

INTERNATIONAL YOUTH DAY 2015

Voices of the future

Bangladesh is at the stage of reaping the benefits of a demographic dividend. This is a rare window of opportunity for a young nation like Bangladesh. However, despite barriers to political, social and economic opportunities, youngsters are making strides in all areas. Today, on International Youth Day 2015, we present the views of three youth leaders from various walks of life to get a glimpse into the ways in which young minds hope to make a difference.

Stronger together

LUCKY AKHTER

THE Shahbag Gonojagoron movement was largely influenced by young people. In fact, young women were particularly active in this movement. The most important aspect of youth mobilisation is taking forth social issues to them. Our society is gradually veering toward an individualistic way of life. People are busy thinking about their own concerns, their own lives. We need to create a space in this regard to attract youth to social issues. In order to do so, we need to create awareness.

The responsibilities a young person has towards their society is not emphasised within our education system. As a result, they grow up individually rather than in a social manner. This, I believe, is a huge impediment in youth mobilisation. As our education system allows for different kinds of education practices, we see that the young people develop in a separate way, with different values. Those studying in Madrassas have a different way of thinking as those studying in English medium or Bangla medium schools. We are not being able to weave these three sectors of education in one thread. That's why it's challenging to mobilise the youth or even relate the issues to them, as there is a different way of explaining these to each of these groups.

Just as how we were able to bring attention to a particular issue during the Gonojagoron movement, if we were able to talk about different issues that concern the wider public and are successful in taking them to the younger generations, we can definitely create a stronger, more elaborate platform.

Every sector of our life is determined by politics – be it education, economics or anything, everything is linked to politics. So, to all the youth of the country, you should be the ones determining the politics that dictate every part of your life. As a young citizen of Bangladesh, you should have the courage, the verve to determine the state of politics in your country. No matter where you are or what you are doing, try to work on this in whatever scale or magnitude. This is one huge way that you'd be helping your country.

The commentator is General Secretary, Bangladesh Students' Union.



From the Outside Looking In

AHMAD IBRAHIM

IT has almost been a year since I was last in Bangladesh and since then many things have happened. Before moving to the US, I used to work at this newspaper and that meant always being in touch with the latest news in the country as it broke. Here, the news comes sparingly and only through the cold, white screen of my laptop in the form of articles, or statuses on social media or through my parents on Skype. Predictably, only the most major news comes through: the ridiculous size of Muhith's budget, Sundarbans breathing its last, our cricketing team reaching newer and newer heights, the murders of bloggers at the hands of religious fanaticism.

Putting a positive spin on things is difficult especially when you're far away from the lived reality that the people in your home country experience on a regular basis. And so the question may very well arise- why come back? Why not just stay in a place that doesn't have all these troubles (by no means, though, is it trouble-free)? I have been asked that very question by many Bangladeshi expatriates who have successfully made the move without the slightest inclination of turning back. For all the talk of the burden of posterity falling on the shoulders of our bright young generation and the promise we hold in finally pulling our country out from the trenches of a war whose memory still haunts us, once the transition is made to a foreign country, the rhetoric does a 180 degree turn. Don't



come back, we hear. Buy yourselves a house, a car, get a job and a green card will be on its way soon.

If there is one thing that I have gained from existing some 13000 kilometres away, it is context. Bangladesh does not exist in a bubble where the only players are her citizens. We are a low-middle income country in a region that has historically faced colonial violence for hundreds of years and still continues to do so in the form of big corporations and capital accumulating firms that consider our workers dispensable and our lands pollutable. The immigrant diaspora itself faces a great many instances of violence

in their desperate need to provide for their families back home.

To those of us packing our bags for good, I can only say that things will hardly get better if the ones capable of making it so keep leaving by the droves. The international model of capitalism disproportionately benefits the capital-heavy old colonial powers and depleting ourselves of human capital is hardly the answer. Yes, we have our fair share of problems- rampant misogyny, racism, homophobia, transphobia, religious fundamentalism to name just a few. But we have a part to play, if we want to, in making things better and it's not from thousands of miles away. So to those of the bourgeoisie like myself getting college degrees, doctorates and PhDs abroad: come back, change the status quo and do right by your motherland.

