

INTERNATIONAL DAY OF TOLERANCE

Independent Bangladesh was built on values of inclusion and tolerance

We cannot let these values slip away



SHUPROVA TASNEEM

I always believed I lived in a tolerant society. What else could one think, growing up in independent Bangladesh? The generations born after the Liberation War were brought up on stories of the birth of the nation and the fundamental policies enshrined in our constitution by the Father of the Nation—democracy, nationalism, secularism and socialism. We learnt of how a united nation fought the Liberation War, despite having collaborators in our own ranks who attempted to use a twisted and defiled version of faith to justify genocide and create a divided society. We overcame extremism, authoritarianism and prejudice, and chose freedom, democracy and tolerance instead, building a country based on principles of inclusion, with a place for everyone at the table—*Banglar Hindu, Banglar Christian, Banglar Bouddho, Banglar Musolman*.

All one had to do was look around them to see the signs of this liberal society. Is this not the country where folk culture thrives on every inch of the land, where there is a singer or a poet in every household, where the annual book fair draws more crowds than Eid sales and Humayun Ahmed’s stories still sell like hot cakes? How can a society such as this, be anything but tolerant?

It was in 2001 when this illusion first shattered (for me), when two separate bomb blasts carried out by militant outfit Harkat-ul-Jihad struck at the heart of the capital’s Pohela Boishakh celebrations at Ramna Batamul, killing 10 people and injuring 50 others. The carefully orchestrated attack on one of the most inclusive celebrations in Bangladesh, shown live on television and watched across the nation, sent a clear message in this new era of rising militancy—tolerance will not be tolerated.

This period saw terrorist bombings of places of worship—10 people were killed in the 2001 Gopalganj Roman Catholic Church bombing and 12 died in the 2004 bombing of the shrine of Shahjalal; assaults on centres of culture and entertainment—27 people died in coordinated bombings of cinema halls in Mymensingh; as well as attacks on

journalists, teachers and political leaders, culminating in the horrific August 21 grenade attack on an Awami League rally. It was a time of great uncertainty and fear, at the height of which Jama’atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) exploded a total of 500 bombs in 300 locations across the country on August 7, 2005.

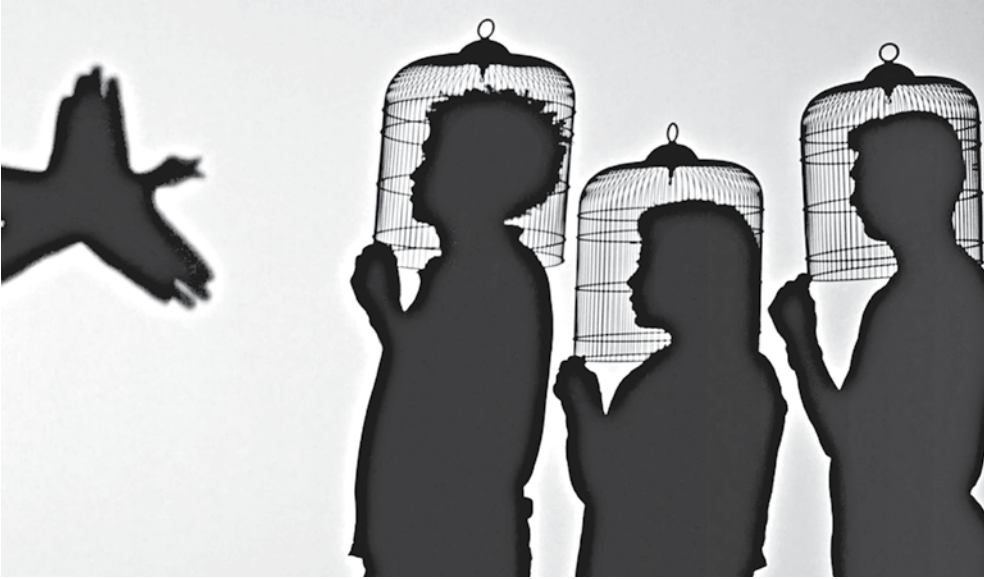
After 2016, international terrorism also reared its ugly head in Bangladesh, with ISIS and Al-Qaeda inspired attacks on religious minorities, secular bloggers, members of security forces and Sufi spiritual leaders. The painful memory of the 2016 Holey Artisan attack, one of the worst terrorist incidents this country has ever seen, is still etched in our national psyche.

