

Trafficking network enslaving women

Why the inaction by law enforcers?

NEWS has emerged of a trafficking network in Oman that is enticing Bangladeshi women with promises of regular jobs but ultimately pushing them into sexual slavery. What we have learnt from talking to those few who have managed to gain their freedom and return home to lodge complaints with the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET) is that the situation is quite dire in Muscat, the capital city of Oman.

Apparently, there are some 20–25 Bangladeshi women who are being held at an office of a recruiting agency and from there these victims are “sold” to other parties for varying periods of time before the cycle begins again. They have no rights and are made to do things against their wishes and are often victims of rape. Women who want their freedom from this hellhole are made to call their families back home with pleas to pay ransom money.

The above scenario speaks volumes of the abject lack of protection facing women expatriate workers. These so-called recruiting agencies and brokers promise the sun and the moon to unsuspecting women and lure them to overseas labour markets with promises of good jobs, only to have them end up in a land where they have no physical protection, let alone decent pay and nominal working conditions.

We find the lack of action by law enforcement agencies utterly perplexing, particularly when there is firsthand information available from returnees. Last week, we had written an editorial about a certain minister advocating that the police not take cognisance of complaints by our expatriate workers under the Anti-Trafficking Act, and we reiterate that this is entirely the wrong message being given out. People are being trafficked and abused physically and we must stop acting like nothing is happening. The testimonies of returnees clearly point out the sufferings they are going through and the refusal of authorities to act against these traffickers is tantamount to acquiescing to their activities.

Why such apathy towards our heritage?

Pre-colonial-era building being destroyed mindlessly

RAJSHAHI prison authorities have partly destroyed a pre-colonial-era building inside the jail complex in the city's Sreerampur area without consulting any archaeologist. The building was previously being used as the bungalow of deputy inspector general (prisons) since the 19th century, and authorities have claimed they are renovating it, keeping the original design intact. However, as this newspaper reported this week, the reality seems to be quite different. For example, the contractor hired by the Public Works Department (PWD) had demolished the roof of the structure, which has a complex blend of European and the then Bengal's vernacular designs. According to archaeologists, conserving the building's heritage by demolishing the roof was simply not possible.

The justification used by the authorities to not hire archaeologists to aid in protecting the uniqueness of the structure was that they have taken photographs of the building before tearing parts of it down, and so the contractors working on it would be able to keep its original design intact. The executive engineer of Rajshahi PWD said that they weren't obligated to consult an archaeologist, as the building was not listed as “archaeologically protected”. However, there are reasons why archaeologists are experts at their job. And the apathy shown by the authorities both towards the knowledge of archaeologists and the usefulness of their expertise in safeguarding this pre-colonial era building, which, even if not listed as “archaeologically protected”, is of great historical significance—is simply appalling.

We have seen other historical structures similarly get ruined in the past, in nearly the exact same manner. And such demolitions, in many cases, were carried out with the motivation of embezzling money. The authorities in this case mustn't repeat such mistakes and allow more historically significant structures to be ruined. They should hire archaeologists who can guarantee that the originality of the structure in question is maintained after renovation.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Are we forgetting the true meaning of Eid-ul-Azha?

Yet another Eid-ul-Azha—the festival to commemorate the spirit of sacrifice for the Muslim community—has passed, and again it has been proven that we are completely disregarding the teachings of our peaceful religion. The prophet himself (pbuh) had asked his followers to treat animals in the best possible manner and to spare them any needless suffering, but we witness the exact opposite of that in our country.

A lot of the animals become subject to abject cruelty starting from when they are bought till the moment they are sacrificed. One is not even supposed to sharpen knives in front of them, whereas we regularly get to see the cattle being slaughtered in front of one another.

Moreover, this practice of carrying out the slaughter in the middle of the road is very common in Bangladesh and needless to say, it is not at all hygienic. From now on, the city corporations should direct the public to carry out the slaughter in public abattoirs or inside the premises of their own house.

