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WOMEN IN BANGLADESH : ZIA'S VISION

Women throughout the ages and around the globe have suffered discrimination. This is an unchallenged fact of history. Nations are wont to talk of "Man-Power" as among their fundamental resources. The fact that for centuries women constituted just short of half that total resource has been conveniently or deliberately ignored. Women continued to be treated as dependents—a totally arbitrary burden. The fact that they perform nearly two-thirds of the work hours, yet in comparison receive only one tenth of the world's income is only belatedly being recognised.

Today, despite the ferment generated on the rights, status and role of women, their position in the great majority of countries in the world remains essentially a static one. Women continue to remain outside the mainstream of development. They are still encumbered by vast and complex problems of assimilation and absorption in the socio-economic body politic. They remain circumscribed by a network of inhibitions and limitations rooted in their own vulnerability and the historical and institutional milieu in which they have evolved.

The inequalities to which they have been subjected are cumulative and institutionalised. Poverty and

lack of education, training and job opportunities have enforced their subjugation. Legal and religious constraints, psychological and social barriers rife with inconsistencies and distortions have trapped them in a straightjacket of seemingly perpetual dependency and vulnerability.

THE POSITION IN BANGLADESH

Bangladesh represents in microcosm the ills that characterise the position of women in most Third World countries. With a man-land ratio of 90 million people on 55,000 square miles of territory the objective results are appalling. Ninety-nine percent of women live in rural areas. Only 14% are literate compared to 29% men. These figures themselves are insufficient in depicting the level or quality of literacy since experts hold that in reality only 2 to 3% are truly literate in a relative sense. Some studies showed that 78% of the total families in Bangladesh had *no* female literate and that a deplorably large percentage of women are either non-schooled or dropouts. Social taboos against female education persist in strength.

The employment picture reveals a similar staggering discrepancy. Of a labour force of 25 million only 6 million are women. This figure is declining due to continuing displacements as a result of modernisation. The picture in the public and semi-public sector is equally dismal. The scope of employment is restricted to a depressingly small number of traditional fields—education, social welfare, family planning etc. In decision-making

jobs employment of women is less than marginal. These dismal statistics must also be seen in the context of deep-rooted psychological and social obstacles and attitudes that continue to exercise a prohibitive influence on any meaningful break-through on the part of women.

In rural sectors the position of women is even more depressed. Reduced to the ambiguous status of housewives, they continue to remain shackled to household and subsistence sectors with little hope of breaking through to the plane of income-generating employment outside their houses. Modernisation and induction of inappropriate technology are displacing them even from their traditional role in agricultural and cottage industry sectors. The socio-religious frame-work inherent in the patriarchal structure coupled with religious taboos, the purdah system, their illiteracy, lack of training and job opportunities and overall lack of mobility have imposed on them a permanent dependency.

In the urban sector, women's so-called emancipation is highly segregated and limited to a few traditionally recognized fields such as medicine and teaching. Attitudinal changes of their role induced by economic pressures are as yet negligible to constitute any significant break-through.

Legally the position is also ambiguous with vital differences between form and substance, between guaranteed principles and their translation into codified and legislative rights ; in short, between *de jure* rights and *de-facto* exercise of these rights. Thus for instance, the constitution offers "equality of opportunity for all

citizens in respect of employment or office" and further lays down that "no citizen shall on grounds of religion, race, caste or sex...be discriminated against in respect of any employment or office." It has already been demonstrated in the employment field that these Constitutional guarantees have not been upheld. The Constitution also states that women would enjoy equal political rights and status without discrimination as to sex. They are eligible to vote and participate in and contest elections to all publicly elected bodies. The past ten years of Bangladesh's history have made abundantly clear the *extent* to which these rights have been denied. The provision in the constitution that women shall have equal rights with men in all spheres of the state and of public activities faces a similar discrepancy between rules and reality.

