

# TEENS and TWENTIES

## The Bully in Us

by Nameer Rahman

**B**ULLY, according to the dictionary, means "someone who uses force or power to coerce others." That line describes a whole spectrum of people and society, of all ages, rich and poor.

We all have a bit of the bully in us, but some have it more than others, and that's the problem. Why are they a problem? Well apart from the self explanatory dictionary meaning, bullies have several pronounced characteristics, such as callousness, viciousness, mean streaks insensitively being some of them. And they can pose serious social and economic problems, if not long term global one's as I'll explain later.

Bullies are usually created, as a result of these characteristics combined with external factors. Sometimes their activities may go unnoticed, ignored or even condoned and encouraged. The external factors are the child's age, his upbringing, his immediate company (friends), the neighbourhood he was brought up in and last but not least, his social standing, all affecting him to a certain degree. For example, the institution could be a school with rigid rules.

The bully could be a senior in bad company, or he comes from a tough neighbourhood, or maybe a child who's spoilt and wants everything his way, or all three. Therefore if the school happens to be strict, the senior could do anything he wants, with his "victims" — unable to defend or retaliate themselves because the school supports the hierarchy.

The chance of this happening are more probable in stricter, conservative societies, where people who stray from the accepted social norms are not tolerated. So any sort of mistreatment is ignored and in a way encouraged. But this bullying isn't restricted to conservative countries. In the United States, society and family life has degenerated to such an extent that to say bullying is rampant is an understatement.

It's so bad that kids are killing each other with guns — as young as young as eleven year olds! In Britain and Germany, Neo Nazis and skinheads are on the rise. They're bullying the Semites and Asian; in general "Non Aryans."

Bullying doesn't exist just on a social level. It goes up to a global scale. We had the two superpowers bullying various

countries during the cold war. USA in Grenada and Vietnam. The Soviet Union bullied Eastern Europe mainly Hungary and Czechoslovakia and invaded Afghanistan. The US supported subversive groups in Nicaragua and the Soviets supported the North Koreans in the Korean war. Later Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait. These are examples of stronger countries bullying weaker ones for not following a dictate global order.



Today's school yard bully could set the motion for tomorrow's dictators and autocrats. Today's bullied could be tomorrow's global bully getting backs for years of hardship. Far fetched? Not so. Hitler and Napoleon were two such people. Look what happened. Europe was "bullied" and destroyed. Millions lost their lives.

The immediate problem still persists in our schools and neighbourhoods. One often hears horror stories of bullying in schools. Bullies are problems, but not just the schools. It is up to society as a whole to tackle them because they could seriously weaken a social infrastructure.

They'll grow up to be the "mastans" on the street. I'm portraying a very negative scenario but it could happen. Luckily Bangladesh is a country that is neither too strict nor too flexible in its ways. We don't have such major problems as yet. Prevention is better than cure. The ball is in our court. Let's hope we don't fumble.

## Ditch Those Adult Values, Mind the Consequences

by Lamis Hossain

**I**T'S cool not to conform when you are young. "Ditch those adult values," a voice drums your brain. To announce your rebellion to the world, you can grow your hair long, swear profusely, listen to loud antisocial music, join the Trotskyites, skip school, or drug your 'darwan' and sneak off to parties. These experiences are a valuable part of youth culture and growing up, but the thrill can turn sour for those who step over the line and break the law.

The reality of juvenile delinquency is far from glamorous. Headlines around the world bring shocking news of children killing children. 11 year old Robert Sandifer known as Yummy, shot and killed a 16 year old girl in the US this September. Yummy in turn was brutally gunned down by his own gang. This month, a five year old was pushed out of a building in the US by two youngsters because he refused to steal.

Although we are shocked by these incidents, we brush them away as examples of eroding values in the West. But the murder of 15 year old Isha, allegedly by a group of teenagers, has forced us to look closer to home.

"What went wrong? Whose fault is it?", we ask in disbelief. Parents, poverty, schooling, erosion of family religious values, industrialisation, and the media — all come under scrutiny in our quest for someone to blame.

Before we conclude that our society is indeed in a deep crisis, we need to remember that juveniles who murder are rare, even though media focus may indicate the opposite. Instead, our attention should be directed to the other offences committed more frequently by youngsters.

