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FOUNDER EDITOR
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Marriageable age for girls must remain 18

Provisions for exceptions should be removed

WE welcome the State Minister for Women and Children Affairs, Meher Afroze Chumki's reiteration that the minimum marriageable age for girls would remain 18. However, our concern remains about the proposed draft law under consideration, which includes a provision that allows for a girl to marry at 16 under special circumstances.

Under the existing law the legal marriageable age is 18 but this has not stopped child marriage in our country. According to an Ictdb and Plan International study released in 2013, 64 percent of women aged between 20 to 24 were married before 18.

We are therefore extremely worried that a provision that allows a girl to be married at 16 under special circumstances will result in creating a scope for more girls to be married off at 16 years or even younger. Women's rights activists and civil society in general, have voiced their fears regarding this issue and have requested the government to do away with any such provisions. It is more important for the government to address the circumstances that have led to the proposal of such provisions. This includes providing security for girls, empowering them through education and working with society to change the mindsets of men. The law must remain unambiguous and categorical about keeping the marriageable age at 18.

Transport workers hold city hostage

Remain strict on enforcing laws

IT is utterly preposterous that a city can be held hostage by transport workers protesting the punishment of a co-worker caught charging extra bus fare to passengers. But this is what happened on Sunday leaving thousands of people stranded on the roads with no means to get to their destination. The suffering of passengers is immeasurable when buses go on strike – this time the bus workers blocked major thoroughfares – preventing other vehicles to pass.

Such total defiance of the law cannot be tolerated. The BRTA (Bangladesh Road Transport Authority)'s sentencing the errant bus helper to a month's imprisonment was a legal measure and did not warrant such arrogance from the transport workers. If there were genuine grievances they could be addressed through the legal process.

We laud the BRTA director's (enforcement) firm stance to continue the drive against illegal increase of fare, unfit vehicles on the roads and fake driving licenses. Drivers and helpers, who violate the law, causing grievous accidents and forcing passengers to pay unlawful fares, must be brought to book. Blocking of roads and paralysing the city by bus workers for unjustified demands cannot be indulged. Here the steel will of the government should be expressed against such moves rather than on peaceful public protests as is often the case.

Two sides to the Syrian conflict



SYED MANSUR HASHIM

INTERNATIONAL headlines are full of news, views and analyses on the pros-and-cons of Russia's entry into the Syrian civil war. With more than 70 percent of Russians backing Putin in his Syrian adventure, it is understandable why Russia has gone in with a big bang. While all that is going on, there is of course another side to this whole scenario and which has everything to do with profits, and that is natural gas. Rewind to 1989; two countries viz. Iran and Qatar begin exploration of a gas field buried 3km below the Gulf of Persia with a potential "51 trillion cubic meters of gas and 50 billion cubic meters of liquid condensates, it is the largest natural gas field in the world. Approximately one-third of its riches lie in Iranian waters and two-thirds in Qatari ones," an article in *Foreign Affairs* declares.

In 2009, Qatar proposed to build a pipeline that would send their share of the gas through Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Syria to Turkey. The aim was to reach Europe and effectively provide a second source of liquefied natural gas (LNG), the infrastructure which had been built up since '89 and would give Europe a choice to wean itself away from cheap Russian gas. Syria refused to be party to it and Russia wasn't too keen on the project either. Qatar isn't the only player in the Middle East with massive natural gas reserves. Iran is another major contender from the same South Pars/North Dome gas field that Qatar developed and proposed its own pipeline that would take Iranian gas through Iraq and Syria to Europe through the Caspian Sea (falling under Russian sphere of influence). The Iranian proposal met with Russian approval and going by what has been published in international media, agreements were signed in 2012 and required infrastructure were to be completed by 2016.

Coming back to the conflict in Syria,

reports of Qatari involvement in funding of groups opposed to the Assad regime surfaced in 2011. Eventually many other players in the region have gotten involved, including the Saudis and Turkey. While Turkey is seemingly aligned to the United States (US) in the fight against IS, it appears that the country is more interested in containing the Kurds than IS. Indeed, the Islamic State (IS) boasts some 30,000 foreign fighters, most of whom have made it to Syria using Turkey as a transit point. The US, which never appeared to have a clear-cut Syria policy, is reeling from a

props up both Russian morale and provides a showcase for all these new and untested military equipment, which will undoubtedly help in Russian foreign military sales. Many a political commentator have gone to great lengths to portray Russian intervention in Syria as one that is designed to send a strong message to Washington that Russia demands respect; that it is no longer a unipolar, but a bipolar world, where the US must pay heed to what Russia thinks. All those arguments hold true. But as history will testify, wars are

solution is thrashed out in the near term, this conflict could become another Afghanistan. Indeed, this could be worse than Afghanistan in the sense that IS has demonstrated that it is the true successor of Al-Qaeda. With reports coming in that the Taleban in Afghanistan are now getting "advice" from IS, this militant outfit is well on its way to becoming the king of the global jihadist movement.

