

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 20

because of social norms and harsh economic realities. Poverty, the number one driving factor behind child labour, perpetuates this vicious cycle as poor families dependent on child labour not only fail to send their child(ren) to school but also deem it okay to do so because of the low perceived value of education. The concept of child rights seems to be alien to many, including law enforcement agencies who treat children as they would an adult.

Children are exposed to severe forms of physical and mental violence at homes, educational institutions and public places. A ten-year-old boy was beaten to death in a madrasa in Barguna on August, 2015, a seven-year-old boy was found chained in shackles in a madrasa in Pabna on November, 2015 and two girls were seen being beaten in a leaked video at an orphanage in Barisal on July, 2015.

Furthermore, Bangladesh has one of the highest rates of child marriage in the world and the highest rate of marriage of girls under 15. Despite the fact that the Majority Act, 1875 clearly provides that a woman must at least be 18 years of age to be able to get married, social norms, religious beliefs, and glaring poverty, once again, trump the law, and young girls are forced into marriage by families hoping to rid themselves of the girl child seen as a "financial burden". The punishment of either imprisonment of up to one month and/or a fine of up to Tk 1,000 hardly acts as a deterrent.

However, it is to be noted that although significant progress is yet to be made in the realm of women's and child rights, commendable initiatives have been taken by the government, rights organisations and NGOs. On December 21, 2015 the cabinet approved a policy that fixed the minimum age for domestic helps at 14, with a focus on fair wage, decent working hours, maternity leave and legal actions against physical and verbal abuse, among other things. More girls than boys are now in school, school enrolment has increased and dropout rates have reduced. Furthermore, the Bangladesh government, by putting women at the forefront of international conflict and disaster management, has secured the historic achievement of having one of the only three all-women peacekeeping units in the world, and has laudably defied the stereotypical notion that often views women within the confines of the home.

But these initiatives are a small step



Social media users took to Facebook using the hashtag #JusticeForRajon to demand justice for 13-year-old Sheikh Md Samiul Alam Rajon who was tied to a pole and beaten to death by a group of men.

ILLUSTRATION: AMIYA HALDER

towards fully restoring women's and child rights in the country. And as the saying goes, "A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step." Along with universal education and elimination of poverty, a transformation in the national psyche and social consciousness is needed if child labour, child marriage, physical/sexual/mental violence against women and children, and other forms of abuse are to be completely eradicated.

Infringement upon minority rights
2015 has been yet another year of violence and discrimination for minority communities in Bangladesh. For the indigenous people in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), communal tension and land disputes have continued to bring misery. Today, 18 years after the CHT Accord has been signed by the government and the Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti (PCJSS), some of the core provisions of the Accord are yet to be implemented.

In an article titled "Why a roadmap is of utmost importance" published in this daily, Jyotirindra Bodhipriya Larma, one of the signatories of the Accord and President of PCJSS, states that some of the unresolved central issues include

"resolution of land disputes after inserting necessary amendments to the CHT Land Dispute Resolution Commission Act 2001 in line with the CHT Accord; rehabilitation of internally displaced persons and India returnee refugees to their respective homesteads with restitution of their lands to their rightful ownership; dismantling of all temporary military camps including 'Operation Uttoran'; and rehabilitation of the Bengali settlers outside CHT with due honor and dignity." Larma claimed that decades of empty promises have been made to the people of the CHT in an attempt to give the impression that the Accord is being implemented, when in reality, it's far from it.

Discriminatory restrictions on foreigners visiting the CHT region were imposed by the government in 2015, following which it came under both national and international criticism. According to the memorandum, foreigners are required to obtain permission from the government if they wish to visit the CHT. Although the government revised the directives, it retained the restrictions.

Groups in the CHT region have been carrying out protests against the establishment of Rangamati Science and Technology University and Medical College since the CHT Accord has not been fully implemented. Rights organisations argue that upon the establishment of the university and medical college it would draw a closure to the implementation process of the Accord and reignite Jumma-Bengali tensions. Moreover, the Pahari Chatra Parishad and Hill Women's Federation have raised concerns about the fact that local permanent residents including the CHT Regional Council and Hill District Councils have been completely left out of the decision-making roles in the running of the two institutions.

According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, an organisation that monitors and analyses issues of internal displacement worldwide, around 280,000 people continue to live in displacement in CHT as a result of the insurgency of 1973-1997. Internally displaced people (IDPs) include not only the indigenous people of the CHT, but also Muslim Urdu speakers,

Hindus and Buddhists. A total of 431,000 people remain displaced as a result of past conflict and violence in the present day. Most of the IDPs belong to minority groups who have been displaced much more disproportionately than majority Muslim Bangalis.

Land grabbing by influential quarters and suppression of the rights of the indigenous people continued unabated while the trend of violence against indigenous women and children saw an alarming rise in 2015. During the period January-July 2015, a reported 56 indigenous women and girls were subjected to violence.

2015 was also marked with the first ever attack on the gathering of Shia Muslims on the occasion of Ashura in Old Dhaka's Hossaini Dalan. Around three improvised explosive devices were detonated, killing at least one person and injuring scores of others. This kind of sectarian violence, attacks on church pastors, Hindu temples (Kantaji temple, Iskcon temple), Hindu bloggers, and hate speech targeted at minorities often spewed and endorsed by the thousands in the online space (Liton Das incident, for e.g.), points to the glaringly shrinking space for minorities in a "secular" Bangladesh.

A new year of hope

As we ring in 2016 with much pomp and celebration, we hope that the new year will be unlike 2015 in many ways, one that will not mirror the horrific incidents that have made the nation bow its head in collective shame. We hope that the government will fully commit itself towards upholding civil liberties for all and suspend the prevailing culture of impunity that allows perpetrators of violent crimes, be it against women, children or minority groups, to go scot-free.

It is with a renewed sense of optimism that we wish for 2016 to be a much more tolerant, stable and prosperous year, free of unending political, communal and sectarian violence. A year in which inter-religious tensions are not stoked for political purposes, a year of peaceful co-existence in this diverse land of ours, and a year in which the fundamental rights of the country's people are protected.

The writer is a member of the Editorial team at The Daily Star.

2015'S MAJOR INCIDENTS OF:

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND CHILDREN

PAHELA BAISHAKH SEXUAL ASSAULT
GANG RAPE OF A GARO GIRL
ATTEMPT TO GOUGE OUT WOMAN'S EYE FOR DOWRY
RAJON KILLING
RAKIB KILLING

ATTACK ON MINORITY RIGHTS

HOSSAINI DALAN BOMB BLASTS
ATTACKS ON PASTORS
KANTAJI TEMPLE BOMB BLASTS
ISKCON TEMPLE GUN ATTACKS AND BOMB BLASTS
CRICKETER LITON DAS RECEIVES HATE MESSAGES FOR PUJA GREETINGS

CREDIT: SHAER REAZ