In Dhaka alone, at least five out of the approximately 150 cases in courts everyday involve young people according to an estimate by Mamoun Kabir, a project officer for the Bangladesh Retired Police Officer's Welfare Association (BRPOWA), an organisation working closely with juvenile offenders. Comprehensive statistics are difficult to obtain since the police do not list juvenile offences separately.

"It is also difficult to know the exact number of juvenile offences because very few children are asked to put their age down," Kabir explains. "We are currently running a campaign to make sure police stations note the child's age. This is very important as it determines which law will apply."

According to the Penal Code, nothing done by a child under the age of seven is an offence. This can apply to those above 7 and under 12 if the child lacks sufficient maturity to understand the consequences of his/her conduct. Children under 16 years should be dealt with under the Children's Act 1974. This act ensures among other things, that juveniles are tried and detained separately from adults.

"Most youngsters are caught for stealing," Kabir informs. "We are not sure what kind of theft is more prevalent because police records note the charge as 378 (theft) in general terms."

A look at some of the case studies done by the BRPOWA shows the type of offences juveniles are likely to get involved in. Amirul (14) and Sahid (15) were apprehended for arms trafficking. They claim to have fallen in love with guns after seeing a pistol for the first time. Monir, a 14 year old, was involved in an airport gold smuggling ring. According to him, many children are involved in the business due to financial reasons. On the other hand, 14 year old Masum's parents are well off, but he started hanging out with a bad crowd and taking heroin and marijuana. His father alerted the authorities when he began stealing.

Examples of other offences include taking manhole covers, stealing from parents, bag snatching, watching obscene videos, and

prostitution. Although some crimes are gang-oriented such as the Phensidyl drug ring child snatching, or pickpocketing, there are otherwise very few highly organised juvenile crime gangs in the city.

It is quite often the parents who want to hand over their unruly children to the correction institutions. "Repetitive bad behavior at home can become an offence," Kabir explains. "These are situation where the parents simply cannot control the child. There are cases where the child keeps breaking the parents most expensive or cherished possessions for some reason or another. In one example, the child deflated his mother's car tyres every morning so that she couldn't leave for work."

Most of the offenders caught come from poor backgrounds. This does not mean, however, that children from wealthier families are trouble free. "Rich kids usually don't get caught. Even if they do, they can be released for a first time offence if the parents can give an assurance that they won't reoffend," the project officer explains. This assurance is harder to provide where the parents are poor and cannot guarantee the attention or resources required to keep the child in line.

"If a child's brain is flooded, the child eventually drowns," a Time magazine article on Robert Sandifer observed. If so, what kind of problems are our youngsters engulfed in? Why do they offend? In Bangladesh, the reasons are often financial. "Children here have to think of earning a living from a very early age. They soon realise that a straight path is not so lucrative and resort to crime," Kabir explains.

There are other factors in the equation as well. Family environment affects children's behavior, broken families, neglect, over domination, and even too much love can have adverse consequences. 12 year old Kajol, unable to bear his parents' excessive strictness began loitering the streets indifferently. He was admitted to a correction institution for being an uncontrollable child. Incident can also occur due to the parent's carelessness. 11 year old Saif found his uncle's pistol lying around and gravely injured the servant boy with it.

A M Mezbuddin, a retired police officer and Chairman of BRPOWA is critical of parents.

"They are slack and neglectful of their children. They should keep in touch with what their kids learn in school, who they hang out with, and what they do." He appreciates that many middle class families increasingly consist of two working parents, but he thinks it is important to find some time to make an effort to guide children nevertheless.



Schools are also found lacking. Before schools used to pay attention to their students. Teachers knew whether a child was changing for the worse," the BRPOWA chairman claims. "Nowadays they are just like the doctors — they are only anxious to get private tutorials."

Another culprit identified by both Mezbuddin and Kabir is the media. Both believe that children innocently mistake the action on film for bravado. "The media is major cause. Otherwise youngsters wouldn't know so much about guns and so forth. They acquire a curiosity to experiment," Mezbuddin maintains. In fact, they don't even have to go to the cinema to get this impression. "Posters of both Western and Bangladeshi films convey certain images to children. They are a big influence on young people," says Kabir.

