

## Sidelined upazila vice-chairmen

Women's empowerment being mocked at

**T**HE women vice-chairmen of the upazila parishads, elected three months ago, are yet to take office, as no government circular has so far been issued on their job description. The 475 vice-chairmen are completely left out of the parishads' functioning at the moment, as they have not been given any space in the parishad offices.

Now the scheme of creating the post of vice-chairman exclusively for women will surely be a self-defeating one, unless they are allowed to play their due role. Three months have already been lost, and nobody knows how many more months it will take to create the conditions where the vice-chairmen can have their share of the parishads' work. The idea behind creating the new position was to ensure direct participation of women in decision-making at a very important tier of the local government, but it is not being followed in the right spirit.

Women are contributing significantly to the development process and credit is due to them for the success of many income-generating projects all over the country. The success of the micro-credit programmes should also be attributed to the integrity and commitment of women.

So, it was in the fitness of things that the decision to create the position of the vice-chairman was taken to empower them. But the latest developments indicate that good decisions alone do not produce good results. If the women vice-chairmen are not allowed to work, they might soon become redundant. And their position will turn out to be purely ornamental.

It is really not clear why the government could not issue the circular or guidelines in the matter in three months. Is empowerment of women such a negligible matter that the decision makers could ignore it for such a long time?

The upazila parishads are already facing some problems arising out of the tussle between the parishad chairman and local MP who has been made adviser to the parishad. The fight for supremacy has already degenerated into crude brawls in some instances. Now, the situation will worsen further if the vice-chairmen are not allowed to play their due role as representatives of local women. The issue has to be resolved on a priority basis to enable the vice-chairmen to take office and initiate various development programmes in the interest of local people. Given our womenfolk's track-record of honesty and dedication, they will, we believe, succeed in their mission if they get the opportunity.

## Violence against domestic help

Make provisions to govern their employment

**R**EPORTS of bad treatment meted out to housemaids by the mistress or master of the house make one wonder whether we are part of the civilised world. Horrid descriptions of ruthless behaviour continue to fill newspaper headlines and yet there appears to be nothing that the law of the land can do to prevent hapless domestic aids falling victim to torture of their employers or have the perpetrators punished through a quick trial. The fact that 305 of the victims (nearly 50 percent of the reported cases of violence against house maids) succumbed to torture between 2001 and 2008 should put any civilised society to shame.

The number of such incidents, of which we suspect only a fraction of what actually occurs gets reported, is horrendous. And going by the statistics available one could safely surmise that this category of workers is perhaps one of the most victimised of our workforce. This is an informal sector of employment where a large labour force is engaged which is neither under the scrutiny nor examination of the authorities and the employers are left to their own devices to determine their pay and condition of work.

Seeking the help of the law by the victims is not much use either mainly because the employer, being more influential, finds his or her way to circumvent laws or find a way to settle out of court which the poor domestic help has no other option but to accept. And in this too, much of whatever compensation is paid goes to the middleman.

We feel it is time for the state to step in. It is not too late to put in place provisions governing the terms and conditions of work of housemaids. Not only should that be introduced without delay, but also associated with it should be provision for stringent punishment, particularly for physical abuse. It is also time to consider whether some provisions couldn't be put in place that would ensure not only speedy but also less costly trial process. As for the present the relevant ministry should come forward to provide legal aid to the victims to pursue their cases.

However, one can hope for little improvement in the condition of the housemaids if the employers do not change their attitude towards the employees. Housemaids are indispensable features in the life of middleclass working families and they must be treated with due respect and consideration.

## Let us 'speak' about greed

This man used to sit in an edifice, a symbol of supreme moral authority. It is a place where laws are created for the betterment of life of the people of the republic. But, did this man live up to the reputation of the edifice where he has been sitting for many years?