It is time to stop fighting. With all major world players actively engaged in Syria, unless leading powers can set aside their differences about which party

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PHOTO: AFP

public relations disaster of having funded a ghost army that has cost the US taxpayer \$500 million in man and material and produced some 54 "fighters", who appear to have suffered a 90 percent casualty rate and it is unclear how many are still "fighting", not to talk about the military arsenal that seem to have walked over to IS.

Enter Russia with some of their latest military hardware and which has gone on a rampage that is heavily reminiscent of the American blitzkrieg which CNN brought to a world audience during the first Gulf war in 1991. Needless to say, it

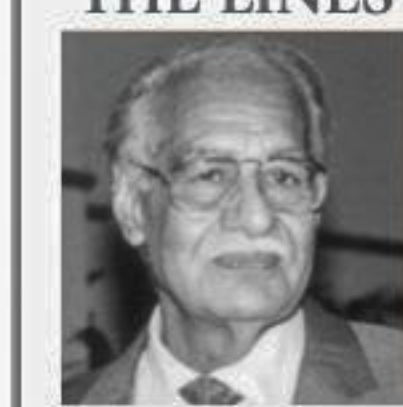
almost always about profits, human rights seldom figure big in such conflicts. When we talk about natural gas supply to such a big market as continental Europe, what is one regime-change, if it paves the way for billions of dollars of business per annum? While Russia plays hardball and some Arab nations begin arming groups of their choice to take down Russian military assets deployed in the field, the conflict in Syria is evolving from a low-intensity civil war to that of a full-blown proxy war. What has many people worried is that unless a political

they will negotiate with, Syria could very well make the Afghan war look like a walk in the park. A united and undivided Syria would be very nice. However, given the bloodletting that has been allowed to go on for nearly five years, a Yugoslavia-type solution may be the next best thing to settle for. But for that to happen, sincere efforts are needed by the permanent members of the UN and their regional allies to come to the negotiating table and thrash out a deal that will be adhered to.

The writer is Assistant Editor, The Daily Star.

Futility of the beef debate

BETWEEN THE LINES



KULDIP NAYAR

INDIA has been pushed into an unnecessary debate on whether beef should be banned or not. This is a wrong question to ask in a country where the emotions of Hindus are linked with the cow, which they revere. The real question is whether a person should have been lynched when it was presumed that he had consumed beef. Even this allegation was based on false rumours. It looks as if the Hindu extremists have come to dictate their views of the religion.

It is a blessing that the debate on beef did not last long. The discussion had begun to polarise the society. Maybe, this realisation made Prime Minister Narendra Modi say that Hindus and Muslims should come together to fight poverty, not each other. He kept quiet for a week and would not have probably taken an equivocal position but for public pressure. Even what he ultimately said was so tepid that it looked like he was merely going over an exercise.

It seems as if the Rashtriya Syamsewak Sangh (RSS) had come to feel that the BJP government under Narendra Modi would be exposed to unforeseen dangers if the extremist fringe went on harping on beef. The Muslims would have felt more insecure. This made RSS pipe down. Not long ago, its stalwart L.K. Advani candidly admitted that it was possible for the BJP to have an absolute majority in the Lok Sabha with the support of Hindus but it would be difficult to administer the country without Muslim cooperation. Yet this has remained on paper.

If the Sangh Parivar had felt so strongly about garnering the Muslim support, it would have taken appropriate steps for the participation of Muslims. For it, the Muslims do not really count in the affairs of the

country. Take the central cabinet for example; only one seat has been given to Muslims and that too of minor importance.

Still worse is the distance which is increasing between the two communities. There is hardly any interaction between them. Both seem to live in a world of their own. This is primarily because of polarisation which is deepening and which the Sangh Parivar is purposefully cultivating.

