

INTERNATIONAL DAY OF GIRL CHILD

A promise to girls

ELA BHATT and DESMOND TUTU

TODAY is our human family's first-ever International Day of the Girl. This is a day to celebrate the fact that it is girls who will change the world; that the empowerment of girls holds the key to development and security for families, communities and societies worldwide. It also recognises the discrimination and violence that girls disproportionately endure -- and it is especially important that one of the cruellest hardships to befall girls, child marriage, should be the UN's chosen theme for this inaugural day.

The marriage of adolescent girls, sometimes to much older men, sums up much of the harm, injustice and stolen potential that afflict so many girls around the world.

Ten million girls under the age of 18 are married off, every year, with little or no say in the matter. That's 100 million girls in the next decade. Their parents may feel they are doing the right thing to protect their daughters, but in reality these brides will be vulnerable to ill health, violence, inadequate education and poverty -- as will their children.

Imagine, instead, the wonderful force we would unleash if these girls could be spared such a life.

They would be more likely to stay in school. Studies have shown that when girls stay longer in primary school, they earn wages up to 10% to 20% higher in their adult lives. As they get older, the differences in earnings are even more encouraging: for every extra year in secondary school, they can earn up to 25% more in adulthood.

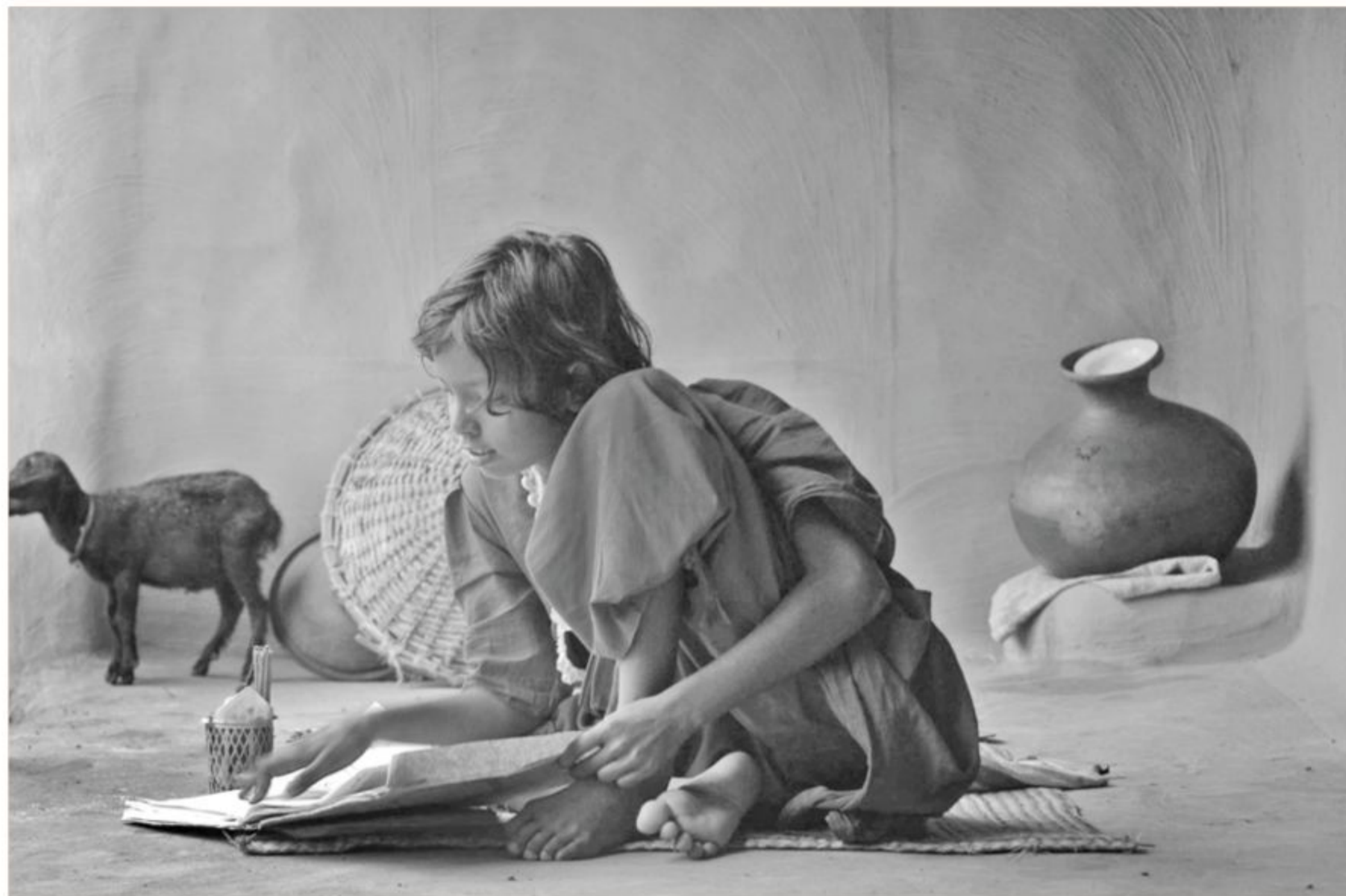
These girls would also be more likely to be healthy, and less likely to contract diseases such as HIV/AIDS than married girls of the same age. And when a woman does eventually start a family, again experts have shown the benefit of having enjoyed a healthy, educated and safe childhood: rates of maternal and child mortality are also improved by better education, while there are also likely to be happier relations between husband and wife and within the family. What is more, women reinvest more money into their family than men do -- so everyone benefits from the higher earnings.

