

But these fundamentalists were not satisfied by the result. So, to get the desired effect, they burnt down 110 BRAC-run schools. Recently, they have increased their activity against the NGOs because these institutions are conducting secular education among the village children, encouraging women to come out from behind the veil and even to earn their own living by working outside their own homes.

It should be noted that 70% of the students at the BRAC-run schools are girls.

Grameen Bank at one time had 1,000 branches covering 34,000 villages. In 1993, it dispensed \$1.5 billion of credit to help the deprived rural women to earn their livelihood. Some 94% of 2,000,000 recipients of Grameen loans are village women.

If the mullahs succeed and NGOs are forced to suspend their services, the impact on women in rural Bangladesh would be disastrous. I hope that the people of Bangladesh will not yield.

We hear of resistance from the villagers from time to time. But much depends on what the government and political parties do to counter the wave of fundamentalism in our country.

Though declared Islamic by successive military rulers Bangladesh is not like many other Islamic countries. The people are entitled to certain fundamental rights, irrespective of religion and sex.

Bangladesh has its own modern legal system. From the lowest to the highest court, people are entitled to get justice according to modern laws. There is no room for religious courts or judgements by village elders or clerics. Fatwahs are obviously illegal.

As far as I know, in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Morocco, Sudan, Indonesia and Pakistan there are Sharia [religious] boards appointed by governments to give decisions on laws passed by the governments — whether those laws are in conformity with the Koran. Even there, the government-appointed Sharia boards have no right to render justice by themselves. They implement their orders through government agencies. In Bangladesh there are no Sharia boards, no grand muftis, but in the villages, the mullahs act as grand muftis.

They issue fatwahs, and execute the fatwahs by themselves, ignoring the authority of the state.

A fatwah was issued against me. The mullahs were courageous enough to deliver a verdict of capital punishment against me. To encourage the killer, they also offered a handsome prize for my head. The amount is quite high, for a poor country like Bangladesh. But the government remained a silent spectator.

Instead of taking action against the mullahs the government issued a warrant to arrest me, brought charges of blasphemy against me, and initiated a criminal case in the law courts. The trial is still on. I do not know what awaits me in the future.

This is the basic question that faces the liberals and humanists in my country. It seems that after a long phase of military rule Bangladesh has a democratically-elected government. The mullahs, armed with medieval ideas and fundamentalist

arrogance, appear as the real rulers of Bangladesh — particularly in the countryside.

They have already made a dent in public administration and have spread their tentacles of bigotry and hatred in all directions. The government and the political parties are either unwilling or unable to meet the challenge of the fundamentalists, for short-term political expediency.

Since Bangladesh is predominantly a Muslim country the government and political organisations apprehend that intervention against fundamentalism will lead to a loss of popular support. The ruling party has already compromised with the fundamentalists by accepting them as partners in the government.

The opposition has also joined hands with fundamentalists — trying to dislodge the government. It is true that they have not yet made a united front against the government.

In this process, it is the fundamentalists

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who have benefited most. They have gained a sort of legitimacy and respectability.

As I have already said, it is the women who are suffering most. Bangladesh is a poor country. In 1992 the population of Bangladesh was 110,000,000. The average annual per capita income was just \$220.

Statistically there is little difference between male and female average life expectancy. For men it is 55 years, and for women 56 years.

But other related figures are quite alarming. For instance, in 1988, in every 100,000 would-be mothers, mortality was 600. In China the corresponding figure was 150 and in Sri Lanka, 80.

In 1992 it was reported that in Bangladesh 40% of women of reproductive age were using family planning methods. In 1970 the average number of children of a mother was 7. In 1992 this figure has come down to 4.

But my impression, as a qualified gynaecologist, does not correspond to these figures. They should be accepted with a grain of salt.

Most of the women would like to have smaller families. But in my society it is the men-folk who decide. Patriarchy does not give women the right to control her own uterus.

The believers in religious orthodoxy believe that a woman's body is just for the pleasure of her husband. Scriptures say that a woman should offer her body whenever the husband decides.

Generally speaking, the fundamentalists

do not believe in family planning, nor is the average man willing to use family planning devices, as he considers that it diminishes his pleasure.

It has been reported by social workers that village kids have been playing with freely distributed condoms — as if they were balloons.

Some people believe that marriages are made in heaven. In my country marriages are made by the elders of two families. Neither the bridegroom nor the bride has any choice. Generally the bride is given away in marriage after prolonged bargaining about dowry.

Early marriage and early motherhood are the fate of average girls in Bangladesh. Few girls and boys marry for love — and these marriages are confined to urban, middle-class, educated people.

A dowry is a must for a bride, in almost all cases. Poor families become poorer in the process. Often the happiness or physical security of the married girl depends on the amount of the dowry she brings to the in-laws' family.

A girl child is not desirable, so they remain comparatively neglected in the family. They get less nutrition and less education and less medical care. In Bangladesh in 1990, 65% of adult males were illiterate. The figure for illiterate women was 78%.

In the secondary stage of schooling there are only 49 girl students for every 100 boy students. At college and university levels the gap has grown much wider.

The traditional social norm is that educated women cannot be good wives. They may develop an independent spirit; education may give them a personality of their own.

According to convention, women are made for the pleasure of men and for procreation. So they should be kept confined and taught the precepts of religion which asserts that women's heaven is to be found under the feet of their husbands.

With the emergence of an urban middle class, the hold of religion is slackening. Young Muslim girls are attending colleges and universities. But even at university level, students are discriminated against on the basis of sex. Recently, at Dhaka University, there was a rebellion against this discrimination.

The rules say that girl students must return to the hostels at sunset. But the male students have more liberal rules.

At one time I wrote against this discrimination. Now, however, girl students have won some concessions from the authorities.

I believe in equal rights for women. I do not think this simply means legal or constitutional equality when they remain ignored in practice. That is why I write against the oppression of women. Naturally, I had to write against the powerful patriarchs and against the mullahs. This is the simple reason that led me to flee my country. I never think of making compromises with people who believe women are lesser creatures than men.

They say that women are created from the ribs of man. Nonsense! ■