

The Teacher and the Preacher: Lessons of History

RONNY NOOR

GERMANY now has the best economy in Europe. It is also one of the leading industrialised nations in the world with a functioning democracy, where more than a million Afghan and Arab refugees have so far poured in, seeking safety from violence in their war-torn countries. But merely three hundred years ago, it was a poor, heavily rural country with few urban centres. All that changed with the Age of Enlightenment, which paved the way for its modernisation and development. One of the greatest philosophers of that age was Christian Wolff. Born to impoverished parents in Breslau, he became a professor of mathematics and natural philosophy at the University of Halle in 1707. He was a prolific thinker who earned a great reputation in the next twenty years. But his ideas drew the ire of the Pietists, Christian fundamentalists, who called him an atheist, a pagan, a Confucian, because Wolff declared, pointing to China, that a great society could be based on rationality. The Pietists influenced the Prussian king, Friedrich Wilhelm I, to banish the philosopher. So Wolff had to leave the Prussian territory within 24 hours under threat of death.

He went to the University in Marburg and gained an even stronger reputation for his ideas. In the meantime, Friedrich Wilhelm I had passed and his son Friedrich Wilhelm II

became the king of Prussia. A patron of the arts and the Enlightenment, he invited Christian Wolff to return to Halle, and the philosopher did. His return was considered a cultural victory for Prussia as well as for rationality. This champion of academic freedom was later celebrated as "the teacher of

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Germany" and ennobled - the only philosopher in history to be honoured like that. All this was possible because of a prudent king - now better known in English as Frederick the

Great - who established religious tolerance and freedom of the press, and helped Prussia ascend to a leading European power.

One could say that it was Christian Wolff who paved the way for celebrated German thinkers like Immanuel Kant, Arthur Schopenhauer, Friedrich Nietzsche, Wolfgang von Goethe, and others in Western Europe, ushering in the great social and scientific achievements of the 19th century, propelling Europe to the height of human civilisation because the Europeans sought knowledge "beyond the utmost bound of human thought," in Tennyson's words. Although later, Germans had to suffer in the First World War and the Second World War due to megalomaniac political leaders obsessed with power, the spirit of Enlightenment that was ingrained in German society has helped them to strive with a Faustian urge to lift themselves from the ashes of every catastrophe to the present state.

While Christian Wolff's rational philosophy in the 18th century was leading Germany and the rest of Western Europe from religious fundamentalism to Enlightenment, the puritanical teachings of the preacher Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab was taking hold in Saudi Arabia. Popularly known as Wahhabism, it became the leading form of Sunni Islam in Saudi Arabia under the patronage of the House of Saud. This ideology is behind the Taliban's ascendancy to power during the civil

war in Afghanistan in the 1990s, where its adherents flocked to by the thousands, to help the mujahideen fight modernisation. It is also known to be the ideology of the Islamic State and those fighting in Syria to remove the Shia president Bashar al-Assad. Reminiscent of the religious wars of Europe before the Enlightenment, these wars are sending millions of Afghan and Arab refugees to seek shelter in Europe, a Europe enlightened by the rationalist ideas of philosophers like Christian Wolff.

Millions of our people also fled to India during the Liberation War in 1971 to seek refuge from the atrocities of the Pakistani dictator General Yahya Khan and his local collaborators, those henchmen who killed their fellow citizens in the name of Islam. But thanks to the bravery of our freedom fighters, we were able to defeat the forces of evil and gain independence. It cost the precious lives of three million of our people. Hence, the father of our nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, declared on January 10, 1972 at a public rally in New Delhi - during a stop-over while he was on his way home from Pakistani captivity - that we would be a secular nation. We promised then that we would not cause suffering to anyone in the name of religion. We decided that we would be defined by our humanity, not any faith. We said that our first identity would be Bangladeshi, not Muslim or Hindu. However,

after the Taliban took power in Afghanistan, the Wahhabi ideology began to spread in the Indian subcontinent. The novelist Taslima Nasreen had to leave our country due to death threats by religious zealots and lost her citizenship. Attempts were made on the life of the late poet Shamsur Rahman and that of the Awami League leader and current Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. Leading politicians and secular thinkers like Avijit Roy and others were killed. Those who are involved in these jihad-inspired terrorist activities are no different from the Pakistani collaborators during the Liberation War in 1971. They wish to turn us again into a subjugated people who will not be able to think for themselves but do the bidding of others. How will we then survive or develop as an independent nation? Their ideology is an insult to our freedom fighters and to the father of our nation.