Finally, it should be ensured that these animals are not mistreated because such acts of cruelty simply go against the true value of the sacrifices we make on this holy day.

Dr Arif Matin, by email

MD MATIUL ISLAM

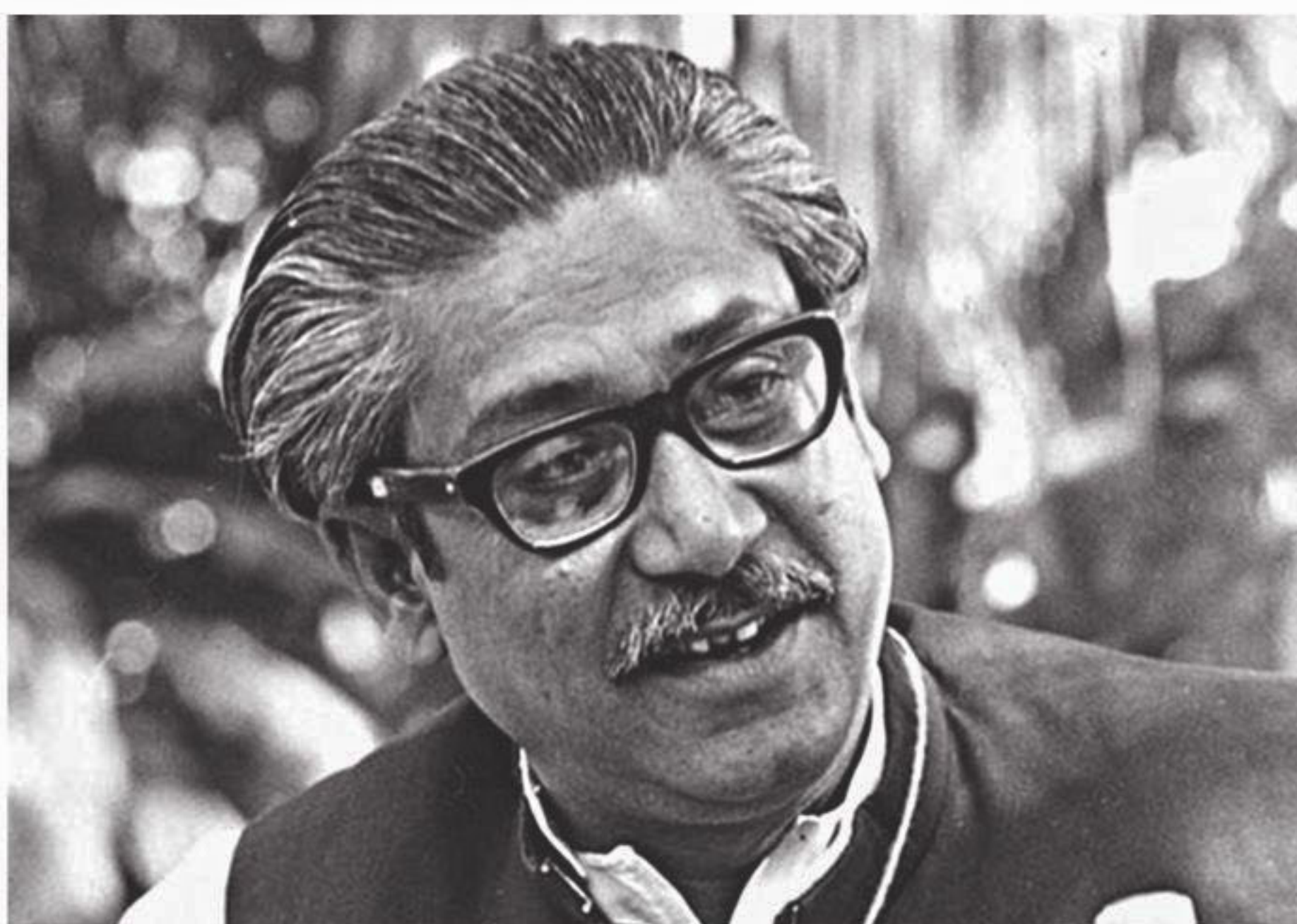
BANGABANDHU Sheikh Mujibur Rahman believed that: “To do anything great, one has to be ready to sacrifice and show one's devotion. I believe that those who are not ready to sacrifice are not capable of doing anything worthy. To engage in politics in our country and to make our people happy, one must be ready to make huge sacrifices.” His own life was a life of constant sacrifices. Sheikh Mujib practised what he preached and preached what he practised. He died at the age of 55, but his achievements and the legacy he left behind dwarf the accomplishments of many a politician around the world.

