

WHO GETS TO DEFINE YOU?

THE SOUND & THE FURY



SUSHMITA S. PREETHA

IMAGINE a life of never fitting in, of constant ridicules and derisions, of being shunned by your own family, of being denied jobs and a chance at a "comfortable" life, of being harassed and assaulted, often sexually, because of who you are. Imagine

having to struggle on a daily basis with society, the state and your own self to hold on to a multifaceted identity that the rest of the world quite simply refuses to understand. Imagine the internal conflict of a soul deemed, by the external world, as aberrant and unnatural, when every fibre of your being tells you that this is who you were meant to be. Imagine then, years and years later, when this stigmatised identity has become a pre-dominant marker of your being, the government telling you that you are NOT who you think you are, that you have no legitimate claims over defining your own identity.

On July 2, the government conducted "medical tests" on 14 members of the hijra community who had been selected for low-level government positions as part of a scheme to rehabilitate the marginalised population. Subsequently, they classified 12 of them as "full-grown males" and disqualified them from accessing the scheme. Not surprisingly, the hijra community, who have had to fight for a long time for this quota, was indignant, terming the tests as "insulting" and explaining that having male genitalia did not preclude a hijra from being or identifying as one.

We had all been pleasantly surprised when the government took the long-overdue move to address the plight of this community; we had lauded the humanity and foresight of our policymakers in attempting to incorporate the "Others" into the mainstream. We had thought that, perhaps, the state could lead the way for a more tolerant, diverse society. After all, it was the same government that had recognised hijras as a third gender, and enabled them to obtain voter ID cards. But now, with the latest move, we are left wondering whether the government even understands what being 'third gender' or 'hijra' entails, and why it deems it has a more legitimate claim over defining the identity of this group than the group members themselves. Years ago, a self-identified hijra, now a



PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

transgender rights activist, had told me, "We are simply hijras, but there is nothing simple about being a hijra. People try to define us based on their own understanding of what it means to be a man or a woman, but it's very limited. It doesn't grasp the intricacies of our lives." Her comment stemmed from years of frustration at being "imagined" in different ways by the media, state, NGOs and academics, who have sought, often with the best intentions, to "understand" this "deviant" specimen of the human race.

NGOs, working on HIV/AIDS related programmes, have identified and consequently defined hijras as a vulnerable population in needs of urgent medical support, further criminalising them in society's eyes as sexually deviant creatures who pose a threat to the country's low rate of HIV transmission. The media in Bangladesh has focused on their "unusual" lifestyle, portraying them, for the most part, as unnatural beings who still deserve our sympathy. The government too has regarded them as

somehow physically deformed, of deserving state support out of pity for their "abnormality". Academics, on the other hand, have romanticised them as the archetypes of an 'alternative' gender/sex system. All of these discourses, even when they emanate from different institutions with often disparate claims over the hijra body, have a few crucial points in common. First, they mark the hijra as an Other by by emphasising the ways in which they are categorically and essentially different. Second, they view hijras solely within the framework of sex/gender difference, which ignore the role of other factors, like class, religion or geography, in shaping the hijra identity. Third, and perhaps most importantly, they do not give adequate voice to the people who are being represented.

In the common imagination, hijras are often conflated with eunuchs ("a man who has been castrated") or hermaphrodites ("a person born with male and female reproductive organs"). In reality, however, hijras can be eunuchs or hermaphrodites, or

neither, or both; they can be born intersexed, born "male" who undergo castrating operations that rid them of their genital organs, or born "male" who do not undergo an operation and have their reproductive organs intact. They may dress up in women's clothes and engage in feminine practices without thinking of themselves – or desiring to be – "female;" they may have male lovers and sexual partners, without ascribing the identity of "gay" to themselves and/or their sexual partner(s). To be a hijra, or to identify as such, therefore, involves negotiating a complex and often contradictory terrains of selfhood.

