

TALKING POLLS AND BEYOND

'Good political environment will come if leaders are respectful towards each other'

**Brig Gen (retd) ASM Hannan Shah**, adviser to the BNP chairperson, joined politics in 1984 after retiring from the army in 1982. He worked as organising secretary of the party's central committee and president of Gazipur district unit, and actively participated in the movement against military autocracy in the '80's. He was elected member of the parliament in the fifth and sixth parliaments and served as minister from 1991 to 96. Shah was the only vocal leader in favour of Khaleda Zia when she was virtually under "house arrest" before her arrest on September 3, 2007. He has been arrested several times during the present government. **Rakib Hasnet Suman and Rashidul Hasan** took this interview.

What changes have you brought in the party constitution, and did you discuss the matter in a party forum like the executive committee?

No, it was not discussed in the party forum. According to our party constitution the council is the sole forum that has power to bring changes in the constitution. I think that they [standing committee] were forced to bring changes in the party constitution due to government pressure under a special situation.

BNP could not hold any meeting of its central executive committee in the last two years. Why?

It was the failure of the party leader who led the party at that time. But as a leader you were in a position to lead the party.

I am the adviser to the chairperson, not to the party. The party has a general secretary, joint secretary-generals and standing committee members, they did not take any initiative. It was their failure.

But you were in the frontline after

imposition of emergency.

I played my role as an adviser to the BNP chairperson. But they [other leaders] did not do carry out their responsibility, therefore, they might have to face questions from party leaders and activists.

You do not seem as active after release of Khaleda Zia.

My first target was to free Khaleda Zia, second, to resist the government's plan to send her abroad and third, to face the propaganda against Khaleda Zia and her family members by some pressure groups.

Have you succeeded in this regard?

Of course, she had been freed through legal process; she did not bow down to any pressure and has kept her image as an uncompromising leader, and is leading the party again.

Khaleda Zia has said that BNP will participate in the dialogue and in the election.

BNP will participate in election if an election-friendly atmosphere is

ensured. BNP knows that election is the only way for a political party to go to power to serve the people.

What is your feeling about the minus-two formula?

Apparently, it seems that the initiators of the minus-two formula have gone backward.

BNP has demanded lifting of the emergency. What's the problem for your party to take part in the polls under emergency?

Why should the emergency continue? Who gave the mandate to the present government? They had mandate only for three months. After that the government turned into an unconstitutional government. There is no chaos, hartal, clash, labour unrest, movement... so why is the emergency continuing?

The commerce adviser said that emergency will continue to ensure security of voters.

I think he has no idea about elections in Bangladesh. In fact, a certain quarter wants to hold election under emergency only to implement their

plan. I have already said that the present government has planned to form puppet government in future through an election. You also heard about a list. This government claims itself to be non-political... if it is true why would they prepare a list?

You will have to take part in the polls under this government.

That does not mean that we will accept anything they say.

Do you think that Hawa Bhaban destroyed the image of BNP?

BNP's political opponents and different agencies of the present government tried to humiliate BNP and the Zia family. I myself visited Malaysia to investigate the allegation that Tarique Rahman siphoned off money, but did not find anything. No one can bring any allegation against Khaleda Zia that she took money from them.

The ongoing anti-corruption drive started with huge support of the people. Do you think the drive should continue?

There is no country in the world without corruption. But corruption is not acceptable and it must be controlled. The cases filed against political leaders were only to victimise them. Could the present government prove any of the allegations they have raised against political leaders?

But the lower court has already convicted many persons.

Please don't talk about lower court. I myself have seen that five-day remand order was issued against me in an extortion case of Tk 20,000 as a Major Shahab was present there, while it issued two days remand order in a murder case on the same day. So it proves that the whole epi-

sode was designed only to make the politicians controversial. And I have to say that they have sent the country backward. I was an army officer for 24 years, and engaged in politics for the last 25 years. The uniformed soldiers of today cannot understand everything, leading to the failure in every activity of the government. Some advisers also admitted that they have to clear everything through the higher authority.

Who is responsible for the failure -- the government or the force behind it?

Crores of people of the country are suffering due to lack of knowledge of the main forces about running the country, and because of some whimsical decisions and in the attempt to implement many policies at a time. That is why the government has lost all the support. People have no faith in this government. The inexperience of the government and the force behind it is responsible for the present situation, but they had no lack of sincerity.

So what has the nation achieved after 1/11?

It is now clear to the countrymen that 1/11 was a preplanned drama. Some local and foreign forces staged the drama. Those who never sent observers to monitor elections in any country under emergency are now saying that Bangladesh is an exceptional.

