

## Trisha's death triggers protest and arrest

*But can we guarantee this will not happen too often?*

IS Bangladesh testing the limits of its capacity for cruelty and depravity? The death of Trisha is a perfect mirror for the corporate self-image of the people. No rational explanation can suffice to describe the collective mindset of a nation which is willing to tolerate death of young girls one after another. Arrests and trials, few and far between are hardly signs that Bangladesh is unwilling to put up with such crimes. Most are never reported and even when done so the perpetrators get away. This is what we have become.

Bangladesh is protesting against this horrific incident where a girl child of class four was chased by a bunch of rowdies till she jumped into a pond and drowned to death. The killers would probably have gotten away had there not been massive protest in Gaibandha and which later spread to other parts of the country. But the crucial need to bring the culprits to justice will have to be met. Otherwise, in this country where perpetrators of violence more often than not go scot-free this will be possibly read as a potential opportunity lost to political parties to scold each other.

Trisha will not be the last girl to die this way. If anything, more could take to their dry and watery graves in future. The logic is simple. This isn't an act of isolated violence. It has been given birth to and nursed in a perverse and twisted society unable to protect its children. So long as the desperado sub-culture feeds on societal indifference and an indulgent law enforcement system, the factors which lead to such deaths will never go away.

While Gaibandha has erupted in protest, Dhaka has basically remained silent except for a few odd meetings and rallies. This is significant because Dhaka is a city of protest and rage. Two things may have happened. Either Dhaka is moved only when a political death takes place and therefore has been eroded of all human morality or there have been so many deaths that Dhaka has gotten used to it. The death of a child doesn't move it anymore. Whatever be the verdict, it holds up a notice of our pathological shrivelling before the face of terror.

Few societies are as disabled as we are. One wonders as we participate in politics, what we defend? When we vote, what we seek?

We demand the trial of Trisha's killers and an end to the scene where we fear more deaths are possible.

## Men of misfortune

*Govt must address detained job-hunters' woes*

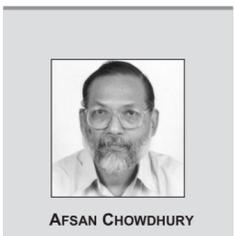
MORE than ten thousand Bangladeshis languish in detention centres or prisons across the world, so says a report front-paged on July 19 in the Bangla daily *Prothom Alo*. Most of these people left their homeland in search of a secured today and a comfortable tomorrow. However, a mixture of gullibility and misfortune has landed them in jails or detention centres thousands of miles away from their near and dear ones. While some have been tricked into their misery, in the false promise of lucrative employment, some others violated contracts, hopped jobs for better pay and eventually found themselves behind the bars. Again, there are others who, in the lure of quick money, were drawn to illegal business and criminal activities, and are now serving time in penitentiaries. Among the delinquents, there are some getting closer to the gallows every day for crimes that are punishable only by death.

What's worse, they don't have anyone to turn to in their times of misfortune. Our missions abroad have earned notoriety over the years of being apathetic to the woes of migrant workers, especially the ones doing unskilled and low-paid jobs. Seldom are their cases heard, let alone addressed. The same can also be said about the Ministry of Labour and Manpower. Their collective apathy often results in unmitigated plight for gullible overseas job seekers who almost always fall prey to unscrupulous recruitment agents and their middlemen. And when they land in trouble, the embassies all but look the other way, as has been the case with the thousands of detainees. They have neither received any legal assistance from the Bangladesh missions, nor any assurance from the government of a passage back home. They have lost everything they had and some are just awaiting death in miserable conditions without proper food or medication.

The present government has recently commissioned a ministry to look after the welfare of expatriate Bangladeshi workers. Its reaction to this particular case has been typically bureaucratic: it is looking into the matter. It says it will not take responsibility for those who have resorted to illegal means to win a passage overseas and will only help those deceived by unscrupulous recruitment agents. Such categorisation is simply unacceptable. All the detained Bangladeshis are our citizens; we cannot abandon any one of them. Let us bring them back and then establish who were actually responsible for their current circumstances. Let's not grope in the dark when we are dealing with human beings in utter distress.

