

Combating militancy

We reiterate the PM's' views

PRIME Minister Sheikh Hasina hit the nail on the head when she called for the UK and the west to do more to combat militancy. We endorse her views

Bangladesh, along with the countries of South Asia is rightly worried with the so-called global war on terror shifting both focus and base from the Middle East to our region in the last several years. The trickle down effect is inevitable, but the policy of the current government has thwarted the overt rise of the extremist groups in Bangladesh. That notwithstanding, we have reasons to be worried that the gaze of the international extremists and terror groups has turned on our country as fertile grounds for recruitment as evidenced by the arrest of a Briton of Bangladeshi origin in 2014. And several intending Jihadists were preempted before they could leave the country. Reportedly, some of the British Muslims killed fighting for ISIL were of Bangladeshi pedigree. What is worrisome for us is the financing of Bangladeshi extremist groups by some section of the Bengali diaspora in the UK.

The statement of our prime minister underlines the fact that terrorism, provoked by convoluted religious motivation, is a universal phenomenon straddling geographical borders and needs cooperation of all the affected countries to counter. It would not be out of place to mention that the British counterterrorism strategy, formulated in 2003, is predicated on four Ps of which one stands for 'Prevent-' i.e. to stop people becoming terrorists or supporting violent extremism. That being said, on its part, we must also delve seriously into why the extremists' narratives resonate in the psyche of a segment of our youth, miniscule they may be, and what should be done to prevent it.

Rules on amended labour law

Are they adequate?

SOME serious concerns about workers' rights remain unaddressed in the amended labour rules published recently. Two years ago, in 2013, when the labour law was amended, various national and international organisations, including several trade unions, voiced their grievances, claiming that it goes against the fundamental rights of the workers.

In response, the government has made some laudable moves such as improving workers' safety, one of the most important criteria of ideal labour conditions. Experts, however, feel that much more need to be done in areas such as trade unionism, outsourcing and profit sharing by the workers. The law also does not provide for adequate compensation to workers in the event the factory shifts to a faraway location.

Reportedly, there remains a wide difference in terms of compliance between large and small companies and sub-contracting firms. That implies a lack of will as well as investment in the monitoring and evaluation of companies.

We feel that ensuring labour rights demands a radical rethink. Gaining trade privileges from the US should not be the one and only raison d'être for improving labour standards. Treating workers with dignity and paying them a decent wage are ultimately in the interests of business owners.

So far the demand for improvement of workers' conditions has come from buyers. The motivation for change has to come from within the industry. And in turn the government should play its due role in implementing the labour law.

NO, WOMAN, NO CRY

NO STRINGS ATTACHED



AASHA MEHREEN AMIN

FEW women have dared to do what Rebecca Lolosoli, a Kenyan, has done. Rejecting the patriarchal Samburu tribe she came from, she has created the ideal village for women where chauvinism, gender violence, and discrimination just do not exist. In fact, men are not allowed to enter the village unless they get permission from the women. After experiencing violence

and abuse herself and that inflicted on others, Rebecca decided that enough was enough. Braving the threats, insults and ostracism, she formed Umoja village 25 years ago, giving shelter to women and girls who had been victims of various kinds of violence such as rape, female genital mutilation and forced marriage.

The women of the village are self-reliant, making jewellery or handicrafts for a living. Many of them suffered physical torture from their husbands; almost all had to go through genital circumcision as part of the Samburu tradition. Others had been abandoned by their husbands or families for the stigma attached to the abuse they had gone through.

Now, however, there is no shame, only pride that they can raise their children by themselves without the help or charity of any man. They have even set up their own school and community centre. Rebecca says in an interview (by Broadly, an online site), that the women of Umoja want their children, especially their daughters, to be educated.

This may be the ultimate feminist fantasy – in fact it echoes the ethos of Begum Rokeya's Sultana's Dream that describes a matriarchal society where women are in charge of everything from law and order to scientific research. But Rebecca's story is also one of great tragedy – it was because these women were subject to the worst kinds of torture and humiliation by men of their own community and outside it, that they were pushed to form their own little oasis. Undoubtedly the Samburu community, apart from the loss of face at this humiliating exodus, has also lost out economically and socially, in terms of the labour, skills, not to mention wisdom and nurturing, of these women.

Although it is plain common sense that when all members of the community are happy and productive, the economic returns will be huge, women are constantly being subject to violence and discrimination, thus depriving the community of its full economic potential. A recent World Bank research has found that countries that have discriminatory laws against women or do not promote gender parity also fare poorly in economic terms. The World Bank Group's Women, Business and the Law 2016 report has identified legal barriers to economic empowerment that keep women out of certain jobs, reduce access to

credit and make them more vulnerable to violence.

Women for instance, says the report, are barred from working in certain factory jobs in 41 economies; in 29 economies, they are prohibited from working at night; and in 18 economies, they cannot get a job without permission from their husband. Only half of the economies covered have paternity leave, limiting men's ability to share childcare responsibilities. In 30 economies, married women cannot choose where to live and in 19 they are legally obligated to obey their husbands.

