

The need to be seen



SHAQUIE HOSSAIN

LITTLE FUNDAMENTALS
The fundamental need of a human being, I think, is to feel seen. To connect. And that connection happens through recognising ourselves in others.

I grew up reading fairy tales. Cinderella and Snow White, beautiful white women, who were oppressed by other women in their lives, and anxiously waiting to be rescued by Prince Charming. But I also grew up around working mothers, business owners, strong homemakers and astounding personalities. Even then, I find it difficult to identify people in a crowd. I can find a reflection of myself in...

When I started my work with adolescent girls about five years ago, I realised this feeling of being unseen was something they also struggled with. The madrasa where we have been working for the longest is an all-girls institution. A few months ago, we had a discussion with the girls to see how they are formulating their identities as Bangladeshi Muslim women growing up in the madrasa education system here in Dhaka. Part of the process was asking them about their aspirations to see how they conceptualised themselves now and what they would like to be in the future. They said they wanted to be doctors, scientists, engineers, psychologists, scientists, and even musicians.

I remember the first time I visited an all-girls madrasa, walking into the

room which they used both as a classroom and as their bedroom. About 20 to 30 girls were scurrying around, restless, afraid, or maybe just shy of outsiders. They huddled together, shrugging their knees, quite literally clutching their selves. When we asked them what they wanted, their unprofessional aspirations were, they anonymously said doctors.

Their aspirations have evolved over time. Not as a result of accepting the impossibility, but more as a result of realising other possibilities. This desire to become something greater than what they were told they could be was also something they were just starting to explore.

They still report feeling isolated, hopeless and marginalised. The career options they want to pursue aren't necessarily supported by their guardians or their stream of education. Their options are apparently limited. But more importantly, what they are limited by is their ability to dream, to imagine an infinite number of possibilities.

An infusing the recent discussion, we brought them together in a workshop where we invited a musician, a scientist and a doctor, contemporary Bangladeshi Muslim women who had accomplished great feats in their respective fields. These women had also overcome the barriers in their minds that had been posed by their desire to be perfect, good, Muslim. Bangladeshi Muslim women who had to abide by rules, and meander their way around the ever-emerging question of "What would people say?" to realise their dreams. The hope was that the girls would see themselves in these women and find the courage to embark on



COURTESY: LEANING BOUNDARIES

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the pursuit of their home. These women were difficult to find. But what is even more difficult to find is historical figures that had done a phenomenal job of mitigating their whole identities as Muslim Bengali empowered women. We initially wanted to focus on historical figures but we had to discard the idea when we realised that we could think of very few women who hadn't been turned into a controversy as a result of pushing for women's empowerment as Muslim Bengalis.

The Muslim-Bengali dichotomy is a subject matter that is best tackled in a separate article. It is the feminist movement in Bangladesh that also

something that has been fairly complicated. Feminism in Bangladesh emerged in opposition to government-sponsored Islamisation of the 1980s citing religion as instrumental in the oppression of women in Bangladesh.

In her book, *Reshaping the Holy: Democracy, Development and Muslim Women in Bangladesh*, Elera Shehabuddin noted that Bangladeshi women's groups are predominantly composed of urban middle and upper-class women, mirroring strong class divisions in Bangladesh society more broadly. There has been, therefore, a deep class divide limiting the participation of poor and rural

women, many of whom conceptualise and envision responses to oppression in different ways than those who give discourse on women's rights nationally. As a result, poor women and women of faith have felt isolated within the feminism discourse in Bangladesh.

A few weeks after, when I heard of *Her Story*, I was thrilled. The book of women's history in Bangladesh to create contextual educational and motivational material. Homegrown narrators. Even though the book is currently in English (I am told that a Bangla version of the book will be published at the Boi MeLa), the way the stories have been captured over a timeline that starts in ancient Bengal, is an astute way of shaping women's history in the region that predates and moves beyond simply capturing women's role in the liberation war.

The illustrations were impressive, the stories inspiring, the language easy enough for seven-year-olds to understand, I researched so hard. However, I wondered as I read if the narrator, Amiya (the name, interestingly, could belong to any faith group), was someone the girls I would relate to. Or would they relate to Khana, or Ila Mitra, or even Suika Kamal? Or contemporary ones like Mabiha Akhter or Nayma Haque and Tamanna-e-Lusfi?

