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Militants active again

Can't afford to let our guard down

WE applaud the preemptive drive by police forces on Wednesday that resulted in the recovery of grenades, bomb making materials and cleavers. The raid on the hideout in Mirsarai, Chittagong surely brings a sigh of relief. This is especially so, given that the two were arrested while trying to attack a police check point in Comilla the day before.

Law enforcers surely deserve praise for the fact that militant attacks, which had become a menace last year, has gone down significantly. However, their claim that Neo JMB and other militant groups are on the back foot should not be a reason for complacency. The audacity of the arrested Neo JMB duo to try to attack a police check point in the first place speaks about their efforts to regain the initiative. Similarly, the attack on the prison van convoy on Monday by militants indicate that there might be more such groups working in collusion or otherwise.

It is pertinent that according to studies conducted by the Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies (BIPSS), the jails in the country are being used by arrested militants to preach their radical ideologies. Containment and de-radicalisation steps are called for now to stop the further spread of their ideology.

The amount of bomb-making material that was seized – 280 packets of metal balls (each pack contains 100 balls) and 40 packets of explosive gel to give an example – also raises questions. Where are these militants obtaining these? Can anything be done to choke the supply of the material? The law enforcers have done a commendable job in tackling militancy; it is now time to look towards making sure they are deprived of all assets to inflict violence and eventually neutralise them fully.

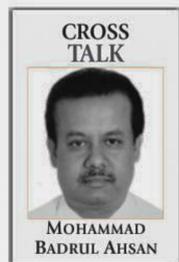
Less than one percent defaulter

Availing loans still daunting for women

IN our country where the national average for default on loans is around 10 percent, women entrepreneurs default less than 1 percent. Yet, the odds are stacked against them. We find that women entrepreneurs begin with a very small capital base and progress steadily, whereas their male counterparts are into huge capital loans and default at much greater numbers. Despite these figures, national banking institutions, particularly the state-owned banks throw away thousands of crores of Taka every year to fund ventures led primarily by male entrepreneurs that never get off the ground. Although things are starting to change slowly, with some private sector banks coming up with special products designed for small and medium enterprises (SMEs) that are women-led, the progress remains painstakingly slow.

Bangladesh Bank data speak volumes about the quality of women entrepreneurship. Women constituted only 3 percent of the Tk 141,935 crore disbursed to SMEs. Now why is that, especially when bankers know that the default rate amongst women is so low? This lack of interest in providing loans to women has as much to do with societal outlook than anything else. It would seem that decision-makers in the banking sector are stuck in the past with archaic perceptions that women have nothing to contribute to the national economy. Yet, the biggest contributor to our export is readymade garments sector that is powered by women who constitute the bulk of the workforce. Is it not time the central bank stepped in to make the necessary changes so that women entrepreneurs get their share of the bank credit line? Women have proved themselves to be very good borrowers and it is time the banking sector recognised that fact and evolved.

Lies make us blind in full sight



CROSS TALK

MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

IF an eye for an eye makes the whole world blind, what does a lie for a lie do to us? A lie is a false statement made with deliberate intent to deceive; it's an intentional untruth. It throws acid in the face of

facts and disfigures them beyond recognition. Liars are comparable to demons, who steal the soul of truth. In this increasingly deceptive world, truth is regularly decked up to create conflict and chaos.

The world is drowned in deceit as lies heaved upon lies inundate the plains of rectitude. Shops sell adulterated food. Pharmaceutical companies overstate the potency of drugs. Courts give mischievous verdicts. Doctors make dubious diagnoses. Banks mislead services, deducting spurious and hidden charges from client accounts. Teachers are relaxed in their grading standards. Lying has been second nature to politicians.

Much of the woes of the world are tied to lies. And these ties have many manifestations. In some cases, lies are downright falsehoods. A lie is often dressed in pretensions. Hypocrisy or double standard is yet another form. A lie can be an overstatement. It can also be an understatement. It can never have the equanimity of truth, which holds the ideal in balance with the real.

