

# No country for gentlemen and gentlewomen

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HABIBUL HAQUE KHONDKER

PLEASE do not get me wrong for the use of the phrase "gentlewomen." I am just old-fashioned and once upon a time the phrase gentlewomen was quite acceptable. For example, Richard Braithwaite, the English poet, wrote a book titled *The English Gentlewomen* in 1631 on social conduct. I am also old-fashioned insofar as I hold on to certain social values such as truth and justice. The country I am referring to is, of course, Bangladesh.

Why am I making such a provocative and unkind statement that Bangladesh may not be suit-

able for gentle, decent people any more. Okay, let's say, this is more of a hypothesis -- since sociologists are good at it -- and not a statement of fact. A hypothesis is an unverified proposition which can often go wrong. I sincerely wish that this particular hypothesis goes wrong.

It occurred to me when I saw the television footage of many gentlemen and gentlewomen (from their dresses and polite manners with the police) standing in a human chain with posters of Mr. Tarique Rahman's release. There must be a difference between sending an accused person overseas for medical reasons on parole and demanding his unconditional release. In

the former the compelling reason is humanitarian; the latter is a defiance of the law.

I have no problem with the demands of sections of people who want to see former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia and the rest released from the detention and stand trial as a free person. The issues of technicality, legality, human rights are probably on the side of the BNP loyalists and protesters. If the voices are for human rights and right to fair trial of all the political detainees no one would object. If due process of law finds all these people under custody innocent, so be it -- let them come out and join their loved ones. But if it is a protest against trial of "notables" then that

is a serious problem. Why in the 21st century, should some individuals be deemed to be above law?

It is a matter of grave concern and I am simply appalled by the fact that a large section of the people in Bangladesh are ready to stand indifferent to the allegations of corruption and are not willing to see the processes of law take their own course. The prospect of potential wrong-doers and political figures with charges of corruption walking free makes me think that if that transpires, gentlefolk should consider leaving Bangladesh for other countries where justice, fairness and decency remain the norms and guiding principles of society.

Most of those who came to demand the release of Mr. Tarique Rahman, I assume, are BNP loyalists with personal loyalty to the Zia family. I am sure these people would also like to see Mr. Tarique Rahman as a future replacement for Mrs. Khaleda Zia in the tradition

of South Asian political culture. The recent political developments in Pakistan may also rekindle hopes in the minds of BNP loyalists that why cannot be a similar drama repeated in Bangladesh? If Mr. Asif Zardari who once earned the nickname Mr. 10% can be placed in the exalted post of the president of Pakistan, why can't Mr. Tarique Rahman, notwithstanding the allegations of corruption and abuse of power, be the future president of Bangladesh?

This is a dark prospect. And this is not the first time. Many decent folks in Bangladesh have done that before. They overthrew President Hussein Muhammad Ershad in 1990 on charges of corruption and abuse of power and then re-elected him as member of parliament. Former President Ershad in the last days of the four-party alliance administration became a prize partner. He is adored him again as a national leader by certain political parties.

Many writers suggest that Bangladeshis have short-memory, or maybe they are too forgiving. And why not give every person a second chance for redemption? My theory is that most Bangladeshis suffer from "Stockholm Syndrome," which simply means that hostages after a prolonged period under captivity begin to sympathise with their captors. Bangladeshis -- or a large number of them -- I am afraid, have lived as captives by bandit regimes and thus have developed sympathy for their rulers; the taproot of which is a combination of fear, a sense of insecurity and helplessness.

Some gentle folks, if they can, would leave the country. Others would live with moral qualms; the rest will celebrate the return of "democracy" (i.e. democracy minus the rule of just law) and the return of Mr. Babar and Mr. Tarique Rahman.

Albert Hirschman, the Harvard don, in exploring human behav-



Ungentlemanly conduct.

our, especially in a firm, suggested that customers usually have three options: exit, voice, or loyalty. These options work just as well, in theory, for citizens in a national context. Some folks will remain loyal no matter what; for others the options are either exit or voice (protest).

Exit may not be a viable option for many in Bangladesh, so they are down to one of the two options: loyalty or protest. This is a choice that the people of Bangladesh and their leaders have to make. And the time is now.

Habibul Haque Khondker is a sociology professor.

## Breaking the barriers

**We want today's women to realise their dreams and take the challenge of establishing their rights, be it at the workplace or be it in their homes. The challenge for them is not to let go of their own identity and to not give up the possibility to compete with the outside world -- as I truly believe that no ambition is too ambitious.**

MAMUN RASHID

I recently wrote a short piece on the economic impact of discrimination against women in Star Business. Though my esteemed readers usually don't expect me to write on non-business related issues, somehow this piece arrested the attention of quite a few concerned.

