

"The streets and institutions are male-dominated and aggressive."

Professor Dr. Saskia Wieringa of University of Amsterdam speaks to Nahela Nowshin of The Daily Star at the International Conference on Gender, Diversity and Development hosted by Dhaka University from March 27-29. Dr. Wieringa is the co-founder and secretary for the Kartini Network for Women's/Gender Studies in Asia, and is working on a book on heteronormativity in Asia.

THE Daily Star (TDS): Dr. Najma Chowdhury, Founding Chair of the Women and Gender Studies Department of Dhaka University, and you go way back...

Dr. Saskia Wieringa (SW): This was around twenty years ago. I was approached by the Dutch embassy about an interesting project and they wanted us to collaborate with Dhaka University. So I came to Bangladesh and met Professor Dr. Najma Chowdhury. She told me about her dream to set up a women's studies department and I said, "Ok, let's go ahead." The embassy also gave us their full support. The two of us together had a vision of what we thought would turn out to be a wonderful department. We would spend lots of time together planning and talking about the books, courses, research projects and programs that we wanted the department to have. Maybe it took a bit longer to realise this dream than originally envisaged but Professor Chowdhury's dream has come true and very few people in the world can say that.

TDS: You have published widely on sexual politics in Indonesia. Could you please tell us a bit about that?

SW: I have written several books on Indonesia. To give you a short background, I started out with research on batik labourers and the weak women's movements in Indonesia. The women's movement was weak in part because of the military push in 1965 that stigmatised the Communist party through myths, lies and sexual slander of its women. They associated women's political agency with prostitution, rape and castration of the generals who were murdered. This was a total lie. From that moment onwards, women's political agency was sexualised and perverted. All throughout Suharto's dictatorship women's movement was extremely weak. The grassroots women's movement was dead. I also did more general research on tradition, gender and sexuality. I am back to my first big research project which is on the 1965-68 massacre (anti-communist purge) in Indonesia which resulted in the death of more than 500,000 people. A people's tribunal has been set up and I am the current chair of the committee.

TDS: Please tell us about some observations that you've made after coming here.

SW: What strikes me the most here is the aggression I see on the streets. A study has shown that 80-90% of female domestic workers here face physical and sexual abuse in the households they work in. There's an extremely high level of sexual violence in this society. One of my PhD students, Intiaz Shaykh, did a brilliant study about men and masculinity. He sheds light on the ways in which women are viewed as objects and men tolerate their own objectifying pornographic gaze on women; this plays into the question of masculinity. Women (although, very few) are becoming aware of their rights but men have to change as well. The streets and institu-

tions are male-dominated and aggressive. I am so happy to be in the field of education because there's so much stupidity and prejudice around. A lot needs to be done in the field of education. We have to move away from aggression and greed in our society and towards one of peace and harmony. And I don't mean harmony based on inequality but one based on respect for everybody.

TDS: It's always the women who are questioned and put under the microscope (even when they themselves are victims of sexual violence perpetrated by men).

western world and the Indian subcontinent in terms of women's issues?

SW: You have to look at the socio-economic indicators. To have full equality, things like political power, education and access to health should be equal. In the Netherlands, the figure is around 0.9 (1 being full equality) and for Bangladesh the figure is 0.6. So an improvement has to be made there. But apart from that, the pervasive mentality that views women as subordinate and dependent don't appear on these indicators. In the Netherlands, we have these kinds of ideologies



PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

Dr. Saskia Wieringa speaks at a roundtable session at Senate Bhaban in Dhaka University on March 29.

SW: The short story *Sultana's Dream* (by Begum Rokeya) addresses such issues. The gender roles are reversed and here she imagines a feminist utopian society in which women are at the wheel and men are the ones being controlled because most of the mischief and acts of violence are carried out by men. Why don't we give women the control for once? Begum Rokeya saw the dilemma... *everything* is controlled by men.

TDS: Women's sufferings around the world are not that different. But what would you say are some of the differences between the

(maybe even as strong) too but they don't manifest themselves in as aggressive ways as they do in Bangladesh. It's terribly violent, open and public here. A lot of people here live on the streets so they have no recourse but to be out in the open. We should not have to live in fear but in a neoliberal world driven by greed, people's livelihoods are at risk and that is more apparent here than in the West because people there at least have social security (however insufficient). Because of higher insecurity in this part of the world, we see more violence because insecure people are easier to fight.

Are we losing Bangladesh?