And we know, having seen it first-hand in successful efforts to reduce child marriage, these women won't let their daughters marry as children. Child marriage could cease to exist with their generation.

Today, we have the opportunity to enshrine such a

global pledge to end child marriage.

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), international targets set at the turn of the century, proved it was possible to think, and to act, on the largest of scales: halving extreme poverty, halting the spread of HIV/AIDS and providing universal primary education are some of



MUNERA MOKSHED MUNINI/DRINK NEWS

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its objectives, all by the target date of 2015. Unlike many international commitments, the MDGs are still remembered years later, and helped galvanise unprecedented efforts by governments.

Important progress has been made towards meeting the MDGs: for instance, the target of halving the propor-

tion of people without reliable access to improved drinking water has already been met, and primary school enrolment of girls has equalled that of boys. Overall the MDGs have made a historic contribution towards reducing poverty.

But this progress will be stunted if we fail to address

injustices as staggering, persistent and widespread as child marriage. As our leaders begin the process of preparing new development goals to succeed the MDGs, the persistence of child marriage should be seen as one of the major barriers to the well-being of our human family.

WORLD SIGHT DAY

VISION 2020: The right to sight

M NURUN NABI

WORLD Sight Day (WSD12) is observed every year on the second Thursday of October as an annual day of awareness to focus global attention on blindness and vision impairment. It is being observed on October 11 this year. Activists in the eye care sector around the world usually arrange diversified activities around the date. There is no global theme for WSD12, which allows each participating organisation to use the occasion to highlight its own priority areas to address the requirements of its own target audiences.

More than 285 million people in the world are visually impaired, of which 90% are from developing countries. These people are disconnected from the mainstream development process and in many cases such visually impaired persons are thought of as burdens to their families and the society as a whole. But in 80% of the cases visual impairment is preventable. VISION 2020 was launched in February 1999 to enable all parties and individuals involved in combating blindness in a focused and coordinated way to achieve the common goal of eliminating preventable and treatable blindness.

The World Health Organization (WHO) and the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness (IAPB) with an international membership of NGOs, professional associations, eye care institutions and corporations launched VISION 2020 as a global initiative.

