

Women and public space

2013 SSC results

Reflects success of new policies

IT is extremely heartening to see that the results of this year's secondary school certificate exams have surpassed previous performances on all counts, which include the madrasa and vocational boards as well. From the total number of successful candidates to the number of candidates getting GPA-5 to the number of schools with a hundred percent pass, this year's performance has been most inspiring.

For this admirable performance congratulations are in order, particularly to the candidates who had to weather a spate of hartals and rescheduled exam dates, which must have been most off putting to them.

We feel too that a good deal of the credit for the commendable results is due to the dynamic changes brought about in the system like the introduction of junior certificate exams a few years ago, which students have to take in class-VII. This year's SSC candidates were the first batch to take the JSC exams in 2010, and the benefit of that has been demonstrated in this year's SSC results. And introduction of creative question method and mode of conduct of classes with special emphasis on mathematics and English have helped students shed the practice of learning their lessons by rote instead of internalising them. It is however, important to keep in mind that quality is as important as quantity, and we hope that in future the system would be able to inculcate in students the ability to think creatively.

We also note with satisfaction that the incidents of students adopting unfair means in the exams have been reduced. We hope it would be brought down to zero eventually.

While the successful candidates can justly rejoice at the results, for the administrators there is need to ponder at the fact that ten percent failure in terms of numbers is quite considerable. What would be their fate? The other thing that has vexed in the past the successful SSC candidates, which is more than a million this year, is the scope for admission into the reputed colleges. Regrettably, given the inadequate number of colleges, many successful candidates with good results may not find entry into the institutions of their choice.

Syrian imbroglio

Dim light at the end of the tunnel?

THE unrelenting civil war in Syria remains one of the most intractable of problems facing the Middle East. At long last, a flicker of light can be seen through the doom-gloom scenario as the United States and Russia find a common ground in Syria. After months of differences on ways to resolve the deepening crisis with the USA insisting Assad must go first, US Secretary of State John Kerry had marathon talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov before striking a deal on a common approach to the Syrian problem.

They have basically agreed to push both sides -- rebels and Assad loyalists -- to find an end to the bloodshed for which they have offered to hold an international conference.

The basis is already there in the Geneva agreement cobbled by Kofi Anan that the world powers had signed up to in June last year but never came close to seeing it implemented. The accord set out a path towards a transitional government 'without ever spelling out the fate of President Bashar al-Assad'. Lavrov and Kerry now hoped they could convene the international conference by the end of May to build on the Geneva agreement.

In what seems to be a major US concession to Russian concerns over instability in the Middle East ally, Kerry appeared to have softened the US stance on Assad's future.

Washington until recently appeared to be thinking of options to mount more pressure on Assad on the question of use of chemical weapons but has lately scaled down its rigidity on the issue. Kerry has told reporters that 'only the Syrian regime and the opposition can determine the make-up of a transitional government to shepherd the war-torn nation towards democratic elections.' The Russian-US accord has been dubbed as 'very significant fast step' by Lakhdar Brahimi, the UN-Arab League for Syria which means so much more needs to be done by way of ending one of the bloodiest of civil wars in

MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

HERE are fears that the virulent movement of a certain quarter might restrict and contract the increasing entry of our women folk into public space. The reference is to the demands of the Hefazat-e-Islam movement that is unfortunately occupying a disproportionately large space of our media. Looking back one would find that women's movement beyond the confines of the household and women's participation in public affairs has not been easy. Therefore, the efforts to put the clock back needs to be seen in historical perspective in order to appreciate the potentials of damage that may be caused by the obscurantist elements.

The degraded condition of Indian women was taken as an indicator of India's inferior status in the hierarchy of civilisations. It is no wonder, therefore, that the status of women became the main focus of the reforming agenda of the modernising Indian intellectuals of the 19th century.

Thus female infanticide was banned, sati was abolished and widow remarriage was legalised. However, men treated women as subjects of their modernising project and could not imagine them to be their conscious equals claiming agency for their own emancipation.

In India, while the public space became the sphere of activities for men, women were confined to the household. The ancient Hindu law-giver Manu prescribed a permanent dependent status for women, to be protected by their fathers, husbands and sons at different stages of their lives. However, if this was a fact of life, it was also true on the other hand, that seclusion of women was not a universal practice, as there is evidence of high public visibility of women, both rich and poor, in certain regions in the 18th century.

The ideal of secluded womanhood came to be universalised only in the 19th century. The Muslim society too put similar restrictions on women. At this time the Islamic revivalism movement spearheaded by the Ulama and the modernisation campaign led by the educated middle-classes constructed *Sharif* culture almost as a private polity,

with the status of women being central to it, as an indicator of the progress of the Muslim community as a whole.