ABDUL MANNAN

ON August 21, 2004, 23 Awami League leaders and workers were brutally killed in a premeditated grenade attack in a rally on Bangabandhu Avenue addressed by the then Leader of the Opposition and Awami League, Sheikh Hasina. Needless to say the intended target was Sheikh Hasina, as 12 deadly grenades were aimed at her. Luckily, she escaped the mayhem but her hearing capability was seriously damaged. After the incident, noted Indian journalist Hiranmay Karlekar wrote a thought provoking book titled 'Bangladesh: the next Afghanistan?'

Afghanistan was then being systematically ravaged by the Taliban militants. Earlier another attempt was also made on the life of Sheikh Hasina in Kotalipara, Gopalganj. Police arrested a man named Mufti Hannan in connection with the attempt in Kotalipara and August 21 grenade attack. Hannan had close connection with HuJI. He also confessed that he was regularly in touch with Tarique Rahman, elder son of Begum Zia. After witnessing the never ending attacks by religious bigots and the petrol bomb related violence introduced in our political arena recently many have started thinking that perhaps Karlekar was right in his observation. The thinking was further reinforced when blogger Md. Oyasiqur Rahman Babu was hacked to death by three religious bigots in broad daylight in Dhaka on Tuesday. This comes barely after the brutal murder of Avijit Roy, another blogger and online activist. The same year, a very similar attempt was made on another blogger Asif Mohiuddin. Similar attempts were made to kill the eminent poet, now deceased Shamsur Rahman, and writer Dr. Humayun Azad. Although Shamsur Rahman managed to save himself, Dr. Azad succumbed to his injuries a few months later in Germany. The killers who were involved in such barbaric acts often did not have any idea what blogging is.

Religion was used for all recent killings of bloggers, though in Islam nowhere is it written or said that anyone has the right take another person's life in the name of religion. According to available reports, the three alleged killers did not know Masum, their hujur who gave them their 'assignment,' from before but met him for the first time when he shared with them the plan as to how Babu should be killed. He even showed the photograph of Babu beforehand so that the killers can identify him easily. The three did a reconnaissance on Babu's movement and he was hit near his residence in Tejaon industrial area when he was on his way to office.

Those involved in these killings and militancy belong to fundamentalist political parties like HuJI, Ansarullah Bangla Team, JMB, Hizbut Tahrir, Hizbut Towhid, LoT, and if not all most have their roots in Jamaat-e-Islami. Another recent phenomenon that has surfaced is that not all who are involved in such brutal killings are madrasa students. Some of them, especially those belonging to Hizbut Tahrir, come from different public and private universities. Those arrested for killing Rajib were all students of a high profile private university of the country.

On October 2, 2014, there was a massive explosion in Khagrager in the district of Burdawan in West Bengal where two bomb makers with close connections with JMB were making highly dangerous and deadly Improvised Explosive Devices (IOD). A week or so ago, the National Investigation Agency (NIA) of India, while submitting charge sheets against 22 JMB operatives in the Bonkshal Court in Burdawan mentioned that those charge sheeted at least 4 of them were Bangladeshi citizens. Of those accused 13 were arrested and 8 are absconding, 2 died during the deadly explosion. The charge sheet mentioned that those accused were involved in a conspiracy to remove the elected government of Sheikh Hasina and replace it with 'Sharia' based government. All arrested or accused had connections with madrasas in Burdawan, Nodia, Birbhum and Murshidabad. Unfortunately since the attack on poet Shamsur Rahman till the killing of Rajib, no one was convicted though there is a long standing demand to try the militants and terrorist under Anti Terrorism Act of 2009 (amended in 2012).

In the last 40 years, the country has witnessed the alarming mushroom growth of Quomi madrasas without any sort of government control and subsequently most of them have become incubators of nurturing militants. So far none of these madrasas have managed to produce any religious scholar worth naming. Even a country like Pakistan has attempted to control these breeding grounds of militants but the failure of the Bangladesh Government has contributed in the creation of killers of Babu and others. It may be safely said that Babu is not the last victim of these religious fanatics. There will be many more to come unless the government is serious enough to take action against these bigots. Delay in action may result in losing the Bangladesh that three million martyrs dreamt of in 1971 and transforming the country into another Afghanistan as Hiranmay Karlekar forecasted. These demons should be made to understand that the reach of the government is much wider than they think.

The writer is a former Vice-chancellor, University of Chittagong. Currently he teaches at ULAB, Dhaka.

