

Suma's story



ZAFAR SOBHAN

IMAGINE for a moment what it is like to live your life in fear. You are 12 years old, studying in class seven, enjoying spending time with your school friends, watching your favourite soap operas and reality shows instead of doing homework, listening to new artists on the radio, slipping out of the house to spend time giggling and gossiping with your friends, pleading with your parents to buy you a mobile phone, your whole life ahead of you.

Then a shadow falls on your life. You notice a man, old enough to be your father, following you, his eyes moving up and down your body, making you feel uncomfortable. Everywhere you go, there he is, his steady, unblinking stare, his ravaged face, a cigarette dangling from the corner of his sneering lips, his teeth stained yellow, his eyes bloodshot.

One day he approaches your parents and demands your hand in marriage, never mind that he is middle-aged and repellent, that he is already married with two children, that you are too young to even begin noticing the boys in your class at school, that he makes

STRAIGHT TALK

As long as two out of every three acid attackers walk free, as long as the men who perpetrate such crimes consider themselves untouchable by the law, these kinds of attacks will continue to occur. No one flings acid on the spur of the moment or in the heat of passion. These are cold-blooded, calculated, pre-meditated crimes. Severe and certain consequences can therefore effectively reduce their incidence.

your skin crawl and your heart thump with fear when you see him, that you lie awake at night, terrified, your stomach turning over, unable to sleep, your eyes and ears straining in the darkness for any unfamiliar sight or sound.

He is well-known in the locality as a man not to cross. His eyes are filled with malevolence as he swaggers into your home and contemptuously demands you for himself, not pausing to wipe his feet outside the door, tracking mud into your spotless home, not even putting out his cigarette as a mark of respect to your parents, sprawling himself across your front-room, aggression, arrogance and menace oozing from his paunchy but still powerful frame, the threat of violence behind his every movement.

Your parents are simple people. Your father trades vegetables at Gabtoli market in Dhaka. They do not want trouble with this man. They know what he is capable of. They try to put him off. They plead with him that you are too young, that they will think about it when you are older. Evenings you sometimes catch them speaking to one another in hushed voices, tension

and fear etched on their loving faces. You wake one night to get a glass of water and see your mother sitting in the balcony, her head bowed, weeping silently as her fingers move across her prayer beads.

The man's harassment of you continues. Now he does not merely follow you and stare at you from afar but comes right up to you, so close that you can smell the foulness of his breath, see the savage glint in his eyes as he leers at you, making vile and obscene remarks in a low, guttural tone, reaching out to grab at you with his nicotine-stained fingers.

He grows more aggressive and threatening daily. You return home from school every day in tears until you can take it no longer and beg your parents to keep you at home so that you don't have to run the gauntlet of his harassment and humiliation twice a day. You barricade yourself in your house only to see him from the balcony, lounging outside your gate with his two friends, making catcalls, and staring up at you with malice and spite.

One day he barges back into your house, and when your par-

ents again plead with him for time, he grows furious, smashing a flower vase against the wall. He grabs your father by the throat and demands one lakh in "compensation" for being "kept waiting" for two years. He storms out of the house, slamming the door behind him, threatening terrible consequences if he is not satisfied.

Three days later he returns with his two friends and a pot of acid and flings it at your face and upper body, and your life, as you know it, is over. You are 14 years old.

I couldn't come up with a more horrific story if I tried.

If there is a more grotesque crime than this, I can't think of it. The only silver lining to Suma's tragic story is that the man who did this to her was apprehended on Wednesday and we can now hope and pray that he gets the death penalty in accordance with the law. Frankly, capital punishment is too good for him, but one takes what one can get.

The Acid Survivors Foundation, Prothom Alo, the late Nasreen Huq, among others, deserve unending praise for the tireless work on behalf of the victims of acid attacks like Suma.

In large part due to their combined efforts, the numbers of acid attacks have been coming down and convictions are on the rise.

Last year there were 156 recorded acid attacks in Bangladesh, down from a high of 367 in 2002, though there are also cases that remain unreported so the full number is undoubtedly higher, leading to 48 convictions for an approximately 30% conviction rate.

We have done a creditable job in terms of rehabilitating acid victims and helping them lead a full and productive life. Public awareness campaigns as to the appalling nature of the crime have helped to decrease its prevalence. But where we need to do more is on the prosecutorial side.

As long as two out of every three acid attackers walk free, as long as the men who perpetrate such crimes consider themselves untouchable by the law, these kinds of attacks will continue to occur. No one flings acid on the spur of the moment or in the heat of passion. These are cold-blooded, calculated, pre-meditated crimes. Severe and certain consequences can therefore effectively reduce their incidence.

Look at the present case. Suma's attacker did nothing to hide his identity or his intentions. The brazenness of the attack is part of what made it so reprehensible. Nor is his crime solely his cruel disfigurement of a young girl. What made him feel that he could ruin her life with impunity is the same thing that made him believe that he could terrorise her

for the two years prior with impunity.

This is the kind of criminality under the shadow of which too many Bangladeshis must live their lives. It is a crying shame. People should not have to live their lives in fear.

If there is one thing Bangladeshis want and have a right to expect from their government, it is to be kept safe and sound.

Sociologist Naomi Hossain in a piece entitled "The Price We Pay" published in the January 2008 edition of Forum magazine, pointed out the debilitating cost to individuals and society that was wrought by the fact that so many of our citizens have little recourse to law and must live insecure, vulnerable, and defenceless lives.

"This, it seems, is how you live in rural Bangladesh. You sleep (in squalor) next to your cow so it is not stolen overnight. You marry your daughter off before she sprouts breasts so as to avert her rape. You never really get ahead of the game because you have cut off your nose to spite your face."

Let us never underestimate the crushing effect that lawlessness and a culture of impunity has on the common men, women, and children of Bangladesh. Nothing scars their lives so severely as their lack of security in their persons and property, and a safer and more secure Bangladesh in which everyone has recourse to justice and can live free from fear is both a moral imperative and absolutely within our capabilities.

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Callous disregard for human life

Those responsible at the DMCH must be brought to book

THE death of a poor farmer due to the utter negligence of the DMCH is representative of the general slide in the dutifulness of the public service providers in the country. The unfortunate man died, having waited, not one, or two, but six long agonizing hours, for medical attention, which he did not get. A doctor did see him at last, but half an hour after he had passed away -- to pronounce him dead. One wonders whether one could find a better example to illustrate the miserable conditions of our government hospitals. This is an act of criminal negligence.

The death brings to light several things about how badly the hospital is organised and staffed to attend to emergency patients. Most people that have had the misfortune to seek emergency medical aid at the DMCH have had to face different kinds of ordeals, but this is perhaps the first time that, even so long after arriving at the hospital, a patient could not get the urgent treatment.

The six-hour travail of the patient and his family members is too heart rending to be repeated, but only highlights the abject callousness of the hospital -- right from the attendant at the emergency ward up to those doctors and departments that they sought help from. It demonstrates the very inhuman part of our character that betrayed an utter disregard for human life -- as also absolute lack of professionalism of the staff.

There are several questions that we want the hospital authorities to reply to. Why was the patient asked to go to the OPD on arrival at the emergency ward at 6 in the morning, knowing fully well that the OPD does not open for another 2 hours, and told to go back to the emergency unit once they managed to reach the OPD attendants? We would like the authorities to answer why his family members had to run around from one department to another pleading for treatment? Why nobody could discern the condition of the patient in an environment that is supposed to be swarming with doctors and would be doctors?

This is not the way to run a hospital, much less a premier government hospital. The director of the hospital has said that such an incident is not likely at the emergency unit. Now that such an incident has cost a man's life can we expect him to take the most stringent action against those responsible for the negligence, and inform the public accordingly? And can we also expect him to be more particular about the way his emergency unit functions?

The hard realities before BIMSTEC

A strategy for purposeful cooperation is the need

THE BIMSTEC ministerial conference on poverty alleviation in the region is certainly a timely move. And it is so because of the very crucial issues which the region in particular and the world in general happen to be confronted with at the moment. The Chief Adviser has pointed to some of those issues. We may note that tackling those issues are important if the programme against poverty is to have any meaning. In this context, it would be well to recall the very reasons for which the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) was established in 1997; and of course those reasons are all self-explanatory. At a time when regional cooperation around the world on fundamental economic and political issues has become something of a norm, and necessarily so, it is only natural that BIMSTEC too will be expected to throw up the results one desires of it.

We hardly need to remind ourselves of the extent of poverty which dogs the region. That fact, coupled with the recent rise in prices of food across the globe, has clearly upped the pressure on BIMSTEC member states to undertake urgent steps toward dealing with the crisis. One way of tackling the problem is to increase the level and frequency of cooperation, especially when the matter is one of rolling back poverty. BIMSTEC has arrived at a stage where it can seriously reflect on the need to set up a common fund to assist the poorer sections of people among member states. And with food prices being an increasingly bigger problem, it makes sense to suggest that a regional food bank be mulled over. The reason is obvious. With little guarantee that poorer nations can in future pay for the food they wish to buy from nations with good stocks, it becomes important that BIMSTEC nations undertake a long-term program to replenish their stocks and at the same time devise a formula vis-à-vis collective food security among themselves. Apart from that, the growing threat from climate change is an area where the organisation should be formulating a strategy to combat the menace. News on that front does not look good and hence the need for a collective handling of what appears to be impending trouble.

In simple terms, a lot more beef needs to be put on the BIMSTEC bone if it means to become a well-meaning organisation. Nothing could more help that process along than for member states to develop and expand ties in trade, eventually to a point where they can emulate the cooperative patterns of economy observed elsewhere around the globe. In other words, BIMSTEC member states should begin thinking of a free, open market for and among themselves.

The weight of words



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

WILLIAM Shakespeare writes in Romeo and Juliet that if we call a rose by any other name, it would still smell as sweet. But is that true for words in the realm of language? If we fail to use the right word or write it in wrong spelling, would it still ring the same sweet meaning to a listener or reader? Just think of one example. If you say "wart" and the doctor thinks "nose," would you care to ask him to remove a wart from your face?

Alfred Korzybski reminds us that "the map is not the territory." Words don't always describe what one likes to speak. There is a certain amount of abstraction in our expression because words have a degree of fuzziness to them. Words with same spellings have different meanings. Again, words with different meanings have similar pronunciations.

CROSS TALK

Thus, words are sound of soul, utterance of conscience, and concentrated expression of how a speaker or writer wants to relate to the world. There was a time in this country when examiners added special marks for good handwriting, and deducted some for spelling mistakes. There was a time when correct pronunciation was a matter of pride. The world attached a lot of importance to the sanctity of words.

So, if the word "cushion" is spelled as "kushion" and "lace" is spelled as "lass," and trust me these are real-life examples, what is the big deal? Does it matter how we spell a word so long as readers can tell what it is? Why is it important to emphasise on correct spelling or pronunciation? Why does language need to follow a certain discipline?

The thing is that words, like people, have character. Spelling and pronunciation define its meaning in the same manner behaviours and approaches tell us about an individual. What if you see a person going to the mosque, drinking at the bar, gambling at the casino and regularly attending religious congregations? You wouldn't know what to think of him. You would tend to question his character.

Right now our use of language is in that questionable state. From textbooks to billboards to everyday writings and utterances, words are abused either in spelling or pronunciation. If you listen to FM radios, Bengali words are spoken with English inflexions. If you watch television, English words are uttered with Bengali diction. And then read signboards, printed matters, writing on walls, buses and other places, use of wrong spelling is a common phenomenon.

It's Nikolai Lenin who has cautioned: "Liberty is precious -- so precious that it must be rationed." As it appears, we are taking too much liberty with words, writing and speaking them as we wish. I have seen the word "choice" spelled as "choise" on the marquee of a pastry shop. The word "Midway" written in Bengali on a bus has been written as "Mibway" in English. When asked, the candid response of the bus conductor was that the painter wasn't sure if the belly of "d" distended to the left or right.

These are but few examples

strict on both of the above? Why other nations are careful so that their children don't grow up muddled in how they speak and what they write? George Orwell has informed us that those who seek power over others must inevitably master the process of corrupting words. To paraphrase Orwell, sloppy language produces sloppy mind.

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In other words, there was a strong drive towards purity of language. It was like a certificate for the speaker or writer, which confirmed if he was of high or low origin, if he was educated or illiterate, rich or poor, sophisticated or boorish. A word was the manifestation of man in his true essence, like the performance of an instrument is manifest in sound quality.

It gave rise to a sense of humour that a person who didn't know was going to smash his teeth if asked to utter a complex word, and break his pen if asked to write it. Thus, the finesse of a person largely depended on his delivery of the word. A good man, a bad man, a gentleman or a rascal, words testified for the efficient and sensitive control of the language across the moral, ethical or aesthetic world.

We are currently living in times when much has changed. More people are literate, more students pass examinations, more foreign graduates return home and more schools, colleges and universities have opened across the land. Yet more mistakes are occurring in spelling and pronunciation. How does it happen?

Mens sana in corpore sano. It's a famous Latin quotation, which is translated as "A sound mind in a sound body." This is where we have lost the connection. Our minds are scattered and bodies are agitated. We have compromised with compromises and our virtues have long dissipated. If the soul is negotiated, nothing sacred is left to be profaned.

Words carry the weight of the world, and we have been making them weightless without even thinking of the attendant horror. How is it different from a disfigured face looking in a fractured mirror?

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Politics and price of oil



ABDULLAH A. DEWAN

WORLD oil prices have risen by nearly 50% since the beginning of 2008, and nearly doubled over the past year. Both economic and political factors have driven this unsettling rush in oil prices. However, some recently proposed remedial measures here in the US appear nonsensical. President George Bush and presumptive Republican presidential nominee John McCain both have recently proposed withdrawal of the 1990 federal moratorium on offshore oil drilling.

Last month, the Senate defeated a Democratic sponsored bill designed to impose windfall-profits tax on oil companies, and empower the US attorney general

NO NONSENSE

The moratorium was imposed to benefit tourism, fisheries, small businesses, and coastal dwellers. Damage to these resources is too high a price tag for an expected negligible price decline that is 10 to 12 years down the line, by which time many alternatives to oil may become reality. Economists dismiss all this presidential campaign rhetoric about lifting drilling moratorium, windfall tax and 18.4 cents federal gas tax relief (summer tax holiday) as mere distractions from the real issues.

to sue Opec on antitrust grounds (price collusive behaviour). Arguably, a windfall tax would invariably hold back investment in new energy sources; suing Opec (for cartel behaviour that restricts output and fixes prices) will trigger a trade war -- a no-win vitriolic game of tit-for-tat.

Against the backdrop of these nonsensical non-solutions, the US Energy Information Administration (EIA) revealed that even if oil drilling tapped an estimated 18 billion barrels under coastal waters that are currently off-limits, oil prices wouldn't see any drop until 2030.

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Economists dismiss all this presidential campaign rhetoric about lifting drilling moratorium, windfall tax and 18.4 cents federal gas tax relief (summer tax holiday) as mere distractions from the real issues. Why so?

First, new production would take about 10 years to affect the supply, if at all. Secondly, since oil production from West Texas and the North Sea continues to decline, the 18 billion or so barrels of new oil under coastal waters wouldn't be large enough to add a net positive to worldwide

oil supply. Third, off-shore drilling does nothing to slow world energy demand, which is the real perpetrator in runaway oil prices.

