

BITTER TRUTH

HEFAZAT-E-ISLAM'S DEMAND

Sinister move to shackle women again?



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THE portrait of the country the people envisioned 42 years ago is fading fast. Villagers are still mired in poverty. It is hard for our youth to concentrate on any ambitious project and carve out a future for themselves. They can't feel good about their country and are eagerly longing for a

change. Women are still a deprived and neglected section in the society.

The two core issues, elimination of social injustice and economic exploitation of the girl child, can only be tackled through motivation, policy guidelines and bold leadership. The genesis of discrimination and cruelty against women can be traced to the social apathy inherent in the male population of the sub-continent. In Bangladesh, though the constitution provides for equality between the sexes with proper protection for women and children, people have been governed by family customs and rules that fail to give women their due.

What is needed now is attainment of economic viability of the nation. But how can this be achieved? Is it possible only with the men folk, leaving aside the women who constitute 50% of the total population? The demand of the Hefajat-e-Islam, asking the government to cancel its women development policy and ban mixing of men and women in public places is a retrograde step. There is widespread feeling that any such attempt to confine women within the four walls of the house may push the country back to the dark ages again.

This is happening in Pakistan where Malala, the 15 year old activist for girls' educational rights, was shot in October last by the Taliban in that country. It did not end there. A report published in *The Daily Star* on May 6, quoting *The Guardian*, says that letters have been circulated in regions of the country warning men not to allow their wives, daughters and sisters to cast vote in the national election due on May 11.

Islam, since the days of Prophet Muhammad (SM), has demonstrated a sense of tolerance and a spirit to learn and engage in business. But appallingly, Islam in most Muslim countries is now being used by some self-styled religious leaders and fanatics not to liberate, but to entrench inequality.

How can extremists and fanatics bring stability in a country already in a messy situation? The need of the hour is stable, committed and sagacious leadership capable of addressing serious problems, both economic and structural, with the strength to stifle the discord and conflict developing in many ways that has bedeviled progress for the past few years.

More than ever, we must fight divisive forces that thrive on the cult of violence and fanaticism.

It is a happy augury that after ignoring women for decades, aid organisations and prudent leaders are beginning to recognise women as a key to economic advancement. Women in the rural Bangladesh have to play a dominant role because, as more men leave the countryside for jobs in cities and abroad, they head a third or half of all households. The irony is that we remain passive and mute spectators to the grim sight of women toiling in industrial concerns, most notably in RMG factories and construction yards in the cities and in other people's fields and farms in the countryside, for a pittance. The result is that in spite of such hard work, they are languishing in squalor, poverty, hunger and malnutrition. And the exploitation continues, taking advantage of their lack of education and ignorance about the world.

It true that development has come about since

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the government and other agencies started helping women. Village by village, women are gaining tools and confidence they need to provide economic security for their families and make their communities healthier places to live in.

Because of the politicians' failure to lead the nation and give proper policy directions to people, the country has, of late, been a hotbed of chaos and conflict. Terrorism, killing, drug addiction, trafficking of women, have sickened the people. The energy, imagination, talent and potential of young men and women could not be fruitfully channelised to take the country forward.

The neglect in educating girls is doubly alarming because education leads to a drop in infant mortality and reduces birthrate. With firm commitment and stringent actions towards halting the trafficking of women for forced labour, domestic servitude and sex exploitation, the edifice of a prosperous society could be built. Because, when women are given basic human and labour rights, the whole family and the community benefit. More so, when women gain the knowledge and power to make their own choices, society is better able to break the chains of poverty.

Despite growing consensus

on the importance of women's work, gender disparities and inequality of opportunity persist. Too many women are deprived of proper education, an essential tool to be qualified to take a job for which they would receive proper wages. Scores are still barred from access to loans or credit for exercising the most basic of their legal rights. That means when a male earning member, either husband or father, in a family dies or becomes disabled due to disease or accident, the whole family lands in a sea of calamity and distress.

Women are the most neglected element in Bangladesh society till now. The growing population that now stands at about 160 million did not get the support and direction they needed. The country now bears the brunt of depriving women their right to education.

Torture, violence and humiliation are perpetrated on women even on unproven allegations of moral transgressions or adultery. Some years back Nurjahan, a married woman of Sylhet, accused by a local imam of adultery, was half buried and then stoned. Kada Banu of Rangpur was buried to her waist outside her home and pelted with old shoes for a similar alleged transgression. Many such stories are not reported in the newspapers because of the sense of humiliation and stigma it leaves on the victim and her family.

Democracy is playing a key role by giving women the right to vote and making national interest, not gender, the main determinant of who gets to run governments. Similarly, free enterprise is helping the female cause by making quality, productivity, and profits paramount in business decisions. Women feel that the reserve quota for women parliament members should be done away with in a bid to reward merit as well as to institute in women a sense of competitiveness and equality of status with men, strengthen confidence level, and arouse an urge to acquire knowledge through education and hard work.

