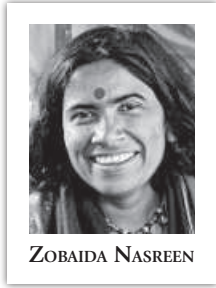


ROKEYA DAY

Rokeya and the need for more sisterhood



ZOBAlDA NASREEN

those videos, the workers themselves described the abuses they faced in Saudi households and sought help to return back home. The outpouring of tears and the fears on the faces, clearly visible despite the veils they were wearing, say a lot about the brutality they had to endure in their overseas employment. They are the victims of patriarchy and globalised capitalism combined. Yet, we have allowed this to go on: in the last four years, 9,000 Bangladeshi women workers returned from Saudi Arabia, most of them with stories of physical torture and sexual assault, and another 152 bodies of women workers were received.

These migrant women workers are stripped of political and social citizenship. Their country of origin had done little to ensure safe working conditions for them, while the receiving country would not take any responsibility for improving their situations. The workers themselves have no political voice. Nobody stood with them in solidarity. Not in Saudi Arabia, nor in Bangladesh. There was also no display of “sisterhood” for them.

Begum Rokeya (1880-1932),

writer and perhaps the most radical women activist in modern Bengal, is still fiercely relevant in naming and discussing such oppressions and exploitations of women. The first value that Rokeya promoted was the value of sisterhood: women need to stand alongside other women in solidarity. The reality of present day is quite different from hers in many ways, but the need for sisterhood is more than ever before.

In her views, the first step towards women’s emancipation begins with education. It cultivates critical consciousness in the oppressed women in a patriarchal system.

Since Rokeya, the social conditions



Begum Rokeya
(December 9, 1880 –December 9, 1932)

have undergone significant changes and major milestones have been achieved, especially in imparting basic education to girls. Women’s long struggle have paved the way for many women taking up important roles in society. Two women leaders have been dominating our politics for the last two decades. More women than ever before are enrolled in schools, colleges and universities. Yet, the lives of working women have not improved meaningfully. Much remains to be done.

One of the major contributions of Rokeya was to identify that women remained an oppressed and exploited class for centuries. She also reminded us of the constant struggle

women face, even to hold on to the rights, recognition and respect they achieve. More women’s education and participation in job market have made the world a better place, but new forms of inequality and exploitation have emerged.

Undoubtedly, the economic progress that we have achieved in this country has come largely on the back of women workers. Though women make up 80 percent of the workforce in the readymade garment sector, they have a muted political voice. These factories often turn into sites of protests over living wages and allowances. Sexual harassment is an important source of mental stress for women workers. Incidence of sexual harassment ranges from insults directed at a person’s gender, suggestive comments, or language, and demeaning remarks to unwelcome touching and grabbing and other physical assaults. These workers need support in terms of organising and forming alliance against harassment.

Sexual harassment and abuse in public places have become “normalised”. Despite widespread incidents faced by women of all social classes, only a few generate some outrage. Unfortunately, we rarely see any solidarity across class, ethnicity and other categories of difference. There is no better time to look back at Rokeya’s writings than this current moment.

Rokeya dreamt of a radical new future for women at the dawn of the 20th century. She was among the first women in Bengal to conclude

that women’s emancipation was impossible without economic freedom. For her, the key was educating women. Rokeya emerged as a writer at an era when women’s education was seen as the path to producing suitable housewives. In a major departure from her contemporary activists or their predecessors, she emphasised women’s economic independence as the essential component of women’s emancipation and to rid them of mental slavery. Her vision still resonates strongly today.

Rokeya developed critiques of some of the roles that patriarchy had assigned for women in the name of tradition and religion. It is this critical consciousness that set her apart from other social activists.

Rokeya’s imagination was not limited to women’s economic freedom through education only, it went far beyond and dreamt of women wielding political power. Despite the presence of a number of women leaders in senior positions, we have serious lacking in this regard. Women workers have almost no representation; women labour-intensive sectors are among those that offer the least protection. The situation can only improve with greater distribution of political power.

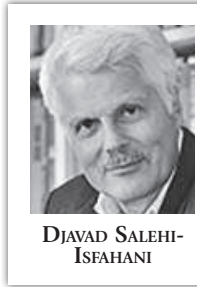
It was beyond Rokeya’s historical time to make or advocate spectacular advances for women’s political power. But she certainly did dream of a day when it would be realised.

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PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

Can Iran outlast Trump?



DJAVAD SALEHI-ISFAHANI

SINCE President Donald Trump withdrew the United States from the Iran nuclear agreement in May 2018 and re-imposed sanctions, Iran’s economic output has dropped significantly. Though economic collapse is not imminent, time is not on Iran’s side. With US politics in tumult, and a presidential election on the horizon, Iran’s leaders are now faced with the unenviable task of determining whether and how to engage with a Trump administration that, while hostile, needs a high-profile win.

As is often the case in foreign policy, Iran’s leadership is divided about the balance of costs and benefits of talking to Trump. Some may think it is worth waiting until after the 2020 US presidential election to return to the negotiating table, potentially across from a more predictable and less mercurial Democratic administration.

