

Cowards strung together in a daisy chain

Prime minister's visit to India

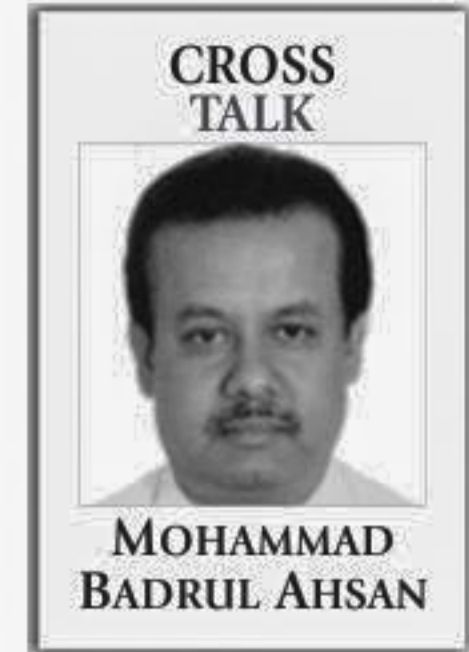
Hope the bottlenecks are resolved

THE Prime Minister is embarking on a most important bilateral visit in recent times, since Bangladesh-India relations happen to be, for us, the most important bilateral relationship. Reportedly, some 33 deals and MoUs are likely to be signed during the four-day visit starting from today.

Generally, in bilateral relations, the past is a very good index of how the future years will develop between the two countries. For her part, our Prime Minister has exhibited her commitment to maintain the best of relations with India. However, Bangladesh-India inter-relation is hinged on a few basic bilateral concerns which form the nub of the relationship. For India, it is security and transit. For Bangladesh, it is economic development and reduction of trade deficit and sharing the waters of common rivers.

So far Bangladesh has addressed all of India's security concerns by ensuring that its territory was not used to conduct hostile acts against India. And India's transit requirements, particularly of gaining access to the 'Seven Sister' states in the North East through Bangladesh, have also been ensured. As for our concerns, we are glad to note that Bangladeshi goods now have free access to Indian markets, but India may consider removing some of the countervailing duties. And while sharing of Teesta water continues to defy resolution, it remains a disappointment for us. Water remains the most important factor for our survival, one that has great impact on our environment and our flora and fauna. And this is something we would want India to appreciate.

We wish our Prime Minister all the best and hope that the level of Bangladesh-India relationship will be taken a few notches higher through this visit.



CROSS TALK
MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

ashamed of his wife's indiscretion to face the embarrassment. Those who found his lifeless body assessed that if he wanted, he could have easily saved himself at the last minute by planting his feet on a chair, which was within his reach. Shame, in those days, worked like the sprinkler system in a high-rise building. It activated itself whenever there was fire.

Now, that sprinkler system is all but broken. Shame is a word that has been erased from our minds. We no longer experience the painful feeling of humiliation or distress caused by the consciousness of wrong or foolish behaviour. Nothing seems to make us ashamed of ourselves anymore.

Once it was shameful to lie, steal and cheat, and an entire family could be ostracised if they brought shame upon a village or neighbourhood. It was also shameful to keep bad company. People frowned upon anybody who lived beyond his means. Anybody failing to keep a promise invited public scorn. Not too long ago, chronic debtors admitted themselves in hospitals to avoid harassment by cranky creditors.

It's believed that the root of the word shame is derived from an older word which means "to cover." For example, an individual covering himself is a natural expression of shame. This physical connotation eventually projected itself onto the mental, and formed the basis of human decency that signified our civilisation. Metaphorically, shame as an emotion is like a garment or cloak that covers the ethically naked self and gives it an acceptable social identity.

There have been times when shame was serious business. The samurais in Japan had their *bushido* or code of honour which involved dying by committing *seppuku* to avoid shame. Former South Korean president Roh Moo-Hyun committed suicide by

