

Combatting extremism

Factor in family role and inculcate religious values

MUCH of the discordant note that one witnesses in society today is due to a lack of tolerance, mores and values. That was the takeaway from the discussion at a roundtable on the role of the family and religious values in combatting extremism held on Wednesday. Several important issues emerged from the discussions participated by a cross-section of society of mixed ages, educational background and religions. The views and suggestions of the young participants merit due consideration.

One significant matter to have come out of the discussions was that disharmony in society was caused not only by a lack of knowledge of other religions but also a lack of understanding of the underlying message of one's own religion. That has led to misinterpretations of religious texts and misuse of religion to further the agendas of respective groups—extremists in particular.

The other significant message was the importance of the role of the family during the formative years of a person in inculcating religious values of tolerance and respect for other religions. And for this, it was suggested that religious education and emphasising moral studies should form a part of the curriculum which should not be restricted to learning about the fundamentals of one's own religion only; it is essential to also acquire knowledge of the essentials of other creeds. Such knowledge would help thwart the attempts of extremists to recruit the vulnerable segment of the youth with shallow knowledge and highly idealistic notions. In this regard, it should be ensured that textbooks do not contain materials that are likely to engender ill feelings between different communities.

We believe that the youth of today are tolerant and empathetic towards the feelings, views and traditions of people of different cultures, creeds and colours. But the formative years are the period when young people are exposed to many susceptibilities, and that is where the family comes in.

No relief for flood victims even after the floods!

Urgent rehabilitation needed

AS this newspaper reported yesterday, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies estimates that around 7.6 million people who have been affected by flood are at risk of hunger and disease. Floods in the north and north-eastern parts of the country have damaged more than 600,000 homes. And with floodwater receding from 19 of the 28 districts hit by floods, various types of waterborne and skin diseases have started to spread among the affected people.

A scenario such as this is not a new phenomenon in Bangladesh. Being a flood-prone country, we are well aware of certain problems that floods create. Despite that, the administration's reaction to the recent floods has been slow. And we are yet to see it provide any medical aid to victims in many flood-hit areas. This has only aggravated the situation as many people who are suffering from different types of diseases due to floods have claimed that they have been passing their days in considerable misery in the absence of government aid, particularly in the form of medicine and treatment.

Why has aid been short in coming? And why hasn't the administration worked more proactively to tackle the spread of such illnesses, especially given that it should already be well-accustomed to dealing with such problems? Under the existing circumstances, there is every reason to fear the outbreak of more diseases. Does the government have any plans on how to prevent that from happening?

It is bad enough that so many people have had to suffer from the devastation brought about by the floods. Now that the floodwater is receding, it is totally unacceptable to have them be left high and dry. We hope the government recognises the urgency of the situation, and actively works to ensure that food and medicine are delivered to them at the earliest. Moreover, every action necessary to stop any sort of outbreak of contagious diseases should be among its top priorities.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Making schoolgoers financially literate

Bangladesh Bank initiated the school banking programme in 2010 for students to help them understand the importance of saving, develop a saving habit and start getting financially literate from an early age. But school banking in Bangladesh goes further back than that. Some private banks had earlier taken initiatives to establish the practice amongst students, albeit without much success. Finally, it got renewed impetus when the central bank issued the formal circular.

Accordingly, Bangladesh Bank instructed all scheduled banks to open this financial inclusion policy in schools. The scheme aims to instil the habit of saving into students and make them more skilled with money management. Through the programme, students can get a hands-on, simplified banking experience from school. Any student aged between 11 and 17 years can open an account with banks supporting the service. There are also a few advantages, such as the waiving of fees and charges, free internet banking, lowered minimum balance requirement, debit card availability at lower costs, etc.

School banking is also gaining popularity across the country, according to reports that showed that deposits crossed Tk 1,500 crore at the end of last year. Guardians should encourage their children to avail themselves of this option for their own convenience and better financial planning.

Md Zillur Rahaman, by email

Republics under threat, globally

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING



BRIG GEN SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN NDC, PSC (RETD)

IN America, is witnessing a sort of redux of absolutism forcing many to query whether we are seeing the beginning of the end of democracy in that country.

The world had witnessed a constant effort by America to outdo Europe in terms of freedom and liberty since its emergence from under the British domain, and its struggle to secure moral ascendancy over it. The reason perhaps can be found in the famous Oscar Wilde quip that America has "never quite forgiven Europe for having been discovered somewhat earlier in history than itself." In fact, Alexis de Tocqueville had predicted the gradual descent of America into what he called "democratic despotism" nearly two hundred years ago. That view stemmed from his sojourn across the country in 1831. It is a disquieting fact that the phenomenon is infecting other countries too.

