

The curse of child labour

Commitments should not be on paper only

As we observed World Day Against Child Labour yesterday, we were reminded yet again of just how far behind we are in terms of eradicating child labour in Bangladesh. No measure of economic growth can ever justify or conceal the fact that child labour in the country is rampant and around two million children are engaged in child labour.

This is despite Bangladesh being a signatory to a number of international instruments that aim to protect the rights of children and having passed domestic laws and policies that prohibit child labour.

The Labour Act 2006 specifies that the minimum age of employment is 14 and the government has even declared a number of sectors as hazardous for children. But countless children way below 14 are engaged in some of the worst forms of child labour in many of the aforementioned sectors, leaving them exposed to physical, economic and sexual exploitation.

Because of the fact that child labour is largely driven by economic reasons, children from low socioeconomic backgrounds are often forced to work in dangerous conditions as welders, bus conductors, domestic help, tanners, etc., putting their lives in serious jeopardy. These children are not only being deprived of a childhood but also being robbed of their future with no scope to acquire a proper education and the skills needed to exit the cycle of familial poverty.

An overall nonchalant attitude towards child labour and the lack of implementation of existing laws and policies make it extremely difficult to reduce – let alone eradicate – child labour in Bangladesh. Without proper enforcement of the law and a zero-tolerance policy towards child labour, the Bangladesh government will fail to live up to its commitment to protect one of the most vulnerable segments of the population.

Slow progress in tannery transfer

The pollution goes on

DESPITE the government's repeated ultimatums to relocate all the tanneries operating in the capital's Hazaribagh area, the transfer process remains sluggish. The latest deadline ended on March 31, 2017. But so far, only 35 percent of tanneries have been shifted to the Savar Tannery Estate, informed the Industries Minister to Parliament on Sunday.

Numerous articles, reports and studies have been published over a decade about the disastrous impact of operating tanneries at Hazaribagh. The Buriganga River is being seriously polluted due to the discharge of highly toxic untreated chemical waste from tanneries into its waters. In 2016 alone, these tannery factories produced every day about 21,600 cubic metres of environmentally hazardous liquid containing chemicals, a large amount of which directly went into the River. As long as the government fails to make the tanners abide by the relocation order, the pollution of the Capital's lifeline goes on.

On the other hand, it is alleged that the Savar Tannery Estate is not fully equipped for running tanneries. It is reported that the Central Effluent Treatment Plant (CETP) of the industrial complex is yet to be completed. Hence, the tanners fear of losing production due to relocation. There is also apprehension that inadequate pollution control measures would seriously damage the Dhaleshwari River in Savar.

We cannot emphasise enough that the authority should expedite the transfer process. It should fully equip the Savar Tannery Estate so that the leather industry does not suffer from the shifting process. Adequate measures also need to be taken to protect the surrounding environment, particularly the Dhaleshwari River, from the hazards of tannery wastes.

SILENCE OF FRIENDS

Activism in the Modern Era

THE MIDDLE PATH



ADNAN R AMIN

A couple of months back, a renowned company released a TV commercial and it quickly elicited mixed reactions, the most common one being anger. What was exactly in that advert? Well,

accompanied by a feel-good pop tune about 'The Movement', the film showed a protest rally or movement of avant-garde young people, peppered with token minorities. They catch the gaze of a famous fashion model Kendall Jenner (of the notorious and notoriously tacky Kardashians Family).

Beckoned, she sheds her costume and heads to the front of the procession. There, she hands a policeman in the barricade the product; and he drinks it. This is apparently the goal of the 'movement', since everyone starts celebrating.

What is the big deal? Well, many complained that it deliberately copied the look and feel of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. The hue and cry is over hiring a white protagonist for a film clearly

Contemporary activism has been largely commodified. Many urban-centric movements gain momentum – not because activists care about an issue, but because citizens want to partake in the romanticism of political action.

inspired by a Black movement. It was also seen as trivialising the BLM, having stripped off all the hardship and police mistreatment, to leave audiences with only a happy carnival of sorts. That Kendall Jenner – whose family is thought to shy away from a political stand on racism, while copying fashion and aesthetic trends from the Black community – was chosen to lead the movement, was also an affront to many. The company pulled the film on its first day and issued an apology.

Ironic that activism shut down a film

that attempted to celebrate activism.

Social media has opened floodgates of unexamined causes and unstoppable rebels. With the license to post/share anything and zero accountability, young men and women have taken to protests and activism over anything and everything. Today, there is activism for eliminating air travel, stopping standardised spelling and spelling bees, fair portrayal of snakes on movies and covering up the mermaid's body in the Starbucks logo.

requires conforming consumption is but a toothless mimicry.

Globally, citizens are jealously guarding the freedom to engage in activism, but wielding such activism with caution, lest it invokes the ire of the powers that be. In fact, there is little reflection on the ambitions, commitment, tactics and manner of modern day activism. There is little thought given to how low-commitment, photogenic activism by uninformed / half-informed activists

'violence under the influence'? Do we not realise that social maladies thrive on the failures of political institutions?