## 'I just want a safe place to work'

Of workplace and sexual abuse of women



AFSAN CHOWDHURY

THE young lady is happy and yet nervous. She is barely able to restrain her excitement as she works and as she speaks, she chats of her new job to be. She has a probation period. Will she be able to impress her new bosses? Her colleagues tease her about the new job. They are from different backgrounds, of different shapes and sizes and like many colleague-friends accept her on her own terms.

She likes the laughter, the banter, the near madness that fuels a newspaper office work. But then such places have their own logic and the price of that environment is a relatively low salary compared to what her new job will get her. It always is. But she has spent days, months in the *bon homie* of her good companions. She already begins to feel nostalgic about the impending 'past'.

"I will miss you all so much. I felt so good here." Her eyes mist, as she knows that life will never be so 'unofficial' again. The middle-aged journalist who works bare feet because his shoes are wet tries to look at her without moving his chair.

"Did you get the message that George Bush called you." Everyone laughs. It's their own private joke. In newspaper offices middle-aged men never grow up.

"This is a place where I felt safe."

"You will feel safe where you are going too."

"I know. That's why I took this job. But you all are..."

"You are about to become respectable Melamine." It's a nickname for the girl who is leaving given by those who are staying back.

\*\*\*\*\*

BANGLADESHI girls work in a society, which is not ready to accept working women. It's a strange paradox that while families are unable to run on single incomes or as girls shoulder greater responsibility or just look for plain old

differ if you are a girl. At 24 you better work because your father can't make it alone. He has retired and your kid brothers are still studying. So, if need be, you dropout and take the first job. She enjoyed her job, which didn't involve serious responsibilities.

"I had to have sexual relationship with my boss because I had come to know by that time what he would do."

"And this went on?"

women assert themselves or use our sexuality for professional domination. Either way, it's meant to put down women.

Society has left us adrift without telling whether it's right to sexually repress women or not, something we have traditionally done.

When we spill acid on a woman's face we will also blow the trumpet of our insecurity at a brutal level. When we make a pass at our colleague who can't protest, at the girl who

another NGO."

"But when she went to a legal aid NGO, she almost went broke down under questioning. They actually couldn't believe that such things were possible. We had to rescue her and get her into hospital."

"What happened to her later on?"

"Her brother came from the village and returned her to the same house. They paid well and looked after the entire family"

such a serious problem in certain parts of Africa that it's called the 'sugar-daddy' syndrome. Where ageing men copulate with teenagers who are at the mercy of a shrinking job market.

"People don't understand how international policies reach out and strike someone million miles away. Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAP) have taken away jobs and business and we take whatever we get. Life is not ours anymore."

I saw a gristly poster of a man pawing a child.

But who is responsible for the scene?

\*\*\*\*\*

A girl tells me that she has been offered a job but the man who has made the offer wants to take her out. She has refused but she knows that it amounts to refusing the job. So a woman is sexually harassed before she takes a job, while doing a job and even after she leaves it.

What should women do?

\*\*\*\*\*

MELAMINE is sad because the period of her tenure is coming to an end. We tell her that the benefits will outweigh the pain of losing her old friends. We give her all the advice that is useful and a few that are quite useless. When the day of her departure will come she will be despondent but the excitement of her new job will overwhelm everything.

"Keep your spirit up. For your child's sake."

She smiles, now more relaxed.

We are not offering solutions or surprises but only narrating a transition that is taking far too long. Society is scared of changes though it's only in change that our survival lies. We accept so many things including the autocracy of the rich but yet we are unable to deal with the democracy of women.

All women want is a secured working environment and there are so few places that can provide it.

Afsan Chowdhury is a Senior Assistant Editor of The Daily Star.

## STRAIGHT FROM THE HEART

We are not offering solutions or surprises but only narrating a transition that is taking far too long. Society is scared of changes though it's only in change that our survival lies. We accept so many things including the autocracy of the rich but yet we are unable to deal with the democracy of women. All women want is a secured working environment and there are so few places that

careers, society can't bring itself to cope with this new phenomenon. Some would say a new threat to malehood. But even if that feminist reading of the work situation is not entirely correct, this isn't a comfortable equation.

