

A break in hartal for cricket?

Making a mockery of people's suffering

THE BNP-led 20 party alliance's announcement of a 12 hour 'break' in hartal to allow for people to celebrate the Bangladesh Cricket team's victory over England for the World Cup quarterfinals is a contrived attempt to gain public sympathy. There are innumerable reasons to feel outraged and disgusted by this announcement.

One has to only remember the images of arson victims writhing in excruciating pain in hospitals, many of them dying an agonizing death – the tragic consequence of the ongoing blockade-hartal. For them the announcement of such a 'reprieve' from hartal is a cruel, callous joke.

Hartal and blockade centred violence has taken over 83 lives, destroyed hundreds of vehicles and robbed the livelihood of thousands of people. It has also disrupted the academic future of our young people. Why weren't such 'breaks' announced for our close to 15 lakh SSC and other equivalent board exam candidates who are not sure when certain exams will still be postponed, cancelled or completed? Why are there no breaks for all the other students of schools, colleges and universities – the academic calendars of which have gone haywire, thanks to the constant danger of being petrol bombed? Students at all levels are frustrated with the continuous interruption in their studies and are worried that they will not be prepared for upcoming exams. The HSC exams for more than 10 lakh examinees, scheduled for April, may also be affected if the blockades and hartals continue. Will the BNP and its alliance concede to give a respite to these candidates in the interest of the students whose futures are determined by the successful completion of these board exams? Or will they only reserve these 'breaks' for a victory in cricket?

Torching land offices

Punish the culprits

WE cannot but deplore in the strongest terms the senseless acts of vandalism that have plagued the country in the last two months, the latest victim of which, it seems, has become the land record offices across a big swathe of the country. A string of such incidents has been reported in the last three weeks where such establishments have been vandalized and the records burned.

Even though these dastardly acts of sabotage have not led to any loss of life, for the criminals chose the dead of night for perpetrating such senseless acts, there is no denying that the fallout of such attacks will have a huge ramification on the citizens' property ownership. Bangladesh's land offices are hotbeds for corruption as it is, and, to make matters even more grievous, only 10 percent of the data is digitalized. It gives us reason to believe that a vested quarter is trying to take advantage of the present political unrest and is deliberately targeting such government establishments to grab from the poor whatever little pieces of land that they have.

We know that every crime has a reporter, and no information is unattainable. In this context, it is crucial that the law enforcers use human intelligence. It is indeed bereft of any logic that they have not been able to nab the criminals for such subversive acts. Chances remain high that if these incidents are not stopped, they might develop into an insidious trend of attacking government record offices and will open new avenues for land grabbing.



KNOT SO TRUE
 RUBANA HUQ

THE International Woman's Day comes every year with new campaigns, new tag lines, new slogans and newer pledges. Every year, there seems to be more men endorsing women's rights. Every year, there seems to be more men waking up to a 'new' reality that women too need to be upgraded from the 'sub-human' category to the category of a 'human' being. How does one explain how a woman feels during these times when a woman does get special attention?

My morning on March 8, 2015 started with watching the documentary, "India's Daughter". That morning, with a cup of coffee in my hand, I shut the world down and indulged for sixty minutes. Jyoti Singh, a 23-year old was gang raped in a bus in Delhi on December 16 and died on December 29, 2012. It's a tale of a pain endured by the parents, and the confessions of an accused, Mukesh Singh. Mukesh looks at the camera and says that while being raped, a woman should be quiet and not fight and he argues that Jyoti would have been alive if she hadn't fought back as they would have then dumped her body somewhere and she wouldn't have suffered organ injuries. The defence lawyer, A.P.Singh, goes even further saying that he would burn his own daughter if she had done what Jyoti had done, which was to have gone out with a male friend in the evening. The most shocking reaction comes from none but a woman, the Minority Affairs Minister, Najma Heptullah, who sided with Home Minister Rajnath Singh and blamed the previous UPA government for allowing the film to be made. This was a clear case of a man against a woman; a woman against a woman; and a government against a woman. The list could go on. But, luckily, in the meantime, a private television channel sported a black screen with only a picture of a burning candle with the typeface of "India's Daughter" during the slotted hour and had just carried the views of the viewers scrolling at the bottom. Kudos. Media always

#SheForHe

finds a way of fighting back in times of crisis. Like it did, on June 24, 1975 when Emergency was declared in India. In protest, on June 28, the Delhi edition of the Indian Express on June 28 carried a blank editorial, while the Financial Express reproduced in large type Rabindranath Tagore's poem "Where the mind is without fear."

