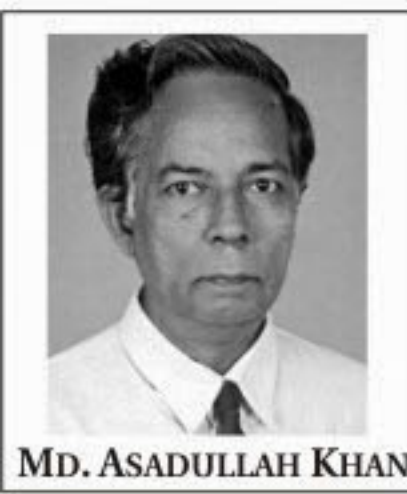


BITTER TRUTH

# Education is prerequisite for women's emancipation



**W**HILE addressing a function arranged by the women and children affairs ministry marking the

International Women's Day, 2011, Prime Minister Sk. Hasina reiterated her stand to curb violence on women, punish the perpetrators of crimes on women and establish equal rights of women in the society. But, the portrait of the country people envisioned 39 years ago with women having equal rights and opportunities is yet to be materialised.

Even today, it is hard for women to take up any vocation. Most women get little support from either parents, or husbands or in-laws or society at large. A World Bank report on women's health concludes that poverty and deeply etched social attitudes have produced a kind of hidden holocaust of the female population.

The closest thing to a single culprit is the dowry system, which makes a daughter a family burden and a son, who collects the dowry, an asset. But there are other factors, including the illiteracy or the low level of education, that contribute towards this situation.

It is always hard to comprehend violence -- the anger, jealousy or plain sadism -- that can drive people to commit acts of unimaginable horror. A report published in a Bangla daily on February 28 indicated that one Asaduzzaman often made advances to Yasmeen (16) of the same village but was firmly rebuffed. One evening, when her parents were away, he raped her.

Out of humiliation and shock, Yasmeen committed suicide. In his effort to take away Yasmeen's body from the hospital without autopsy Asaduzzaman's complicity in the crime became public. He was arrested and the victim's body was sent to hospital for autopsy. Many such cases are not reported because of the sense of humiliation and stigma it leaves on the victim and her family.

The country is replete with instances of torture, violence and humiliation perpetrated on women, along with reported and unproven cases of moral transgression or adultery. Some years back, Noorjahan of Sylhet, accused by a local Imam of adultery, was half buried and then stoned. Out of total shock, Noorjahan later committed suicide.

Hena was raped by her cousin Mahbub. But the five member village judge's panel headed by a madrassa teacher sentenced Hena to 101 lashes and executed the sentence without looking for the rapist.

A report made public by ODHIKAR, a human rights organisation, indicated that during the last five years 1,257 women were killed and 243 women committed suicide in women oppression related cases. And in 2010 alone 210 women became victims of rape.

Scores of women have fallen victim to acid attacks every year, mostly because they refused to accept the sexual advances or refused to marry the persons chasing them. There are about 200 acid attacks every year, according to Bangladesh National Women Lawyers' Association, which provides legal aid to the victims.

Often, the perpetrators are



RAJ ANIKATY DRIK NEWS

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spurned suitors who feel that if they cannot have the woman they desire, they must mangle her so badly that she has no takers. Others use acid -- which is available despite the restriction imposed on its sale -- against women as punishment in property feuds, or because a bride did not bring enough dowry. These men are driven by revenge, and it seems as if throwing acid has become a common thing or fun for them.

The two core issues -- elimination of social injustice and economic exploitation of the girl child -- can only be tackled through motivation, policy guidelines and bold leadership at the highest level of the government. The genesis of discrimination and cruelty against women can be traced to the inexplicable attitude of social apathy inherent in the male population.

Though our constitution provides for equality between sexes

with proper protection for women and children, the actual situation is dismal. The fact is, mere formulation of policy guidelines, unless implemented, will never bring about emancipation of the women folk. People are still governed by customs and rules that fail to give women their due. Economic progress and change in traditional attitudes are needed to halt the degradation of women. Even more important is education, as female literacy rises, birth rates drop, life-spans increase, and the status of women is enhanced.

Till now, the energy, imagination, talent and potential of our young men and women could not be fruitfully channelised to take the country forward. True, with firm commitment, and policies towards halting the trafficking of women the edifice of a happy and prosperous society could be built. Because when women are guaranteed basic human and labour rights, the whole family and the community benefit. More so, when women gain the knowledge and power to make their own choices, society is better able to break the chains of poverty.

Despite a growing consensus on the importance of women's work, gender disparities and inequality of opportunity and treatment persist. Too many women are denied the right to go to school, or take a job for which they receive equal pay. Too many are concentrated in the informal work sector, and scores are barred from access to loans or credit or from exercising the most basic of the legal rights.

The neglect in educating girls is doubly alarming because education almost always leads to a drop in infant mortality and reduced birth

rate. Because of their high literacy rate, the states of Kerala and Tamil Nadu in India have been able to solve problems that seem so intractable elsewhere in the sub-continent. Undeniably true, no society liberates itself that treats its women badly.

A somewhat happy glimmer is that the poorest in the villages are getting the message about the importance of education, but the increasing awareness and motivation of the parents hasn't been matched by a corresponding improvement in schooling facilities. Although enrolment in higher education for girls in recent years has increased, the dropout rate in the primary and secondary levels is still alarmingly high -- 35% at the primary level and 42% at the secondary level.

To effect a change in the plight of the people vis-à-vis the economic situation of the country as well as emancipation of the women folk, we must do away with the flawed and discriminatory education system. Moreover, societal, cultural and religious values in the country, especially in the villages, appear to be loaded against female education.

