

Women trafficked to Syria

Slave trade in the 21st century?

THE stories of human sex trafficking from Bangladesh to Syria, as documented by a prominent Bangla daily, are truly horrifying. From the statements of the victims and their families as well as Rab informants, we are to gather that women and girls are being sold as "slaves" in different cities of Syria for \$3000 or less, after being tricked into believing that they would get jobs as domestic workers in Lebanon. They are being forced to work and live under unbearable conditions, with no means of protesting their plight or escaping their confinement. We are alarmed that not only are women from Bangladesh being subjected to insurmountable violence, but that their pleas for rescue are falling on deaf ears of the authorities.

Last year, three women who had been sent back to Bangladesh due to illness, claimed that there was an organised transnational network trafficking who were conducting this trade from Bangladesh. Unfortunately, there seems to be a severe lack of coordination among different government bodies to identify the agencies involved in the trade and to rescue the women from Syria. With each institution pointing the finger towards another, and failing to take action, more and more women are falling victims to this terrible trade, while those in confinement are continuing to live under slave-like conditions.

We urge the concerned ministries to stop dilly-dallying on this matter and take urgent steps to rescue the women from Syria, and if need be, seek help from international agencies. They must waste no time in identifying the recruiting agencies who are conducting this trade and bringing the perpetrators to book.

Another avoidable death

Stop using the wrong side of the road

WE are saddened by the untimely death of a young man riding a motorcycle which was hit by a police-requestioned vehicle in the Kakoli area of the capital on February 23. The police vehicle, driving on the wrong side of the road, was making a u-turn and apparently hit the motorcycle to avoid a speeding covered van, which happened to be travelling on the right side of the road. It is not enough that the minibus hit the motorcycle and knocked over the occupants, it literally ran over the victim in a bid to get away. And yes, the incident at Kakoli is not the first of its kind.

Our heart goes out to the young man of 25 who has had to pay with his life in an accident that could have been avoided. It is even more pathetic to see that the errant vehicle belonged to the police who are supposed to be upholders of the law. Driving on the wrong side of the road has become routine on the streets of Dhaka, with official vehicles, escorted or otherwise, using the wrong side to beat the incessant traffic gridlock to get to their destinations.

We want that the vehicle driver be brought to book for the accident and wilful flouting of rules. The police must stop errant drivers from operating their vehicles in an illegal manner. But the police can hardly expect people to follow traffic rules if they are seen to violate the rules themselves.

COMMENTS

"Pabna school still named after ex-Pak premier"
(February 20, 2016)

Sujon Mondal
It needs to be changed immediately.

Alamgir Mahmud

It is the result of sheer negligence of the authority. The government should issue a circular to all the districts to trace institutions or roads that bear the name of any Pakistani or Rajakar and take corrective measures.

Md Anwar Khan

There are several roads and buildings throughout the country which bear the names of British people. That should also be changed.

Shozib Shazzad

It's a shame for the whole nation. We celebrate 21st February as International Mother Language Day but don't bother to change the name of these roads, buildings or academic institutions.

"All they want is justice"
(February 19, 2016)

Sayema Hussain

We can't even say that we are shocked or ashamed. As a nation, we have failed to ensure the protection of our children.

"This was black and this was white"



KNOT SO TRUE

RUBANA HUQ

AN op-ed can never afford a fiction. But then when real times across the globe are closer to fiction, one has the freedom to add colour and paint the canvas to share with the readers. Back in 1961, Kurt Vonnegut wrote a short story titled Harrison Bergeron. The story is a satire, which critiques the usual claim of every man being equal. It's also a revolt against authoritarian impositions. This dystopian science fiction portrays year 2081, and the plot focuses on 14-year-old Harrison Bergeron, an intelligent and athletic teenager who is taken away by the authorities just because he has exceptional intelligence. At the same time, a handicap radio gets installed by the government to regulate his father, George's above-average qualities. In the story, there is a Handicapper General who works through her agents and by virtue or curse of "leveling", she regulates the citizens of the state. Handicapper General also controls a newscaster, who struggles to read the bulletin and after failing to deliver in the most unnatural voice, she hands the microphone to the ballerina wearing the most grotesque mask and heaviest weights. The ballerina starts off by reading the news in the most pleasant tone but has to apologise and then switch to a more unpleasant voice. Meantime, the seven feet tall Harrison escapes from prison, with 140kg of handicaps strapped to his body, enters the studio, calls himself the Emperor, rips off all of his handicaps, along with the handicaps of a ballerina who he calls his "Empress", orders the musicians to play, dances while flying to the ceiling, then finally kisses his ballerina in mid-air. Unfortunately, the story of freedom does not see a happy ending here. The Handicapper General enters the studio and shoots them both, while Harrison's parents George and Hazel watch the episode on television. George rests on the ground with 21kg of weights locked around his neck and briefly recognises his son on TV before going back to their average lives, while the television screen

goes dark. There's a lot of truth in the plot. Fifty-four years ago, Vonnegut saw what most countries experience today. He saw people being forcibly levelled. No one could look prettier, no one could sound different, and no one could have diverse views. The level of intolerance has grown across the globe. The alignments are regularly shifting from one plain to the other, and many of us living in today's world are bound to rules of fear. Most of us can't risk saying something other than what is usually being "said"; most of us can't afford to appear "different"; most of our views are regularly "levelled", if not by others, then very often by ourselves through self-censorship.