In a ruthlessly competitive world, we can't snub the female half of the world's talent. And this important message must get to our leaders, especially the radical leaders of the Islamist parties who, out of some mistaken idea and belief, are trying to shackle the women folk in the country. They must realise that without educating men about women, the social barriers would be harder to remove.

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first rally in Shapla square ended peacefully, but the demands made by the organisers of the rally would show how wrong we had been in our assumptions. The demands forcefully reminded us that no matter how moderate and progressive we consider ourselves as a nation, there exists among us a sizeable section that would like to follow an ideal that is miles away from our line of thinking.

The dead seriousness of the demands, and that these are not simply words written like graffiti on a wall, would be proved by the second march and rally that turned parts of Dhaka into a battleground last week. People world over watched in shock and awe a city besieged by hirsute men of all ages raising slogans and raiding and trashing vehicles, stores, and property--fighting law enforcers along the way. This was no different from the usual battles that other political parties staged in the past when enforcing strikes. A purported assembly of marchers from religious seminaries behaved no differently from trained political workers. In fact, from electronic documentation of the riot in the streets it seemed the combatants were more aggressive than the average political worker.

The consequence of this mayhem after the second rally is heavy. Perhaps this has caused the worst damage in human lives and property in a political fight in recent years in Dhaka, with reverberations across the country. Lives have been lost, property damaged, and normal business transactions have ceased in many parts of the country, with fears of more damage to come.

Should this have been allowed to happen? Could this have been stopped? How could a seemingly placid group of pupils and teachers of religious seminaries muster such strength and have such political muscle to bring a capital city to its knees? How could a confederation of religious institutes assume such power as to dictate what should be the guiding policies of the constitution, and what legislations need to be implemented? This is particularly so when the sponsors of the rally and major leaders have avowed no affiliation with any political party?

Answers to these questions can be partly found in historic manipulation of religious seminaries and their leaders by our political leaders in the past and present, and partly in our deplorable inability to separate our national identity from religion alone.

To this we can also add a resurgence of faith and religious practices among many Muslims to a noticeable level.

From the days of Pakistan we witnessed time and again our military dictators using the madrassas as a launching pad for their career. This served two purposes. It allowed them to appear as pious leaders and appeal to religious sentiments of the majority. It also gave them access to a preformed social organisation of madrassa teachers and students that have a large presence in the rural society. President Ayub Khan and President Ziaul Haq of Pakistan used these platforms very effectively. In our time we would see both Gen. Ziaur Rahman and Gen. Ershad resort to such practices. The number of madrassas quadrupled in Pakistan during Ziaul Haq's time, and in Bangladesh the number grew over three times from 1971 thanks to the patronage both from the rulers during the period, and from private donors.

One expected that with demise of dictatorship buying support of religious groups and patronising them, and coddling them to that end would abate. But politics makes strange bedfellows as we would painfully learn from previous governments that were elected democratically. Our political leaders make compromises and have concordats with groups that may be ideologically in the other end of the spectrum for short term gains. In the long run it is the nation that will suffer for allowing growth of ideals and ideologies that are totally different from the ones that provided the very foundation of the country.

The country is passing through a delicate stage of identity. On the one hand we have a group that believes firmly in the principles on which the country was founded. On the other we have a group that wants to reestablish an ideology that led to a failed nation. This is a threat not to be dismissed as a simple protest. This is a threat that needs to be met by all who have a stake in the future of our country. This should begin by calling an end to the current political impasse by a dialogue among the contending political parties, and recharging the next electoral process. This is audacious, but this could be a good way to end the new challenge to our identity.

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Lunacy, greed, and image

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A day after the finance minister of Bangladesh downplayed the impact of the Rana Plaza building disaster on the garment industry, the death toll from the building collapse shot past 530. He could not outplay the home minister though, whose statement a day after the April 24 disaster was anything but a salutary one.

Before one could fully comprehend the magnitude of the unfolding tragedy, the honorable home minister presented the nation with a preposterous hypothesis that the building may have collapsed due to banging and shaking of the pillars by BNP's hartal supporters. In a subsequent interview, he held on to his hypothesis, making one wonder: Is it worthwhile to reason with someone who will bring you down to his level and win not by rationality but by asininity?

How does the minister expect a normal person to respond to his accusation that is a falsehood seemingly supported only by science fiction? It has, to say the least, impaired my capacity for a sensible response. All I can say is that his demeanor is an indication of politicians' amoral zeal in the pursuit of achieving, at any cost their sinister, personal goals.

His egregious remark evoked memories of the fairy tale "The Story of the Three Little Pigs." Sent out into the world by their mother to "seek their fortune," the first little pig built a house of straw while the second one built a house of furze sticks. But the Big Bad Wolf huffed and puffed and blew the houses down and ate the pigs. The wolf's huffing and puffing could not, however, level the house built by the third little pig, as it was made of bricks.

