

Dealing firmly with sexual harassment

Old values must be reasserted among the young

WE agree with the participants at a round table held in the city on Wednesday that stalking or sexual harassment of women has taken the form of a menace for society. In these last many months, increasing numbers of women have been falling prey to unwarranted and unsolicited attention from wayward youths, who have clearly developed the feeling that they can get away with their sinister activities. Of course, a principal focus, all the way from the citizens' level to the government, has been a raising of awareness of the issue and the ways and means by which it can be rolled back.

The participants at the round table have very justifiably noted the misleading use of the term 'eve teasing' when it should without question be 'sexual harassment'. On an issue of such grave import for society, it will simply not do to go for euphemisms. Beyond that, there is a clear demarcation of the role that the state and the family can play in offsetting the menace of sexual harassment. We have all along been hearing of a strict enforcement of the law against stalkers. We would now like to see some action on the ground. Indeed, the authorities should now step up to citizens and inform them of what action has so far been taken about those already in custody on charges of sexual harassment. Besides, citizens must also know what efforts are being expended to nab those stalkers who have managed to stay a step ahead of the law. As to what the family can do to stem the crime, the path is clear. A return to old values is in order. Children must be imbued right from the beginning with ideas of morality and a sense of what constitutes a stable, educated and fair social order where men and women are partners in all spheres of life. To be sure, the schools are there to impart such lessons to the young. But the fundamental values of life are grounded in the family. And the family today, has lagged behind in doing all those good things which families in earlier times accomplished as part of their social responsibilities. That must change.

A positive sign of things is the move to punish stalkers through an operation of mobile courts. A stalker, one understands, will serve a year in prison or will pay a fine or will do both. The authorities must be careful, though, in ensuring that the innocent do not suffer, that the laws against stalking are not misused or abused by individuals or groups to settle personal scores. Furthermore, it remains the responsibility of the authorities, especially the law enforcers and security forces, to track down the elements who harass women by threatening them or using abusive and profane language by mobile phone. On a final note, the offer of help to victims of sexual harassment by an NGO and a call centre operator by telephone can be seen as a step forward in handling such criminality. Even so, the modalities by which the sexually harassed will be helped and to what extent their security will be ensured must be made clear.

There is no time to lose. Unless stalkers are swatted down swiftly, both in urban and rural areas, young women all over the country will find their movements circumscribed --- to our intense shame.

Business prospects with North-eastern India

Removal of trade barriers and enhanced connectivity are key

TRIPURA chief minister Manik Sarkar's observations on the huge prospect of trade and commerce that his and other northeastern states of India hold for Bangladesh made at a conference organised by Indian business and industry leaders in Agartala are highly encouraging for Bangladesh and its business community. That Bangladesh can immensely benefit from expanded trade relations with its closest neighbour need not be overemphasised.

As the Indian business leaders pointed out at the conference, there is a huge market worth USD 20 billion for Bangladesh in the north-eastern Indian states alone. Oddly though, in spite of this enormous volume of business for Bangladesh to make from those outlying states of India, it is still trailing behind India with a large trade gap of over USD 3 billion. And the Bangladesh foreign Minister Dipu Moni, who is on a two-day visit to Tripura and was present at the conference did rightly stress the need for removing the prevailing tariff and non-tariff barriers coming as they are in the way of a freer and further expanded trade relations between the two close neighbours.

Though part of India, the cost of business between these north-eastern states and the rest of India is very high, if only for the great distance the goods and services have to travel to reach there. Which is why Tripura chief minister has portrayed such an optimistic picture of trade between Bangladesh and the north-eastern states of India.

We cannot agree more with Tripura chief minister on such prospects. Having said that we would like him to take note of the customary barriers that often prejudice such possibilities. True, there is a large market for Bangladesh's readymade garment (RMG), food items, toiletries and leather goods in Tripura and other north-eastern Indian states. But can Bangladesh exporters access that market in an open and hassle-free manner? Apart from certain duties that are imposed on our exportable items, there are also the non-tariff barriers like costly laboratory tests and import permits for the Indian importers of these goods.

