

## Restoring common lowest slab

*Implement it immediately*

**W**E welcome the news that the government is considering restoring the common lowest slab facility for all consumers. This is an overriding issue which we think should have been addressed much before. With the common lowest slab withdrawn since March, consumers now are faced with a steep rise in their monthly electricity bills at a time when spiraling prices of essentials are adding to their woes. In the month of Ramadan, the situation has only worsened. Therefore, instead of merely thinking about it, the government must immediately implement it and restore the common lowest slab facility in order to relieve consumers of hefty electricity bills.

Before the common lowest slab, consumers had to pay a mandatory minimum bill and additional bill for consumption above the 100 units mark. Whereas now, there has been a change in the power tariff structure according to which consumers have to pay at three different rates depending on their consumption per month without any common slab, i.e. consumers using below 100 units pay Tk 3.05 per kilowatt; those using above 100 units and below 400 units pay Tk 4.29 per unit and those above 400 units Tk 7.89 per unit.

Bangladesh Energy Regulatory Commission (BERC) has so far justified this rate by repetitively stating that it was necessary to reduce pressure on government subsidies for power generation. It has also come up with the explanation of increased production cost of power from fuel-based rental plants following rise in oil prices in international market. As we have said in this column before, increased production cost was the result of the government's policy on rental power generation, which should not be passed on to the common people. Therefore, we think the government's plan to restore the common lowest slab should be translated into reality without further delay.

BERC was established to bridge the gap between the producers and consumers of power. However, we have so far found it concerned only with the producers' concerns and not with the consumers' plight. We hope that it will also be equally concerned with the consumers' woes.

## Pranab Mukherjee, India's new president

*His experience gives the office a new sheen*

**T**HE election of Pranab Mukherjee as president of India is important for a couple of reasons. In the first place, it is reflective of the clout the veteran Bengali politician has had on Indian politics, given his experience in government. In the second, it promises to be a marked change from how the presidency has been looked upon in the past five years under Pratibha Patil, against whom allegations of impropriety have been levelled on a fairly regular basis. Mukherjee's elevation to the presidency is also significant in light of the fact that he did not have the unanimous support of all political parties. His rival P.A. Sangma did not have a chance against him, of course. Even so, Mukherjee would have been happier had a wholesale consensus built up around him. There is too the belated support he drew from West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee.

All said and done, though, president-elect Pranab Mukherjee is the one man who at this point can restore Rashtrapati Bhavan to the sanctified image it has generally had since India attained freedom in 1947. Mukherjee steps into a presidency which in the past has been exalted by the presence of Rajendra Prasad, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, Zakir Hussain, V.V. Giri, Shankar Dayal Sharma and others of equally high intellectual brilliance. In a sense, Mukherjee has a certain edge over them in that he arrives at the presidency after substantive experience gained at such important ministries as finance, defence and foreign affairs. A Mukherjee presidency, therefore, will be one that cannot be taken for granted despite the holder of the office traditionally being a figurehead. For once in a long time, India could look forward to an activist president who has a good record as a consensus builder.

We in Bangladesh welcome the rise of Pranab Mukherjee to India's presidency. In every position he has served, he has been careful to understand Dhaka's concerns when it came to dealing with Delhi on various bilateral issues. His position on a sharing of the waters of common rivers and on other matters has been one of respect to Bangladesh's people and political leadership. Like the people of India, we in Bangladesh look forward to a thriving, throbbing presi-



SYED MANSUR HASHIM

**T**HAT was how American academic David Lesch portrayed Bashar-al-Assad in a biography. To the rest of the

country, Bashar is better known as "Bessho," (baby Bashar). Despite having lost three of his closest confidantes in what was undoubtedly an audacious attack inside one of the most heavily guarded sites in Damascus, the national security headquarters, Bashar hangs on to power defying the world. Both the serving defence minister and deputy defence minister and a former defence minister were taken out by a suicide bomb. This coupled with a string of top military leaders totalling some 24 generals defecting in the last couple of weeks had both the opposition and foreign observers believing Bashar was done for. Unfortunately, things are seldom that simple in the Middle East. Bashar still has his younger brother Maher al-Assad, commander of the army's Fourth Division, who has driven rebel forces out of a Damascus district. As long as Maher commands, Bashar has hope.

