

The alternative road to dissent

The Dowry Prohibition Act-2017

Effectiveness depends on enforcement

THE Cabinet has approved in principle the draft of "The Dowry Prohibition Act-2017". It incorporates the earlier Dowry Prohibition Act, 1980 and subsequent amendments. The Act lays down 14 years' rigorous imprisonment along with fines for any individual or individuals who incite any girl to commit suicide over dowry. It has a provision also for a life-term of 12 years for hurting a woman over dowry. That the government has taken cognisance of the fact that dowry is a serious social malady that needs to be tackled with legislation is welcome.

However, as pointed out by legal minds, most of what has been proposed in the new Act is already in place under different laws. But it is good that all issues have been brought under a single Act. That said, Bangladesh is a country that has ample laws on paper. It is the lack of enforcement of existing laws that have been the problem. It is our hope that those responsible for upholding the law will utilise this upcoming Act to go after the perpetrators of dowry-related violence.

The incorporation of imprisonment and financial penalty, if applied to the full extent of the law should help reduce the thousands of incidents of dowry related violence we are forced to witness every year in both rural and urban Bangladesh. The time is ripe to deliver the message that women cannot be maltreated over dowry that demanding dowry is illegal and only time will tell if the Act is being utilised as it was intended to.

The plight of female migrant workers

Punish the traffickers

WE are appalled at the scale of brutality that a female migrant worker has endured in the hands of traffickers in Malaysia. She was raped and forced into sex labour before she was rescued. And all this in the hands of her fellow countrymen.

Bangladeshi migrant workers, particularly women, face an array of abuse abroad. According to UN's International Organisation for Migration, seven out of ten female migrant workers suffer torture while abroad. Unscrupulous recruiting agencies and brokers run a syndicate that puts a large number of female workers abroad in conditions tantamount to modern-day slavery. Deprived of any rights and without much education, they resign to their fate.

The number of women migrant workers has shot up significantly in recent years, and along with it have spread the tentacles of human trafficking syndicates. In this light, it is of vital importance to formalise the sector. We urge the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment to blacklist agents involved in cheating and exploiting female workers.

Every female migrant worker needs to be provided with a local SIM card with a provision for emergency dialing to a dedicated hotline at the Bangladesh embassy in the concerned country. Repeated violations of human rights should be taken up with host countries. Also, it is incumbent upon the concerned officials to put emphasis on skills development programmes so as to diversify our labour market abroad. On top of it all, it is crucial to sensitise female migrant workers regarding the dangers of unofficial channels to work abroad. Also, the cases of abuse need to be followed through and the traffickers must be given exemplary punishment.



KNOT SO TRUE
 RUBANA HUQ

LUCKILY we don't live in the United States of America. Luckily we don't have to take to the streets to protest the executive orders of the president. But yes, we have issues. In any democracy, it's common to have issues and its super common to voice dissent. Currently, our point of concern is to ensure a free and fair national election. And thank God, the search committee has at least one person who is acceptable to most and is, by profession, a teacher to many, a mentor to most. Therefore, we have hope. However, thanks to social media, hopelessness is also becoming a big part of our psyche.

I woke up to a tweet by an extremely intelligent young woman talking about how the Honourable Prime Minister could not afford to claim the Champion of the Earth award anymore, since she was going ahead

media, which reflects our life and conviction, one must exercise restraint and be gracious. Thomas Friedman, the moderator, did not violate this rule and was, most thankfully, moderate.

Amidst all the protests regarding Rampal, what about presenting the case in a different light? How about a Rampal debate in Rampal, between the government and the Civil Society where all the relevant questions can be answered and where even a neutral monitoring cell can be set up? Instead of taking to streets, how about a visit to Rampal to talk to the locals and gauge the risk by all those who protest? Maybe a trip to Rampal could help? At the same time, one could wonder how the 1200 MW Quang Ninh Power Station, which was last commissioned in 2014, and also the Thang Long Power Project of 600 MW coal-fired power plants are both located within 6 km from Halong Bay in Vietnam, which is a UNESCO world heritage site? How was that allowed? One could wonder how Jinnah power project of 2000 MW is located adjacent

Bangladesh to claim its reasonable carbon space. After all, Bangladesh uses 2.5 percent of coal while the West uses 41 percent of it!

The same proposal is applicable to the minimum wage demands in Ashulia. Many have registered protests, many have slammed Bangladesh, many have taken it to the official level, but how many protests have even considered that the unit prices of readymade garments being made in Bangladesh are not going up? In spite of a rise in exports (this year relatively modest), no one is paying more to any manufacturer. And yes, there is a global recession and the fact that the brands can't pay more because the consumer isn't buying more stands in favour of the arguments of the brands and the retailers not increasing prices. That is understandable. But who's going to look at the manufacturers' pockets and gauge if it's deep enough to revise the minimum wage at this point of time, considering the annual increment of 5 percent is anyway going to be effected now? Who's going to pay for the production loss of 15 days resulting from all the Ashulia protests that happened?