I remember having been struck by a work of art in Tate Modern, at least a decade ago. Francis Picabia, the French avant-garde painter and renowned cubist, painted "The Fig Leaf" in the 1920s. He used glossy household paint over another original painting, based on

a technical drawing of a turbine brake. The figure in the new image had a fig leaf representing censorship. The piece caused a stir and scandal when submitted for a Paris exhibition in 1921. The concept of self-censorship has always been an issue of shame for free thinkers. Every time I confront my own demon of self-censorship, every time I think of having to hold back on what I want to speak or write, I refer back to the picture and treasure the image, holding it close to my heart.

A simple question needs to be asked in today's world of evolving democracies with standardised aspirations. How can every text, every report, every opinion, every ideology, every dream, every disappointment, and every perception ever be the same? How can we ever expect that there will never be any deviant views (even rogue ones), or any protest in our landscape? To put it simply, can we ever be either black or white? Apparently neither black nor white, scientifically, has

any specific wavelength; rather white light is supposed to contain all wavelengths of visible light, while black is the absence of visible light. To the best of my understanding, no artist, no journalist, no educator, and no hero was ever born to defend the absolute ends of these two spectrums. Rather all great men have traversed forests riddled with confusion, anarchy and have finally found watersheds to self-examine and spread their wings. And above all, one must remember that it is only history that qualifies to choose placements for those who bask in fame and for even those who rot in ignominy. And no one but time has been the best judge of all, always.

The 106 year-old Virginia McLaurin, who just met US President Barack Obama had once picked cotton in the fields of South Carolina and never dreamt of dining with white people in the same restaurant. She had never imagined living long enough to see a black president. Coming from a time when black American students never made it past eighth grade, Virginia danced in joy when she met the President and his wife Michelle. At the very end of her life, while the 106 year-old Virginia recalls the racial divide and shares her experience of having gone through a time where "This was white and this was black", she has also finally seen a better day where the lines and ideas are not brutally defined anymore.

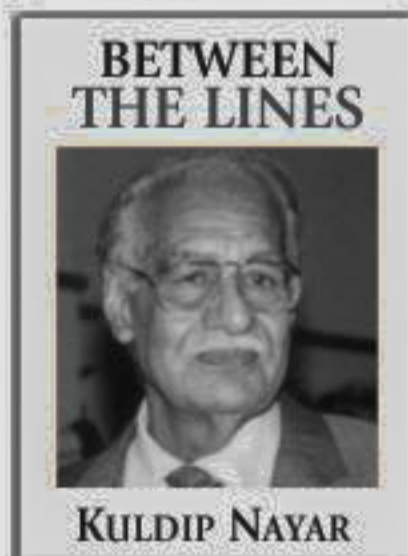
With time, shades of grey have crept in to our scenes, allowing every individual to make adjustments within his or her own sphere. Pure 'Black' or 'White' is not the flavour of the season anymore. But then, grey lines blurred with damaging reportage or advocacy should not go unpunished if anyone is proven guilty beyond doubt. But the process must be complemented by cautious wisdom, vision, and objectivity. Whatever happens in the process, anyone keen to dissect and get to the bottom must also be ready to confront odd and discomforting truths, which may be harsher to handle as shocks often stem from where it is least expected. Very often, most disappointingly, harsh truth stems from the closest corners in our lives. Discoveries of such manner rarely lead to glory.

The writer is Managing Director, Mohammadi Group.



Francis Picabia, The Fig-Leaf.

Spare the students



BETWEEN THE LINES

KULDIP NAYYAR

WHETHER students should take part in politics was a question of contention even before independence. The same debate raged when I was studying law in Lahore. We would skip classrooms on the call of Mahatma Gandhi or some other national leaders to show solidarity with the independence struggle. The agitation was against the British rulers and it never struck us that we were missing studies.

Even when Pakistan's founder, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, raised the slogan for a separate homeland for the Muslim community, we, the students, resisted the pulls of religion. True, the Hindus and Muslims had come to have separate kitchens, but we ate together and were getting food from both kitchens. The polarised atmosphere had little effect on us.

Today, the Akhil Bhartiya Vidhyarti Parishad (ABVP) is advocating a soft version of Hindutva in universities across the country. The Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) may be an island in the midst of a Hindutva sea. Yet, all credit to the university and its students for, more or less, preserving the core ideas of India — democracy, pluralism and egalitarianism. Unfortunately, the struggle to sustain secularism still continues.