The *Sharif* Muslims in Bengal shuddered at the thought of their women transgressing the norms of *pardah* (a Persian word, literally meaning curtain). For both Hindu and Muslim women, this metaphor of *pardah* did not merely mean their physical seclusion behind the veil. It meant "multitudes of complex social arrangements which maintained social and not just physical distance between the sexes." By the 19th century the ideal of *pardah* had become universalised for both Muslim and Hindu women and for both elites and commoners, although in its practical implications it acted differently for different groups.

In so far as Indian educated women were concerned, we may mention Begum Rokeya Sakhawat

Hossain among the Muslim women in Bengal. At the turn of the century a number of women in middle-class Indian households were educated, either formally or informally. However, this did not improve the conditions of their social existence remarkably. The goal of the Muslim educators of women was "to create women who would be better wives, better mothers and better Muslims."

It is interesting to recollect that the colonial State too wanted to confine women to domesticity. For it was there that they would be safe both for themselves and for the State. Both the customary Hindu and Islamic personal laws which the courts upheld and the new statutory laws which the State promulgated, sanctified the right of the patriarchal family and constricted the freedom of choice for women.

In the 1920s and 1930s women's participation in political affairs remained predominantly an urban

phenomenon. In so far as Muslim women were concerned, many of them participated in the Khilafat-non-cooperation movement.

However, if this helped towards weakening of the rigors of *pardah*, its total abolition was out of question because for Muslims it was a symbol of their cultural distinctiveness. The Indian National Congress and its leaders were simply not interested in women's issues and except for allowing some symbolic presence, never included women in any decision making process. The congress wanted women to be "law-breakers only and not law-makers."

The developments of the early 20th century that meant the birth of a new consciousness, new organisations and the politicisation of women did bring

Today, women became conscious and actively participated in the political struggles and identified themselves with emerging nations, feminism had not yet been incorporated into the prevailing ideologies of liberation. Any transgression of this boundary would lead to immorality, ir-religiosity and dishonour for the community.

in some remarkable changes for some women-the more enlightened, middle class and urban variety, who had effectively claimed for themselves a niche in the public space. However, for the rest of the Indian womanhood, the changes were less meaningful. The new reality recognised certain public role for women but

accepted at the same time the social, biological and psychological difference between the sexes.

Women's constricted role in public affairs and space came to be seriously challenged in the 1940s when women across class and religious lines began to claim a more active role for themselves in the public space and fought as comrades-in-arms with their male counterparts in the last phase of the struggle for freedom. This female activism was markedly visible in the quit India movement of 1942 when most male leaders were imprisoned. In 1920s and 1930s many middle-class educated women had joined the communist movement and had participated in mobilising working classes, in organising industrial actions and in campaigning for the release of politi-

cal prisoners.

Involvement of women in the community movement was expanded to a new level when the *Tebhaga* movement began in Bengal in 1946 with the sharecroppers demand for two-thirds share of the produce. The communist leaderships, however, preferred only supportive and secondary roles for women and could not think of women outside the conventional structures of gender relations, that is, family and marriage, and therefore, could not trust them with guns in the actual battlefield.

The Pakistan movement in the 1940s opened for the Muslim women of the subcontinent a new space for political action. The Muslim league also sought to universalise its politics and in 1938 started a women's sub-committee to involve Muslim women. As the Pakistan movement grew momentum more and more women were sucked into it as election candidates, as voters and as active demonstrators in street politics. This political position was a liberating experience. Importantly, this signified an acceptance of a public role for women in Muslim society.

While the Pakistan movement did involve some Muslim women in public action, the partition experience once again reinforced the traditional *ashraf* ideal of Muslim womanhood, to be protected within the domestic sphere. Any transgression of this boundary would lead to immorality, ir-religiosity and dishonour for the community.

Thus, as it seems the women's question in colonial India and post-partition Pakistan hardly received the priority it deserved. Although women became conscious and actively participated in the political struggles and identified themselves with emerging nations, feminism had not yet been incorporated into the prevailing ideologies of liberation.

The national liberation of 1971 and women's liberation movement on the international stage had galvanised our womenfolk into actions of emancipators. There is a very long way to traverse. The regressive swinging of the pendulum has to be stalled.

The writer is a columnist of *The Daily Star*.