While I finished watching the documentary and shared the link with a young woman, she responded by saying: "But that's India. We are a lot better off here." I gaped in disbelief. If we have failed to tell our young generation what the picture of torture and abuse in Bangladesh looks like, then we have failed our own faith. As per the data of Ain-o-Salish Kendra, in 2014, 707 women had been raped; 81 died; 99 of them fall between the age range of 7-12; 35 are under six years of age. 27 were sexually abused, out of which 13 were murdered and 14 committed suicide. 262 were killed in domestic violence. 163 were killed in dowry related issues and 11 had committed suicide. If we have not told our children that there is a black act in this very country of ours, known as Colonial Era Evidence Act of 1872 which gives every rapist a chance to be "innocent till proven guilty", then the fault lies with our own voices.

Every time we read about a rape, an abuse, if we don't react to the news and leave it only to organisations to compile the data, launch the movement and watch it tapering off and occasionally gaining steam, then the real cause will only slide into the shadows and the face of the evil will never register in the hearts of any of our children. Maybe we could raise black flags on our places of residence every time we read about a rape? What about running a blank spot in the electronic media just for one minute in protest of the barbaric episodes every time they happen? What about telling our own children in spite of having 9 million women engaged in agriculture, 3 million in readymade garment sector, 9 million homemakers, 9000 media and entertainment workers, 70,000 bank employees, 65000 teachers and 5000 women in high places in service and industry sector, in

this very same country, responding to an ICDDRDB survey, 89 percent men surveyed in rural areas and 83 percent in the urban areas reported that it is "ok" to mildly beat (mriduprohar) a woman?

It is the same land where many like me woke up to a dreadful photograph printed on this very English daily on March 8, 2015. The picture was of two battling female politicians in Bogra, pulling the roots of each other's hair out in order to be seen ahead of the other in a political initiative. By the afternoon, amidst all the marches and programmes in the city, another incident had taken place: a particular political party had just announced their nomination for the male mayor and ended their munajat by praying to be freed from the "clutches" of the two women in and out of power.

Luckily we have Nadia Sharmeen in our soil, who had just been awarded the International Woman of Courage prize for her bravery during the Hefazat-ridder times in Dhaka a few years back. Nadia was severely beaten up, hospitalized, and had lost her job with the private channel that she was covering the consignment for. Nadia is not only my hero, but she stands for millions of women in this country, who cry in private and brave a smile in public. She stands for many of us who have multiple hats to wear, many roles to play and cannot afford to be portrayed in distress. Speaking of which, someone right outside my door is waiting for a document to be signed while I shed my tear, hide it, wipe it away and camouflage my sadness with a smile. After all, a woman cannot afford to be seen sad in a professional environment. Being a woman is not easy; being a partner is hard; and being a professional woman is the hardest, just because it's really not a world where a man stands up for a woman; it's truly a world where most of us live for the Man. Commendable initiatives like 'HeforShe' will never be translated into reality unless we run persistent campaigns to be transparent with our own problems, and by being in constant touch with our own expectation and pain.

The writer is the Managing Director of Mohammadi Group.

TO BAN OR NOT TO BAN, IS THAT REALLY THE QUESTION? Feminist solidarity in neoliberal times

DINA M. SIDDIQI

ANOTHER International Women's Day has come and gone. This year, my Facebook feed was jammed with passionate debates on the merits of the BBC documentary 'India's Daughters.' I found the emerging fault-lines fascinating for their reprising of issues that have long haunted post colonial feminisms in other places and contexts. Who can speak for (Indian/Bangladeshi/'native'/Muslim) women? Does location or race matter in the making of a feminist intervention? How do we distinguish knee-jerk nativism and cultural nationalism from legitimate critiques of colonial and imperialist framings? Most significant for me: where do analyses of contemporary of neoliberal capitalism fit in? I do not engage with the contents and storyline of the documentary but reflect on a set of concerns and anxieties generated by it.