From the feedback that I have received, it seems that the situation is much worse in many organisations or institutions. If not apparent discrimination, subtle exploitation is taking place in many places. The resultant impact being that organisations do not get the best out of their female colleagues.

I am sure the readers know many more stories of discrimination against the women at the workplace or in the family or community. In Dhaka city we see parents sending their son to a better school than their daughter, the boss keeping the young female colleague engaged in "chatting" with him instead of allowing her to do her work and go home in time, not to talk about women losing their jobs or being marginalised for refusing to attend to the "indecent proposals" of male colleagues or seniors.

Therefore, when the time or opportunity comes, the female colleagues lag behind and can't make the best out of their opportunities. But despite all these, many women are bouncing back, standing on their feet, winning against the adversaries and moving forward at home and abroad.

Closing the leadership gap between men and women is one of the central challenges of this century. We might debate this issue, but it nevertheless remains true that there might be many talented women but very few of them take top leadership positions.

Today, we see women around the world taking top positions in

various multi-national companies. What has really changed in most other countries putting women in the forefront is the absolute mindset or the outlook of working women and their strong determination. Undoubtedly, women have made substantial progress in this 21st century, but, apart from many developed countries, to a lot of people there is still a question of where they have come since that young woman eagerly took the first step in her career, and how they broke the barriers.

Many women professionals in Bangladesh may deserve equal respect and recognition. Greater educational and employment opportunities for women, influence of western media, and particularly the growth of individualism combined with self-confidence have brought the discussion of women breaking the barriers to the forefront. Some women from our country have had the courage and ability to lead an institution not only in Bangladesh but also outside the country.

Can anyone ever think of a career in a country that is often plagued by war, political instability, and rampant criminal activity? Anyone, man or woman, would think a thousand times to take up that challenge. Nowhere are the conditions more demanding.

For a multi-national bank operating in a country like Afghanistan, finding customers is one thing; finding bankers to serve them is something else. Turning a profit may be the least of a bank's problems. For a woman it is even worse, especially when she sees some of her male colleagues in other banks or institutions resigning and going back to their home country.

In a rigidly conservative Afghanistan, Nasreen Sattar, currently CEO of a foreign bank in



From voters to leaders.

Afghanistan, has very competently marked her presence while leading the bank. Quite apprehensive about how the Afghan men would react, she has broken the barrier by successfully managing the bank's growth. She has taken a bold step to take up this challenging position, and proved her leadership in many aspects. A Bangladeshi woman taking up a top-most position in a country like Afghanistan has truly made a difference in the society and can be cited as a role model for many.

For all the real progress women have made in education, in their choice of career, and in their pay, a relatively small percentage ever make it to the top in Bangladesh. Women make up a significant percentage of the overall labour force, but hold only an insignificant percentage of top earning positions, and an extremely insignificant percentage of titles, such as CEO or COO.

A critical element in making it to the top is being in the pipeline to do so -- here women hold only very few key line jobs that make up the pipeline in most corporations. Aside from being in the pipeline, women in our country also have to believe that they can make it.

Studies suggest, and my own experience confirms, that it is hard for women to believe that they can progress if they cannot look up and see faces like their own at the top. We also find lack of confidence in women about reaching at the top. So when highly educated women perceive a dearth of viable options and

leave the workforce, the pipeline narrows even further. This creates the possibility of a vicious cycle -- a cycle in which a woman's desire to make it to the top is sapped by the very paucity of other women who have done so.

How do women balance careers with their responsibilities as mothers and wives? Often it takes energy, patience, hard work, and creativity. Millions of women around the world, however, somehow manage to do it all, often at the cost of their own personal time. Perhaps this is nothing to worry about, since it reflects choices made by women clearly in advantageous positions.

But the concern is over the best and brightest women, those future leaders, leaving the country -- not just because it's not what Nasreen Sattar or other successful women leaders in other parts of the world have done -- but because of the ever-increasing need for a highly skilled workforce. It is in everyone's interest to redouble our efforts to help women rise to the top and help close the leadership gap.

We want today's women to realise their dreams and take the challenge of establishing their rights, be it at the workplace or be it in their homes. The challenge for them is not to let go of their own identity and to not give up the possibility to compete with the outside world -- as I truly believe that no ambition is too ambitious.

Mamun Rashid is banker and columnist.