SHAHNOOR WAHID

**A**NCIENT philosopher Seneca said about greed: "It is not the man who has little, but he who desires more, that is poor." Mahatma Gandhi was more specific. He said: "Earth provides enough to satisfy every man's need, but not every man's greed." Lord Buddha is known for his wisdom. He said about greed: "There is no fire like passion, there is no shark like hatred, there is no snare like folly, there is no torrent like greed." And the ultimate has been written down in Bhagavat Gita. It reads: "Hell has three gates: lust, anger, and greed."

With those quotes to warm us up, we are now all set to talk about this folly called greed that only humans have. It's a shame for us when we notice that greed is not present in the animal world. Lions and tigers, even lowly hyenas, do not kill more than what they need to satiate hunger. This way they help maintain the balance in nature in their greedless world. But with humans it is totally different, of course, except for some saintly men and women who could defy the pull of this strong urge. The rest of us are caught in the "greedlock" of greed.

Greed and lust go hand in hand, thus making a formidable pair, to earn ill repute wherever they tread. It has proliferated with the advancement of civilisation, thereby contributing immensely to human misery. And it has been instrumental in the collapse of many big empires in the bygone era. The fall of the Roman Empire could be taken as one example. Many historic figures disgraced themselves to shame and perfidy when they fell victim to greed and

lust. Greed has made many small men even smaller. Today, we shall talk about such a small man and his uncontrollable greed.

This man used to sit in an edifice, a symbol of supreme moral authority. It is a place where laws are created for the betterment of life of the people of the republic. But, did this man live up to the reputation of the edifice where he has been sitting for many years? Everyday, we come to hear about his greedy escapades with public money, and we feel small ourselves.

His greed is proving to be uncontrollable, unsatiable, and all-pervasive. His unabashed greed his higher education could not tame; rustic greed his three-piece suit and a tie could not civilise. He had seen harmful laws being ratified before his eyes but never challenged the government of the day. He had seen many innocent people imprisoned for not supporting the activities of the government of the day, but raised no voice against.

This man has been scooping up state money in terms of millions every month -- that again taking resort to unlawful means! Imagine him being a lawyer himself! How much money did he need to run his family? Why did he have to take home ill-gotten money through abusing his power, and then give all sorts of dubious answers in support of his shameful activities? Shall we exceed our limit if we say that he is greed personified? What else can justify his shameful actions while holding a very prestigious post?

The kind of money he took for the care of his garden could buy books for hundreds of school students. The kind of money he took in the name of entertainment of guests at his office could build low-cost houses for many poor people of this country. The kind



How much does a man need?

of money he took in the name of his treatment could buy irrigation pumps for hundreds of poor farmers.

This man comes from a very humble background where he has seen poverty and has also seen how people learn the amazing trick of overpowering poverty to live a life of peace and tranquility. Poverty can never break the back of an honest man. And this man has surely seen many such great people in his lifetime but did not care to follow their trail. Along the way, he took a very wrong turn and eventually has come to where he is today -- facing charges of illegal gratification. What an ignoble end of a foreign educated lawyer.

So, Sir, you could have become a respected man in our country. But you

chose to shrink before your overwhelming greed. Respect was the lowest priority in your life. You wanted to be rich and powerful at any cost. And yes, you have become rich and powerful at a huge cost. Sir, some day you will have no need for all the money you amassed. Some day you will not be able to wear those hundreds of three-piece suits kept in your wardrobe. Someday you will crave for a word of respect from the people you "ruled." You will want to give a million for one such word. Some day you will question -- what went wrong? You will surely find the answer, but perhaps that will be too late.

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## Array and disarray in the Left

The CPI (M) is not going to enter the history books as having betrayed its core commitment, anti-imperialism, in order to stick to office.

M.J. AKBAR

**L**EADERS come in two cultures. One sort of leader accepts the necessity of accountability in public life. This group is in a minority. The majority follows a law, which their followers know only too well: "If we win, I get the credit; if we lose, you get the blame."

It's ironic that the best democrats in Indian democracy are the Marxists, whose ideology demands class war rather than planting your finger on a symbol.

