

RAISE YOUR VOICE for Human Rights

Let's change lives through human rights

PROFESSOR DR. MIZANUR RAHMAN
ON behalf of the National Human Rights Commission Bangladesh-JAMAKON, let me extend good wishes to all the readers. 66 years ago, on December 10, 1948, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights - UDHR was adopted by the UN General Assembly. That precisely is the reason why December 10 is celebrated worldwide as the Human Rights Day.

For us, though, this day bears special significance. Our dear motherland - the People's Republic of Bangladesh is a product of one of the basic human rights i.e. the right of nations and peoples to self-determination. We reaped this harvest of human rights in the month of human rights, which is also the month of our victory in the liberation war 1971. The human rights day and the victory day are thus intertwined. Probably this explains why our hearts are filled with unbounding joy, why the nature is singing and dancing around us!

The theme of this year's Human Rights day is- Human Rights 365 Days. This literally means that each day of the year is a human rights day! Human rights do not evolve around any one particular day, nor can human rights be confined to festive celebrations. Human rights are inherent, inalienable and indivisible rights of an individual. Therefore, the notion of human rights covers an individual every single moment, every second, every minute, every year, every day round the clock and round the year. Human Rights are, in poetic expression "Shadows following you, wherever you go".

Lives of individuals may truly be changed through human rights. However, for better and effective protection of human rights, merely being rights conscious is not adequate. One must be equally diligent and careful about fulfilling his or her duties. As a matter of fact, time and again it has been proved beyond doubt that if one performs his or her duties specifically and in good faith, his/her rights are automatically realised.

We are committed to establishing a society where, human rights culture will have its abode on a solid and strong foundation. This, in turn, requires true appreciation of the multifaceted dimensions of human rights. In other words, protection of civil and political rights alone does not guarantee further development and effective protection of human rights.



Simultaneous access to and realisation of economic, social, and cultural rights are equally essential. According to the opinion of many experts, in a developing country like Bangladesh, economic, and social rights are comparatively more significant. Nonetheless, we must not lose sight of the fact that if civil and political rights fail to attain a minimum acceptable standard in a society, despite protection of economic, social and cultural rights, the status of an individual may be compared to that of 'a bird in a golden cage'.

This explains why the contemporary understanding of human rights evolves around the notion of 'human dignity'. Every person is entitled to dignity and if this dignity is violated or impaired in any manner, question of human rights violation arises.

'Human dignity' is the sum total of various rights and freedoms. To this we should add the surrounding environment ensuring overall security. Back in 1941, the then US President Roosevelt proclaimed that 'right to lead a life without fear or want is human right'.

So today when we are asking 'Come! Let's change lives through human rights',

we are as a matter of fact, voluntarily accepting certain obligations vis-a-vis our neighbours and compatriots - to the best of our ability try to ensure for all irrespective of sex, colour, creed, religion caste, opinion etc. a life without fear and free from want.

An individual is engulfed by fear and uncertainty in a situation of violence and intimidation. It infringes human dignity and we must not let that happen. Moreover, if we truly believe in human rights, let us no doubt, even for a moment, that all perpetrators of human rights must face justice, today or tomorrow. Human rights cannot flourish if perpetrators of human rights are not dealt with severely.

If we sincerely want to realise the theme, 'Human Rights 365 Days', we must internalise the truth that 'I am you and you are me'. Let us take this vow and demonstrate our respect and full allegiance to human rights. A dignified life may be established only through promotion and protection of human rights, paving the way for realising the lifelong dream of the Father of the nation and our cherished goal- Golden Bengal (*Sonar Bangla*).

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Minority rights under threat

TAPAS KANTI BAUL

SHAKESPEARE'S Antonio and Shylock of Merchant of Venice depicts much about the root cause of communal disharmony among the Muslims and other religious minorities of Bangladesh, since Antonio represents Christian elite who sought help from Shylock, who once persecuted at the hands of the Christians as a Jew, turned to a money launder. Shylock, the antagonist, turned into a blood thirsty bogeyman, when he had the chance to take revenge against Christian elite even though Antonio had nothing to do with the persecution of Shylock, he stands as a representative of all the persecutors in front of Shylock. Non-Muslims of Bangladesh stand as Antonio in the eyes of Muslims of Bangladesh. Question is - how?