The current government must be commended for its strong stance against such acts of terrorism and its active role in rooting out its exponents. However, terrorism is only the most extreme version of the intolerance that has, time and again, made its presence clear in our country. Unfortunately, we have not seen a similar level of political will in dealing with this issue—it was only this month, on November 7, that the Bangladesh Hindu, Bouddha, Christian Oikya Parishad implored the Prime Minister, once again, to intervene and stop attacks on minorities.

There is no denying that these past few months have been especially grim for tolerance in Bangladesh. On November 1, videos of a mob attack on several Hindu households in Muradnagar, Cumilla went viral, and the local administration had to impose Section 144 in that union to bring the situation under control. This came right on the heels of the horrific images of the charred body of Shahidunnabi Jewel circulating on social media. On October 29, he was beaten to death and burnt by an angry mob in Lalmonirhat who (falsely) accused him of desecrating the Holy Quran. During this year’s Durga Puja, there were the usual reports of the goddess’ idols being vandalised. According to the Bangladesh Peace Observatory, 18 temples have been attacked and 27 idols were destroyed up to September this year.

However, the growing intolerance in our society is not just reflected in assaults on different religious beliefs and ethnicities; there have been attacks on cultural spaces and the inclusive philosophies they represent as well. Many will remember the heart wrenching photo of Baul Ronesh Thakur

standing in the remains of his music room, which was torched by miscreants in May this year. This is not the first time Bauls have come under attack—in 2011, religious fanatics shaved the heads and beards of 24 Bauls in Rajbari, and in 2016, 20 criminals assaulted and shaved the heads of three Bauls, including a woman, in Chuadanga. As *The Daily Star* columnist CR Abrar wrote in September, “such assaults are ultimately attacks on free thought and democracy.”



Venezuelan artist Javier Tellez's film installation “Shadow Play”, centred on the themes of identity, exile and intolerance.

And such assaults are, unfortunately, all too common nowadays. One only has to go on social media to see the intolerance that has crept into our daily interactions. A large number of attacks on minorities in recent years were incited by fake news being spread on Facebook, usually of a “report” or rumour of a minority individual posting something offensive about religion, with the most serious of such incidents being the 2012 Ramu violence that led to mobs destroying 12 Buddhist temples/monasteries and 50 houses in Cox’s Bazar. Even beyond that, whether the online conversations are centred on marital rape, the eviction of indigenous communities from their ancestral land or the rights of hijras to receive religious education—the dogmatism (bordering on fanaticism) that

surfaces is constant and reveals something sinister about us as a society.

It is only natural for human beings to hold their beliefs close to their hearts. But why are we so afraid of those who disagree with us? Why, instead of “agreeing to disagree”, must we attack, verbally and physically, those we consider to be different? It is this refusal to allow differences to exist in society that is truly concerning, especially when this intolerance of differing voices have been institutionalised

living abroad have been victims of anti-Muslim sentiments. However, at the same time, we must acknowledge that some quarters are using this very real oppression of Muslims in certain countries to manipulate ordinary citizens into following radical and narrow-minded interpretations of religion. Everywhere in the world, we see different leaders playing to their respective galleries—as French President Macron flexes his liberal muscles to woo voters away from right-wing populist leaders like Marine la Pen, isolating and alienating Muslim immigrant communities in the process, so do leaders like Turkey’s Erdogan and Pakistan’s Imran Khan jump at the opportunity to cater to their voter base and denounce “liberal, anti-Muslim voices.” Together, they contribute to creating increasingly divided communities across the world, where the victims of such polarisation are always ordinary citizens.

The religious conservatives in Bangladesh are no different; whenever a global conversation about Islamophobia arises, it is used as an opportunity to play on the sentiments of believers and promote certain intolerant agendas. This is where the authorities in Bangladesh have to navigate a slippery slope. We have already seen them give in to these intolerant voices, culminating in the removal of sculptures from public spaces and the removal of secular writers from our education curriculum. But once you give an inch, they are bound to take a mile, and we are now faced with demands that range from the distressing to the downright ridiculous—this week, there were reports of demands from a certain religious group to scrap the plans for erecting a statue of Bangabandhu in the capital, as well as the demand from a popular online religious “leader” that cricketer Shakib al Hasan issue a public apology for attending a Kali Puja celebration in Kolkata.

Freedom of religious beliefs and practices is enshrined in our constitution, but that has to apply to all religions, and it in no way gives us room to allow the use of religion as a shield for a radicalism which promotes beliefs that ultimately go against the values that this country was built on. The question we must now ask ourselves is—where do we draw the line? How tolerant can we be of intolerance?