They treat their party as an institution, not an individual's or family's private property. Decisions are made through a collective system, not sent to a single individual for an assent or dissent. Responsibility is assigned to individuals, and individuals are stripped of their ego.

This is perhaps why ex-Marxists become so egotistic; all those decades of suppressed ego is suddenly let loose. There are rewards for success, even when this leads to stagnation. During 33 years of Marxist rule in Bengal, there have been only two chief ministers, Jyoti Basu and Buddhadev Bhattacharya. Basu left because of age; he was not pushed out. No one is pushed out.

There have been only two finance ministers, Dr. Ashok Mitra and Ashim Dasgupta. Dr. Mitra resigned on an issue of principle, otherwise he might have retired only along with his friend, Jyoti Basu. If you win elections you can do no wrong. And that is what the problem might be in 2009. Buddhadev

Bhattacharya could lead the Left in Bengal to its first major setback in three decades.

The buzz in Kolkata has already moved towards post-modern: Bhattacharya has decided to resign if he cannot ensure 25 seats out of 42. How do the Kolkata *adda* wallahs know? Political information is always porous. The man at the top has merely to make an observation to a confidant or two; the latter discuss the possibility with their close comrades, and word rolls down reaching the dabblers and journalists. There are at least three distinctive aspects of this story.

A chief minister is planning to take responsibility for failure. Politicians across the country will do badly. Every other politician is thinking deep thoughts on how to cling on despite defeat. This, of course, does not apply to dynasts, who will look for generals to hang.

Second, 25 seats out of 42 is still a clear majority. But the Left has set the bar high and will not lower it.

Third, by levelling the bar at 25, the Left has already psychologically conceded 17 seats to the Trinamool-Congress combine. Even at the height of the Congress wave following the assassination of Indira Gandhi, the Left conceded fewer seats.

There are two reasons for this. The Muslim vote, estimated to be over 35%, has switched away in large numbers. And there is no split in the anti-Left vote after Congress accepted the slightly humiliating terms that Mamata Banerjee offered during

seat-sharing talks.

The Marxists tried, with Pranab Mukherjee's help, to sabotage this, but final orders came from Sonia Gandhi in Delhi and it went ahead. The Congress accepted only 16 seats out of 42. Mamata, who had only one, catapulted to 26.

The Left read a clear message in this decision. The Congress was treating the Left, rather than the BJP, as its principal enemy in this general election. How? Because in the states where an alliance would have hurt the BJP, like Jharkhand, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, the Congress rejected an alliance with leaders who could have helped defeat the BJP, like Shibu Soren, Lalu Yadav, Ram Vilas Paswan, and Mulayam Singh Yadav.

The distribution of seats in Jharkhand had even been announced, but the arrangement collapsed suddenly, at the last minute. As a consequence, the BJP will pick up vital extra seats in a state where it was comprehensively defeated five years ago.

The Marxists believe this to be part of a careful Congress strategy to marginalise the Left. There is nothing personal or sentimental about their response. They will not permit Congress to lead another government, because they are convinced that Congress will use every tactic to pursue the same objective if it returns to government. They know it is a battle of survival and they intend to survive.

They can also sense an opportunity to do unto Congress precisely what Congress did unto them: use power, with Congress support in parliament, to target policies which the Congress has made part of its core personality -- economic reform and the Indo-US nuclear deal. That is the dilemma that the Congress faces. Can it support a government with a Marxist foreign minis-

ter who announces an abrogation of the nuclear deal? Surely Dr. Manmohan Singh would never find the flexibility to support a government in parliament that sabotaged his main achievement. What would the Congress do in such circumstances? It is not a question of swallowing one's pride.

Nor should anyone believe that Marxists would compromise in order to save a non-Congress, non-BJP patchwork government. They have an agenda, which is in the public domain. They will implement it. The CPI (M) is not going to enter the history books as having betrayed its core commitment, anti-imperialism, in order to stick to office. This is high on its list of campaign themes, as anyone interested in Bengal and Kerala will know.

