

# The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR  
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## Forced marriage of a minor

### Stop this abuse

THE news of three people – a mother, stepfather and husband- being sent to jail for forcing a twelve-year-old girl into marriage, brings to the fore the terrible malaise called child marriage that afflicts us. Despite an Act that prohibits girls under 18 to be married, the number of girls married before that age is around 66 percent.

The report describes how the minor's mother and stepfather forced her to marry a 38-year-old man who gave her sedatives and raped her for five days. It was only because locals were outraged by this incident that the culprits were arrested. We cannot imagine the trauma this little girl has gone through or what more she will have to bear in the future. But this case certainly highlights the immediacy in taking actions to stop child marriage that allows for such abuse.

Rights activists and the media have been shouting themselves hoarse to bring to attention how crucial it is to put an end to this medieval practice that robs a child of her childhood and takes her out of school. We cannot lose any more time over such a crucial issue and the government must take serious steps to enforce the law that prohibits child marriage. The fight to put an end to this deplorable abuse must be fought together with the help of parents, teachers, lawmakers, law enforcers and local government officials. Mass media campaigns are therefore a must along with enforcement of the existing Act. Child marriage must be made unacceptable in the eyes of society.

Adequate punishment to those who conspired to force the twelve-year-old into a situation in which she was sexually abused will be a step forward in the fight against child marriage.

## Road to higher middle income economy

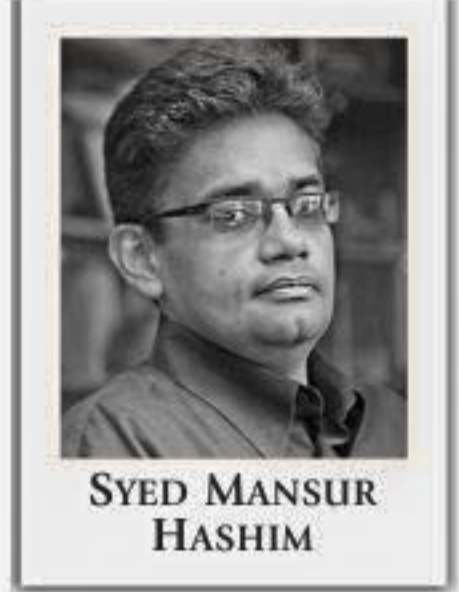
### Transportation system needs major overhaul

IT is indeed heartening to see the prime minister declare the establishment of the Bangladesh Development Authority to help foster business and economic activities in the country. The government's plan to create 100 more Special Economic Zones will also be crucial in attracting more Foreign Direct Investment. There are, however, some serious impediments before Bangladesh's goal to become a higher middle income country. The 45th largest economy in the world has one of the worst logistics and transport services in the region. It still does not have a modern multimodal transport system to speak of, as a result of which local exports lose competitiveness in the global market. Not only that, our ports, road, rail and air services are still to become at par with their Asian Tiger counterparts. So are our workforce and technology.

As discussants at the Bangladesh Investment and Policy Summit have said, in the last decade, there has been no marked improvement in the container handling capacity of the Chittagong Port. The completion of the four-lane highway connecting the capital with the port city has been given a time extension for the fourth time last month. The project, which was supposed to finish four years ago, has been delayed because of unavailability of stone chips.

Bangladesh's transportation system needs to go through an overhaul. Gridlock in the highways bleeds the country's economy, and bringing about a sustainable solution to the menace is the order of the day. Barge services between Chittagong and Dhaka can be a good beginning. It is essential to improve ports, road, rail, and air services. Private sector, which is ready to invest in transport infrastructure and trade logistics, can team up with the government.