Ours is a republic—at least that was what the character of the state was intended to be as visualised by the founding fathers. The underlying spirit in naming the country thus was to emphasise and justify the name itself—people's democracy or, in other words, popular sovereignty. However, that has not been the case. It might sound facetious to suggest that the infectious nature of this phenomenon puts us in very good company. As one distinguished professor of politics writes, "Authoritarian, xenophobic populist movements have grown strong enough to threaten democracy's long-term health in several rich, established democracies, including France, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States."

It seems that given the recent trend of assuming an authoritarian character by some elected governments, visceral tribalism-fostered exclusivism and vicious majoritarian rule snuffing out heterogeneous politics—the likes of which we witness in the largest democracy in the world—elections, participatory or otherwise, have become the shortest way to absolutism. Belying the universal precept that "every person is born with the faculty to govern himself"—the basic human faculty that allows voters to choose the best way to be governed—the means of doing

that, i.e. an unencumbered atmosphere to choose public representatives, has been snatched away from them.

In the case of Bangladesh, it is disheartening to note the growing apathy of the public towards elections. And the fact has been admitted by an MP, once a minister of the current AL-led alliance government, and still part of it. The polling figures of the 2018 national elections dished out by the EC are misleading. Their veracity has been exposed only too clearly by the turnout figures of the recently concluded local government elections and the trend of vote-casting in the local elections in the last decade. Unlike the 90 percent turnout in the parliamentary elections, which defies common sense (100 percent turned out to vote in 213

the formulation of policies, rules and regulation because "democratic republics are not merely founded upon the consent of the people, they are also absolutely dependent upon the active and informed involvement of the people for their continued good health."

But in countries where members of parliament do not depend on popular mandate or have no need for their votes, people become irrelevant. Rules are framed and laws are enacted to benefit a coterie. It no longer remains participatory but becomes a usurped democracy which is by the few and for the few.

One wonders whether James Madison had our country in mind when he was writing his Federalist Papers. His words seem so eerily prescient fitting exactly the

society that had promised but has failed to deliver an egalitarian dispensation for the people, where the interests of the greater majority of the poor and middle-class would not be sacrificed at the altar of the interests of the minuscule minority. A look at the budget would prove Madison's words true. The interests of the "great body" have been forfeited by the obligation to serve the interests of the few that command the major wealth of the country. That would never have been possible if our democracy would not have been divested of its spirit.

Look at the many regulatory banking policies that have made a virtue of the culture of loan default. It will not only encourage pathological and habitual defaulters to seek more loans and default



centres), there was a diminished rate of voter turnout in the last upazilla elections. For example, voter turnout in the first four phases was 43.31 percent, 41.25 percent, 41.41 percent and 36.50 percent respectively. The upazilla elections held in 2009 had a 70.57 percent voter turnout while in 2014 it dropped to 61.23 percent. The spiral down has to do as much with the charterer of politics in our country as with the pathetic role of the Election Commission. Not only is this bad for democracy, it is also harmful to the system of governance. Why?

Role of the voters does not end with elections. While in our country, Election Day is the only day we have democracy, in a real democracy that has ideals and mores firmly ingrained in the character of the society, people not only elect their representatives but also participate in

model of governance that is dictating the order of things obtaining today. He had said, "Every new regulation concerning commerce or revenue, or in any manner affecting the value of the different species of property, presents a new harvest to those who watch the change..." and which consequently accords "unreasonable advantage to the sagacious, the enterprising, and the monied few, over the industrious and uninformed mass of the people." Madison had also said, "The reason pure democracies fail is that majorities learn that they can legally take property and/or liberties away from others. Those subjected to abuse can be anyone outside the majority coalition, and their minority status can be based on race, religion, wealth, political affiliation, or even which city or state they reside in."

That would be a fitting epithet for a

even more, but will also inspire other borrowers to become defaulters. Because of the lack of the spirit of democracy and a pliant opposition in parliament, nobody feels accountable to anybody, because people are irrelevant.

At the conclusion of the US Constitutional Convention of 1787, Benjamin Franklin was asked by a lady whether America would be a monarchy or a republic. He had replied, "A republic... if you can keep it." Our founding fathers had given us a republic. After fits and starts and the painful interregnum of 15 years from August 1975, there was a new dawn in January 1991. But after 28 years since, would one be remiss in asking if we have been able to keep our republic?