Race and the politics of location

Predictably enough, Indian cultural nationalists are furious that a 'white' woman had the temerity to make a documentary on rape in their country. BJP functionaries, beholden to Hindu cultural nationalism, have derided the filmmaker for undermining India's reputation on the global stage and stymieing tourism to boot. These nativist responses are easy to dismiss but they do not displace questions of location, voice and privilege.

First, some obvious points. If feminists are to concede that no 'outsider' can ever capture the complexity of individual women's lives, then all women would be reduced to speaking for themselves. This is an absurd proposition. Not to mention that the outsider/insider dichotomy is deeply problematic. Being a woman doesn't automatically allow privileged insight into another woman's lived realities.

It's worth pointing out, however, that enduring structures of (neo) colonialism mediate the general relationship between Euro-American women and those in the global South. What prompts the desire to go elsewhere and 'help' women in other places? The belief that 'they' are more oppressed and need more help than women at 'home'? That may not have been this particular filmmaker's motive but it is common enough and



PHOTO: UTPAL BARUAH/REUTERS

carries traces of a missionary impulse. (I am reminded here of Zia Haider Rahman's novel 'In the Light of What we Know,' in which he captures with humour and insight the sense of entitlement of a certain class of cosmopolitan global citizens who show up in unfamiliar places and feel equipped to 'fix' development problems). In this instance, 'white privilege' was certainly at work, as evidenced by the filmmaker's extraordinary access to under trial prisoners and prison officials.

I want to make clear that my argument is not about individuals and their personal biases: my point is to draw attention to the highly unequal structures of privilege and entitlement that cut across race and reinforce certain kinds of hierarchy. Indeed, the politics of location exceeds geography and colour of skin. It is intimately linked to our ideologies. Our political locations shape our ways of seeing -- an Orientalist reading of poor Indian/Bangladeshi/'native'/Muslim men as essentially uncivilised and in need of corrective instruction from above -- is hardly exclusive to a certain category of Euro-Americans. Much of the urban middle class/upper castes in South Asia subscribe to differing versions of an Orientalist script, one that is often reproduced in mainstream development policies. An 'Us versus Them' geographic binary merely enables denying our own

complicity in global structures of power.

Entangled contexts and the dangers of erasure

Questions of power -- geopolitical, national, historical, structural and symbolic -- keep falling through the cracks in ensuing debates on censorship. We forget that the lines between "hate speech" and "free speech" are profoundly political and always unstable. Politics, not ethics, drives decisions to ban or protect speech. Demands for censorship invariably feed into such politics so that whether or not the documentary should be banned is the wrong question to ask. Surely, the more urgent task is to uncover the interests and stakes in demanding or resisting censorship, and the political maneuverings that privilege one set of "truths" over another.

The controversy over 'India's Daughter' (a curiously paternalistic title for an avowedly feminist intervention) is a reminder that when presented in a decontextualised, stand-alone manner, analyses of sexual violence hide as much as they reveal. In an important essay, Priyamvada Gopal observes that such violence is intimately connected to other systems of privilege, exploitation and inequality, including, in the Indian context, caste oppression, religious chauvinism, resource appropriation (including that of mineral-rich land from indige-

nous tribal communities by multinational corporations) and the vicious economic inequalities fostered by an unfettered capitalist prosperity that has yet to bring basic shelter and nourishment to millions (The Guardian, my emphasis).

Difficult solidarities

Given the hegemony of neoliberal development paradigms in shaping the 'women's question,' this may be the right moment to rethink what constitutes the problem of gendered violence in Bangladesh. Intersectional analyses that take on board inequality and dispossession do not find a place in mainstream analyses of gendered and sexualised violence. How are resource appropriation (think ecoparks, open-pit coalmining, extractive shrimp farming, and land-grabbing in the CHT) as well as rising economic inequality (with its attendant "class rage") connected to the forms of sexual/gendered violence that occurs routinely? Why do we not raise these issues as feminist questions? Why is class constantly displaced as a diagnostic of power? This is done most frequently through essentialised ideas of patriarchal cultural norms, as though culture were separate from class.

