

## Recognising rights of women

Political use of religion must not be allowed

THE violent protests against certain provisions of giving women equal rights, incorporated in the National Women Development Policy (NWDP), that some Islamic groups resorted to recently, prompted the government to form a review committee to examine the issue in detail. The committee has recommended that six of the provisions be expunged from the NWDP as it found them contravening the Islamic laws. However, some Islamic scholars have observed that the committee has failed to point out precisely where the provisions contradict the injunctions of the Holy Quran. They also welcomed the policy as a charter of women's rights and condemned those who are opposing it vehemently.

That is indeed a significant development, since the situation certainly called for the genuine Islamic scholars to come forward with their interpretations of the Islamic laws on women's rights. It was also a dire need that the truly religious people would give a call for shunning the path of violence, which Islam does not approve of. There is ample room for arguments, counter arguments and a logical discourse on the issue. But what was most undesirable was the attempt on the part of some fanatic groups to clinch the issue through applying physical force. They tried to incite people and turn the whole thing into an emotive issue that degenerated into direct clashes with the law enforcers. Sadly absent in their action plan was logic and reasoning. They tried to create a bogey in the name of religion.

It is really a matter of great relief that Islamic scholars are showing interest in the issue and have realized that religious bigots should not be given the sole responsibility of interpreting the laws on the rights of women.

The criticisms levelled against the NWDP show that the obscurantist forces are not ready to settle any issue peacefully. They also conveniently forgot that equal rights for women would actually help to enhance the latter's social security. And Islam is known for its unflinching support for any action that aims to ensure fair play and justice. We believe the Islamic scholars will play their due role in shaping public opinion in favour of establishing a just social order. Besides giving women equal property inheritance rights, all conscientious and truly religious people should strive for eliminating vices like dowry and repression on women which are a gross violation of what Islam teaches us.

## Boro procurement drive

Incentive price for farmers key to success

CONGRATULATIONS to our farmers and agricultural extension workers on their making a roaring success of the boro season yielding a bumper crop. When declining rice production and consequent high prices of cereals are worldwide phenomena, Bangladesh stands out with her proven promise of being a rice surplus country.

With the boro harvest estimated to be around 20 million tonnes, the government's procurement target of 1.5 million tonnes seems quite reachable -- on the face of it. There are two reality checks we must go through before getting our hopes too high. First, just as higher boro production has induced the government to try and procure more, so also has it stimulated the appetite of open market operators to haul up as much cereals as possible into their godowns. Practically, the government and the private sector buyers are competing with each other. Secondly, through the failure of their successive procurement drives, the government has learnt the hard way that it is not simply a matter of announcing a price and waiting for the growers to respond voluntarily. The initiative must lie with the government.

Let's not forget that besides the government there are other major players in the market, and not all with the best of intentions in their mind. With surplus you have the smugglers trying to siphon off some of it while the fariahs or middlemen stand between the government purchasing centre and the growers and buying up the commodity afield. The rural financiers who had advanced money to small farmers and sharecroppers would shovel out the crop from the field.

It is a common experience in the rural setting that the fariahs pay the price at the government rate at the doorsteps of the growers who are only keen to sell their produce without having to bear the cost of journey to the government's purchasing centre. So, the government purchasing agents will have to reach the growers at their doorsteps before the middlemen do.

The objectives of the procurement drive are two-fold. One is, of course, building a stockpile of rice; and two, making sure that in doing so, the farmers have been given remunerative price for their produce. If we fail to reward our farmers for their good work they will hold it against the government in the next season by moving away from cultivating boro. That will be dealing a blow to our drive for food self-sufficiency.

## Realities of rural life



ABDUL BAYES

RURAL households in Bangladesh are undergoing major socio-demographic changes that many of us are not possibly aware of. But this could be revealed from a recent survey of households in 62 villages funded by the Research and Evaluation Division (RED) of the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (Brac). Since it is a repeated sample survey, a comparison over time could shed some light on the changes of the parameters at stake. I shall attempt to highlight a few of those with the caveat that the analysis or forecast is a preliminary observation of mine alone, and has nothing to do with the institution involved in generating the data.