A few days ago, some Muslim fundamentalist students, not more than five or six, allegedly spoil the liberal image of JNU and raised slogans seeking India's destruction. JNU's vice-chancellor, Dr. Jagdish Kumar, told me that their number was not more than a handful. But they had tarnished the image of the university.

The electronic media, in their attempts to improve TRPs all the time, spread the impression that JNU was the epicenter of activities by fundamentalists and separatists. It was suspected that even the video clip, which was run throughout the day by a television channel, was doctored.

Take, for instance, Vishwa Deepak's claims of grave lapses in the channel's coverage of the JNU sedition case. The journalist, who resigned from the channel, wrote: "We journalists often question others but not ourselves. We fix others' responsibilities but not ours. We are called as the fourth pillar of democracy but are we, our organisations, our thoughts and our actions really democratic? This is not just my question but everybody else's too."

To a large extent, I agree with Deepak. We journalists often tend to preach more than practice. In his protest letter to his employers, Deepak, while apologising for the use of such words to describe the situation, asks: "Along with Kanhaiya (Kumar), we made many students appear to be traitors and anti-nationals in the eyes of the people. If anyone is murdered tomorrow, who will take its responsibility? We have not merely created a situation for someone's murder or to destroy some families but we have created the conditions ripe for spreading riots and brought the country to the brink of a civil war. What sort of patriotism is this? After all, what sort of journalism is this?"

Yet, I do not rule out the audacity of separatists to pay homage to Afzal Guru, who had plotted the attack on the Indian Parliament. It is deplorable. But the question is should they be allowed to set an agenda for the nation when India's population has overwhelmingly come to cherish democracy and pluralism? The incident at JNU should not be allowed to dilute the arduous work done to sustain

pluralism when the country was divided on the basis of religion.

In fact, JNU has a position in India that is akin to Oxford in London or Harvard in the US. There is a liberal atmosphere and even the odd voices, which go against the general ideals, are given a space to express themselves. No one questions the motive because the basics are never doubted.

Today, religious parties have hijacked the society to reap political gains. The most unfortunate part is that religion has made deep inroads into the universities.

When then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi established JNU, the purpose was to inspire students through her father's ideals. A product of the independence struggle, Nehru was the nation's icon, not of the Congress Party, which undoubtedly led the movement to wrest the country from the exploitative British rulers. The purpose of Indira Gandhi, his daughter, was undoubtedly to perpetuate his name. But he was the real architect of 'Modern India' and deserves to be remembered and followed.

Bangladesh does not have a similar institution. But Pakistan has Lamus in Lahore, similar to JNU and enjoys the same reputation. My personal experience testifies this. An engineering female student there asked me at a lecture in the campus why Partition took place when people on both the sides

were similar, ate the same food and wore the same dress.

The student was unbiased and indicated that the atmosphere remained unpolluted. And that was some 40 years ago. Today, religious parties have hijacked the society to reap political gains. The most unfortunate part is that religion has made deep inroads into the universities.

The RSS, which seems to guide the Narendra Modi government from its headquarters in Nagpur, is appointing key posts to avowed followers of the Hindutva philosophy. Distinguished scholars, known for their secular ideas, have been pushed out because the RSS does not want students to be inspired by their example of not mixing state with politics. If a democratic polity has to have any meaning, it must stay away from religious identities which are now being refurbished.

Unfortunately, other fields are also getting affected. Take, for example, the incident at the Patiala House Court. A few lawyers, affiliated to the BJP, created a rumpus and beat up student leaders and journalists when Kanhaiya Kumar was to be produced at the court. Kanhaiya's statement that he had nothing to do with the students who raised anti-India slogans did not relent the attackers, some of whom were said to be outsiders, wearing lawyers' robes.

It's time that all political parties put their heads together to consider steps which would leave the students to solely pursue their education instead of wasting their time on parochial politics. The nation will suffer if the students, who are idealistic at that age, are not allowed to throw up such thoughts which in the long run will help the country to cherish its ethos.

The writer is an eminent Indian columnist.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Maniacs at large

The recent killing of four children is shocking and I am speechless. In the last one and a half months, thirty-nine children were killed. It seems that evil forces are getting the upper hand as law-enforcing agencies are failing to control the criminal activities. It cannot go on like this; the authorities concerned must take urgent steps to stop these gory incidents.

Nur Jahan
Chittagong

Recently four kids were brutally murdered at Sundrateki village of Bahubal upazila under Habignaj district over a panchayat (village arbitration) dispute. We want quick and highest punishment of the killers. We also would like to thank the Bahubal upazila health and family planning officer for launching a temporary health camp at Sundrateki for the treatment of the deceased children's family.

Md. Abdul Halim
Sirajgonj



PHOTO: MINTU DESHWARA