

A woman mountaineer's dream shattered by reckless wheels

Separate cycle lanes are urgent

We are heartbroken at the death of a promising young woman, a mountaineer who was training to fulfil her dream of conquering the Everest. It was a horrific hit-and-run incident that happened on Friday while she was cycling on Lake Road, next to Chandrima Udyan. It is heartbreaking because in a patriarchal society where women with minimal ambition are pitted against all kinds of odds, Reshma Nahar Ratna pursued athletic endeavours with such determination. A schoolteacher by profession, her passion was to climb mountains and she had taken a basic mountaineering course from the Nehru Institute of Mountaineering in India's Uttarakhand. She scaled the Keokradong peak in Bandarban and the highest mountain in the Stok Range of the Himalayas in the Ladakh region of north India last year. She loved singing, running and cycling. We have lost an inspiring young woman whose contributions to our country have been cut short by a meaningless act of recklessness.

For that is exactly what it was—a complete disregard for human life that has also taken thousands of lives before Reshma. At least 168 people were killed and 283 injured in 149 road crashes across the country during the Eid-ul-Fitr festival and amid the shutdown, according to Bangladesh Jatri Kalyan Samity. Despite the passionate student movement for road safety in 2018, despite the unbelievable number of valuable lives we have lost, despite all the promises made by the transport authorities to reduce the number of road crashes, lives are being lost or maimed relentlessly every day. Even the lighter traffic during the pandemic could not save Reshma who was cycling along a road that is a favourite of many fellow-cyclists.

Although over the years there has been a significant revival of cyclists on the roads, the risks they take continue to be very high as there are no separate cycle lanes like in other countries. As we have seen the world over, cycling is considered the most environment-friendly, efficient mode of transport, especially for cities with heavy traffic, as well as an excellent form of exercise.

Reshma's untimely death has highlighted the need for separate bicycle lanes. The Dhaka North City Corporation's Mayor Atiqul Islam has given the nod for such lanes as proposed by a group of organisations and platforms that want to promote cycling and keep cyclists safe. We hope it will be approved and implemented on an urgent basis and cover the main roads of the city. Although it is a start, just having separate lanes will not keep cyclists safe. Reckless driving and utter disregard for road rules have to stop. The Road Safety Act must be enforced. Reckless drivers and transport owners who employ them or unleash unfit vehicles on the road have to be held accountable and punished accordingly. This can be possible only if there is political will to do what is right. In the case of Reshma's death, we expect the law enforcers to identify the minibus and its driver through proper investigation. Those responsible must be meted out appropriate punishment for this crime.

Saving lives through blood donation during the pandemic

Digital platforms led by young people show the way

It is encouraging to learn that volunteers of social media-based blood donation groups have continued their humanitarian work during this pandemic, risking coronavirus infection. Roktodoran Opekkhay Bangladesh and Amra Roktosandhani are two such Facebook groups that along with many other digital platforms have been carrying on their lifesaving activities maintaining health guidelines. Although at the beginning of the pandemic, donors were facing difficulties in donating blood due to a lack of transportation and restrictions on movement, the situation is getting normal now. The blood donors think that there is nothing to be afraid of if proper distance and hygiene are maintained while donating blood. These platforms also suggest donors maintain personal safety through hygiene practices and avoiding unnecessary contact with anyone—the persons accompanying the donors or the patients' family members.

Milon Hossain, a 30-year-old motor mechanic from Pabna, is one of the volunteers of Roktodoran Opekkhay Bangladesh, who recently drove 35 kilometres from his village to the Pabna Sadar Hospital to donate blood to an ailing woman. Asif Ahmed is another courageous volunteer who has been managing blood donors for the group since 2017. Although Asif was discouraged from donating blood because of his physical disability of congenital hand deformity and weakness in both legs, this 20-year-old young man has proved that disability is not an inability to donate blood and has donated blood three times so far. Sajal Ahmed from another Facebook group, Amra Roktosandhani, despite his family's objection, has also donated blood to save the life of a woman whose baby died inside her womb during the pandemic.

Although many organisations have been working in the field of voluntary blood donation across the country for decades, these digital platforms have made it easier for the patients and their relatives to manage donors in recent times. The number of such groups has also increased over the years, as many young people willing to serve patients have created or joined these groups. The massive campaigns have also brought about a positive attitude towards blood donation, increasing the number of voluntary donors.

We hope these groups will get all the support they need in carrying out their activities and also hope that many amongst us will be encouraged to donate blood for critically ill patients in these trying times when people in general are still afraid of donating blood.

TRIMITA CHAKMA and PALLAB CHAKMA

As we witnessed the global crisis of the coronavirus pandemic hit Bangladesh at the end of March 2020, we became anxious about the impact it would have on the indigenous peoples of the country, who were already struggling with longstanding issues related to their socioeconomic, political and cultural rights.