Statistics reveal that 40% of all girls are engaged in all household works compared to a negligible number of boys. In spite of several laws restricting child labour, labour participation of girls has increased while the participation of boys has declined. Moreover, disadvantages facing the girl child are compounded by increasing incidents of violence against girls and women.

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## LONDON 2012, 500 DAYS TO GO

WILLIAM HAGUE

In just 500 days, the world's gaze will turn to the UK as the lights go up on the opening ceremony of the 2012 Olympic Games. The British people stand ready to welcome friends from across the globe, athletes and spectators alike, to what my friend and Chairman of the Games, Lord Coe, describes as the greatest show on earth.

more times than any other city. On each occasion we have sought to make a lasting contribution to the Olympic movement. During London's 1908 games athletes paraded for the first time under their national flag and events held to coincide with the 1948 London Games would later give birth to the Paralympic movement. In 2012 we intend to honour this tradition of innovation by

material from buildings demolished to prepare the site has been channelled back into construction and we have planted 20,000 trees providing a new lung for the city of London, a new habitat for wildlife and a new haven of relaxation for Londoners.

We have also incorporated disability access into the design and construction of buildings, open spaces and public trans-

achievement. That is why I am so pleased that we expect 80,000 spectators for the Paralympic Games in 2012, a 16 fold increase since its inception in 1960, as through the Paralympics we continue to transform attitudes to disabled people with brilliant showcases of disability sport.

As part of our Singapore bid we pledged to connect young people across the globe to the power sport. The International Inspiration programme aims to give 12 million children in 20 countries access to high quality and inclusive physical education, sport and play. It has already reached more than 7 million children globally and over 300 schools in the UK have built partnerships with counterparts around the world as part of the programme.

Our Olympics will aim to bring people from across Britain together. Regions up and down the country will host visiting athletes at pre-Games training camps and the Olympic torch will light a path around the British Isles, bringing the spirit of the games to the four corners of our nation. The tour will come within an hour of 95% of the UK's population and entertainment, shows and concerts will mark its arrival at each stop.

We see our stewardship of the Olympics as part of a four year celebration of British culture. Cultural Olympiad projects in the art, film, music, digital and museum sectors are already under way and will bring further opportunities for everyone to take part in the celebrations, as will a 12 week festival of arts in the summer of 2012.

As British foreign secretary, I would like to invite you to see for yourself what the UK has to offer during this truly momentous occasion. I want to show you that our great nation is one of the best places to live, work, visit and do business in. As of today, you can book your tickets to the greatest show on earth. Come and join us for what promises to be a truly unforgettable experience.

The writer is Britain's Foreign Secretary.

## The case of the missing sky



**W**ANTED: The last piece of night sky. If anyone sees it, please let me know. This is not a joke! The search is on for any remaining places where stars can be seen, instead of the dull, gray glow which has replaced constellations above most cities.

Astronomers desperately need dark skies so they can do their exciting astronomer-type activities, such as counting the stars, re-counting them, counting them a third time, looking nerdy, wearing white coats, not having girlfriends, etc.

Stargazers at the International Dark Sky Association rejoiced recently when they found a small island called Sark, between Britain and France, which had no streetlights or cars.

Every night Sark residents (bugs, butterflies, horses and the odd human) enjoy an amazing show of stars and meteors. The nerds declared Sark the world's first Dark Sky Island.

Astronomers say there's too much urbanisation. They're right. The property industry around the world has gone mad. Consider this email I got from reader Kathy Heys. "I've had five landlords in nine months," the Hong Kong resident said. They keep selling her apartment (with Kathy in situ) to other landlords. She's never quite sure who to pay the cash to. One day it's one guy, the next, a complete stranger.

Well, Kathy, I think you might as well just send the money to me. I'm not your landlord, but hopefully it'll be my turn one day, and we might as well be ready.

My friend Tony bought an apartment which was just a drawing on a flipchart. "You'll have the

satisfaction of being the first owner of a brand new home," I told him. He replied: "What are you talking about?" The deeds had changed hands five times.

(Bubble? What bubble?) Perhaps the most ludicrous property development story of recent days concerns Shanhi Shingnapur. This is a famously crime-free town of 3,000 people in Maharashtra, India. Most houses don't even have doors, let alone locks. A reader from India told me last week that a bank has just been built there.

Townfolk ordered executives at UCO Bank to follow tradition and have no locks on its doors. The bankers thought this was a bit unusual for a bank, but were willing to co-operate. Local police are seriously unimpressed with the situation, and discussions are continuing.

Imagine the conversation: Townsfolk: "Never in a million years will we allow you to break our no-locks tradition and lock the doors of your bank." Bankers: "Well, okay, it's your money." Townsfolk: "Wait. Maybe we need to talk about this a bit more."

The town is small, so perhaps Indian police could take some inspiration from Sark, and have a very small security presence. The last time Sark was in the international news was in 1970, when it was invaded by the French. The invasion fleet consisted of one Frenchman. The defending army consisted of one part-time policeman, who arrested the Frenchman without harming him.

As wars go, it was rather charming. (You can't say that about a lot of wars.) Of course, the big question is: was it our friend Grandpa Fardel?

Meanwhile, my nerdy astronomer friends would love to hear from you if you can introduce them to some nice patches of night sky. (Or some girlfriends.)

To know more, visit our columnist at www.vittachi.com



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Our preparations are well under way, with our stunning new parkland development, the largest in Europe, already three quarters complete.

London is privileged to have been selected to host this international sporting extravaganza

organising games that are more environmentally sustainable, accessible and inclusive than ever.

As such, the 2012 Olympic park design has energy efficiency at its core, providing a blueprint for sustainable living. 90% of the

port; ensuring that all can fully enjoy the spectacle of the Games. Such work is of vital importance and I am deeply committed to opening up access to the Games. To this day, designing and passing the Disability Discrimination Act is my proudest political