Bodily proof of one's sex/uality – in the form of absence of genitals, whether "natural" or "made" – cannot be the sole markers of the hijra identity. However, for the government, it seems, reducing an identity to a body part is the only way to make it legible for itself, and to the society at large. Mainstream society, after all, believes that anybody born with the male genitalia must necessarily have a masculine gender expres-

sion and be attracted to women; anyone who challenges binary and fixed conceptions of gender and sex/uality are ostracised and deemed as 'unnatural'. But there are and always will be people who do not fall into neat black and white boxes, who transcend narrow and taken-for-granted binaries, who reject or embrace the male or female within them, irrespective of their anatomies. And contrary to the hue-and-cry about our "culture" not having any "space" for such people, gender non-conforming people have not only existed in this region for a long time, but have actually been revered (whether in Hindu mythology or Mughal courts).

It was, in fact, during colonial encounters that bodies in many ways were inscribed and redefined with fixed notions of gender and sexuality. It is also important to remember that "hijra" as a recognisable category did not really exist prior to British colonial rule. Although there were eunuchs, hermaphrodites, transvestites, intersexed or sexually ambiguous individuals in pre-British India, it was not until they were named, identified, documented, and classified as a group with distinct and essential attributes – the hijras – that it became an identity in the way we understand it today. The British attempted to classify hijras as one of many low caste groups in the Indian subcontinent, and demarcated them as a criminal caste, making an explicit connection between criminality and sexual non-conformity. It further delineated cross-dressing and badhai as punishable offences, aiming to invisibilise and silence the hijras/eunuchs from the public sphere. Laws were inscribed onto their bodies, so that they could be regulated, surveilled and controlled, and many of these laws, including the ones on cross-dressing, still remain in force in Bangladesh today.

The government should realise that the whole point of recognising third genders is to allow people to identify beyond the male-female binary. Hijras at any given point in time inhabit multiple variable expressions of gender and sex, and the government's failure to acknowledge that will only add to their continued oppression. Identities are neither fixed nor absolute. Bureaucrats and politicians, who have no understanding of the historical and socio-economic reality of the hijra identity, cannot be allowed to single-handedly decide who is or isn't a legitimate hijra.

The writer is an activist and journalist.

The bright future of renewable energy

MOHAMMED MUNIRUZZAMAN

THE advantages of renewable energy like solar, wind and tides are well known, i.e. they do not produce any pollutants, greenhouse gasses and are eco-friendly. Perhaps the greatest advantage is that they do not require any fuel and are free of international price whims. All that is required to set them up are places with abundant sunshine, wind and tidal power and the sources of these energies are practically unlimited. The great disadvantage, however, is that we do not have any control over energy production. In spite of this drawback, the International Energy Agency predicts that by the middle of this century the sun will be the largest source of energy superseding fossil fuel, wind, hydro and nuclear. If renewable energy is to play an important role in our future energy mix then energy storage and more efficient systems have to be devised.

Are the days of flat solar panels that we are so used to seeing, over then? Not yet, say the scientists. Even though smart technologies and new methods of harvesting energy are being added regularly, the solar panel will be with us for some time. One smart device that has attracted attention is the thin film technology. The

solar thin films printed in bulk reduce both manufacturing and installation costs. As technology improves, the solar harvesting material could be integrated into rooftop material.

Another great idea is the solar window. These are ordinary looking windows that have been coated with electricity generating material but still remain transparent. The coating material on these windows is the world's smallest working solar cells occupying a space of less than a millimeter. It is believed that nanotechnology will also play an important role in future energy harvesting. Nanowires are light solar energy absorbing material. These nanowires are four to five times more efficient at converting solar energy into electricity than silicon based solar panels.

The problem with installing solar panel is the relatively high cost of an inverter – a device that converts direct current (DC) solar thermal electricity into alternate current (AC) that we use in our homes. However, with the advent of micro inverter technology, it is possible to have just one panel to start the solar power generating system and at a much lesser cost. The infrared spectrum solar panel is another smart device that harvests not only visible light spectrum into energy but also converts infrared

spectrum into electricity.

