

The boy who could have lived

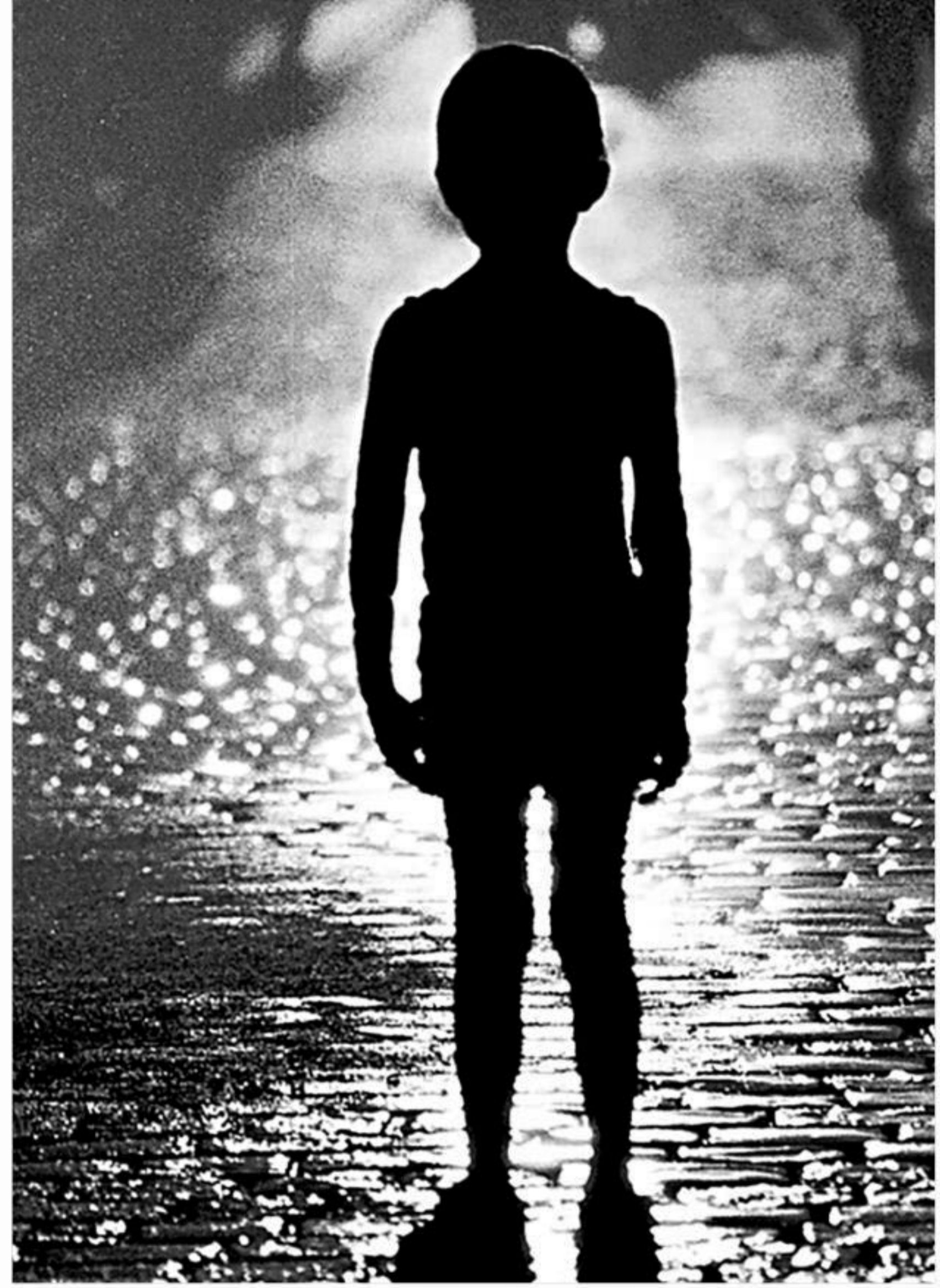


BADIUZZAMAN BAY

If you're a Harry Potter fan, you must have heard the simple past tense version of this heading. Harry, "The Boy Who Lived," survived the Dark Lord's wrath with the mysterious powers of magic. The Deathly Hallows. Elder Wand. Invisibility Cloak. Yes, his mother's love, too, but a wizardly one at that. As fascinating as that reads on paper, the world of magic and miracles is not for mere mortals. Fairy tale doesn't function at the same wavelength as reality does. In the world that we live and breathe and toil through the vagaries of our existence, we aren't protected by such powers. Life, here, hangs by a tenuous thread. And we have only each other to look out for when there is a threat or danger.

Or, do we?
 I have been haunted by this question ever since I got the news of Raj. Md Raj, a nine-year-old who lived in the capital's Dayaganj area, died after being hit by a car last week. This could have been just another hit-and-run tragedy in the teeming streets of our city where people die every day. As pedestrians and vehicles vie for the precious little space that is still available, road casualties are becoming a daily reality. But Raj's death strikes a chord on so many different levels that it's impossible to ignore it nor can it be filed away with ordinary hit-and-run cases.

For what happened to him was not a *Raj didn't die on the spot. He died in hospital. He died because he couldn't get there in time, thanks to the inaction and evasion of responsibility by the police officers as well as the lack of moral courage of the local hospitals that refused to admit him.*



casualty; it was a murder, a downright denial of his right to life, committed by the very people who were supposed to protect him. Details of the incident as reported by a Bangla daily are quite nauseating. Raj was playing with his friends by the roadside when a car that belonged to the police struck him, leaving him bloodied and battered. As people surrounded the car, an on-duty sub-inspector (SI) of police persuaded them to leave the case to him. He talked to the plainclothes officer inside the car, and after establishing their common professional identity, let him go, soon departing the scene himself with his own police car.

The boy was rushed to two local hospitals, none of which agreed to treat him because of the nature of his accident. He was eventually taken to Dhaka Medical College Hospital, where the doctors declared him dead. Had the police officers not fled the scene, tails between legs, knowing the likely consequences of their action, Raj's story