We are now at a crossroads in our history. Our future and the future of our descendants will depend on the decision we make today as a society, whether we want a war-ridden underdeveloped society run by despots of one kind or another, or a relatively peaceful and prosperous society with a functioning democracy. Frederick the Great's decision regarding Christian Wolff can serve us well in this respect.

The writer is an English professor and educator at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, USA.

Child marriage It's not just poverty

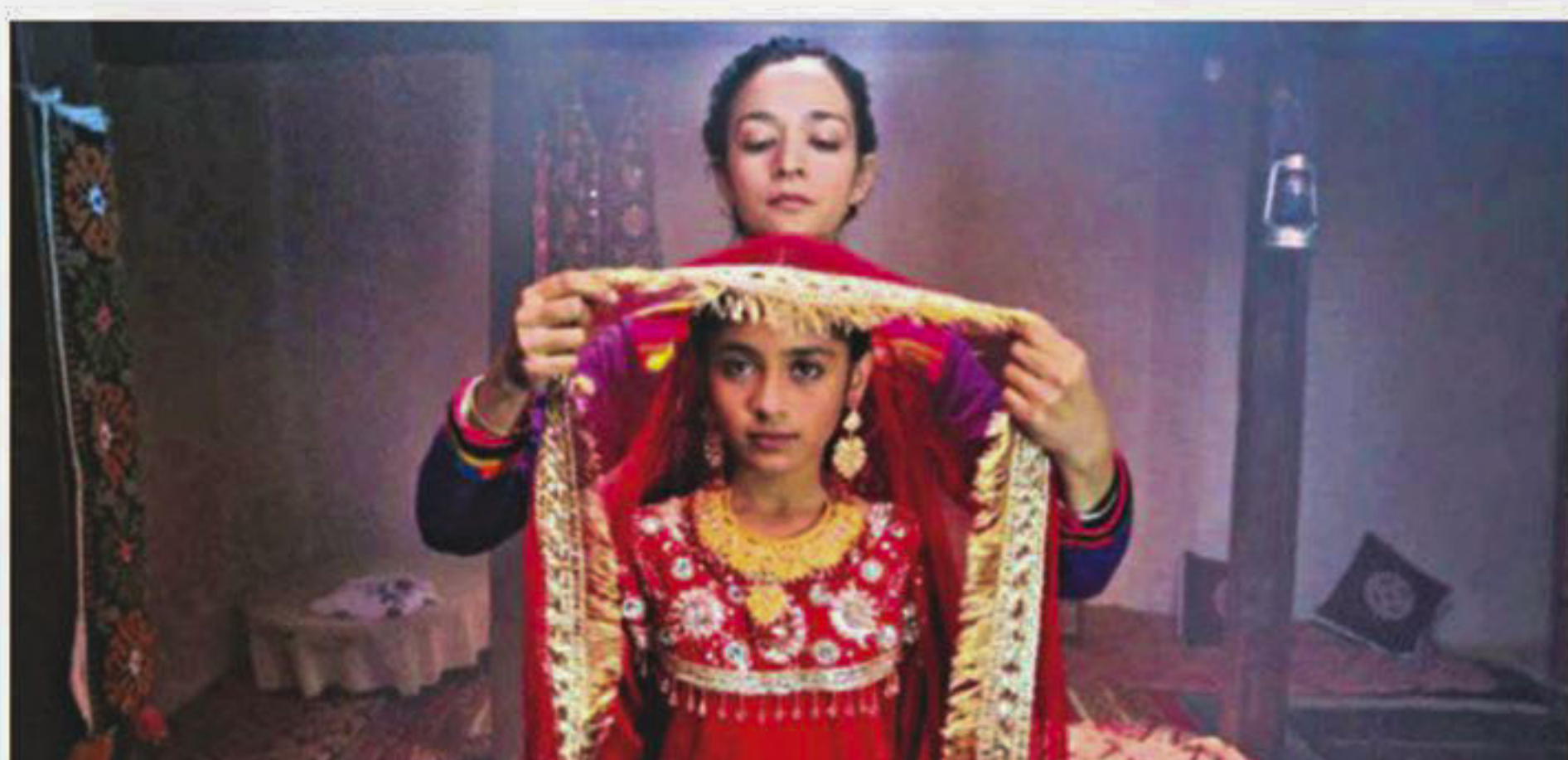
LAILA KHONDKAR

"YOU give dowry and I receive it, why are you bringing government into this?" said a woman in a village in Rangpur district during a discussion on women's status. I had the opportunity to facilitate the session, and have thought of this many times hearing several years ago. The comment reminds me that it is extremely challenging to get rid of a harmful practice if it is socially accepted, even when it is prohibited legally. Law is important, but not enough to bring social change. Recently there have been several discussions about child marriage, since there were reports that the government might lower the minimum age of marriage for girls. Like many others, I strongly believe that the minimum age of marriage for girls must remain 18 years, and any move to change this is a serious violation of child rights. But today's article is not about this. I would like to reflect on why the rate of child marriage (64 percent) is so high in Bangladesh, even when we have the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929.

Child marriage is one of the most significant reasons for girls dropping out of school, and marks the end of childhood for them. This increases the risk of domestic violence to the girl children. Due to physical and mental immaturity, married adolescents are sometimes unable to perform responsibilities according to the expectations of their in-laws. This makes them vulnerable to abuse. In extreme cases, there is divorce or separation. Married adolescents are also not able to participate in the decision making process of

their family, and thus the patriarchal norms continue. Child marriage leads to early pregnancy, and adolescent girls are not properly prepared for parenthood. Adolescent mothers are more likely to suffer from birth related complications than adult women. Malnutrition is also very common for them.