The Rana Plaza building was obviously not made of straw, nor of furze sticks, but of "solid" bricks. So the Big Bad BNP Wolves could not have razed it to the ground by huffing and puffing.

The minister's hypothesis for the collapse of the building is irrational and pathological. It is a clear reflection of the absurdity of a person's mind. He was brazenly overzealous in his attempt to fend off accusations that the government is responsible for the tragedy because of its unwillingness to enforce the building codes.

He may be huffing and puffing at the media for ridiculing him. If he would have been a little careful to avoid needless inflamed

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rhetoric, the media would not have ganged up on him with all that "huff and puff" and "blow your house down" stuff. He should have known that "a fool is made more of a fool, when their mouth is more open than their mind."

There is a saying that to explain the unknown by the known is a logical procedure. But to explain the known by the unknown is a form of lunacy. The category in which the home minister belongs is anybody's guess.

Politicians in Bangladesh think superiority really matters. Relying on their inflated sense of superiority, they are tempted to act in a crazy way, without realising that the pursuit of superiority is itself crazy. And the minister is no exception. He may be a man of high intellect and passionate emotion. But he seems limited in his capacity to sustain optimal combinations of the two. His behaviour did nothing toward diminishing the inherent danger and deadly instability in the very existence of a large number of these buildings in Bangladesh, ready to collapse any day pushing hundreds of more lives into the great oblivion.

Another problem with the politicians is that a majority of them are unwilling or lack the capacity to speak the truth to their constituencies. They are also oblivious to the fact that deterioration of public discourse is especially dangerous as far as citizens' trust of the government is concerned. This leads to a growing tension between the dependence of a fragile democracy on the consent of citizens and the antidemocratic tenor of the politicians.

It is important to understand that the antidemocratic manner in which government policies in Bangladesh have developed over the past few decades makes it confusing for the general public to grasp the central issue, namely the issue of the government to ensure public safety and guarantee of life. As the quality of this reliance becomes more exposed, public anxiety and resistance grows to such an extent that people no longer trust the offering of assurances by their leaders.

As for the factory owners, it seems "greed, sloth, pride, and gluttony" are not vices to most of them. Instead, these are their mantras, their marketing tools. To them, morality has no place in running a business. Their ravenous greed for profit is an example of the Socratic saying: "He who is not contented with what he has, would not be contented with what he would like to have."

They fail to realise that none of them became rich on their own. They borrowed money from the banks to build the factories. There is a question mark on how much they paid back to the banks. And how much do they pay the workers who toil for them? A mere pittance, I reckon. They only know how to receive; they do not know how to give. Because of them, the country has lost part of humanity.

Finally, while the poor souls trapped under the rubbles of concrete and twisted rods of Rana Plaza were crying aloud for help, it was a shame that the home minister deemed it appropriate to play the blame-game, shifting the onus from the shoulders of the government and his party's thugs, to the shoulders of his political foes. On the other hand, lacking sensitivity to human sufferings, the factory owners were unabashedly concerned about their image abroad. Only in Bangladesh! As for the garment factory workers, the answer they heard was simply the "echo of their wailing cry."

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The other Bangladesh

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IN a short span of four weeks Dhaka was besieged twice by a hitherto less known organisation of seminaries that provide religious education on a syllabus dating back over a hundred years. These religious institutions known as Qawmi madrassas that were inspired and modeled after the iconic Deobond Madrassa in UP, India, had traditionally catered to the spiritual needs of Muslims in Bangladesh. The graduates of these institutions ordinarily performed as imams in mosques, provided religious services to village and urban societies, and some rose to fame as religious scholars with their oratory and religious knowledge. Very few indulged in politics, at least not directly. Those who did usually joined one or the other existing political parties of the country.

It was a surprise, therefore, that a primarily non-political organisation of a motley group of very conservative religious institutions could muster hundreds of thousands of loyalists and descend upon the capital city in a long march covering hundreds of miles. The first long march was ostensibly organised to protest against an alleged insult to religion by some of the supporters and sponsors of the mass rally in Shahbagh square, the principal focus of which was demand for punishment of alleged war criminals. In an ironic twist of events a rally that espoused the very principles that had inspired our liberation struggle, some of the lead participants of the rally would later besmirched with accusations of anti-Islamic slur in their web logs.

In a normal society such accusations would have been met with rational discussions and appropriate legal steps should such accusations warrant any. But we live in a society of least tolerance of opposing views, most of all if it touches religion. And we also live in a political world where no opportunity is lost to spite our opponents, and each such event is exploited to the party's advantage.

The smoldering issue of perceived insult to religion and prophet apparently sparked the counter reactionary movement and the long march that brought into the fray not only the pupils and teachers from the seminaries; it also incorporated elements that had always distanced themselves from the core values of our independence struggle, and had built a political platform for promoting their own brand of identity and ideology. This is an identity and an ideology that we thought we had put behind us when we gained our independence. The