

# Nawab Bahadur Abdul Latif

K. Z. Islam

As a part of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), *The Daily Star* and Robi jointly initiated "English in Schools" programme 2 years ago and it is still running successfully among 1,000 listed schools. To cope up with the rapid pace of modernity and face the challenges of 21st century, the sole purpose of this initiative is to increase the number of English speaking people in Bangladesh. The joint scheme has already proved to be very effective medium and *The Daily Star* hopes to introduce some new and fresh ideas to increase the effectiveness of this project in the coming days, which will surely open a new horizon and boost the English language scope of the students. This initiative deserves encomiums as it is regrettable that after 1971 the importance of English in schools was completely diminished.

This very initiative of introducing English among the Muslims brings back the memory of Nawab Bahadur Abdul Latif (NBAL) who took a similar initiative in the mid-eighteen century.

We shall briefly examine the total degeneration of the Muslims in the Indian subcontinent in the early days of British rule.

The first step in the conquest of India by the British was undoubtedly the Battle of Plassey. A three-fold alliance among the Hindu banker Jagat Seth and his rogue candidate for the Murshidabad throne Mir Jafar and the British military commander Robert Clive sealed the fate of the Muslims on the battlefield of Plassey on June 23, 1757. Clive reaped an enormous personal fortune and was made virtual ruler of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa with Mir Jafar and Mir Kasim as his puppet Nawabs.

During the Governor Generalship of Lord Cornwallis the "Permanent Zamindari Settlement" of 1793 radically transformed the character of Bengal's rural relationships as the tax collectors, predominantly Hindus, became the owners of the land. The ultimate outcome was that, in about two years, the old Mughal aristocracy of Bengal were displaced by Hindu families -- the Roys, Sen and Tagores -- who led the westernisation of the society in Calcutta. By the outbreak of the mutiny in 1857, these families were so strongly attached to the British Raj that their loyalty proved critical in averting the spread of the mutiny to Bengal.

After 1857, when the wrath of both the British and the Hindus fell on the Muslims, their status was degenerated socially, financially and educationally. The situation was so lamentable that Viceroy Earl of Mayo thought it fit to appoint W.W. Hunter to examine the status of the Muslims. The report is a classic titled *The Indian Musalmans*, published in 1871.

As recorded in *The Indian Musalmans*: "A hundred and seventy years ago it was almost impossible for well-born Muslim in Bengal to become poor: at present it is almost impossible for him to continue rich" (p.150).

"It elevated the Hindu collectors who up to that time had held but unimportant post to the position of land holders, gave them a proprietary right in the soil, and allowed them to accumulate wealth which would have gone to the Musalmans under their rule" (Indian

Musalmans, p.155). The status of the Muslims had degenerated to a level lower than the Hindu scheduled caste.

We now look at the role of Nawab Abdul Latif in the upliftment of the Muslims and the promotion of education, particularly English, among the Muslims of Bengal. His family ancestry can be traced to Khalid bin Walid of Arabia whose descendants settled in Faridpur, Bengal, during the Mughal rule in India. Born in 1828, he moved to Calcutta at an early age and was sent to Calcutta Madrassa, the great education institution founded for the benefit of the Musalman boys by the British Governor General Warren Hasting.



Nawab Abdul Latif

At school NBAL distinguished himself in the study of Arabic and Persian. The study of English, then an optional subject, held a peculiar fascination for him and the avidity with which he pursued the study of this language soon attracted the attention of his teachers. The orthodox Musalmans looked upon the study of anything appertaining to western learning with prejudice and that of English language with positive suspicion. So great was young Abdul Latif's keenness that even after class in the seclusion of his home he used to pursue his lessons in English.

By 1847 Abdul Latif, while still in his teens, was appointed by the government as assistant to one of the Amers of Sindh. He worked in this capacity for about a year. He was next appointed a teacher in the Dhaka Collegiate School. Here too he served for a brief period. In 1847, an Anglo-Arabic class in the Calcutta Madrassa was opened for imparting instruction in English. In 1848, Abdul Latif was appointed Anglo-Arabic professor in-charge of this class.

In 1849, when he was 21 years of age, the Government

of Bengal appointed him as a deputy magistrate. His great abilities began to manifest themselves. One cannot but marvel at the fact that although for nearly 36 years NBAL occupied no higher official position than that of a deputy magistrate, he had little difficulty in carving a place for himself as the leader of the Musalmans of Bengal.

Early in life NBAL realised the lamentable condition to which Musalmans had unfortunately been reduced, chiefly owing to the educational backwardness of the community. Realising the evil affects of the exclusiveness of the Muslim community, anxious to imbue its members with a desire to interest themselves in western learning and progress, and give them an opportunity for cultivation of social and intellectual intercourse with the best representative of English and Hindu society, NBAL founded the Mohamadan Literary Society (MLS) in April 1863. By holding discussions, meetings, lectures and annual conversaciones at the Town Hall, the Society helped to raise the Muslim intellect and lead it to the path of advancement.

