

## Nine children die of measles

### Why were they not immunised?

LAST week when we learnt about the death of nine children in a remote area of Sitakunda in just four days, we were alarmed. But now that we know the reason behind the deaths—that these children died of measles—we are outraged. Outraged, because it is now clear that the deaths could have easily been prevented if these children had been vaccinated under the usual immunisation coverage. Why did it take so long for the authorities to even identify the disease? Why were these children not vaccinated?

What is even more shocking is that, none of the members of 85 families who live at Tripura Para of Sonachari union of Sitakunda have ever been immunised against measles. It is surprising that there was no mention of the area in the ward-based "micro plan" according to which immunisation programmes are conducted by the government. Can there be any excuse for such negligence?

We hope that the 88 children, now receiving treatment at different hospitals, recover soon and no more children from the community are newly affected by the disease, which now remains a challenge for the authorities.

As we know, Bangladesh has an impressive track record when it comes to immunisation programmes, as for the most part they have been very successful. But the Sitakunda case raises questions. Have the authorities been doing what they are supposed to do? It's crucial that the government identifies other such marginalised communities and immediately brings them under the coverage of its immunisation programmes. And the people responsible for such negligence must be identified and punished according to the country's law.

## River in Habiganj faces threat

### Encroachment and pollution killing it

THE Khowai River at Rampur in Habiganj Sadar has been under serious threat from the dual attack of encroachment and pollution. It is not simply a lack of awareness that is causing the mindless dumping of waste near Khowai Bridge. Environmentalists blame the district authorities for not taking proper steps to handle garbage and waste management. The issue of encroachment of the river is the same we see all over the country. In the absence of an enforcement of existing environmental laws, a coterie of powerful interest groups has steadily been filling up portions of the river banks and the water body has been narrowing down to dangerous levels.

Municipality authorities need to move fast to handle waste which includes human waste that is making its way into the river. This in turn is causing a major pollution problem which will end up affecting marine life and eventually, the drinking water supply. We do not want to see rivers like the Khowai end up like so many other rivers because authorities are either too inefficient or not powerful enough to enforce guidelines that are there to check pollution and stop encroachment.

People often fail to see the bigger picture about how rivers give population centres life. A dying river always ends up affecting communities living around it. Fish dying, lack of irrigation, the spread of diseases and a lack of safe drinking water are some of the harmful effects. All we can hope is that authorities will take steps to stop the degradation of rivers like Khowai before it is too late.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Horrible state of the international airport

Despite repeated complaints on the issue, the terminals of the Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport are littered with buckets that are supposed to collect the water leaking profusely from the ceiling. These water leaks have made the floor of Terminal 2 muddy. The walkway from the exit to the parking area is dangerously slippery because there is no roof or shade to protect passersby when it rains. In fact, the whole parking area is muddy and difficult to wade through while carrying luggage.

We are tired of repeatedly complaining about the poor conditions of the international airport. It appears that the authorities simply cannot be bothered to arrange for maintenance of a place that is the first thing that foreigners see when they land in our country.

Sirajul Islam  
Dhaka

### The fight against Chikungunya

While Chikungunya continues to wreak havoc in Bangladesh, it is unfortunate that it has no vaccine and that physicians seem to have limited knowledge of this infection so far. Sufficient awareness and clinical knowledge are necessary to diagnose the Chikungunya infection properly. But unless citizens take the initiative to keep their surroundings cleaner, the municipal authorities are only going to fight a losing battle through all their safety measures. One should use mosquito nets and close windows in the evening to prevent mosquitoes from entering the house. Most importantly, they must keep their surroundings clear of stagnant water or pools where mosquitoes can breed.

Vinod C Dixit  
Ahmedabad, India

# Truth hurts, doesn't it?



KNOT SO TRUE



RUBANA HUQ

THESE days, one has to keep all the "right" answers ready for questions one has no answers to. After all, this is not the United States of America, where the head of the state follows

the "Bring your daughter to work day" rules and shows up with his little girl at G20 summit and divorces the Paris Accord. After all, we are not the citizens of the leading democracy in the world, which has elected a man who is an unending inspiration for late night comedy shows. After all, we don't have leaders who have their children guarding their parent and turning an administration into a badly-run family business. In all honesty, I wonder what would happen to our leaders if they even slightly came close to what Trump feels, tweets, does or defends. Would we ever forgive them? I quite don't think so.