Rabeth, an 18 old completing his final year of intermediate disagrees. "I don't think you get addicted to gun fights just by watching them." He feels that disallowing children from watching something only makes them more curious to see it. But Rabeth believes that star TV plays a role in middle class kids development. "Dish antennae is an influence — not the violence but the adult movies. Kids are exposed to conflicting values at home and on the screen." On the other hand, 21 year old Afifa feels that Indian films do the most damage. "Since they are set in a similar social background which the children can more easily relate to and copy."

In a keynote paper prepared by Salauddin Ahmed for a Seminar on Juvenile Offences, the author lists lack of adequate diversions among the various reasons for children's behavior. Some young people may perhaps agree with this. Afifa comments, "There is nothing much to do except watch TV."

Sometimes kids go to concerts, but then they end up fighting." She suggests having more amusement parks and cinemas showing kids' movies. Rabeth also points out, "There are not enough fields. There are none near my area for example. If I can't be bothered to go all the way to the nearest one then I just end up watching TV." Rabeth also thinks that there should be more extracurricular activities for the young, such as after school science clubs or youth clubs.

Parents, schools, media, recreation are all put into context by some commentators as part of a much bigger social problem. In the face of lessening influence of the home and of religious authority, young people grow up viewing a panorama of broken homes, orphan asylums, jails and prisons — a vivid testimony to society's failure," according to Dr Malika Khatoon. "With this confusion and social breakdown, it is not strange that restless and adventurous youth attempt to solve their own problems through tampering with alcohol, sex and crime."

In an earlier interview with the Daily Star, Professor Syed Ahmed Khan of Dhaka University's Sociology department commented, "Our society is now dominated and led by the older generation and there is no special mechanism to listen to youths and harness their potential."

The young people feel the same way. We should get the young people involved in social activity," says Rabeth. "We should give them more importance and make them feel that there is value in what they are doing."

It is time to listen to the young. The first steps could be straightforward: keep open spaces for the young in an increasingly congested metropolis, establish libraries cum youth clubs in every locality, and inspire the young to participate in extra curricular activities. Finally both parents and teachers have to spend more time guiding the young to inculcate moral and human values. These may be obvious suggestions but they are not being implemented.

Juvenile delinquency is not a new phenomenon. It is unfortunate that it has taken such tragic events to shake us from the cosy confines of our middle class homes. The issue should not be forgotten once the initial rounds of shock and outrage are expressed.



## Through Space & Time

by Asrarul Islam Chowdhury

**Y**OU will always see the cosmos And thus the heavens the way they are The supernovas, the black holes And many other wonderful things For if they were different You would not be here to observe them.

Try to look through them Try to understand their creativeness With an ever-green inquisitiveness. For when you have finished your Journey through space and time No matter how you look back at it You will always find that The love you take Is always equal to The love you give

## Song Offerings

### Gitanjali

Translated by Rabindranath Tagore from the original Bengali

**W**HERE the mind is without fear and the head is held high: Where knowledge is free: Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls: Where words come out from the depth of truth: Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection: Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary desert sand of dead habit: Where the mind is led forward by thee into ever-widening thought and action: — Into that heaven of freedom my Father, let my country awake.

**W**HEN the heart is hard and parched up, come upon me with a shower of mercy: When grace is lost from life, come with a burst of song: When tumultuous work raises its din on all sides shutting me out from beyond, come to me, my lord of silence, with thy peace and rest: When my beggarly heart sits crouched, shut up in a corner, break open the door my king, and come with the ceremony of a king: When desire blinds the mind with delusion and dust, O thou holy one, thou wakeful come with thy light and thy thunder

## Michael Fay and Singapore Law

by Itmam Mahmud Choudhury

**T**HE recent caning of American, Michael Fay in Singapore has raised some questions on crime and the necessary actions required to fight crime. Michael Fay, an American citizen studying in Singapore, was arrested for mischief and vandalism. His atrocities were spray-painting about 50 cars in one of the posh districts in Singapore as well as illegal possession of public property. He went through a fair trial, defended by a counsel of his own choice, in an open court. He was found guilty and was incarcerated to three months in jail with six strokes of the cane. For his appeal case, he was defended by a Queen's Counsel but the verdict remained the same. Case closed. Very simple. The punishment received by Fay was adequate to his crime with no partiality to anyone's favour. Further more, Mr Ong Teng Cheong, the President of Singapore granted him clemency and reduced the caning sentence. Instead of six strokes, he only faced four strokes of the "rotan". But this is where the story begins.