I heard a rather strange and sad story the other day. A senior government official (with heart) had gone to visit an activist in the hospital a while back and sympathised with him, and scorned the police for having beaten him up. He offered help and compensation. The victim with a broken leg was satisfied. A day later, the official had gone back to visit him again with a bag of goodies and surprisingly learnt that the patient had been released. Now...that is a threat to the credibility of the civil society activists. Unfortunately, much of what we protest lack meat and many of us either depend on random rhetoric or our alternative 'copy-paste' tools. Neither rhetoric nor imitation could ever satisfy the quest for truth ever. Therefore, be it Rampal or Ashulia, it is best to clarify points on a public forum where the administration or the private sector can be forced to be accountable. Let us also remember that one can only demand accountability when one has complete knowledge of the issues being discussed. Otherwise, let's raise questions and wait for answers, failing which we can all take to streets and protest, yet once again.

Discrediting any one, any issue, any sector takes almost no time in today's world. But restoring lost glory is difficult. In spite of social media being a strong indicator of popular opinion, I risk wrath by sharing the last two statuses that prompted my final departure from Facebook three years ago:

- 1) A status "My father died this morning" receiving 110 likes in less than 10 minutes.
- 2) A "check-in" status when entering Banani Graveyard accompanied with a selfie.

More recently, a friend of mine reported that a housewife had requested her FB friend to give a "like" to her having bought *puti mach* (small fish) from the bazar. National issues may be subjected to endless similar social media statuses, but real protest requires real gumption, knowledge and the courage to share, educate and confront. We need to stand together and take responsibility to demonstrate that there's enough reason to believe in what we believe in and that in case, if we fail, we have the grace to accept the "other" as well.

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IMAGE: PINTEREST

with the Rampal coal based power plant. I also woke up to see that a renowned photographer was arrested and then later released by the police during the anti-Rampal protests that happened in the capital the other day. BBC also ran a full story on it with most major newspapers covering the protest as headline news. Unfortunately, I am exposed to many sides of the same story on a daily basis. So, I know and don't know much at the same time. But there are a few things that we stick to when it comes to decorum and ethics. So, when the ex-Vice President of the US Al Gore referred to "dirty" coal over and over again and confronted our current Prime Minister, something in my heart did not seem right. The debate in Davos seemed unpleasant. Courtesy matters. That is why, even at home, even in our tiny little home screens, we have grown a distaste for those who scream and argue their points in our late night talk shows. In

to a mangrove forest; how the Yokohama coal fired power plant is located near a residential area; how multiple coal fired German power plants are, till date, located on town and river banks.

And of course, how can the American 'Pleasants Power Station', a 1300 MW power plant, be located at Willow Island in West Virginia, only 1 km from Wayne National Forest? These are natural curiosities that need a fair response. Your columnist is certainly not an apologist for anyone, but before we protest Rampal, it may become more useful to ask the pertinent questions in a public forum instead of being engaged in a rhetorical protest. A visit to Rampal, (which is off from the World Heritage Site by 69.6 km) coupled with a detailed knowledge of the plant and the Pashur River may evoke a better response and help all parties clarify the need for

PROJECT SYNDICATE

Trust in markets and antitrust in media



SERGEI GURIEV

THIS year's World Economic Forum Annual Meeting in Davos came at a moment of puzzlement for the world's economic and financial elites. Although the global economy has lately been doing rather well, voters have been rebelling against them. Despite much-publicised challenges and weak points, there has been plenty of good economic news in recent years. Globalisation and technological progress have supported annual global per capita GDP growth of 2.5 percent since 2009 – lower than before the Great Recession, but still very high by historical standards. In the last 35 years, the share of the world's population living in poverty has fallen from 40 percent to just 10 percent.

Perhaps the biggest grievance of the past year has been inequality. But, at the global level, inequality is falling. And while inequality has risen within some advanced economies, the increase has not been particularly dramatic, and it remains at reasonable levels.

But that is not what the average citizen sees. According to the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development's new Transition Report, based on the 2015-2016 Life in Transition Survey produced by the World Bank and the EBRD (where I am Chief Economist), the perceived increase in inequality far exceeds the reality described by official data, typically based on household surveys.

In all but one of the 34 countries where households were surveyed, a majority of respondents reported that inequality has risen in just the last few years. Yet the official data show very small changes in the Gini coefficient (a standard measure of inequality) over this period, with most countries having experienced a decrease in inequality.

One might assume that, in a clash between data and perception, data always win. But, in this case, it may be the data that are wrong – or, more accurately, we may be using the wrong data. Unlike ordinary citizens, who see the homeless in the street and the billionaires in the news, the household surveys that underpin inequality measurements may be under-sampling those at the very top and the very bottom of the income distribution.

Another kind of data, gathered by the French economist Thomas Piketty, may provide a more accurate picture of inequality today: tax records. Those data indicate that income growth among the super-rich has lately far exceeded that of the rest of the population. Philippe Aghion of Harvard and the College de France and his co-authors have reinforced this finding, showing that, while inequality has not increased among the bottom 99 percent of rich-country populations, the top 1 percent has pulled away from the pack.