Due to the historical turnover of the events, Muslims conquered the Indian Subcontinent from the Hindu and Buddhist rulers and later, under the British rulers, the non-Muslim elites got their power back and started to persecute Muslims. The British rulers exploited this sentiment very well and sowed the seed of communalism very deep into the hearts of their subjects. Muslims regained political control of the soil through the independence of Pakistan and from then onwards, the Muslim politicians and rulers started to persecute the non-Muslims in both Pakistan and in Bangladesh. It's like the poetic justice of Shakespeare repeating over and over again, only this time it seems to be a never ending journey for the religious minorities of Bangladesh.

The picture is different between pre and post partition of 1947. Within one year of partition, the world was presented with the first expression of rights to which all human beings are inherently entitled, i.e., Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Now, we have a benchmark of rights and the State must ensure these rights for its citizens. These rights have also given us the opportunity to measure whether human beings are living with human dignity or not. Like touchstone, it enables us to test every act of the State so that we can

identify the violation of human rights by the State. Now, what do we see if we apply these 'touchstone-like' human rights on the lives of the religious minorities of Bangladesh? Are they living a dignified life as enumerated in both UDHR and the Constitution of Bangladesh?

Answer is 'No'. Why 'No'? In flashback, let's think about Ramu, post-election violence of 2001 and 2014 and the rape of Purnima. You will see religious minorities have come under attack, with abductions, desecration of religious sites, and forced conversions. There have been many reports of Hindus having been evicted from their properties, and of Hindu girls being raped, but either the police have refused to investigate or the families of the victims were terrorised and they were forced to leave their village. The government has chosen neither to prosecute those responsible, nor do discipline police officers who failed to protect victims. Many members of the Hindu community were alienated from their land by the Vested Property Act. Even though the Act was repealed in 2000, its implementation is far from reality.

Under Article 5(1) of the 1960 Convention against Discrimination in Education: "It is essential to recognise the right of the members of national minorities to carry on their own educational activities, including the maintenance of schools", but alas, in our education system in primary and high school level even though religious education is mandatory, there is acute lack of religious teachers to teach the minority group.

With all the above facts add the discriminatory provisions placed in the Constitution, like: the Preamble, secularism and the state religion etc. and the culture of impunity for committing atrocities upon religious minorities and all these will establish that the religious minorities of Bangladesh do not have any dignity and they are living a life without any respect towards their human rights.

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The power of human rights education

MOHAMMAD GOLAM SARWAR

IN every year human rights day is observed with lots of commitment and aspiration from national and International patrons. After 65 years of human rights declaration, human rights still remain a matter of observance and not being a matter of effective realisation. Do human rights exist for a day, or a month? Is it a matter of celebration or observation? The answer might be negative if we attach the literal meaning of the two powerful words, "Human Rights". It is true that promotion of human rights movements in Bangladesh received much celebration and this celebration will continue. Astonishingly it is evident that human sufferings also become a great agenda to discuss amidst of the presence of rampant violation of human rights. Consequently human rights are turning into a matter of colossal discussion which ends apparently with no results.

The increasing number of child labour, the highest position regarding child marriage, the untold agony of the victims of human trafficking, uncontrolled malpractice of law enforcing agencies are a few to mention for describing the human rights situation of the country. This situation reflects a complete failure of our understanding human rights discourse. It indicates that we have failed to underscore the spirit of human rights that calls for dignity of human being. It is undeniable that the realisation of the true essence of human rights is not possible only through establishing human rights institutions but it depends to a large extent on the inclusion of the values and norms of human rights in our educational framework. In this backdrop human rights education can work as a beacon to protect and promote human rights. Let me recall the universal declaration which urges that "All human

beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights". The missing point here is that human beings themselves are not aware about their dignity and rights. Being unaware and insincere about their entitlements they often become the victims of human rights violations. Because in this society one party is ready to exploit the ignorance of other in order to secure their vested interest. That's why a saying goes that information is essential for empowerment and at the same time isolation of information often turns into a matter of exploitation.