# Investment plans on paper



SYED MANSUR HASHIM

FIRST the good news: two of the largest Indian conglomerates have pledged to invest US\$11.2 billion in Bangladesh in power, energy and infrastructure sectors. Adani Group and the Reliance Group have made public their plans to construct power plants, LNG terminal, grid connection, port and other logistics. Two power plants are slated to produce 3,200 megawatts (MW) that will supply power to the national grid. The package includes an investment of \$5 billion for construction of a new grid connection which will enable, in the long run, for Bangladesh to be interconnected to the envisaged regional Power Trading System in South Asia. Reliance is touting a \$3 billion package for a liquefied natural gas (LNG) facility that will power a plant with a capacity to generate 3,000MW of power.

These investments, if made operational, will go a long way to mitigate the energy crunch the country faces currently. They will also generate substantial employment for technical and non-technical personnel. Indeed, the government has assured foreign investors that it would fast track investment proposals in terms of

simplifying rules and procedures to facilitate implementation within stipulated timeframes. This was made clear during the recently held two-day investment summit held in Dhaka.

The not so good news: we understand that the Bangladesh Power Development Board signed an agreement with both Indian groups (mentioned above) in June, 2015 to generate approximately 4,600MW of power, yet there apparently seems to be little progress to implement the agreement. Both Adani and Reliance, and in fact, most foreign companies interested in investing in Bangladesh have sought government aid with land acquisition – a fundamental prerequisite to setting up any infrastructure project, and here the situation gets decidedly convoluted. When it comes to implementation, whether it is getting paperwork done or handling land issues, we have serious problems with delivery.

We are told that a new body named Bangladesh Development Authority has been formed to simplify procedures. 100 economic zones will be established across the country and some thirty sites have been selected. While all that looks very good on paper, it is obvious that setting up an economic zone without prior consultation with people in the locality in a densely populated, largely agrarian country is going to run into trouble. This is all too evident in what has happened in Habiganj. Tea estate workers have been protesting en masse about a proposed transfer of 511 acres

of land falling under Chandpur tea gardens. The tea workers in question utilise these lands to grow crops to supplement their diet. Going by what has been published in this paper, 951 acres of arable land falling under the tea estate have been cultivated by workers for more than a century. These people are tied to their lands, and to ask them to vacate, will inevitably result in a grassroots movement – as has happened. The situation in Habiganj has now drawn support from workers in gardens across Brahmanbaria, Sylhet and Moulvibazar and spells trouble for the tea industry as a whole.

The government has a point. The land is owned by the government but leased to the estate. Experts will be better able to explain the legal angles pertaining to whether authorities can cancel the lease agreement or not, but the sudden move to transfer more than 50 percent of the land leased to Bangladesh Economic Zones Authority, without making arrangements to safeguard the livelihoods of thousands of workers is an appalling way to go about doing things.

The argument for special economic zones dedicated to foreign investors is equally strong. We simply do not possess the financial might to upgrade our infrastructure. Without adequate power, there can be no industry, which means no new employment. Without ports and terminals, we cannot look to increasing container handling over

maritime routes to boost imports and exports. And although major studies by international institutions have pitted Bangladesh as one of the "next 11" major economies of the world, that scenario is not going to materialise until we can address our infrastructure bottlenecks. The massive interest generated in Bangladesh by major Asian economic powers ranging from China, India and Japan, is not just because we are strategically located in South Asia but also because Bangladesh possesses a large population of nearly 170 million, where the young constitute a major share.

At the end of the day, the opportunities for foreign investment are there. Laying the foundations for new economic zones is one part of the equation. The other calls for a more pragmatic approach where people are displaced – and there will inevitably be displacement of communities and they must be compensated in one form or another. Otherwise, the state will be pitting itself against its own people. Will authorities be willing to pick up the tab for fatalities when push comes to shove? Strong arm tactics may win the battle in the short run, but an enraged local populace will not bring dividends in the long run. No issue is more contentious than land and this is why it would be prudent to tread carefully and not forcefully.

The writer is Assistant Editor, The Daily Star.