The Mohamadan Literary Society gave a remarkable impetus to the cause of Mohamadan advancement throughout India. In every direction in which it worked, it imparted a new tone to Mohamadan thought and feeling. It never ceased to bring to the notice of successive administrations, the wants and grievances of the Mohamadan community in regard to education, legislation and other cognate matters affecting the well-being of society. The Society was the precursor of similar institutions in other parts of India. It did not take long to attract the favourable notice of the highest officials in this country and in England by the good work it was doing in the cause of advancement and progress.

The Society's conversaciones, which used to be held regularly year after year, were attended by the viceroy, the commander-in-chief, the lieutenant governor, other high officials, ruling princes, zamindars, noblemen and representatives of all branches of learning and all classes of the community.

Since its establishment in 1863 the annual conversacione of the Society was held regularly at the Town Hall under the personal supervision of its Founder Secretary Nawab Abdul Latif till his death in 1893.

Finally in 1885, Nawab Abdul Latif was appointed as prime minister of Bhopal for just three months.

The government, in recognition of his meritorious services, honoured him with titles and decorations from time to time. In 1877, at the Imperial Assemblage, at Delhi, Viceroy Lord Lytton conferred upon him the title of "Khan Bahadur" and presented him with an "Empress Medal." In April 1880, Lord Lytton conferred upon him the high title of "Nawab." In 1883, Viceroy Lord Ripon honoured him with a "Companionship of the Most Eminent Order of the Indian Empire." In 1887, on the occasion of Queen Victoria's Jubilee, Viceroy Lord Dufferin conferred upon him the highest Mohamadan title of "Nawab Bahadur."

Having accomplished his mission in life, Nawab Abdul Latif expired on July 10, 1893.

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## Islamic principles work with democracy

IMAM FEISAL ABDUL RAUF

MUSLIM nations are warming up to an era of religious tolerance and good governance. From Tunisia to Pakistan, the Muslim world is in turmoil, as each country struggles to find its own path to an Arab Spring.

Pessimists say that, in the end, all of these countries will end up with some form of authoritarian regime either because Islamic parties cannot accept democracy or out of fear that these regimes will keep a nation out of the modern world.

But I am an optimist. I believe the democratic ferment in the Arab world will eventually bring an era of relative democracy, religious tolerance and good governance. And I believe guiding Islamic principles will lead the way.

Without a doubt, revolutions are messy. When revolutions occur after decades of authoritarian rule, the next stage is often chaotic and sometimes violent.

In this region, there are many examples of long-simmering distrust between ethnic and sectarian groups that go back centuries that had been held in check by despotic rule. Now, suddenly, the grip that had stifled these competing groups has been released.

But I believe after an initial flailing about, conflicts between sectarian groups will slowly abate. Most Muslims want to join the modern world. They want to be part of the international

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community, not held in suspicion. They want governments that serve them. They do not want to serve the government. They want the freedom to develop their own ideas and live their own lives in harmony with their neighbours. In short, they want a government that is as responsive to their needs as a Western democracy.

Many people, both in the West and the Middle East, believe that a Western-style democratic government would preclude Islamic principles. That's because, in the past 40 years, throughout the Muslim world, Islamic law has become dominated by narrow and literalist interpretation that has many Westerners and Muslims believing it is all about regulations on what people can wear and archaic ways that people are punished.

I view this transition as a native Egyptian knowing Egypt as a centre of Islamic learning with universities dating back 1,200 years. I have a hard time with how Islam is being used by political groups and governments.

But to think a democratically elected government in a Muslim-majority country will not have some kind of Islamic influence is naïve. The question is what form of Islamic law will have the most influence.

Islamic law is based on six objectives. The law must protect and promote life, human dignity, property, religion, family and intellect. The law is about enhancing the human experience, not restricting it.

The Quran contains specific demands from God about justice, about feeding and helping the poor, about taking care of orphans, about the rights of women, about religious freedom and tolerance and about human rights.

In order to be truly an Islamic state, a country needs to pay close attention to these principles. Yet, if one were to look closely at the six objectives, one can almost hear Thomas Jefferson talking about life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Once a country has embraced democracy, then radical Muslims no longer have a home. Whoever is elected to leadership must join the political world that requires compromise and coalition building. Radical Islamic regimes can only be imposed by countries ruled by tyrants or ayatollahs who have rejected democracy.

In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood may want to impose more Islamic values in the government as a result of their election to power. But if the Muslim Brotherhood governs by a strict, literalist interpretation of Islam, they will see the backlash.

