

Selected extracts from the July issue of Forum

Rumanas, and why they stay

HANA SHAMS AHMED

WHEN Zobaida Nasreen called me up to tell me what had happened to Rumana, I was on a busy street in Dhanmondi and I thought I had heard her wrong. I kept asking her to repeat. She must be talking about someone else, I thought.

But she wasn't. It was Rumana Monzur Hema, one of my childhood friends with whom I had intermittent interactions after we grew up and finally reunited last year when her daughter was admitted to the same school as my son.

When I heard about what her husband did to her I was in disbelief and shock.

We had looked up to her as the girl who always came out either first or second in her class. She had come out First in her Masters finals from the International Relations department of Dhaka University and had started teaching right away. Last year she was elated when she won a scholarship to the University of British Columbia. She had been unsure whether to take her four-year-old daughter Anushe with her. In the end she decided to leave her daughter with her mother.

She never discussed what was going on between Sumon and her. He was a graduate engineer who was involved in some business, that's all we knew.

And that's why the brutality of the story along with the identity of the victim seemed overwhelmingly unbelievable.

Eyes gouged out. Nose bitten off. Lip bitten off. Dragged by the hair and attempted to be strangled. Saved by maids with an extra key to the room. Of course we presume that if a so-called 'emancipated' woman is threatened with abuse, she would have the support mechanism to walk out of that marriage, that she would not care what her family and relatives or those meddling people in our society say, that if she is financially independent

she did not have to worry about her and her children's future.

All those assumptions and presumptions fell apart when we heard the sadistic brutality of what happened in Rumana's room on June 5, 2011.

I couldn't understand why someone like Rumana, with whom I had a discussion about Barbie dolls and feminism on her daughter's birthday last year, had put up with assaults from her own husband for so long. Now I look at those birthday photos and shiver when I see the face of Sumon behind his daughter and all the other children, know-

ing what was going on behind the scenes. Then, as the media discussions spilled out into the open, I slowly began to realise why Rumana had still not left the monster that was her husband for so very long. The reasons are visible on Facebook, on the blogs, in the distasteful innuendos poured out of the inks of journalists' pens, in the subject lines of emails filling up my inbox through various mailing lists and as mass spam to Rumana's Dhaka University colleagues.

The realisation surprisingly also came from what was said from between the lines of the 'character certificate statements' from her well-meaning friends from British Columbia, Canada. When the story first broke, the media reported the facts of the attack, the brutality and the family's reaction and her educational and family background. But as soon as Sumon 'briefed' the press about what he described as 'the torture done on him', some in the media turned around and started giving frustratingly large spaces to allegations made by Sumon about how he had been 'wronged'. And of course the Internet, apart from its milieu of advantages also provided an excellent platform, through Facebook, for the one too many insecure misogynists, very much like Sumon, to unleash their anger at the loss of control over 'their' women through a much-feared word called 'emancipation'.

Some bloggers aired their concern about how everyone was so 'one-sided' about the incident. There is a reason behind everything that takes place, someone said in an e-group. Can anyone honestly say that they have never done anything wrong in their lives, asked another commenter in a discussion group? Discussions revolved around how 'too much freedom' for women always ended up in such tragedies and that 'western dresses and attitudes' always caused problems for women. Women needed to maintain their 'modesty', some pointed out. And if they didn't, the men should not be blamed for going around on a rampage of harassment, acid attack, rape and domestic violence. Another spammer who claimed to know Rumana 'very well' sent a mass-mail to many university teachers complaining about some women teachers, mainly those who teach feminist studies, at the university, and threatened that "either the women-kind will preserve our values or we man-kind will start exercising our rights" and asked that "every man-kind should come forward and let Sayed talk openly".

For the full version of this article please read this month's Forum, available free with The Daily Star on July 4.

Hana Shams Ahmed is a member of Drishtipat Writers' Collective. She can be reached at hana@drishtipat.org.