## Kuwait revisited

**It's not only a matter of the country's remittance inflow, but also a matter of the country's dignity. Bangladesh government's response to the migrant worker issue reflects its subservient policy, as the government hardly raised a voice of protest, nor did it file any formal complaint with the Kuwaiti authorities, let alone bring the issue to the notice of the ILO, UN, or international human rights organisations.**

RIPAN KUMAR BISWAS

A 2,300-member contingent of the Bangladesh army served with coalition forces during the 1991 Gulf war in order to return Kuwait to the control of the Emir of Kuwait. During the demolitions of mines from many parts of Kuwait, after the war, Bangladesh lost 59 soldiers and many others were injured.

In acknowledgement of these efforts, around 267,000 Bangladeshis have been treated savagely, maligned in the local press, and unduly blamed for criminal activities, and about 1,100 Bangladeshi workers, who primarily work as menial labourers, have been kicked out of the Arab state since last July.

The trouble began in the last two weeks of July. Thousands of Bangladeshis and other South Asian migrants employed as cleaners, rubbish collectors and stevedores/dockers, went on strike over a long list of grievances: poor wages, poor working conditions, overtime without pay, lack of sick leave and time off, etc. The workers also claim that employers force workers to pay extra for health and accommodation costs they say should be borne by the companies.

Due to rising inflation, workers attempted to protest only to be met with the full force of the Kuwait government which does not enjoy anyone daring to oppose those in power. The Kuwaiti police along beat the trapped workers mercilessly while breaking up the protest and also in detention.

So far in progress, Kuwait ordered its law enforcers not to arrest or harass any Bangladeshi workers if they refrain from getting involved in any further violence. According to a handout press note issued by the Press Information Department on August 3, the

labour department of Kuwait assured Bangladesh government that the wages and other outstanding payments of the deported workers would be sent through the Bangladesh embassy. And as of August 20, the Kuwaiti government closed down five companies for violating the new labour law.

But evidently, very little has changed since the Kuwaiti government decided, in the wake of the July 28 demonstration by migrant workers that the private sector would have to increase the minimum wage for workers to 40 Kuwaiti dinars per month and also bear the workers' insurance, housing, and health expenditures.

According to the Arab Times, a Kuwaiti English-language daily, around 6,000 Bangladeshi workers went on strike on August 17 over non-payment and unlawful deductions of their salaries although the Kuwaiti government recently set a minimum monthly wage to be paid without any curtail.

Meanwhile, the National Labor Committee of US recently unveiled news of mistreatment from the US military base camp at Arifjan, Kuwait. Around 300 guest workers, mostly Bangladeshi, are forced to work 11-hour shift, seven days a week.

Although the US troops themselves are reportedly very kind and decent to the workers, but the company Kuwait Waste Collection and Recycling Company the workers work for, treat the employees poorly. For the 70 hours of work, workers are usually paid just \$34.72 a week, or 50 cents an hour, which is 45 percent short of the 90-cent-an-hour wage that workers are guaranteed when they purchased the contract to work in Kuwait. The company usually confiscates the passports of their workers at the time of hiring.

Observing the mass exploitation of workers, especially in a firm, suggested that customers usually have three options: exit, voice, or loyalty. These options work just as well, in theory, for citizens in a national context. Some folks will remain loyal no matter what; for others the options are either exit or voice (protest).

in Kuwait, Charles Kernaghan, director of the National Labor Committee, urged the US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to call upon the government of Kuwait to end the trafficking of hundreds of thousands of foreign guest workers to Kuwait, where they are stripped of their passports, forced to work long hours, often seven days a week, while being cheated of half their wages.

According to him, Kuwaiti government must take it seriously if the US were to raise strong voice against heinous practice of exploitation, as there is a defense pact between US and Kuwait to guarantee the security of the Kuwaiti people and government.

Bangladesh, a net oil importing country, has a demand for nearly 8.8 million tons of fuel per year, including 2.8 million tons diesel. The Kuwait Petroleum Corporation, a state-owned company of the Kuwait government, is the main oil supplier to Bangladesh. Bangladesh is importing 1.15 million tons of oil from Kuwait for consumption over the July-December period by paying a higher premium.

In his upcoming visit to Kuwait in between September 3-4, Foreign Affairs Adviser Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury, also in charge of expatriate welfare and overseas employment, should strongly protest against mass exploitation in Kuwait and mention that a good bilateral relation depend upon mutual cooperation.