From the field level information, the average size of a rural household is estimated to be 4.93 in 2008. This contrasts with 5.32 in 2004, 5.67 in 2000 and 6.15 in 1988. The monotonic and steep decline

in household size could partly be adduced to migration and partly to a fall in the ratio of children in the total population of sample households. That migration has increased is evident from increased flow of remittances. The share of remittance to household income almost quadrupled from a bare 5 percent in late 1980s, depicting a trend growth rate of about 11 percent per annum.

It may be mentioned here that even for functionally landless households, the share of remittance income to total household income surged to about 13 percent from about 3 percent in the late 1980s. Enpassant, Dr Mahabub Hossain and I have presented a threadbare discussion on these structural changes in income in a recently published book: *Gramer Manush Grameen Arthonity -- Jibon Jibiker Porjalocho* (2007).

The second reason adducible to

the smaller size of a household is a fall in the ratio of young people over the years. Particular mention may be made of the proportion of infants (under 4, that fell from 14 percent to 10 percent during the last decades. This is good news for poor families who could, possibly, devote resources to other productive pockets rather than on rearing infants. Likewise, the fall in the share of children means that demand for primary teaching would go down, thus enabling a diversion of resources from primary educational infrastructure. Of course, the government will have to target improvement in quality of education.

Another observed demographic change in the households is declining overall population and its determinants. The child-women ratio (a proxy for general fertility rate) in sample/households is estimated to be 38.80 in 2008 compared to 40.76 in

2004, 44.89 in 2000 and 67.23 in 1988. It is quite evident that since 1988, the fertility level and the rate had been declining, posting positive news for us. That is, population growth rate has been falling over time.

But a close look at the statistics shows that the decline has almost tapered off between 2008 and 2004 compared to the earlier two periods. That means that the population is not declining any more, or is declining at much below the rate we are accustomed to assuming. The academic advice in this case would be to use cautiously any projection based on a declining population growth rate. Otherwise, that might underestimate total population or overestimate the fall in fertility rate, with serious implications for policy purposes.

However, the proportion of people aged 65+ had been on a rise -- implying longer life expectancy

-- and peaked at 5 percent, compared to 2 percent two decades back. Improvement in health and other social facilities could have contributed to that increased life expectancy. On the other hand, the proportion of working age group (15-60) also seems to be increasing, calling for more job creation for the rural working population. Thus, while a reduction in the proportion of people at lower end of the pyramid gives us good sleep, the rise in the upper (60+) and middle portion (working population) could keep policy makers sleepless because of the thin labour market and welfare dole.

After a decade of increasing enrolment in schools, the most recent data seem to show that the trend has lost its earlier speed. There may be two reasons to explain the phenomena: first, performance based scholarships might have pulled back poor students and second, recent economic hardships might have stalled the entry of children to schools, especially from poor families.

In a 2004 survey, 32 percent of rural males (15 years+) reported cultivation as their primary occupation and about 8 percent reported agricultural labour as their primary occupation. In 2008, the figures stood at about 37 and 11 percent, respectively. The

changes are opposite to what have been observed in the earlier two periods when the respective shares have been falling. In other words, it seems, a portion of the rural population who left agriculture -- as farmer or labourer -- has gone back to the "sweet home" of agriculture.

Is it the food crisis, high prices of agricultural commodities or lack of employment opportunities elsewhere that brought back them to agriculture? A cursory look at data also tends to show that proportions of tenants has gone down, implying that profitability in agricultural operations might have caused a reverse swing in the tenancy market. Anyway, this could have serious implications in terms of poverty reduction as the tenants mostly belong to the poor segment of the rural setting. However, elaborate insights on these vital issues could be presented in next installments.

By and large, as time rolls on, realities in rural life get changed. Occasional surveys on households, preferably repeated ones, could feed policy makers with new dimensions of information. The need for revisits is always there since we do not operate in a static regime.

Professor Abdul Bayes is a Professor of Economics at Jahangirnagar University (abdulbayes@yahoo.com).

## Upazila Parishads the way to go

With the strengthening of local government, and Upazila Parishad as the focal point of rural development, a participatory government at the grassroots shall be established to take decisions on development issues independently, and manage public functions properly. This will eventually help to reduce the importance of Parliament to the public at large and allow members of parliament to concentrate on legislative functions, rather than spending time and energy as lobbyists of their constituencies.