could have ended differently. Hit-and-run is a criminal offence and police officers, of all people, should know it. They should have known better than to run like that because it's common knowledge how cases like this end up for the victims. It's especially unfortunate when the victim is a child, who probably didn't even know what hit-and-run is or why anyone should think of escaping when a little action on their part could save a life. Growing up in a city where the difference between streets and playing fields is getting increasingly blurred, for the lack of open space, he was too young to understand that playing with caution could make a difference between life and death. He probably didn't even know what death is. No one that young is supposed to know that either.

What we should take away from this particular incident is that Raj didn't die on the spot. He died in hospital. He died because he couldn't get there in time,

thanks to the inaction and evasion of responsibility by the police officers as well as the lack of moral courage of the local hospitals that refused to admit him, fearing consequences. Someone once said that you don't appreciate life until you get to the other side. Like lying in a hospital bed. I don't know what Raj was thinking in his final moments in hospital. Could he appreciate life as he saw it?

Any hit-and-run incident is tragic but police doing it makes it frightening. Since no case was registered, they will probably get away with it as so many of them did on so many different occasions in the past. It's ironic that the most commonly used slogan about our police force is, "Police are people's friends." We are told to trust the police and help them. The new IGP has assured us that the 200,000-strong force would be made people-friendly. Well, guess what, trust is not a one-way lane. You don't get someone's trust unless you prove your sincerity to earn it. In Raj's case, it's not so much the police action that betrayed our trust, it's the lack of it. The lack of moral courage to do what's right. The lack of empathy for a young boy fighting for his life. The lack of accountability in the police administration.

And the elaborate cover-up that took place to sweep the whole incident under the rug, as if nothing had happened, shows this force, frankly, is not yet ready to work on their credibility issue. And the collateral damage that they've been piling up around us may make it difficult for us to ever trust them again.