Like Nelson Mandela who dedicated his life to fighting apartheid, a system of racial segregation established by the National Party's white-only government in South Africa, Sheikh Mujib dedicated his life to fighting for the just causes of East Bengal: the demand for Bengali to be made one of the state languages side by side with Urdu, free Muslim League leadership from the clutches of a few aristocrats, establish East Bengal's rightful place in the administrative hierarchy in Pakistan, and fair and equitable allocation of the country's resources between the two wings of the country.

Due to his fight for the causes he believed in, he was continuously harassed by the government of Pakistan. He was arrested and imprisoned a number of times. In 1965, he was falsely charged with sedition and sentenced to one-year imprisonment, only to be released by an order of the High Court. In 1968, the government of Pakistan filed the infamous Agartala conspiracy case against Bangabandhu as a number one accused, with 34 other Bengali civil and military officials. The accused persons were charged with conspiring for the secession of East Pakistan from the rest of Pakistan through armed revolt. However, the conspiracy case did not make much headway. Almost all the approvers turned hostile. The government of Pakistan backtracked when a mass movement started and a furious mob set fire to the state guesthouse, and

NATIONAL MOURNING DAY

The legacy of Bangabandhu



The cruel hands of assassins ended Bangabandhu's life on this day, August 15, in 1975 when he was at the prime of his life.

Justice SA Rahman, Chairman of the Tribunal, and Mr Manzur Quader, Chief Prosecution Lawyer, were compelled to leave East Pakistan. The government of Pakistan unconditionally released Sheikh Mujib and others.

Again, on March 25, 1971, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib was arrested, tried in camera for sedition in Lyallpur Central Jail in West Pakistan and was sentenced to death. It was due to the intervention of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who assumed the responsibilities of chief marital administrator and president, replacing General Yahya Khan, that Sheikh Mujib's life was spared. Bhutto set him free and sent him to London by PIA, from where the British government sent him to Bangladesh by its Comet Jet to lead the newly created sovereign state of Bangladesh.

Like Bangabandhu, Nelson Mandela was also repeatedly arrested for “seditious” activities, was unsuccessfully prosecuted in 1956 Treason Trial and finally was sentenced to life for conspiring

to overthrow a legally established government. It was at the intervention of President Frederik Willem de Klerk that Mandela was released from prison in 1990. Nelson Mandela's first task was to work for national reconciliation. The inhuman treatment that he suffered at the hands of the apartheid government during his jail term was all forgotten and forgiven. Mandela and de Klerk led efforts to negotiate an end to apartheid. In the resultant 1994 multiracial general election, Mandela led his ANC party to victory and became president.

Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's life was also one of reconciliation, not recrimination. During his political struggle for the rights of the Bengalis, he never ever made any distinction between the Bengalis and Biharis or between Hindus and Muslims. The support for the ruling elites of West Pakistan by Muslim migrants from eastern India drew the anger of the Awami League cadres. Sheikh Mujib, disturbed by the attacks on Urdu-speaking Biharis, publicly announced: “The Biharis

and the non-Muslims are our sacred trust.” On his triumphant return to his dreamland Bangladesh, where he got an unforgettable reception, he drove straight to the Racecourse Ground to address the mammoth gathering. In his address, he openly invited the Biharis and non-Bengalis to become good citizens of Bangladesh. Referring to Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's request to Sheikh Mujib, during their farewell meeting at the Chaklala Airport, to consider forging some sort of a loose confederation between Pakistan and Bangladesh, Bangabandhu said: “I convey my good wishes to the people of Pakistan. We now belong to two separate nations and I wish you and your people prosperity and happiness.” There was no blame, no recrimination.