The chain of events that has unfolded since the inception of the Syrian uprising means there is no turning back the clock. Yet Bashar hangs on defiantly, albeit with support from foreign friends who block the UN from endorsing a military intervention. What is ironic here is that Bashar was never destined to lead his people. His father Hafez Al-Assad had been grooming Bassel to take the reins of government, which was cut short in 1994 in a car accident outside Damascus. Bashar was recalled from London, given a crash course in military and political

affairs, and the government machinery went into overdrive to revamp the image of the "new leader" in waiting. Known as a quiet introvert, Bashar inherited Bassel's inner circle and within two years a new Bashar had emerged, outwardly more confident with a better physique and carefully tailored voice to fit that image.

As Bashar took the reins of government in mid-2000, there was anticipation that he would break

tackle the bureaucracy.

Yet in less than two years, Bashar had retracted to his father's hard-line position in cracking down on a fledgling democratic movement. The young president was unable to break free from the security apparatus built up over the decades by Hafez al-Assad, and the initial spark of hope ignited by his ascendance to power was shattered when the new regime chose to quash the rebellion of the tribes in Deraa in 2010. The revolt



*Given realities on the ground, the last bastion of hope for Bashar may well rest with his hardliner brother Maher. Were Maher to fall, the strategic landscape could alter dramatically and the endgame drawn to a decisive close.*

away from the repressiveness of Hafez's policies and usher in hope. Initial steps taken by the younger Assad pointed to a more optimistic future. A number of political prisoners were released from prison, discussion forums sprouted up in the capital city on the future direction of the country. There was genuine talk of reform as foreign advisors were sought to help revamp the administration and technocrats, for the first time, were brought in to

was not so much aimed at the regime, but at Rami Makhlof, one of Assad's cousins who it is said controls nearly half the Syrian economy. Malkouf's legendary corruption is supplemented by a horde of aides close to the regime that have effectively divided the country into their personal fiefdoms. The other point of massive public discontent was with Maher commanding the elite Republican Guard and being head of the best Syrian unit, the 4<sup>th</sup> Division.

## PRAFUL BIDWAI COLUMN

# Male insecurity drives aggression



PRAFUL BIDWAI

**G**ROWING violence against Indian women, such as the aggravated sexual assault on a young student in

Guwahati, has deeply shocked the public. Violence against women is the fastest rising crime among all cognisable offences under the Indian Penal Code.

National Crime Records Bureau statistics show that between 1953 and 2011, the incidence of rape rose by 873%, or three times faster than all cognisable crimes, and three-and-a-half times faster than murder.

In India, a woman is raped every 22 minutes, and a bride burnt for dowry every 58 minutes. The number of crimes against women, including sexual harassment, cruelty by the husband or his relatives, abduction and trafficking, annually exceeds 2,61,000.

Separate numbers aren't available for the harassment faced by women for not bearing sons, and for that South Asia barbarian speciality called acid attacks, which disfigure a woman for life for rejecting a man's advances.

The sexual assault on the woman outside a bar in Guwahati was aggravated by a media-person's apparent instigation to strip her so a TV channel could scoop the story.

The police failed to respond in time to distress calls, trivialised the incident, and delayed arresting the molesters. Even more unethically, the victim's identity was disclosed by the media, by a member of the National Commission for Women, and worse, by the chief minister's office.

Guwahati has a relatively calm, polite public culture. Beneath the surface hides a lot of sexual frustration. In November 2007, a 17-year-old Adivasi girl was stripped and paraded in Guwahati.

Guwahati has witnessed a more rapid spread of consumerism and ostentatious spending than many

other fast-growing cities. Most of its 127 bars are only a few years old. But they are marked by raucous music, vulgar display of wealth, testosterone-driven competition for female attention, swagger and rowdiness, lubricated by alcohol.

Such behaviour, Bollywood-style gangster mannerisms, and boastful cellphone conversations are now commonplace across India.

Young men are often exposed to sex primarily through Bollywood songs choreographed to suggestive movements or Internet pornography. They are in constant search of objects of desire whom they must conquer by showing off and aggression.

Such conquest has nothing to do with a natural, easy, passionate relationship of affection or love to which physical contact comes organically. It's devoid of values such as compas-

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sion, sensitivity, cooperation, and caring.

Male conduct sometimes bursts into lascivious mob-style violence. More often, it takes the form of lewd taunts, or forced contact with and groping of women's bodies. No wonder women feel unsafe in every city -- even in broad daylight.

Beneath the aggression lies deep insecurity among young men, who are typically under-socialised and denied an opportunity to interact naturally with women.

In our societies, boys and girls rarely meet or play together. Sexual segregation occurs early, and stereotypes are formed well before adolescence.

Under the stereotypes, male "virtues" like bravery, physical strength, "toughness," and refusal to cry, are celebrated. Girls must imbibe "femi-

nine" characteristics like modesty, gentleness, soft speech and hard domestic labour.

