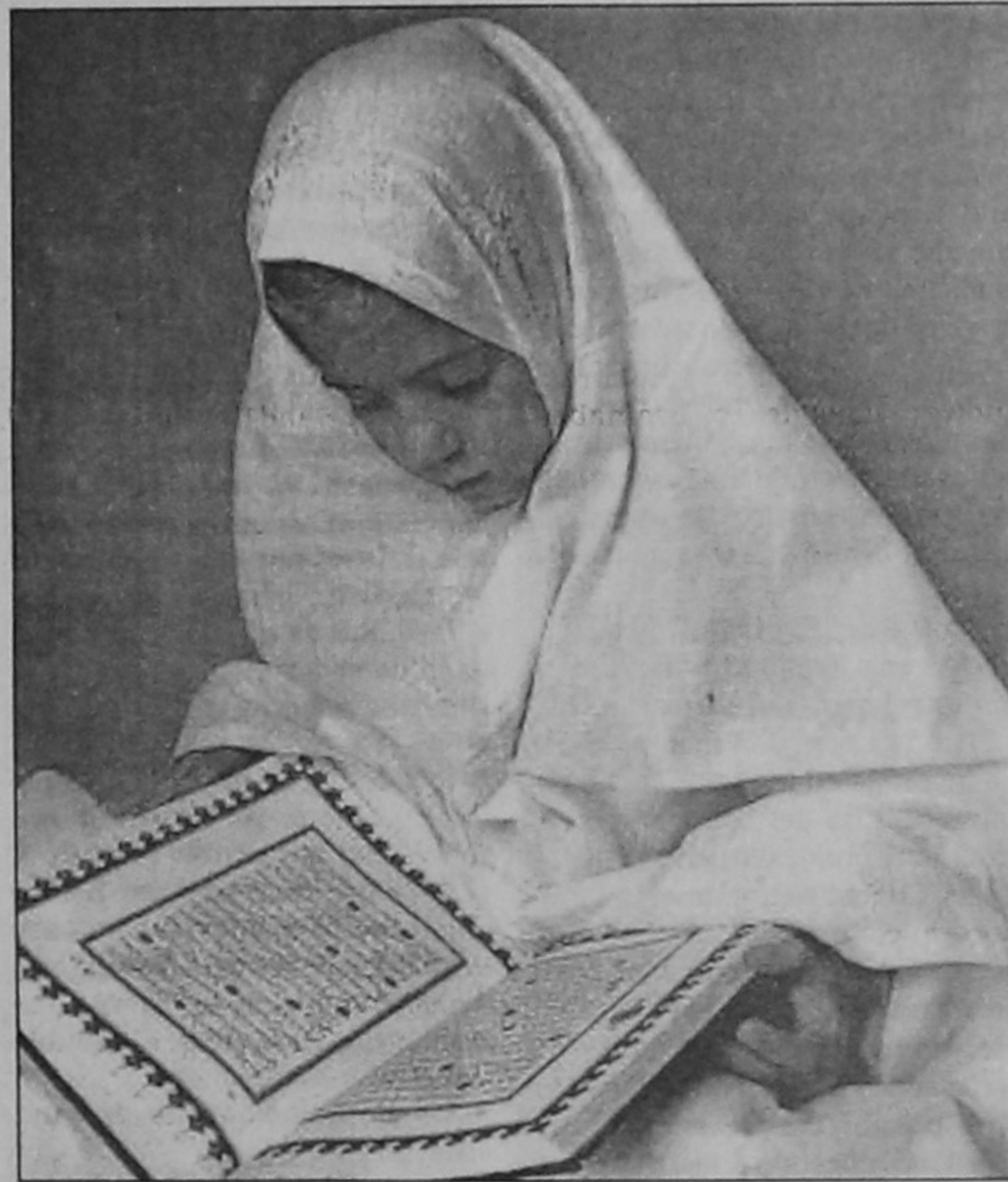
But it also states: "Ye are forbidden to inherit women against their will. Nor should ye treat them with harshness, that ye may take away part of the dowry they have given them... Would you take it by slander and manifest wrong?" (Sura Nisaa, 4:19-20).

There must indeed be something most extraordinary, most chivalrous about this child of the desert that alone among the great teachers of mankind did he confer the first legal status of honour and responsibility upon women, making them *sui juris*, ensuring their economic independence, and providing them opportunities in every sphere of human activity and in every domain of thought, guaranteeing their rights in the properties of the deceased parents, of the husband and the children. "From what is left by parents and

those nearest related, there is a share for men (and a share for women, whether the property be small or large -- a determinate share." (Sura Nisaa, 4:7)

These are rights and privileges which could not even be conceived of till the enactment of the Married Women's Property Act in England by the middle of the 19th century -- rights which are being conceded by the civilised nations of Europe and America in the twenty-first century. Mention may be made in this connection that in the case of marriage also a Muslim woman enjoys unique rights and privileges. Marriage in Islam, though considered a sacred relation between the husband and the wife, is not a sacrament, but purely a civil contract.

