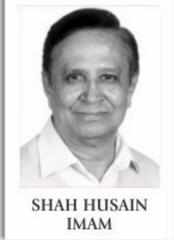


Polls, tantalisingly close, yet so far

PLEASURE IS ALL MINE



SHAH HUSAIN IMAM

premonition rend the air. Why? All because consensus on modalities of the election still remains a far cry and so is the possibility of a well-participated credible election.

People are even expressing doubts whether an election would at all be held, and if held, what would it be like -- tainted with poor turnout, one-sidedness and falling short of international standards? Or, an imposed one that because of lacking legitimacy will have to yield place to a new one held at double the public expense, not to that for the first time, too. Only an incurable optimist will repose confidence in such an election.

When this is the perception in the final days of the incumbent government, how relevant is it to talk about the strengths and weaknesses of the Election Commission (EC)? I would say, it's all the more reason why we must place the preparedness of the present EC under the microscope.

Representation of People's Order (RPO) is the pivot of the electoral laws. The 2007 caretaker government carried out extensive reform of the RPO through an ordinance. This required candidates to furnish particulars on their track record including criminality, if any. Also, it tasked the grassroots committees in constituencies to create panels of nominees on

the basis of which the central leadership will finalise the names of candidates. This provision aimed to curb nomination business, has been struck out of the RPO. It needs to be revived as a badge of intra-party democracy.

In material terms, the Election Commission's proposals to amend 41 articles in the RPO were overlooked in preference to law ministry's recommendations to amend 28 articles. These, placed before the cabinet in a bill form for approval, include raising of the election campaign spending ceiling and debaring 'independent-rebel' candidates from elections. This impinges on the democratic right of citizens to contest election. Thankfully though, in the face of public outcry, the

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Commission has retracted from its abdication of the authority to cancel candidature of persons found guilty of misconduct.

For electoral offences, the punitive clauses have been watered down and the Election Commission's request for transfer of a government official may not be obligatory for the authority to comply with. The law ministry has also not endorsed the Commission's proposals for authority on auditing electoral expenditure and processing action against candidates concealing information or otherwise liable for infringement of RPO regulations.

It will be worthwhile to take a cue from how the EC is structured and how it functions in the established democracy of India as compared with the EC in a relatively nascent and troubled

democracy such as in Bangladesh.

Our EC is five-member body with a CEC and four Commissioners. Indian Election Commission is a three-member body with a CEC and two Commissioners. The vastness of India makes the election the largest single event management in the world for which the credit goes to the compact three-member Commission. In a country of 800 million voters, 350 general assembly elections are held to 36 states in addition to the national elections. The Commission works with 650 chief electoral officers at the district level drawn from the IAS cadre on contract for three years. They are such a mosaic of diverse origins that a certain neutrality is built into the structure.

In Bangladesh, the EC has 3,500 staff members of different grades; Operatively, returning officers and assistant returning officers drawn from the executive cadre are the lynchpins in the system.

In India, a system of total compliance with the model code of conduct prescribed by the EC is a fact of life because political parties, candidates, constituencies and voters fully cooperate with the EC in the electoral endeavour.

The electoral infrastructure has complements in committees of accountability, and moral certification and monitoring committees that address the concerns centering around election expenditure, use of money and muscle power, 'paid news,' use of communal language in campaigns among a whole lot of predilections a general election may fall prey to.

Remember that in a historic verdict of the Indian Supreme Court 'no-vote' by way of rejecting a candidate has been recognised as a citizen's right to free expression among his/her fundamental rights.

In the context of Bangladesh, such an option could add value to the right of franchise which political parties lay a unilateral claim to.

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Environmentalists versus anti-environmentalists

QUAMRUL HAIDER

IN the article "Little option but to go for a coal-fired power" published in the Op-Ed section of The Daily Star on October 9, the author Mushfiqur Rahman has branded the environmentalists as a rag tag bunch of "Left leaning activists, opposition political parties and groups along with a section of environmental activists [who] have been agitating against the Rampal power plant project." By doing so, he has not only trivialised the worldwide environmental movement, but also demonstrated his myopic view of man's perseverance to live in harmony with nature. Contrary to what he thinks, the environmental movement attracts a large cross section of people -- rich and poor, conservative and liberal, old and young -- from different segments of the society all over the world. They are all linked by a common thread -- interest in protecting the environment, and hence the planet we call our home.