This transition period provides a great opportunity for American diplomacy. Instead of fighting the influence of Islam in government, US diplomats should explore with their counterparts in the Middle East the positive aspects of it and how it can be implemented to create a form of government that expands human rights, religious freedom and dignity for all.

The writer is author of *Moving the Mountain, Beyond Ground Zero to a New Vision of Islam in America*, and Chairman of Cordoba Initiative.

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## WORLD POPULATION DAY

# The unfinished agenda

ARTHUR ERKEN

TODAY is World Population Day; a day the international community commemorates to seek worldwide attention to the issues and challenges related to population growth and distribution. It's a special day for Bangladesh, giving the size of its population (150 million people), the ongoing growth of its population (2 million people are added every year) and having the world's highest population density (about 1,000 people per sq. km). But before we delve on these figure and its implications, let me start with a story; the true story of Rokeya.

Rokeya's mother was always complaining that there was never enough time or never enough food. It was true: her mother had to raise six children on the little that her husband -- a peasant who worked on other people's land -- brought home. And, to make matters worse, as her mother used to say, her first three children were girls so they couldn't help their father make a living. Rokeya, who was brought up in a remote rural village in Faridpur, has bitter childhood memories. She remembers the evenings when there was not enough food to go around, her mother complaining and her father sitting silently in a corner. She vividly remembers the days her mother took her to work at other people's houses to earn some extra money. At 14 years, Rokeya was married off and her mother advised her not to make the same mistake that she did by having so many children.

Rokeya had her first child quickly after she got married, but she never forgot her mother's words. When a family planning worker came to talk to her, she consented to take contraceptive pills. Subsequently, and in desperate need for work, the family moved to a ten square metres room with tin walls in a slum with no running water or sanitation, in downtown Dhaka. Her second son was born and a few months later she underwent a tubectomy. Her husband was always very supportive when it came to family planning matters. Now their children go to school and do well. The only thing Rokeya regrets is that in Dhaka she doesn't find trees nor the laidback life that she had in the village. But that doesn't concern her all that much, because she knows that, thanks to her efforts, her children are going to have a better life. They will be educated and, God willing, she says, her daughter will be a doctor and her son a soldier! And all of this is thanks to her mother, who was able to teach her not to make the same mistakes she made.

The above case is one of many success stories of the family planning programme in Bangladesh. In the last two decades, Bangladesh has performed remarkably well in the family planning arena. Today, many married women

of child bearing age use a family planning method to control their fertility (the Contraceptive Prevalence Rate is 61%) and now on average a woman has 2.3 children during her lifetime, compared to 4.3 children in 1991 and 6.5 children in the early 1970s.

Although these figures and personal stories are very impressive by any standards, there are still a large number of couples who don't have access to family planning services, especially among impoverished communities living in urban slums or remote, hard-to-reach rural areas of this country. Some 12% of all married couples (or more than 4 million couples!) want to use family planning, but say they have no access to quality information and services. Furthermore, family planning services are also significantly lacking for the rapidly expanding adolescent population.

This is an issue that should concern us all, as most girls in Bangladesh still get married below the age of 18 years

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(approximately 80%) and get pregnant while still in their teens, many of whom will experience potentially life-threatening complications during pregnancy and childbirth. Therefore, the country's family planning programme should begin to have a more targeted approach aimed at providing family planning information and services to poor and marginalized couples living in remote rural areas and in the ever-growing urban slums.

At the same time, appropriate sexual and reproductive health information, including information related to family planning, should reach our adolescents. After all, they make up almost a quarter of the population, and many of whom will start family life in the coming years.

Also, the very low use of long acting and permanent methods of family planning should be of concern, as fertility is now so low that most women have completed childbearing by their mid- to late-twenties, and women have another two decades of reproductive life to protect themselves from unwanted pregnancies. Therefore, the family planning programme in Bangladesh needs to be continuously strengthened and expanded further so that there is equitable access to services for all communities and there should be an emphasis to improve the method mix by increasing the prevalence of long acting and permanent family planning methods.

Universal access to voluntary family planning services alone can reduce the unmet need and thereby minimise adolescent pregnancies, unintended pregnancies, unsafe abortions and maternal deaths. Therefore, ensuring access to voluntary family planning is one of the best contributions to empowering girls and women, and one of the most cost-effective investments a country can make in its future. By keeping young adults healthy and productive, by allowing parents to have smaller families and devote more resources to each child, and by reducing public expenditures on social services, family planning services contribute to economic growth and equity. Ensuring availability of affordable contraceptives and other essential reproductive health supplies is a vital part of overall socio-economic development planning.

So yes, Bangladesh has done remarkably well when it comes to reducing its population growth rate, and in reducing the number of children a woman has these days. But, providing universal access to quality family planning information and services to all those who want to plan their families remains the greatest unfinished agenda of Bangladesh! So, on this World Population Day, let us redouble our efforts to make family planning again our top priority.

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