DHIRAJ KUMAR NATH

LOCAL government, as we see it today, is the cumulative result of years of change, upheaval, and evolution. This is about local leadership, building strong communities and ensuring the well-being of the people it serves, while striving to help local areas grow and develop. In Bangladesh, the Upazila Parishad has been considered the focal point of local government for the last 26 years. Presently, the government is planning steps to strengthen its efficacy with public representative in power with majority and popular adult franchise.

The stage is, perhaps, set to hold the Upazila Parishad election prior to the election of 9th Parliament. This will be the third Upazila Parishad election, with previous elections held in 1985 and 1988. In the Upazila Parishad election of 1985, about 200 chairmen having allegiance to the then President H M Ershad won the election, which posed a question about the procedure of election at Upazila level. The second election also could not satisfy the

political parties with regard to fair representation.

In 1991, when the Upazila Parishad Ordinance was repealed on the basis of the recommendation of a committee headed by Barrister Nazmul Huda, the election system was also one of the concerns for the party in power. Of course, this decision to make the Upazila non-functional with existing setup and manpower was termed by many as "throwing the baby with the bath water."

The Parliamentary Standing Committee, in its meeting held on April 5, 2005, recommended that the Upazila system should continue as focal point of administration to address the issues of rural development and poverty alleviation.

The Local Government (Upazila Parishad and Upazila Administration Reorganisation) Ordinance of 1982 contained the provisions of some transferred subjects and some retained subjects. Transferred subjects to the Upazila Parishad administration were health, family planning, education, rural development, cooperatives, fisheries and livestock etc. In fact, there was a

move to empower the Upazila Parishad with devolution of power through an elected body, which Members of Parliament did not like since their influence in their constituencies on these subjects would be reduced significantly.

In 1987, there was an amendment to the Upazila Parishad and Upazila Administration Reorganisation Ordinance (Amendment), 1987 that came into effect from June 4 1987 where the provision of suspension of Upazila Parishad Chairman has been incorporated.

In reality, there were few inherent problems that were experienced as weaknesses of Upazila Parishad administration, such as:

- The distribution of works, responsibilities and authorities were not clear between chairman and Upazila nirbahi officer;
- Most of the chairmen expected to see UNOs as obliging and obedient, but it appeared to be difficult since UNOs were drawing and disbursing officers. They tried to remain impartial in disposal of cases because of their accountability and demand for transparency from local public;

- The prioritisation of projects, selection of sites and preparation of work plan generated contradictions on the concept of need and political based advantages;

- Frequent transfer of UNOs on the request of chairmen generated resentment and discouraged the officers;

- Although UNOs were used to acting as the staff officers to chairmen, they were authorised to grant leave, arrange training, write annual confidential reports etc., and also exercise power under 144 Cr.PC.

- Advocates and lawyers were reluctant to attend the Upazila magistrate courts because their chambers were at district head quarters. This, along with difficulties in the movement of under-trial prisoners, compelled the Upazila magistracy concept to windup.

The lessons learnt in the past should be taken into consideration prior to reactivating the Upazila administration with the election of chairmen and members of Union Parishad, who are members of the Upazila Parishad.

There should not be any iota of confusion in establishing the Upazila Parishad as the focal point of rural development, with decentralisation of powers and functions to address issues like food production, management of health, family planning, service delivery, educational infrastructure, rural electrification, distribution of fertiliser, management

of land etc.

According to experts in agriculture, rice production in Bangladesh could be increased by 50 lakhs tons easily, provided fellow land, unused ditches and ponds, coastal areas and hoars are brought under intensive paddy cultivation with high yielding varieties of seeds, drip irrigation and scientific use of bio-fertilisers. The landless and marginal farmers could be effectively mobilised with the distribution of khas land and renovation in the system of share cropping appropriate to the localities. Besides, at least 5 lakhs hectares of land could be brought under double and triple paddy production with adequate management of irrigation facilities and modernisation of cultivation.

