

Jumping to conclusions in poignant encounters



CHINTITO SINCE 1995
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YOU never know until they tell you. We humans have been perennially judging each other by appearances mainly, but also by what we say or do or not.

Curious, but none of my business—I still had to ask this Bangalee girl in her twenties why her supposedly beautiful black hair was dyed blonde. Since she was born, brought up and residing in the UK, I wondered in self-misery whether she had forsaken her Bangladeshi roots in vainly trying to earn a few points with her English friends.

"You would look so lovely in black," I said, trying to neutralise what sounded like a judgemental observation laced with pity.

She was unperturbed and seemed to have heard jerks like me more than once.

She has a form of cancer, external as it was, she explained most kindly to a person she understood to be health illiterate. My heart sank to my feet and my lips began to dry. The ailment, she went on with extreme politeness, bleached the skin on the back of her neck, contrasting with her dark hair. She elaborated that she faced more questions about the patch on her neck, and hence her choice to decolourise her mane. We discussed everything else for the rest of the evening. When shall we learn to mind our own business? I learnt quite a bit.

At a suburban school in a relatively poor neighbourhood, a Class VII teacher took note of the peculiarity that the two brothers admitted to his class



A schoolboy helps another scale down a wall built on a road used by residents of two indigenous villages in Bandarban as this gate of Meghla Parjatan Complex remains closed most of the time, obstructing movement of people.

PHOTO: SANJOY KUMAR BARUA

were never ever present together for lessons. He let it pass for a few days. As time went on, he was increasingly being worked up by the boys' alternating play of truant. Their rotating presence in class was downright insulting because they were deliberately deceiving their teacher.

Driven to the edge of his patience, one day he confronted the brother who happened to be present.

"You boy," he asked rather raucously, "why don't you two brothers ever come to class together?"

"Sir..."

"Do you think I do not understand anything?"

"Sir..."

"Tell me, what's your problem? And it better be good."

The child's voice was now even lower. "Sir ... between the two of us we have only one pair of trousers."

The teacher silently pledged to do something about it, but outwardly only toused the child's hair.

A gentleman, in offering his greetings to another likewise, extended his right hand to commence a routine handshake as a gesture of goodwill and fellowship. He was rather taken aback when in return he was offered his counterpart's left hand.

Reeling from amazement, catalysed by his mental conclusion that the other entity was impolite, more so because his right hand was obscured from view by the shadows dancing in the afternoon sunlight:

"What's the problem? Why are you

giving me your left?"

"I don't have a right hand," the man was apologetic; "I lost it in 1971."

Himself a decorated Freedom Fighter, the man embraced the other as a comrade does another. He did not have to say "sorry". That would sound so lame. You cannot apologise to a Gazi for losing an arm for his country. Then again, you never ask a blind man whether he can see.

A developer company has a logo with lots of green colour. It has printed a project brochure showing its proposed building in the midst of immense greenery, blue cascading sky in the backdrop, and children running towards a not-too-distant water body. No, the building is not coming up in any *haor elaka*. Not many consumers are willing to buy that amount of seclusion for any amount of money. The development is taking place in congested Badda, where the best bet to find greenery is on cultivated rooftop gardens, if at all, or a well-nurtured flowerpot.

Developers have the liberty to indulge in fake advertising, peddling *ghol* but promising *doi*. Some of their pamphlets show 3Ds of living rooms where children can ride a bicycle, but in reality the space can barely fit a sofa set. Their luxurious bedrooms are one-bedroom. One can stand in their veranda, but not sit. The neighbouring buildings are but a handshake away, but their catalogues show clouds passing in between.

It is advisable not to jump to ecstasy by believing the printed matter. Punter should visit the proposed site with a readiness not to be too dismayed if it is under water or three metres below road level. Seeing is believing!

You would jump to the conclusion that a gate was for entering and exiting a bounded area. However, by remaining

always shut, it belies the conclusion met by one's eyes. The matter in Bandarban becomes more heartrending because the case in point involves children.

A report in *The Daily Star* on February 2, titled "The gate of grief", read that the entrance to the Meghla Parjatan Complex in Bandarban remains closed most of the time, which pretty well sums up the efforts of the concerned authorities to boost tourism in the district. Tourists are obviously not being served by this "second" gate. Another main gate remains open for those who want to visit the hanging bridge and zoo inside.

Nearly two years ago, the Bandarban district administration built the gate, and locked it. Recently, it locked too the pocket gate, adding pain to the hard life in the hills. For decades, villagers of two indigenous neighbourhoods commuted on a road, now shut by a gate. This bizarre preventative action is also denying schoolchildren access to and from their school, twice a day.

Children happily scale the wall adjacent to the closed gate, and the more able ones help the smaller kids. For them, it is a matter of necessity, even fun in a way perhaps. The gate is however denying the villagers their decades-old "right of way", and that is against the norm.

Only the decision-maker, being a government employee, knows for sure whether any legal framework has been violated. Every day the villagers encounter an office order that has transformed a well-meaning gate into a wall.

Let us not judge by what the eyes behold, even it be beauty, for underneath a flimsy cover, deliberate or otherwise, lies the rude truth.

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Appreciating women who don't work (for pay)

'Work' is not only paid labour



RIFAT MURSALIN

THE following questions are for the men reading this article: have you ever cooked meals to feed yourself and others? Have you ever cleaned an entire house?

Have you ever washed and folded your clothes, as well as the clothes of your family members? And finally, have you done these chores regularly for months and years? If you answered yes to all or any of the preceding questions, I can virtually guarantee that you are cognizant of how arduous and demanding these aforementioned tasks can be.

