

University authorities must take charge

Exercise your authority and do your duty

WE welcome the PM’s announcement that she would direct the authorities to ensure that criminal activities in the universities are stopped. We welcome her statement as well as her resolve to cleanse the campuses of criminals, thugs and crooks. By the time we go to press, more than 24 hours will have elapsed since the PM made her comments, but nothing palpable seems to have been done in this regard. Although we believe that it is the duty of the authorities to ensure a congenial environment on the campuses and impose their authority without fear or favour, and without waiting for specific directives from the highest quarters, we hope that the relevant authorities would move immediately and start implementing the prime minister’s directions.

It is disheartening and shocking that the words “terror” is used to describe the activities and “criminal” to define the deportment of some of the students belonging to the student wing of the ruling party. Regrettably, the authorities of many public universities had lost control over their institutions, and it was not the command of the VCs or provosts but the writ of the BCL cadres that ran on the campuses, because either the administration was too mortified and lacked the moral courage to act against them or appeased these goons for their own benefits.

We want that the highest seats of learning be restored to their pristine character, where students would find the opportunity for intellectual advancement through open discourse and free exchange of views in a peaceful atmosphere. And that can only happen if the faculty is non-partisan and unbiased and where the administration can apply the rules strictly without fear or favour and without being back-seat-driven by ruling party cadres. The prime minister’s intentions are clear. Cleanse the campuses, wrest back the control of the universities from criminals and exercise your authority given to you by the state.

The power of girls is limitless

Create a safe, wholesome environment to ensure this

FOR policymakers, parents, teachers and communities in general, the fact that investing in girl children is one of the major catalysts of development cannot be emphasised enough. We have enough proof of this in many benchmarks of a nation’s progress. Girls are outshining boys in the SSC, HSC and equivalent examinations. Girls have given exemplary performances in football and cricket despite social constraints and logistical limitations.

When girls are given the opportunity, they make major contributions to society, they bring change in prejudiced, backward mindsets, they take the country forward and even initiate movements to save the world from extinction. The theme of this year’s International Day of the Girl Child is “GirlForce: Unscripted and unstoppable”, which indicates the power of the girl in breaking barriers, challenging stereotypes and bringing in innovation, creativity and most importantly, solutions to problems that grownups have not been able to solve.

Yet despite the overwhelming evidence of how a nation profoundly benefits from nurturing, encouraging and cherishing girls, in Bangladesh and many other countries striving for greater economic growth, we are falling behind when it comes to ensuring a safe environment for girls to develop and take the opportunities that could allow them to reach their potential. Every day the news of a girl child or adolescent being raped jars our conscience and leaves us helpless. Rape of girl children has reached unprecedented levels despite there being stringent laws governing sexual assault. The Women and Children Repression Act 2000 stipulates that the concerned tribunal must finish trial proceedings of any case under this law within 180 days after charges are framed. But in reality, this does not happen despite High Court directives aimed at ensuring this.

In fact, many rape and sexual assault cases do not even get registered at the police stations—because the child’s family is poor and has no powerful connections, for fear of repercussions from the rapist(s), because of the perception that the child will be stigmatised and further harassed by unsympathetic law enforcers.


It goes without saying that the government, the law enforcement agencies, parents and the entire society must take steps to protect our girls. It is a chilling fact that from the time they are born, girl children become vulnerable to sexual violence and harassment which have led to regressive trends in our society. This includes a high incidence of child marriage (because parents fear for the security of their daughters) leading to girls dropping out of school before or after higher secondary school as well as a rising rate of suicide among girls tormented by stalking.

Society must be sensitised to shun child marriage so that parents do not try to circumvent the law with the help of falsified birth certificates or by taking advantage of the special provision in the Child Marriage Restraint Act 2017. Stalking too must be shamed by society and boys must be taught at home and outside to respect girls and treat them as equals. Without such basic changes in our social consciousness, there will be little progress in our attempts to ensure a wholesome life for our girls.

And until we do that, our girls and consequently our women will not have the opportunity to take our nation to the heights that we want it to reach.

One good turn deserves another

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING



BRIG GEN SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN
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I venture to pen my thoughts on an issue knowing fully well that a recent Facebook posting critical of the Indo-Bangladesh MoU which allows India to draw water from the Feni River to the tune of 1.82 cusec, cost the life of a Buet student at the hands of some reprobates belonging to the BCL cadre.

