

Saluting our unsung women heroes

Support these silent doers

WE are humbled and honoured to have co-hosted with IPDC Finance Limited an event yesterday that is unique in its spirit and message to the world. It was to recognise seven remarkable women who have been quietly initiating positive change in society. They are not prominent women, some of them have never had the opportunity to study, and have personally gone through a lot of hardship and trauma. Yet their courageous spirit and irresistible urge to help others have made them achieve incredible deeds. The “Unsung Women Nation Builders Awards 2019” was indeed an inspiring event that demonstrates how women have been contributing to nation-building without any expectation or self-interest.

Among the awardees this year was late freedom fighter Khurshid Jahan, who was a young mother in 1971 when she joined the Liberation Movement and helped to treat wounded Freedom Fighters and collect intelligence for them. Hazera Begum grew up in the streets as a child and was later forced into prostitution in order to survive. But this did not stop her from establishing a child development centre for about 50 street children, providing them with food, shelter, education and love. The other recipients of the award are also awe-inspiring: Japanese philanthropist Hiroko Kobayashi financially supported 100 Bangladeshi girls to complete their school and college degrees; Bilkis Banu established an orphanage with personal funds that is home to 75 children; Chhobi Dasgupta who started working in a garment factory at age 12 is now an entrepreneur and has her own garments factory, employing more than 100 employees; Rupa Dutta raised funds to expand a school for Mro children and also set up a hostel with the help of donations; Salma Chowdhury, founder of ASHIC, an NGO dedicated to helping children with cancer.

Like the previous recipients of this award, these women have shown the real spirit of humanity through their incredible selflessness. It is something we can all learn from and be inspired to play our part in building this nation. We hope that the government as well the affluent in the society would come forward and support these exemplary efforts.

Enforce the law on child labour

Penalise brick kiln owners heavily

DESPITE the law prohibiting the employment of children, many brick kiln owners across Cumilla's Chaudhagram upazila employ minors to do hazardous work. Investigative reporting by this newspaper has found that there are many minors working for the 350 or so brick kilns that operate in Cumilla district. In fact, that is a practice in most of the brick kilns in Bangladesh. The work itself is extremely dangerous and there are often casualties as there is little by way of workers' safety in the industry. On January 25, we reported the death of 13 workers when a coal-laden truck flipped over on to a makeshift shed at a brick kiln in Cumilla. Nine of the 13 victims were schoolboys from Niphamari. Children like them work part time at brick kilns to support their families and pay for their education.

While the authorities assure us that steps are being taken to strengthen monitoring around brick kilns so that no underage worker is employed, one must contend with the fact that the socio-economic situation of the families that send their children to work in brick kilns is poor. Poverty drives families to force their children to find work. That said, the local administration has a duty to enforce the law on child labour. Raising awareness among brick kiln owners is simply one side of the coin. It's up to the local administration to do their part in making it very expensive for brick kiln owners to flout the law. Similarly, it is up to the authorities to address the issue of finding new avenues of income-generating activities for those living in poverty so that they are not compelled to engage their children in hazardous work to support their families.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Start from the family

Family is the best social platform through which any initiative for gender equality could be properly addressed. The first step would be to acknowledge the fact that we need to accept the reality that men, women and people of third or alternative gender are all equal and should be treated and respected appropriately. At the family level, we need to always emphasise the importance of equality for all, particularly in front of the children so that the sense of equality for all is imprinted on their minds. If we learn to empower and respect women at our family level from a truly socio-cultural perspective, we could expect some positive changes in society, however small they are. This is a serious social movement in which we all need to participate sincerely to ensure gender equality at both macro and micro levels.

Saikat Kumar Basu, Canada



SOURCE: www.awarenessdays.com

Rethinking our digital priorities

MOYUKH MAHTAB

ON April 14, 2016, the European Union adopted the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) with the aim of giving control to people over their personal data, recognising certain “digital” rights that individuals are entitled to regarding how their personal data is collected and used. These digital rights include, among others, the rights to: information, access, rectification, restricting on processing and erasure. That internet users have inviolable rights—and it is now being argued that access to the internet itself is a fundamental human right—may seem odd to us. Of course it does; in a digital culture where blocking and banning is the norm, where access can be snapped at a moment's notice, and one needs to think of a hundred possible repercussions before posting anything online, the idea of digital rights, is not even part of our discourse.

