

Myanmar's latest ploy to push out Rohingyas

Will the international community do nothing?

AFTER forcing almost a million Rohingyas to flee from their homes and take shelter in Bangladesh, Myanmar is now taking steps to construct a concrete structure in the no-man's land on its border with Bangladesh in Bandarban's Ghumdhum area.

The structure, when completed, will cause flooding and displace the 6,000 or so Rohingyas who have been living there since August 2017. They will be forced to cross into Bangladesh. Conversely, the structure could also serve as an advance post for the Myanmar army to patrol the area and one that will have security ramifications for Bangladesh. The fact that the construction of any structure in a no-man's land is a direct violation of international law appears to have no bearing on the Myanmar authorities.

It is not so much what Bangladesh will do, but what the global champions of human rights and the international community will do in response—that is the question. The law is black and white on the issue. It states that no construction can be done within 150 yards on either side of the border unless a bilateral agreement to that effect exists between the two nations. To the best of our knowledge, Bangladesh has made no such deal with Myanmar.

Now that the Myanmar government is actively taking steps to build a structure that is in contravention of international law, and one which will be used to physically evict the few thousand Rohingyas stranded in no-man's land, the international community cannot sit by and do nothing. Because if no pressure is brought upon Myanmar to stop this construction, it will mean giving the regime *carte blanche* to act as it pleases in the future when it comes to Rohingyas or any other ethnic minority in that country.

Who is maintaining Dhaka's cleanliness?

Why is there a dumping ground underneath Mouchak flyover?

THE piling of garbage under the Mouchak flyover is another example of the sorry state of management plaguing Dhaka city. Residents of the area, having suffered through terrible gridlocks and various other problems for years because of the construction of the flyover, are now forced to endure this new nuisance, while various city authorities continue to shirk their responsibility for cleaning this mess up.

As this newspaper reported yesterday, the local DNCC Councillor of the Public Works Department and the DNCC's Zonal Executive Officer (Zone-3) both indicated that they are not responsible for the problem when contacted and asked about the matter. And the great irony here is that while this mindless dumping takes place at the bottom of the flyover, the flyover itself is relatively clean, which is the same picture that we see in the case of many other flyovers throughout Dhaka. This is a perfect example of how city authorities often portray everything to be fine on the surface, while management problems persist underneath causing all sorts of suffering for city dwellers.

In order to overcome this vicious cycle of mismanagement and inaptitude, city authorities need to be held accountable for failing to provide proper services to the inhabitants of Dhaka.

In the meantime, we call on the concerned authorities—whoever that may be—to immediately clean up the area under the Mouchak flyover, and to take the necessary initiatives to ensure that it remains clean henceforth.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Number of taxpayers needs to be increased

The Daily Star carried a news report on January 8 titled "New finance minister sets sights on boosting revenue." The goal set by the new finance minister is appreciable. In a nation with a population of more than 160 million people, only 1.7-1.8 million submit their tax returns. The new finance minister has pledged to increase the number to 40 million.

While this is an ambitious target, that there are many who are liable to pay taxes but do not should not be ignored. By bringing more people under the tax net, the government can reduce its excessive reliance on indirect taxation.

One of the main reasons why people do not pay taxes is the complicated process involved with submitting tax returns. To really live up to his promise, the finance minister must take steps to drastically ease the process. The government can set up an automated system using which people can calculate how much tax they owe to the government, and make the payment online or through a mobile-based process. This will encourage people to pay their due taxes on time. In addition, the government should launch awareness campaigns on why people should pay their taxes regularly.

Shafkat Rahman, By email

Hefazat leader's plea: More than just a statement

BLACK, WHITE AND GREY



ALI RIAZ

SHAH Ahmed Shafi, head of the Hefazat-e-Islam (HI), is in the news again. In a sermon delivered to the parents of the Darul-Ulum Mainul Islam Madrasa in

Chattogram, commonly known as Hathazari Madrasa, on the occasion of its annual gathering on Friday, he asked the parents not to send their daughters to school beyond grade IV or V. He not only pleaded but made those present promise they won't send their girls to school. The attendees acquiesced.

The reason for not sending girls to schools, according to Allama Shafi, who is also head of the Al-Hiyatul Ulya Lil-Zami'atil Qawmiya Bangladesh, the highest organisation of Dawra-e-Hadith of the Qawmi madrasa, is that schooling would make girls disobedient. Understandably, there have been strong reactions, particularly in social media. Even those who were either silent or expressed muted reactions when Allama Shafi was in the news last time on November 3, on account of the "Shokrana Mahfil," seem to be outraged by this deplorable call. The "Shokrana Mahfil" accorded Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina the title "Mother of the Qwami" for recognising the highest Qawmi degree as equivalent to a post-graduate degree. In some regards, this call is not inconsistent with Allama Shafi or his organisation, Hefazat-e-Islam. Misogynist statements and demands are hallmarks of HI as well as other conservative Islamists.