I don't know, honestly, because I have yet to take the book to them. I would have to see if they relate to anybody other than Begum Rokeya, often spoken of as an Islamic feminist, as paradoxical as that term sounds. But I wish we had done a better job of documenting women

who also played a role in shaping religion such as Buddhist Bhikkhunis (female monks) in the Pala dynasty, experts in religious texts and customs and those who conducted religious ceremonies. Because for us, their religious identity is not something they can, or want to, grow out of. It is a key element of who they are.

But if there is such a lack today, it is not Her Stories that is at fault. It is History.

History, unfortunately, is His Story. It does a terrible job at documenting women who have changed its course by virtue of being who they are and doing what they do. Particularly women who have both the Muslim element and the Bengali element strongly present in them, who I can cite as examples for my girls.

Girls, see, who have such trouble feeling seen; girls, who have such difficulty finding themselves reflected in someone else.

I hope someday these girls will acquire a sense of belonging and challenge dominant narratives of feminism, nationalism and religion in the Bangladeshi context. I look forward to a day when they can find themselves in others. Or even better, the day they will write their own stories so they don't need to find themselves in others.

But until then, I will continue to teach them to dream, push boundaries and cite examples of trailblazers who came before them to pave their paths.

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RTI vs RTP: Is there a contradiction?

SHAMSHI Bari and RUIH NAZ

THE disclosure of information on people's race or ethnicity during World War II caused one of the worst tragedies to mankind. It led to secret denunciations and seizures, sending millions of friends and neighbours to labour and concentration camps and eventually to gas chambers. It changed the course of history.

A fundamental change in gate rise to was elevating the status of the individual vis-a-vis the State. It led to the introduction of Europe's stringent privacy regulations. Governments in Europe took steps to protect personal information of individuals from such abuses by the future. The concept of protection of personal data or privacy was born. It spread all over Europe quickly, and to the rest of the world gradually.

The technological inventors of our time, including the Internet and social media, have enabled unprecedented connectivity in the world. While humankind is ever closer, privacy and personal space for individuals is constantly shrinking.

The definition of privacy and the meaning of sensitive personal information vary among countries and cultures. Some curbs focus more on constitutional rights rather than individual rights; others, such as countries in Europe, are sensitive to privacy rights because of their experiences in the World War II era.

However, the legal right to privacy is commonly recognised in every national constitution, as in ours, and in most international human rights treaties including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Common examples of "personal data" are: address, credit card number, bank statements, criminal

record, medical record, etc. However, new technologies have driven the collection of personal information by governments and private bodies far and wide.

Databases holding information that range from tax, medical, employment, criminal, and citizenship records to identification technologies such as identity card systems, fingerprints, and DNA mapping, proliferate information. Services run by communications operators collect information such as emails, records of persons communicated with, lists of websites visited, and mobile locations. And, of course, people share information through social networking sites.

The increased flow of personal data across borders has caused growing concerns among citizens about data abuse by governments and private bodies. There are increasing calls from citizens' groups all over the world for their protection. What is our perspective on the matter in Bangladesh?

Some 80 countries all over the world have adopted comprehensive laws that give individuals some control over the collection and use of these data by public and private bodies. There are among 115 countries that have also legislated on citizen's right to information held by governments.

On the face of it, the right to information (RTI) and the right to privacy (RTP) may appear irreconcilable. RTI laws empower citizens to access information held by governments and private bodies, RTP laws, on the other hand, grant individuals a fundamental right to control the collection of, access to, and use of personal information that is held by governments and private bodies. Thus, one promotes access and the other seeks to control it.

However, instead of looking at

them as conflictual laws, RTI and RTP are better considered as "two sides of the same coin." They complement each other in the sense that one promotes individuals' right to protect themselves and the other promotes government and essential for good governance. This explains why there is considerable debate around the globe on the subject. Is there a need to adopt both the laws or a single law can cover both?

In Bangladesh, unlike in most industrialised countries, there is no single specific privacy or personal data protection law. The

protection of personal information that may offend the privacy of the personal life of an individual—and any such information that may endanger his life or physical safety of any person.