A lie, like misfortune, doesn't come alone. It's said that a thousand lies are needed to hide one lie. Once lied about, a fact or an individual triggers the domino effect by setting off a series of falsifications. One dwindling truth knocks down other standing and contiguous truths. The first lie is like a nuclear accident, succeeding ones being radioactivity released.

In *A Brief History of Lies, The Most Brilliant Book Ever Written*, David Nanavati makes a striking claim. He



SOURCE: WWW.MARINIJ.COM

writes that research shows 1 in 5 things humans say in social situations lasting more than 10 minutes are generally lies. It sounds familiar because those of us, who heavily socialise, also know how people exaggerate things when they brag. The author also gives examples of the types of lies all of us willingly cooperate in without hesitation, including Santa Claus, the tooth fairy, other mythical characters, divorce, and talking to children about the birds and the bees.

Many of us grew up believing in the iconic cherry tree myth in which the first US president George Washington was six years old when he confessed that he had

damaged his father's cherry tree after he got a hatchet as a gift. Now we know this inspirational story about the value of honesty was dishonestly invented by his first biographer Mason Locke Weems. Lies are created by men before lies will create them.

History as a continuous process may have cutoff dates for events, but the underlying thoughts, ideas and spirits run like threads. Humans, like spiders caught in their own webs, have lost track of when the first lie was born. But they're now unable to extricate themselves from the tangle that evolved as lies begot lies pushing truths into oblivion. Adults of

every generation ask their children to be truthful, themselves wallowing in prevarications.

Nanavati's book also discusses research into the physiology of lying. An MRI study by the University of Southern California in 2005 found that pathological liars had significantly more "white matter" in their brains and slightly less "gray matter" compared to others. White matter is made of axons connecting different parts of grey matter to each other. Nanavati quotes police statistics that about four percent of people are accomplished liars and can lie very well.

Turning and turning in the widening gyre, the liar can't hear the truthful anymore. Most people these days can lie with a straight face or through their teeth. There was a time when lies embarrassed their speakers if they were exposed. Now it embellishes their unscrupulous intentions. Lying is an insult like water rolling off a duck's back.

In fact, lies are deeply ingrained in our convictions today, and it's an open secret. Corrupt parents bring home illegitimate incomes. Unelected lawmakers represent constituencies. People buy credentials instead of earning. Hard to find anybody true to himself or herself. We're living in an endless masquerade ball where every participant is attending in costume.

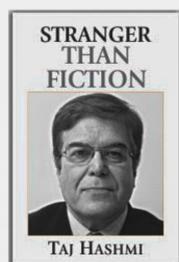
The irony of our time is that lies are the only truth. The strategic disavowal of truth leads to the ultimate avowal of falsehood. Fake news refers to false information or propaganda published under the guise of being authentic news. As a matter of fact, it's a catharsis releasing repressed emotions, lies within us oozing like pus coming out of abscess.

A lie for a lie has made us blind in full sight. We see others without recognition, also true the other way around. The pathology of lies is creating pathetic phonies. Whichever may come first, having two faces is a function of distorted facts.

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CHILD MARRIAGE RESTRAINT ACT 2017

Another regression therapy for Bangladesh?



STRANGER THAN FICTION

TAJ HASHMI

A recent move by the Government to allow child marriage under special circumstances is tantamount to excluding many Bangladeshis from the benefits of growth and development. Young women are likely to become the main victims of the recently enacted Child Marriage Restraint Act-2017. It allows a Bangladeshi boy or girl to get married in special cases with parental consent and judicial permission before reaching the minimum age limit — 18 for women and 21 for men — as stipulated by an act in colonial India. What the Parliament enacted on February 27th — paradoxically, in the name of restraining child marriage — signalled an obvious departure from the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929, which fixed the minimum age of marriage for girls at 18, and for boys at 21.