By ignoring the impact Rampal power plant will have on the Sundarbans, the energy czars of Bangladesh are portraying a mentality that is referred to as "frontier mentality." One of its tenets is: humans are apart from nature and immune to natural laws. People with such mentality consider nature as an adversary against which man must constantly struggle. The frontier mentality has had profound, even devastating, effects on the natural world and human society, as witnessed by the loss of wetlands and tropical rain forests throughout the world. The French philosopher and writer Albert Camus aptly summed up this mentality when he wrote: "Man is the only creature that refuses to be what he is."

Anti-environmentalists believe that even if our interests impinge upon other living things,

it should not prevent us from pursuing our interests. Hence, we should go ahead with the construction of the Rampal power plant even though it will exert an inordinate amount of strain on a fragile ecosystem that is home to so many species.

Environmentalists on the other hand embrace progress, but not blind progress like the one professed by anti-environmentalists. According to them, in order to have a sustainable society where humanity can prosper, we have to bring about fundamental changes in our behaviour, in our lifestyle, in our thinking process as well as the way we go about doing our day-to-day business. We should cooperate with nature, not dominate it. They also believe that if a human endeavour rips apart the Earth life support system, as the Rampal project will do to the Sundarbans, it cannot be called a success.

The so-called "left leaning activists" are not against the Rampal project; they just want the power plant to be built elsewhere. Just like most of the conscientious citizens, they are expressing their concern at the already rapidly declining wetlands, estuaries, and biota of the Sundarbans caused by human activities.

Environmentalism is not a subversive movement, as anti-environmentalists would like us to believe. Instead, it is a movement that advocates an alternative form of progress -- a movement that seeks to foster a sustainable relationship between us and the planet we inhabit with other creatures.

Perhaps referring to our "infectious greed" for creature comforts that is leading us toward an unsustainable society, Mohandas Gandhi said: "There is sufficiency in the world for man's need but not for man's greed."

The writer is a Professor of Physics at Fordham University, New York.

INTERNATIONAL DAY OF THE GIRL CHILD

To get all girls in school we must harness innovation

PASCAL VILLENEUVE

IT has often been said that when you educate a girl, you educate a nation. There is an overwhelming body of evidence that educating girls and women is consistently associated with positive outcomes such as reducing child mortality, fighting poverty and improving health.

The good news is that today more girls are in primary school than ever before. But that doesn't mean the work of educating girls is finished.

Globally, 57 million children of primary school age don't go to school; 31 million are girls.

In Bangladesh, about 8.3 million children of age 6-15 years are out of school; about 3.6 million of them are girls.

This is not only wrong and a violation of every child's right, it is also bad economics. Educating girls is the single most powerful investment for the development of nations.

Educated young women have smaller families and healthier children.



They are less likely to marry young or die in childbirth, more likely to send their children to school, and better able to protect themselves and their children from malnutrition, HIV/AIDS, trafficking, and sexual exploitation.

An educated girl has better opportunities, as she is more likely to get a job and earn a higher wage, and her nation's economy is likely to benefit as a result. An extra year of primary school boosts girls' eventual wages by 10% to 20% and an extra year of secondary school by 15% to 25%. One percentage point increase in female education raises the average level of GDP by 0.3 percentage points.

It is, therefore, critical -- and to everyone's benefit -- to ensure that girls are able to attend school and receive a quality basic education.

But simply getting girls to school is just a first step. We must also make sure they stay in school, learn and complete their education.

Often, even when girls are in school they face challenges that make it difficult for them to continue to attend and learn. One such important challenge is child marriage. In Bangladesh, 29% of women aged between

20 and 24 years were married by the age of 15, three years before the legal age for marriage in Bangladesh. Child marriage has many negative consequences, including denying girls the right to an education. Innovation for girls' education has the power to change that. Making even incremental changes in how education is accessed, designed, and delivered can strengthen girls' participation, learning, and empowerment.

This can mean solutions as simple as finding creative transportation options for girls to get to school -- whether it's by bus, moped, bicycle or even canoe. Or making sure that female teachers are paid and that girls receive scholarship payments in a secure and convenient manner by developing collaboration between school systems and the banking industry.

Unicef puts innovation to work in programmes as well. The 'Child Friendly School' approach is Unicef's main vehicle for advocating and promoting quality and safe learning environments -- environments with qualified teachers, without violence, with access to clean water and hygiene facilities, etc. This approach has now spread to over 100 countries.

In Bangladesh, innovation has come in the form of shuttle boats for children living in lake areas so that girls and boys do not have to miss school because they live in areas that are surrounded by water.

Making infrastructure, facilities and supplies in and around schools more responsive to the needs of girls is also a part of innovation. For example, Unicef in collaboration with the government as well as individual school authorities in the Sylhet division of Bangladesh has improved water supply and sanitation facilities in schools, which has ultimately encouraged girls to attend school more regularly, with a number of schools that have more girls than boys.