It is easy to speak of a generic and generalised phenomenon of violence against women, and so to be 'in solidarity' with women from other communities, classes and castes. But women's bodies are not interchangeable, even when inscribed with similar sexual violence, for the modes and reasons of inscription are context specific.

Even as I write these words, another reminder of the extraordinary complexity and layered meanings of sexual violence appears on my screen. The horrific lynching of a rape suspect by a mixed 'mob' of men and women in Northeast India was produced by a coming together of acute xenophobia, state inaction, vigilante justice, and Islamophobia. A gendered ideology of protection nested at the heart of this production of violence as spectacle.

The writer is a Professor of Anthropology at Brac University. She is currently writing a book entitled Elusive Solidarities: Gender, Islam and Transnational Feminism at Work.

COMMENTS

"It mustn't be 16" (February 8, 2015)

A Senior Citizen
 There should be NO lowering of age to 16, under no excuse. It will have manifold ill-effects. Our education is limping, our economy is affected badly. And now further pressure on population?

"Rental power co faces \$23m fine" (March 3, 2015)

Farida Khan
 One more sad Bangladeshi tale of lack of accountability, political connection and business nexus, money taken from the public and fines never to be paid.

Deep Purple Blue
 These power plants are robbing the country and consumers with impunity. They are above the law due to their political connections. Everywhere in the world, these rental power stations are temporary, stop-gap arrangements, but in our country, the contracts of these rental power stations have become permanent features. The collective efforts of these rental power stations are preventing the establishment of more cost-efficient larger power stations.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Congratulations, Tigers

Hats off to the Bangladesh Cricket Team for their great victory against England in the World Cup 2015. Their stamina, perseverance and commitment in the match enthralled us. No doubt every player gave his best to the game. Keep it up, tigers. All the best.

Md. Hamidur Rahman
 Jessore

Visionary power plans

I was heartened to see the news "Power trade with India" (TDS, Mar. 7) and the vision of the AL government in generating power supply for Bangladesh by 2030. I use the word 'vision' because in my fairly long life time, I have seldom seen any government taking a long-term vision for Bangladesh -- at best it had always been a maximum of 5 years time. The AL government is sometimes criticised by some for being quite autocratic at times, but in this case its leadership at least is trying to set some vision and taking some steps to reach their targets. I can well remember when the AL government took power in 2009; the baseline

power generation was a little more than 4000 MW. Now it has gone up to more than 10,000 MW in 6 years time. And by 2030 the vision for generating power has been set as 39,000 MW. I am happy with the vision not because of the amount of MW but because of the shift in production plan. By that time as per the vision, Bangladesh will drastically switch to electricity generation based mainly on coal and nuclear power and joint collaboration with India, Nepal, Bhutan and Myanmar. If it happens a huge amount of subsidy for quick rental plants will be reduced and the budget allocation for electricity subsidy could be utilised for development purposes.

Shazzad Khan
 Gulshan-2, Dhaka

Protests should be peaceful

Julian Baggini, a renowned philosopher said, "You should protest about the views of people you disagree with over major moral issues and argue them down, but you should not try to silence them, however repugnant you find them." In a democratic system, protest is an important part of people's right, but it must be expressed through peaceful means.

After the detention of ex-president of Maldives Mohamed Nasheed on February 22, 2015, his supporters protested by marching a rally in the capital city. While they were marching, they

were carrying the flag of Maldives and giving slogans for the release of Nasheed, unlike the protesters of our country who carry petrol bombs, cock-tails, sticks, sharp weapons and firearms to create violence.

After the death of Russian opposition leader Boris Nemtsov, almost 20,000 people peacefully protested in Moscow through marching in the street. The important fact is, they did not create any violence even after their leader was shot to death.

If BNP-led 20 parties' alliances think about the common people, then they should avoid violence and pursue a peaceful way to fulfil their demands.
 Ripu Sen
 International Islamic University Chittagong