At the heart of the concept of the GDPR's digital rights is the concept of privacy over personal data. Access Now, an international NGO that advocates for digital rights globally, defines personal data as “any information relating to you, whether it is related to the private, professional, or public life.” With staggering amounts of data available online to corporations and governments, users' control over how that data is used is next to nil almost. And it matters—from the use by internet giants of one's data for targeted advertising or selling to advertisers, to governments' use for mass surveillance, the implications are chilling. Yet, according to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), only about 58 percent of countries worldwide have data privacy laws. This is in sharp contrast to the 72 percent of countries which have cybercrime laws. And although it may seem that the concerns about the right to privacy, especially online, are a relatively recent phenomenon, the history of privacy laws actually goes back at least to the 1980s.

In our national discourse, legislation regarding the digital world has mostly focussed on empowering the state and not individuals. Surrounded by computers and immersed in the internet, we tend to forget how revolutionary the invention of the World Wide Web was in the course of history. In 2011, in the UN General Assembly, the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression in his report went as far as to say that internet was a medium which enabled the “discovery of truth and progress of society as a whole.” Terming the right to freedom of expression and opinion as an “enabler” of other rights including economic, social and cultural rights, the Special Rapporteur described the internet as a “catalyst” of that crucial fundamental right to free speech. And all of these rest on the unique nature of the internet: its speed, accessibility and the degree of anonymity it

provides. Whether one looks at it from the angle of the accessibility to knowledge or development of human rights, the internet is truly revolutionary. And it is because of this revolutionary nature that the debates over how much control states can exercise over the internet has become so heated in this decade.

Freedom House reports that 2018 saw the 8th consecutive year of global internet freedom decline. Countries around the world continue to stock up with the newest technologies for “managing” how and what can be accessed online. In the same year, 17 governments approved or proposed laws restricting online media on various grounds. The reductionist debate over online freedom continues to be framed over concerns of “national security”—as if privacy and security are mutually exclusive.

For Bangladesh, “digital” has become the by-word for development on one hand, while on the other, indiscriminate blocking or

restrictions on sites for ambiguous intents is what the Special Rapporteur called a “chilling effect”—a fear of exercising the right to free speech.

The Special Rapporteur's proposals at the General Assembly cited before make a compelling argument relevant here: that there are certainly cases where restriction of access is legitimate. But, the report reads, the criteria have to be narrow, must be lawful and subject to challenge, and not be disproportionate to its aims. It reads, that barring child pornography, any other restriction is usually unwarranted. The report, in light of the UN's International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, sets out when it might be legitimate to restrict content: when it can curtail another's rights, poses a threat to national security, and can incite violence; but the action must also be the most “restrictive means” of achieving the aim. The report also adds, “Even when justification is

views, which are of course harder to justify in democracies which formally uphold freedom of expression. Criticism, under our wide and ambiguous definitions end up being construed as anti-state or seditious. In this context, even talking about digital rights seems absurd. But it is a discussion we must have. The Digital Security Act was one chance where we could have actually addressed this; indeed that is what the law should have been about. Like the GDPR, it could have empowered citizens with certain rights over their personal data, how they can be collected, how long they can be stored and in what manner, and legal recourses one could take if those rights are violated. It should have set up infrastructure and protection standards that governments and corporations must follow when collecting data. Neither global corporations nor states should be able to use one's data in a way one is not comfortable with. This could be anything from mobile operators selling



restricting of access has almost become the norm. Recently the country implemented a ban on thousands of websites to block “pomographic” content—something no one can seemingly argue with. However, the issue is not as simple as it is made to appear; given the nature of the internet, the same site can host content flagged as immoral, while also containing content of immense educational value. Users in Bangladesh are unable to access certain blog sites, the immensely popular site Reddit, and for a time were even unable to access Google Books! If one were to take the line of argument for banning websites such as Reddit to its logical conclusion, even Wikipedia should be on the list of blocked websites. That is absurd, especially given that the state's prerogative is not moral monitoring. Of course, as every official knows, any digitally native user can get around any blocks. But the net effect of such

provided, blocking measures constitute an unnecessary or disproportionate means ... as they are often not sufficiently targeted and render a wide range of content inaccessible beyond that which has been deemed illegal,” reads the report. So, if a site like Reddit does even contain immoral content, blocking out all the other content which it provides and which are not illegal, renders such a block too broad and indefensible. And, “while the protection of children from inappropriate content may constitute a legitimate aim, the availability of software filters that parents and school authorities can use to control access to certain content renders action by the Government such as blocking less necessary and difficult to justify,” reads another part of the report.

Of course, moral concerns are sometimes the fig leaf covering concerns over critical

data to advertisers for targeted marketing to how personal information, say for the NID, is stored.

On one hand we have the immense possibilities that the internet provides—access to news, books, articles, discussions with people with similar interests—at our fingertips. The possibilities that not even Sir Tim Berners-Lee could have foreseen. On the other, we see increasing control about how, when and what users can access, and a situation where one has very little control over one's data. In order to truly make the “Digital Bangladesh” digital, we need to start with getting rid of our constant policing over the internet and empower citizens with the rights needed to be safe and in control.