This point has been brought to the fore by the return of Sahitya Akademi awards by some six eminent literary figures, including Nayantara Sehgal, Jawaharlal Nehru's niece. In their letter, they have contended that the space for free expression is shrinking day by day. Indeed, they represent the country's ethos. The saffronisation that the BJP is imposing cannot be acceptable to a society which has been nurtured in the values of free expression and pluralism. It is unfortunate that the RSS and BJP leaders have not realised this basic fact so far.

Modi, once the RSS percharak, should draw a lesson from the communal rioting at Dadri, near Delhi. A Muslim was lynched on the basis of a rumour that he had consumed beef. Even if he had, there is no law forbidding eating beef. True, all the states, except two or three, have banned cow slaughter but none of them have banned eating beef.

Modi should realise, if he has not done it yet, that pluralism is the whiff and whoop of the society. Even if some extremists in the Sangh Parivar do not like this, there is a preponderant majority which believes in the idea of India: democracy, secularism and egalitarianism. No doubt, there are pockets in the country where the majority has an unbridled say and denounce pluralism. But this is not true about the nation as a whole. It has full faith in the free say of minorities and will defend that say.

Those who declare on TV screens that they eat beef are not serving the cause. In their efforts to register their secular credentials,

they are doing more harm through their chest beating.

The country's focus should have been on the lynching of Astaq Hussain who was dragged from his house on the rumour that he had consumed beef. Even if it is a fact, the question arises, whether a person who eats beef should be killed. Nearly all states in the country have banned cow slaughter. The directive principle of the constitution also says: "The State shall endeavour to organise agriculture and animal husbandry on modern and scientific lines and shall, in particular, take steps for preserving and improving the breeds, and prohibiting the slaughter of cows and calves and other milch and draught cattle".

The matter of eating beef was registered as a case at the Supreme Court of India. The judgment stated that it was up to a person whether he wanted to eat beef or not, and it was no crime if he decided to eat it.

The real fact is that a fringe segment of Hindu extremists have made beef an issue to polarise the society for electoral purposes. In the same way, the Hindu extremist organisation Shiv Sena, confined to Maharashtra, has also given the state a bad name. Not only has the Shiv Sena sullied the reputation of democratic structure of India but has also besmeared itself. Shiv Sena's founder Bal Thackeray had realised the futility of violence and had come to condemn it. This helped Shiv Sena gain acceptability and have its nominee in the chair of chief ministership.

Still, the democratic functioning is not to the liking of Shiv Sena's new breed. Blackening the face of Surinder Kulkarni, a respected journalist who has pro-BJP leaning, is the way in which the Shiv Sena functions now. The uproar over this incident should make the Sangh Parivar realise that India's soul is secular. And so it will stay.

The writer is an eminent Indian columnist.

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COMMENTS

"Legal experts, cops differ over arrest"
(October 18, 2015)

Muntaser Mahmoud

It is disappointing to see the Police being influenced by powerful people.

"Victim gets Tk 15,000"
(October 17, 2015)

Shahtab Rahman

Only?! A rickshaw itself costs 25 grand.

Mahbub Alam

At least he received Tk 15,000.

Saad Hassan Hasib

This incident is setting a bad precedent about how influential criminals can easily bypass the law.

Mustaqeem Asad

In Bangladesh, money can buy you anything.

Tarif Khan

The Daily Star dared to publish the perpetrator's name, something that other newspapers didn't. Highly appreciated, you deserve respect.

Ahmad Hussain Abir

15,000? Is this all he could spare?

Md Nasir Uddin

It again reminds us that law is not equal for all in Bangladesh, especially for the politicians of ruling party and their relatives.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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US should take care of its own people

According to the 2014 census of the United States, 6.8 percent of the US population or roughly 22 million people live in deep poverty. Income below fifty percent of the federal poverty level is defined as deep or extreme poverty. The figure is bewildering for the US, one of the richest nations in the world. The current federal poverty level income of a US family of

four is \$24,000.00 a year, which means that the same family earning \$12,000.00 a year is in extreme poverty.

On the other hand, the US is spending billions of dollars in foreign aid every year. The US planned foreign assistance for the FY 2016 is \$33.7 billion (source: <http://beta.foreignassistance.gov/>). The US government is spending this huge amount of money in order to influence and gain hegemony over foreign nations. **Nawfal Talukdar USA**

Stop Child Abuse

Nowadays, children are not safe anywhere. A lot of them are abused both at home and outside. In Bangladesh, child abuse is a reality but is rarely talked about. Child abuse causes serious psychological damage to children. Children should be provided with a healthy environment which is conducive to both their physical



and mental growth.
Hanna Begum Proma
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SUST