What is your comment on the activities of foreign diplomats and donor agencies regarding internal affairs of the country?

I think they should obey the Vienna Convention on diplomacy. On the other hand, the political parties who frequently go to them

(foreign diplomats) for any reason should change their mindset. It is unfortunate that a political party wants to allow foreign observers but has objections against local observers.

There are allegations against some local organisations that are interested in observing the polls as they are connected with political parties, and Awami League has raised specific allegation against an NGO.

Awami League likes to create controversy. They said they would ratify all the activities of the present government. It means they will also make all the unconstitutional and extra-judicial activities of the government legitimate. But we cannot do this.

What will be the position of BNP on the activities of the present government, if voted to power?

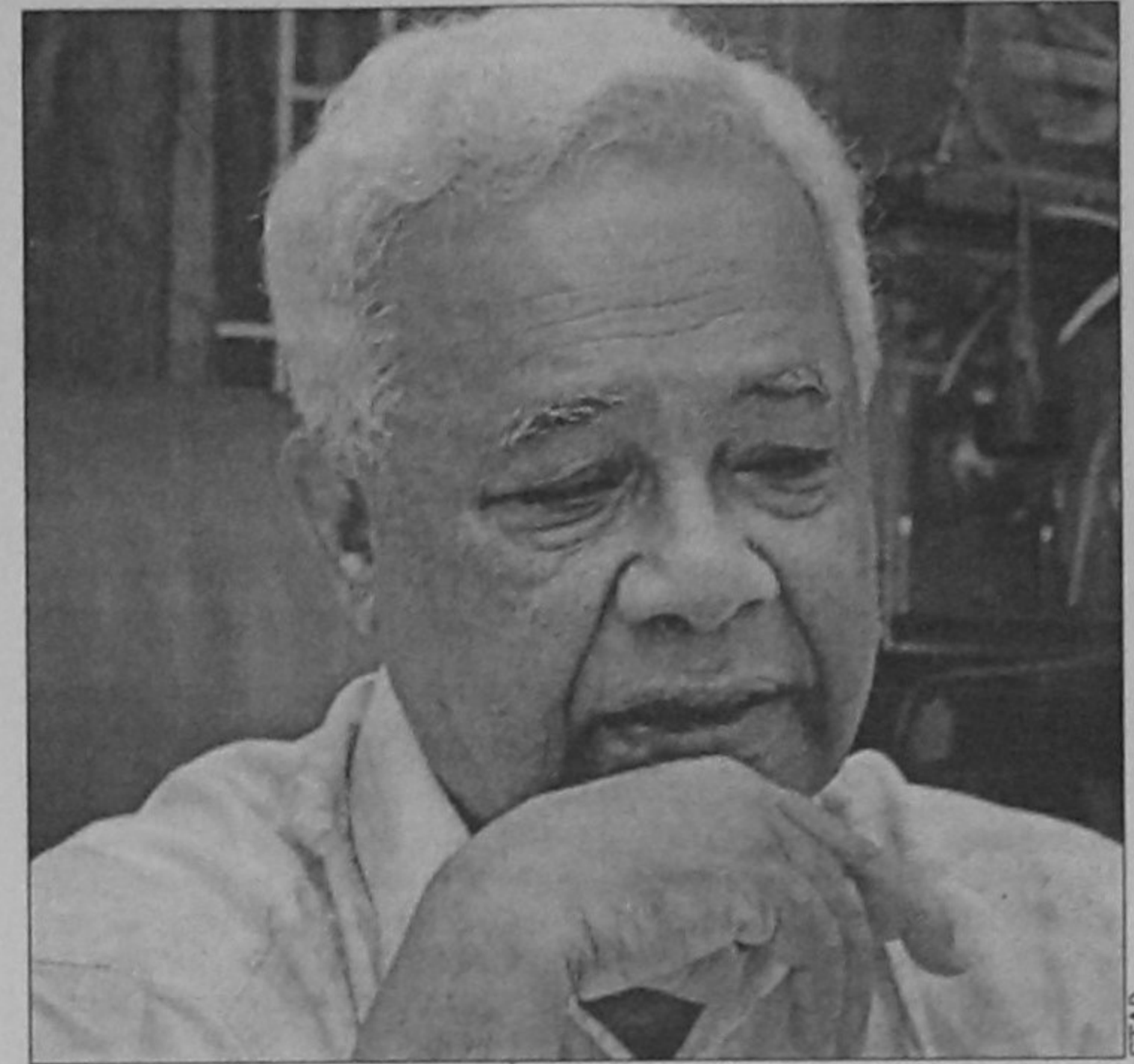
Our chairperson has categorically said that we have nothing to do if anything done was unconstitutional.