Perhaps the most important innovation of all is engaging young people themselves as an important catalysing force. In Bangladesh, a Young Champions initiative is under way, wherein children aged 15-18 years old will form a cadre of young champions as advocates and spokespersons for children and girls' education.

Education is everybody's business, but business as usual is not enough to overcome the barriers to girls' education. Efforts must be scaled up on all fronts to increase access to education and to enhance the transition from primary to secondary education. Well-functioning and equitable labour markets for girls and youth are needed for households to have an incentive to invest in their children's and girls' education.

Last, conditions must be created where girls and young women are safe, healthy, educated and fully empowered to realise their potential to transform their families, their communities, their economies and their societies.

In short, the world along with Bangladesh must be willing to do things differently. To try new things, invest in what works and harness innovations that energise fresh, creative, effective and efficient solutions, especially those involving young people.

Only by doing so can we give girls an education that prepares them for the challenges of the 21st century.

The writer is the Representative of Unicef Bangladesh.

Education is necessary for preventing child marriage

ARGENTINA P. MATAVEL PICCIN

TODAY, the World observes International Day of the Girl Child for the second time since its inauguration in 2012. This year's Day will focus on "Innovating for Girls' Education" because educating girls empowers them and is one of the most effective ways to improve the health and prosperity of societies.

Considerable efforts in the past decades in Bangladesh have been successful in getting more girls into school. Progress has been made in increasing equitable access in education (NER: 98.7%; girls: 99.4%, boys: 97.2%), reduction of dropouts, improvement in completion of the cycle, and implementation of a number of quality enhancement measures in primary education. Bangladesh has already achieved gender parity in primary and secondary enrolment. Innovations such as providing scholarship to female students up to the higher secondary level have played an important role in retention of girls in school.

There are good reasons for the focus on girls' education in Bangladesh. When a girl gets an education, she has the power to delay her first pregnancy, and is healthy and equipped with the right skills and opportunities; she holds the key to unlocking many of the world's most pressing problems: reducing maternal and child death, breaking the cycle of poverty, advancing gender equality and propelling countries' social and economic development. As educated mothers, they will invest in the health, education and success of the next generation. As leaders of both today and tomorrow, they can be a force for social cohesion, progress and peace. Educating girls is the key solution to reversing the relentless trend of poverty, disease, and exploitive situations of girls. Not only does education change the girls' destinies, it changes those of their future children. Education of girls has positive effects on family healthier future.

There are incalculable benefits of empowering girls with life skills and formal education. In Bangladesh, early marriage



forces girls to drop out of school. Bangladesh has one of the highest rates of child marriage in the world. A recent survey indicates that 64% of women currently aged between 20-24 years were married before the age of 18 years. Reversing these trends is key to ensuring that the next generation of women has a different future from that of their mothers.

The reasons for child marriage vary: social norms, poverty and lack of education all play a part. Child marriage has a devastating impact on their lives.

Child brides often lack access to health information. Because their bodies are not ready to cope with pregnancy and childbirth this makes them more vulnerable to serious injury and death in childbirth -- the leading cause of death in girls. Child brides are also more likely to experience domestic violence and to live in poverty than women who marry later. Moreover, child marriage perpetuates poverty by keeping girls, their children and their communities poor. To bring about sustainable change, we first need to provide greater options for girls by investing in them. Continuing education and retention in schools delays child marriage and creates better employment options for future. Girls' education helps to break the inter-generational poverty cycle.

The writer is the Representative for the United Nations Population Fund in Bangladesh.

By THOMAS JOSEPH

CROSSWORD puzzle grid with clues for Across and Down.

A XYDLBAAXR is LONGFELLOW

On letter stands for another. In this sample, A is used for the three L's, X for the two O's etc. Single letters, apostrophes, the length and formation of the words are all hints. Each day the code letters are different.

9-14 CRYPTOQUOTE
HGG NIEHC ZVKCQD HWV
HGDR UUVHE ZVKCQD.
UUVHEKQC JKVD HGG
EHCFCU JRVJNVW.
- XHMF FVWRIHM

Yesterday's Cryptoquote:
THE TROUBLE WITH SUPERHEROES IS WHAT TO DO BETWEEN PHONE BOOTHS.
- KEN KESY

BEETLE BAILY



3-2

HENRY



3-2

by Mort Walker



3-2

by Don Trachte



3-2

QUOTABLE Quotes

"Until you value yourself, you won't value your time. Until you value your time, you will not do anything with it."
M. Scott Peck