

The greatest champion of women's rights

SYED ASHRAF ALI

CLARA Zetkin, Mary Wollstonecraft, Anne Nurakin, Margaret Spranger, Kate Millet and Germaine Greer are all universally acknowledged as pioneers in the world of Women's Liberation. People in every nook and corner of the globe remember with deep respect these salt of the earth whenever they discuss women and their emancipation from the clutches of male chauvinism. But very few of us are really aware of the fact that the first person to advocate effectively the cause of women was indeed the holy Prophet Muhammad (pbuh).

Nobody denies today the fact that in every country women play a significant role in society. Most of us admit today that woman is the builder and moulder of a nation's destiny. Though delicate and tender and soft as lily, she has a heart far stronger and bolder than that of a man. She is the supreme inspiration for man's onward march -- an embodiment of love, pity and compassion. She inspires not only ordinary men, men who are shaky and feeble-hearted, but even the salt of the earth.

Giants with unshakeable conviction and dedication, titans with supreme qualities of head and heart also need inspiration and assistance from the fair sex in the crucial hours. History testifies that even Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), immediately after the first Revelation, received inspiration and advice and consolation from his wife Khadijatu'l-Kubra (RA). That is why even Napoleon Bonaparte claimed unequivocally: "Give me good mothers and I will give you a good France."

It was the Prophet of Islam (pbuh) who for the first time in history had the sagacity, courage and conviction to declare that woman is not "a scorpion ever ready to sting," not "an organ of the Devil," but she is the Mohsena -- an impregnable fortress against the conspiracies of Satan. He was the first to acknowledge that "the wife is the empress of the husband's house," the first to declare that a man or woman's first duty is not to help his/her father first but he or she should attend to her mother's need first.

That is not all. It was the holy Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) who was the first to assert that he is the best among human beings who behaves best with his wife. He also declared in unambiguous terms that Heaven lies not at the feet of the father or husband, it lies at the feet of the mother.

There must indeed be something most extraordinary, most chivalrous about this "Child of the Desert" that alone among the great teachers of mankind he conferred the first legal status of honour and responsibility upon women making them Sui Juris, ensuring their economic independence and providing them with opportunities in every sphere of human activity and in every domain of thought, guaranteeing their rights in the properties of the deceased parents, of the husband and the children -- rights and privileges which could not even be conceived of till the enactment of the Married Women's Property Act in England by the middle of the 19th century -- rights which are being conceded by the civilised nations of Europe and America in the twenty-first century.

In the case of marriage also, a Muslim woman

enjoys rights and privileges which have never been granted in any other religion. Marriage in Islam, though considered a sacred relation between husband and wife, is not a sacrament but purely a civil contract. No person can marry a woman without her consent. Liberty is allowed a woman, who has reached the age of puberty, to marry or refuse to marry a particular man, independent of her guardian, who has no power to dispose of her in marriage without her consent or against her will; while the objection is reserved for the girl, married by her guardian during her infancy, to ratify or dissolve the contract immediately on reaching her majority.

It is indeed essential to the validity of the marriage in Islam that there would be (i) declaration or offer on the part of the one, (ii) acceptance by the other, and (iii) before sufficient number of witnesses (in Hanafi Law, two). What is more, it is obligatory on the part of the hus-

indiscreet but believing, are cursed in this life and in the hereafter: for them is a grievous penalty." It also declares: "And those who launch a charge against chaste women, and produce not four witnesses (to support their allegation), flog them with eighty stripes; and reject their evidence hereafter; for such men are wicked transgressors." (Sura Nur, Verse 4).

With the advent of Islam a woman was no more considered a mere chattel, she formed an integral part of the estate of her husband or her father. Islam, which as a complete code of life guides every sphere of activity and in every domain of thought clearly ordains: "Ye are forbidden to inherit women against their will. Nor should ye treat them with harshness. On the contrary, live with them on a footing of kindness and equity." (Sura Nisaa, Verse 19). It is stated in the Holy Quran: "They (women) are your (men's) garments and you are their garments." (Sura Al-Baqara, Verse 187).