SEENALU HAQ

The economics of our loins

FARAH MEHREEN AHMAD

LIKE, they say, and death, for sure, are beyond our control. Just like my worth. "Ajke tumi 100,000 taka, kalke 50,000, porshu 25,000, aar tar porer din... NAI!" is what he said to me when I told him I am in my twenties and not interested in getting married at the moment. "Boyosh toh are kom holona!" he said. "Taar upor dekheto eto bhalona. Kaalo. Shomoy thakte thakte biyeta kore felo. Eto porashuna-ghuraghuri-chakri-bakri diye ki hobe?" (You're not getting younger! On top of that you're not that good-looking. Dark-skinned. The knot while you still have time. What are you going to do with all this education-travelling-work?)

A couple of years back, I had gone to this monk with flowery expectations -- spiritual detoxification, carnal detachment, cathartic solace... blah blah blah. Clearly, I got none. And if you're thinking he stopped with the spiel on my age, looks and depreciating market value, you are mistaken. He ended with a death threat.

He gloated about how he has Jinns; how an elephant once bowed down to him; how someone was once rude to him and he broke that guy's neck just by lightly stroking it and immediately healed it with another stroke; how a recovering alcoholic once promised him he'd never touch liquor again, but did, and died. Yes, he told me the guy died solely because he broke his promise. I lost my attention somewhere around him telling me how he cured his own "purushali okkhomota" with his special powers.

I do a pretty neat job of zoning out while making a person think I am paying attention. So I launched my tried and tested method of staring and nodding at skewed frequencies. All of a sudden I snapped out of my daze when he said "Shotti toh?" I just smiled not knowing what he was talking about. He continued, "Ei chaar deyaler moddhe bole jokhon diso, tomar agami bochorer jonmodiner moddhe biye na korle kintu tumi moray jaba. Aami chaina tumi moro, kintu amar kacche je protiggya bhanghe, shey moray jaye." (Since you have made a promise within these four walls, you will die if you don't get married by your next birthday. I don't want you to die, but whoever breaks a promise made to me, does.)

But I didn't say a word! He said my nod was my proxy for a verbal promise. Talk about backfire!

It has, however, been a couple of years since this encounter. Birthdays have come and gone, you still haven't received a wedding invitation from me (I promise biriyani at my funeral), and I am still around. As is the unenlightened, inhuman and adamant malice this man represented -- a contrived, persistent and rampant value index of a woman's worth.

My experience with the monk is nothing out of the ordinary. He is like those aunties you meet during the wedding season, which is like a series of Black Fridays for the meat/marriage market. "Haate bhalo chhele ase." Please aunty, keep your Tom Thumb in your purse. I'm no Thumbelina.

For the full version of this article please read this month's Forum, available free with The Daily Star on July 4.

Farah Mehreen Ahmad is a postgraduate student and a member of Drishtipat Writers' Collective (DWC). She can be reached at farah@drishtipat.org.

The labyrinth of budgets and finances

ZIAUDDIN CHOUDHURY

LABYRINTHS are not something that one consciously steps into; one gets caught in these somewhat unknowingly. Budgets are such labyrinths that are not intended that way, but they become so when you try to explain these to the people affected by it. Every home needs a budget (of what to spend and where the money comes from), and so does a nation. But woe becomes the head of the household who cannot please anyone in his house with his spending plan and least of all try to get the money everyone in his or her family wants to spend. Now jump the screen to the national budget that has millions of lives hooked to it. Woe betide becomes the person who finds him in this labyrinth of unfulfilled desires of many and wrath of many others, and yes, like the poor head of the household he has to find the money he has planned to spend.

On June 8 this year, Bangladesh Finance Minister presented the 40th annual budget of the country for a staggering Tk.1.6 trillion crores, about \$22 billion in current exchange rates. The budget brought to my mind the very humble but historic first budget of our newly liberated country presented by Tajuddin Ahmed in 1972. The budget of a paltry Tk. 786 crores (about \$684 million in then exchange terms) pales into insignificance when compared with this gargantuan growth. But the budget in 1972 was drawn in a country devastated by a nine-month long war, with millions of people still looking for food and shelter, with roads, bridges and our buildings in a state of utter shambles. It was for a population of under 80 million. We have doubled our population since then; our revenues have increased, and so have our expenditures. We are coping with an ever-expanding requirement to meet both basic needs of our people, and to invest to grow the economy. This is a tall order for any Finance Minister, and no budgets however well intentioned can meet the expectations of all.