And there is always the dark, dark shadow of sexuality in so many cases. As Nachiket says in his song, almost a national anthem of the problems of the working girl, "*khetei khawa meyera to voggyo*" (working girls are consumables).

We just don't eat our food or drink a bottle of cola but chew women as snacks when we get the chance.

"They are tit bits", a friend once said as he gulped a glass of water to drown the merry joy of the prospect of having sex as part of his 'social duty' in employing someone.

Is that what is called entitlement of the powerful?

\*\*\*\*\*

SALMA was almost a classical case of abuse. She got the job when she attended a wedding party of a friend. She had done her graduation and was looking for something to do. The age or the need to work doesn't

"This went on."

"So working girls are forced."

"No, they are vulnerable. That's because these employers are not human beings. Their mentality is that of a *jodkar*. Just like they call their peon *haramjada*, they think of us as *beshyas*."

"So how are women going to deal with it?"

Salma exploded in rage. "No, no you got it all, wrong. Why should we deal with it? How are women going to deal with it when you think all women are of loose character?"

Her rage shakes her body and as she breaks into sobs I don't understand where her anger ends and her loathing begins.

\*\*\*\*\*

I agree that treating working women as easy sex preys is largely our problem but in most cases it's rooted in our own uncertainty in a multi-sexual world. Urban society is a very recent phenomenon and only a handful of women are allowed to work in offices. Our behaviour is that of being unable to determine whether to be professional and lose some of our sexual insecurity as

works under us, we do the same without the blazing liquid.

We are screaming that somebody should accept our fragile and inadequate sexual identity.

We aren't man enough to accept women as human beings, as colleagues and certainly not as our equals.

\*\*\*\*\*

IF the situation is bad at office level it's horrific at the domestic workers level. In that world girls, women etc are really *oggyo*, consumables. I was told of this case story by members of Breaking the Silence, a group working on sexual abuse.

"This girl was brought in by her family to work as a maid. Soon, her master started to abuse her. In fact, the wife would hold the girl down during the act of abuse. Her excuse was that after an operation she had lost interest in sex so she was helping her husband. Actually, as the girl later told us, she was also being abused by the uncle who would come after the husband went to work. One day, unable to take anymore, the girl fled away. She was found by a colleague from

The perversity is not in the act of sexual abuse but our tolerance of the same.

\*\*\*\*\*

SALMA called me one day and as I wasn't in touch with her for long this was a surprise. She had become pregnant and when she had approached her boss, the inevitable happened. She was shown the door and not allowed in again. Since her relationship was no secret, some of her colleagues sympathised. They collected money and that paid for her abortion, a slightly botched up job. Her wounds took long to heal. Meanwhile, her uncle married her off as a second wife to a man who wanted a wife who could bear him a child.

But without her knowing, something had gone wrong with her abortion. She had become infertile. After a couple of years her husband threw her out.

"Could you help me get my *mahr*?"

I couldn't do much and we dropped contacts again.

\*\*\*\*\*

WORKING in office has become

## Shades of emergency?

Nothing exceeds like excess

PRAFUL BIDWAI  
*writes from New Delhi*

THE arrest of Mr Vaiko Gopalasamy and other MDMK leaders under the Prevention of Terrorism Act for publicly supporting Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam highlights a grotesque irony: they were amongst POTA's staunchest defenders.

The irony extends to the entire National Democratic Alliance. The NDA insisted on ramming POTA through Parliament--rejecting thoughtful advice from the National Human Rights Commission, and distinguished jurists and human rights activists.

The MDMK, the BJP's staunchest and steadiest Southern ally, may now be banned outright. Whether or not it is banned depends on the personal whims and cunning of one individual: Ms J. Jayalalitha. Yet, it would be churlish to revel in the NDA's embarrassment. Mr Vaiko's detention under the draconian POTA is unjustified. This is not because POTA is being *improperly* applied or *misused*.

Section 21 of the Act clearly states: "A person commits an offence ... if he addresses a meeting ... encouraging support for a terrorist organisation..." POTA defines "a meeting" as a gathering of "three or more persons," with or without public participation.

