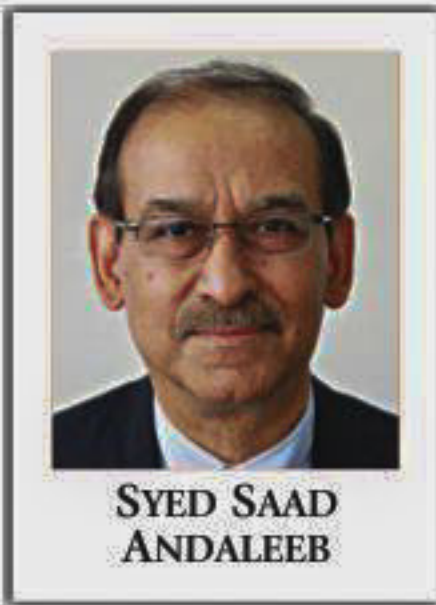


Leading by inspiration



"Great leaders lead by example and inspiration"

THE nation is now in the grips of another approaching election. A flickering hope among many is for an inspirational leadership that energises, enthuses, and leads competently, and with good intentions to touch the lives of the people of Bangladesh. According to Lenos, "Inspiration has blazed a trail of extraordinary accomplishments across the pages of history. It is the breath of the divine that fills the sails of human creativity and passion, driving forward into a hopeful future."

It is indeed a time of mixed emotions where the euphoria and enthusiasm of the voters—rooting for their chosen candidate or party—is coupled with apathy and anxiety caused by the uncertainty of looming violence and a disruptive tussle for power and control. The soul of the nation is divided today, with groups of varying ideologies vying for voter approval. Whatever the outcome, however, it is a time of expectations, a time for hope—that the future will be better than the past.

Inspiration in Bangladesh has often been clouded by how the nation has been portrayed at various times. It has been listed as one of the most corrupt nations for successive years. Things have improved, but not to the extent expected. The state of political rivalry, as well as misrule and unbridled opportunism in various sectors,

has not been exactly inspiring, threatening to rend the basic fabric of trust concerning various entities: the politicians, the bureaucracy, law enforcers, media, bankers, educators, businessmen, health personnel, courts of law, and various service providers—public and private.

Fortunately, inspiration has not been completely lost on the nation: The language movement remains a beacon from which the world has gained the International Mother Language Day—a day to cherish and honour. The surge of inspiration to vanquish an oppressive regime and its collaborators during the liberation movement was so intense that people were willing to pay the ultimate price. Even a victory in a hard-fought game of international cricket has inspired the young and the old to soaring heights, making them think, feel and act like winners.