The interesting aspect of the call is that it is not a demand to the government to stop women's education. There is no reason to believe that even if it was a demand, it would have been met by the government. Bangladesh has made extraordinary progress in girls' and women's education in the past decades and has become an example of success in the realm of education in South Asia.

One of the key successes is gender parity in enrolment in education. Successive governments since 1991 have made efforts to continue the progress in the education sector. For example, the

female secondary school stipend programme, which started as a pilot project in 1982 and later turned into a nationwide programme in 1996, has been exponentially expanded since then under different governments. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has been applauded at various international forums for this success. Notwithstanding the concerns regarding the dropout rate and the quality of education, enrolment of female students has increased. There is



Whipping up sentiments with religious rhetoric allows groups such as Hefazat-e-Islam headed by Shah Ahmed Shafi (pictured above) to extract what they want from the government.

no turning back. Allama Shafi and his ilk are aware of it. Perhaps that's why they are not making demands to the government. Instead they are trying to sway the public, especially those who are within their reach.

One can take comfort in the fact that this shocking plea will have no bearing on most of the citizens as they will continue to send their children to schools, and the government will not bother going down the road of changing its policy. But one should neither ignore what these kinds of positions imply nor be oblivious to the fact that there is a political dimension to it.

Hefazat-e-Islam is one of the Islamist organisations that profess Islamisation from below, to make a particular interpretation of Islam as the ethos of the society. This has been the modus operandi of social Islamists all around the

globe. In many instances, such as this one, there is no religious diktat against female education, but by using the garb of religious education, conservative Islamists tend to provide an impression that they are speaking for Islam. This is not about Islam or its teachings. The statement was made at the annual gathering of a madrasa, an educational institution, and by someone who heads a government-approved body called Al-Hiyatul Ulya Lil-Zami'atil Qawmiya Bangladesh. This gives it a veneer of a knowledge-providing institution.

There is another important aspect to this episode. These kinds of tacit demands, often outrageous, are raised as a bargaining chip. By triggering a particular segment of the population, these actors compel the government to meet other demands. The changes made in the school textbooks in 2017 are a case in point. In the backdrop of the demands of changes in the textbooks being met, Fayszullah, a HI leader, told a New York Times reporter on January 22, 2017 that "The larger goal...goes far beyond textbooks. He hopes to push through a full separation of boys and girls beginning in the fifth grade. Mixing of sexes in the classroom, he said, results in young men and women who 'prefer to live together, prefer to have physical relations before marriage.'" The recognition of the Dawra-e-Hadith degree without any reform in the curriculum and the removal of the Lady Justice statue from the Supreme

Court premises are other examples.

Whipping up sentiments with religious rhetoric allows these groups to extract what they want from the government. It becomes difficult, almost impossible, to withstand the pressure, particularly when the public discourse is infused with religious rhetoric and politicians are engaged in a competition to portray themselves as protectors of religion of the majority. Over time, it takes on an extremist tone. The mixture of majoritarianism and religion backed by the state machinery with a populist authoritarian party in power creates a perilous situation. While the political leaders tend to be at the forefront whenever such a situation arises, citizens' uncritical acceptance and acquiescence normalise this tendency. As such, they bear responsibilities too.

The question is: why do the ruling party and the government succumb to the pressure? In the absence of (or due to weak) moral legitimacy, the ruling party is left with little option but to capitulate to any pressure which appears to be powerful. It could be the domestic religio-political forces or coercive state apparatuses or foreign countries. By befriending HI, whether by choice or by political compulsion, and by embracing the religious rhetoric, whether for popular majoritarianism or ideological shift, the ruling Awami League has bolstered the HI and other similar forces in past years. Whether any other party would have acted differently is an open question. But past records of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party suggest that the differences would be of degrees, not of kinds.

Yet, what we know is that appeasement has not mutated the HI; instead, against the backdrop of a controversial election on December 30, 2018, its leader has reminded the country of its presence. It was not quite unexpected—the writing was on the wall before the election. As I had written in an earlier article, "If the next election delivers a government with a questionable moral legitimacy, the influence and the strength of the Islamists are likely to grow further" ("Why are Islamists in the limelight?" Star Weekend, December 28, 2018). It is imperative that we condemn the statement, but we should not be oblivious to the bigger picture.