No person can marry a woman without her consent. Liberty is allowed a woman, who has reached the age of puberty, to marry or refuse to marry a particular man, independent of her guardian, who has no power to dispose of her in marriage without her consent or against her will; while the objection is reserved for the girl, married by her guardian during her infancy, to ratify or dissolve the contract immediately on reaching her majority. This settlement of money or



It is indeed essential to the validity of the marriage in Islam that there would be: (1) declaration or offer on the part of the one, (2) acceptance by the other, and (3) before sufficient number of witnesses. What is more, it is obligatory on the part of the husband that he should promise to pay or deliver a sum of money or other property as dowry to his wife. This settlement of money or

property on the wife, without which a marriage is not fully legal, is known as "mahr." It is, therefore, evident that in a Muslim marriage is not fully legal, is known as mahr. It is really unfortunate that Muslim bridegrooms in our society nowadays force the brides or their parents to pay the dowry -- an act which is never permitted in Islam. And many among us are not even aware of the fact that Islam also empowers the

wife to effectuate a divorce on various grounds including cruelty, insanity, and impotence of the husband.

What is more, the Holy Quran emphatically warns: "Those who slander chaste women, indiscreet but believing, are cursed in this life and in the hereafter: for them is a grievous penalty." It also declares: "And those who launch a charge against chaste women, and produce not four witnesses (to support their allegation), flog them with eighty stripes; and reject their evidence hereafter, for such men are wicked transgressors." (Sura Nur, Verse 4).

The Holy Quran has also totally quashed the age-old belief that women have no souls and are not entitled to enter paradise. It declares in very clear terms: "Never shall I suffer to be lost the work of any one of you, be he male or female; you are members, one of another... If any do deeds of righteousness, be they male or female, and have faith, they will enter paradise, and not the least injustice will be done to them." (Sura Al-i-imran, Verse 195, and Sura Nisa, Verse 124).

And it is not only in household affairs, but in other spheres as well that Muslim women have a proud and glorious record. Women in Islam have never failed to rise to the occasion in the hours of crises. They have braved many an ordeal, fought many a battle, tided over many a crisis.

The first person to embrace Islam was a woman -- the Sadiq Dost -- Hazrat Khadijah 'l-Kubra (RA). The

first martyr was a woman -- Bibi Sumaya (RA). The first person to know of the Holy Miraj was a woman -- Bibi Umma Hani (RA). The custodian of the first compiled copy of the Holy Quran (al-Umm or Sahifa) was a woman -- the "Mother of the Faithful" Bibi Hafsa bint Omar (RA).

What is more, Bibi Ayesha Siddiqua (RA), a wife of the holy Prophet (pbuh) and the daughter of Abu Bakr (RA), the first caliph of Islam, personally commanded her own troops at the famous Battle of the Camel against the legendary Sher-e-Khoda Hazrat Ali bin abu Talib (RA), the fourth caliph.

That women were allowed to move freely in society in the early days of Islam is an undisputed fact. Will Durant states in The Age of Faith: "He (Muhammad) improved the position of women. He allowed them to come to the mosque, but believed that their homes are better for them: yet when they came to his services he treated them kindly even if they brought suckling babies; if, says an amiable tradition, he heard a child cry, he would shorten his sermon lest the mother be inconvenienced. He placed woman on the same footing as man in legal processes and in financial independence, she might following any legitimate profession, keep her earnings, inherit property, and dispose of her belongings at will... A tradition quotes the Prophet as saying to women: 'It is permitted to you to go out for your needs.' We find Muslim women moving about freely and unveiled in his time, and a century thereafter."

No wonder, Annie Besant boldly declared in the Life and Teachings of Muhammad: "In Islam, men and women are put perfectly on equal footing. Mussalman women have been far better treated than the Western women by the Law. By the Laws of Islam her property is carefully guarded whereas Christian women do not enjoy such absolute right according to the Laws of Christian West. I often think that women are more free in Islam than in Christianity, women are more protected by Islam than by the Faith which preaches monogamy. In al-Quran, the law about women is more just and liberal."