Which begs the question, who will we look up to when we're in danger? Will we ever have a friendly, responsible police force? Will they not try so hard to antagonise people? Will common sense prevail? Will our streets be ever safe enough so that we can go out without having to look behind our back like it is enemy territory? Will we be able to give our children a safe and healthy childhood? Can they avoid such unfortunate ends to their life? I really don't know.

What I do know, however, is that when there is no hope, and every chance of a normal life seems lost, we will still have each other, you and me, and us the people in general. A shared belief in humanity and the powers of kindness and compassion for every living soul can work miracles in keeping us out of harm's way. That's probably a tiny drop in a very large bucket, but I keep hoping that it is our best chance at having a peaceful coexistence in this troubled world of ours.

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Bangladesh performs better on Graft Index

More to be done

It is indeed good news that Bangladesh climbed two spots (index score is out of 100 where a higher score is better) in the global Corruption Perceptions Index 2017. Of course that's nothing to write home about since we scored 28 out of 100, where the global average is 43. The index is recognised worldwide and Bangladesh's rating was based on eight globally reputable survey sources. We did better in the 2017 index because there were positive perceptions on the country's march forward on digitisation, including e-procurement.

Bangladesh's ranking would have improved markedly had we been able to tackle corruption better. The government should do more to fight high-level graft and ensure accountability of public institutions. There should be zero tolerance for land grabbers. There still exists refusal of the political elite to even acknowledge the existence of graft which must be corrected, and changes should be brought about to make the Anti-Corruption Commission more effective—giving it the tools to take on powerful interests involved in graft in the financial sector.

All this of course has had a negative impact on the country's image which is perhaps why Bangladesh scored second last among all Saarc countries with only Afghanistan trailing us, a country dogged by civil war and strife for decades.

What all this points to is that we need to do much better before Bangladesh is considered to be a country taking concrete steps to tackle the sticky issue of graft. We have to be serious about empowering the ACC to go after corruption wherever it is occurring. Again, the ACC alone cannot tackle graft; it will require sincerity and cooperation of other state bodies and that is only possible if there is commitment at the policy level.

Children would be the worst sufferers

Population glut in urban areas

FINDINGS of a study jointly conducted by Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) and two other organisations show that approximately 43 percent of the country's total population, that is around 81 million people, would be living in the urban areas by 2029. This will certainly degrade the living standards of city dwellers who are already living in poor conditions.

Needless to say, this huge population will find their place in urban slums and many of them will have to live on the streets. Most of the women would have to work as domestic help or as garment workers whose children would end up living in an unsafe environment. As the study has found, 93 percent of children in the slum areas are involved in child labour, and eight in 10 children aged between one and 14 have experienced psychological aggression or physical punishment.

As grim as the picture might seem, there is still a lot that we can do. As more and more people come to the cities in search of a better livelihood, the government must plan and design the cities in a way that would ensure better living conditions for them. That means our urbanisation process must be more resilient and child-friendly. At the same time, the government must create work opportunities for people in the rural areas and provide them with all modern facilities in order to encourage them to live in their villages.

PROJECT SYNDICATE

The sexual harassment reckoning



LUCY P. MARCUS

"DEEDS, not words!" Britain's suffragettes shouted, as they fought for—and won—the right to vote 100 years ago. Today, that call to arms seems more apt than ever. For all the advances that women have made in the last century, the tendency to pay lip service to women's rights and dignity, without doing what is necessary truly to protect them, is more obvious than ever.

In recent months, high-profile movements like #MeToo have amplified women's voices and catalysed others to come forward with harrowing stories of abuse, coercion, and harassment. They have publicly exposed those—from former Hollywood titan Harvey Weinstein and casino mogul Steve Wynn to Oxfam employees who reportedly traded sex for aid—in positions of power who have abused, mistreated, and otherwise victimised women and girls.

Some of these figures, such as former USA Gymnastics doctor Larry Nassar, have been brought to justice. Even some who failed to protect young women—including the boards of directors of USA Gymnastics and Wynn Resorts, and the president of Michigan State University, where Nassar was on the faculty—are facing the music. All of this has put increasing pressure on men in power at least to acknowledge the added obstacles women face, from workplace harassment to a persistent pay gap.