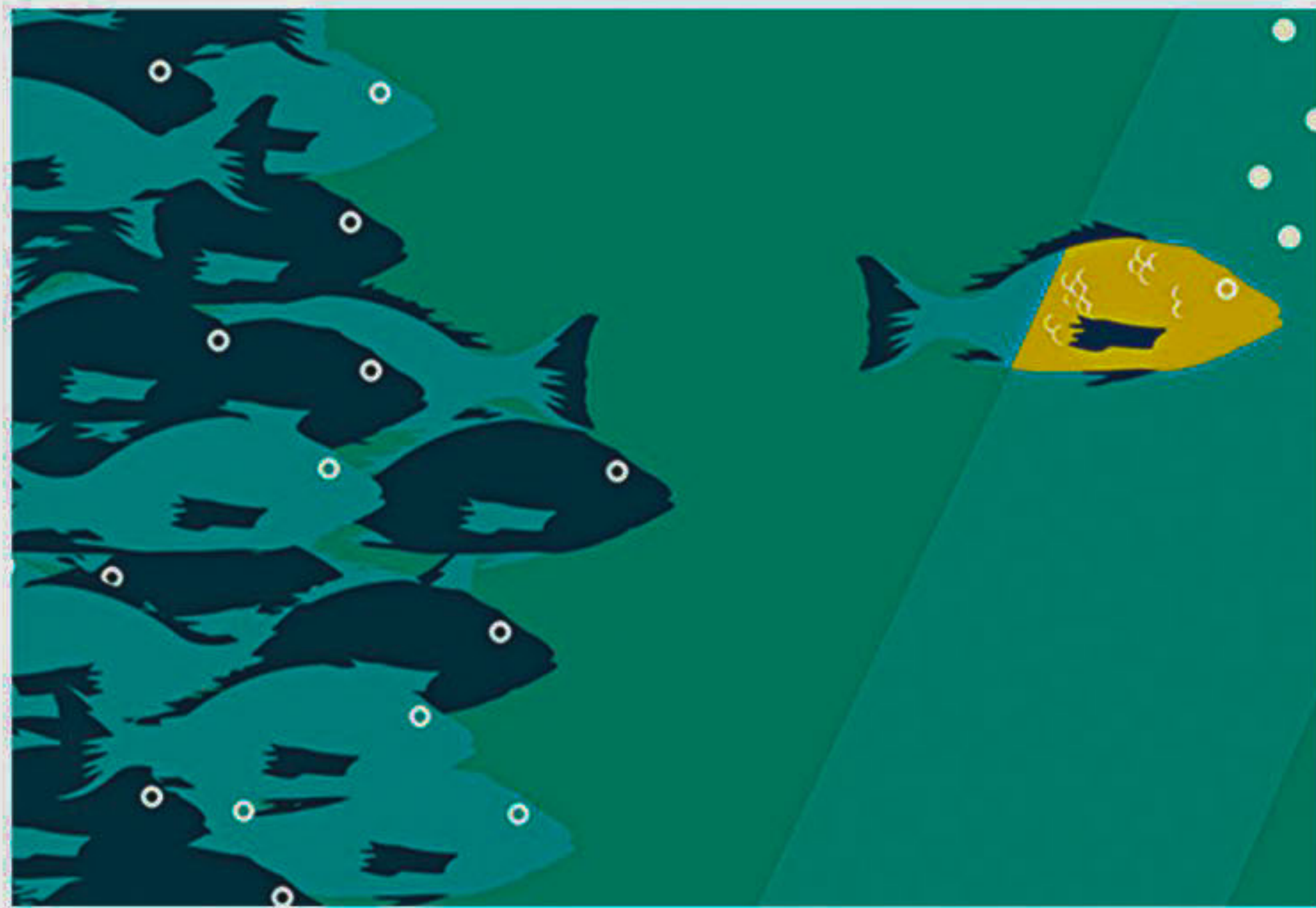
Inspiration need not always be grandiose. Day-to-day incidents can also be uplifting: a policeman steps in bravely to deflect harm to a citizen; a judge takes a courageous stand against a corrupt and powerful politician; or a disabled child from a remote village beats the odds to pass a crucial exam. Good, honest, and decent citizenship can be inspiring.

Acts of inspiration can be contagious, like a candle lighting other candles to create an ever-brighter glow. And as more people are drawn into the inspirational ambit, things become palpably better. As someone once said, "There is real magic in [inspiration]. It spells the difference between mediocrity and accomplishment."

Bangladesh, today, has a large reservoir of talent waiting to be inspired and set free. Signs of vitality and vibrancy are just about

everywhere. People want to do new things, make changes, and vie for the best. There is a potency among them that is unmistakable and must be effectively and skilfully used. The leadership must recognise the vital signs, feel the energy, provide the space, mobilise resources, and provide encouragement to this bubbling energy to

wealth, a crying need of the day that must be pursued doggedly for the nation to progress with equity and justice. Making statements about the ideals, however, will not be enough; they must be demonstrated in every act of the imminent leadership—an inspired, just, and enlightened leadership—that values, nurtures, and



SOURCE: WWW.ONEDIO.COM

generate a contagious enthusiasm for a glorious future.

Four ideals played an inspiring role when Bangladesh was instilled with the spirits of democracy, nationalism, secularism, and socialism. Although the last was never really practiced, it is about redistribution of

emancipates its people and guides its collective energies.

Inspiring leaders blaze trails where others want to follow. When the nation feels inspired and enthused, standing confidently on the bedrock of justice, rule of law, human rights, democratic values,

inclusiveness and good governance, scaling new heights can be so much easier.

This is a time of renewed expectations based on promises made; the leadership must not fail to deliver on their promises, otherwise disillusionment will quickly set in with grave consequences. Importantly, the leaders must become better role models that others would want to emulate. In that role, they must inspire the nation to become more self-reliant, more confident, and more proud but humble. It would provide the impetus for Bangladesh to soar toward the promised dream: Shonar Bangla.

Even more uplifting would be to witness inspirational leadership cascading down to other levels. When parents inspire their children, teachers their students, bosses their employees, social workers their charges, or factory managers their workers, the nation's spirit of enthusiasm and positive energy can be raised another notch.