India’s request to use the Feni River water was granted quite quickly (contrasted with the inordinate delay in giving Bangladesh full control of Teen Bigha, or the much promised but yet to be delivered Teesta water in the dry season). Draft of an MoU on Feni River was prepared in 2011. It was supposed to be signed in 2011 when the Teesta deal was also supposed to be signed—but was ultimately signed on October 5, 2019. We hope that this would stop the clandestine way the people along the Indian side of the border were drawing water from the Feni River through underwater pipes into India.

It is a true manifestation of the current Bangladesh-India relationship. The gesture is noble; it was on humanitarian grounds, to meet the need of the people of Sabrum in Tripura, where drinking water has become scarce. And why not? We cannot forget the contribution of the people of Tripura to our Liberation War, and neither should one forget the fact that at one time in 1971, the number of Bangladeshi refugees in that state had outnumbered the state’s population.

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It is not the proposed quantity of water, a meagre 1.82 cusecs, that is important, but the symbolism of our gesture. It was done to ameliorate the shortage of potable water faced by those residing across the border.

our gesture. It was done to ameliorate the shortage of potable water faced by those residing across the border. And by doing this we can claim to have been more caring to our Indian neighbours than some of the Indian states have been towards each other. Remember, the Cauvery issue between Karnataka and Tamil Nadu is yet to be resolved.

However, this is not the first time we have demonstrated our empathy for our close neighbour. At least on one instance not long-ago, Bangladesh had allowed the transportation of essential goods to the

northeast free of charge, but with precious little in return.

One cannot overlook the fact that a good part of Bangladesh suffers from lack of water in the dry seasons and a glut of it in the monsoons. There are parched throats in Bangladesh too; large swathes of land have been rendered fallow owing to salinity and desertification due to Farakka. Similar has been the consequences of depleted flow of water in the Teesta during dry season. But the reduced flow of Teesta in dry seasons is manmade rather than natural. The answer to a very important question as to why does the Teesta River run dry in non-monsoon months has been aptly answered by some Indian researchers—and that is, there are more dams than needed. And the dams are built to run hydro-power project in the upstream of

the river; diversion of water at Gajaldoba Barrage to the Mahananda river through a link canal adds to the depletion of flow downstream in the dry season. The Gajaldoba Barrage has as much damaging consequences on Bangladesh as the Farakka dam.

And all that we get to hear from our Indian interlocutors, particularly after the prospect of reaching a deal on the Teesta in 2011 was scuttled by Mamata Banerjee’s intransigence is what our prime minister was informed by the Indian prime minister this time too, that is, the

Indian government was working with the stakeholders in India for concluding the agreement as soon as possible. Modi cannot do without Mamata (the other stakeholder) on board; this is in stark contrast with Modi doing away with Article 370 where he did not feel compelled or obliged to take the other stakeholders on board!

Let us also take the question of transit. It was a longstanding demand of India for geo-economic as well as strategic reasons to allow a land bridge between its eastern part and the Seven Sisters. That was acceded to and transit of Indian goods through Bangladesh commenced formally in June 2015. But reportedly, our territory has been used to carry Indian goods since 2014 on the basis of the 2010 Hasina-Manmohan MoU. It had taken considerable time to determine the various

charges Bangladesh would levy on India for the use of its facilities, but not before it was pontificated to us by one of the PM’s advisors that demanding tariff for the use of transit was against WTO rules, and that it was only the uncivilised and uneducated that demanded transit fees. In contrast, Bangladesh is yet to get permission for transit to Nepal and Bhutan.

It is odious to expect or demand return for a humanitarian act, but going over the many MoUs and agreements between the two countries or the list of Indian wishes we have fulfilled (some detractors would

say demands we satisfied or requirements we met), as a Bangladeshi one wonders if there is anything of substantial long-term benefit for Bangladesh granted by India so far. Except perhaps, the Land Boundary Agreement which was signed after a prolonged procrastination by India (its excuses propped up by a very convenient pretext of “legal and constitutional reasons”) in July 2015, there is nothing of comparable reciprocity that Bangladesh has received.

The foreign minister is reported to have described the state of Bangladesh-India relationship as that of a husband and wife. If that be so, then only one party seems to be benefiting from the relationship.