But acknowledgement is not enough; nor is punishing one powerful abuser at a time. We must build a culture and a system in which women—not to mention other marginalised groups—do not face such barriers at all. And, despite all of the words of support, concrete action on this front has been severely lacking.

What would such action look like? For one thing, it would address the blurring of the distinction between private and public—a trend that some leaders have been slow to be recognise.

In some ways, this blurring benefits the marginalised. Behaving professionally at work but monstrously

at home is no longer tolerated the way it once was. This was clear in the case of former White House staff secretary Rob Porter, who had been accused of domestic violence by two of his ex-wives; his second wife filed an emergency protective order against him in 2010.

The White House was well aware of the allegations—backed by photographic evidence—against Porter. His security clearance was delayed, owing to concerns that he was "violent." Yet he continued to rise in the ranks of the Trump administration, which has repeatedly attempted to obfuscate the issue. It was

overwhelmingly Republican Alabama elected Moore's Democratic challenger.

But there is another side to blurring the line between public and private, owing to the interconnectedness of people's work and social lives. Office holiday parties or off-site work, for example, can create confusion about behavioural protocols, not to mention opportunities for bad behaviour.

In some cases, social events have been designed to enable such behaviour. An undercover investigation by the *Financial Times* recently revealed that the "Presidents Club" was hosting annual

risk of serious reputational damage.

When it comes to business, CEOs and board members have an obligation of stewardship to safeguard their firm's reputation. That means implementing credible measures to ensure that colleagues or employees are not abusing their power inside or outside the office, and holding accountable those who bring the company into disrepute.

Abuses of power and disregard for duty of care are becoming increasingly difficult to cover up, and thus increasingly likely to have negative consequences. Those powerful figures



Former Michigan State University and USA Gymnastics doctor Larry Nassar was sentenced to up to 175 years in prison for decades of sexual abuse. PHOTO: AFP

only when the information about Porter's past was revealed publicly that he was forced to resign.

The White House's handling of the Porter situation reflects the Trump administration's willingness to side with anyone who serves its political agenda—such as Roy Moore, the failed Senate candidate from Alabama, even after credible allegations that Moore had made sexual advances against several women when they were minors. But the public's tolerance for such behaviour is clearly running thin. Voters in

men-only charity fundraisers, secretive gatherings where British business, government, and entertainment figures would raise money for worthy causes. But these were also social events, where attendees drank, caroused, and sexually harassed skimpily-clad hostesses, who had been required to sign non-disclosure agreements.

Taking effective action to stop such activities is in everyone's interest, not just that of potential victims. The organisations the harassers represent would also benefit from reducing the

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who hope that they can just offer words of support, buying time until things eventually return to business as usual, are in for a rude awakening. The dam has been broken, and the reckoning has begun. Like Britain's suffragettes, those calling for action will be satisfied only when their reasonable demands are met with concrete action.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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The drug problem in public service

There have been a lot of allegations lately about drug usage among public servants. *Prothom Alo* reports that the government plans to give candidates drug test before recruiting them. The home minister has already issued a notice to investigate drug allegations against existing public servants. I commend the government for taking this issue seriously.

Those who, despite being public servants, regularly break the rules should be discharged immediately. The government should adopt a zero-tolerance policy in this respect. Otherwise, the consequences will be far-reaching for our society.
 Md Wadud Rahman, *Rajshahi University*

MCQ is a universal option

MCQ is a universally recognised method of assessment practised worldwide. Only someone who studies seriously and truly understands all the topics of a particular subject can answer MCQs correctly. That's why a student has to study the whole book seriously.

Therefore, the idea of abolition of the MCQ system in response to the question leak phenomenon is not rational. We can think about incorporating less MCQs instead of abandoning the method outright. The authorities should refrain from taking hasty decisions.
 Shafkat Rahman, *By email*