Let's hope the New Year will usher in a leadership that will build a more kind, gentle, and strong nation where we will see less hate, less violence, less greed, less corruption, and less cruelty. In their place, let's hope to see a more caring, capable, creative, and inclusive ambiance where strength of character, humility, graciousness, civility, empathy, courage, and service to the nation will reign supreme. Let's hope the new leadership will craft an optimistic vision, instil imaginative ideas, and inspire excellence all around.

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Begum Rokeya: A trailblazer in women's rights

Celebrating the iconic activist on her 138th birth anniversary

MITALI JAHAN

BEGUM Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, the legendary Bengali writer-activist whose leadership had transformed the lives of thousands of people in this region and beyond, was born on this day in 1880. Incidentally, she died on the same day, 52 years later. For those who may not know, Begum Rokeya was an advocate of women's rights in the Indian subcontinent during the British rule. Through her charismatic and resilient leadership, she defied all obstacles put up by a society that barred women from pursuing their dreams. With a sound knowledge of the history of the region and the challenges facing the time and society in which she lived, she was a woman far more advanced and progressive than her contemporaries.

Through her writings, she raised her voice against the challenges and had the vision for the emancipation of Bengali Muslim women at a time when it was unthinkable for anyone to think so. She showed how a misinterpretation of Islam and a deep-seated patriarchal mindset in society combined to keep women behind doors, and deprived of their rights.

Begum Rokeya was born in a village called Pairaband in what is now Rangpur. Her father was a well-educated landowner and had a keen interest in education but maintained a strict rule of the Islamic code of *pardah* (veil) for the women in the family. That is why, while her brothers got the opportunity of schooling, she was deprived of education. Rokeya and her elder sister, Karimunnessa, were deeply interested in learning Bengali and English. Their elder brother Ibrahim,

who had a great influence on their lives, taught them the languages. They did that at night, while everyone else was asleep, so as not to arouse anyone's suspicion. She got married at a very early age and had a huge age difference with her husband, Khan Bahadur Sakhawat Hossain, then the deputy

these two men in her life was crucial and needs to be recognised, so that today's men can understand the importance of their own role in the transformation of the lives of women in our society.

Rokeya's writings mainly revolve around the oppression of women. Prominent among

absurdities of the society, and in *Padmarag*, women are seen gathering the courage to change their lot by becoming educated and financially independent. Rokeya also wrote several other novels and short stories.

She always believed that women were held back by their ignorance of their own rights and responsibilities. In 1909, she set up the Sakhawat Memorial Girl's School immediately after her husband died, the first school for Muslim women in the region, starting with five students. She went from door to door, trying to persuade Muslim families to allow their daughters to attend school. She ran a slum literary programme in Kolkata, forming work teams to visit women in the slums to teach them reading, writing, personal hygiene and child care.

Begum Rokeya was a self-educated and self-reliant woman with a progressive bent of mind. Her leadership followed the transformational feminist style which is reflected in her works. Through her writings and activities, she sent a message to the women to prepare themselves to claim their rights and privileges and to help construct a better, more just society. It is surprising that such a message would come from a young Muslim woman from the colonial Bengal. She was the first woman in her society to talk about gender equality. She said, "We [women] constitute one half of the society, and if we are left behind, how can the society progress?" She realised that lack of education and low level of literacy make access to opportunities limited, and commonly undermine the confidence needed to enter public life, be it in a village, or community, or at the national level. She raised her voice

through her writings and worked hard to uplift the lot of women, by instilling a sense of renaissance in them and emboldening them to taste freedom, swimming against the current of patriarchal social views.

Rokeya also recognised the importance of women's economic independence. She realised the importance of organised action for change and raising public awareness. In 1916, she founded the Anjuman-e-Khawateen-e-Islam (Muslim Women's Society), an organisation that was at the forefront of the fight for women's education and employment. Its members advocated for women's legal and political rights, sponsored women's attendance at school, gave shelter to orphans, offered legal and financial assistance to widows. It was the cornerstone of the feminist movement in Bengal, and paved the way for the vibrant and politically progressive feminist movement seen in contemporary Bangladesh.