It is not in dispute that Mr Vaiko on June 29 addressed a public meeting near Madurai extending support to the LTTE.

The real problem is not the *abuse*

of POTA, but its normal, regular, use. POTA is an intrinsically harsh law which defines "terrorism" all-inclusively, gives sweeping powers to the authorities, and allows 10 to 14 years' imprisonment for helping banned organisations.

POTA is liable to be used against political opponents. Ms Jayalalitha has done just that--following "due process".

and 120(B) of IPC. Hate speech or incitement to violence must be penalised. But that's not terrorism.

That Ms Jayalalitha could "legally" invoke POTA against Mr Vaiko knocks out the argument that it contains "adequate safeguards". POTA is fatally flawed. It subverts the principle of "innocent until proved guilty" and relies on non-judicial confessions--violating not

Geelani of distributing pornographic literature, found--being circulated unsolicited on the Internet--on his computer!

Equally condemnable is the government's harassment of Tehelka.com, which stands starved of investment through the persecution of venture-capitalist Shankar Sharma--who was raided 25 times. Tehelka's "sting" reporters have

nated eight persons, many tied to the RSS, to the 20-member CPAC. They included Tarun Vijay, editor of *Panchajanya*, known for ludicrously equating of Marx, Macaulay, and Madrasas. These new members demand dis-accreditation of journalists like *Time's* Alex Perry because they "hurt the nation's sentiments".

This is pernicious. Even during the Emergency, the government

were released after editors' intense protests.

The next day, lawyers obtained a legal stay on the deportation of the Nepalis who risked being lynched in Kathmandu. But by 6 a.m., they were already deported--contravening a treaty which gives Nepali citizens "equal" treatment, and violating well-established norms.

A government which gets so paranoid about a meeting demanding a dialogue between the government and the Maoists in Nepal can suppress dissent to any extent. No wonder it is trying to pressure some of the biggest newspapers by encouraging foreign investment into their pro-Hindutva rivals. It can bung any journalist into jail by planting incriminating material on him/her. This dangerous trend must be reversed.

**Postscript:** It is shameful that Bhopal gas disaster victims had to go on a 19-day-long hunger-strike to demand that the government follow the Supreme Court's order on the criminal prosecution of Union Carbide chairman, Warren Anderson. The CBI has gratuitously diluted charges against him.

The victims rightly demand the Rs. 1,300 crores left of the compensation due to them not be distributed among Bhopal's gas-*unaffected* population. But what can be more disgraceful than the government's callous response to the protest?

Prافل Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.

## TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

### Holding cable TV viewers hostage

I fully agree with Mr. Fahad Saleh's letter (July 21). What will we benefit if the government agrees to the demands made by the cable operators? We have been deprived of our only source of entertainment and we would continue to be the victims of inferior service.

It would only be fair if the cable operators ask for this month's bill after subtracting the proportionate amount from the monthly bill for the number of days the operators were on strike

I call upon all subscribers and request them not to pay a full month bill to the operators. How could the operators shutdown the channels when we pay for their services? They should keep in mind that it is the subscribers whom they should satisfy cause without us their businesses will go down the drain!

A.H  
Dhaka

### Well done BUET teachers

You have suspended all student politics on campus. To me this is the news of the century; while many lamented, none came forward to stop it.

This is indeed a bold step and may you succeed in it.

M. Anisuzzaman  
*Superumary teacher,  
Public Administration Department,  
DU*

### Politicisation

I have gone through the news "Libraries in political web" (July 19). A committee formed by the present government has selected 52 books on Ziaur Rahman and Khaleda Zia for public and college libraries.

The previous AL government also selected 41 books on Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Sheikh Hasina. More interestingly, at least 20 books were authored by the committee members, their wives or close associates, and none from the noted authors like poet Shamsur Rahman, Begum Sufia Kamal,

Shawkat Osman, Hassan Azizul Huq, Dr. Anisuzzaman and Humayun Azad.

Where is the neutrality? What is the difference between BNP and AL? In the name of democratic government every sector of this country is being politicised. When will the people get a relief from the curse of the so-called politicisation tendency?