Additionally, the Information and Communication Technology Act 2006 provides for safeguards of information and related matters stored in the memory of the computer. Although the Act does not explicitly mention "personal data", there is scope for implied use. An area of relevance is Section 54, which foresees liability in case of data, computer database theft

data. Damages may, for example, be sought for the illegitimate invasion of privacy. The Contract Act 1872 may similarly provide protection in the form of compensation or damages if a party breaches a contract. For example, personal data protection can be inserted into protection contracts and company policies.

But these are not enough in the current data privacy context. As a fast-developing country, we certainly need a broader set of personal data protection regime to cover all the contingencies. Guidance in this regard is available from the most influential of all Data Protection

person... one who can be identified, directly or indirectly, by reference to an identification number or to one or more factors specific to his physical, physiological, mental, spiritual, cultural or social identity."

The UK, too, has a Data Protection Act in addition to the Freedom of Information Act (FOI). While FOI applies only to public sector organisations, it covers a wide range of information. The Data Protection Act, which applies equally in both the public and private sectors, allows individuals the right to find out what information about them was being held, and to insist on having that information kept accurate and up-to-date. The UK Information Commissioner's office deals with dispute resolution for both the instruments.

In the US, though there is no single data protection law comparable to the EU's Data Protection Directive, there are many privacy legislations adopted on an ad hoc basis, as and when circumstances require (e.g. the Video Privacy Protection Act of 1988, the Fair Credit Reporting Act, and the 1996 Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act).

The above may provide us with guidelines on how to go about the subject in Bangladesh. It is up to us now to decide what is best for us. Do we need separate privacy legislation, as in EU countries, or should we be satisfied with ad hoc mechanisms, as in the US? The Government may have some ideas on the subject but since the subject of privacy concerns citizens directly, we must take the lead. Is the civil society in Bangladesh ready for this challenge?

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Constitution and other laws of the land, however, provide some protection. For example, Article 43 of the Constitution recognises the right of every citizen to be secured in his/her home against entry, search and seizure (subject to any reasonable restrictions imposed by law in the interests of the security of the State, public order, public morality or public health). It also recognises the privacy of a citizen's correspondence and communications. The RTI Act also provides

and a wide range of computer trespass, unauthorised digital copying, downloading and extraction of data, computer database or information. To the extent they may relate to personal information or data, they are of relevance. Still punishment has been provided for any infringement. However, the provision does not extend to personal data stored anywhere else other than in computers.

The law of tort may also be of some use for protection of personal

instruments of the world, the European Union (EU) Data Protection Directive. It has been adopted by the 27 EU member-states (plus three European Economic Area countries) and by numerous other countries in Africa, Europe, and Latin America that trade with the EU.

The directive takes a broad approach to personal information. Personal data are defined as "any information relating to an identified or identifiable natural

QUOTABLE QUOTE



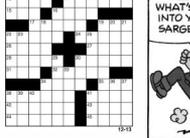
LM MONTGOMERY CANADIAN AUTHOR

It's been my experience that you can nearly always enjoy things if you make up your mind firmly that you will.

CROSSWORD BY BLOSSOM

ACROSS	32 Throng	9 "Norma -"
	34 Bloke	10 Make a demonstration
	35 "Son - qu"	16 Rotter
	5 Cube face	18 Peril
	11 Car bar	39 City opposite E
	12 Radio-emitting star	19 In confrontations
	41 MP's quarry	20 Yem'en stage
	42 Prompt	21 Theater prize
	13 Catch sight of	43 Pecked on
	14 Glutton, slangily	44 Fasily on stage
	15 Highway rescue	23 Concealed
	16 Soda choice	45 Capital on a fjord
	17 House chiller	25 lobster part
	19 Lush	29 Plot
	22 See clear of	30 Dreidel, for one
	24 Sad sack	33 Toread
	26 Field cries	34 Economic declines
	27 Bank offering	36 Young horse
	28 Other cousins	41 Flaming spot
	30 Light brown	5 Pandly
	31 Print measures	38 Position
		39 First numero
		40 Cash dispenser
		41 In the past

BEETLE BAILEY



BY MORT WALKER



YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

DUST	SCARE
OPTIC	LOSSES
FASHION	LIGHTS
FOUR	WINGS
SAVING	TORY
DENCH	ONES
GET GO	
CATO	RATES
UP	ASHES
FLIGHT	WINGS
FLOOD	LIGHTS
ELUDE	T WITHE
DOTS	NYET

BABY BLUES



BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