The full realisation of human rights requires all human beings to be aware of their and other people's rights and to ensure their protection. This is the undertaking of human rights education which generates knowledge, build skills and attitudes for prompting behavior that uphold human rights. Human rights education can make a real difference in people's lives. When an employer torture a child domestic worker it is not his richness and dominance but the lack of humane mind devoid of human rights education which influences him to commit human rights violations.

Human rights education boosts the ego of human being to ensure tolerance, peace and to become respectful to others. It also involves the nourishment of the human impulse to engage in the struggle for human rights for all people. Human rights education can read between the lines of power relations and social changes so as to enable a struggle to change those power relations that impede the full realisation of human rights. The most notable feature of human rights education is that it can empower people by enhancing their capability to secure equal protection of law and access to legal institutions. It is well settled that only when people become

educated and aware about their rights, they can assert and invoke their rights in governance system.

Human rights education needs to be inculcated both in the formal and informal system of education from elementary level to the tertiary level. Human rights education at the rudimentary level can develop positive attitudes and values in children. They will start questioning at young age as to how things can be changed for the betterment of the society.

The theme of this year's human rights day urges for protection of



human rights every day of the year, human rights 365. The actual realisation of this theme is only possible if human rights education can be approached in a fashion that will raise the voice of common people with a view to making their government accountable.

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Improving the standard of human rights

DR. NAHID FERDOUSI

HUMAN rights are the rights that are ensured by the state in line with the standard of the international instruments and national policies outlined in line with that. They are commonly understood as inalienable fundamental rights to which a person is inherently entitled simply because of being a human being, and which are latent in all human beings irrespective of their nation, location, language, religion, ethnic origin or any other status. There is no standard parameter for the Human Rights. Still there is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which offers the guidelines for the establishment of human rights throughout the world.

The Constitution of Bangladesh is the principle guideline for the behavior of the dignity all the

Women are the main victims of the violations of human rights throughout the world. Similarly the women in the developing countries are the worst victims of the situation like that of Bangladesh. Despite the existing legislation prohibiting violence and discrimination against women, several police and newspaper reports and hospital statistics indicated the widespread increase in violence against women in Bangladesh, including domestic violence, rape, acid-throwing, dowry-related violence, fatwa-instigated violence and sexual harassment in the workplace. These all contribute to the exploitation, deprivation and oppression of women in Bangladesh, and all are violations of the fundamental human rights.

Violence against women conflicts with the basic human rights established in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948 and other documents like the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Such violence denies women the right to life (ICCPR Article 6); right to be free from discrimination; right to health; right to bodily integrity; right to privacy; the right not to be subjected to torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment (ICCPR article 7); the right to liberty and security of person (ICCPR article 9); and the right to be free from all kinds of violence including sexual violence.

Early marriage and pregnancy are also violations of the rights of the girl child to equal opportunities in education and training. The government of Bangladesh is failing to respect the rights of women as it does not consider all forms of violence against women, including sexual harassment at the workplace or religious induced violence sanctioning immoral behaviour and fatwas (an arbitrary religious decree) which remain outside the circumference of the law. Children are also vulnerable to the violation of human rights and they are subject to different violations based on the economic, social and cultural situations.

In this backdrop it can be suggested that in order to improve the standard of human rights in Bangladesh following measures can be taken into account:

- Enhancement of education.
- Enhancement of Public Awareness by mass media
- Making laws for activating and implementing human rights properly

It can be said that there are so many problems in Bangladesh but still we hope with the activation of newer policies and ideologies and expansion of mass awareness, human rights standards can be improved.

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