The unprecedented and revolutionary improvement effected in the position and status of women by Islam under the inimitable and magnificent guidance of Hazrat Muhammad (pbuh) has indeed been acknowledged by all unprejudiced writers, both in the East and in the West. Had the holy Prophet of Islam done nothing more, his claim to be a benefactor of mankind would have certainly been indisputable. Pierre Crabite very rightly declares: "Muhammad, thirteen hundred years ago, assured to the mothers, wives and daughters of Islam a rank and dignity not yet generally assured to women by the laws of the West... Muhammad was probably the greatest champion of women's rights the world has ever seen."

Syed Ashraf Ali is former Director General of Islamic Foundation Bangladesh.

## GOOD FRIDAY

### The death of Christ and the message of reconciliation

**This he did to transform our attitude so that we repent for our sins and voluntarily die to our sins and live to righteousness, enabling us to stand before a righteous and Holy God. In other words our relationship is righted with Him.**

MARTIN ADHIKARY

WE live in a world where peace and reconciliation are most wanted. Man is alienated from God and his fellow beings. Reconciliation is harmony and peaceful co-existence and mutual trust. Jesus Christ sacrificed his life to atone for our sins, so that there is peace with God and also peace among men. The sacrifice of animals was inadequate for doing away with human sins. Theologian Philip Hughes observed: "A brute beast, by its very nature, is unqualified to serve as a substitute for man, the crown of God's creation."

In Jesus' time about 250,000 cattle used to be killed every year in Jerusalem on the Jewish Passover festival! Jesus became the true and perfect sacrifice as he lived a life of total obedience to God and His laws. The cross did what the Old Testament law could not.

Capital punishment was so cruel, gruesome and deadly that no

Roman citizen was sentenced with this. But such was the depth and breadth of Christ's love for Man that he took upon himself the death on the cross. All this was according to Divine plan. Christ's sacrifice is once for all as it is the supreme sacrifice.

This he did to transform our attitude so that we repent for our sins and voluntarily die to our sins and live to righteousness, enabling us to stand before a righteous and Holy God. In other words our relationship is righted with Him. This has been possible because of the vindication of God's Son in his glorious resurrection, which is the foundation stone of the Christian message of reconciliation, new life and hope for a lost world.

In this imperfect world the image of God in man is tarnished. With envy, jealousy, greed and pride man is in a lost situation. The Puritan scholar Joseph Alleine said: "O miserable man, what a deformed

monster has sin made you! God made you 'little lower than the angels,' 'sin has made you 'little better than the devils.' God's sinless Son came to take man's place, and took upon himself that punishment that was due for man.

Paul said: "Him who did not know sin God made him sin for us that we might become righteous of God in him (2 Cor. 5: 21)." God in His unique grace reconciled us with Himself. We don't earn our salvation, it is God's free gift of grace to repentant man, received in faith only. Only in faith and trust we come to Him, and in humility we turn our hearts and minds and he accepts and counts us as righteous.

Simone Weil says about God's transforming grace: "All the natural movements of the soul are controlled by laws analogous to those of physical gravity. Grace is the only exception." Eugene O'Neill observed: "Man is born broken. He lives by mending. The grace of God

is the glue." On the Cross of Jesus we see God's grace poured out for our peace and reconciliation, and we are called to a new life of righteousness, peace and harmony with God and with others.

The following points stand out in my mind about reconciliation and peace:

Firstly, reconciliation is the theme of the Bible. It is the central focus of the message of Jesus Christ. "...the punishment that brought us peace was upon him..." as Isaiah had prophesied long ago. Due to the disobedience of Adam, man got alienated from God, man, and nature. But through the obedience of Christ, man is reconciled with all.

Secondly, we need to internalise the tenets of our faith in our personal lives. Thomas a Kempis regretted during the 14th century: "Jesus now has many lovers of his heavenly Kingdom, but few bearers of his Cross." The Incarnational faith must be made visible even in this mundane life, in loving service and commitment to its demands of justice and peace.

Many people like war and fighting. "Too long have I lived among those who hate peace. I am a man of peace; but when I speak, they are for

war (Ps 120: 6-7)." This is a harsh reality of this world. Many more people than not represent Satan, as seen in John Milton's Paradise Lost: "It is better to reign in hell than to serve in heaven."

Most people wish to be served, to be the greatest. But Jesus said those who wanted to be great must be humble and be servants. He taught this by precept and example. There is no short-cut road to lasting peace. The only way is consideration and love for others.

Thirdly, for reconciliation among people and communities we must seek to know and speak the truth, and we need to confess where we have done wrong to others. This implies that we need to do justice and live in humility before God and with others. There can be no peace and harmony without openness and justice.

