

Containing child marriage

A compelling agenda we must redeem

AN under aged mother produces an undernourished child, and what you look at is a generation of underachievers. That about sums up the ill-effects of child marriage.

Indeed, there is an increasing realization that by effectively combating child marriage we would be redressing a whole lot of other problems that spring from it. It is pivotal to cutting back on baby boom, maternal and child mortalities, malnutrition and domestic violence. When such is the potential range of benefits promised by eradication of child marriage, the lack of matching efforts to fend it off is both inexplicable and inexcusable.

How despite our realization of its baneful effects, we have allowed its magnitude to grow is appalling. As many as 66 percent of girls under 18 have been victims of being married off with severe health risks to underaged mothers and the new-born babies.

Given the defiant and pervasive nature of the problem, we need to launch a massive social sensitization campaign against what is essentially a social malaise. Gender discrimination is at the root of the problem. Literacy and awareness of a girl child's rights will be of help. Basically though, the rejectionist approach would have to come from within households and communities.

Of course, the archaic law of 1929 is shame. An updated, strong law prescribing exemplary punishment to offenders and plugging hole for cooking up age of the bride in particular are imperatives. Digital birth registration should be an antidote.

The services of local government representatives, teachers, NGO activists and imams need to be employed for the drive.

DAP in a bind

Stop the tinkering

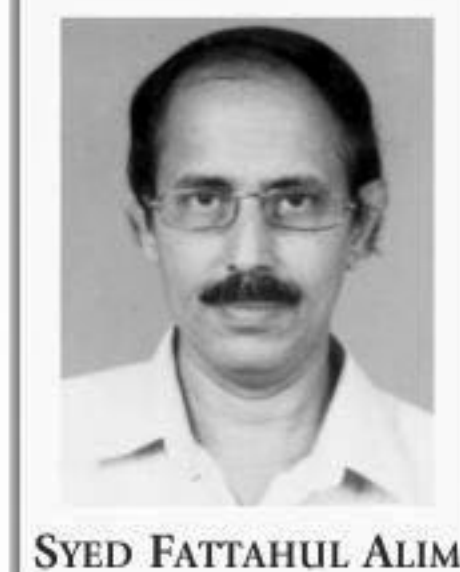
IT is the second time in less than a week that we have been constrained to comment on the status of the detail area plan for the capital city. This is to reinforce even further our consternation at the prospect of DAP, the document which is the basis of the master plan for the development of Dhaka city, becoming irrelevant given the very abject manner in which the government has chosen to bend its provisions to meet the interests of vested groups. It has been four years already since DAP was approved, and all we have seen are attempts to foil its implementation.

We must put on record our reservation about the justification of a ministerial committee on DAP with the task of final review of a document that has not only been approved but issued as gazette also. As it is, the document is rather flawed given the many compromises that had to be made to cater to the requirement of many different interest groups during its formulation, and could do without motivated tinkering.

DAP is a part of a three tier plan package which is complemented by other two tiers, viz. Structure Plan and Urban Area Plan which were prepared during 1992-1995. And any alteration without consultations with the experts who framed DAP might leave a gaping hole in it and ultimately cause the collapse of the other two segments of the Dhaka Metropolitan Development Plan. And this is exactly what might happen if the order of the housing and works minister, who is also the head of the ministerial committee on DAP, almost unilaterally endorsing filling up of 8000 acres of flood flow zones and

Come out of the denial mode

KALEIDOSCOPE



SYED FATTAHUL ALAM

their family member(s) after those tragic encounters. Their repeated appeals to the authorities to return or even provide information about their lost family embers have fallen on deaf ears.

Those people who gathered at the Press Club are real, and the 'disappeared' family members they were lamenting over are also real. But the state minister for home Asaduzzaman Khan would not, perhaps, believe that that they are so.

We say this because the other day he dismissed a report on the last five years' account of the victims of 'enforced disappearances' published by a local human rights watchdog, Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK). He not only questioned the number of such disappearances as reported, but also denied the occurrence of any incident under the rubric, 'enforced disappearance'. In his view, barring some exceptional cases, these disappearances involve persons going into hiding of their own free will for various reasons. To prove his point he cited an incident or two in which the alleged 'enforced disappearances', were purely cases of self-exile from public view by the persons concerned.

One does not deny that the kind of disappearances that the minister was talking about cannot happen in society. They happen. But what ASK was dealing with in its report was a far more serious matter than those happening on the fringe of society. And being in charge of home ministry he could not have been unaware of those incidents of grave public concern. For example, how can one explain away in a lighthearted tone a case of disappearance in which the body of the victim was recovered later? Can one just look the other way, or even imagine that those were not there, when a leading newspaper on August 30 reported that 35 corpses were recovered from Keraniganj area at the last one month and a half and, of those, identities of 17, found floating in the river, remaining unknown? Who knows how many of the dead are victims of enforced disappearance? Facts are too stubborn to be wished away.

