WHAT DO WE WANT?

It is necessary that we all agree at least on some basic things, says Dr Kamal Hossain

Perhaps the most difficult challenge Bangladesh faces is how to build a consensus for shared goals and values. Citizens seem to be sharply divided along political and ideological differences. The values and principles that won us freedom in 1971 seem far away in our rear view mirror. The dream of a society that provides the optimum opportunity for the fullest realisation of the potentials of an individual remains unrealised.

Politics used to mean an active participation in popular movements which led to positive changes in people's lives. The language movement, Six-Point and Eleven-Point movement and the non-co-operation movement that led to the war of liberation are examples of that. If we could do it then, why can't we do it now? Can we reconstruct our shared past for building a better future for all? "If Bangladesh is to move forward, we must regenerate the sense of national unity and forge a consensus on national values and goals, as well as modalities to attain these goals," says Dr Kamal Hossain, lawyer and statesman.

No one is above the law. "That can only be sustained through an impartial application of law by law enforcement agencies that are free from interference and influence, in particular, from the executive and the ruling political party. The judiciary has to be independent."

Law enforcement agencies need modernisation. "A systemic change needs to be brought about in relation to the police. The draft of a new Police Act has been kept on the shelf. The nineteenth century Police Act and the mind-set on which it was based require to be replaced by a system where police is seen as the protector of the rights of citizens and the community."

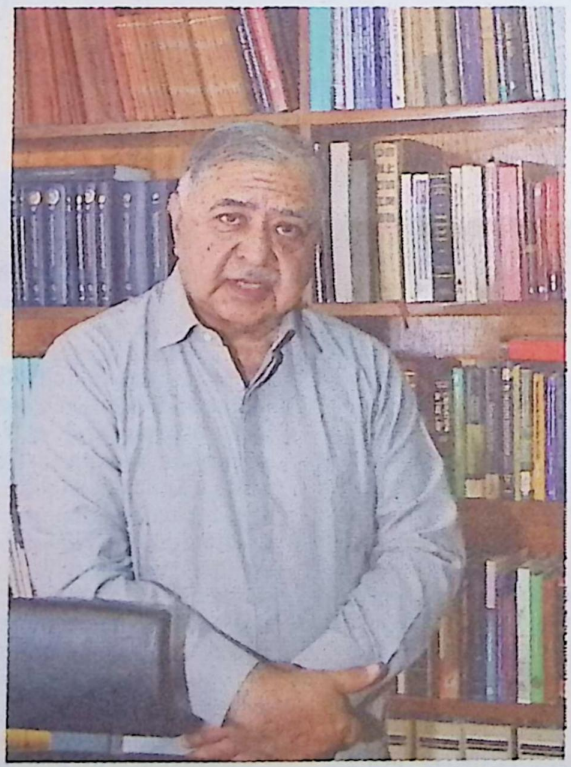
Discrimination in any form and shape be it on the basis of religion, region, or ethnicity must be eliminated. The constitution gives every citizen equal rights. "Communalism, or the abuse of religion for political purposes leading to extremism, intolerance and terrorism and the practice of discrimination on the basis of religion, must have no place in our society."

An effective, participatory and elected local government help democracy flourish and reduce inequality. "Local government institutions must be strengthened and adequate resources made available to meet the needs of local communities and be free from partisan interventions."

Education is the key to bringing about real change. Universities must be centres of academic excellence that produce future leaders in science, arts and business. "Educational institutions must be free of armed cadres and campuses made free from their predatory activities."

The voices of the silent majority must be heard over state-owned media. "An Independent Broadcasting Trust, led by trustees who enjoy public confidence and respect could significantly contribute to the process of change. The muted voices of the silent majority could then be heard throughout the country so that they can reach their public representatives and expect them to respond to their needs and priorities."

We need to develop institutions to manage conflict, and strive to create a culture where differences of opinions are not simply tolerated but embraced. We can no longer blame the British Raj or the Pakistani military junta for our problems. The enemy this time is us. "The challenge of change calls for a truly unified, well-coordinated national effort rising above partisan interests. We need to reach out to all citizens who can make meaningful contributions to change. Our goal is to forge a national consensus so that we can move forward in unity and establish a state that can secure justice, equality and peace."



Dr Kamal Hossain

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS