

## A probashi is not an authentic Bangladeshi?

I am baffled that my authenticity and my way of thinking as a Bangladeshi writer have been questioned. What is the definition of a Bangladeshi? Someone who lives in Bangladesh? My living abroad should not mark me as someone who is non-regional.

ZENAT KHAN

LET me start this article by thanking the editor-in-chief and all the editors of *The Daily Star* who look at my work, and for giving me a platform to write my pieces and express my views for the last two years. This newspaper has given me a great forum for writing on issues pertaining to Bangladesh. *The Daily Star's* online version is read by many people across the globe.

Since I have made America home for the last 32 years, the online newspapers help me to stay connected with all the news, trials and tribulations that my beloved country goes through. For the past six months, I think, I have been honing the skills for writing newspaper columns.

As an expatriate, I offer a unique perspective on Bengali social issues, particularly related to gender disparities in society, women's rights and education. I consider myself well versed in the pressing news of Bangladesh. Many people across the globe who are interested in South Asia read newspapers from South Asia.

On the night of the July 1, I was awakened by an overseas phone call from Tehran from a friend of many years, who told me that she had read my article of July 1, titled "*Sultana's Dream: Still a distant Utopia?*"

She wanted to know the whole story that was told in *Sultana's Dream*. After hearing the story she compared Begum Rokeya to one of the greatest feminist Iranian poets, Simin Behbehani. Like in Begum Rokeya's *Sultana's Dream*, in Simin Behbehani's *ghazals* the roles of males are also reversed.

I was also told that a reader had posted comments regarding my authenticity as a Bangladeshi writer who writes from abroad. I read the posted comments. Therefore, in today's column, I have chosen to write a response to the reader who posted his/her comments.

As writers/columnists, at some point we will have to deal with negative comments from our readers. It comes with the territory. It is always a reader's prerogative

engaging myself with my readers. That way, they have a better understanding of who I am, and where I am coming from. A reader is the ultimate arbiter. A writer must exercise his/her artistic freedom, irrespective of the place he/she chooses to live.

Writing from abroad leads me to a deeper understanding of, and connection to, my Bangladeshiness. Though I live in the US, I am not disconnected from the realities of Bangladesh. True, on a day-to-day basis, I do not go through all the hurdles that my Bangladeshi brothers and sisters go through.

Though I do not suffer because of power cut, traffic jam, the rising price of day to day necessities, it doesn't make me less virtuous, or someone who cannot have an opinion about a current Bangladeshi topic or write about the greatest social reformist of all times like Begum Rokeya who belonged to India as Mother Teresa belonged to the world.

I do not count myself amongst the fortunate bunch for having the privilege of living in the United States of America. It has its advantages. I am more updated on the issues of Bangladesh because I have easy access to the Library of Congress. It allows me to have more knowledge about Bangladesh from abroad than I would have if I actually lived there.

I am baffled that my authenticity and my way of thinking as a Bangladeshi writer have been questioned. What is the definition of a Bangladeshi? Someone who lives in Bangladesh? My living abroad should not mark me as someone who is non-regional. When I am measured against all the regional columnists/writers who write from Bangladesh, I shouldn't be devalued as a writer.

To be, to write, to be a true Bangladeshi, a person's geographical location is not of utmost importance. It is how one feels in her heart for the country where she was born, where her forefathers came from, who longs to hear any news of her motherland and cares about the issues of the land -- social, political, economic and otherwise!

Whether I write fiction or an opinion piece, it is my hope that through my writing I am able to connect my mind to the minds of the readers. The quest is the same for all writers, whether they are physically in Bangladesh or writing from abroad. Yes, when a negative comment is posted, as a writer one will have self-

to read a particular column or not. The comment page was set up for the comments -- both positive and negative -- made by readers. I have no qualms about that.

Only when a reader questions my authenticity as a Bangladeshi -- or whether I have the right to write about Bangladesh or a great feminist social thinker like Begum Rokeya since I am a *probashi* -- do I consider that as a personal attack on me as a person first, and then as a writer.

Therefore, in my defense, I think clarifying some of the fallacious beliefs from a writer's point of view will clear up some of the misconceptions that some readers may have about *probashis*.

The reasons vary for why people choose to live abroad for decades. Everyone has a different story. I felt that, without knowing me or anything about my life, the reader's comments were somewhat unjust. He/she has no way of knowing whether I live a better life here in the United States than the ones who are toughing it out in Bangladesh. I do not write about my life in America.

A writer can choose his/her figure of speech any way he/she sees fit. It is a writer's artistic freedom to choose a topic or a place to write about. As a Bangladeshi living abroad, I have the right as a writer to write about my motherland without anyone making me feel non-regional.

A writer can be intrinsically good or bad whether he/she writes from his/her native country or from a foreign country where he/she sets up home, be it temporary or permanent. How can a writer be inauthentic due to where he/she lives?

A lot of the writers do mix the local issues with global ones when they write. For me, I choose topics that are contemporary, and how peoples' lives are affected as a result, in Bangladesh. I do not write about Bangladesh because I feel nostalgic about the place.

I am not at all embarrassed by what the reader wrote about my last article. If a writer succumbs to negative feedback then he/she compromises artistic freedom. I welcome this opportunity of



Bangladeshi at heart, even though far from home.

doubts and confusion. I try to navigate through the criticism and go on because there is no other way.

By living in America I haven't lost my ability to connect with Bangladesh.

The reader's point that it is ludicrous to be sitting in America's Starbucks coffee shop and writing about social reformer and writer Begum Rokeya struck me as unfounded. When I write, I

take pride in the fact that I do write with authenticity. I write about things I feel passionately about. What I write, I write honestly.

In my last column I focused mostly on the lack of education of rural girls in Bangladesh. Rural Bangladesh is not a romantic place for me. That is home. I spent my impressionable years in an idyllic rural setting. My ancestral village

home in Ghorashal on the outskirts of Dhaka is the only place on this earth which I truly call home.

Thanks to my reader who suggested that I come home and face all the problems like the rest of the Bangladeshis. I live for the day.

Zenat Khan is a fiction writer and a contributor to *The Daily Star*. She lives in the United States.

## Local government conundrum



The election manifesto is the fundamental policy guideline of the AL-led government, which was endorsed massively by the people -- the owners of the Republic -- on December 29, 2008. How did the MPs belonging to the grand alliance ignore that in making local government laws?

KARTICK MANDAL

POLITICAL gangsterism is a concept I have borrowed from Hadiz. The widely known decentralisation scholar Vedi R. Hadiz is a professor at the National University of Singapore. He has done intensive research on the politics, governance and decentralisation of his own country -- Indonesia -- in the 1990s and 2000s, using the concept to characterise the behaviour of the political actors of Indonesia.

With the collapse of Soeharto, many of the criminal and corrupt politicians who once collaborated with the authoritarian regime (1966-98) joined, and were rehabilitated by, the post-Soeharto democratic

regimes. This implantation of authoritarian-lieutenants to the democratic regimes, particularly to that under President Megawatti Soekarnoputri, is termed as "political gangsterism" by Hadiz.

This write-up intends to analyse the imprudent action of our central political actors regarding the Upazila Parishad (UP) Law legislated in the parliament in 2009. The Parliament enacted UP law by amending the previously passed Act of 1998. The law was passed in clear contravention of Article 7(2) of the constitution.

The Constitution of Bangladesh -- the supreme law of the land -- declares that all powers in the Republic belong to the people, and the exercise of such power "shall be effected only under, and by the authority of

this Constitution [Article 7(1)]." The words "only under" and "by the authority" deserve mention.

It further says that if any law is inconsistent with the Constitution the law shall be void to the extent of the inconsistency with Article 7(2). The Bangladesh Constitution thus declares its supremacy over everything and anything else.

Let us shed some light on how the Constitution vests "authority" on both the central and the local political actors. Article 65(1) of the Constitution has vested members of the Parliament (MPs) with the power to legislate law for the land. The MPs, therefore, are not empowered "under" this constitution to get into local development activities.

Executing such activity, on the contrary, is vested with the local government in every administrative unit, composed of the persons elected in accordance with the law [Article 59(1)]. Furthermore, Article 59(2) very emphatically defines their jobs as "... (c) the preparation and implementation of the plan relating to public services and economic development." So the constitution does not "authorize" the Parliament to frame any law that engages the MPs in local development.

Going against this constitutional provision the Parliament enacted the UP law, empowering the MPs to advise the parishad with a binding implication for the latter [Article 25(3)]. The parishad is also obliged to take the MP's advice in preparing upazila development plan (Article 42).