On March 8, we celebrated International Women's Day all around the world. It is a momentous occasion to remind ourselves to continue working toward achieving gender equality. Staying faithful to the age of advancing social justice causes through hashtags, the theme for International Women's Day 2019 is #BalanceforBetter, calling for a more gender-balanced world. As I am currently living in an entirely new country, neither the country of my birth nor that of my upbringing, I am encountering unfamiliar conventions and norms in society, many of which are embedded in gender roles and expectations. In light of the International Women's Day, I have been

reflecting on what the occasion meant to me, a man.

In the United States, where I lived most of my adult life, one of the most fundamental women's rights issues is gender inequality as it pertains to wages. This phenomenon is called the *gender pay gap* or the *gender wage gap*. In simple terms, it means women receive lower compensation for the same work they do as men. In fact, the gender pay gap is a recorded phenomenon occurring all over the world, developed and developing world alike. Even after considering hours worked, occupations chosen, education, professional experience, and various other factors, the wage gap continues to persist.

This article, however, is not about the sources or impacts of this gender inequality. Rather, it is about honouring women who work without any monetary compensation. I am referring to the housewives of Bangladesh, and I am sincerely hoping this would not give anyone ideas to create a reality television series called "Housewives of Dhaka". I am not advocating for women to be paid for household chores; my suggestion is much simpler and easier to implement.

As I contemplated women's rights in Bangladesh and South Asia, it was not difficult to think of a plethora of grave socio-cultural issues that are impeding our progress. There are the overt and patent injustices and inequalities, such as childhood marriage, sexual harassment, domestic violence, and lack of educational support in many areas.



These are by no means limited to Bangladesh or South Asia. No society on earth is a utopia, and each has its own fair share of problems. I happily acknowledge the positive strides we have made as a country for women's empowerment, but I am also adamant on speaking out on social issues that continue to persist.

There is an irony in this article: when I write about women who don't work, I am actually describing women who work the hardest, just in a different context. In our capitalist culture, we have limited the connotation of the word "work" to only refer to paid labour. Working is seen as glorious, and staying at home is seen as *being less or not enough*. In fact, even dictionary.com offers a caveat when searching up the word "housewife," indicating the word is "sometimes perceived as insulting,

perhaps because it implies a lowly status". As a consequence, we tend to overlook and ignore the massive contributions by women who stay at home. Their contributions are taken for granted, and the essential role they play to sustain our social structure and familial fabric often gets erased. Without women at home—our grandmothers, aunts, mothers, sisters—our society, as we know it, would collapse.

Growing up, when someone would ask me about my parents' professions, I would say "My mother has never worked". As I matured and began to see the world through my own refined lenses, I realised how inaccurate that statement was. My mother is one of the most hardworking people I know, and I have spent almost two years working on Wall Street, with bankers toiling away for 15 hours daily. Without the women

in our lives who fed and raised us, we would not be where we are. Now, if anyone asks me the same question, I make sure to respond, "My mother is a housewife; she stayed home and raised three sons."

This would be an appropriate moment to point out that in no way am I endorsing women to become housewives. A woman should and must be able to make her own decision on whether to work or stay at home. What I do hope is to give a voice to the women who are left out of conversations on women's empowerment as the country modernises and more women increasingly join the labour force.

Let us be inclusive in our usage of the term "work". The most committed, dedicated, and selfless people I know work all day, without a break, for no pay. Let us try our best to acknowledge and appreciate all the sacrifices they continue to make for all of us. Simply altering the manner in which we frame our conversations can have a massive impact on our future generations. If we want to raise our sons and daughters to be just and fair, we must deconstruct and reframe the ways in which we converse. Let us start with acknowledging and appreciating the incredible contributions and sacrifices of the women in our lives.

Rifat Mursalin is a Bangladeshi-American currently pursuing a Fulbright grant in Malaysia, who is deeply passionate about social entrepreneurship, education, youth empowerment, and international development.

QUOTABLE Quote

Antonio Gramsci
(1891-1937)
Italian Marxist philosopher and communist politician

Common sense is a chaotic aggregate of disparate conceptions, and one can find there anything that one like.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Sighing cry
- 5 Glisten
- 10 Edna Ferber book
- 12 Cruise vessel
- 13 Boys' school VIP
- 15 Print units
- 16 Faucet
- 17 Mex. neighbour
- 18 Try to get, legally
- 20 A party to
- 21 Haughty
- 22 Mailed
- 23 City of New York
- 25 Turnpike cost
- 28 Mass units
- 31 Refinery rocks
- 32 Sports

DOWN

- 1 Grill waste
- 2 Appear suddenly
- 3 Addict, e.g.
- 4 Bro's sibling
- 5 Open-handed hit
- 6 Towel word
- 7 Harmonious
- 8 "Taken" star
- 9 Straying
- 11 "Shoo!"
- 14 New Orleans celebration
- 19 Game no-nos
- 20 Scientist Newton
- 24 College unit
- 25 Grace of
- "That '70s Show"
- 26 Baltimore player
- 27 Pea or peanut
- 29 Slugger Mickey
- 30 Ignores the limit
- 33 Tender spots
- 35 Towel word
- 38 Salt, to Simone
- 39 Director Burton

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BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

WHY IS HE A SERGEANT AND I'M A PRIVATE, WHEN I HAVE A HIGHER I.Q.?

HE'S OLDER

HIS I.Q. HAS SENIORITY OVER YOURS

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott

MON? WHAT ARE YOU DOING?

MEDITATING.

IT CLEARS THE MIND AND RELIEVES THE STRESS.

OKAY, I'LL JUST SLIDE YOU TOWARD THE KITCHEN SO YOU CAN MAKE ME A SNACK WHEN YOU'RE DONE.

THE STRESS IS MAKING A COMEBACK.