The result of this deliberate exclusion from economic activities, the research concludes, adversely affects not only the women but also their children, their communities and hence their countries.

In Bangladesh, as in most of South Asia, women are

scenario. Between January and June this year, there were reports of 378 rapes with 29 deaths as a result of rape; 63 of the victims were children between 7 and 12. ASK's report has also found 87 cases of sexual harassment with 6 suicides as a result of this. 112 women were tortured and murdered by their husbands in that short period.

True, there are more women in the work force in Bangladesh than ever before, which is a sure parameter of progress. But women are still not paid equally as their male counterparts, especially in blue collar jobs, and their productivity is significantly impeded physically and mentally by violence.

The lack of security at home and outside it, therefore, is a huge impediment to women's empowerment and the empowerment of the nation as a whole.



PHOTO: WIKI

disempowered not so much by discriminatory laws but more because of the discrimination they face in getting justice through the legal system. We have anti-dowry laws, the Child Marriage Act, Prevention of Women and Child Repression Act 2000 and other laws that on paper cover most forms of violence and offer redress for the crimes. But in a society where cultural practices dominate, these laws can prove ineffectual for the victims. Money and influence are used by perpetrators - all male - to dupe the system and go scot free. Society, by and large, is unsympathetic to female victims. The low number of convictions of cases of violence against women results in an increase in the number of such incidents.

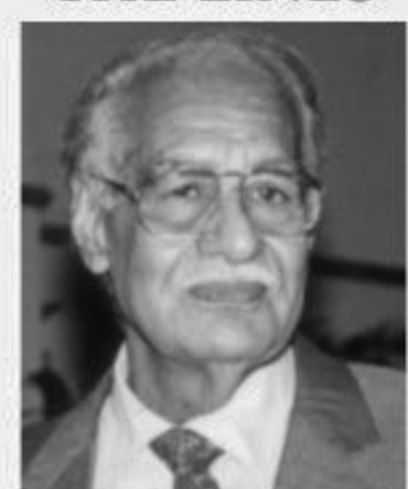
Statistics from Ain O Shalish Kendra (ASK) gleaned mainly from newspaper reports depict a horrifying

Rebecca Lolosoli was sick and tired of seeing her fellow women folk being regularly abused by men in her tribe and the brutal traditions it imposed, making them weak and powerless. She chose to make a change – leading the women out of their prison into a sanctuary of peace and economic freedom. Meanwhile, other women, inspired by Rebecca, have left their repressive communities to form similar matriarchal villages where women and girls can work, study and live a life without humiliation. For the men of the Samburu tribe, the abandonment is an insult to their masculinity and their traditional role as the protectors of women. For the world, Rebecca's initiative is a form of protest against the injustice half of its population suffers as a result of debilitating patriarchal domination.

The writer is Deputy Editor, Editorial and Op-ed, The Daily Star.

RSS-BJP kinship

BETWEEN THE LINES



KULDIP NAYYAR

If there was any iota of doubt about the links between the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), Prime Minister Narendra Modi dispelled it. He

present ed his key ministers to RSS chief MohanBhagwat and asked them to provide information on the working of their ministries.

The party has been evasive on the link because of its realisation that the RSS does not go down well with an average Indian. It was the same question of connection which split the Janata Party. The Jana Sangh, the earlier avatar of the BJP, promised to sever its link with the RSS when it joined the Janata Party and gave an assurance to Gandhian Jayaprakash Narayan (JP Narayan) that it would cut off its relations with the RSS, provided it was allowed to stay in the Janata Party. This delinking did not, however, happen and it betrayed JP's confidence.

When I asked JP why he allowed the Jana Sangh (JS) to merge with the Janata Party when the former hadn't cut off its link with the RSS, he said that he felt "personally let down" because the JS leaders had gone back on their words.

This must be true but in the process the Jana Sangh was able to get secular credentials. The blunder committed by JP has cost the nation, and the Jana Sangh of yesterday has emerged as the BJP of today and has been able to secure

an absolute majority in the Lok Sabha.

The Congress should have gained from the situation. But its obsession with the dynasty and President Sonia Gandhi's insistence on having her son, Rahul Gandhi, as successor has dissipated the advantage. The party has lost its dependable vote-bank of Muslims. The community is now following either regional parties or even flirting with the idea of supporting Owasi, who is trying to present himself as the sole representative of Muslim leaders, as those in the Muslim League used to do before partition.

The community does not want to go back to parochial politics. Yet, it may have no option except to toy with the idea since the RSS has come out openly on the field to guide the BJP, jettisoning its role of being a pure cultural organisation. That the RSS has not gone through the electoral process does not bother the organization, because it knows that the BJP has to depend on the RSS cadres to win elections.