All of us are aware that poverty, social insecurity of adolescent girls, lack of education and vocational skills development opportunities for girls, natural disasters, social acceptance and weak enforcement of law are some of the reasons contributing to child marriage. I want to emphasise on something that is usually missing in child marriage discourse. Gender inequality is one of the root causes of child marriage. The society places disproportionate emphasis on women's reproductive and caring roles, and they are often not viewed as individuals with the right to realise their full human potential. Thus, marriage becomes the most important and central event for a girl or woman (across all socio-economic groups), and parents consider it to be their major responsibility to ensure that their daughters are married off. So when they find a 'suitable' groom, they arrange marriage for their daughters, even when they are under-aged and/or have not completed their education. When a boy drops out of school, even poor parents take initiatives (for example, enrolling him in vocational training or giving him money to run a small business) so that he can be economically productive. But when a girl drops out of school, most parents will arrange their marriage. Parents believe that they need to ensure that their son gains the capacity to generate



A still from Afia Nathaniel's *Daughter*.

income, but they do not hold the same belief for their daughters. This does not only happen in poor families. Many parents from well-off backgrounds do not understand the importance of continuing education of girls or their full participation in the workforce. That is why they do not hesitate to arrange the marriage of their daughters in the middle of their university education.

In her novel *Motichur* published in 1904, Begum Rokeya wrote:

"We shall do whatever is needed to be equal to men. If we have to earn independently in order to gain independence then we should do that...Why shouldn't we earn? Don't we have hands, legs, and intellect? Can't we engage in business with the amount of energy that we spend in household work in the husband's place? [...] Why do we cry if our girls are not

married off? Educate your daughters properly and let them enter the workplace; they can earn their own livelihood."

We have not been able to live up to the vision of the revolutionary Begum Rokeya in creating an environment where women's economic emancipation is valued and celebrated. More than a century ago, Begum Rokeya wrote that women are suitable for any profession, including being a judge, magistrate, barrister and even viceroy. Wouldn't she be upset to learn that even now parents 'cry' when they are unable to marry off their daughters? Marriage is critical for maintaining one's family and social life, but that is relevant for both men and women. Why should only women's lives revolve around marriage? Why do they have to 'sacrifice' their academic and professional ambitions to maintain a

family life? Don't most of them face gender stereotypes in choosing a career? We shall not be able to address child marriage until we truly confront these issues.