The commentator is a student at Knox College, USA and is a cultural and literary activist.

For the greater good

ANSHAH ANJU KHAN CHOWDHURY

WHEN it comes to social work, young people are often motivated by certificates or other 'rewards' given by social organisations. The fact that they volunteer for a work that benefits the less privileged section of the society will definitely look good in a CV or a university application but we shouldn't overlook the bigger picture here. A sincere effort taken by a young person who has the energy, the intellect and the physical ability to bring about a genuine change can change the way the society works.

I believe that while many individuals as well as organisational efforts surrounding social development focus on momentary welfare of the underprivileged, we need to think of initiatives that are more long lasting. For example, we at Durnibar Foundation do hand out rice to disadvantaged people of slums in Mohammadpur but we also ensure that the children of these families are sent to school. Our target groups are extremely poor families with a number of children, who are usually forced to work for their and their family's livelihood. This way we ensure that a family has enough to eat and their children are not forced into child labour. Volunteers of Durnibar frequently supervise these children's educational progress and provide them with necessary academic support. Young social workers could thus think of using the same resources for a more sustainable good of the deprived.

We youngsters have a lot of things at our disposal. We have the energy, the verve, even the time to engage in social change. Instead of wasting our time needlessly on Facebook, we could spend our energy, resources and time to actually do some good for the society. Even a few hours taken from our social networking time could reap huge benefits for those far less privileged than us. It's up to us to inspire the willingness to change our surroundings for the betterment of our future as well as those who don't have even the basic amenities that we take for granted.

The commentator is the founder of Durnibar Foundation.



UNLOCKING THE YOUTH POTENTIAL



NAHELA NOWSHIN

ON December 17 1999, the UN General Assembly endorsed the recommendation made by the World Conference of Ministers Responsible for Youth that August 12 be declared International Youth Day. Today, on the 15th year of its observance, we wonder about the state of the youth in Bangladesh. Are the young segments of our population living up to their potential? How hopeful are they about the future? Do they believe sky is the limit?

Diogenes, the Greek philosopher, said, "The foundation of every state is the education of its youth." If Diogenes were alive today, he wouldn't be too impressed with the current state of affairs. Ignoring the dismal school and university enrollment rates countrywide among other factors, a simple look at the most recent HSC results gives one a glimpse into the declining state of the education system. In the eight general education board, a total of 65.84 percent of students passed the HSC. This is the lowest figure since 2008. Coupled with the political upheaval early this year -- non-stop oborodh and hartal led by the BNP and its 20 party alliance -- and allegations of question paper leaks, students nationwide were among the worst hit, as their academic lives bore the ultimate catastrophic consequences. The VAT of 7.5 percent slapped upon private universities added insult to injury (especially when you take into consideration the fact that education and the cost of living in Bangladesh is disproportionately higher than developed

countries). Growing dissatisfaction and pessimism among students is rampant, and their pleas continue to be ignored.

One of the most toxic traits of the education system in today's Bangladesh -- and it has been said countless times before -- is the extent to which it has been politicised. Higher education, bureaucracies, corporations are all politicised to some extent in democracies, but in Bangladesh, it has been so deeply embedded over time that it's impossible to discuss the impediments to an effective education system without touching on the festering wound that is student politics.

It's a shame that student politics in Bangladesh today, manifesting itself as a strict patron-client relationship, has become synonymous with corruption, violence and everything evil, given the country's historical relationship with student demonstrations that planted the seeds of independence in 1971 and helped foster the nation's self-identity. In the present day, this institutionalised form of discrimination of students based on party affiliations endorsed by both political parties is a major hurdle for current and prospective students who simply want an education without getting involved in the messy, dirty business of politics.

Whereas student movements in the foregone days lent the youth a voice to be collectively heard and rally under a common banner, politically opposed youngsters and footsoldiers of the main political parties -- lured by the trappings of being involved in student youth wings -- are now too busy killing one another to engage in activism for the common good. Unlike in the 60s when a secular spirit brought together the youth to stand up against exploitation and other forms of injustice, much of student political activism

today tends to verge on the extreme. Given the dangerous lack of space in civic society allotted to youth voices and their political underrepresentation, the forces of radicalisation have never loomed larger and the threat of militancy increases by the day. The overall culture of violent politics -- legitimised through decades -- is a major stumbling block in the way of tapping the potential of Bangladesh's window of opportunity that is its demographic dividend.