First of all there was the media "Blitzkrieg" from the US with newspaper editorials of the different states condemning the caning sentence and making totally unfounded comments on Singapore calling it a "barbaric" state. The news reports blew the whole issue out of proportion. Apparently majority of the well known tabloids were unhappy over the adjudication

but there was an overwhelming support from ordinary US residents who wanted the 18 year old boy to be caned. Even in Michael Fay's hometown, Dayton, Ohio, a large number of people agreed that he should be caned. Unsatisfied with the survey results, newspapers described the caning process and its consequences. Its portrayal of the caning read more like a horror show. With totally no evidence whatsoever, the papers told a fabricated story in which every lash of the cane would rip the flesh of the buttocks and form a bloodied mess and throughout the arduous ceremony, antiseptics would be splashed on to the wounds causing to sting and hurt immensely. After the tremendous torture the victim will not be able to sit for days and the trauma would place permanent emotional and physical scars on the victim.

Secondly, the US President, Bill Clinton who was under media pressure asked the Singapore government to rethink its actions and requested that the caning sentence be removed. This put the Singaporean lawmakers in a difficult position. On one hand they had to please the leader of the world's superpower and on the other, they had to satisfy the Singapore public. After much consideration, Fay's strokes was reduced by two lashes and the compromise was well appreciated by the people of Singapore but the US government was displeased and remarked that Singapore

would suffer the consequences. Coming from the US, a country of such high stature, this type of attitude is certainly disappointing. This conflict between the two nations boils down to just one thing — law. The Clinton administration was not pleased with caning rule, labelling it as orthodox. True, caning is painful and it is not very conventional but it is the method has always worked in Singapore. It instils fear into the hearts of would-be criminals and forces them to re-

think before committing any grievous felony. It also acts as a deterrent to criminals who have been caned before, so that they do not return to their old ways lest they be caned again. The number of lashes handed out increases according to the gravity of the crime. The maximum number of strokes received by a person at one go cannot exceed 24. This as well as other forms of punishment has made Singapore virtually a crime — free state, with one of the lowest crime rates in the world. In the US, corporal pun-

ishment such as flogging was abolished since the 1950's. US citizens complained the punishment was too harsh and had adverse effects on those who were flogged. This goes to show that America is too soft on its criminals. Although it has good judicial system and laws are enforced properly; the punishment meted out to criminals are not severe enough to dissuade them from repeating their crimes or acting as an example to others. For instance, vandals are just given a warning, a fine and placed on probation. In America, it is individual rights over society's rights whereas Singapore protects the latter's rights. Liberalism and individual rights has its pros but look what it has caused, a rampant crime rate. People committing heinous crime are so easily acquitted that it is no wonder some of the large cities in the US have such shocking levels of rape, murder, drug related offences and vandalism. Another point to consider are values. It is quite obvious that in America, the erosion of society's values has caused a runaway crime rate. In Singapore we place the community's interest first. It is the criminal who should pay the price for his misdeeds, not the public, and it is this which has caused many US citizens to support the caning as they were fed up about their government's lax rules on enforcing crime prevention.

President Clinton's request to the Singapore President to grant clemency to the American youth was not proper. Anyone else in Michael Fay's position would have suffered the same fate. Just because the accused was an American citizen, the whole country turned its attention to the case but if a Singaporean committed the same crime, it would not have caused a stir at all. Moreover, Singapore and America have had good relations and the latter is indispensable to Singapore in terms of trade and expertise. Singapore was under enormous pressure because it did not want to blemish its ties with the United States. However, Singapore did the right thing by making a firm stand and not bending under pressure. It decided to go ahead with the caning. If it did not, the public would have lost its trust in the government. This shows that no one is above the law. No matter where one is in this world, one should always respect the rules and regulations of that particular country. In order to fight crime, the hand of law should strike swiftly and effectively and should not be biased to any one's favour. [The writer is Itmam Mahmud Choudhury, a Bengali Singaporean who passed his A-level Exam recently. He is now undergoing two and a half years' compulsory National Service and will continue his studies in the National University of Singapore after his NS.]