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The silent suffering of mentally ill women



ZOBAIDA NASREEN

A Prothom Alo online report on January 8 brought our attention to the crime of sexually abusing women suffering from mental illness.

The report said that a mentally ill woman, Rozina Akter, gave birth to a baby girl on the footpath beside an open drain in Chattogram's Agrabad area. It also highlighted the humanity of police sub-inspector Masudur Rahman who came forward to rescue the mother and the baby and took them to a nearby hospital. Scrolling down the story, I saw photographs of the mother with her baby in hospital. The photos struck me as her story and her face seemed very familiar. I remembered another story like this, the story of one Tara "Pagli" whose unintelligible smile left me with a lot of questions about the society in which we live.

I met Tara in 2011. At the time, apart from teaching at the University of Dhaka, I was also involved with the Bangladesh project run by Bangladesh Asiatic Society. For this, I often had to go to the Asiatic Society office at Nimtoli from Kala Bhaban via Curzon Hall. Almost every time, I saw a woman sitting on the footpath near the entrance. She was around 30-35 years old. She had a stick which she would keep moving sideways all the time. I could never hear her clearly due to the distance between us, but it seemed she was talking to herself. Sometimes I found her eating bread happily. Sometimes she would look angry and scold someone, even though I never saw anyone in front of her. Sometimes we made eye contact, and she would smile at me, and I would do the same. Her smiles made me interested to know her. I asked local people about her and came to know that she was living there and was generally known to all as "Tara Pagli". She would go here and there and take whatever food was given by the people but she would always return to her place that footpath and sleep on a torn sackcloth at night. Three months later, Tara's belly

appeared bigger and I understood that she became pregnant after being raped.

After knowing the reality of Tara, whenever I went to that area, my eyes looked for her. Tara continued to do what she did. She kept smiling at me, talking to her mind. But I could no longer return her smile as I started to grasp its hidden messages. It appeared as if Tara, through her mysterious smile, was mocking the society that rejected her, treated her like she was nothing and uncared for. It was also a protest against the existing power structure of the society. I felt the urge to further

through comments posted under the Rozina story, I was happy to see people praising the police officer who helped her for his kindness and compassion. But none of the comments touched the issue of the act of raping a mentally ill woman or her being on the footpath in the first place. According to the published report, people gathered to witness Rozina in pain during labour close to a drain, but none of them came forward to help her or her child later as if their lives didn't matter.

Like Tara, Rozina has been living in the open, before public eyes, for quite some time now. She has been roaming in

