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PHOTO: MOAZZEM MOSTAKIM

"The only noise now was the rain, pattering softly with the magnificent indifference of nature for the tangled passions of humans." — Sherwood Smith, writer

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PHOTO: STAR FILE

Who Defines Obscenity

It is very alarming that a professor of Dhaka University (DU) has been suspended for showing "obscene materials" in the classroom, in which he was teaching Gender and Development to his Masters students. When the government has been incorporating educative content on sexual and reproductive health rights in secondary level textbooks, it is really hard to believe that DU took such a step that would discourage scholars to talk about sexuality and gender. In the last issue (dated March 17, 2017), Star Weekend published the slides shared by the professor in the classroom, where I found no sign of obscenity. I will not be surprised if there is some kind of internal conspiracy due to which the teacher has been suspended under the excuse of "showing obscene materials". However, if this is the practice of our country's most reputed institution of higher education, we must rethink about the quality of higher education in Bangladesh.

Abdullah Khan
Rampura, Dhaka



PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

Corrupting a Generation

The Star Weekend published an article titled "Corrupting a Generation" on February 24, 2017 which elaborately focused on how we have corrupted our entire educational assessment system. I was astounded to know that every year, from 2012 to 2017; question papers of at least one public exam were disclosed before the exam date. Even question papers of the recruitment exams of Bangladesh Civil Service, conducted under Public Service Commission, one of the most empowered institutions of the country, were leaked. However, our government still made little progress to find those who were behind such heinous crimes that has almost destroyed our entire education system. Before any of the upcoming public exams, the government must ensure that all the culprits responsible for question paper leaking are brought to justice. It is really very shameful for us that our nation, which once won a nine month long liberation war, now, cannot arrange a single fair and transparent examination for its young students.

Masum Billah
IER, University of Dhaka

The opinions expressed in these letters do not necessarily represent the views of the Star Weekend.

OPINION

The Palestinian struggle for independence bears some resemblance to ours, but Bangladesh's support for their cause dated back to its pre-independence period, when the wartime Prime Minister Tajuddin Ahmed refused Israel's offer of recognition and military help without a second thought. Genuine commitment towards the Palestinian cause has remained elusive across the political spectrum from then on.

True that, unlike Palestine's Arab brethren, Bangladesh has never maintained any overt or covert relation with Israel. "All countries of the world except Israel," reads our passport. In all possible diplomatic forums, Bangladesh has persistently sided with Palestine. Yet, a critical look suggests that the relationship has always been symbolic at best, or opportunistic at worst.

In 1973, Bangladesh supported Palestine's fight against Israel in the October war, sending a medical unit and relief supplies for the fellow war-ravaged country. A curious mind ought to wonder whether it was a realpolitik act by Bangladesh because within the next few months we secured OIC membership and simultaneously allayed fears among some Arab states concerned with our emergence.

In the early 80s, plenty of Bangladeshi youths went to Lebanon to fight against the Israeli invading force. According to the US Library of Congress, the then Bangladesh government put the number of volunteer fighters at nearly 8,000 – a figure Naeem Mohaiemen, a historian who investigated the case, believes was "inflated". He argued that the government's desire to "signal a significant contribution to the Palestinian cause" could be a motive behind the exaggeration.

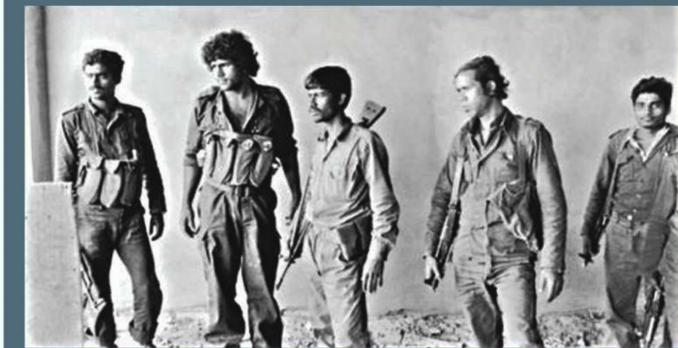
In fact, the great Mendi Safadi saga was another reminder of the fact that we, too, could not resist scoring political points by utilising the Palestine card. It exemplifies that Bangladesh, like many other so-called pro-Palestine countries, simply takes pleasure in offering diplomatic support, which is thoroughly meaningless because no one seriously thinks that our diplomatic clout terrifies the Israeli establishment. However, there is something that really does.