Upazila Parishads can intensively supervise the sectors like poultry, fisheries and livestock, social forestry, horticulture, milk production and involve cooperative societies in the marketing of agricultural produces etc. All these initiatives of the Upazila Parishad will eventually promote poverty reduction, employment generation and empowerment of women capable of addressing any disasters, climatic changes and soil erosion.

Everyday, nearly 235 hectares of arable lands are being lost in Bangladesh due to unplanned housing, filling of fisheries and water bodies for construction of buildings, play grounds or parks, shopping complexes, etc. At the

same time, around two lakhs babies are being added every day to our population. Rapid urbanisation has emerged as a threat to the city facilities, and is generating health and social problems.

With the strengthening of local government, and Upazila Parishad as the focal point of rural development, a participatory government at the grassroots shall be established to take decisions on development issues independently, and manage public functions properly. This will eventually help to reduce the importance of Parliament to the public at large and allow members of parliament to concentrate on legislative functions, rather than spending time and energy as lobbyists of their constituencies.

The Election Commission might prescribe a code of conduct for candidates in Upazila election. Any person with corruption of any nature, grabbing of khas land or forest property, moral turpitude, tax evasion, loan defaulting, and having no basic education, shall be declared ineligible to be candidate. Affiliation to a political party shall not be considered as disqualification but any person who failed twice to be elected at Union Parishad or Upazila Parishad shall not be eligible to be a candidate for chairmanship of Upazila Parishad.

Dhiraj Kumar Nath is a former adviser to the caretaker government.

## Burma's simmering saffron revolution on the boil again

This is the first sign of unrest since last year's Saffron Revolution was brutally suppressed. "More protests are expected in the coming days as the anger against the regime is rising," a Chiang Mai-based activist, Khin Omar, with close links to the protest organisers, told The Daily Star. The protests have been triggered in part by the government's planned referendum on May 10, and are certain to grow in the coming days before the poll.

LARRY JAGAN

SPORADIC street protests erupted in several Burmese cities over the weekend as Burma prepares to go to the polls to vote on a new constitution. More than fifty demonstrators, led by some twenty saffron-clad monks, tried to make their way to the country's famous Shwegadon Pagoda in Rangoon on Saturday. Police prevented them from entering the temple and quickly herded them away.

The Burmese authorities have prohibited Buddhist monks from entering the historic pagoda precincts since the massive protests last September. Many other monks who planned to join the procession were detained while travelling on buses from the suburbs and neighbouring cities to the protest.

There was another small protest at Rangoon's Tamwe Bazaar. More than a hundred protesters also took

to the streets in Sittwe, the capital of the predominant province of Arakan in western Burma. There are unconfirmed reports of small demonstrations in several other cities over the weekend.

This is the first sign of unrest since last year's Saffron Revolution was brutally suppressed. "More protests are expected in the coming days as the anger against the regime is rising," a Chiang Mai-based activist, Khin Omar, with close links to the protest organisers, told The Daily Star.

The protests have been triggered in part by the government's planned referendum on May 10, and are certain to grow in the coming days before the poll.

The military regime is obviously nervous about the vote and is carefully orchestrating the referendum results. It is certain to announce an overwhelming majority of the country has endorsed the charter, which will effectively allow the army

to retain political control of the country for decades to come. But there are growing signs that the many in the electorate may, in fact, reject the constitution, although the authorities will undoubtedly manipulate the count.

What they cannot change, though, is the growing rage against the junta that is welling up again in all sections of Burmese society, especially amongst the country's clergy -- who have, in fact, been banned from voting in the forthcoming referendum.

Burma's monks may have been crushed by brute force last September, but in the monasteries right across the country, there is simmering resentment and anger. One senior abbot admitted privately that next time the monks will need to take up arms if they are to overthrow the regime.

Hatred of the country's military rulers is also growing amongst the people on the street, increasingly

burdened by soaring inflation. Even the middle classes in the main commercial cities of Mandalay, Moulmein and Rangoon are progressively more disaffected by the army's heavy-handed tactics and a collapsing economy.

Protests are ready to erupt again in the country's streets. "The country is a social volcano ready to erupt," a Burmese businessman recently told The Daily Star. "All it needs is a spark to ignite it." But most diplomats in Rangoon are cautious about predicting fresh protests anytime soon, though they admit the causes of last year's massive monk-led demonstrations have not been addressed.