There are over 50 indigenous communities living in Bangladesh, primarily spread in the delta region of the country or "the plains", as well as in the south-eastern part of the country known as Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). These diverse communities have their distinct languages, cultures and heritage and only constitute approximately 1-2 percent of the total population of the country. As minorities, the indigenous peoples have long been cut off from the benefits of mainstream socio-economic development measures. A recent study by Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies and ILO revealed that several socioeconomic indicators such as health, education, household-level income, food consumption, participation and women's empowerment remain below the national average for indigenous peoples.

For instance, the poverty rate among indigenous peoples is much higher than the national average of 20.5 percent. The poverty rate among the indigenous peoples in the plains is nearly 80 percent whereas, in the CHT, it is around 65 percent. The indigenous population of the country has been living in a state of perpetual marginalisation and poverty due to various factors. Their lives and livelihoods have become highly vulnerable due to the increasing dispossession of land and resources caused by conflict, land grabbing, climate change and various development interventions, as well as the prevailing systemic discrimination.

Soon after the government declared a country-wide shutdown to prevent the spread of Covid-19, the immediate socioeconomic impacts of the pandemic hit the indigenous communities the hardest. According to a recent study we conducted on the impact of the pandemic on indigenous communities, thousands of ready-made garment workers and beauty parlour workers have lost their jobs, agricultural production has been hampered, small enterprises are struggling to survive, regular health services and education facilities have been disrupted, violation of indigenous

peoples' human rights has been on the rise and, most alarmingly, indigenous communities are faced with a severe food insecurity. For example, the Hajong families in Durgapur, Netrokona reported having to cut down on the number of meals eaten per day to only one. Many indigenous migrant workers who have returned home are now staying at their village without any income and are in desperate need of employment opportunities for their survival.

What is noteworthy is that the

However, most indigenous communities involved in our study have reported that they received little or no support from these programmes.

The government's initiative of remote learning through digital education (i.e. classes broadcasted through Sangsad TV and YouTube) remains inaccessible to hundreds of thousands of marginalised indigenous students due to the existing "digital divide". On top of the existing challenges to accessing education such as language barrier, indigenous children

As we celebrate this year's International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples with the theme "COVID-19 and indigenous peoples' resilience", we observe with indignation that the indigenous peoples of the country continue to be disproportionately impacted by the crisis. While the indigenous communities have been demonstrating incredible resilience at the face of historical injustices and marginalisation, let us not forget that the responsibility for protecting them still



Most indigenous communities involved in a study by Kapaeeng Foundation have reported that they received little or no support from the Covid-19 assistance programmes of the government.

STAR FILE PHOTO

communities seem to be more anxious about the impact of the shutdown rather than the spread of the virus. As one of the respondents, Kalu Ram Rishi, a 42-year-old Mushor labourer from Parbatipur, Dinajpur said, "The indigenous Mushor community is more afraid of starvation during the lockdown period than being affected by the virus."

The government has taken several policy measures in response to the Covid-19 crisis, including social safety net and other support programmes for the low-income and marginalised groups.

both in the hills and plains lack adequate IT equipment, internet connection, and sometimes even electricity.

The International Monetary Fund has projected that Bangladesh's economic growth, which has been steady at 7 percent a year on average over the past decade, is likely to drop to 2 percent in 2020. As an unofficial lockdown continues with no timeline in sight, indigenous peoples who are already facing multiple difficulties engendered by the Covid-19 crisis are now confronted with even graver challenges in the days to come.

lies with the state.

Therefore, it is crucial for the government of Bangladesh to explicitly address the needs and priorities of the indigenous peoples not only in terms of short-term responses to the pandemic, but also in terms of the prevailing systemic and structural socio-political, economic and cultural barriers that continue to marginalise them.

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Two brick-laying ceremonies for Ram: Which one was kosher?

SAEED NAQVI

It reflects on the civilisational power of Lord Rama in this ancient land that Independent India's five prime ministers involved themselves in the affairs of his birthplace at Ayodhya: Nehru, Rajiv Gandhi, P.V. Narasimha Rao, Narendra Modi and, tangentially, V.P. Singh in between.

India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, learned his early lessons about the limits to his power when the Rama idols "mysteriously" appeared on the night of December 22, 1949 at the spot where the Lord was supposed to have been born and UP Chief Minister Govind Ballabh Pant refused to have the idols removed, despite Nehru's insistence. Secularism was a fine concept but not at the cost of Hindu faith. In the different approaches to Ayodhya are embedded serious divergences within the Congress on the centrality of Hinduism in national life. Not only was Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya president of the Congress for a record four terms, but he was also a founder of the Hindu Mahasabha. One may quibble over proportions, but there is Hindu Mahasabha in the Congress DNA just as there is the RSS in the BJP.