It seems that contemporary activists are reluctant to go up against 'the establishment' in fear of retribution. Many appear afraid of being caught up in the false dichotomy of the 'Us or Them' that ruling party affiliates have been peddling. The answer is riskless, but pithy-sounding activism that doesn't attack underlying causes or structures, but only grazes the surface for the activists' benefit. And why blame them? Activists of yore grew up examining society and desiring justice. This generation grew up studying Che and desiring his sideburns. This is how the illusion of activism starts to replace actual activism.

Of course, not all is lost. Look again at the Banani rape case and remember how social media pressure mounted, till all the accused were arrested. More importantly, the overdone conversation on rape and victim-blaming was rejuvenated. I am reminded of an article on the #YesAllWomen movement (USA), "[because of this activism] the realms of gender shifted a little. They shifted not because of the [crime], but because millions came together in a vast conversational network to share experiences, revisit meanings and definitions, and arrive at new understandings."

Another movement generating informed discourse is – (what should've been branded) the pro-Sundarban movement. One of the reasons why it persists may be because a dedicated group of activists are regularly breaking down complex information into bite-size chunks, for wider consumption. And this is vital. Articulation of worthy issues and deconstructing it for wider consumption is a social service essential for grassroots mobilisation; and is starkly absent in our domestic politics.

Apart from elections, activism is the single most important medium of interacting with the state / government. And there are stark examples of intellectual stagnation in political activism. As rulers and regulators find newer ways to erect walls of secrecy, breach citizen privacy and fence in citizen freedoms – citizens must respond by finding smarter ways to thwart government corruption and violations. For that, activists must educate themselves to the point of becoming orators, thought leaders and public intellectuals. For that, they must forget the mask, and reach for the book.

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SOURCE: PINTEREST

We don't have to look far to catch glimpses of such activism in Bangladesh. A renowned telco recently posted a somewhat inappropriate rhyme / meme about an impending cyclone. Naturally, netizens took issue and the post was taken down. Think about the TV chef with the onomatopoeic name: her antics with instant noodles have led thousands to defend a notion of 'proper cuisine' by hurling insults. Recently, another group has emerged that defends the chef's freedom to make sandwiches out of noodles. Neither, however, has pondered the nutritional value of instant noodles and its role in urban school children obesity.

Attention deficits and short shelf-life of news stories means that everyday activists seek out issues with easy moral clarity; issues that demand roughly 60 seconds and zero research to form a position on. Often, the aim is not to further the cause, but to further one's reputation by attaching it to the cause.

I can't resist a couple of anecdotes in this regard. During a rally some years ago, I overheard some young men discussing their choice of 'protest clothes'. One had bought (or borrowed) a bandanna. Another had had his 'Master of Puppets' shirt washed two days in advance. In another incident, passionate and articulate protest planners eventually disbanded because the Guy Fawkes masks - if ordered on Alibaba - would not arrive on time. Needless to say, any act of dissent that

actually invites mockery and scorn to the entire analytical category.

Last year, when an (recently-arrested) elderly schoolteacher was forced by a political bigwig to do squats holding his ears - social media users erupted in protest. However, their response to it? Posting photos of themselves holding their ears in solidarity; as if to share the teacher's burden. One camera click, and activism was done. Unexamined remained the confluence of constitutional and community justice systems.

Contemporary activism has been largely commodified. Many urban-centric movements gain momentum – not because activists care about an issue, but because citizens want to partake in the romanticism of political action. I would argue that this is precisely why we hear so many voices against social ills (e.g. child marriage, violence against women), but few if any against political dysfunction (e.g. embedded corruption, bureaucratic nepotism and dynastic rule).

For example, after the sensational rapes that took place in a hotel in Banani, activists critiqued men's reluctance to admit that 'no means no'. But we heard nothing against the law enforcement establishment that refused to register the case; or against the organised racket that stuffs young men full of methamphetamine. Can we not connect the dots from 'protection of political actors in the narcotics trade' to

PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

Trump's climate scapegoat

AWAKENING INDIA



SHASHI THAROOR

BY accusing India of demanding "billions and billions and billions of dollars" as a condition for its participation in the Paris climate agreement, US President Donald

Trump has ruffled what promised to be a close relationship between the world's two largest democracies.

After Trump singled out India in his speech renouncing the Paris Accord, Indian Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj retorted that "there is absolutely no reality" in Trump's allegation. According to Swaraj, India joined the agreement not "out of greed or fear," but "because of our commitment to protecting the environment."

Trump insists that the Paris deal is unfair, because while "India will be allowed to double its coal production by 2020," the United States is "supposed to get rid of ours." To be sure, India still gets most of its electricity from coal-fired power plants, which account for just under two-thirds of its total energy capacity. But India does not have the access to inexpensive natural gas, which has allowed the US to reduce its carbon dioxide emissions in recent years.