These retrograde patterns of inequality are changing, but not rapidly enough. Meanwhile, a new culture bred by India's "fast-track" capitalism and the market forces is superimposing itself, producing an awkward amalgam. For instance, female foeticide is more common among the more educated and affluent than the underprivileged.

As women get educated and join the labour force, they become more visible, independent and self-confident. For more than a decade, girls have dominated school-leaving examinations' toppers' lists. And women are proving more diligent and reliable than men in call centres, offices, factories and outdoor sales jobs.

This is producing new insecurities among men, who seek to control women in various ways. Recently, a village *panchayat* in Uttar Pradesh decreed that no woman can use a mobile phone. The all-male *panchayat* fears that women might talk to strange men and lose their "purity." However, no restrictions are imposed on the men they might talk to.

Other examples include conservative dress codes imposed on women by colleges and religious leaders, attacks on women in pubs by Hindutva fanatics, and public stripping of "inappropriately" dressed women even in supposedly cosmopolitan Mumbai.

Why, even police chiefs in many cities warn women against dressing "provocatively." In 2007, the Delhi police issued "security tips" for students from the Northeast, who frequently face harassment: "Revealing

By turning back on genuine grievances of his people against an inept and corrupt system of governance that kept the vast majority of the people in abject poverty, Assad dashed hopes for a better future and the Syrian revolution was born. Today, Bashar finds himself on the back foot because of the murderous campaign against his people that has left nearly 20,000 dead and hundreds of thousands fleeing across the country's borders as refugees. With large swathes of the country beyond the regime's control, the question is what Assad will do now. Will he seek a safe exit? Or is it a fight to the death? Despite the critical blow of losing some of his closest aides in the suicide bomb, the regime shows no signs of relinquishing power.

According to the British *Guardian* newspaper of July 18, Bashar "telephoned the United Nations observer chief, General Robert Mood, and took a condolence call from Lebanese supporters at the discreetly guarded Malki residence he shares with his wife, Asma, and their children in the heart of the capital," basically debunking rumours that the president had fled the capital to organise a last stand in the coastal heartland of his Alawite sect. There is no denying that the Assad regime finds itself short of critical support with the demise of top military and security chiefs in the latest bomb attack. Also, after so much blood has been spilt, there are now very few countries that may offer the estranged leader a safe haven. Given realities on the ground, the last bastion of hope for Bashar may well rest with his hardliner brother Maher. Were Maher to fall, the strategic landscape could alter dramatically and the endgame drawn to a decisive close.

The writer is Assistant Editor, *The Daily Star*.

dress be avoided. Avoid lonely road/bylane when dressed scantily. Dress according to sensitivity of the local populace."

The NCW chairperson herself has now joined the chorus advising women "not to ape Western culture" and "dress carefully." (Read, blame the victim for her harassment!)

In South Asia's patriarchal society, where gender discrimination is pervasive from cradle to grave, many women internalise male prejudices. A recent medical survey found that only 8% of Indian children with poor eyesight regularly wear glasses. 49% of the girls who need glasses say they don't use them for "cosmetic" reasons, and 83% refuse because that would hamper their "marriage prospects."

Even worse, a Unicef report this year finds that not just 57% of Indian males but also 53% of females in the 15-19 age-group believe that wife-beating is justified. Such sanctification of domestic violence doesn't speak of a civilised society.

It won't be easy to fight entrenched patriarchy and male chauvinism without a campaign of Social Reform. Social Reform, which combats male chauvinism, casteism, communalism and other forms of parochialism and hierarchy, and promotes Enlightenment values such as reason, freedom and equality, was an early component of the Freedom Movement.

Social Reform lost momentum long ago and has fallen off the agenda altogether. There is no alternative to reviving it. Progressive intellectuals, teachers, enlightened politicians and concerned citizens must contribute to this revival. This is a litmus test of their leadership.

As for now, our administrators, and especially the police, must all be put through gender sensitisation courses. We must hold their feet to the fire in demanding that they provide the security and freedom women deserve.

The writer is an eminent Indian columnist. email: bidwai@bol.net.in

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

July 24

**1148** Louis VII of France lays siege to Damascus during the Second Crusade.

**1974** Nixon must hand over Watergate tapes. The US Supreme Court orders President Nixon to surrender tape recordings of White House conversations about the Watergate affair.

**1977** End of a four day long Libyan-Egyptian War.

**1990** Iraqi forces start massing on the Kuwait-Iraq border.