A group of Palestine supporters has developed an effective and non-violent method to fight Israel's brutal occupation: Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement. As its title itself suggests, the strategic campaign advocates for a cultural, academic and economic boycott against Israel, and urges for divestment from all Israeli and



SHOULD BANGLADESH DO MORE TO SUPPORT THE PALESTINIAN CAUSE?

NAZMUL AHASAN



Many Bangladeshi youth went to Lebanon to fight against the Israeli Invading Force in the early 80s.

PHOTOS: COURTESY

international companies that operate in Israel, and hence contribute to solidifying its occupation and colonial project. It also calls on countries to hold Israel responsible for its gross human rights violations and crimes against humanity by imposing sanctions against it. As we speak, the movement sweeps the leading university campuses across both sides of the Atlantic.

Most recently, a United Nations panel, ESCWA, accused Israel of imposing an apartheid regime on Palestinians. It is the first time any UN agency reached such a conclusion, and it signifies Israel's growing

isolation, albeit the UN secretariat distancing itself from the report.

With a consensus on Israel's culpability in war crimes growing, the decentralised movement has created panic in Israel, which sought to tackle it forcefully. Israel's friends in the West sought to delegitimise it by passing bills that promise punishment for those who support BDS, and branding the movement as "anti-Semitic".

While it is ironic that such a move signals a departure from democratic values like free speech they say they defend, all their counterproductive

measures result in more opposition to Israel's apartheid system.

Inspired by anti-apartheid boycott movement in South Africa, BDS denotes a powerful tool to combat Israeli injustice. If sovereign states like Bangladesh endorses BDS and adopts an official policy based on it, it could accelerate the process. Despite the fact that Bangladesh already has an official policy of non-cooperation with Israel in place, the proposed policy will render considerable feats.

By endorsing the BDS strategy, Bangladesh could firstly set precedence for other countries to follow. Secondly, it designates an extended ban on companies that operate or benefit from or contribute to Israel's notorious 'settler enterprise' which might diminish the settlement enthusiasm.

"Bangladesh luckily has a policy on non-cooperation with Israel, so the most important means for the government to hold Israel, and those complicit in its violation of international law and human rights, accountable is by joining in the global campaigns against those profiting from Israeli crimes," Maren Mantovani of the BDS Central Committee wrote to me.

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, who recently visited Bangladesh, was against a total ban on Israel in spite of (or because of) the latter's brutal policy, but had no problem with a ban on products made in the settlements. If Bangladeshi policy solely targets Israeli settlements at least, it will adhere to the official Palestinian policy regarding BDS. On the other hand, Bangladesh should also be prepared for the backlash, especially the widespread accusations of anti-Semitism.

But why should, of all countries, Bangladesh make the move?

The answer lies in the fact that both countries are familiar with each other's nationalist struggle. Other Muslim countries, such as Indonesia and Algeria also fought their own liberation wars. But it was we who found Yasser Arafat, the father of Palestinian national movement, and Nelson Mandela, the great South African anti-apartheid leader, so inspiring that we invited them to the event marking the silver jubilee of our independence.

As we now head towards celebrating the golden jubilee, there is an opportunity for us to once again showcase our anti-colonial and anti-apartheid legacy to the world. In the absence of Arafat and Mandela, we could only do that by embracing and upholding their spirit of resistance – that is to say, by adopting the BDS strategy as an official policy. ■

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