

CROSS TALK

Decline in poverty rate

Widening income gap challenging

THE Household Income and Expenditure survey (HIES), 2010 has come up with some good news. The poverty rate at the national level has gone down by 8.5 per cent between 2005 and 2010. In absolute terms, this is no mean achievement, given the shock of global recession and internal political instabilities it had to absorb along the way.

The overall decline in poverty, however, does not reflect the proportionate distribution of national income among the different sections of the population. The Gini coefficient, for instance, has fallen by only 0.009, from 0.467 in 2005 to 0.458 in 2010. It reflects the lack of matching performance by the economy in addressing the ever-widening income gap. As Gini ratios serve to measure per capita income inequality vis-à-vis average increase in social income, it becomes obvious that far from moving towards an equitable distribution of wealth, it has rather remained concentrated in a few hands.

During the five-year survey period, traditional poverty pockets in Rajshahi and Rangpur could not show any significant improvement. Driven perhaps by climate change, Barisal division, which was once known for its surplus crops, has now joined the rank of poorer districts with a poverty rate of 40 per cent.

On a par with the general decline in average poverty level, rural as well as urban poverty has also diminished between 2005 and 2010. That brings to the fore government's continued emphasis on poverty alleviation through various income generation programmes for the poor. We cannot also forget the contribution being made by the non-government organisations (NGOs) in addressing poverty, especially in the countryside.

To help reduce rural poverty, the visible shift in the people's dietary patterns from cereals dominated meals to a wider basket of potato, fish and meats deserves mention.

While the economy's overall performance is praiseworthy in terms of combating poverty, there are still genuine reasons for caution seeing that increase in social income has not readily translated into reduction in the rich-poor gap.

UGC survey of public varsities

It is an eye-opener

THE University Grants Commission survey findings about five public universities are certainly worrying. The survey, which covered the universities of Dhaka, Chittagong, Khulna and Rajshahi and the Bangladesh Agricultural University, reveals the depressingly low standards to which teaching has declined among a large number of academics. When 28 per cent of teachers are observed to be extremely poor in teaching, when indeed the quality of research work undertaken by academics (13 per cent of teachers are not into research at all, while only 20 per cent are doing very well) does not conform to regional or international standards, it is time for us to sit up and take notice. There would be little point in arguing that beyond this 28 per cent are those teachers who appear to have been doing a good job. The fact is that teaching at the public universities must be of a uniformly high quality which demonstrates the intellectual excellence of academics.

The irony is that while in recent years there has been an increase in the number of universities in the private sector, such an increase has not been matched by enhanced standards of classroom performance by academics. The roots of the problem of course lie in the questionable means of teachers' recruitment over the years. Individuals not qualified to teach at universities or with partisan political loyalties have come into the profession. At the other end, a rather large number of good teachers have made their way out of the country to teach at foreign universities. Add to that the growing tendency among public university teachers to go for well-paying part time teaching jobs at the private universities. Where opportunities for research are the issue, fund constraints at the public universities have by and large stymied the growth and expansion of academic excellence.

There are priorities that need handling here. In the first place, appointment of low quality or politically affiliated teachers must be put a stop to. In the second, serious thought must be given to salary increases for teachers as well as funds availability for research at the public universities. Mediocrity is not what universities are for.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

June 24

1340 Hundred Years' War: Battle of Sluys The French fleet is almost destroyed by the English Fleet commanded in person by King Edward III.

1793 The first Republican constitution in France is adopted.

1812 Napoleonic Wars: Napoleon's Grande Armée crosses the Neman River beginning the invasion of Russia.

1901 The first exhibition of Pablo Picasso's work opens.

1916 World War I: the Battle of the Somme begins with a week-long artillery bombardment on the German Line.

1932 A bloodless Revolution instigated by the People's Party ends the absolute power of King Prajadhipok of Siam (Thailand).

1939 Siam is renamed to Thailand by Plaek Pibulsonggram, the country's third prime minister.

Take the patriotism test



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

PRIME Minister Sheikh Hasina criticised the National Committee to Protect Oil, Gas, Mineral Resources, Power and

Ports last Saturday, and she said something, perhaps on the spur of the moment, that could have spurred a momentous debate in this country. That it did not is alarming. It may be our sclerotic hearts that what should touch us most does not touch us anymore.

The PM asked who else could think of this country more than she did and whether anybody could be a greater patriot than she is. It may sound like boasting, but she has hit the nail on the head. Our politicians exchanged many invectives during that week, but none addressed the challenge raised by her.

True, our PM thinks about this country more than others. She has to because uneasy lies the head that wears the crown. She runs the government and she has to take decisions. She also loves this country more than others because not too many of us can claim to have experienced the horror of an attack on their lives.

But that is not why what she said last week is significant. It is significant because she has rescued the word "patriotism" from getting obsolete. After a long time, a leading light of our politics has uttered this word in its right context. It was not a political slogan. It was not a rabble-rousing statement. It was not even an election-time buzzword. Instead it was a profound question that should have got the rest of us wearing our thinking caps. How many of us really love this country, and who amongst us loves it more than others?

The prime minister has thrown an executive challenge at us. I expected torrential protests from her opponents at least, if not from like-minded politicians, whose subsistence existence depends on her. But I definitely expected some reaction from the opposition camp. I thought they would get furious, spitting out objections with bangs of bullets ricocheting off concrete walls. I was hoping they wouldn't let it go unopposed.



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Ideally, patriotism is to politicians what revelation is to prophets. The politicians must be fired by the zeal of transcendental politics, taking their love of country to supernatural or divine heights. Their lives ought to shape the country that will shape the lives of ordinary citizens.