How have we done in all these 40 years since the first meagre resource and spending plan of 1972? The budgets have grown steadily over time, each budget has promised growth and lofty revenue goals, and expenditures have accelerated both on running the business and investing for growth.

For the full version of this article please read this month's Forum, available free with The Daily Star on July 4.

Ziauddin Choudhury works for an international organisation in USA.

DR. MOHAMMAD MAINUL ISLAM

EVERY year when the Population Day (July 11) approaches, people show an enthusiasm about the country's population problem. But after a while such discussions fade away, just like the government's population policies. Although high population is the prime problem of Bangladesh, population control has not been given due importance and neither has the government taken any effective steps in this regard. On the contrary, on June 2, 2010, in the Parliament, what the honorable Prime Minister said is really frustrating. She neither considers the population of one of the most highly dense countries of the world as a burden, nor is she concerned about the high growth rate of its population. She vowed to transform the population into skilled manpower -- which of course we all appreciate -- but without keeping it within a manageable and tolerable limit, is it really feasible? Is population in Bangladesh a development challenge or a development opportunity? The fact remains that, high population growth is a serious impediment towards the development efforts of the country and therefore it is crucial to realise the seriousness of the issue and to take necessary steps in this regard as uncontrolled population could very well spoil all development efforts. We must develop the nation but the increasing population of Bangladesh may act as a formidable obstacle.

Population in Bangladesh and national budget

There exist differences in opinion about the exact size of the population of

The people problem

Bangladesh and in this context the government and the UNFPA differ. Given the fact that the result of the census that took place between March 15-19 has not yet been published, it is difficult to ascertain the exact figure. But according to the UN Population Division, at the moment the population of Bangladesh is more than 16 crore (2008 revision). According to the Vision 2021 of the present govern-

ment, by the end of 2020, population of Bangladesh will exceed 18 crore, of which 8.2% will be of over 60 years of age. In each square kilometer, 1,289 people will be living where DR. MOHAMMAD MAINUL ISLAM the corresponding figure at present is 1,142 people. Growth rate of population will be reduced to 1.15% from 1.42% and every year there will be an addition of more than 20 lakh people.



PRITTO REZA

ment, by the end of 2020, population of Bangladesh will exceed 18 crore, of which 8.2% will be of over 60 years of age. In each square kilometer, 1,289 people will be living where DR. MOHAMMAD MAINUL ISLAM the corresponding figure at present is 1,142 people. Growth rate of population will be reduced to 1.15% from 1.42% and every year there will be an addition of more than 20 lakh people.

Following this trend of population, in 2050 the population of Bangladesh is

projected to reach as high as 22 crore. Therefore, we can be said to be moving towards an uncertain future and if we do not control population now, our future looks bleak. In spite of such an alarming situation, it is a matter of great regret that the population programmes of the country lack required momentum. In the national budget, we neither find any specific plan of action nor the required

1.13% of gross domestic product (GDP), for the health and population sector. This allotment is even 0.90% lower than FY 2011 budget.

Although the budget speech has given importance to the health sector, when it comes to the question of allotment, such importance cannot be observed. Just like before, instead of social sector, infrastructure development has been given greater importance. As a result, improvement of health status and health care services will face various challenges. Against the backdrop of lagged behind health system, inefficient family planning, badly affected upazila hospitals from the scarcity of good doctors, and as a whole the deprivation of the mass population from efficient and modern health care services, the allotment given in the health and family planning sector is surprisingly low. No doubt, more budgetary allocation was needed in the sector, particularly for population control. However, we also do not observe any clear vision or clear cut strategies in the FY 2012 budget. In this context, even if agricultural production increases significantly, if the present growth rate of population continues, the target of self sufficiency in food can simply be considered as a fairy tale story.

Although the budget speech has given importance to the health sector, when it comes to the question of allotment, such importance cannot be observed.

For the full version of this article please read this month's Forum, available free with The Daily Star on July 4.

Mohammad Mainul Islam, PhD, is Assistant Professor in the Department of Population Sciences of the University of Dhaka (E-mail: mainulbdcn@gmail.com, mainul@pku.edu.cn).