The circus of democracy

F.S. AIJAZUDDIN

POLITICIANS invented democracy as a joke, and electorates have taken it seriously. One has only to follow the latest election campaign in Pakistan to be reminded that in politics, as in the theatre, comedy like tragedy is a very serious business.

Aldous Huxley once observed that while we look at comedy, in tragedy, we participate. For the past six weeks we as a nation have watched. On May 11, we will have an opportunity to participate.

Six weeks ago, at the outset of their campaigns, almost all the parties complained that the time available to them for electioneering was too short. Now, with polling day only two days away, already warring politicians have begun showing signs of exhaustion. Tired of exchanging blows, they have stooped to trading insults, more often than not aimed below the belt. Their flaccid tongues and weary arms flail aimlessly at targets no longer within reach.

No rules (the tut-tuts of the Election Commission notwithstanding) have governed this gladiatorial contest. It has been a fight to the finish, except that in this arena, the end will not be death in the sawdust or the liberty never to fight again. It will be the beginning of a different sort of servitude, a new five-year parliamentary term.

During this electoral campaign, leaders from all the major parties (with the exception of the PPP and the MQM) have crisscrossed constituencies across the country. They came. They saw. More importantly, they

were seen. But only on polling day will they know whether or not they have conquered.

Modern electioneering has undergone a transformation. There is no room nowadays for gifted speechwriters like Ted Sorenson who articulated John F. Kennedy's thoughts with such memorable brilliance. There is no place for gifted orators such as Harold Wilson or our own Quaid-i-Azam M.A. Jinnah. Technology has come between a candidate and his audience.

In an earlier age, daily newspapers brought politics to the breakfast table. Today's television transmissions serve it like a 24-hour buffet, in which dishes are constantly refilled. They are not allowed to go cold or become stale.

In an earlier age, daily newspapers brought politics to the breakfast table. Today's television transmissions serve it like a 24-hour buffet, in which dishes are constantly refilled. They are not allowed to go cold or become stale. The servings may be bland, at times indigestible. They may be tasteless. What matters is only that they should be fresh.

Speeches in the field pass through a number of filtering screens—bullet-proof ones at public rallies, the monitors of news editors who mincemeat a continuous flow of harangues into sausage-sized sound-bites, and finally the television screen where the voter can, at the touch of a fingertip, decide which candidate to switch on or off.

In a sense, the electoral campaign for the next National Assembly 2013

began five years ago, in 2008, when the proceedings of the last Assembly were televised live. Over those five years, the public has been a spectator of the Pakistani equivalent of the Roman Circus Maximus. "When the politicians complain that TV turns their proceedings into a circus," Ed Murrow (the doyen of American broadcasters) had once written, "it should be made plain that the circus was already there, and that TV has merely demonstrated that not all the performers were well-trained."

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Will the next batch of MNAs be better trained than their predecessors? Will they perform better? Will they be younger and therefore more proactive? It would need a seer with 40:40 vision to predict what will be the composition of the next National Assembly, or who will form the next national government.

What is clear, though, is that every party, not just the Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf, regardless of its ideology, will need to prepare for a change within itself, to make space for greener shoots.

Over the next five years, our television channels will continue to play a role as crucial as they have during the past six weeks. Until now, they have been projecting personalities and highlighting policies.

Their future responsibility will be that of a watchdog with the added instincts of a bloodhound—to reveal, to expose, and whenever necessary, to help apprehend those elected representatives who fall short of national expectations. It is a heady responsibility, though, and not one to be taken casually.

"It is not the critic who counts: not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles or where the doer of deeds could have done better," the former US president Theodore Roosevelt said in a speech at the Sorbonne in 1910.

"The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood, who strives valiantly, who errs and comes up short again and again, because there is no effort without error or shortcoming, but who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions, who spends himself for a worthy cause; who, at the best, knows, in the end, the triumph of high achievement, and who, at the worst, if he fails, at least he fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who knew neither victory nor defeat."

At this time in our political chronology, as we stumble awkwardly towards democratic maturity, we, the passive voters, "those cold and timid souls" who know neither personal victory nor defeat, should salute those thousands of candidates who will not be elected, those who will "fail while daring greatly". In that defeat, they too will have served our national interest.

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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

May 11

- 1857**
Indian Revolution: Indian rebels seize Delhi from the British.
- 1867**
Luxembourg gains its independence.
- 1927**
The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences is founded.
- 1946**
UMNO (United Malays National Organisation) is created.
- 1996**
The 1996 Mount Everest disaster: on a single day eight people die during summit attempts on Mount Everest.
- 1998**
India conducts three underground atomic tests in Pokhran to include a thermonuclear device.