A team of scientists at the University of California, San Diego's School of Engineering on nanoparticle paints have developed a nanoparticle paint that makes concentrated solar power (CSP) plants work more efficiently. CSP employs thousands of mirrors to generate electricity, can convert 90 percent of the absorbed heat into electricity and work even in the dark, unlike any other available technology.

There is no denying that from big corporations to individuals everyone's interested in clean solar technology. But the problem has always been about how to store it. Although progress has been made in the form of Tesla Powerwall and the MIT research spin off (Liquid Metal Batteries) we still have to rely on grid supply at night. Solar cells must harvest energy when the sun shines, so unless we can station solar panels high in space and beam power back to earth we have to keep our house hooked to the grid.

Waves and tides are some of the most predictable big energy sources available. However, it has received less media attention than solar and consequently less funding. High altitude winds, way above the ground, have historically been beyond our reach. With

the progress of science and technology we could be on the verge of converting that wind energy into electricity. Investments are available now to build airborne turbines that could float in space and beam down the energy. But as with parking solar panels in space,

interesting ideas to harness the tidal energy – buoys or other above and below the sea surface design and oscillating hydrofoil moored to the ocean floor; as the water passes, it oscillates the buoys and hydrofoil generating electricity. With about 40 percent of

called it "the fastest growing solar home system in the world". With more than 50,000 systems being added every month the government's vision of providing universal electricity to everyone by 2021 appears well on course. In the meantime however, we should

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the engineering challenges remain formidable. Other advances in the field use the jet engine concept of wind energy and the magnetic levitation in wind turbines to reduce friction thereby increasing efficiency. There are a couple of

Bangladesh's population having no access to grid electricity, the government's Solar Home System (SHM) has proved to be a great success. The programme has already reached 3 million homes as of late 2014 and the World Bank has

strengthen our R&D in universities and research organisations and manufacture our own solar panel.

The author is Professor of Physics, Jahangirnagar University, Fellow of the Royal Astronomical Society (UK) and Fellow of the Bangladesh Physical Society.

QUOTABLE Quote



ROBERT CAPA

If your pictures aren't good enough, you're not close enough.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Self-referential, in modern lingo

5 Beach crawlers

10 Stratford's river

11 "Can it!"

12 Monthly bill

13 Target at a party

14 Bringing into being

16 Making folds

20 Whirlpools

23 Heckler's cry

24 All set

25 Bill Withers song

27 McKellen of "The Hobbit"

28 Bends

29 Giving away an intruder, maybe

32 Defeating soundly

36 Fellow performer

39 Singer Brickell

40 Nonchalant

41 Dickens girl

42 Squalid

43 Casual tops

DOWN

1 Painter Chagall

2 Continually

3 Muscle quality

4 Tummy relief

5 Russia neighbor

6 Ladder parts

7 - loss

13 Except

9 Sauna site

11 Some agents

15 Low card

17 Alpine goat

18 Iditarod end

19 Leaves

20 Idle on film

21 Precious

22 Copenhagen native

25 Arm bone

26 Division

28 Impassioned

30 Took steps

31 - Kat

33 Nantes notion

34 Khartoum's river

35 Salon offerings

36 "Survivor" network

37 Mine output

38 Spot

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

F	A	L	L	B	U	N	N	I	E	M
A	L	I	E	N	E	L	A	T	E	
T	I	N	G	E	S	E	L	A	T	E
E	G	G	S	W	E	L	T	E	R	
S	H	E	L	T	E	R	I	R	S	
T	R	I	L	L	Y	E	S			
				M	E	C	C	A		
				D	O	E	O	H	W	O
A	I	R	S	M	E	L	T	E	R	
S	V	E	L	T	E	R	O	R	E	
C	I	L	I	A	U	C	O	N	N	
O	N	S	E	T	B	A	L	E	D	
T	E	E	S		M	E	R	S		

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

BABY BLUES by Rick Kirkman & Jerry Scott