The Left will not do well. It will be mowed down in both Kerala and Bengal, but it will still have around 40 seats in the next parliament. Both Sharad Pawar and Dr. Manmohan Singh acknowledge that a non-BJP government is impossible without the support of the Left.

Curiously, the Left, with 60 MPs, may have been less relevant to a government's survival in 2004 than it could be with 35 or 40 in 2009.

Would it not be paradoxical if Prakash Karat were being sworn in as foreign minister in Delhi and Buddhadev Bhattacharya were submitting his resignation in Kolkata? But stranger things have happened.

Let me suggest one of them. If the BJP becomes the single largest party, you would be surprised by the number of small parties which suddenly discover the virtues of stability at a moment of economic crisis. The Left will be actually relieved; it can be where it is happiest -- in the opposition.

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## Servants, not masters

What all our political leaders have conveniently missed out and will never have told us is that in a democracy, it is the people who alone are their own masters.

SHAMSUDDIN AHMED

**P**RIME minister Sheikh Hasina while addressing government officials recently at the silver jubilee celebration of Bangladesh Public Administration Training Centre at Savar very rightly reminded them that they are the servants of the people, and not their masters. These words of counsel are often uttered by our political leaders whenever they have an occasion to address any formal gathering of government officials.

Government officials themselves are also much too familiar with such words of exhortation. When they are inducted into government service, the first thing they are told as officers under training to bear in mind is that they are the servants of the people, and not their masters. How many of the government officials groom themselves up and behave as such in their career is a different matter.

However, what all our political leaders have conveniently missed out and will never have told us is that in a democracy, it is the

people who alone are their own masters. Any one who is paid from the taxpayers' money is a servant of the people. Prime minister Sheikh Hasina would have earned the gratitude of the people and would have become the first ever elected leader of this country to have acknowledged it if she had said that in this sovereign and independent republic of Bangladesh even the elected leaders like her are also the servants of the people, and not their masters.

Unfortunately for us, no prime minister, ministers and lawmakers have ever acknowledged that politics is the noblest of professions to serve the cause of the people and the country. They have abused and denigrated politics simply as a profession to make a living.

And in sheer arrogance of power they wield and their newly found status which comes with fortunes, most of our elected rulers have behaved in the past and still behave as if they were the uncrowned kings and queens of this country. When they ask government officials to conduct themselves as servants of the people, and not as their

masters, they in fact put themselves in the shoes of the masters and demand complete loyalty, obedience and obeisance from all government officials.

If there has been an erosion in the discipline, dignity and moral conduct of our government officials, it is largely because our power hungry and unscrupulous political leaders have forced them either to serve with untinted personal loyalty and go up the ladder in their career or be defiant for the cause of the interest of the people and the country and suffer.

Has any of our rulers ever said the truth that government officials and functionaries of all national democratic institutions must always uphold the interest and the cause of the people and the country and play their due role to establish truth and justice in our national life?

Has any of our rulers ever said that while it is the duty of government officials to obey all lawful and legitimate orders of the government, they may defy the policy and the order of the government should such policy and order militate against the constitution and the interest of the republic?

No wonder today we have few government officials who conduct themselves with dignity and honour expected of them. Mostly we have placid, cool headed and thoroughly compliant officials with a politi-

cal tag who would not care for the sufferings and the miseries of the people but would do only what their political masters would ask them to do. A police officer or a magistrate would let a murderer go out of the country because a corrupt minister has asked him to do so.

Educated people with principles and integrity are few and far between not only in the bureaucracy and the police administration but also in most of our national institutions including the judiciary.

It is the duty of the government to ensure that government officials at various tiers of administration work with zeal and efficiency to mitigate the sufferings of the people and to that end help establish genuine democracy and accountability. But how can government officials deliver service to the people, if the government and the ruling party lawmakers and party activists arrogate to themselves the privilege of enjoying the fruits of development meant for the people?

Until and unless genuine democracy is established in the country, we will continue to hear our prime minister counseling government officials to behave as servants of the people, and not their masters because such sham clichés play well to the gallery.

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