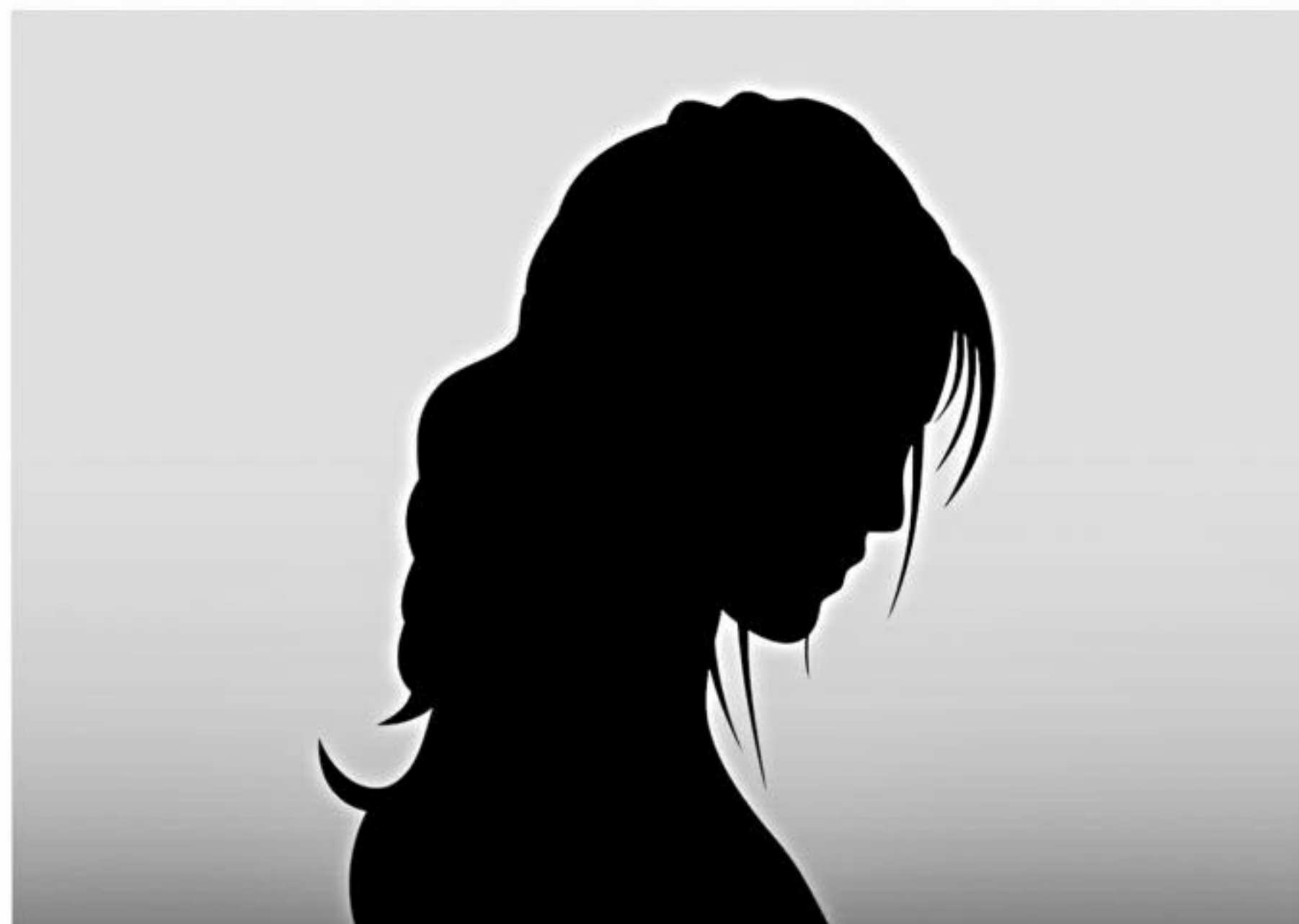
and police collected DNA samples from male workers at the facility in an attempt to identify who assaulted her (CNN News).

Bangladesh and the US are quite different from one another in many aspects. Since the US uses modern technologies like finger print and DNA tests to identify culprits, it is expected that they would identify the rapist soon. But Bangladesh cannot do that yet. Even rapists know that if they rape a mentally challenged woman in Bangladesh, there would be no justice. No case from a mentally challenged person is accepted. The identity of the rapist can be traced in most of the cases, except during wars and riots. But only in the case of a mentally ill woman, if she knows the identity of the rapist and even if she wants to tell everyone, nobody would believe her.

Crimes like rape and sexual abuse of mentally ill women are almost always hidden in plain sight as the perpetrators have power and control over their victims; mentally ill women rarely report such incidents or come forward to seek help because of legal barriers and fear of the perpetrators; and the majority of the people in our society do not think that rape and sexual abuse of these women deserve any attention. These crimes are "silent" in nature and difficult to address as the existing legal system is not willing to listen to the victims even when they know the perpetrators, because their testimonies are not accepted as credible. The society in general also does not acknowledge the plight of these helpless women who suffer in silence.

But we do not want a legal system that keeps rapists or abusers of mentally ill women untouched, or stops the victim from seeking justice or even filing a case. We need to think how these individuals become further insecure because of the existing laws, and the state acts against them when they need care and support. The government claims that there are enough shelter homes for such people; but why, then, were these women not taken to those homes and given proper care and shelter?

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investigate her case. However, Tara disappeared a week later. I did not get to know what happened to her or her unborn child.

Four years after my encounter with Tara, I came across another case like hers from a newspaper report that described how a mentally ill woman gave birth to a baby at Badamtali in Chattogram's Agrabad area. Paltu Barua, a former police sub-inspector, brought the child to his home. I read that story with joy, but I also had a sad feeling about it: I could not find the answer as to why nobody was interested to search for the rapists of those unfortunate women.

This time around, while going

Agrabad area for the past three years. In the evening, she comes back to her little roofless space that she considers home, on the street in front of the Ethnological Museum. Though Tara disappeared nearly ten years ago, many girls and women like Tara continue to be raped or live precariously on the streets.

While thinking about Tara and Rozina, I came across another story; it was from the United States of America. A 29-year-old comatose woman at the Hacienda Health Care facility in Phoenix, Arizona gave birth to a baby boy on December 29. The woman had been in the vegetative state for 14 years. She is considered a sexual assault victim,