But we are hopeful that the Indian authorities are increasingly awakening to the fact that freer trade relations with Bangladesh is in the interest of both the countries. On this score, for enabling further expansion of trade and commerce between Bangladesh and India, the present level of connectivity has to be taken to greater heights. To this end, Bangladesh has already opened up the prospect of using its two seaports Chittagong and Mongla for India and two other South Asian states Nepal and Bhutan. It is hoped the region as a whole would seize the opportunity and turn these two ports as a hub of regional trade and commerce.



A conspiracy theory

It's a great footloose feeling without having to worry or feel anxious about anything. All our failures, incompetencies and mistakes have found a momentous scapegoat. The blame goes to conspiracy.

MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

IT should give anyone the creeps if others were watching him when he was sleeping in his bed. And, the prime minister frightened us one fine Wednesday when she said that load-shedding after midnight was a work of conspiracy. It's scary to think that others were busy plotting against us when we tried to catch some sleep.

If the prime minister has said it, I have believed it. This country is an archipelago of conspiring islands. One political party is conspiring against another within the country. Then one leader is conspiring against another within the party. The businessmen are conspiring. The professionals are also doing the same thing. Students are plotting against students, doctors against doctors, spouses against spouses, brothers against brothers, and cousins against cousins.

I knew it the moment the prime minister said it. There is no dearth of mindless min-

ions of petty interests who are stupid enough to think that it could be a perfect political ploy to hurt the government by hurting the people. So they tried to give us hard time during the sweltering summer nights. They wanted us to go sleepless without fan or light as a way to discredit the ruling party. Only in their silly minds could they believe that it was going to do the trick.

They didn't know others were eventually going to dig out the conspiracy, which we did. But what we don't know yet is who are these people who have been trying to rob us of our good night's sleep. We don't know these mean and cowardly conspirators, who want to harm the innocent people to harm their political adversaries.

Of course, they couldn't be from the prime minister's party. If they were, I know she would have wasted no time to foil this conspiracy. I bet they are from one of the opposition parties, may be a cabal of them altogether, and could be foreign agents as well trying to sabotage this country. Forgive me for being speculative. Since I don't

know who they are, I am only going through the possibilities. It's like a snake in a dark room. It could be anywhere when you don't see it.

What is the government doing to catch those culprits? Does the government know who are these people? Does it know how they are advancing their evil scheme? I mean what is the point of telling us unless the government is also ready to sock it to those who are doing us this horrible mischief?

John Updike once wrote: "America is a vast conspiracy to make you happy." I don't know if the prime minister also endorses a similar line of thinking. May be she talked about the conspiracy because she thought it was going to make us happy. May be some of us are happy to know their government is doing a good job, if not for an odious clique working to ruin it.

On the other hand, the leader of the opposition is also gunning for her own conspiracy theory. She is convinced that this government is in cahoots with a foreign country. Right or wrong she claims that if the transit is given to India, it will compromise our national sovereignty.

It's an irony that the conspiracy theory is gaining ground at the top and trickling down the layers of this country. Every time one political party wins the election, the other claims it was a conspiracy. Every time someone is accused of anything, he claims it was a conspiracy to undermine him.

When someone fails to get a job, it's a conspiracy of interviewers in favour of a less deserving candidate. If one doesn't get a promotion, one believes it's a conspiracy of his superior to deny him his rightful career slot.

If not already, we are evolving into a nation of vast conspiracy. And if not wholly, it's partially true that this conspiracy theory is making many of us happy. We no longer need to bear the burden of guilt. We no longer need to be accountable for anything. It's a great footloose feeling without having to worry or feel anxious about anything. All our failures, incompetencies and mistakes have found a momentous scapegoat. The blame goes to conspiracy.

Whichever political party comes to power claims to have done so many good things. And, it reminds one of Alexander Pope on his deathbed. His doctor gave him a thorough check up and assured him that his breathing, pulse and other vital signs were improving. Pope amusingly told a friend: "Here I am dying of a hundred good symptoms."

The ruling party tells us this country has all the "good symptoms." The opposition likes us to believe the sky is falling. Conspiracy is why we never know what is really happening.

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Strengthening cooperatives

Although the Constitution has given special importance to cooperatives, sufficient measures have not been taken in the past 36 plus years to translate the good wishes of the framers of the Constitution into reality. The earlier we rejuvenate the cooperative system, the better it will be for improvement of the socio-economic conditions of the people, in particular of the rural people.