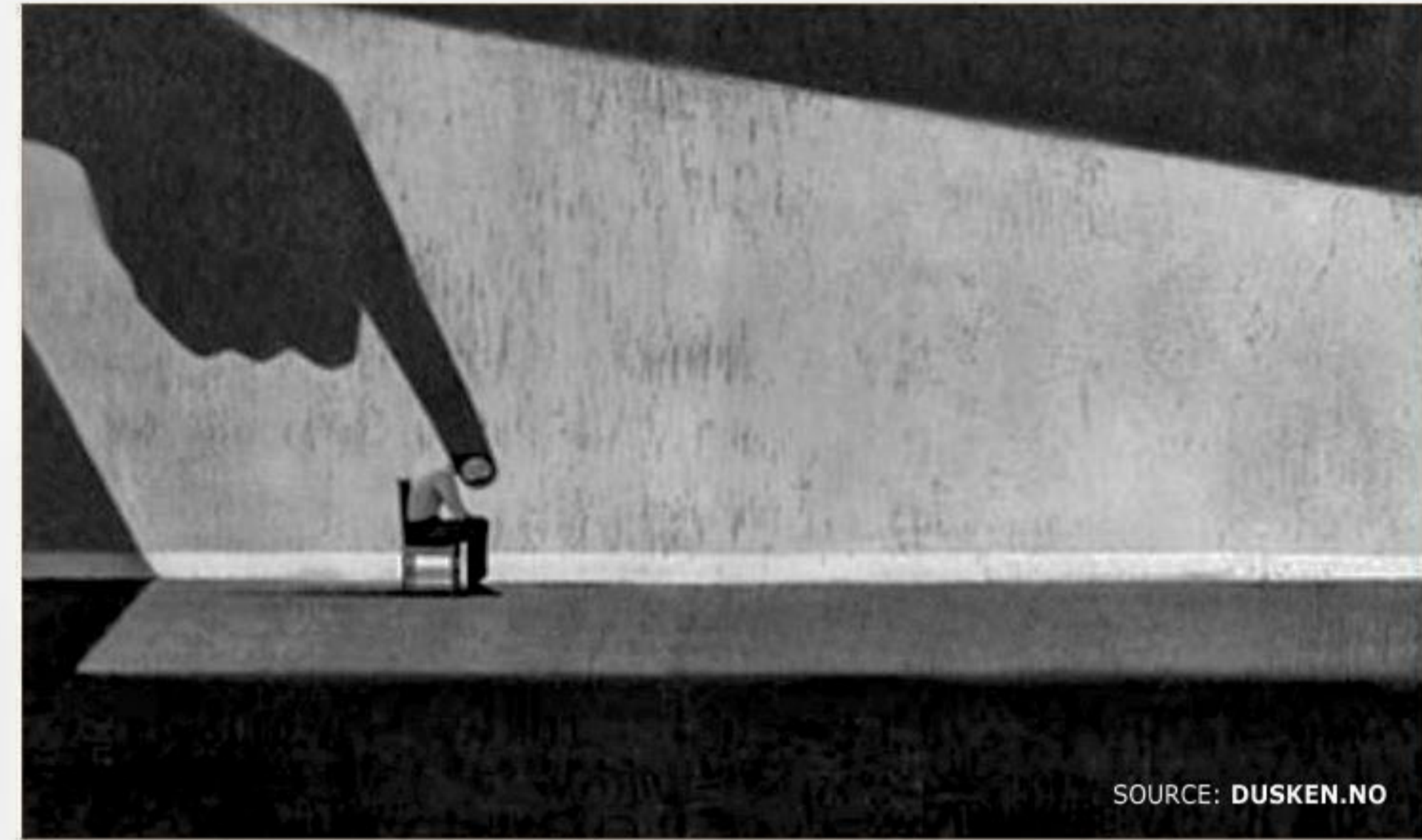
leaping from a hill amid an investigation over a bribery scandal. Robert A Kaster wrote in the American Philological Association's 1996 Presidential Address titled "The Shame of the Romans" that in ancient Rome an academic suffered *pudor* or shame if he failed publicly to answer a question in his area of expertise. He also mentioned that a philosopher named Diodorus is said to have literally died of shame from just that cause.

Shame is thus the flipside of honour, and one can't exist without the other. Shameless people can't be honourable, and honourable people can't be shameless. This contradiction is deeply ensconced in our society where so many of us are so aggressively shameless, while at the same time also arduously vying for honour.

never casted their votes. Lawmakers know they never got elected to office.

It's said that shame pertains to a person, and guilt pertains to an action. In other words, shame is when someone thinks he or she is bad; guilt is when someone thinks he or she has *done* something bad. Immanuel Kant and his followers held that shame comes from others. Others, including Bernard Williams, argue that shame comes from oneself.

In either sense, shame as a realisation has been banished from our lives. If it still exists anywhere, it's in the dark recesses of our shifty hearts where conscience plays one-handed solitaire – to be won after all cards are discarded one by one. Anxiety of the



SOURCE: DUSKEN.NO

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136th IPU Conference

Practise what you have preached

WE are happy that Bangladesh successfully hosted one of the largest gatherings of parliamentarians through the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and are heartened by some of the very positive messages that came out of the conference. But to think that holding the IPU conference in Dhaka is a reflection of the confidence of the international community in our democracy would be to stretch it too far.

Out of the several key points mentioned in the IPU communiqué, one of major relevance remains the overwhelming influence of money in politics, to which, politics in Bangladesh and other countries have become captive. When politics centres so much on money, it itself obviously becomes a tool for making more money through all means necessary. The end result being any lack of political accountability and transparency accompanied with massive surges in corruption, such as that we currently see all over.

National interest, meanwhile, is hampered. Individual rights are all but ignored and collectively denied. State institutions are, moreover, hijacked by special interests to serve their cause alone which is almost always in conflict with the concepts of egalitarianism, rule of law, social justice, etc., leading to unsustainable levels of societal inequality.

But it is precisely because of its unsustainability that this trend must be reversed. And, most importantly, it is the moral obligation of politicians and parliamentarians to correct the current shortcomings that are forcing immeasurable sufferings on countless numbers of people around the world. We hope that this conference can serve as an initial building-block to doing all that.

WORLD HEALTH DAY

The hidden problem

Shadows of mental stress over urban adolescents



SEAMA MOWRI

"He had a bottle of poison in his hands and told me he would drink it if I didn't agree to marry him."
 – A 16-year-old girl living in a Dhaka slum explaining the circumstances that led her to consent to marriage.