VISION 2020 is about making a world in which no one is needlessly blind and where those with unavoidable vision loss can achieve their full potential. The overall aim is to eliminate the main causes of avoidable blindness and prevent the projected doubling of avoidable vision impairment between 1990 and 2020. From the outset, it has been clear that the goal of eliminating avoidable blindness would best be achieved by integrating an equitable, sustainable, comprehensive eye-care system into every national health system. The VISION 2020 initiative is intended to strengthen national health-care systems and facilitate national capacity-building.

The mission of VISION 2020 is to eliminate the main causes of avoidable blindness by the year 2020 by facilitating the planning, development and implementation of sustainable national eye care programmes based on the three core strategies of disease control, human resource development and infrastructure and technology, incorporating the principles of primary health care. This will be achieved by mobilising the will and passion for action through advocacy and by mobilising

resources.

The objectives of the programme are to increase awareness, within key audiences, of the causes of avoidable blindness and the solutions to the problem; advocate for and secure the necessary resources to increase prevention and treatment activities; and facilitate the planning, development and implementation of national VISION 2020 programmes in all countries.

Vision 2020 involves the active participation of UN agencies, governments, eye care organisations, health professionals, philanthropic institutions and individuals working together in global partnership to accomplish this goal by the year 2020.

According to WHO, of the estimated 285 million visually impaired population worldwide, 39 million are blind and 246 million have low vision comprising severe or moderate visual impairment; preventable causes are as high as 80% of the total global visual impairment burden; uncorrected refractive errors are the main cause of visual impairment; cataracts are the leading cause of blindness; 65% of visually impaired; and 82% of blind people are over 50 years of age, although this age group comprises only 20% of the

world population. The main causes of visual impairment are refractive errors, cataracts and glaucoma, while the main causes of blindness are cataracts, glaucoma and age-related macular degeneration.

VISION 2020 is built on a foundation of community participation. Overarching issues, such as equity, quality of services and visual outcomes, are addressed as part of national programmes.

Some of the major achievements under VISION 2020 initiatives are: all 193 WHO member states are formally committed to investing in eye care; World Health Assembly resolutions have urged WHO member states to develop and implement VISION 2020 national plans, with WHO providing technical assistance; a WHO Action Plan for Prevention of Blindness and Visual Impairment has been prepared and was unanimously adopted at the 2009 World Health Assembly; 135 countries participated in a VISION 2020 workshop; 107 countries have formed national VISION 2020 committees; 91 countries have drafted national eye care plans; to date, 15 million fewer people are blind compared with projections made when the initiative was launched. The many successes of VISION 2020 have been achieved through a unique, cross-sector collaboration, which enables public, private and philanthropic interests to work together, helping people to see, all over the world.

The writer is Project Coordinator, Dhaka Urban Comprehensive Eye Care Project. E-mail: duecp@yahoo.com

Valley of despair

SEEMA MUSTAFA

INDIAN MP Rahul Gandhi seems to have decided to focus on Jammu and Kashmir, or more specifically, on the Valley after his overtures failed to win over the people of Uttar Pradesh. Given the sensitivities of Kashmir and the trauma of its people, one wishes him luck in the hope that his decision to take corporate honchos to the Valley for an interaction with Kashmiri youth is productive and leaves a lasting impact.

It all depends on what he has decided to bring to the table. If it is just an employment-generating exercise, it will, in all probability, be rejected by the state's young people who will perceive it as no better than the usual New Delhi dole. This is not to say that employment opportunities, if offered by corporate honchos, will be rejected outright, but to emphasise that while Kashmiris will make use of the opportunity made available, it will neither calm their nerves nor erase the trauma of a generation reared on conflict and its aftermath.

It can only be hoped that "interaction" with the industry bigwigs led by the heir apparent of the

Congress party does not turn out to be just a publicity gimmick. It has all the ingredients to attract the media: Rahul Gandhi himself, a host of industrialists who are always media favourites, and of course, Kashmir with its "romantic" turbulence.

A beginning could have been made without the industrialists and by ensuring that cottage and small scale industries were set up across the state for the processing and sale of honey, saffron, apples and walnuts, to name just a few natural goods abundant in the state.