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The ABCs of S-E-X

Why compulsory education is more important now than ever



ZAHRAH HAIDER

SEX is a taboo subject in our society, but there is a desperate need for nationwide sex education in schools especially, which goes beyond a brief overview of reproduction, and includes concepts like consent, contraception and the various forms of harassment.

It would be naive to suggest that sex education is the only solution to ending rape culture, but we cannot deny that it is undoubtedly a key component in combating it. By teaching boys and girls about consent and bodily autonomy, we equip them with the knowledge to recognise and curb harmful behaviours before they escalate to sexual violence. UNESCO has identified this as the only long-term solution. Bangladesh needs sex education that is compulsory, comprehensive, and inclusive to people from all backgrounds. This education should be standardised across Bangla-medium, English-medium, urban and rural schools, and it needs to start from a young age. As Oroddho Foundation, a non-profit organisation working on social justice issues, have said, it is much easier to shape young minds than it is to intervene when they are older and less receptive to change.

Educating people about sex should be a multifaceted approach that explains the biological facts in accessible language, not scientific jargon. However, it shouldn’t just stop at the science—we need education that is holistic. It needs to highlight the difference between consensual and non-consensual acts; the influence of coercion and peer pressure; the various forms of contraception available for both men and women and comprehensive information about sexual health and sexually transmitted infections.

Although Bangladesh is a secular nation, the conservative values held by society influence the way we approach certain topics that are stigmatised or still seen as taboo. Whether it’s drugs, alcohol, tattoos or sex, the fact of the matter is that despite the disapproval of society in general, these things exist, and will continue to exist. It’s human nature to have sexual feelings and to want to explore them. Repression tends to manifest in problematic behaviour at the very best, and at the very worst, sexual violence. Therefore, the concept

of consensual sex must be ingrained in sexual education. It doesn’t mean encouraging people to have sex—far from it. It is merely about ensuring that boys and girls are fully informed about sex and consent.

Our culture champions subservience in women and dominance in men, which inadvertently encourages entitlement. Entitled men don’t respect boundaries, and therefore don’t respect consent, which then leads to sexual violence. Sex education will teach that no one is entitled to intimacy, and emphasise the importance of respecting women, to see them as human beings in their own right and not inferior beings to be taken advantage of for someone else’s pleasure.

We’re so caught up in the idea of *lojja* (shame) that we avoid talking about sex, but do abusers have the same *lojja*? Are they bound by social stigmas? We

are talking about (to the extent that it is necessary) all natural bodily functions. Giving children the appropriate language to understand their bodies means they will be better at communicating if anything is wrong. When we teach children about sex the correct way, we’re teaching them to differentiate between appropriate and inappropriate behaviour. Groping, inappropriate touching, molestation and sexualised comments all fall under the umbrella of sexual abuse.

We also need to teach children the importance of having agency over their bodies. How often do we see children being forced into physical contact—whether it’s pressuring them to sit on a relative or family friend’s lap, or hug or kiss them? When you ask a child to engage in any sort of physical contact and they say no, listen the first time. Respect their boundaries. If you don’t,

people of all genders, ages, backgrounds and occupations are capable of abuse. Statistically, there may be more men who are offenders than women, but there’s still a percentage of men who are victims, who feel too embarrassed to speak out because they fear they’ll be perceived as weak, and because of the misguided notion that women can’t be rapists, or that men cannot rape other men. Sex education cannot overlook this. It must also consider the weaponisation of false rape accusations, and teach that it is detrimental to societal progress if people falsely accuse others in order to gain something.

Describing those who are guilty of sexual offences as “animals” or “monsters” only serves to “other” them. To refer to rapists as animals is to do animals a disservice. Referring to them as monsters equates them with fictional or abstract creatures, thus introducing a degree of separation from reality. And the reality is this: they are people. We must not allow them to hide behind metaphors.

The death penalty for rapists isn’t a solution or a successful deterrent. It’s a superficial victory; ultimately, no one is winning. Rape is rarely about the act of sex, but about exerting power. If we create a culture where people are sufficiently informed and can speak freely about these issues without fear of judgement, and without the possibility of conversations being derailed due to misinformation, we are detracting from said power. Punishment is necessary but it doesn’t address the root cause. This is where sex education comes in. Feminists Across Generations, who provide a platform to those fighting against gender-based violence, have published a series of demands which tackle the multiple aspects of rape culture. They’ve recognised the significant part that schools play in perpetuating institutionalised rape culture and have highlighted the urgency with which we need sex education implemented around the country.