Nehru was a proud "Pandit" but there was a clear mismatch between his elitist tolerance of Hinduism and the all-pervasive Hindu faith in the make-up of most of his colleagues. It turns out, in retrospect, that Nehru's secularism was a huge gamble. It would be thrilling if the secular experiment succeeded to a point where my brother Shanney could revisit relatives in Karachi and regale friends in JNU with the observation which became a classic in the 70s: "Nice place", he said returning from Pakistan, "but too full of Muslims." Today, this gregarious raconteur finds himself fixed in the pitying gaze of relatives from across the border. I called him in Lucknow on August 5, the day of the Shilanyas ("foundation stone laying"). He didn't say much. It is instructive that the top-down secularism of Nehru and Mustafa Kemal Atatürk of Turkey faced eclipse within weeks of each other.

In his very first speech in parliament

in May 2014, Prime Minister Modi had lamented 1,200 years of foreign subjugation. But after the Shilanyas at Ram's birthplace in Ayodhya, he was specific about the timeline of the Ayodhya struggle, that it had taken 500 years since Babar's arrival to liberate the hallowed birthplace. There will of course be arguments galore: has the choreography at Modi's Shilanyas brought down the curtain on the old consensus on the Idea of India? Is that what an emotionally pent-up nation's

Srivastava, a more harassed officer I shall never see. Since I was seated next to him, I could virtually peep into the pit where the brick was to be laid, under instructions from Rajiv Gandhi, his cousin Arun Nehru, and UP Chief Minister Narayan Dutt Tewari. It was an underhand, duplicitous operation, totally violative of the Allahabad High Court order that prohibited any construction on "disputed" land. In a show of force, Ashok Singhal of the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), the



File photo of an armed police officer standing guard on the bank of Sarayu River ahead of the foundation-laying ceremony for a Hindu temple on "disputed land" in Ayodhya, India, on August 4, 2020.

PHOTO: REUTERS/PAWAN KUMAR

cathartic "victory over Babar" entails? Was it that... a victory?

Priyanka Gandhi Vadra must be commended for having "openly" endorsed the beginning of a Ram temple, but in doing so she may have slighted her father's memory. Rajiv Gandhi may not have been present at Ram's birthplace for the first brick-laying ceremony on November 9, 1989, but a foundation stone was laid at the behest of Rajiv Gandhi's government under official supervision of the District Magistrate of Faizabad, Ram Sharan

Hindu body leading the agitation for a temple, threatened "rivers of blood": he would lay the foundation stone on exactly the spot which the temple plan dictated, namely the "disputed" land. Clandestinely, the VHP was allowed to have its say. But Srivastava was to put out a press note that the brick was laid a 100 feet away from the disputed site.

Rajiv Gandhi was fighting for his life against his once-favoured Finance Minister V.P. Singh's rebellion, in the 1989 general elections. He struck a desperate deal with the VHP. The VHP

was to press the BJP to pull back its horses in a seat at Faizabad and three in Kerala. The VHP will claim that it had done the Shilanyas where it wanted in the first place. This double-cross, too, was part of the secret deal. Despite all these machinations, Rajiv lost the general elections.

In his memoirs *The Turbulent Years*, Pranab Mukherjee has confirmed a gem of a story. A week before the Shilanyas, Rajiv Gandhi, escorted by Home Minister Buta Singh, visited godman Devraha Baba who had a delightful way of blessing his devotees. He dangled his legs from a thatched roof and thumped on the heads of those he chose to bless—in this case, the renaissance Prime Minister of India, eager to know if he should allow the Shilanyas. The Baba, networked in the interstellar spaces, transmitted his message: "Bachcha, ho jane do" (child, let it happen).

The soft saffron that Rajiv adopted by way of electoral tactics came to him from two sources: Indira Gandhi donned this shade during the 1982 Jammu election, this being her gut response to the Khalistan movement. Two years later, the unprecedented majority with which Rajiv Gandhi came to power, after Indira Gandhi's assassination by her Sikh bodyguards in 1984, was not attributed to a sympathy wave but a massive Hindu consolidation against "minority" communalism.

This conventional wisdom among Congress senior leaders caused him to open the temple locks in May 1986. Since then, the Congress has been wasting away, wearing soft saffron, selling its family heirlooms, even as the BJP acquires a shade of saffron as hard as it was on show at the Shilanyas in Ayodhya.

Since it is accepted by everybody—except perhaps Randeep Surjewala—that the Congress is now beyond redemption, the best that the Gandhi siblings can do is to recover as a priceless memento that brick which was laid in their father's name in Ayodhya to start a temple for Lord Rama.

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