In the political history of faux pas, apart from the routine Trumpian ones, the closest that the United States has ever come to was with Sarah Palin in what may be the most damaging interview any candidate on a presidential ticket had ever given, in which Palin made one idiotic statement after another while responding to CBS's Katie Couric. In an instant, all over the globe, Palin was mocked for her failure to remember any Supreme Court decisions other than Roe v. Wade along with her inability to name a single newspaper or magazine she had read other than "all of 'em, any of 'em," and finally for claiming her foreign policy experience having stemmed from Alaska's proximity to Russia. In times like this, do people resent these leaders? Yes, they do. Remember the time when an Iraqi journalist hurled his size-9 Hush Puppies shoes at President Bush during a news conference in Baghdad, which prompted amusing internet mock-ups of Bush ducking pies and snowballs?

Truth is, at a time when many try and use laws to suit their own conveniences, many of us end up suing or being sued

for different issues. So, one has to watch words carefully before spitting them out. Even utterances in social media don't go unnoticed. But in case of our finance minister, most of us will have the heart not to critique him when he says "rubbish" and speaks the truth the next minute. For instance, after having read out the long list of 100 topmost

Heaven and Earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

There are many actors at play. Some take advantage of the political system, some reap benefits of "chamcha-hood" and some simply stay naïve and sound infantile. In the meantime, we threaten the very fabric of democracy and embarrass our topmost leaders.

think that flung rotten eggs would make Imran or Ullash change their minds about how they perceive the administration? Right when the country is faring well, and at a time when the government can legitimately claim success for all that it has achieved, callous sycophancy can endanger the election landscape. Don't we know that already?

And what exactly did the Mayor of Dhaka North achieve by hurriedly stating that he wasn't responsible for the indoor mosquitoes? The statement could have been an instant response to a tricky question from a reporter, but as an elected representative, isn't he supposed to hold his ground and explain himself better? In his defence, one could also say that he is undertaking a Herculean task of transforming a city that is a prey to the greed of the land grabbers who pay no heed to the law. In his defence, one could always say that his response was an instant reaction to people expecting him to shoulder most of the problems that were not created from his end. But I will refrain from using his defence and rather urge him to act as a responsible elected representative who will not only give us a patient hearing (when we face troubled times) but also ensure that we clearly know his intentions and his roadmap to solve problems that this city has had for a long time. Whoever said, politics was easy? None.

On that note of caution, I too will hold my tongue and not speak my mind about why we have had our export figures falling and why I think, targets should be set according to the realities on the ground. After all, if readymade garment export has grown only by .20 percent in a year and if we have fallen 5 percent short of our total projected growth target, there must be a serious warning somewhere. If automation is fast taking over the industry, where and how will we accommodate our workers who will lose their jobs? Are we ready for an inward looking economy? Ouch. Truth hurts. More later.