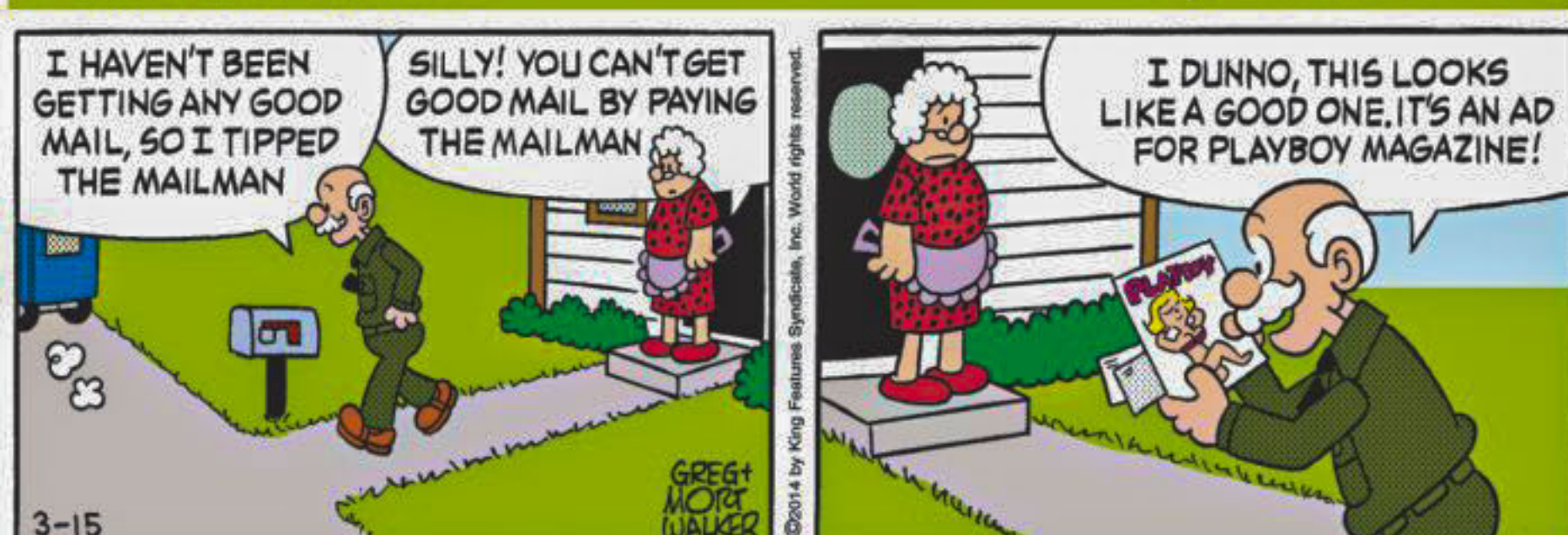
Child marriage is one form of sexual violence and is a major challenge of our time. So what should be done to prevent this? Integrated programmes, instead of disjointed projects, addressing the structural causes should be implemented to address child marriage in a holistic way. The enforcement of legal processes, proper birth and marriage registration, strengthening social safety net programmes to increase parents' income, improving girls' safety in communities, including through national and community-based child protection systems are needed to address child marriage. Men and boys should be involved as key agents to prevent child marriage. But most importantly, parents should be educated on the rights of girls to education, health and protection. Their capacity should also be developed in treating boys and girls equally. There must be attitudinal changes in the ways parents and the community, in general, view girls and women. A social movement is required to achieve true gender equality. There must be full economic, political and social empowerment of women; we must learn to celebrate their achievements beyond their roles as wives and mothers.

Let us have the same aspirations for our boys and girls. Let us raise our girls in a way that they become confident about themselves, and can realise their dreams to the fullest.

The writer is Director of Child Protection, Save the Children.

BEETLE BAILEY

by Mort Walker



BABY BLUES

by Kirkman & Scott



CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

42 All gone

DOWN

1 Make wavy

6 Record song

11 Batter's low hit

12 Showed over

13 Loser to Dwight

14 Burning

15 Domains

17 Haul into court

18 Family

19 Josephine, for one

22 Break off

23 2006 Winter Games setting

24 Went cycling

25 Calgary team

27 "East of Eden" brother

1 "The Sands of Mars" author

2 Take, as a bus

3 Not coastal

4 Diner buy

5 TV schedule section

6 Refrain syllable

7 Game caller

8 Up

9 Opera legend

10 Patellae places

16 They light up

20 Deadline for some

21 Free

24 Flying mammal

25 Thrifty

26 Telemundo viewer

27 Frolic

28 Redress

29 Diminish

30 Studies all night

34 Open space

36 Summer sign

41 Sailing boat

37 Sixth sense

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

DAMP S GATOR

OHARE ALIVE

HAREM GIVEN

VEIN BOND

TWIN ORAL

WIN ARABIAN

ORGAN MAGMA

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