India thus has no choice but to build new coal plants in the medium term. As Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi pointed out when the Paris agreement was concluded, India still needs to "grow rapidly to meet the aspiration of 1.25 billion people, 300 million of whom are without access to energy."

India is now the world's third-largest greenhouse-gas emitter – behind China and the US – but that is because it has made impressive gains in terms of economic growth. At the same time, India has long advocated for the principle of "common but differentiated responsibility," which holds that the industrialised countries that have contributed the most to global warming have a larger obligation to address it.

India has expressed a willingness to reduce emissions, but on the condition that developed countries do their share, to set an example. In the past, there have

been doubts as to whether India would go along with the collective global effort embodied in the Paris agreement. But in response to Trump's decision, the Indian government has reaffirmed its commitment to fulfilling its obligations under the deal. At a recent news conference with French President Emmanuel Macron, Modi vowed to "continue working" to reduce emissions, "above and beyond the Paris accord."

To that end, India has announced ambitious plans to shift away from its traditional, high-polluting energy sources. It hopes to generate 40 percent of its energy from renewable sources by 2030, and it expects 100 gigawatts of that to come from solar energy by as early as 2022. In fact, this year India will likely

cultural, and spiritual attachment to the environment. "Our commitment to the environment is 5,000 years old," Swaraj said in response to Trump. "River worship, mountain worship, tree worship," she said, invoking Hinduism's deep connections to the natural world, "is India's cultural heritage."

Notwithstanding Trump's dubious claim that the Paris agreement saddles the US with "draconian financial and economic burdens," his decision is particularly strange, given that the agreement is voluntary and non-binding. Under the agreed deal, all participating countries are free to determine their own emissions-reduction targets and the policies for achieving them, and they may make revisions as they see fit.

Trump did not like the INDCs set by the Obama administration, he could have revised them at any time. He still would have faced global opprobrium, especially from countries that joined the accord because the US was willing to share the burden. But he probably could have avoided unnecessarily antagonising a country that fancies itself a US strategic partner.

The risk now is that Trump's demonisation of India could derail a bipartisan effort, ongoing since 2000, to strengthen bilateral ties. In the US, Democratic and Republican administrations alike have pursued a strategic partnership with India, based on existing trade ties, investment, and the large commercial and familial networks linking the two countries. Trump's gratuitous remarks have now undermined these efforts.

In India, there is speculation that Modi may postpone his planned visit to the US later this month. That would be unwise. India's diplomatic challenge now is to weather the occasional turbulence generated by a mercurial US president who is playing to his domestic base. Otherwise, it could lose out on the international and geopolitical advantages of its relationship with the US.

Even if India and the US differ on the Paris climate agreement, they can still coordinate in other important areas. For example, during his recent visit to Saudi Arabia, Trump identified India as a victim of terrorism – a problem that the US shares. Meanwhile, bilateral trade between the two countries stands at over USD 100 billion annually; and the Indian diaspora has gained unprecedented influence in Washington. The US House of Representatives now has five members of Indian descent, and the Senate has one.

These are pillars upon which a stronger US-India relationship can be built. We need only disregard the occasional "covfefe" from the White House.

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Environmental activists and supporters display placards during a demonstration in New York, to protest US President Donald Trump's decision to pull out of the 195-nation Paris climate accord deal.

PHOTO: AFP

overtake Japan as the world's third-largest solar-power producer, after China and the US.

Indians like to point out that while China is home to 17.5 percent of the world's population, and India is home to 17 percent, China generates more than 23 percent of global emissions, while India accounts for less than 10 percent. In terms of emissions per capita among the world's polluters, India ranks 128th – between Anguilla and Moldova.

Indian leaders such as Modi and Swaraj often tout India's religious,

Moreover, there is no penalty if a country fails to meet its "nationally determined" target. Having publicly committed to the deal, each country is honour-bound to pursue its particular obligations in good faith, or it will be held accountable in the court of public opinion.

Trump misses the point entirely when he says that India, but not the US, is "allowed" to continue its coal-power production. All 195 signatories have offered their own Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDCs). If

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Recapitalising government banks with taxpayers' money

The government has put aside Tk 20 billion from the budget for the state-owned banks and a private commercial bank. But this earmarked amount comprises the common taxpayers' money. How reasonable is it to inject capital this way into banks that are suffering from capital shortfall, with our money? This capital shortfall in financial institutions is a result of management inefficiency and lack of good governance. For the past several consecutive years, the government has been injecting taxpayers' money to replenish this capital shortfall. It plans to do so again this year. For how much longer will the government continue to provide capital for financial institutions that continue to engage in wrongdoing and inefficiency? Instead of repeating the same mistake ceaselessly, the authorities should help identify the real issue. If it is management failure that is occurring repeatedly, then the banks should be reorganised into a better structure.

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