Till her last days, Begum Rokeya was busy with her writings, activism and social work. Her leadership, particularly in the context of the early 20th century, had amplified the impact of women's life in undivided India. Rokeya's words and messages are still very relevant to our current time and society. Her foresight, tolerance and broadmindedness can still guide women who want to pursue their dreams against all sorts of intolerance and religious bigotry. No wonder she is still a towering figure in the women's movement and a guiding light for thousands of women leaders.

Mitali Jahan is a lawyer at the High Court Division of Supreme Court of Bangladesh, and Programme Manager at Human Rights and Legal Aid Services Programme, BRAC.



Statue of Begum Rokeya in Begum Rokeya Memorial Centre, Pairabondh, Mithapukur, Rangpur.

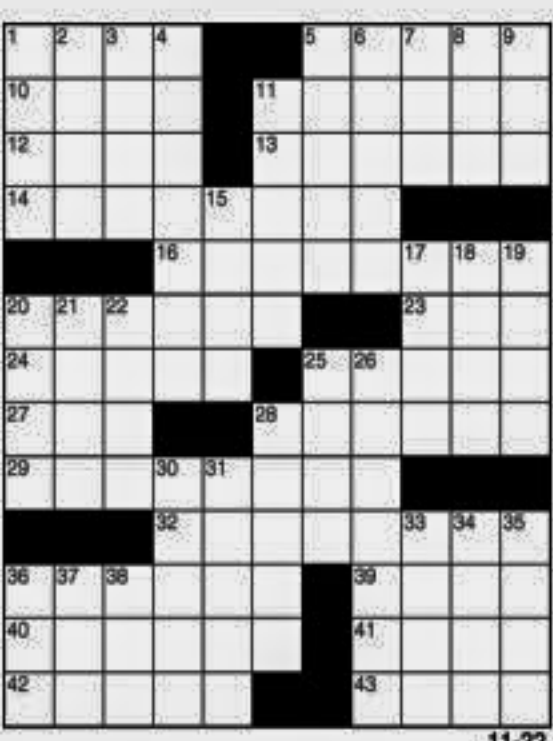
PHOTO: NAHID SULTAN/WIKIMEDIA

magistrate of Bhagalpur. He, however, supported female education and helped his wife improve her Bangla and English skills. Gradually, she mastered the two languages. Her husband also encouraged her to write and Rokeya eventually adopted Bangla as the principle language of her writing. The role of

her works are *Sultanar Swapna* (Sultana's Dream), *Padmarag*, and *Abarodhbasini*. In 1905, she wrote *Sultanar Swapna*, one of the earliest depictions of feminist utopia. In it, she relies on role reversal to show the society what women are capable of if given the opportunity. In *Abarodhbasini*, she reveals the

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Sign of freshness
 - 5 Sandbar
 - 10 Song by the Kinks
 - 11 Probability
 - 12 Finished
 - 13 Give fizz to
 - 14 Thanksgiving dessert
 - 16 Thanksgiving entree
 - 20 Moolah
 - 23 Bordeaux buddy
 - 24 Entertain
 - 25 Kind of pride
 - 27 Cal. abbr.
 - 28 Tatters
 - 29 Thanksgiving side
 - 32 Thanksgiving side
- DOWN**
- 1 Spill over
 - 2 Adore
 - 3 Guinness of film
 - 4 Holiday events
 - 5 Valentino role
 - 6 Women's quarters
 - 7 -- roll
 - 8 Drama division
 - 9 Director Ang
 - 11 Island off Naples
 - 15 Newborn's need
 - 17 Roof feature
 - 18 Surrounded by
 - 19 Idiosyncrasies
 - 20 Humid
 - 21 Melville book
 - 22 Litter's littlest
 - 25 Restaurant star
 - 26 1040, e.g.
 - 28 Whiskey drinks
 - 30 Volcano output
 - 31 Statistical tool for comparing means
 - 33 Nantes notion
 - 34 Taboo act
 - 35 Get bigger
 - 36 Snap
 - 37 "Gross!"
 - 38 Take to court



YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

T	A	R	A	L	A	C	K
A	C	U	T	E	M	I	L
L	A	P	E	L	A	M	P
I	C	E	A	I	R	B	A
A	I	R	L	I	N	E	C
A	T	O	N	E	B	A	R
D	E	R	B	E	R		
G	E	E	T	E	E	T	H
B	A	N	A	I	R	S	H
A	I	R	P	L	A	Y	E
S	N	A	I	L	A	S	T
S	O	G	G	Y	S	L	E
O	N	E	S		P	A	R

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