Prices are sky-rocketing. Diesel and petrol costs, which sparked last year's protests, have risen again recently; the price of cooking oil has more than doubled since the beginning of the year. Nearly ninety percent of Burma's families spend more than eighty percent of their income on food alone. Malnutrition and poverty is growing alarmingly, as the military government spends massive amounts on arms and military hardware.

Despite this, Burma's reclusive and secretive leader, General Than Shwe is pressing on with his own plans to institutionalise military rule. The new constitution took the

army more than fourteen years to draft. Most details of the arrangements for the referendum are yet to be made known -- and the actual constitution was only revealed to the public two weeks ago.

It is not being distributed, but sold -- at 1000 kyat, or the equivalent of a dollar -- something an impoverished population, most of whom live on less than \$ 2 a day, cannot afford. There are restrictions on public debate and criticism of the charter is banned, punishable by more than ten years in jail. The Burmese media has been silenced; they have been ordered not to report anything about the "No" campaign.

But this, though, has not deterred some from protesting already against the constitution, with the inevitable result that they have been locked up.

The main pro-democracy party, Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy, has announced its opposition to the new constitution -- partly as they were excluded from the drafting process, but largely because it is undemocratic. The president must be a military man, a quarter of the parliamentary seats will be nominated by the army chief, and the military reserves the right to oust any civilian administration it deems to have jeopardised national security.

The detained opposition leader, Aung San Suu Kyi is effectively barred from political life because she was married to a foreigner, the eminent British academic and scholar of Tibet and Buddhism, Michael Aris, who died of prostate cancer in 1999.

"For the people who have the right to vote, we would like to encourage again all voters to go to the polling booths and make an 'X' (no) mark without fear," the NLD urged voters in statement released to the press last Friday. But they conceded the whole process was a sham.

"An intimidating atmosphere for the people is created by physically assaulting some of the members of (the) NLD," its statement said.

But while the odds seemed to be stacked against the pro-democracy opposition, all is not. The country's top general, Than Shwe is desperately ill and losing his grip on the army. He reportedly suffers from chronic diabetes, hypertension and has massive coronary problems. He often has diabetic rages, and more recently is showing signs of dementia -- absent-minded and forgetful, including not remembering the officers he had recently sacked, according to a Burmese medical source close to the first family.

It now seems that Than Shwe's

days are severely numbered. His kidneys are failing and he has to have dialysis every day. He spends more than six hours a day resting, according to a military source inside the general's staff. He is effectively dead, according to Asian diplomats who are close to the old man.

To make matters worse, there are major rifts appearing within the army at the very top. Than Shwe's immediate subordinate, General Maung Aye is increasingly disaffected with his boss, feeling that he is allowing rampant corruption to bankrupt the country. He is particularly concerned about the use of an untrained and brutal paramilitary force, connected to the community-based mass organisation, the Union Development and Solidarity Association that Than Shwe personally created some 15 years ago to stir up public support for the military government.

It was thugs from this group who attacked Aung San Suu Kyi in northern Burma in May 2003, in what many believe was a concerted assassination attempt on her life. Later, they led the assaults on the monks last September. The USDA, lead by hard-line supporters of Than Shwe, has been given responsibility for organising the referendum and will also to run the elections, which are now planned for two

years time.

Maung Aye fears this group is going to get stronger after the referendum, and effectively replace the army in running the country. He understands that the USDA's conduct and brutal tactics have tarnished the military's image. Many junior officers -- the "Young Turks" as they call themselves -- feel the same way. They are looking to the four top generals immediately underneath Than Shwe to take action.

While there are no concrete signs yet of a possible palace coup, there is already a new wave of demonstrations in the street against the military government, which threatens to grow in the coming days before the polls open for the referendum. Most Burmese people see this as their first chance since the 1990 elections, which were overwhelmingly won by the NLD, to express their outrage at military rule.

During these uncertain times for the army, there is the possibility for things to change -- and to change rapidly. At the very least, there will be more protests against the government in May during the referendum campaign.

Larry Jagan is a Burma specialist based in Bangkok.