The two specific articles of the UP Act not only undermine the political authority of the parishad but also violate the fundamental characteristics of local government, and circumvent the constitution as well. Furthermore, it also disregards the Supreme Court's verdict.

The Supreme Court, in its previous verdict in 1992 in the case known as Kudrat-e-Elahi Panir vs Bangladesh, observed that "the Parliament is not free to legislate law ignoring Articles 59 and 60 of the Constitution (44DLR (AD) (1992)). Thus, we can confidently conclude that the law passed in the Parliament ignores the court verdict.

We should analyse the MPs' perspectives as well. The MPs argue that they have a

certain mandate from their constituents, and non-compliance will affect their chance of re-election. They also argue that MPs' involvement in development activities is evident in many other countries -- which is a very self-serving argument and nothing but a travesty.

British MPs, having offices in their respective constituencies, deal with things such as pension, insurance and the like, but not with matters devolved to the County. Just to recall, this column analysed the election results of 2001 and 2008 in one constituency. That analysis shows that getting involved in local development activity is not a guarantee of getting re-elected (The Daily Star, August 3, 2009), there are many other important factors related to political economy.

The people do not expect such actions and violation of the law from a party that led the Liberation War and framed the Constitution. The people remember the commitment made by the Awami League (AL) that they would strengthen local government if voted to power (Section 6, the Charter of Change -- election manifesto 2008).

The election manifesto is the fundamental policy guideline of the AL-led government, which was endorsed massively by the people -- the owners of the Republic -- on December 29, 2008. How did the MPs belonging to the grand alliance ignore that in making local government laws?

Surprisingly, the Parliament passed other laws relating to municipalities and city corporations, which are free from such controls. Politicians at the centre have always used local government institutions since their formation in the late 19th century. This kind of self-serving action in relation to local/national power relations can only be called "political hypocrisy," if not "political gangsterism" as mentioned by Hadiz.

May we appeal to the popular democratic government to repair the damage by nullifying the amendments made in 2009 in these two particular articles [Article 25(3) and Article 42)] of the UP Act 1998.

Kartick Mandal is a local government activist. E-mail: mandal1964@gmail.com.

## Teaching them

There is a need for looking at the girl's point of view sympathetically, and persuading the tormentor through his parents, schools and colleges to refrain from such disgraceful behaviour.

MAHMUDA HUSAIN

OVER the last few months we have been shocked by the unprecedented number of suicide cases among girls due to eve teasing. Eve teasing has become a kind of violence. A teaser is a "person who makes fun of or provokes others in a painful or unkind way."

Eve teasing begins as an attempt to irritate a girl or catch her attention. A lewd stare, an un-wanted bump, a seemingly casual touch, cheap gesture, downright uncouth comments, making unwelcome calls or missed calls, sending indecent text messages, are all examples of eve teasing. The boy does not even think that this type of despicable behaviour is a crime.

Social norms and values are being forgotten day by day. Love and affection have been lost in our society. Our society is patriarchal, and gives more importance to boys in many cases. In our families, we have discrimination between boys and girls.

Eve teasing mainly takes place in front of schools, coaching centres, lonely places, bus counters, market places, in the neighbourhood etc.

In the last few years a large number of students of schools, colleges and universities committed suicide because of eve teasing. Eve teasing might seem to be harmless "fun" to some but gets on the nerves of the victims.

Parents concerned about their daughters keep them at home or marry them off at an early age. Because of early marriage maternal mortality rate and infant mortality rate are high, which hamper the achievement of the Millennium Development Goal.

Serious all out effort must be made to combat eve teasing, which is becoming a social malady. There is much that can be done by both the girls

and the boys, and also by institutions, parents and the community. The society usually makes light of any complaint by either the girl or her friends. It has a way of blaming the girl rather than the boy.

People admonish the girl, saying that she must have given encouragement to attract the comments. And the girl, being frustrated, may even commit suicide. So there is a need for looking at the girl's point of view sympathetically, and persuading the tormentor through his parents, schools and colleges to refrain from such disgraceful behaviour.

There is a need for an awareness building campaign by the NGOs, local government bodies, and the schools, colleges and communities against eve teasing and on the ways to redress it.

Mahmuda Husain is a human and women's rights activist, and member of Gender Trainers Core Group.