Nonetheless, it is sad to see on television channels, RSS chief Bagwat making it clear who the boss is, when Prime Minister Modi met him and paraded his ministerial colleagues in front of him. True, the electorate has given a majority to Modi but never did he say during his campaign that when it comes to the country's governance, the RSS would be very much there.

In fact, during his campaign, Modi assured the minorities, particularly Muslims, that whatever be the party's stance in the past, the new slogan was sab ka sath, sab ka vikas. At a few meetings, he went out of the way to make Muslims believe that he would be the best custodian.

Realistically speaking, there has been

nothing discriminatory in his way of working so far. However, the fact of the RSS saffronising the educational institutions and making appointments of its own men at key positions is visible. It suggests that Modi is implementing the RSS agenda slowly but relentlessly. It is evident that the Muslims have ceased to count in the affairs of governance. The central cabinet itself has just one Muslim minister and he too has been assigned an unimportant portfolio. Even

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otherwise, the increasing impression inside and outside the government is that a soft-type of Hindutva has begun to prevail in governance.

The target of the RSS to have a Hindu Rashtra may look distant at present. But Modi still has three and a half years to go. Both he and the RSS chief, who now often meet publicly, seem to be working according to the plan which they have devised at Nagpur, the RSS headquarters.

The BJP and its students' wing Akhil Bhartiya Vidyarthi Parishad have no independent thinking. They just follow the script finalised at Nagpur.

This has a different manifestation. Sometimes it appears in the shape of ban on meat and sometimes the dress code and even compulsory teaching of Sanskrit in schools and specific morning prayers in assemblies. The redoing of Nehru Memorial Museum at Delhi is part of the same thinking. The RSS, which was nowhere when the movement to oust the British was fought, is now trying to occupy all the space and parade as the real champion of freedom.

One sadly feels the absence of passion of the freedom struggle and the philosophy of pluralism. Even the name of the architect of modern India, Jawaharlal Nehru, is being systematically erased. For example, the postal stamps of Nehru and Indira Gandhi are being obliterated. The havoc caused in the field of education is terrible. History is being re-written and text books are changed to downgrade the role of leaders that were instrumental in getting us the freedom. It is no surprise that the names of frontiers Abdul Ghaffar Khan and Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, who stood bravely against the Muslim League, are seldom mentioned.

Understandably, the RSS and its affiliated units like the BJP and the Bajrang Dal feel left out when the freedom struggle is mentioned. But they do not have to minimise the freedom struggle itself because that will amount to a great disservice to tomorrow's generations. The important thing is the struggle for independence and the sacrifices made by innumerable people.

The writer is an eminent Indian columnist.

COMMENTS

"UN keen to take more Bangladeshi peacekeepers"
(September 16, 2015)

Abul Naser

It's great to learn that Bangladeshis are doing well in peace keeping missions.

"Hasina wins Champions of the Earth award"
(September 15, 2015)

Meshkat Hossain Milon

Congratulations to the PM! She is really worthy of getting this award. We feel proud of her.

Mokshed Hasan Robin

Dhaka is the second least liveable city on earth. If it rains for half an hour the streets get waterlogged; there is no end to traffic jams; and the air of Dhaka is too polluted to breathe. We expect that she will change the city into a better place.

"Sylhet tea workers observe strike for pay hike"
(September 15, 2015)

Hashem Mian

The tea workers get only Tk 69 per day. They are demanding Tk 200, which I think is quite reasonable.

Muslim Ahmed

The government should intervene and make the tea estate owners pay a decent wage to their workers.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Indo-Bangladesh relation and opportunities

India and Bangladesh are connected through history, geography, ethnicity and a rich cultural heritage. Strong Indo-Bangla relations are the demand of the time for better strategic and diplomatic ties, as well as better future prospects of the people and economy of this region.

Both governments deserve credit for recently resolving a number of contentious issues such as the land boundary dispute, border and security management, etc. Both countries should also work together to share

the water resources, promote river transportation and trade across international borders. There are vast forests and wilderness zones across the India-Bangladesh border. A joint Indo-Bangla environment protection and conservation programme can greatly help in protecting the rich biodiversity of that region, endangered wildlife species and scanty forest resources. Such a programme can also help in reducing smuggling and human trafficking in the border areas as well as curb the unpredictable rate of poaching and illegal trade of endangered wildlife and forest resources in both nations.

Saikat Kumar Basu
Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada

Obama's green signal to drill Arctic Ocean

It is not understandable why President Obama has given a green signal to Shell to drill two oil exploratory wells in the Arctic Ocean this summer. Arctic Ocean in the northern hemisphere remains covered by ice for most of the year. It is one of the few places on our planet that is yet to be touched. Due to the rise in temperature and climate change, Arctic ice is melting at an increasing rate. At this critical juncture, drilling in Arctic Ocean is too risky. President Obama should review his decision and disallow Shell Oil from drilling wells in the Arctic Ocean for the greater interest of our planet and its people.

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