Women in Islam have never failed to rise to the occasion in the hours of crises. The first person to embrace Islam was a lady -- the Sadiq Dost -- Hazrat Khadijatu'l-Kubra (RA). The first Shahid was a lady -- Bibi Sumaya (RA). The first person to know of the Holy Miraj was a lady -- Bibi Umma Hani (RA). The custodian of the first compiled copy of the Holy Quran (Al-Umm or Sahifa) was also a lady -- "the Mother of the Faithful" Bibi Hafsa bint Omar (RA).

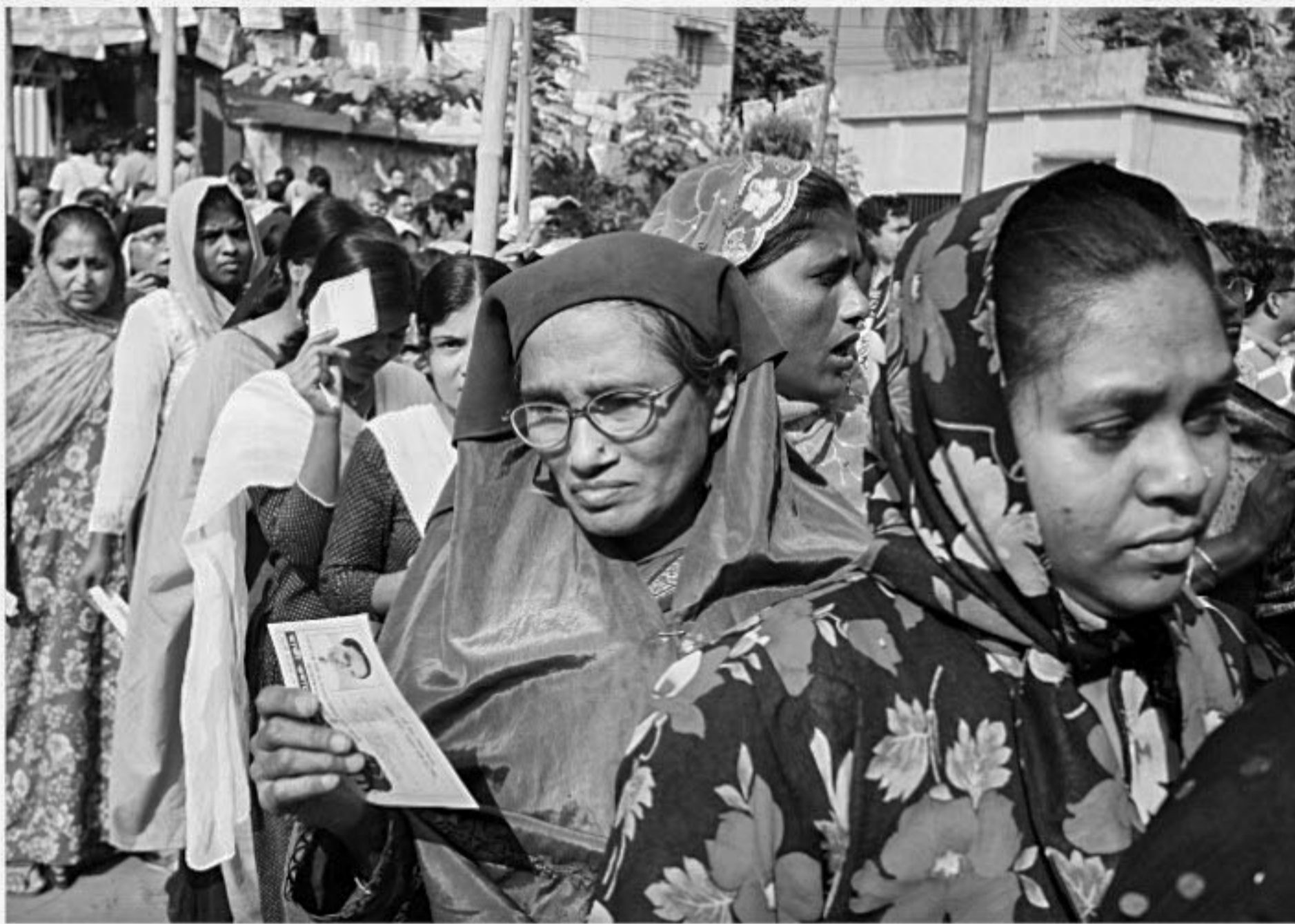
A historic incident during the caliphate of Hazrat Omar bin Khattab (RA) also vividly depicts the high respect commanded by the women in Muslim society. With the expansion of conquests, wealth had begun to pour into the hands of the Muslims. They had naturally started spending lavishly and were conferring big dowries on their wives. Omar (RA), who intensely desired the Muslims to stick to their original simple and abstemious ways, spoke to the congregation in the mosque denouncing indulgence in such luxuries of life. It is recorded