M. S. Uddin  
*Nagoya, Japan*

### "Persona non grata"

I live in Uttara and work in Rokeya Sarani. Opening up the Cantonment for the general public from Banani onwards was a very charitable move by the government. I am very grateful for that because it saves me time and hassle on my commute.

Two days ago, I was coming home in my car. I entered Cantonment from the entrance near the old airport. I drove on and was coming out of the Staff Road where the "Heroes live forever" gate is. I was stopped by the guards over there and was asked where I was coming from. I didn't lie and said that I was

coming from Rokeya Sarani. They made me turn around and they said that I have to come out of the Banani diversion.

So I had to turn around and go back the same way I had come to get out through Banani. I find it absolutely ludicrous. The Cantonment has been opened up, but only until Banani, and not beyond that. What's the logic behind that? I don't see any logic behind making me turn back and get out through Banani.

Kimu  
Dhaka

### Tele-scam

It took foreigners' complain for the BTB to wake up to the tele-lines tampering. I am sure there are thousands of such local complaints, which fall on deaf ears.

Why can't we send those responsible to jail for such crimes? Why is the union so powerful, that all the governments during the last twenty years had to bend over to them?

Another murky Mahboob.  
FM  
Chitagon

### "In Love with Carnatic Music"

Many thanks to Meghna Ameen for presenting Carnatic as an option to the classical music listeners of Bangladesh.

Carnatic mode uses *srutis* (notes that sits between formal notes) much more than the North Indian counterpart which makes it sound a bit off to us baptised northerners. I even feel that the swars are also perched a bit off. Why else then you can immediately identify a Carnatic singer from the rest. I would agree that it requires more training than *Hindustani* but I would also add that in order to be a master on either of the music or for that matter on anything of value the practice is a constant way of life till death. So the qualification of "harder" in that case becomes irrelevant.

I would like to break a myth that I have heard before and the article also alluded to the notion, that once you master the Indian Classical Music you can sing any form of music. For example European Classical is a completely different music system from the Indian Clas-

sical System. One excels in harmony and the other in melody. I can not imagine Fayyaz Khan, however deep his voice is, singing an aria, set for a Tenor in a Verdi's opera. It will be an insult to both the master and the music.

With the amazing variety of cultural strands in this wonderful world where folks have been using music to paint even a more variety of emotions with music I would think twice before making a statement where a particular strand is referred to as the best. In any case it was nice of her to introduce us to this sister mode of classical music to us.

Syed Hussain  
Dhaka

### Ban student politics

I fully support the suggestion of the Education Reform Committee about banning student politics in Bangladesh. As I read the comments of general student, teachers and sensible members of the civil society, everybody wants student politics to be banned except the student leaders or some politicians who are directly or indirectly beneficiary of

such damaging politics in the educational institutions. They want to defend this violent politics saying that student politics is not bad only the terrorism related to it and suggest to get rid of terrorism and affiliation with the political parties.

But it is impossible to delink student politics from the political parties. Today's student leaders are in such a way attached with the political leaders and party godfathers that even if they wanted to sever their relationship with them they won't be successful. Almost all student leaders have arms and musclemen at their disposal because they need them for their survival. For the same reason they need money, which they collect from toll, snatching tenders and other illegal activities.

If anyone is interested in doing politics, we welcome them. But not before his/her education is completed and it remains outside the campus. I invite the opposition leaders to join hands with the government and help the country get rid of this violent student politics.  
Mohammad Jalal Uddin, FCMA

Kuwait

### Is Kemal Ataturk a great leader?

There is a debate going on in your letters page on whether Kemal Ataturk was a great leader or not.

He might be a great leader but the role he played was detrimental to Islam and the Muslims. Rather his activities were in favour of the West. In fact he was not a secular but an atheist. He Saved Turkey partially and removed the Ottoman rules which was not the rule of Mullahs but of patriot and devoted Muslims except a few exceptions.

At that time the Ottoman emperors was in favour of Islam and the Muslims. Kemal Ataturk was intelligent, brave and clever no doubt but no real muslim can or should support him.

Dr Sultan Ahmad  
Dhanmondi, Dhaka