The concentration of wealth at the very top, point

out Piketty and others, may be dangerous. If political institutions are weak, wealthy tycoons can use their money to "capture" government officials and tilt economic regulations in their own favour. With their newly acquired competitive advantages, they can accrue undue profits, reinvesting part of their haul in acquiring even more unfair rents. The concentration of wealth would become difficult to limit, and, over time, smaller entrepreneurs would be crowded out.

Of course, if a country's political institutions are strong enough, not even the super-rich can distort the rules of the game. In that case, those who accrue the most wealth are the most talented and luckiest entrepreneurs, who reap their rewards for driving innovation and growth that benefit the entire economy.

Unfortunately, in many of the EBRD's 36 member countries, political institutions are not all that strong.

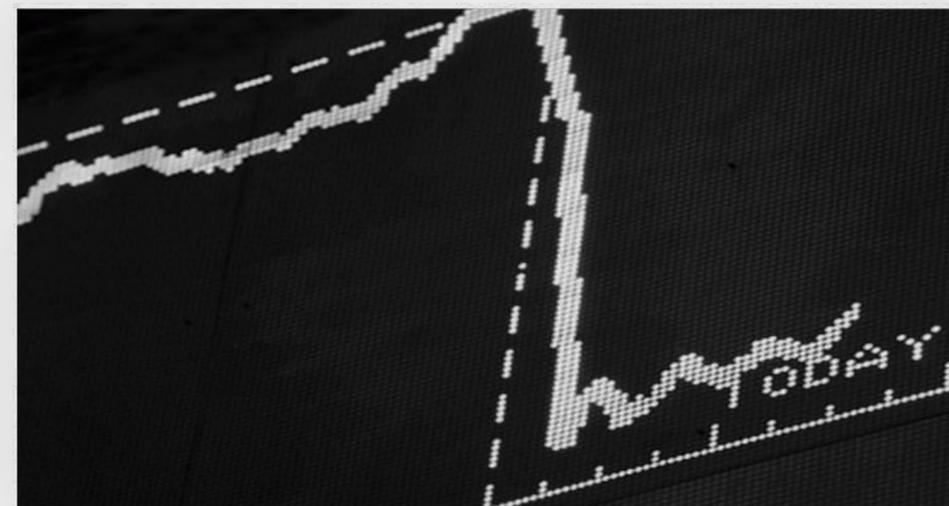


IMAGE: AFP

This is reflected in the fact that commodities and natural resources account for a majority of billionaires' wealth in the EBRD countries, suggesting not just that resource rents are available, but also that those rents are being inadequately taxed.

There is a clear need to tackle the unfair political influence of the super-rich. Most directly, this means making political financing more transparent, with stricter and more effective regulations. But it also means addressing the use of media by oligarchs to manipulate politics to their own benefit.

As Luigi Zingales pointed out in 2012, oligarchs can use media ownership to solidify their political positions, which they can then exploit to secure rents from which they can fund media. Former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, Zingales argues, was masterful in this regard. But many oligarchs in the post-communist countries have done likewise.

Some oligarchs would argue that it is better that they own the media than that the government does; at least they can compete with other oligarchs. That is a red herring. Yes, ownership of media by a kleptocratic or authoritarian government is dangerous. But so is ownership of media by oligarchs who can collude with one another to protect their collective interests – interests that may differ sharply from those of the rest of society.

Media lie at the foundation of modern democratic societies. That is why ownership should be transparent, with, ideally, media owners prohibited from owning other assets. In short, media should be subject to the same kind of antitrust policy as, say, infrastructure industries.

Of course, such an antitrust policy would face fierce political resistance. And even if such a policy were implemented, tycoons would continue to work to

influence the media through, say, mispriced advertising contracts. And, to some extent, some media might welcome oligarchic subsidies as a way to manage new challenges to traditional business models.

To address these problems requires, first and foremost, a strong independent regulator. At the same time, transparent and de-politicised public subsidies can help to support the social good of honest news media.

Implementing an effective media antitrust framework will not be easy. But it will still be easier than contending with an increasingly dissatisfied public losing faith in democracy and open markets.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR
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Ragging in public universities must be stopped

Ragging, the hidden mistreatment of freshers at the hands of senior students, has over the years become a tradition in the higher educational culture in Bangladesh. Many of these junior students are seriously affected by it, with the worst of the practices forcing them to walk barefoot across campus, stand in the searing sunlight for hours, and propose to girls in humiliating circumstances. Many freshers even prefer to avoid going to the university in fear of being subjected to this.

It is true that new university students need to be acclimatised with the college culture, but they certainly do not have to accept such repressive actions. Considering the harmful effects of these activities, university administration ought to take effective initiatives to curb this negative culture. Meanwhile, senior students should speak out against it and work to protect their junior classmates and welcome them in more positive ways.

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