Bangladesh should also announce greater regulation of labour broker practices. Despite its complete disinterest in ever previ-

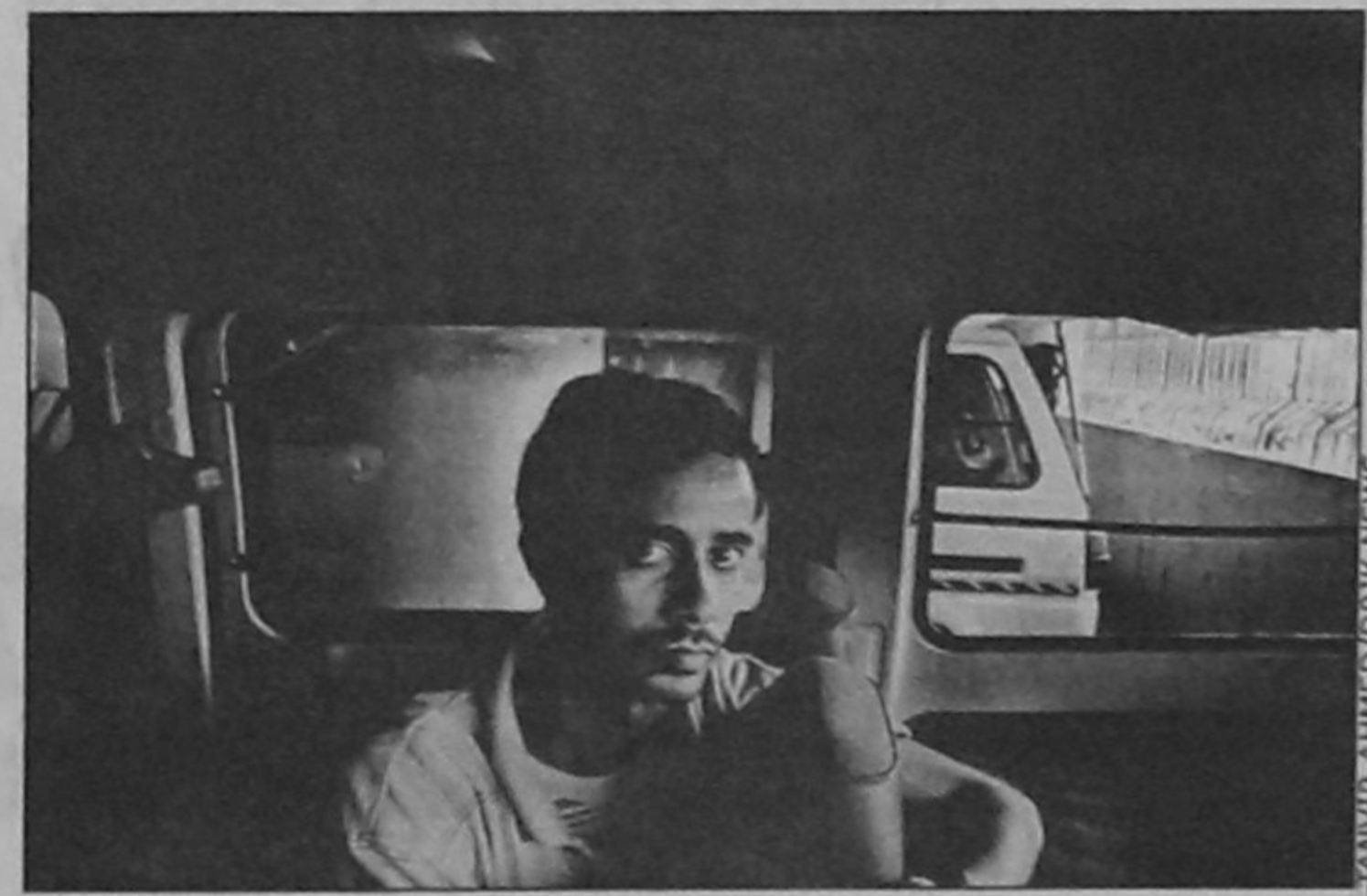
ously regulating or limiting workers' exploitation by local recruiting agents, the country needs to resolve the labour unrest and repair the damaged reputation of their migrant workforce.

Over 5 million Bangladeshis work abroad, mostly in Saudi Arabia and other Middle Eastern countries, sending home around \$8 billion a year and providing a vital foreign exchange injection to Bangladesh's economy. This is almost as much as the \$9 billion the country's other main export, ready-made garments, brings into the country.