Do you think the initiative taken by the Election Commission will be able to bring qualitative changes in politics?

Political parties are being forced to accept many things now. I don't think these will continue in future if democracy is restored.

Do you agree that rivalry between political parties is responsible for political violence?

I do agree. Good political environment can be ensured if top-level leaders are respectful to each other and mind their language. So I want to say that frequent exchange of views among the political leaders will



Brig Gen (retd) ASM Hannan Shah

ensure good political environment. Will reformist leaders be able to return to the party?

Khaleda Zia is a big-hearted leader so she has pardoned the leaders who nakedly attacked her when she was behind bars. But we, the lower level leaders, are narrow-minded and could not forget the matter. That is why some identified reformist leaders are facing people's wrath in different areas across the country, and local leaders and workers will decide regarding party nomination for the polls.

What are the lessons of 1/11 for

politicians? Of course. Its simple. One should take as much work in one's hands as can be completed. The lesson is not only for us but also for those who came into power after 1/11.

Do you think Khaleda Zia's ego was responsible for 1/11?

I strongly denounce any such argument. BNP is not responsible for 1/11. BNP did not make any mistake, as the party was not in power then. The power was in the hands of the president. Did Khaleda Zia tell the people to bring stick and oars?

Flickers of hope



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

AS the general election draws near along with the expected termination of the tenure of the present extended caretaker government, there is a mood of despondency in many quarters. Responsible people in such quarters are of the view that the villains of our public life have not been punished in sufficient numbers and that we are very steadily reverting to wherefrom we started on 11th January 2007. The question is should we lose heart as quickly as we do? Is it not time to dispel the gloom?

If at all we have not been able to deliver or cause deliverance, then is not that deficit at least, partly attributable to the absence of an

STRAIGHT LINE

There is hope that in the coming days we will witness greater propriety and transparency in public procurement and bigger financial dealings as politicians and bureaucrats are expected to display heightened responsibility. An empowered regulatory body along with political leadership that understands the imperative of change can certainly effect improvements. The fear of accountability at some point of time should act as a helpful deterrent.

articulate, independent, non-partisan and tolerant intellectual community which could foster and sustain a healthy debate on our socio-economic lapses? There are visible indications to believe that our elite have remained collectively indifferent to our woes with the hope that the merciless axe of greed, intolerance and violence will somehow spare them.

All thinking people should bear responsibilities for the supine acceptance of the many indignities and excesses inflicted upon citizens. It would be wrong to assume that someone else will fix our troubles. If we continue to pursue our

ambitions, indulging in consumerism with a vengeance, then we cannot expect the desired change. Leadership of any country reflects the prevailing values and power structure of its society.

If burly sinners have largely managed public affairs to our present predicament, then we need some introspection and find out why things have gone wrong. In such a process we would find that the vitality of our corrective institutions has been successively sapped by our ruling classes that included politicians and public servants of all descriptions. In such a scenario, how can there be a quick fix of our

shortfalls?

While there is a pressing need to put things back on rails, there should be a pragmatic appreciation of the apparently positive developments that show rays of hope for conducting business in an orderly manner in future. There is no denying that fear of law and authority did return in some measure which by itself is no mean achievement when seen in the background of a privilege of impunity enjoyed by politically blessed powerful mischief-makers. The untouchables were touched. Though not very significant in volume, the more than Tk 800 crore

received last year on account of taxes on hitherto undisclosed earning was occasioned by fear.

To many the above may appear trifling and inconsequential but one would perhaps be realistic to remember that our establishment in the not-too-distant past was not keen on fighting graft and other irregularities; it felt no uneasiness in the brazen behaviour of doubtful elements in the supreme corridor of power. Single-minded pursuit of money by power-wielders was not considered unusual.

The reality of the lack of political will to fight corruption in the public sector can be understood if one looks at the comparative performance of the erstwhile Bureau of Anti-corruption since 1971 and that of the Anti-corruption Commission from January 2007. Whatever criminal conviction has been achieved so far augurs well for the future because the graft-fighting body was virtually a toothless entity. A regulatory body that could not bite due to deliberate constraints was not in a position to develop the required expertise to effectively book the corrupt suspects. This dimension of the anti-

corruption process has been lost sight of by many observers. Enquiry, investigation and successful prosecution of corruption and illegal acquisition of wealth are, without doubt, an extremely exacting job.

There is hope that in the coming days we will witness greater propriety and transparency in public procurement and bigger financial dealings as politicians and bureaucrats are expected to display heightened responsibility. An empowered regulatory body along with political leadership that understands the imperative of change can certainly effect improvements. The fear of accountability at some point of time should act as a helpful deterrent.