EIA estimates show that worldwide oil demand outstripped supply in 2007 by nearly 850,000 barrels a day -- approximately 3.6 million gallons of oil per day imbalance between consumption and production. Thus, the unrelenting oil price increase is simply the out-play of demand exceeding supply, implying that the market is functioning by laissez faire rule.

Worldwide oil production has been at its plateau since 2005, at nearly 85 million barrels per day. Then, supply exceeded demand by nearly a million barrels a day, which kept the price cheap.

According to EIA, oil demand in the US over the last four years has increased to around 3.3%, as opposed to a jump of 8.6% demand in the rest of the world driven by over two billion new consumers in India and China tipping into a western lifestyle.

Starting 2006, increased demand gradually matched supply and gasoline prices at the pump hit the \$3/gallon mark in the US. But in early 2007, demand exceeded supply and prices started surging up. The higher price should have increased supply to keep pace with demand as law of supply predicts. Oil market analysts advance three conceivable scenarios why that didn't happen:

- In the late 90's, prices declined to around \$10 a barrel, causing disincentive in investment in exploration and production capacity;
- Geopolitics is also a factor. State-owned oil companies in countries like Iran, Venezuela, and Mexico have diverted profits from reinvestment in modern refineries and additional production capacities to finance their governmental

operations;

- The most discouraging possibility is that the world may have reached the "Hubbert peak" (first described by King Hubbert in the 1950s) in which the world has used half of all oil reserves and that production will soon decline.

It is well known that petrochemicals are key components in much more than just the gasoline in our automobiles. As of 2002, approximately 10 calories of fossil fuels were used up to produce 1 calorie of food eaten in the US. This is so because every step of modern food production is fossil fuel and petrochemical powered.

A recent article published by CNN showed that in the US, up to 20% of the country's fossil fuel consumption is attributed to the food chain, which "often rivals that of automobiles." Feeding an average family of four in the developed world uses up the equivalent of 930 gallons of gasoline a year -- just shy of the 1,070 gallons that the same family would use up each year to power their cars.

Factors, other than supply-demand imbalances, that are

driving up oil prices include:

- Continuing depreciation of the US dollar (crude oil is priced in dollars);
- Risk premium associated with oil due to political instability in oil exporting countries (Iraq, Iran, Nigeria and Venezuela) is driving spot prices and long-term, forward contract prices by as much as \$20 per barrel;
- Speculation by energy traders is believed to add as much as \$10 per barrel;
- Saber rattling and heightened tension involving Iran's nuclear program adding another \$10 to \$15 per barrel -- at least

Many market watchers point to the unprecedented \$11 one-day spike in oil prices -- from \$128 to \$139 a barrel on June 6, after Israel's warning that an attack on Iran's nuclear facilities was "unavoidable" if international pressure failed in persuading Tehran to freeze its uranium enrichment program.

During a recent conference in Madrid, Opec President Chakib Khelil warned that bellicose posture against Iran's nuclear

installations will almost certainly push oil prices to as high as \$170 a barrel in the coming weeks and months.

The oil markets believe "there's at least a 50% chance that the US and/or Israel will attack Iran before Bush leaves office and that Iran will retaliate, pushing oil prices to \$200 a barrel and above," which is why speculators are buying oil futures now at \$140 and even \$150 a barrel.

Most analysts believe that forswearing military action against Tehran would subdue the upward pressure on world oil prices -- which recently hit a historic high of more than \$144 per barrel before falling back.

The market solution to spiraling oil price hikes is to consume less and produce more to narrow the supply demand discrepancy; concomitantly, conserve energy (discard oil guzzling automobiles of all kinds, energy inefficient farm equipment etc.) encourage new technologies, and develop alternative fuels -- from solar to nuclear power.

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