that an old woman rose from among the audience to challenge the statement of the great caliph. Addressing him openly in the vast assembly by his mere name, she said: "Who are you to deprive us of our due rights which God has conferred on us?" And then she recited the verse from the Holy Quran in support of her claim: "And if you have given to any one of them (the woman you are divorcing) a heap of gold, take nothing from it." (Sura Nisa, Verse 20).

The unprecedented and revolutionary improvement effected in the position and status of women by Islam under the inimitable and magnificent guidance of Hazrat Muhammad (pbuh) has indeed been acknowledged by all unprejudiced writers, both in the East and in the West. Had the holy Prophet of Islam done nothing more, his claim to be a benefactor of mankind would have certainly been indisputable. Justice Pierre Crabite very rightly declares: "Muhammad, thirteen hundred years ago, assured to the mothers, wives and daughters of Islam a rank and dignity not yet generally assured to women by the laws of the West Muhammad was probably the greatest champion of women's rights the world has ever seen."

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band that he should promise to pay or deliver a sum of money or other property as dower to his wife. This settlement of money or property on the wife, without which a marriage is not fully legal, is known as *Mahr*. It is, therefore, evident that in a Muslim marriage it is the bridegroom who has to pay the *Mahr*.

It is really unfortunate that Muslim bridegrooms in our society nowadays force the brides or their parents to pay the dowry -- an act which is never permitted in Islam. Many among us are not even aware of the fact that Islam also empowers the wife to effectuate a divorce on various grounds including cruelty, insanity and impotence of the husband.

The Holy Quran ordains: "Reverence God, through Whom ye demand your mutual rights, and reverence the wombs that bore you: for God ever watches over you." (Sura Nisaa, Verse 1). It states without the slightest ambiguity that while the decencies of family life should be enforced, women should always be held in honour and their rights recognised, in marriage, property and inheritance.

It is to remove the age-old misconception and superstition that Islam eulogises woman as Mohsena -- the fortress against the evil designs of Satan. What is more, the Holy Quran emphatically warns: "Those who slander chaste women,

and Japan are expressing deep interest in trade and investment. And Singapore firms are looking at industries ranging from manufacturing to education in which their expertise and experience give them an advantage. A memorandum of understanding signed this week during Burmese President Thein Sein's state visit underlined the importance of these ties.

It identified economic development, human resource development and public administration as three areas in which Singapore can share its strengths. If the government in Naypyidaw is serious about developing its economy, it must regard such tested ties -- and new ones it must forge with the international community -- as vital to its future. It must be prepared to embrace and be open to ideas as much as to investments. That will be key if Burma's economic transformation is to begin in earnest.

The good news is that Burma has no dearth of friends that can partner it in the process. Asean countries, China and India have a history of engagement with it, although tight control of its economy has previously prevented a deeper engagement. With the gradual lifting of Western-imposed sanctions, the United States, Germany

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SHIFTING IMAGES

As is your will, so is your destiny?



MILIA ALI

OVER the past decade motivational gurus, spiritualists, and New Age Therapists have written umpteen books and reams of articles to underscore the importance of a positive attitude in achieving success. The common theme seems to be that positive thinking generates and attracts good energy, which in turn makes the thought a

self-fulfilling prophecy.

The idea is not entirely new. Throughout history philosophers and prophets have asserted that positive thinking can cause a seismic shift in the energies surrounding us and whatever we strongly desire will actually happen. Of course, sceptics find this notion somewhat preposterous and, in fact, risky. They believe that the idea of linking positive thinking to success may often lead to unrealistic expectations and costly misjudgments. People may become overconfident and embark on reckless schemes that are totally out of sync with reality.