At the same time legal rights of women with regard to personal and family laws, criminal and civil procedure codes, payment of wages, Workman's Compensation Act (1923), Contract Act, Partnership and Property Acts, etc. have provided a large measure of legal under-pinnings in law and in practice. The essential point remains that this legal framework has to be further expanded in statutory form and strengthened in application. Vital fields such as labour laws pertaining to women, maternity benefit, abortion and divorce laws, social legislation of various kinds which will increase the actual capacity of women to combat exploitation, achieve personal dignity and get professional recognition are yet to be codified.

In spite of this dismal picture it can be asserted with pride that the women of Bangladesh have made vital contributions in the emergence, rehabilitation and reconstruction of the country. Their role in the war of liberation, their constant support through untold sacrifice and their motivational impetus all substantially bolstered the creation and continuance of a viable Bangladesh. They are and remain a vast untapped potential vital to the future of the country. What had been lacking was the means to activate, integrate and maximize this vast potential in accelerating Bangladesh's development goals.

There was a need, therefore, for the nation to address itself seriously to questions involving the place of women in the nation's future existence. What should be the role of women? What were the constraints—social/political/religious—that prevented maximisation of this effective role in nation-building? How could a new dimension and dynamism be added through their integration in the development process?

ZIA'S CONTRIBUTION

It is here that the contribution of late President Ziaur Rahman was of critical import. The women of Bangladesh—leading intellectuals in a wide variety of professional fields—had already begun the task of examining and elucidating the constraints and limitations faced by women on the one hand and the areas in which their participation could benefit the country on the other. Seminars and rallies were held, articles and books were

written and attempts to educate women of their legitimate rights were made, but their impact on decision-makers and subsequent meaningful translation into actual workable schemes were minimal. As has been the experience of women in male-dominated societies the world over, only lip-service was rendered to the status and rights of women while substantive gains remained painfully slow, if not non-existent.

President Ziaur Rahman was perhaps the first to visualize the immensity of this untapped human resource and to seek ways and means to augment its potential and assimilate it into the fabric of a workable society fighting desperately to keep pace with rising expectations. He was the vital catalyst in guaranteeing their awakening to self-reliance and augmenting their potential contribution to nation-building and national development.

It goes without saying that there were many limitations on what was possible and what was actually achieved, but it can be said without any doubt that the impetus in the emancipation of women in Bangladesh came during his regime.

Let us examine the scope and content of President Zia's contribution to the emancipation of women in Bangladesh.

ORGANISATION AND STRATEGY

It may be pointed out that no specific role for women was visualized at the time of the preparation of the First Five Year Plan, although some limited schemes

were undertaken in the later part of the plan period to improve the lot of women. This can be seen from the fact that a total outlay of only Taka 27.6 million was allocated for the entire plan period, which was mainly utilized for the implementation of five specific schemes developed at the fag end of the five year period. This spilled over to the Two Year Plan following the First Plan when a sum of Taka 61.09 million was allocated for women's programmes.

It was only in the Second Five Year Plan period (under Zia) that the heavy social *costs* due to lack of women's participation in the developmental stream was recognised and specific cognisance given to the importance of integrating women into the nation-building and development process.

The Second Five Year Plan spelled out an integrated conceptual framework of objectives and strategies directed towards enhanced participation of women. A budget of Taka 900 million, more than 30 times the allocation in the First Plan, was allocated for implementation of the programmes. This point alone underscores the dramatic shift in policy.

The objectives envisaged the creation of a proper atmosphere for women to participate in socio-economic activities; expansion of educational opportunities to enhance their absorption in socio-economic activities; provisions for non-formal and vocational education, skill development and specialized training in managerial and entrepreneurial abilities; organisational infra-structure for formulation of policies and

promotion of activities for overall upliftment of women, including uprooted women and their rehabilitation in society; and promotion of physical, moral and cultural upliftment of children.