The education system, as it stands now, is heavily skewed in favour of the politically affiliated and the privileged. There is an urgent need for the reversal of the patron-client relationship deep-seated in student politics in Bangladesh today. The educational environment is one that's supposed to foster political consciousness among the youth and empower them to stand for the change they believe in -- and not function as an extension of the major

political parties and work as their mouthpiece. Corrupt student politics reigning our educational institutions is further tipping the scales in favour of those who already have easy access to educational means.

The abominable state of child rights in Bangladesh is yet another indicator of the country failing its youth miserably, and one that signals a bleak future for posterity. In light of the recent inhumane murders of Rajon and Rakib that have rocked the nation's conscience



to the core, national conversations about child rights have once again been thrown into the limelight, albeit temporarily, I'm sure. It is a travesty that unless incidents of child abuse are recorded on video and shared on social media, the nation, including the higher-ups, turns a blind eye to their plight. The new lows of human depravity that we seem to be succumbing to day by day, in terms of violating child rights, are hardly surprising in a country

where lowering girls' marriageable age is state-sanctioned and child labour occurs in plain view.

On the brighter side, Bangladesh is seeing a growing number of youngsters with a strong sense of responsibility and community awareness. Be it resisting illegal levies, providing schooling for underprivileged children, or fighting for indigenous rights and women's rights, it's primarily the youth who are at the forefront of movements and organisations trying to make a difference. Despite the lack of transparency in private and public bodies, youngsters are unstoppable in their bid to challenge the status quo with democratic tools. These young men and women, who strive for a more just society everyday, are a role model for upcoming generations when it comes to civic engagement and being positive agents of change. In a country where resorting to violent means seems to be the norm, the fact that youth leaders and activists are using peaceful avenues to demand change is a rare sign of hope.

The focus of this International Youth Day is on civic management, and the latter no doubt greatly hinges upon economic opportunities and engagement of the youth. In this regard, the government must set its eyes on prioritising pathways to affordable, accessible education and show true commitment towards protecting child rights -- the state of both of which is in a shambles. One cannot talk about authentic civic engagement without speaking up against the woes of child rights violations and unequal opportunities to education and other resources. But in order to do that, we must first recognise and acknowledge the innovative and diverse roles that the youth can play and the promise that they hold for the future.

The writer is a journalist at The Daily Star.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Cellphone forerunners
 - 7 Uneven hairdo
 - 11 Lace's place
 - 12 Maintenance
 - 13 Baseball's Reese
 - 14 Not fooled by
 - 15 Candy bar nut
 - 17 Pale
 - 20 Nuisances
 - 23 Sch.Support org.
 - 24 Place to order oolong
 - 26 Sweetie
 - 27 Slippery one
 - 28 Stunned wonder
 - 29 Book parts
 - 31 Writer Kesey
 - 32 Messing on Tv
 - 33 Grazing group
 - 34 Western spread
 - 37 Weary sigh
 - 39 Current news
 - 43 Boxer Tyson
 - 44 Broad street
 - 45 Equal
 - 46 Got a pinochle score
- DOWN**
- 1 Energy
 - 2 Pro vote
 - 3 "Aw, shucks!"
 - 4 Quarter back John
 - 5 Stagger
 - 6 Rose part
 - 7 Brit's treats
 - 8 Deal sealer
 - 9 Museum stuff
 - 10 Earth: Prefix
 - 16 Lustrous gems
 - 17 Plant pest
 - 18 Sculpting medium
 - 19 Bike stopper
 - 21 Cattle part
 - 22 Forgo frugality
 - 24 Waco native
 - 25 Shoebox letters
 - 30 Pencil end
 - 33 Traveler's stop
 - 35 Chowder chunk
 - 36 Own
 - 37 Band blaster
 - 38 Tell tales
 - 40 Purpose
 - 41 Take to court
 - 42 Rocker Nugent

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

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