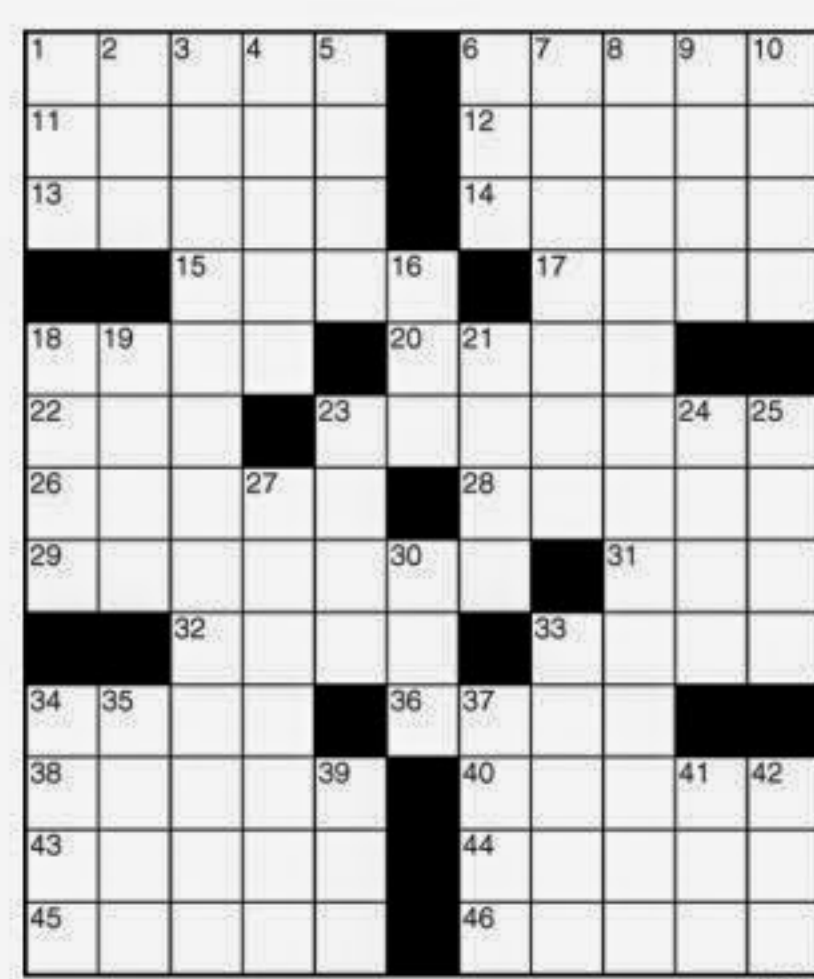
CROSSWORD by Thomas Joseph

ACROSS

- 1 Treated roughly
- 6 Caravan creature
- 11 Nimble
- 12 Texas landmark
- 13 Red Square name
- 14 Arrested
- 15 Effortless
- 17 Computer unit
- 18 Deep voice
- 20 Genesis name
- 22 Decline
- 23 Headgear with eyeholes
- 28 Lowgrade peer
- 29 Weasels' cousins
- 31 Eurasian deer
- 32 Wise teacher
- 33 Eat in style
- 34 General feeling
- 36 Movie plantation
- 38 Phoenix birthplace
- 40 Forum garb
- 43 Moving sinuously
- 44 Conspicuous
- 45 Like Santa's duds
- 46 Full of flavor

DOWN

- 1 Chum
- 2 Application entry
- 3 Sherwood Anderson book
- 4 Inventor Howe
- 5 Lairs
- 6 Highway sight
- 7 Mobile home?
- 8 Sherwood Anderson book
- 9 Put out
- 10 Single
- 16 Hairy ox
- 18 Roof support
- 19 'Fernando' group
- 21 Claiming cry
- 23 Visionary
- 24 Shortly
- 25 Leg bend
- 27 School attendee
- 30 Bonbon center
- 33 Took the wheel
- 34 Physics amount
- 35 Capital on a fjord
- 37 Full range
- 39 Blue shade
- 41 Skill
- 42 Messy digls



Yesterday's answer

CMON SATFOR
HIVE IGUANA
AREA GASBAG
PORTENTS
LEG ELOPE
AMONG SEVER
BOO ETA
INKER ACRES
TASTE LAB
HAVENOTS
ATEASE YOYO
PIANOS OKRA
EXTENT USER

CRYPTOQUOTE

QOK FAAL JMPK MZ Y CGADKZZ,
UAQ Y ZQYQK AP WKMUE MQ MZ Y
L M G K D Q M A U . U A Q Y
L K Z Q M U Y Q M A U . -- DY G J G A F K G Z

Yesterday's Cryptoquote: EFFORTS AND COURAGE ARE NOT ENOUGH WITHOUT PURPOSE AND DIRECTION.
- JOHN F. KENNEDY



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