An aerial view of the Korean Export Processing Zone at Anwara in Chittagong. PHOTO: STAR



Tea garden workers in Chandpur of Habiganj protest the government decision to set up a special economic zone in the arable land of the tea estates. PHOTO: STAR

# The real face of Bangladesh - moderate, secular

SYED MUNIR KHASRU

THE arrest of 27 Bangladeshis workers under the Internal Security Act is the first instance that a radical militant terror cell comprising foreigners has been uncovered in Singapore. The Ministry of Home Affairs said on January 20 that the authorities had arrested the Bangladeshis between November 16 and December 1 last year for "supporting armed jihad ideology of terrorist groups such as Islamic State (IS) and al-Qaeda". According to both the Singaporean and the Bangladeshi law enforcers, some of those arrested members are loyal to Ansarullah Bangla Team, a Bangladeshi radical terrorist group that allegedly subscribes to extremist teachings of radical ideologues such as Anwar al-Awlaki, a Yemeni-American radical preacher with ties to terrorist group al-Qaeda who was killed in a US drone attack in September 2011.

While Singaporeans are understandably concerned about this episode and the large number of Bangladeshi workers in Singapore, the truth is that Bangladesh is a moderate democratic Muslim state known for its religious tolerance, liberal values, and communal harmony. Compared to other South Asian countries like Pakistan or India, Bangladesh has been quite successful in dismantling religious extremism. According to the 2015 Global Terrorism Index, Pakistan (ranked 4th) and India (ranked 6th) are among the top 10 countries where terrorism is highly concentrated whereas Bangladesh is at 25th position.

Despite the confrontational nature of domestic politics, the country has made considerable strides in key socio-economic parameters like girls' education, microcredit, women's empowerment, world class NGOs, and is one of the leading apparel exporters of the world. The state of Bangladesh was founded on secularism as one of the

fundamental principles. Most Bangalis were exposed to Islamic preaching by the 'Sufis' or the saints, whose teachings were centered on love for the humanity. However, like any other society across the world, a vacuum does exist. The radical narrative offered by the extremists loath the 'Sufis' form of religion which is deemed as impure and not representing the true form of Islam. Religion-based politics and resulting

*For Bangladesh, countering radicalisation is a multi-faceted effort that goes beyond the state. It has an active civil society and media which have come together with the government to address issues that are fuelling terrorism via self-radicalisation within the society.*

extremism crept into the country in the 1980s and 1990s when militants came back from Afghanistan where they had fought the Soviets.

The rise of modern radical militant ideology is often traced back to the emergence of Wahabism that led to the formation of a kingdom in Central Arabia in 19th century, currently known as Saudi Arabia. The First World War saw Britain and France orchestrate the Arab Revolt that broke through the control of Turkish Ottoman Empire. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and the transnational anti-Soviet alliance gave rise to extremism in South Asia as the concept of defeating an enemy through violent struggle started spreading.

As the global spread of radical militant ideology is on the rise, Bangladesh is struggling to cope with the self-radicalisation, particularly of the youth population, fostered by a host of factors which includes the ease and availability of the extremist materials, growing divide between the rich and

poor, and the seeming appeal of the grand community or 'Ummah'. The internet has long been a recruitment and propaganda tool for extremist organisations, and the preacher-based model of radicalisation via the web allow close-knit individuals belonging to a group to become self-radicalised.

From the 9/11 attackers to the more recent Boston Marathon bombers, all the individuals belonged to close-knit

groups. The terror plot in Singapore reflects the same kind of decentralised structure of the terrorist organisation. Self-radicalisation is a threat to the security of any state. Yet it is not easy to counter, as individuals who become self-radicalised often have underlying discontent over existing social, economic or political factors in their home society. Regional terrorist networks operating across South Asia also sought to expand their base in Bangladesh. The rise of Jamaatul Mujahidin Bangladesh (JMB), which aims to replace the current state of Bangladesh with an Islamic State based on Sharia law, has unleashed a new wave of terrorism in Bangladesh. The government has been responding by suppressing these terror groups.