On the basis of these broad objectives a forward set of strategies evolved including inter-alia :

- i. An integrated multi-sectoral approach involving population, health, education and employment sectors directed towards engaging more and more women in nation-building activities.
- ii. Non-formal education to complement existing training cum production and mass literacy programme for motivational education covering literacy, health, nutrition, family planning, agricultural extension work and training in self-reliance.
- iii. Stress on income-generating activities for women ; development of indigenous technology suited to their skills ; employment of female infra-structural support in Academies for instructor training, skill development and leadership training ; efforts to assist rural women in lower strata by providing such as certain essential services hand tubewells, etc.
- iv. Programmes tailored to make the household the basic unit of production and where cottage industries could be developed; and, building in urban areas day-care centres, women's

- hostels and other accommodations geared also to rural landless women coming to the cities.
- v. Access to rural women of easy credit through rural banking systems. Special credit schemes for business women were to be developed to finance small and medium level services.
 - vi. Appropriate linkage between women's groups engaged in productive activities and government agencies.
 - vii. Ensuring contact between women's organisations and development activities carried on by local government bodies and participation of agencies such as village cooperative committee, swanirvar committee, union parishad, etc.
 - viii. Location of new programmes in hitherto neglected areas.
 - ix. Establishment of a National Council for Women to formulate policies regarding the development particularly of economic and legal status of women and for securing socio-economic justice for women.

These then constituted a substantial improvement over previous piecemeal and uncoordinated attempts to improve the status and position of women.

ORGANISATIONAL/INSTITUTIONAL DEVELOPMENTS

Bangladesh Jatiyo Mahila Sangstha (BJMS)

Besides policies at the Government level, the women of Bangladesh themselves had to be motivated towards achieving their own goals. In 1976 President Zia ordered the creation of the Bangladesh Jatiyo Mohila Sangstha as an integrated nucleus organisation for "social, economic, educational and cultural uplift of women." This organisation was basically voluntary in nature created as a focal point to organise the activities of women.

Women's Affairs Ministry

Two years later under President Zia's direction a full-fledged Ministry of Women's Affairs under a Cabinet Minister was created to promote and safeguard women's socio-economic and legal status. The Ministry jurisdictionally supervises the functions of the Mahila Sangstha. Under the Five Year Plan, the Ministry is also directly responsible for certain schemes such as co-ordination between rural banking schemes and women's organisations for credit, establishment of appropriate linkage between women groups engaged in productive activities and government agencies, and overall measures to integrate women into the development mainstream.

It can and has been argued that the creation of specialised agencies dealing exclusively with women constitutes in a sense a subtle form of segregation between

men and women in all walks of life. Though the point is well-taken, it is also true that a beginning has to be made to cut through the morass of centuries of discrimination so that practical schemes may be implemented.

Under the auspices of the Women's Affairs Ministry and the Jatiyo Mahila Sangstha a number of ideas have been translated into working models.

Rural Development Programme

An effort was made under this programme to extend national coverage of the work of the BJMS for the social, economic, educational and cultural uplift of women. The 19 Unions were to carry out pilot development projects. Each district committee was entrusted with forming an Union Coordinating Committee of 12 members composed of a President and a Secretary drawn from women members of the Union Parishad. The other 10 members would be drawn from villages comprising the Union or a group of villages if more than 10 in an Union. The villages themselves were to be divided into 'paras' with each 'para' selecting a volunteer to organise village committees.

Union development centres comprising offices, store-room-class-room, sales centre were constructed including a room where trades such as handlooms, dyeing, cottage industries, etc., are taught. Major work of the centres and committees is both motivational and practical—to familiarize women in family planning, national health, child care, nutrition, cooperative farming, adult literacy, etc.

Urban Development Project

The BJMS Ward Committees have divided cities and towns into municipal wards. One hundred member committees with office bearers have been established in each ward along with functional representatives in various sectors who are charged with involving and orienting women in various field—handicrafts, poultry, kitchen-gardens, fish culture, food preparation, adult literacy, day-care, library and club room, family planning, clinic, etc. The aim is for each ward to be self-reliant particularly through fund raising.