While the justifications for the Act are phony, fallacious, and at best speculative, it's in fact a regression therapy, a means of escaping certain anxieties. Even worse, it's a childish attempt to appease people who promote patriarchy and misogyny. They not only include obscurantist and religious forces, but also some so-called progressive elements in society. The other day, one politician — formerly "left-oriented" and "progressive" — justified the marriage of under-age girls to their rapists, for the sake of defending some weird social order. Islamist groups like the Hefazat-e-Islam, who are hell bent on demolishing a harmless statue in the premises of the Supreme Court, also defend the Act in the name of defending Islam and Shariah.

Unfortunately, many Bangladeshis believe child marriage to be the only solution to the problems of rape, abduction, illicit sex, and pregnancy of unmarried girls. Some Muslims believe child marriage is permissible. They don't know there's no theological justification for child marriage in Islam.

Now, let's look at the extenuating situations that warranted the legislation, presumably for the "best interests" of under-age girls in Bangladesh. To the proponents of the Act, protecting adolescent pregnant girls from shame and ostracism for life were the main rationale behind this law. They ignore the fact that child marriage is responsible for millions of girls' dropping out of schools, suffering incurable diseases, and dying prematurely.

Shockingly, all the female politicians

in the country favoured the legislation. Meher Afroz Chumki, the State Minister for Women and Children Affairs, who tabled the Bill said the Government was committed to stop child marriage, and the Act was essential to ensure this! Rebeka Momin, chief of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Women and Children Affairs, told news reporters: "There was no alternative to keeping the special provision considering the socio-economic reality, especially in rural areas."

So far only a handful of people, mostly women representing women, human rights, and development organisations, have held public rallies in Dhaka protesting enactment of the Child Marriage Restraint Act-2017. As if it's only a women's issue, having nothing to do with human rights, equal opportunity, and human dignity in Bangladesh! Unless cross sections of the people, politicians, intellectuals, professionals and others organise mass protests and mobilise public opinion against the Act — paradoxically named as "Child Marriage Restraint Act" — it would further erode the vestiges of human rights and civility in the country.

As Maher Sattar and Ellen Barry have argued ("Bangladesh Weakens Longstanding Law Against Underage Marriage", *The New York Times*, February 27, 2017), this Act "could roll back the country's decades-long campaign to curtail teenage pregnancy and maternal and infant mortality". The authors reject the unconvincing arguments that the Act was "necessary to save pregnant teenagers from social ostracism", as opponents of the Act argue that teenagers in conservative rural Bangladesh "rarely become pregnant unless they are married"; and that in 2015 "fewer than 1.5 per cent of underage marriages took place after the girl had become pregnant". What's disturbing that in 2014, the Government had already tried to reduce the legal age of marriage from 18 to 16. The Act legitimises what conservative Bangladeshis believe: "when girls get educated, they become bad women and have trouble finding a husband". Sattar and Barry believe the Government is courting conservative Muslim electorate and the Hefazat-e-Islam. Welcoming the Act, one top leader of the Islamist outfit said: "In the eyes of Islam, this is the correct decision. Having a law that you cannot get married before a certain age, this I cannot agree with."

This Act, in short, grossly violates the Constitution, which guarantees equal rights and opportunities for all Bangladeshis irrespective of their ethnicity, socio-economic position, gender, and belief systems. Seemingly, neither the state machinery nor the society at large can do anything about

stopping the surge in violent crime and human rights violations, especially rape and abduction of women. Instead of ensuring the rule of law, especially the protection of girls from sexual harassment, rape and abduction, this Act has virtually established the well-known fact about the poor state of law enforcement in the country.

In some specific areas Bangladesh, during the last two decades of British rule, appears to have more civil and political rights, more freedom than what prevails today in the wake of independence. In view of the support for child marriage among sections of politicians and intellectuals in Bangladesh, it seems culturally we haven't changed much from our predecessors in the 1920s. I cite a folk song from rural Rangpur composed year before the enactment of the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929. The "Hefazat mindset" isn't that different from what we get in the song: "From next year onward, you won't be allowed

to marry off your sons unless they grow beard, and girls become shapeless and unattractive. So, marry off your children this year. Henceforth, while promiscuity will reign supreme, nobody will get virgin girls as brides anymore."