M. ABDUL LATIF MONDAL

THE 39th National Cooperative Day was observed throughout the country on November 6. While inaugurating the Day at Bangabandhu International Conference Centre in Dhaka city, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina directed the local government, rural development and cooperatives ministry "to finalise a national cooperative policy on an urgent basis to infuse dynamism into cooperative activities," adding that her government "will do whatever is necessary to spread the cooperative movement across the country to ensure socio-economic and cultural emancipation of the people."

The history of cooperatives in what is now Bangladesh is more than a century old. Recognising the role played by cooperatives in the improvement of socio-economic conditions of the people in the past, the Constitution of Bangladesh has given a special importance to them.

While laying down the principles of ownership, Article 13 of the Constitution has placed cooperatives in second position of ownership preceded only by state ownership. Article 13 says that the people shall own or control the instruments and means of production and distribution, and the forms of ownership shall be (a) state ownership; (b) cooperative ownership; and (c)

private ownership.

At present, the activities of cooperatives in the country are regulated by Samabaya Samity Ain 2001 (Cooperative Societies Act 2001) and the rules and regulations made under it. Critics say that 2001 Act has deviated from many good principles that existed in Cooperative Credit Societies Act 1904, Cooperative Societies Act 1912, and The Bengal Co-operative Societies Act 1940.

In the existing law, the government exercises through the cooperative department immense power over the formation of the managing committees and the activities of the cooperative societies at different levels.

Even a democratically elected managing committee of a cooperative society may be dismissed by the cooperative department on debatable grounds before the expiry of its tenure. The cooperative law and the cooperative department have been control-minded rather than dissemination and motivation-minded.

The management of the cooperative societies at national, district and thana levels have been highly politicised during the past 19 years, when AL and BNP were in power in succession. Elective system in the management of cooperative societies has been an important feature from the very beginning of cooperatives here. The pres-

ent law also provides for election of managing committees of cooperative societies at different levels.

But there are allegations that in the past two decades or so, elections to the managing committee in many cooperative societies were manipulated to ensure return of the nominees of the party in power. As a result, those cooperative societies were run on partisan considerations, which went against the non-partisan charter of cooperatives. This led to unbridled corruption.

This was particularly true for those cooperative societies which received funds from the government or financial institutions on easy terms for implementing their credit programmes, particularly government administered credit programmes.

Under the above circumstances the prime minister's directive to update the cooperative law has been timely. The cooperative law must ensure that the government and/or the cooperative department act as facilitator rather than controller of cooperative societies.

In order to reduce politicisation of the management of the cooperative societies to the minimum, office-bearers of a political party at different levels, including the office-bearers of affiliated bodies of a political party, may be made ineligible for nomination and election to the managing committees of those cooperative societies which receive funds from the government or financial institutions on easy terms.

Fund-shortage has been a constant hindrance for the expansion of the activities of the cooperative societies. Deposits from the members of the societies are quite insufficient for undertaking any productive programme.

The government and/or the financial institutions have to come forward to finance those cooperative societies which want to expand their activities in the fields of agriculture, fisheries, livestock, small and cottage industries, information and

communication technology (ICT) etc. They should be provided loans on easy terms.

Cooperators need to be assured that financing of their productive programmes from the government or financial institutions will be a continuous process if they return the loans in time. This needs continuous motivational work from cooperative leaders.

We have not yet been able to develop an organised cooperative marketing system to market and sell the surplus produce of the members of the cooperative societies to benefit both the cooperators and the general consumers.

Marketing of agricultural produce, fish, handicrafts, cloth etc. of the society members through well-organised cooperative marketing system will save expenses for middlemen who benefit from the producers in various fields, such as less weight, very low prices and loans at high rates of interest. It will save urban consumers, particularly Dhaka city consumers, from syndication of traders, which leads to unusually high prices for such products.

It is good to hear from the prime minister that the government has included five projects in this year's annual development programme (ADP) for cooperative-based bazaar management to facilitate marketing of produce of cooperators and to ensure their fair prices.

Although the Constitution has given special importance to cooperatives, sufficient measures have not been taken in the past 36 plus years to translate the good wishes of the framers of the Constitution into reality. The earlier we rejuvenate the cooperative system, the better it will be for improvement of the socio-economic conditions of the people, in particular of the rural people.

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