Sheikh Mujib displayed matured statesmanship when in 1974, under intense lobbying of some foreign ministers of OIC countries and its secretary general and Bhutto's threat to charge more than 200 Bangladeshi civilian officials trapped in Pakistan with espionage and high treason, he dropped the proposed trial of 195 Pakistani POWs accused of atrocities committed during the war of liberation. This paved the way for Sheikh Mujib's participation in the Islamic Summit in Lahore and the standing ovation of the heads of governments/states of the Islamic countries resulting in quick recognition of Bangladesh by Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, China, etc.

Interestingly enough, like Sheikh Mujib, who is fondly referred to as the “Father of the Nation”, Nelson Mandela, held in deep respect in South Africa, is also described as the “Father of the Nation”. Both were charismatic leaders with great mass appeal. But the similarity between the two great leaders ends here. Nelson Mandela lived a peaceful life after retirement from the high office of the president and died at the age of 95. The cruel hands of assassins snatched away Bangabandhu's life on this day, August 15, in 1975 when he was at the prime of his life and could have served his beloved people for a few more decades.

MD MATIUL ISLAM was the first finance secretary of Bangladesh.

August 1975 and thereafter

SERAJUL ISLAM CHOUDHURY

WHAT happened in August 1975 was a great tragedy perpetrated by an anti-people clique who did not want Bangladesh to move in the direction its people had desired it to take. The desire embodied a dream and an ideology, and for its fulfilment the people had struggled not only in 1971 but even before. The long struggle did not begin all of a sudden. It had a glorious history of its own. In December 1971, it reached a point where it was impossible for the old state not to yield to the emergence of an independent Bangladesh. What the assassins were bent upon doing was the bringing down not only of a great man but also, and not less importantly, of the ideology of secular Bengali nationalism together with the dream of a long-awaited and urgently needed social revolution. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had promoted that collective desire among, and with, the people. In mourning his death, we bemoan the loss of a leader as well as of an opportunity. Sheikh Mujib died a martyr, heading the long list of those who laid down their lives to liberate the people of Bangladesh.

The assassins were a motley group comprising disgruntled army men and a section of the reactionary elements within the ruling party itself. And they acted with the silent support of the capitalist world, of which the US was the leader. The capitalist countries had, we recall, opposed—both morally and materially—the formation of Bangladesh, being apprehensive of its turning to the left.

Not that the leftists at home were satisfied. Some of them were disheartened to see the new state not taking the line of non-capitalist development; others had gone underground fearing repression on account of their failure to join the war of liberation due to their inability to see that a resolution of the class question demanded a settlement of the national question and that the principal contradiction at that moment of history was between the people of East Bengal and the Punjabi military-bureaucratic combine that ruled Pakistan. None of the leftist groups were against a social revolution; indeed, they were fighting for it. But they did not know how to achieve that objective, which is the primary reason why they were divided among themselves, and, despite their sacrifices, were unable to take on the leadership of the liberation war. The leftists had nothing to do with the tragedy of 1975, although the Awami League leadership thought them, quite mistakenly, to be their real enemy, ignoring the reactionaries within their own camp.

The August mayhem was a rightist affair. The whole business of conspiracy, consolidation and execution was done by the ultra-rightists. The more easily identifiable anti-liberation elements, including the Al-Badrs and the Razakars, were not directly involved in the operation, but their ideological kinsmen had taken upon themselves a task which those known and condemned for their activities were incapable of performing.

