

Dignity of persons with disability

by Bayezid Dawla

IN APRIL last a physically handicapped young girl, 18-19 years old, was travelling by a bus in Kushtia. The conductor who was collecting fare in that bus also asked the girl for fare. The girl offered Tk 3 which she had in total but the conductor refused it and said the actual fare was Tk 10 which, she must pay. She was helpless and apologetic but the conductor stuck to his demand for Tk 10. The bus was then running across a solitary place. Suddenly, it stopped and dropped there the unlucky, penniless, disabled girl. The sun was setting. The narrator of the story, Bulujan who is also the mother of a 'disabled' son said, 'I don't know what happened to that girl and if she had reached her home at last (Dr Atiur Rahman, Budget 2007-08: *Protibondhider Chaoa Paoo*, May 2007).'

What happened to that girl later on is unimaginable indeed. Yet, dear readers, let us imagine that no other bus stopped there to pick her up nor was a passer-by around to offer her a rescue. With her 'disability' she also could not walk far. Alone she disappeared into the darkness. If she had screamed her terror-stricken, feeble sound dissolved into the pitch-black night. That scary night alone could tell what happened to that disabled girl trapped into the unforeseen miseries of her 'destiny.'

We know that misery does not end in itself. It rather creates and recreates new stories and myths. If the dark creatures of hell were let loose to appease their insatiable hunger the victim could not but succumb to their desire and 'earn' a new, additional label of a 'bad girl.' Affixing this label to the 'miserable' girls, the 'civilised society' of ours thus awards punishment to the innocent victims.

Stigma is a never-ending social vortex that travels from lip to lip and even through generations. Entering a cave of ignominy is not difficult but managing a safe exit from this cave is more than difficult. With her 'bad girl' brand and 'disabled' stigma coupled thus, that girl with disability will continue to be cursed due to dignity denuded by the 'able,' 'educated,' 'enlightened' and 'civilised' people.

I do not intend to defend the girl thus humiliated to 'pay the actual fare,' and there is no point in trying to do so. The point, however, lies in understanding humanly the inhuman and impolite treatment done to the girl. It is a piety that the passengers of that bus were very polite, and taking the advantage of their 'politeness,' the bus conductor became wild and despotic. To his moral turpitude, the 'disabled' girl thus lost her human dignity.

Losing human dignity is a global reality. This happens in both 'civilised' and 'uncivilised' societies and in both the 'developed' and 'underdeveloped' countries.

People with disabilities share a common destiny of experiencing discrimination and indignity in most cases of their socio-economic and political life. They represent 'about 10 per cent of the population worldwide with 70 to 80 per cent of them living in developing countries.' This big number of people suffers ignominy in many different ways but the experience of humiliation is common. They experience discrimination often when they are denied adequate access to education, employment, and information or to essentials goods.

To combat this global unreal 'reality,' however, organisations active around the crucial issue of 'disability' continued negotiations with the United Nations for five years to adopt the convention. They took part in creating the text of the convention with the principal aim to bring about a 'radical change' in attitudes to the people with disabilities. The text recommends 'inclusive development' of people with disabilities, which represents humanitarian actions and reconstruction such as emergency help and infrastructure accessible to all, and development programmes including access to education for disabled children.

The UN General Assembly adopted the 'International Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights and Dignity of Persons with Disabilities' on December 13, 2006 while the government of Bangladesh signed the treaty on May 9, 2007 (*Saptabik* 2000, pp 138-39, year 10). It is expected in article 1 of the convention that the signatory governments will 'ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all persons with disabilities, and to promote respect for their inherent dignity.' Jan Eliasson, president of the UN General Assembly, said, 'The message that we want to get across is that everyone has a right to a dignified life and that all human beings are equal.'

What does this convention mean to the majority of us who are absolutely unaware that all individuals irrespective of caste, creed, race and culture deserve dignity due to them be they able or disabled? How many of us have captured the meaning of the article 1 of the convention and the message of the UNGA president? The meaning is very simple and clear. The statements are charged with the purged passion for building a fair and just world where all human beings live with dignity and respect.

The incidence of humiliation inflicted upon the disabled girl by the bus conductor is the gross violation of the international convention adopted recently by the UN as his violent action denied respect for her 'inherent dignity' and 'right to a dignified life.' This again disregards the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states in its article 1, 'All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.'

Moreover, this tramples the spirit of the constitution of Bangladesh, which clearly states: 'All citizens are equal before laws and entitled to equal protection of law' (article 27).'

In a pre-budget seminar organised on May 16, 2007 at CIRDP auditorium by Action on Disability and Development, its country director, Mosharraf Hossain, echoed a passion for dignity and said, 'If we can move ahead with support from all walks of life, we'll perhaps find a society which seeks to bring about changes, which promotes democratic values, which respects the disabled people and where all the disabled people will be able to live with dignity.'

It is very appreciable that the government of Bangladesh has shown respect to the need for giving a fair share of its 'development cake' to the 'disabled' by signing the convention and expressed its support for the UN call for rebuilding a world equal and just. 'Equality' and 'justice' will, however, remain mere bookish words/terms in the history of human civilisation and progress if they fail to travel out of the UN Headquarters to the remote societies and communities that hardly draw the attention of their governments or to the dense forests where the 'torch of civilisation' hardly penetrates.

Development does not generate any sustainable results without redressing the bias that creases a historical sense of negation. Development is the change in mindset. Changing the mindset is inevitable for 'humanising the societal and individual values, practices, and behaviour that reflect human dignity as a universal right. It is, therefore, an obligation to recognise the 'inclusive development' which respects human rights of every individual, acknowledges diversity, eradicates poverty and ensures that all people are fully included and can actively participate in development policies and practices.

Signing the convention, the world leaders have done a great job. Now they have to face the great challenge ahead. That is to translate the UN words into community action and popular behaviour so that the human beings - be they 'able' or 'disabled' or be they 'women' or 'men,' or be they 'poor' or 'untouchable' - are not hurled down like disposables from a bus running along a highway. I am sure the conductor would not have ventured to misbehave with the girl the way he did if he were aware that there existed a law to protect her dignity and that he would have to compensate a lot more for the loss she incurred. Let us note, however, that people respect the laws when they get the equal protection of law. Justice works indeed when people themselves become just. Making them just remains a massive challenge now.

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