Instead, apples rot in Kashmir as successive governments have not bothered to set up a single bottling plant, with the result that fruit is sent to Himachal Pradesh to extract juice, and then the packaged product is sold back to Kashmir at far higher price.

Despite the apparent cynicism, there is a strong idealism underlying the aspirations of the Kashmiri youth today. Most have suffered in varying degrees the trauma of conflict, curfews, humiliation, arrests and the killings.

Hundreds of Kashmiris are languishing in jails across India, thousands have disappeared never to return. There is an urgent need for delivering justice. Development and employment will be meaningless without first addressing the issues that have kept discontent shimmering over the years. The Kashmiris do not support militancy, nor do they

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In our travels, as Elders, in Asia and Africa, we have met brave girls -- and boys -- who do not hesitate to stand up to tradition and say no to child marriage. In Bihar, a state in northeast India where nearly 70% of girls marry before they turn 18 (contrary to national law), we met admirable young people who were signing pledges not to marry before 18. In Amhara, a region in northern Ethiopia, where the most common age for a girl to marry is 12, we visited girls who participated in workshops to discuss collectively the benefits of ending child marriage.

These meetings have convinced us that there is a real need to connect groups around the world, enable them to work together and help to end this practice for the benefit of us all. This led to the creation, last year, of "Girls Not Brides," a global partnership of organisations dedicated to stopping the practice, with a membership now growing in the hundreds.

Day after day, the voices of these girls and boys continue to rise higher up the international agenda. We believe that an international consensus on the need to end child marriage is within sight.

When we created "Girls Not Brides" in 2011, we committed to ending child marriage in one generation. Why not, then, pledge the elimination of this harmful practice by 2030?

Development targets to improve global health, education and gender equality would also be directly tackled by a pledge to end this devastating practice.

And generation after generation, girls would be able to fulfil their potential, amplify the benefits bestowed upon them by their own mothers -- and bless their daughters to do the same.

On this inaugural Day of the Girl, we call on the international community to promise a different life to those girls -- a life of their choosing.

Elia Bhatt founded the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), Desmond Tutu is archbishop emeritus of Cape Town and a Nobel Peace Prize laureate. They are members of The Elders, a group of independent leaders working for peace, justice and human rights.

support governments that use violence against innocent people.

Rahul Gandhi must have been briefed well by Intelligence agencies. And while much of what the sleuths have had to say may have been cleverly edited, there will still be enough to read between the lines -- it is for him to arrive at his own conclusions. Gandhi can pick development without justice; he can pick panchayati raj (political system) without trust and confidence; he can pick elections without voters. On the other hand, he can learn from the mistakes of UP, and the special nature of the problems of the border state to pick delivery of justice as his first priority. It will be a tough path, one that might seem full of thorns as it will definitely attract the ire of the right wing political parties, but it is the only path that can bring him closer to the people of Kashmir.

Development is, of course, always good, particularly in a country where corruption and support for the corrupt have eaten into its very vitals. In several states, people are staging protests as their land has been acquired by industrialists in the name of development for a throwaway price and often without adequate compensation.

Many of these industrialists are in Kashmir now and one presumes they will require land in the beautiful Valley to pursue their mega-projects there. But while giving them the benefit of the doubt, it must be pointed out that in conflict-ridden Kashmir, development has

to be preceded, or at least accompanied, by justice.

That is, if this effort is aimed at touching the hearts and the minds of Kashmiris, and not treating them to "shock and awe" with the big bucks of Indian industry.

Countless married women are still waiting for their men -- missing for years -- to return home; there are women still struggling without compensation and rehabilitation; the enforced disappearances; the curfew; the lack of trust with Facebook and Twitter partially blocked in the state; the open suspicion stemming from the ban that makes it impossible for young Kashmiris to visit friends after sunset, and the humiliation and rape of Kashmiri women. All this and more has to be addressed if Rahul Gandhi is at all interested in a real transformation of Jammu and Kashmir.

The writer is Consulting Editor of The Statesman.
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