Kuwait has decided not to renew residency visas of Bangladeshis doing menial jobs, saying these workers are a threat to state security and bring unnecessary international focus on the country. Mistreatment of South Asian workers especially Bangladeshis is nothing new in the Gulf states. Kuwait's infrastructure were built by these workers from South Asia. Kuwaitis owe their liberation to the coalition forces which included Bangladeshi soldiers.

It's not only a matter of the country's remittance inflow, but also a matter of the country's dignity. Bangladesh government's response to the migrant worker issue reflects its subservient policy, as the government hardly raised a voice of protest, nor did it file any formal complaint with the Kuwaiti authorities, let alone bring the issue to the notice of the ILO, UN, or international human rights organisations.

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Bangladeshi worker deported from Kuwait.

## What people are saying

**It is unfortunate that BNP considers the CTG as its competitor. In fact, the CTG has, through its hard and sincere labour, put the derailed government on the track despite many obstacles. The CTG needs cooperation, not contest or competition.**

A.B.M.S. ZAHUR

DESPIRE repeated assurances from the CA, the army chief, and the CEC, people are becoming increasingly disillusioned about holding of the national election by December 2008. Speculation is rife that the election may be deferred till March 2009. However, this writer still believes in the CA, army chief, and CEC.

Though the CTG is working hard to obtain full assurance from all parties for participation in the national election, the position of

the divided BNP is not clear as yet. The party is more interested in the unconditional release of Khaleda and Tarique from detention, and is playing all its cards to achieve its objective.

Though the CA is striving hard to ensure participation of BNP in the election some advisers are of the opinion that even participation of the BNP's reformist group should be enough, as the people are interested in casting their votes in a peaceful atmosphere. As an experienced politician, Khaleda understands that unification of BNP will be time consum-

ing, and that her own and her family's image has been tarnished to a large extent due to recent events. Thus, her party may not win a majority in the election.

It would, therefore, be advisable not to participate in the election, which will make the government weak. This will result in collapse of the government and there will be a new election soon after, in which the four party alliance may be able to win -- as it had done in 2001. This, however, is mere speculation.

It may so happen that both BNP and AL will participate in the

election without their present chiefs. Such a gesture may be welcomed by the CTG because it will avoid many "ifs" and "buts."

Donor countries and agencies may have reached a conclusion (another speculation) that, for establishing democracy in Bangladesh AL was preferable as the country attained freedom under its leadership. On the other hand, BNP is a pro-fundamentalist political party and its partners do not seem to believe, in the independence of Bangladesh. Moreover, under its regime the militants may regain their power and strength to cause great harm to the nascent democracy of Bangladesh. The police have reported that JMB and Huji are regrouping.

It is true that both the chiefs of

AL and BNP have tremendous popularity. Without them, neither party may gain majority in the parliament, and, as such, there may be no other option than forming an alliance government led by AL. If Khaleda is not allowed to contest because of technical reasons she will not allow the new government to operate peacefully and smoothly. However, there would be enough time for new government for obtaining approval of decisions (including ordinances) of CTG in the parliament.

Though the CTG may have lost some of its popularity due to its failure to control the price hike of some essential commodities, it has surely achieved much in other fields. In our import-based market economy it is extremely diffi-

cult to contain price hike of imported items like edible oil, food grain and some other consumer items. In addition, the recent unprecedented increase in the price of petroleum has put tremendous pressure on the economy.

It is unfortunate that BNP considers the CTG as its competitor. In fact, the CTG has, through its hard and sincere labour, put the derailed government on the track despite many obstacles. The CTG needs cooperation, not contest or competition.

Though democracy may not be as efficient as a non-accountable government, the people want democracy because it is accountable and ensures freedom of thinking and participation. This does not mean that we can afford

to be insensitive about our choice of leadership. We cannot forget the horrible days prior to 1/11, when the 4-party alliance government was running like a dictatorial government where money and muscle were dominating people's lives.

The interim government is working to hold a free fair and credible election by the end of the year to establish true democracy. It is worried about the possibility of a return to the situation that existed before 1/11, and nullification of all its good deeds by the newly elected government because the major parties have not accepted the proposal for national charter, nor registered themselves or reformed their parties. However, speculation is

that AL, BNP (reformists), JP (Ershad), and BDB will participate in the election.

There are some unconfirmed reports about the possibility of inclusion of representatives from various professions, and some advisers from the present CTG, in the new cabinet in addition to elected representatives. This newly elected government will be supported by the armed forces, as they have done to the CTG. The parliament will act like a constituent assembly and the constitution will be amended to remove inconsistencies. The new government will operate with a new outlook to maintain continuity of the activities of the CTG. However, all this is mere speculation at the present.

The writer is a former joint secretary.