But if Trump wins the election, his position will be stronger than ever, making him much less open to concessions than he is now, when he has a personal interest in a tangible foreign-policy victory, or, more importantly, the appearance of one. Moreover, economic conditions in Iran may be dire a year from now, weakening its negotiating position further.

The current state of Iran’s economy is difficult to assess. Estimates of the cumulative output loss since sanctions were reintroduced range from 5 percent

to 15 percent. While Iranians claim—with data to back them up—that growth has been positive since spring, outside observers are not convinced. The International Monetary Fund expects the economy to contract by a whopping 9.5 percent this year, on top of last year’s 4.9 percent decline, which Iran’s own data confirm.

Against this background, Iranian policymakers are locked in fierce debates about their long-term growth prospects and economic-development strategy. On one side are Iran’s hardliners, led by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who want to restructure the economy, so that it can better withstand international isolation.

Already, the hardliners point out, the economy is showing signs of recovery, even though oil exports are not. For starters, after plummeting 70 percent in 2018, Iran’s currency, the rial, has reclaimed one-third of its lost value and remains convertible enough to suggest that Iranian economic actors have not given up on it.

Recently published data also paint a favourable picture of employment. During the third quarter of 2019, a record 24.75 million Iranians were working, a 3.3 percent year-on-year increase; the economy added about 800,000 jobs, one-third of which were in manufacturing; and the unemployment rate stood at 10.5 percent, its lowest level in seven years.

These developments suggest that restrictions on oil exports may be forcing Iran to diversify its economy, a sort of Dutch disease in reverse. The country’s hardliners argue that US sanctions are galvanising the “resistance economy,” which is less reliant on trade in general, and especially on trade with the West.



Iranian rial currency notes are seen at a market in the holy Shi’ite city of Najaf, Iraq September 22, 2019.

PHOTO: ALAA AL-MARJANI/REUTERS

This will, Iranian conservatives surely hope, prevent the “cultural invasion” that accompanies globalisation.

But President Hassan Rouhani’s reform-minded, technocrat-dominated government has no interest in reversing three decades of efforts to curb the state’s dominance and open up the economy. They, along with many in the private sector, subscribe to the western neoliberal idea that limited government and free enterprise offer the only viable path to prosperity.

Iran’s economic recovery, the technocrats and neoliberals argue, is temporary. With the government having to print money to fill the budget gap caused by the loss of oil revenues, the rial will, sooner or later, come under severe inflationary pressure. And the

government’s capacity to fight inflation is severely limited, not least because a stronger currency would deplete the competitive advantage that caused the rebound in employment.

In any case, the reformist camp argues, the employment recovery is unlikely to survive more than a year or two under the current sanctions regime, which is depressing foreign investment and blocking Iran’s access to the technologies required for economic restructuring. In 2018-2019, fixed capital formation, which has historically averaged about 30 percent of the GDP, fell to 14 percent of GDP, barely enough to restore the existing capital stock.

Iran’s public sector, struggling to cover its current expenditures, is in no position to offset the loss of foreign

investment. The private sector, for its part, faces a credit crunch, because Iran’s banks are now mostly insolvent.

For now, Iran is moving to expand its uranium-enrichment activities, in a sharp rebuke to an international community that abandoned it. Iran did not deserve punitive sanctions when Trump re-imposed them, because it had not violated the terms of the nuclear deal. By showing the world that it will not succumb, Iran hopes to end the current stalemate without conceding to US demands.

Iran is not the only party with a choice to make. Western leaders must now decide how to respond to its enrichment activities—which, to be sure, remain far below weapons-grade level. Ham-fisted sanctions regimes may cause Iran severe distress, but there are clear limits to their effectiveness. Moreover, they strengthen the position of Iran’s hardliners, and undermine its moderate reformists—a dynamic that compounds the risks that sanctions are supposed to mitigate.

Rather than simply ramping up sanctions further—say, by re-imposing United Nations penalties—the international community should take a more nuanced approach, guiding Iran toward greater openness rather than attempting to beat it into submission. Such an approach certainly would improve the prospect of successful negotiations, both before and after the US election.

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(Exclusive to The Daily Star)

QUOTABLE
Quote

ALDOUS HUXLEY
(July 26, 1894 –November 22, 1963)
English writer and philosopher

*The more powerful
and original a mind,
the more it will incline
towards the religion
of solitude.*

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

27 Quick snacks

5 Long tales

1 Massage target

29 Possesses

6 Bunches

5 Pert talk

30 Loafer ornaments

7 Crash cause

9 Barbershop offering

32 Silhouette

10 Spotted

11 Hilo hello

34 Old auto

12 Game place

13 Trims

35 Exultant

17 Cat breed

14 Succeed

36 Less common

19 Cease

15 Break off

38 Sudden swell

22 Dojo flooring

16 Foolish talk

39 Rude push

24 Stingy sorts

18 Tony-nominated

40 Spots

25 Mall businesses

20 Took the title

41 God of war

26 Spring sign

21 Paint type

DOWN

1 Rockies resort

2 Designer Coco

3 Place to find nuts

4 Second person

27 Outlaw

28 Jacket part

30 Ocean’s motions

31 Tender spots

33 Olympics sled

37 “Caught you!”

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YESTERDAY’S ANSWERS

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
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BEETLE BAILEY

by Mort Walker

4-22

BABY BLUES

by Kirkman & Scott