WHILST this might read like teenage melodrama, the girl's story is not unusual. During the last six months of our research (a project funded by IDRC and led by Professor Sabina F Rashid) in urban slums the research team encountered several stories of manipulative suicide threats and evidence of mental angst among both male and female adolescents and young people. Initially, a love interest may spark such incidents of dramatic behaviour but these are symptomatic of much deeper troubles. The rapid hormonal, physical and mental changes brought by puberty are difficult for any adolescent to navigate but these challenges are intensified when they are experienced simultaneously with the social, economic and structural instability of surviving in poverty in Bangladesh's dense urban slum communities, where adult responsibilities are imposed on children before they are ready.

The multiple stressors experienced by adolescents in these settings are little discussed but include: fathers abandoning families, parents remarrying, children being forced to drop out of school, unemployment, abusive gossip and rumours about girls' characters and "morality", bullying, daily sexual harassment, physical abuse for dowry, taunts regarding dark skin from in-laws, and entrenched gender norms that place unachievable expectations on girls and boys. Any one of these factors – including the dynamics of the overcrowded slums they navigate, living out of cramped one-room households – can have debilitating effects on a person's mental well-being.

Our research also highlights a complex interplay of age and identity. Amongst the slum dwellers, there is an embedded assumption that 'married' implies 'adult', and most of these married 'adults' are 15-16 years old. In other words, there's almost no sense of transition about the stages of adulthood that they go through. As we've noted, most of the early married adolescent girls face the challenge of forming their adult identity at the same time as they are required to assume the duties of a wife and a mother which can create a great deal of mental stress. But who do they turn to?

"I have nowhere to go, no one to seek help from. I see my *nonod* (sister-in-law, who is only eight months younger than me) roaming around with her friends, gossiping, going to fairs... but I can't do any of that. I am *ghorer bou* (bride of the house). I have to take permission from my husband and my father-in-law before stepping out of the house. The only guidance I get from relatives and programme interventions is related to family planning," shares Ayesha about her

experience after marriage.

The WHO constitution states: "Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity." An important implication of this definition is that mental health is more than just the absence of mental disorders or disabilities. Mental health is defined as a state of well-being in which an individual realises his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and is able to make a contribution to his or her community.

In Bangladesh, there is a dearth of knowledge around systematically-collected data on mental disorders and so the extent of the problem remains unknown. A recent systematic review (by Hossain *et al.*) suggests that females are more vulnerable to mental disorders in both rural and urban settings

"Psychodrama as Transformative Intervention in the SRH of Young Men in Urban Slums" – aims to identify the spectrum of risks and health issues affecting young men. "Sexual and reproductive health (SRH) education for young men, particularly those from vulnerable communities like urban slums, is a neglected issue," says Dr Malabika Sarker (Professor and Director of Research at James P Grant School of Public Health) who is leading the study.

As Dhaka transitions into being the sixth largest megacity by 2030, the urban challenges of structural poverty and inequalities, steep social gradients, risky environment, deprived living conditions, entrenched and changing social and gender norms will start to have serious impacts on the well-being of the population at large. What does that mean in terms of the stress resilience of an increasingly urban population? What are the health consequences of



PHOTO: COLLECTED

compared to males. These findings are consistent with another rural study (Ara *et al.* 2001) which reported that social stigma inhibits women from seeking medical treatment for their mental problems.

The BRAC School of Public Health has undertaken a number of research projects that focus on exploring mental health issues among adolescents. One of the projects is trying to understand how early marriages change the life opportunities and well-being of girls in urban slums, and their coping strategies in coerced marriages. Qualitative cases pertaining to sexual coercion in early marriages have provided some insight into the challenges faced by adolescent females living in a society fraught with gender disparities. Another research study funded by NWO-WOTRO –

higher social stress exposure and vulnerability of urban-dwellers, given that stress is the most likely cause of many mental disorders, particularly depression? And from a policy perspective, what actions can be taken to protect people living under dense metropolitan conditions from urban stressors and their negative mental impact? With this article I wish to stimulate a conversation in the hope of facilitating a more nuanced understanding of how urban living conditions impact our mental health. And it is imperative that we start the conversation sooner rather than later.

The writer is a project manager at the Centre for Gender and Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights, James P Grant School of Public Health.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Help disadvantaged children

I read *The Daily Star's* reports on a global campaign named '100 million for 100 million', and a local one of the Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE) organised in Dhaka on April 2, 2017. The campaigns discussed how we can help underprivileged children who are deprived of healthcare, education, and protection in Bangladesh.

According to CAMPE there are around 60 lakh underprivileged children in Bangladesh. Although the rate of child labour dropped from 34 lakh in 2001 to 17 lakh in 2013, it is still alarmingly high and threatens our development as a nation. We must prioritise child development above anything else, focusing on providing basic sustenance, education and training, financial stability, and opportunities for social and self-development. I hope we, as well as the authorities, take measures to tackle these issues immediately.

Shamir Sarkar, University of Dhaka



PHOTO: STAR