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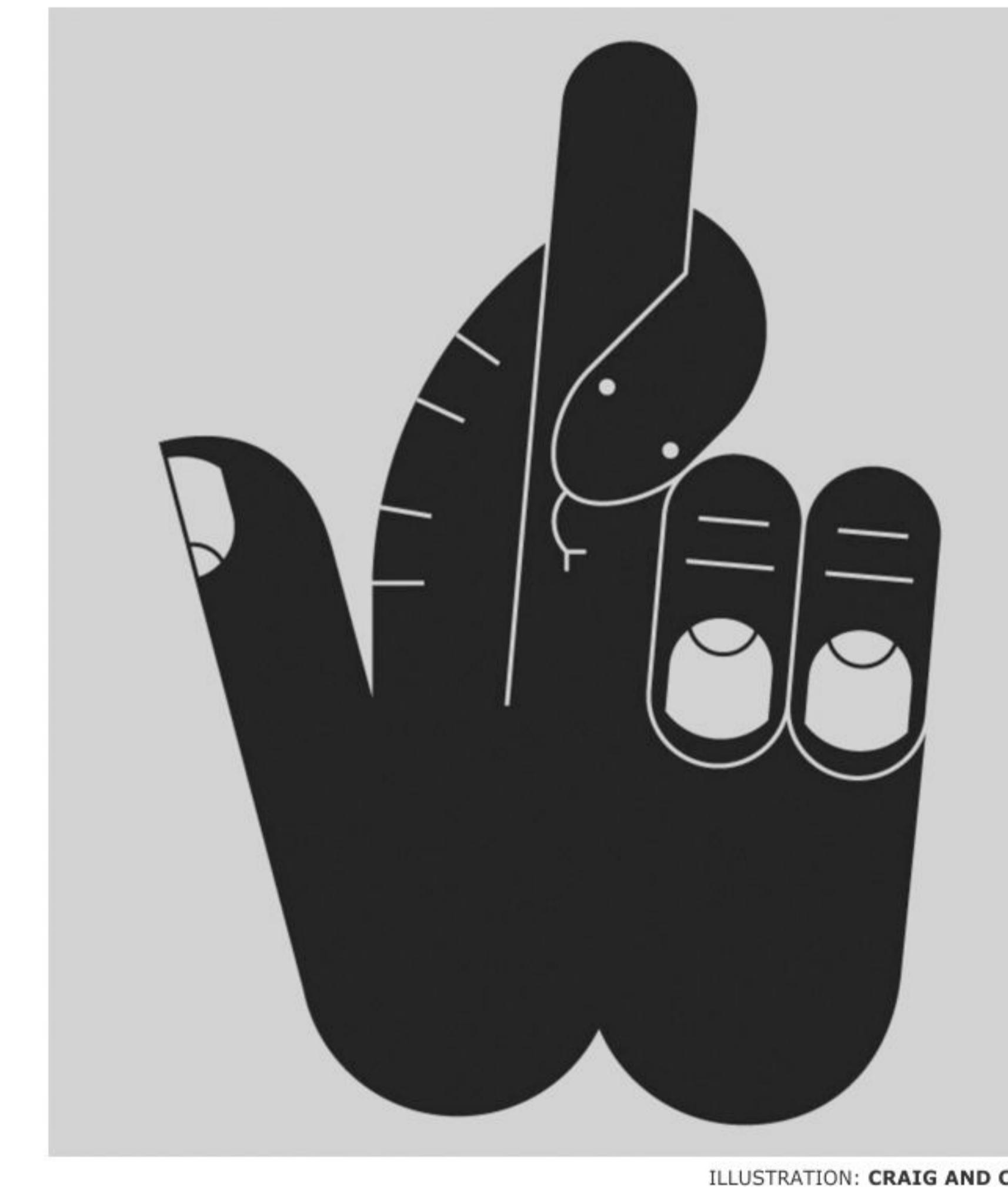


ILLUSTRATION: CRAIG AND CARL

defaulters in front of the members of parliament, he, after just a day, blurted out the truth of the "real" defaulters having escaped the list. While many of us laugh every time he says "rubbish," deep down inside many know that most of the time his utterances correspond to the truth that cannot be shared out in the open, as "There are more things in

After all, what did anyone gain by inventing a new label for the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) as "Rahmat of Allah" (mercy of Allah) for Bangladesh? Seriously? I am quite certain that neither RAB nor the MP's party appreciated the stretch of his exaltation. Or what did even hurling eggs at Imran and Ullash of Gonojagor Mancha achieve? Did we

## Missing daughters

*At the root of sex-selective abortion lies the culture of preferring sons*

ANJITA PARAJULI

AT 26 years of age, Bimala, from a remote village in Western Nepal, gives birth to her sixth child and falls unconscious when she learns that the child is, yet again, a girl. Her husband cries in a corner silently. A mother of four daughters in the town of Surkhet undergoes eight cycles of sex-selective abortions. Another woman, a mother of six daughters, carries out an illegal test to identify the sex of her seventh pregnancy and aborts it upon learning that it is a girl. In the latter two cases, the women and their families are 'educated' people with good socio-economic status.