The liberation war, let us remind

ourselves, was not fought for the limited political aim of independence. We had the experience of independence in 1947 enormously paid for in terms of miseries and tears, and found it to be no more than a transfer of power to the Punjabis to rule over the Bengalis. That is why, since 1952, we had been struggling for liberation, which, we had realised, must be based on the twin recognition that the Bengalis were a nation and that national independence would never be meaningful without an accompanying social revolution. Revolutions have come and gone, but society, which is where people live and expect to thrive, has not changed; it has remained as class-ridden and exploitative as it has since the 1793 Permanent Settlement enforced by the British. We needed and wanted a real revolution, ensuring a democratic transformation of the state and society, guaranteeing equality of rights and

nationalism by introducing Bangladeshi nationalism in its place. Clearly, the purpose was not to widen the definition of nationalism to include the small nationalities to which recognition has been denied in the constitution, but to do away with the idea that the Bengalis are a nation. Not satisfied even with that, General Ershad went to the extent of introducing Islam as the state religion.

It is not without significance that what was called “a historical struggle for national liberation” in the original document has been changed by Ziaur Rahman's decree into “historical war for national independence,” suggesting that we fought for political independence and not for social liberation. There is absolutely no reason to doubt that those who made the alteration were unaware of the difference between independence and liberation. They wanted to make us

but has struck at the very foundations of the state which had been founded on the rejection of the non-secular two-nation theory on which Pakistan had based itself. That Pakistan was a curse and a nightmare has been made obvious to those who are now living in that broken political state. We ourselves came to the knowledge about the monstrous character of that state as early as 1952, having paid much too much in terms of blood and tears for allowing ourselves to be led into voting for it in 1946 by our leaders. Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan, had himself realised the mistake he had made even before the state was set up and had discarded the two-nation theory at the first opportunity that came to him, namely, the occasion to speak before the Constituent Assembly on August 11, 1947.

Looking at the happenings in Bangladesh since August 1975 from a



Bangabandhu among his people in Tungipara.

opportunities to every citizen. The four state principles adumbrated in the original constitution of Bangladesh indicated the goal of a social revolution, for which the first step to be taken was secularism and socialism had to be the ultimate goal.

And it is this possibility of a liberating revolution which the assassins of August wanted to destroy. Those who succeeded them in the running of the state did not find it necessary to make apologies. Briskly they went about achieving their self-appointed task of altering the whole character of the constitution, eliminating the principles of secularism and socialism. Promulgating a martial law order, General Ziaur Rahman removed secularism and put above the preamble words which read, “In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful”, and inserted within it a pledge “in the name of Almighty Allah.” Socialism was replaced by the innocuous idea of “economic and social justice.” The amended constitution negated Bengali

forget that we had fought not for another independence of the 1947 type, but for emancipation of the people through a total transformation of society. What these anti-people elements wanted was not a secular state and a democratic society but a smaller edition of what was once known as Pakistan.

Even bourgeois democracy, not to speak of the one of socialist dispensation, demands as its first requisite secularism, meaning, as it does, complete separation between state and religion; and that's exactly what has been denied to us by the rulers who commandeered the state after August 1975. What surprises us is that the Awami League, which had provided leadership in the war of liberation, has found it convenient to remain silent on the question, giving us the impression that it does not consider the restoration of secularism to be an important issue. The attack on secularism has not harmed any particular person, group or institution

slightly different perspective, one could say that the progress we are supposed to have made amounted really to a widening of the road for capitalism to flourish. The collective dream of liberation was for the establishment of democracy in the country, and it has to be admitted that there is not much of a difference between proper democracy and socialism. That collective dream has been shattered. This change has been hastened by the despicably heinous act of the assassins of August 15.

But mere mourning would not do. It may prove to be counterproductive, creating despair. What we have to undertake is the continuation of the struggle to achieve the realisation of the collective dream of a social revolution. To give up the struggle would be to degrade ourselves further than we have already done.

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