Sex education is pivotal in the fight against sexual violence. The existing legal framework involving sexual assault is in critical need of an overhaul, and policymakers must move swiftly to add compulsory sex education to school curricula across Bangladesh. The sooner we can do this, the sooner we can set the wheels in motion to undo generations of harmful thinking.

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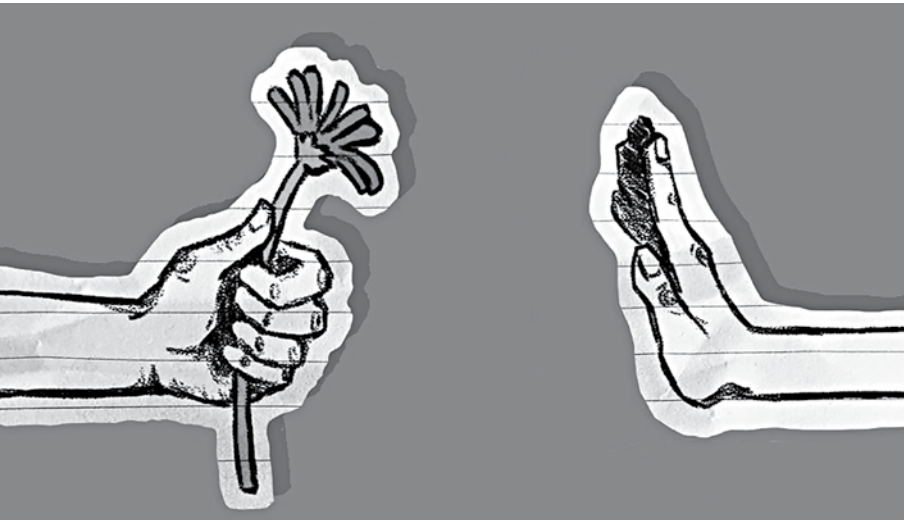


PHOTO: COLLECTED

fail to equip our children with the language to talk about sex in a healthy way because it is considered taboo. It’s an uncomfortable subject for us to broach because the generations that taught us were even more repressed. We’re privileged to have access to an abundance of information at our fingertips, but by not compounding this information with real-life conversations with qualified educators, we’re letting impressionable minds learn about sex from unreliable sources, through pornography and peers who are just as ignorant.

We use nicknames for body parts because we’re too shy to explicitly refer to them, but we shouldn’t treat them like they are dirty words or things to be ashamed of. It’s also crucial to discuss puberty with the same openness as we do anything else. We need to normalise

you are teaching them in their formative years that their discomfort is expendable, that their consent does not matter. This will take root somewhere in their subconscious and will re-emerge later on in life with potentially devastating consequences. Instead, we must do the opposite. We must empower them from early on, and give them the invaluable tool of bodily autonomy.

The more stigma we remove from sex, the more power we reclaim from abusers. Abusers capitalise on the hush-hush culture surrounding sex. They act with impunity because they bank on victims being too afraid to speak out lest they are labelled as “sluts” or that they were “asking for it”. They rely on the fallacy of consent being valid if obtained through coercion. Not all rapists are strangers, and it’s important to recognise that

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS										26 Breathing organ	5 Teapot parts
1 Bowlers and derbies										27 Big snake	6 Some bait
5 Use four-letter words										28 Spanish gold	7 Long, long time
10 Foreboding sign										29 Connoisseur of fine food	8 Plains people
11 Not as well off										33 Light touch	9 Captured anew
13 Kelly of morning TV										34 Investigate	12 Newly fashioned
14 Highly decorative										35 Flammable gas	16 Brooklyn team
15 Breast-bone										37 Persia, today	21 Glossy bird
17 Grier of “Jackie Brown”										38 More profound	22 Was inclined
18 Places for laces										39 Mysterious loch	23 Like museum exhibits
19 Alias letters										40 Attire	24 One more
20 “— a deal!”										41 Merriment	25 Diner order
21 Storage spot										DOWN	
22 Digitizes, as a page										1 Neigh sayer	27 Alternative to briefs
25 Pebble or boulder										2 Friendliness	29 Heredity units
										3 Sioux shelter	30 Cook’s mushroom
										4 Becoming tangled	31 Make blank
											32 High-strung
											36 Gorilla, for example

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YESTERDAY’S ANSWERS

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