The National Women's Development Academy was conceived and established as a non-formal vocational institute for women for welfare-oriented efforts that would pave the way for harnessing women into labour force of the country. It is proposed to set up under the Academy a development centre at each of the BJMS offices at district, sub-division and thana level. The centre attached to the National Headquarters of BJMS in Dacca is the main Academy where volunteers and professional developmental workers from all over the country are trained.

Women's Rehabilitation and Welfare Foundation (WRWF) was formed both to rehabilitate women affected in war or otherwise made destitute and for providing vocational training. Trainees are also educated in family planning and birth control.

Other activities include the development of research programmes to identify women's needs and issues; the development of children's programmes; the

development of skills in production centres ; the formation of small industries ; and, the building of hostels for working women.

Besides these organizations, the Government has encouraged existence of other organizations pertinent to women such as the Bangladesh Mahila Samity, the Bangladesh Mahila Parishad, WRWF, IRDP Women's Cooperatives, Mothers Club, Federation of University Women, Women's Volunteer Association, Federation of Business and Professional Women in Bangladesh, etc.

Many of these bodies along with other enlightened groups and individuals have pursued ideas and experiments which have by a process of accretion contributed to the propagation of the role of women. All these efforts are commendable and should be encouraged. Out of them have emerged useful projects such as the People's Health Centre and the Paramedics Women Centre. A key example is the Swanirvar Women's Programme whose basic objective is to attain self-reliance at all levels through better organisation, planning and use of unused and waste resources, human and physical.

National Council for Women

To give further direction and overall national coverage it is envisaged in the Second Five Year Plan to establish a National Council for Women to formulate policies on women's development especially regarding their economic and legal status.

Women and Employment

A landmark commitment of the government under President Zia was to guarantee employment opportunities to women through the reservation of a ten per cent quota of seats for them in the government and autonomous bodies. It is true that despite this specific reservation of seats not much progress has been made in the employment market with perhaps some exceptions in the fields of education, social welfare and family planning. Nonetheless, the door has been opened for women to participate in the important decision-making fields such as the legislature, judiciary, executive, diplomacy and bureaucracy where even today participation is minimal.

Women in Politics

Today, women in a real sense have been participating in political and public affairs in greater number than ever before. Under President Zia, ten per cent seats have been reserved for women in the Parliament and they are also free to compete with males for the rest of the seats through direct elections. It may be mentioned that reserved seats for women in the Parliament were doubled in 1978 from that obtaining in the previous regimes. Ziaur Rahman's government also ensured participation of women at grass roots level through Union Parishad and the Gram Sarkar (village government). While these developments are certainly only a beginning, it is for the women of Bangladesh to seize the opportunity and promote their own cause.

Women and Legal Rights

Here too, the battle is uphill. As their presence and role in the legislature improves, women can build upon the principles laid down in the constitution and formulate specific legislations that would safeguard their rights without discrimination. A landmark example in 1980 was the review of the Income Tax Act of 1922 altering the practice in the past of denying equal rights to women as given to men in entering partnership with their male relatives and receiving tax benefits.

Attitudinal Changes

Besides the specific policies, programmes and achievements of the government, President Zia's push for the emancipation of women has been directed at bringing a radical change in societal attitudes towards women. As a means of integrating them into the nation's body-politic he has encouraged women to join their male counterparts in defence of the nation's sovereignty and independence. Women have now become full-fledged members of our armed forces. President Zia has also sounded the clarion call for women themselves to revolt against all sorts of injustices, negligence and deprivation to shake off conventional ideas and through their own awakening to engage themselves in national, economic and development pursuits.

CONCLUSION

In concluding this article, it can be said that for

the first time in the history of Bangladesh, women have been given a sense of purpose and an expectation of fair and equal treatment. Under President Zia the government had consciously taken the first steps towards a pragmatic and bold effort to integrate women in the development process, not through words alone but meaningful programmes and policies. With President Zia acting as vital catalyst a new era had been introduced in the emancipation of women in social, political and economic fields. His encouragement and support had been a pivotal one and it is now for the women of Bangladesh to pursue the avenues opened.