For Bangladesh, countering radicalisation is a multi-faceted effort that goes beyond the state. It has an active civil society and media which have come together with the government to address issues that are fuelling terrorism via self-radicalisation within

the society. It is quite likely that ISIS and other terrorist groups will have eyes on Bangladesh, the third largest Muslim majority country of the world. In September 2015, the Bangladeshi Prime Minister raised her concerns as several British Bangladeshis were arrested as recruiters of ISIS and asked Prime Minister David Cameron for "more steps on the ground" from the British government. The Singapore incident is a poignant reminder of the importance of cooperation between national and international actors to combat terror groups.

Singaporeans are known for their tolerance and acceptance and the Home Affairs and Law Minister K. Shanmugam very aptly commented, "How our non-Muslims treat our Muslim brothers and sisters will decide what type of society we are. If we behave with suspicion and negativity, then our Muslim population will be further pushed. The harmonious society that we have built will be at risk." For the Bangladeshi workers, he gave an equally strong message: "They have come here to work to benefit their families, stick to that. As long as they stick to that, they will be protected and nothing will happen to them". Bangladeshi migrant workers and students have a critical role in the country's development and Bangladesh needs to further strengthen its efforts to prevent import and export of radical extremist ideology.

While the deportation of the Bangladeshis underlines the importance of being vigilant and closer cooperation between the intelligence and law enforcing communities of the two countries, it is equally important not to let the extremists negatively influence socio-economic relations and resulting opportunities for people of both the countries.

The article was first published on January 25, 2016 in The Straits Times, Singapore. The writer is a Professor at the Institute of Business Administration (IBA), University of Dhaka.

## COMMENTS

**"Patients in Ctg suffer for 2nd day"**  
(January 23, 2015)

Sameena Hossain

There should be a fair probe before blaming any party.

Mahbubur Rahman

Very often, we see media reports on doctors' negligence. That's really unfortunate.

Nazmul Peash

It's terrible that they are refusing to see patients to defend their colleagues who have made mistakes.

Saiful Islam

Go on doctors, after all most of you have been trained by taxpayers' money and what better way to repay them! If you are so honest then why not face the lawsuit and fight it legally in the court rather than refusing to treat patients? Be honest please, it will help you to restore your professional honour.

Jahanara

It's high time the medical authority introduced the provision of an oath for medical students: If we decide to stop treating patients without any valid reason, we wouldn't be allowed to practice anymore.

**Shakib has become the sixth player to score more than 8000 runs and take 400 wickets (January 22, 2016)**

Mukul Hossain

Congratulations to Shakib Al Hasan for his wonderful achievement and for joining the elite club.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Cut fuel prices now

The fuel price of Bangladesh is the highest in the SAARC region. The price of oil in the world market last week hit a low of \$25 per barrel and our government seems to be making unprecedented profits without much concern for ordinary people. With sanctions on Iran lifted, oil prices are likely to hit as low as \$10 a barrel. Do the policymakers know

that reducing fuel prices would help GDP grow, all the while increasing exports and purchasing power of consumers and reducing inflation?

The government needs to think about the welfare of people before thinking about making profits.

Shahjahan Hafiz  
Gulshan, Dhaka

### Sponsor Khoda Box Sain Baul fest

Khoda Box Sain was awarded the prestigious Ekushey Padak in 1990 for his outstanding contribution to Baul music. He wrote about 900 songs and was one of the pioneers who established Lalon's shrine at Chheuria in Kushtia during the Pakistan period. Khoda Box Sain Smriti Sangsad, the family-funded organisation, organises a two-day baul festival from January 16-17 every year, on the occasion of his death anniversary in Jahapur village of

Alamdanga in Chuadanga district. It is a matter of sorrow that the Ministry of Culture or private sponsors have never come forward to fund that event. We hope and expect that from next year onwards, the Ministry of Culture and the Deputy Commissioner of Chuadanga, as well as other sponsors and media will come forward to promote that event.  
Md. Abdul Karim  
Alamdanga, Chuadanga