According to ASK report, of the 229 persons who thus disappeared between 2010 and 2013, bodies of 31 could be recovered, while the whereabouts of 37 are still unknown. These people did not go into hiding just out of fun and then get killed! In many cases relatives of such disappeared persons said that the

victims were 'picked up' by members of law-enforcement agencies. Were all of them mistaken, or talking through their hat? The same ASK report further goes to show that during the first six months of this year, 74 people were 'picked up' under similar circumstances. Among them, bodies of 23 have been found. This, if compared to the disappearances over a similar span of time in the past years, is an alarmingly high number! These are hard facts and there is hardly any scope to get around them. Rather than being in a denial mode, the home ministry, or the government for that matter, should face facts.

It is worthwhile to note that the rights bodies, in addition to their own findings, usually collect the raw material of their research from reports published in the media on such disappearances. And it goes without saying that those reports often contain versions of the incidents provided by victims' relatives as well as eyewitnesses. And those were no different from the stories of disappearance provided by the 100 families who gathered at the Jatiya Press Club on Saturday. Will the minister dismiss all these reports in a similar vein out of hand?



If he has any doubt about the veracity of the reports provided by the HR watchdog or the media, as a public representative, he owes it to the public to give his own explanation of what happened to those people claimed to have disappeared. Who abducted those people? These unexplained disappearances have stricken fear in public mind about their own safety and security. Who knows who the next target is? Who will give assurance and provide security to the citizens, if it is not the state? Can the government sweep all these cases of enforced disappearance under the rug by just denying their existence?

People getting killed under doubtful circumstances in extra-legal manner has been going on for long. Earlier, detainees dying in police custody, or suspected criminals being shot dead in 'shootouts', or 'cross-fires' by elite crime-busting units usually constituted the stuff of crime reports. It appears, enforced disappearances have, of late, given way to those kinds of extra-judicial murders.

We hope that the government would come out of its denial mode and acknowledge the gravity of the issue at hand. The public wants to see that it is the rule of law and not of jungle that runs the country.

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A straw in the wind

BETWEEN THE LINES



KULDIP NAYAR

The disenchantment of the voters in such a small period is indeed a point of deeper analysis. True, the party made too many promises which were hard to implement. But that is only a part of the explanation. The full explanation is that no home work seems to have done on the capacity to deliver.

Over the years, elections have become only a futile exercise of toll promises and very little implementation. Since the parties' purpose is to win, the reality comes before the public long after it is all over. The voters flip from one party to another, expecting better performance than the last time. They also punish those who did not measure up to their standard. The Congress has been reduced to only 44 members in the parliamentary elections, not even making the 55 seats required to claim the position of Leader of the Opposition Party.

The results of the by-polls also show how the political parties, jaded as they are, losing sheen. The BJP, which swept the Lok Sabha polls, has quickly slipped down in position. The fault lies with the political parties which are not learning their lesson. The voters' disillusionment is visible from election after election. It is obvious that the present dispensation does not sway the electorate. They are looking to prepare the ground for a setup which, in the long run, can counter the saffron power.

The by-elections were seen as a litmus test for the BJP as well as the new combination of the Rashtriya Janata Dal of Lalu Prasad Yadav, the Janata Dal (United) of Nitish Kumar and the Congress. Indeed, the stakes were high for all the three parties in the secular alliance against the BJP which was riding on its massive success in the Lok Sabha polls. The results must have come as a real morale-booster for the combine, particularly for the grand old party Congress.

On the other hand, the BJP must be feeling greatly disappointed for its performance which was below expectations. Though the party leadership put up a brave front, it will have to go back to the drawing board to arrest the trend sooner than later as the BJP has little time before the September by-elections in Uttar Pradesh for 11 seats.

For BJP president Amit Shah, who has made wholesale changes to the party structure—it is a pity that old guards L.K. Advani and Murli Manohar Joshi have been

omitted from the parliamentary board—the UP by-poll results will be crucial. He has already said that he would want all the 11 seats in his basket, largely because the elections will be sort of a semifinal before the 2017 assembly elections in the state.

Shah will have to work overtime to pick his candidates since the by-elections will be a triangular affair with the Congress and the Samajwadi Party having announced their candidates. Even otherwise, Shah's credibility is at stake after he was pitch forked to the current position when he singlehandedly helped the BJP win 70 out of 80 seats from the state in the Lok Sabha polls.