We may continue to criticize the politicians for many of our miseries but in the ultimate analysis politicians have to be the principal arbiters. Perhaps it is a natural weakness to revile a reality which we cannot do without. Herein arises the issue of the wholesome growth of political leadership about which one considered view is that deficits in this respect are largely attribut-

able to the absence of effective local government institutions and consequently local leaders. We now have a local government commission with the supportive legislations that will hopefully facilitate the gradual empowerment of the local bodies. The day may not be very far when our members of parliament will not be focused on non-legislative matters.

The Election Commission may not have been able to put its foot down owing to factors better left unsaid but it has definitely ventured into matters that need urgent attention for ensuring a fair poll. It now has the benefit of a reasonably credible voters list, much to the relief of an exasperated polity. Above all, it has acquired some teeth that need to be sharpened further in public interest. A realization has perhaps dawned that the Election Commission has many unfinished jobs that demand round the year business and not just preceding general election. This is an achievement.

Fear alone cannot deliver for obvious reasons. Damages done to key institutions have to be repaired; for when a republic

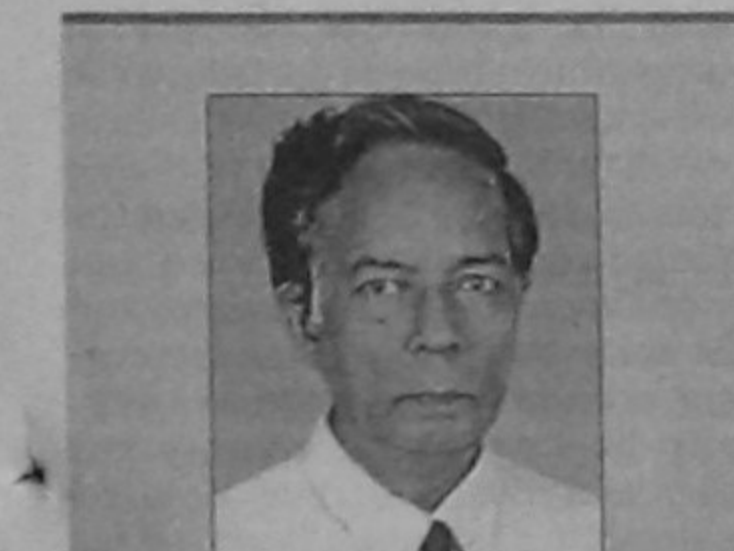
comes to birth, it is the leaders who produce the institutions. Later it is the institutions which produce the leaders. While judiciary has to continue to act as the dispute resolution mechanism, there should be built in credible arrangement for manning it. Efforts to sanitize public service recruitments are laudable but more important would be to produce centres of excellence in education.

If we can sustain the institutional achievements of recent times under enlightened leadership capable of looking beyond then there are reasons to be hopeful. The leaders, particularly of the political arena have to be on a high moral ground. Bangladeshis, genetically speaking, are gifted with higher natural abilities and in the historical perspective we are not a banana republic. Politics has to be a particularly edifying activity despite the skeptics. The air of uncertainty and hesitancy has to be cleared to make room for a better horizon.

Muhammad Nurul Huda is a columnist of The Daily Star.

The population bomb is ticking

Educate women to defuse it



MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

CLIMATIC disruption, barren fields, dried up wells and hunger on a scale never before known by humanity are now a reality. The prospect is horrifying, and this is what Lester Brown, president of the World Watch Institute in Washington predicts for 2050, when the earth's population will have more than doubled from the present 6 billion and the capacity of science to devise methods for coaxing more food out of the soil will, in his view, be greatly diminished. The situation may be too alarming as Brown calculates, with specific mention of the dire economic situation in some Asian countries. Look at the figure: the population of Bangladesh at the time of liberation in 1971 was 75 million and in less than 40 years it has crossed 140 million mark. With 953 people

BITTER TRUTH

Third world women often have relatively few political or legal rights, and not many receive schooling that prepares them for roles outside the home. So said Robert Berg, president of the International Development Conference "Expanding educational and employment opportunities for women is necessary for permanently addressing the population issue."

living in a space of one km and the present birth rate standing at 1.43 percent as said by the Chief Adviser Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed while inaugurating the World Population Day programme in the city in the recent past, (although the figure revealed by other sources puts the growth figure at 2%) there would be 30 lakh new mouths to be fed every year. Consequently the agricultural land in the country continues to decrease by one per cent every year bringing the present cultivable land to 60 lakh hectare from 90 lakh hectare in 1980. With population increasing even at this rate, we will become more populous and impoverished than many other Asian countries bigger than our size.

Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed cautioned that this unplanned growth of population will further complicate the process of meeting the

food demand, basic health requirements and educational facilities triggering a crisis in employment situation and social unrest in the country. Precisely told, we will be unable to eliminate poverty or illiteracy if we cannot control our population more effectively.

The US Census Bureau pointed out in the recent past that the world's population will climb to 10 billion by 2050. And 99 percent of the world's annual growth of 130 million is occurring in the 130 poorest countries. Joseph Chamie, the UN demographer pointed out that in 1950, Europe's population was three times that of Africa. Today Africa's population of almost a billion is nearly three times that of Europe. Such growth, Chamie observed was "simply beyond the carrying capacity of an already beleaguered continent."

True, in the poorest countries of

Asia including India, Bangladesh, and the Philippines growth rates are outstripping the national ability to provide bare necessities like food, housing, fuel, health and education. Living trees are being chopped down for fuel and croplands overplowed by desperate farmers. In most parts of Bangladesh, especially the northern part, in recent times horrifying images of hunger and non-availability of food items have captured world attention signaling the message that we have fallen far short of the need to augment food production as well as arrest population growth. Prospects are so dire that Lester Brown urge the UN to set a goal for a two-child family for the world as a whole, exactly what the chief adviser asked Bangladesh couples of reproductive age to follow while speaking at the inaugural ceremony of the

World Population Day in the city.

A brief survey about progress or, so to say, failure of the population programme worldwide reveals that the first brake on the population growth came in the early 1960s, with the development of the birth control pill, a magic pharmacological bullet that made contraception easier than it had been before. In 1969 the United Nations got in on the population game, creating a UN Population Fund, a global organisation committed to bringing family planning to women who would not otherwise have them. In the decades that followed, the UN increased its commitment sponsoring numerous global symposiums to address the population problem further. Even a global calamity like AIDS has yielded unexpected dividend with international campaign to promote condom use and abstinence helping to prevent not only disease transmission but also conception.

A little more than 30 years ago, global population growth was 2.04 percent. Today it is just 1.3 percent. But, sunny as the global averages look, things look a lot more bleak when you break them down by region. Even the best family planning programmes do no good if there is neither the money nor government expertise and last of all

political will to carry them out. In less developed countries which currently account for a staggering 96 percent of the annual population increase these are sorely lacking. Let's take population control and illiteracy together, as they are inextricably linked. The main reason for slow progress in population control programme is very low literacy among women and very low availability of contraceptives. No rural couple is going to opt for birth control if it means travelling several kilometres, usually on foot, to buy a packet of condoms or pills.

The conditions in which these women and children live are often worse than those in which the village's animals live. This is also a country in which many are still basking in the glow of super affluence. There is something sickening about Bangladesh going into the new millennium with the highest number of illiterate people living in absolute poverty. None of the women in many villages can read and they resist contraception because they need more hands to help earn a living. These families in poor agrarian societies see children as a source of labour and a hedge against poverty in old age and in illness. Happily with the spread of literacy and prosperity in

some developing countries, the idea of small family is gaining momentum. People need to be taught that with lower infant mortality fewer offspring can provide the same measure of security.

Of all the entrenched values often religion plays a greater obstacle to population control. Roman Catholics fought against national family-planning efforts in Mexico, Kenya and the Philippines, while Muslim fundamentalists have done the same in Iran, Egypt and Pakistan. However, where such resistance is encountered, vigorous campaigns should be mounted to promote natural birth -- including the rhythm method and fertility delay through breast feeding control techniques.

The effort associated with the launching of family-planning programme in this subcontinent did not go very smoothly. Many of the countries in the deepest demographic trouble have imposed aggressive family planning programmes, only to see them go badly. In the 1970, Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi tried to reduce the national birthrate by offering men cash and transistor radios if they would undergo vasectomies. In the communities in which those sweeteners failed, the government resorted to coercion,

putting millions of males -- from teenage boys to elderly men -- on the operating table. Amid the resentment and backlash that followed, Gandhi's government was turned out of office.

China's similarly one child policy has done a better job of slowing population but not without problems. In a country that values boys over girls, one child rules have led to abandonments, abortions and infanticides, as couples limited to a single offspring keep spinning the reproductive wheel until it comes up with male. So says Alex Marshal of the UN Population Fund, "We have learned that there is no such thing as population control." He is inclined to say, "You don't control it. You allow people to make up their mind."

Third world women often have relatively few political or legal rights, and not many receive schooling that prepares them for roles outside the home. So said Robert Berg, president of the International Development Conference "Expanding educational and employment opportunities for women is necessary for permanently addressing the population issue."

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