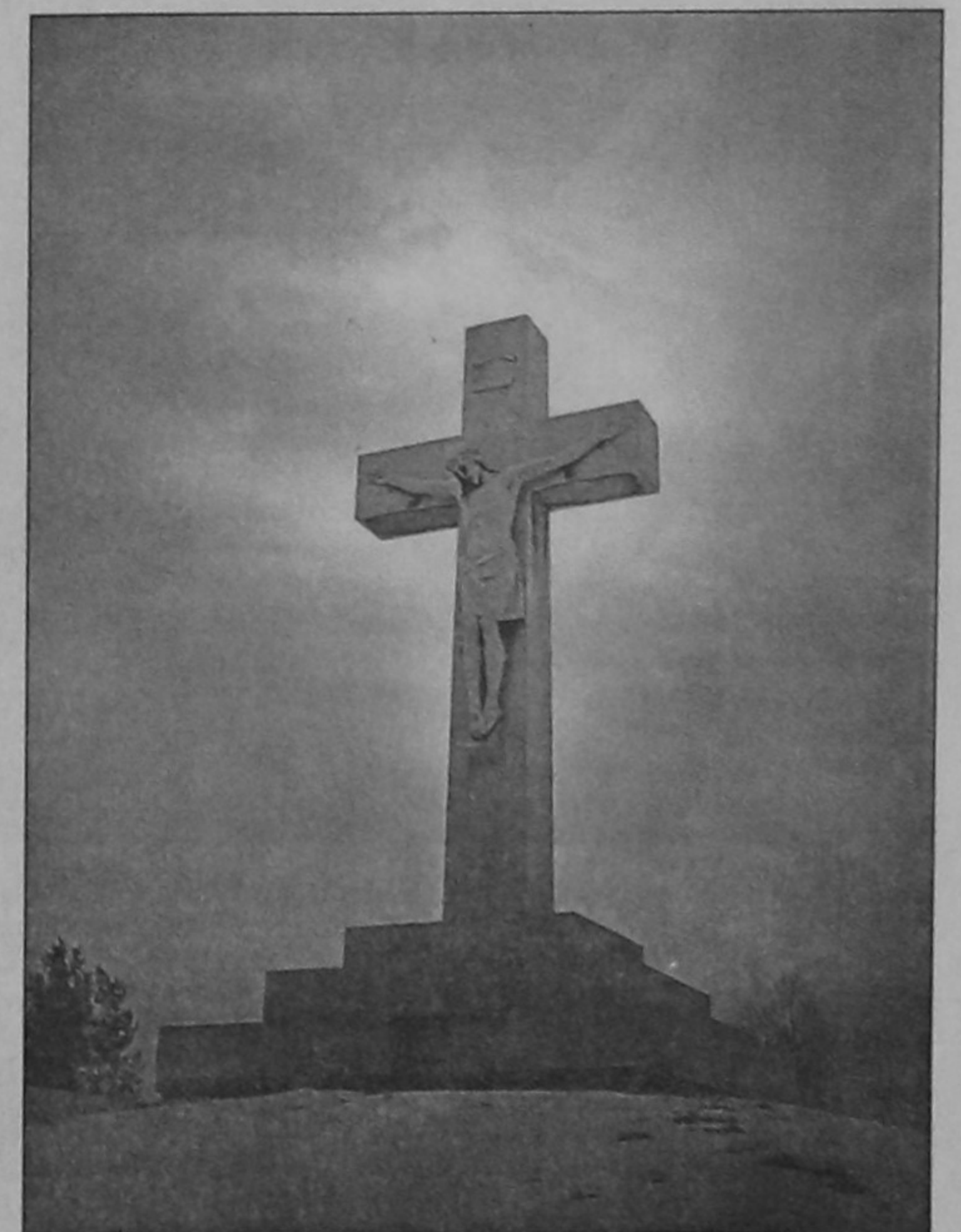
Lastly, we need to be sincere about peaceful co-existence with all people. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said: "Blessed are the peace makers." He did not say: "Blessed are the peace lovers!" We need to strive for peace. "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone (Romans 12: 18)." The apostle Paul exhorts

Christians: "Let us, therefore, make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification (Rom. 14:19)."

The world is in turmoil. Religious beliefs and doctrines are used and interpreted by people with vested interests and cunning politicians, and peace and harmony are undermined; the very spiritual purpose of religion is frustrated. Doctrines divide, but love and respect unite. Right doctrines are important. But authentic life is vitally important for harmonious relationship.

There has been no other time in history than our time that needed dialogue among peoples of different faiths. Dialogue should take place at all possible levels. As a member of the Work Group of Inter-Faith Dialogue of the World Council of Churches during the 1980s, I found that most dialogues were held only at the theological level.

This does not bring intended results by creating harmonious relationship among people of different faiths. May the liberating message of the Cross of Christ move us to meaningfully relate to God and also to other people.



Reverend Martin Adhikary is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.