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Nationalising educational institutions: Opportunity or threat?



SHAMSUL ARIFEEN KHAN MAMUN

been bringing teachers serving in non-government educational institutions under the national payroll, otherwise known as the Monthly Payment Order (MPO). Of late, the current government has nationalised at least 271 non-

SINCE independence, a unique policy initiative in Bangladesh has been to nationalise non-government schools or colleges or madrasas. Another unique initiative has

government educational institutions are embroiled in financial crises that hamper the mission and vision of an institution. In order to create opportunities for students, nationalisation is considered a must to ensure an uninterrupted supply of resources. But besides the opportunities that are created by the nationalisation of non-government institutions, some challenges are also created, including lack of a sustainable supply of academics, lack of faculty accountability and absence of social responsibility among the local communities. In some instances, the challenges outweigh the opportunities.

I have collected quantitative data from 50 government colleges and 27 private colleges located in different parts

the authorities lose control over resource management which includes not only fund collection and disbursement but also teacher deployment, posting and transfer. A government institution runs as if it is a government office, having no authority over resource management. As there is a legal bar in place when it comes to receiving donations or contributions from sources other than the government, a government institution fails to diversify its sources resulting in inadequate financial resources in the nationalised institutions in the long run.

Another finding that has emerged from the analysis of the data is the high student-to-teacher ratio in government colleges. It was found that in a government college,

governing body.

Due to nationalisation of institutions, private colleges lose control over staff management too. For instance, when a non-government college located in a remote area is nationalised, the faculty and non-faculty members of the newly nationalised college become accountable to the central government rather than the local governing body or local community. In such a situation, some teachers resort to lobbying to be shifted to a district-level college—leaving the remote area where colleges already suffer from teacher shortage.

Another challenge is the lack of accountability amongst teachers. With the nationalisation of a private institution, the authorities lose control over its own teaching and non-teaching staff to a significant extent. Authority is concentrated in the centre, i.e. either the ministry or its agency. In the majority of cases, the local authorities of a government institution cannot hold a teacher responsible if he or she fails to fulfil his or her duty or responsibility. If a teacher has good political connections, holding him or her accountable becomes very challenging. In government colleges, there are instances where teachers take classes occasionally instead of regularly.

By contrast, the authorities of a private college can hold teachers responsible for their failure to perform their duties. A private educational institution can do so because the institution can hire and fire its teachers given its legal framework whereas a government institution cannot do so that easily.

So, the challenges associated with the nationalisation of non-government educational institutions are many, including inadequate supply of resources. Despite these facts, nationalisation of non-government educational institutions has been a popular political agenda of all governments in Bangladesh because of the strong link between education policy and political manoeuvring. However, perhaps it is time for policymakers to rethink this approach and consider some alternatives to mitigate these challenges so that the country can achieve its Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) related to education by 2030.

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Mazida Khatun Government Women's College in Lalmonirhat, which was nationalised in 1997.

PHOTO: STAR

government colleges and set aside Tk 15,000 crore in its national budget to meet expenditures required to enlist thousands of teachers serving in non-government schools/colleges/madrasas. However, does it create opportunities or threats for the students who enroll in these institutions?

General wisdom says, three types of resources are required to run an educational institution: (i) funds (ii) academic faculty and (iii) facilities. The need for an uninterrupted supply of resources occupies the centre-stage of any discussion about the education system in Bangladesh. It is assumed that non-

of the country as part of my official responsibility in my current position. After analysing the data, it was found that on average the per-student expenditure in a government college and a private one (enlisted for MPO) is Tk 18,441 and Tk 37,766 respectively. That is, for a student, a private college invests twice as much as a government college. This finding is revealing: it indicates that the financial capacity of private colleges is relatively more than that of government colleges.

After nationalisation of the institutions, the ownership of assets is shifted to the government and, as a result,

the student-to-teacher ratio is 90:1 whereas in a private college, it's 43:1. That means, compared to non-government colleges, there are more students for every teacher in government colleges. Theoretically, a small student-to-teacher ratio is crucial for quality education. So non-government colleges are clearly in a more advantageous position. The root cause of this problem is lack of authority of a government institution over teaching staff management. By contrast, a private institution can exercise its authority over hiring and firing teaching and non-teaching staff upon approval of its local