So far as the mindset of people who justify marrying under-age rape victims to their rapists is concerned, it's not that different from that of the mullahs who dispense similar judgments in the Salish courts of rural Bangladesh. To conclude, marriage is a sacred institution, a life-long commitment between two individuals; not an antidote to rape and illicit sex, let alone a reward for rapist men. Bangladesh needs the rule of law against rape, abduction, and sexual harassment of women, not child marriage — which is a regression therapy, not an efficacious cure.

The writer teaches security studies at Austin Peay State University. He is the author of several books, including his latest, *Global Jihad and America: The Hundred-Year War Beyond Iraq and Afghanistan* (Sage, 2014). E-mail: tajhashmi@gmail.com

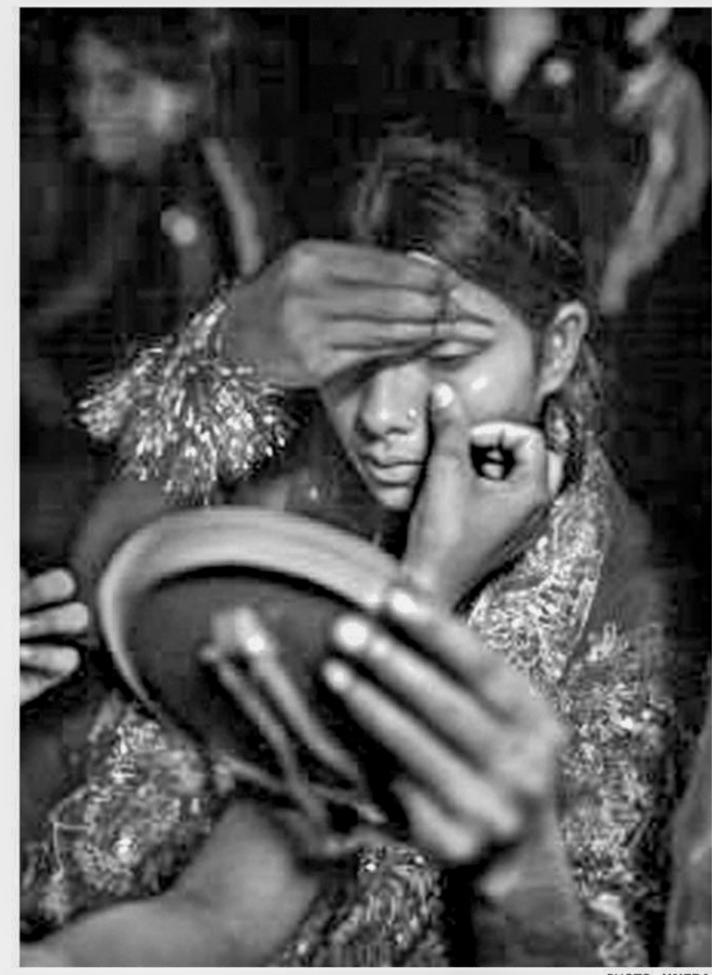


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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Heavy fines and penalties can deter law breakers

Human beings' natural tendency to break rules applies to almost every society. Why some societies have relatively higher rates of crime than another is a question to ponder about. The problem perhaps lies in the weakness of the system. It is no good having laws that are not strictly implemented.

During one of my visits to Canada some years ago, I came across a 'No Smoking Sign' at the entrance of a subway station in Toronto that read, "Smoking is prohibited in this area, anybody found smoking is liable to a fine of USD 500." It is relevant to mention here that the average monthly salary of a Canadian citizen ranges between USD 2,000 to 2,500. Therefore, anyone who dares to violate the aforementioned ban on smoking in public must do so at his/her own risk, knowing that the action will cost them a hefty fine to the tune of 20-25 percent of their monthly salary.

Such imposition of stiff fines or penalties may not fully cure the problems in a society but it will certainly work as a deterrent for those who are likely to disrespect civil laws. The government should review the existing levels of fines and penalties in our cities to tackle some of the most pressing issues, and most importantly ensure that they are implemented strictly and efficiently.

Ehsan Ul Haque

By email