The cases above were recently published in news reports by the national media, and they are far more than personal tragedies. Such tragedy is a way of life for many women in Nepal and some countries in Asia, where the preference of a 'son' is so powerful that the fate of women depends largely on their ability to produce one. Daughters, it seems, are merely unintended by-products born in the process of producing a son. This may sound an unpleasant and archaic observation when viewed by a privileged few, but it is a blatant reality for many. We need not go much further than observe families with three or more children, and see why daughters were born before the coming of the ultimate son in today's context where the state is promoting a two-child strategy.

According to the United Nations Population Fund, 117 million girls are missing from the global demographic, mostly in Asia and Eastern Europe. This data is derived by comparing the current sex ratio of boys and girls at birth to the biologically natural ratio at birth, which is calculated to be about 103 to 106 boys for every 100 girls. In the Asian Center for Human Rights 2016 report, Liechtenstein, an Eastern European country ranked first with a ratio of 126 boys per 100 girls, China ranked second, India ranked fourth and Nepal ranked 11th for imbalance in the sex ratio at birth. In 2010, the sex ratio at birth for Nepal was 104 boys for 100 girls. This increased to 107 boys for 100 girls in 2015.

Abortion of the female foetus is reported to have flourished after advances in ultrasound and other foetal sex identification technologies, but it would be wrong to say that technology is the cause of this horrifying practice. The root of sex-selective abortion lies in the culture of preferring sons. Largely patriarchal countries like our immediate neighbours have a long history of killing newborn girls since pre-technological ages. Such accounts are too traumatising to describe. Sex selection also occurred in the process of conceiving children in the form of the Chinese calendar and other traditional methods to give birth to a son. This practice continues in some places.

While preference for sons prevails across almost all groups and economic classes, the actual abortion of the female foetus has been shown to occur more among the literate and the socioeconomically well-off population, according to one research report from India. As public health expert Dr Aruna Uprety writes in Kantipur, in Nepal the practice is prevalent in the rural far west as well as the country's major urban centres.

In the context of Nepal and India, the culture for preferring sons finds its roots in the Vedic philosophy which grants males the exclusive power to carry forward the family lineage. It is likely that it is this presumed power of the male which eventually gave rise to sociocultural practices that assigned the

religions demonised menstruation as impure rather than glorifying the phenomenon as the primal source of creation? Or was it merely the limitation of knowledge on the science of reproduction? Would such knowledge have changed the narrative of the patriarchal order?

Shaktism—an important sect of Hinduism believed to have originated around 300AD—is taken as the philosophical foundation which celebrates divine femininity as the origin of all existence. The Kamakhya temple in India's Assam worships the bleeding of the mother Earth as the source of fertility. But these philosophies seem to have been pushed aside in the making of the social order that's centred on the male.



son the roles and responsibilities as the family's protector, the inheritor of property and the rightful one to perform funeral rites of the parents—a tradition believed to help the dead ascend to heaven. And all these factors gradually strengthened the preference for the male child.

Not only Hinduism, but other major religions of the world also perceive the procreation of the human race primarily as a result of the masculine force while reducing women to mere apparatuses that carry their seed.

Was the reason behind the exclusive recognition of the male gene in creation and procreation solely the result of patriarchs trying to establish narratives ensuring their supremacy? Was that the reason many

but just like old theories are replaced by new ones with greater empirical evidence, today's science acknowledges that daughters are not merely an apparatus for carrying the men's genes, but are equally the carriers of the lineage. It has become crucial to make a concerted effort at all levels to make people aware that daughters are as much a part of themselves as their sons, and that with growing access to education and economic resources, they are capable of carrying out their duties towards their parents and families.

Anjita Parajuli is associated with the Nepal Youth Foundation.

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