The loss of a seat in the Madhya Pradesh by-polls particularly is an alarm bell for both Shah and Shivraj Singh Chouhan, the state chief minister who has been inducted in the parliamentary board, which is the highest decision-making body. More than the victory by the Congress which wrested the Bahoriband assembly seat from the ruling party, it is the defeat of the BJP candidate which must be hurting it badly. After all, the Congress managed to retain just two out of 29 Lok Sabha seats in the state only recently.

As for the Lalu-Nitish alliance in Bihar, the by-poll results must have come as a shot in the arm for the two veteran politicians. It was a well thought out political gamble the two took and it has paid rich dividends, after their parties had taken a real drubbing in the April-May Lok Sabha elections. Knowing full well the pattern of voting and caste arithmetic of Bihar politics, the two leaders apparently realized that they stood a chance only if they were to put up a collective fight.

No doubt, it was a bold experiment which may well pave the way for a possible realignment of anti-BJP parties on a single platform in the run up to the next assembly elections in the state. Bahujan Samajwadi Party's Mayawati has shunned such an offer from Mulayam Singh Yadav for the UP by-polls because she has not yet forgotten the "attempt" by the Samajwadi Party to eliminate her. But in the time to come if she gains confidence, she could reconsider the offer.

In any case, the by-poll results must have warmed the hearts of many anti-BJP leaders who will want to go such an experiment in the future. CPM leader Prakash Karat who claimed that unity among secular parties had paid off in the recent by-elections is willing to cooperate with the like-minded parties to fight the BJP. But his party and he have issues with the Congress. "Our party line is to fight the BJP primarily because it is in power now. But we are opposed to the policies of the Congress too," he had said.

Whatever the case, there is one lesson for all secular parties to learn. The voters are yearning for an alternative, away from the Congress as well as the BJP. They want secular and democratic governance which is what the independence struggle has provided us. EOM

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LETTERS

TO THE EDITOR

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Will new Gaza ceasefire last?

The new ceasefire between Israel and Hamas has immediately raised the same old question: will it last, or is it merely just another pause, providing



PHOTO: AFP

the prelude for the next round of fighting à la previous ceasefires? We hope the current ceasefire is different and may well last.

There are no winners or losers. Hamas scored a significant political victory as it maintained its ability to fire rockets at Israel up to the last minute before the ceasefire was put into effect, but also suffered massive losses in men and materials. Israel decisively won the military campaign by inflicting huge pain and destruction, but lost politically by creating the perception that Hamas achieved its objectives even though it fell far short of its original demand to lift the blockade altogether.

That said, what has made the ceasefire possible is that both sides have concluded that the continuation of violence will not improve their positions and may well make it considerably worse. The impact of the Israeli and Palestinians' public outcry and the insurmountable pressure on their respective governments was critical to bring an end to the seemingly unending war.

Dr. Alon Ben-Meir

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'Gene Drive' for malaria control

Scientists at Wyss Institute of Harvard Medical School have been working on a genetic emerging technology called 'Gene Drive' which may effectively help combat malaria and other insect-borne diseases, control invasive species and promote sustainable agriculture. The researchers have developed a powerful new genome editing tool called CRISPR/Cas9 which would allow scientists to precisely insert, replace, delete, or regulate genes in different sexually reproducing species. The genetic alternations so done would be spread to future generations and ultimately to the entire population of targeted organisms. These altered species would no longer be capable of spreading diseases in humans, animals and plants. Humans would get rid of certain dreadful insect-borne diseases like malaria spread by mosquitoes. Through application of gene drive technology, animals and plants would be protected against pest and weeds infestation.

Every invention has good as well as bad effects. So scientists at Harvard now are seeking public opinion plus authority's decision to go ahead with the new technology. In my opinion, gene drive should be given a green signal to move forward in the greater interest of the human beings with restrictions of its application on natural human inheritance process.

Professor M Zahidul Haque

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Ensuring quality education for students

Quality education is a must to bring positive changes in society. But it is a matter of regret that the government of our country is giving emphasis on quantity, rather than the quality. Every year, the number of CGPA 5 scorers is increasing, but their quality is deteriorating. It is high time the government took an overall rectification programme to improve our education system; otherwise a bleak future is waiting for us.

Asrafur Islam

Chunarughat, Habigonj

Comments on news report, "Brutal murder in the capital," published on August 28, 2014

Litan Chandra Roy

"...Faruki was always in favour of majars (shrines) and "milads". "But some people do not believe these and were against our organisation. They might be involved in the killing." If this was the motive of such heinous killing, it will be regrettable. The religious minded people should be more tolerant of others' views.

Partha Sarker

What is going on this country? Religious scholars are being killed. These incidents indicate that law and order situation is deteriorating in the country. The culprits should be brought to book.

Dev Saha

It seems, that man had become a thorn for a criminal party/gang and that is why he needed to be eliminated. Intolerance is the motive of that killing?