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INTERNATIONAL DAY OF THE GIRL CHILD

Let’s walk the talk of empowering our girls

A CLOSER LOOK



TASNEEM TAYEB

EMPERORS and kings and even queens have traditionally aspired for boys—male heirs to the thrones, who would govern their nations in the future. Very few, if at all ever envisaged or expected their daughters to succeed them. While the birth of a boy brought joy and celebrations, the birth of a girl has often been treated with less enthusiasm.

Girls have historically been considered lesser beings, less valuable than the boys, meant to be used in forging alliances with other nations through marriage and thus given a very specific kind of education that mostly stressed on sewing, cooking, home decor, perhaps even singing. Girls had mostly been kept behind the curtains, in the shadows—literally and metaphorically. Despite these obstacles that hindered their growth, girls have emerged as leaders, strong women, who in need could lead their nations through wars, struggles and storms.

Over the years, the world perspective on women have changed, so has the fate of girls. From being suppressed, women have raised their voices for their rights—the basic rights of every human. Even in our part of the world, woman have come a long way in overcoming the social stereotypes to prove themselves equally valuable as men in all spheres, and a key factor behind their empowerment has been education.

Today, the world celebrates International Day of the Girl Child, with the theme “GirlForce: Unscripted and unstoppable”. The theme couldn’t have been more relevant for us because of our constant efforts to empower our girls in order to be unscripted and unstoppable. A key factor behind their empowerment remains education.

Many policy-level decisions have been made over the last few decades and effective projects undertaken to facilitate education of girls, which among other initiatives have helped the country improve its human development indicators.

At the heart of these initiatives lies the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) led Primary Education Development Programme (PEDP) I, II, III and IV and the Female Secondary School Assistance Project (FSSAP), a joint initiative by the GoB and the World Bank, along with

many other initiatives. The PEDP has seen major success in breaking gender disparity in primary school education—according to an article by Shilpa Banerji, posted on the World Bank’s blog, the country’s primary school level net school enrolment rate jumped to 90 percent in 2015 from 80 percent in 2000.

FSSAP, initiated in 1993 with the aim of addressing the problem of gender disparity in secondary education in order to empower girls with knowledge, who would later take part in the economic and social development of the country as empowered women, yielded similar results in boosting the secondary school enrolment of girls—the project

at the core of our social mindset that still has not been able to come out of the myopia created perhaps by its feudal outlook that regard girls as a means of procreation and an inferior member of the family, good enough only for household chores. According to an article written by Shobhana Sosale, TM Asaduzzaman and Deepika Ramachandran and posted on the World Bank’s blog, “Child marriage, household responsibilities, high levels of pregnancies, lack of access to appropriate information about sexual and reproductive health, mental health issues and school-based violence are some of the main factors and contribute to lost years in schooling.”

up work as Child Domestic Workers, the government is providing free textbooks and stipends. Over the years, the government has taken up multiple other steps to facilitate the education of girls, including the enactment of the Education Policy 2010, PEDP IV, the 2018-2022 Secondary Education Development Program (SEDP), along with many other such initiatives.

Despite these projects, the major challenge that the government and its development partners will need to address is breaking the shackles of our medieval mindset that discourage education of girls, perhaps because they fear the empowerment of women. But in order to



Education can make them unstoppable.

resulted in a spike in the number of school enrolment for girls from 39 percent in 1998 to 67 percent in 2017. However, while the enrolment rate remains high for both primary and secondary education of girls, increased dropout and low completion rates in secondary schools remain key challenges to address. According to data from the 2017 Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics, the secondary school dropout rate for girls stood at a staggering 42 percent.

One might ask why: the answers lie

According to UNFPA’s State of World Population 2019 Report published in April this year, child marriage rate in Bangladesh stands at an alarming 59 percent. The country clinched the top position in South Asia and ranked fourth globally.

The government, along with its development partners are trying to address the factors that discourage the education of girls. In order to eliminate the poverty factor that impedes accessibility of girls to education and sees many of them being forced to take

have a better tomorrow, a future where empowered women will play a major role in the growth and development of the country—as part of the workforce, as entrepreneurs, as leaders and as well-informed mothers who will rear the future generations—we will have to empower our girls today; empower them with education and knowledge, because a girl empowered with education will most definitely move the nation forward.

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