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The need for the 'correct' politics of development

Addressing emerging development challenges in South Asia



SELIM RAIHAN

DESPITE diverging economic and political trajectories, South Asian countries share commonalities in terms of emerging development challenges in the wake of the new world and regional dynamics. As far as future economic and social developments are concerned, for most of the South Asian countries, there are four major challenging areas which are related to inclusive development, global and regional trade integration, financing development programmes, and politics of development.

With respect to inclusive development, the debate over quantity vs quality of economic growth is prominent in most of the South Asian countries. While South Asia is now the fastest growing region in the world, with India and Bangladesh registering high and stable growth rates, followed by Sri Lanka and Pakistan recording modest growth rates and other countries experiencing unstable growth rates, the inclination toward growth rate figures overshadows the importance of the “quality” of economic growth. Despite high economic growth rates, the region hosts more than one-fourth of the world's extreme poor, and inequality within the countries is on the rise. Furthermore, there are genuine concerns about “jobless growth” as the pace of employment generation in most South Asian countries lags behind the pace of economic growth.

Moreover, a staggeringly high informal employment ratio, low degree of “decent job”, poor working condition, and low female participation characterise the labour market of this region. The growth, employment and poverty challenges in South Asia are primarily aggravated by the nature of development strategies these countries have been following over the past decades. These countries have not been successful in rapid industrialisation, while a few manufacturing and services sectors have been the major drivers of

growth with narrow implications for employment generation, poverty alleviation and inequality reduction. Most of these countries face the challenge of “premature de-industrialisation”. Also, the lack of preparedness in the context of the 4th Industrial Revolution can lead to a large-scale job loss. Alongside these long-standing development challenges, the 2030 Development Agenda has created additional pressure on the development task-lists of these countries. However, it can be argued that the 2030 Development Agenda has also created new opportunities for the South Asian countries to get their development trajectories “right”.

The challenges related to integration with global and regional trade remain critical. As far as integration with the

developing countries to take advantage of China's economic transformation, as changes in China's supply and demand will have spill-over effects on other economies in the region, and industries might shift concentration on other countries in the region.

However, there are concerns over whether South Asian countries have sufficient skills and capacity to take advantage of transferring or emerging industries or develop new businesses to meet the growing demand. While South Asian countries encounter the uphill tasks of diversifying their export baskets and moving into high value-added product space, they also have been less successful in extracting the benefits of regional integration and regional value



global trade and value chain is concerned, there are now emerging pressures, in the wake of growing scepticism about the globalisation and trade integration process, as reflected by Britain's Brexit, escalating protectionism in the United States, and trade war between the United States and China. Furthermore, as China is going through a major economic rebalancing, the impact of this shift goes beyond China's national borders due to China's integration with other Asian countries through manufacturing, trade and investment links. There are enhanced opportunities for Asian

chains. One of the major factors behind this is the hostile political relation between India and Pakistan, for which many regional integration initiatives remain ineffective.

Financing development goals has been a critical challenge for most of the South Asian countries. Given the changing global scenario, for financing development goals, South Asia will have to rely more on domestic sources, and this is, no doubt, an uphill task. The tax-GDP ratio remains low for most of these countries with their heavy reliance on indirect taxes and import duties. The patterns of

public expenditures on social sectors in this region suggest that the averages of the shares of public expenditure on education, health and social protection in GDP in South Asia are only around 2.5 percent, a little over 1 percent and less than 2 percent, respectively, which should be increased to more than 5 percent, 4 percent and 10 percent respectively to meet a large number of development goals.

In addition to the social expenditure, the countries need to spend substantially on developing their physical infrastructure. It is obvious that with the low tax-GDP ratio, it is difficult to finance the aforementioned large development goals. However, the question is how to mobilise the required amount of resources domestically when these countries suffer from weak institutions and inadequate tax infrastructure. It is also important to note that a mere generation of resources would not ensure implementation of the development goals if institutional and governance-related aspects are not addressed properly. Finally, there remains a big challenge in getting the priorities in spending “right”. One example of the wrong priority is the high spending on military affairs in some of these countries, especially in India and Pakistan, who, however, spend little on social sectors.

In order to address the new challenges, the South Asian countries require the “correct” politics of development. The past development trajectories of these countries are largely characterised by “crony capitalism” with a high degree of rent-seeking activities, suppressing the elements of “developmental states”. Their economic and political institutions are mostly weak while informal institutions are prevalent. In the coming days, to implement the development goals, there should be extraordinary efforts and also a strong political commitment to make a significant departure from past practices.

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