In fact, spiritual teachers also caution against unquestioned positivity and advise that it's not as simple as just intensely wishing for something. According to them, there is a complex and painstaking process involved in turning the mind toward positive thoughts. Since we cannot change attitudes overnight, persistent mental discipline and focus are needed to change the basic orientation of the thought process. The first step requires a conscious elimination of all negative feelings so that the subconscious is ready to receive positive energy. Once we allow positive thoughts to replace negative ones we are able to attract positive forces to help us realise our goals.

In all honesty, I am not totally convinced that by simply aligning our desires with positive thoughts we can turn our destiny. There are other forces in the universe, beyond our control, that determine life's outcomes. For instance, how can we discount lady luck or the unpredictable factor that

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Shakespeare termed as "the tide in the affairs of men?" Having said that, I must confess that I am gradually leaning toward the belief that positive thinking certainly boosts one's confidence, which in turn enhances the probability of success.

An interesting personal story comes to mind in this context. A few years ago when I was living in Bucharest, Romania, the renowned virtuoso Zuben Mehta came to perform at an annual week-long music festival. Being a music enthusiast, I bought front row tickets for the entire festival. The day of the Zuben Mehta concert my husband had a conflicting engagement. He dropped me off at the National Theater, promising to join me after the intermission. I went straight to the usher and handed her my ticket. She took one look at it and said "nyet", which I understood to be a "no." Seeing my confused expression the lady kept pointing to the ticket, while muttering something in Romanian. Puzzled, I looked at the ticket and to my utter dismay realised that I had brought the ticket for the next day's show. I tried explaining that it was an honest mistake but had no success since we were conversing in two different languages. In short, I was refused admission to the concert.

Dejected, I came out of the concert hall. Not only did I feel humiliated, I was also despondent since I realised that I had missed the chance of a life time to witness a maestro perform. There was no time to go home and fetch the right ticket. In desperation I called my husband and told him about the mix-up. He paused for a while and suggested: "Why don't you try to get in? Don't show any weakness or hesitation. Just hold the ticket in your hand. Don't volunteer to show it to anyone. In any case we have assigned seats and no one will be sitting there. Walk confidently, with your head high. And remember, think positive and believe in your ability to pull it off!"

Now, readers I am not a very confident person. But on this occasion I plucked up all my courage and decided to give it a shot. I kept repeating in my mind "I can do this" and headed straight toward the Theater. I made a direct and confident eye contact with the usher but virtually brushed her aside and breezed into the concert chamber. The show was about to begin and the lights were dimmed. And, guess what? Before I realised it I was sitting on my designated seat. I actually made it!

Whether positive thinking always results in outcomes matching our desires, I am still unsure. However, I am sure that we can spread positivity in the small space around us through an upbeat attitude. And, there might be some truth in the ancient text of the Upanishad: "You are what your deep driving desire is. As your desire is, so is your will. As your will is, so is your deed. As your deed is, so is your destiny."

The writer is a renowned Rabindra Sangeet exponent and a former employee of the World Bank.

Burma's economic coming out

EDITORIAL DESK: THE STRAITS TIMES

BURMA'S political reforms, revolving on elections that led to the installation of a civilian government, have caught the imagination of the international community. So has the deepening rapprochement between opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi and the new political leadership. Broad support for political reforms from within and outside the country is natural because the hardline Burmese junta stood out for long as a political anachronism in the region. But the country's political development will remain woefully incomplete without it jettisoning the legacy of a closed and autarkic economy that fed on a prickly nationalist suspicion of the wider world.

Burma is now breaking out of both political and economic isolation. It needs to be encouraged for its own sake and in the interests of Asean, of which it is the second largest member-country after Indonesia. An International Monetary Fund mis-

sion that visited Burma last month focused on what it should do for inclusive and sustainable growth. Noting that the starting point is macro-economic stability, the mission said the process has begun with plans to unify the exchange rate and to lift exchange restrictions on international payments and transfers.

The momentum of reform must be channelled into improving monetary and fiscal management, and implementing structural reforms. Obstacles to growth need to be removed. The authorities should improve the business and investment climate, modernise the financial sector, and go further in liberalising trade and foreign direct investment.

The good news is that Burma has no dearth of friends that can partner it in the process. Asean countries, China and India have a history of engagement with it, although tight control of its economy has previously prevented a deeper engagement. With the gradual lifting of Western-imposed sanctions, the United States, Germany

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