So, when the PM made her vaunted statement, it actually should have inspired us. Here was a chance in the mid-course of a government when the country could be drawn into a much-needed discourse. Who amongst us loves this country? Is it the rickshaw-puller who demands the fare of his choice or the vegetable vendor who hikes the price of his produce at his will? Is it the judge who takes money to tamper with justice or the policeman who keeps the law for his keepers only?

Perhaps that is one question we need to ask more than anything else. Is it the businessmen or the bureaucrats? Is it the pundits or the politi-

cians? And how does one prove it? Today, the Taiwanese, Korean and Chinese companies are eager to invest in this country. They are willing to set up factories, create jobs and buttress the local economy. Does it mean they love this country?

Even the blind amongst us knows the answer. These foreigners want to build business synergies between their countries and ours. But they aren't going to waste their energies to build this country for us. The love of country is if we have the unwavering commitment to build it ourselves.

That part sorted out, it is not enough to build factories, create jobs and earn foreign currencies to love this country. Neither is it enough to build bridges, highways, airports, stronger army, more disciplined police force, and open more embassies in foreign capitals. It is not love even to have fought for this country, if one has turned to plundering it afterwards.

Here is my favourite line from Louis

de Bernier's *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*: "Love itself is what is left over, when being in love has burned away...." Everyone falls in love with his country when he is young and idealistic, when he fights for its freedom and honour, when self-interests are still aligned to those of the motherland.

The test of that love comes afterwards, when individual ambition contradicts national aspiration. That is when the prophetic words of Abraham Lincoln come to mind: "I like to see a man proud of the place in which he lives. I like to see a man live so that his place will be proud of him." License, permit, bank balance and houses abroad, our politicians can still convince us they are proud of this country. They are not sure if this country is proud of them. Hence, nobody responded to the PM's challenge.

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| The New York Times EXCLUSIVE

Saudi Arabia's freedom riders

FARZANEH MILANI

THE Arab Spring is inching its way into Saudi Arabia -- in the cars of fully veiled drivers.

On the surface, when a group of Saudi women used Facebook, Twitter and YouTube to organise a mass mobile protest defying the kingdom's ban on women driving, it may have seemed less dramatic than demonstrators facing bullets and batons while demanding regime change in nearby countries. But underneath, the same core principles -- self-determination and freedom of movement -- have motivated both groups. The Saudi government understands the gravity of the situation, and it is moving decisively to contain it by stopping the protest scheduled for Friday.

The driving ban stems from universal anxiety over women's unstrained mobility. In Saudi Arabia that anxiety is acute: The streets -- and the right to enter and leave them at will -- belong to men. A woman who trespasses is either regarded as a sinful "street-walker" or expected to cover herself in her *abaya*, a portable house. Should she need to get around town, she can do so in a taxi, with a chauffeur (there are 750,000 of them) or with a man related to her by marriage or blood behind the wheel.

Although the Islamic Republic of Iran could not implement similarly draconian driving laws after the 1979 revolution, given that women had driven cars there for decades, the theocratic regime did denounce women riding bikes or motorcycles as

un-Islamic and sexually provocative. Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, proclaimed in 1999 that "women must avoid anything that attracts strangers, so riding bicycles or motorcycles by women in public places involves corruption and is forbidden."

The Saudi government, like the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Taliban in Afghanistan, the military junta in

public debates and got involved in decision-making. Aisha, one of the wives of the Prophet Muhammad, commanded an army of men while riding on a camel. If Muslim women could ride camels 14 centuries ago, why shouldn't they drive cars today? Which Quranic injunction prohibits them from driving?

Gender apartheid is not about piety. It is about dominating, exclud-

The women demonstrating for the right to drive in Riyadh are seasoned negotiators of confined spaces and veteran trespassers of closed doors and iron gates. They are a moderating, modernising force to be reckoned with -- and an antidote to extremism.

Sudan and the Islamic Salvation Front in Algeria, ordains the exclusion of women from the public sphere. It expects women to remain in their "proper place."

Indeed, the rulers in Saudi Arabia are the most gender-segregated in the world today. In official ceremonies, and in countless photographs, posters and billboards, the royal family seems to be composed solely of men.

This desire to deny women entrance into the public arena is inaccurately presented as a religious mandate. Yet there is no basis for such exclusion in the Quran. On the contrary, in the early years of Islam, women were a vital presence in Muslim communities. They attended mosques, engaged in

ing and subordinating women. It is about barring them from political activities, preventing their active participation in the public sector, and making it difficult for them to fully exercise the rights Islam grants them to own and manage their own property. It is about denying women the basic human right to move about freely.

That is why the women defying the ban on motorised mobility are in fact demanding an eventual overhaul of the entire Saudi political system. They want not just to drive but to remap the political geography of their country.

These women know the value of a car key. Like the man who faced down tanks in Tiananmen Square, like the

unprecedented number of women participating in protests across the Middle East and North Africa, the Saudi women's campaign for the right to drive is a harbinger of a new era in the region.

It may require decades to see an end to the Middle East's gender apartheid and the political reconfigurations that would necessarily follow. One thing is certain though: The presence of women and men demonstrating side by side in the streets of Iran, Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Yemen and Syria is a sign of more seismic upheavals ahead. Old categories have broken down and the traditional distribution of power and space is no longer viable.

The women demonstrating for the right to drive in Riyadh are seasoned negotiators of confined spaces and veteran trespassers of closed doors and iron gates. They are a moderating, modernising force to be reckoned with -- and an antidote to extremism.

Their refusal to remain silent and invisible or to relinquish their rights as citizens is an act of civil disobedience and moral courage. Their protest, and those of their sisters across the Middle East, represents a revolution within revolutions -- and a turning point in the contemporary history of Islam.

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