

INTERNATIONAL TRANSGENDER DAY OF REMEMBRANCE

Time to change our anti-Hijra bias



OF MAGIC & MADNESS
BADIUZZAMAN BAY

And you expect them to approach the commuters, residents and grocers for money, sometimes using vile techniques. In Bangladesh, these people, who are commonly known as Hijras, have come to be associated with this image of a boisterous group of alms-seekers who use profanity, threats of bodily harm as well as people's sense of prestige to serve their purpose. Unfortunately, this image has been so widely accepted that it is now the defining feature of the identity of a community that is, frankly, every bit as diverse as any other community.

The problem is, despite the air of positivity seen in academic and policy circles in recent years, transgender people remain one of the most marginalised and misunderstood communities in Bangladesh. The public perception of this community is rudimentary at best, and dangerously misleading at worst. This, some may say, is to be expected given the country's rigid social structure and lack of openness about gender diversity, where any attempt to establish the "humanness" of transgender people is still viewed as radical. Globally, the picture is not so rosy either.

Some 331 transgender and gender-diverse people in the world have been killed this year, according to a new report released to mark the International Transgender Day of Remembrance, held annually on November 20. The Trans Murder Monitoring report, compiled by Transrespect versus Transphobia Worldwide, tracks deaths and murders of gender-nonconforming people between October 1 and September 30 every year. Since the project began in 2008, some 3,314 deaths have been recorded. This year, according to Forbes, the number of deaths is down slightly from 2018's 369, but since data on such murders are not kept or produced

systematically in most countries, it is impossible to estimate the actual number of cases.

The report has a chilling conclusion: "Stigma and discrimination against trans and gender-diverse people is real and profound around the world." These people remain "victims of horrifying hate violence, including extortion, physical and sexual assaults, and murder."

Such data on the victims of transphobic violence are unavailable in Bangladesh, neither is there an accurate

Parade in 2014. While civil society and the international community rightly welcomed the change in legal status as a major achievement for the community, it is important to note that the new category actually identifies the Hijra as "people who have a problem with sex," in other words, as sexually impaired or deviant in some way. The government's initiative, while born of an intent to promote greater acceptance of the Hijras, reflects the erroneous public perception of them being impotent, asexual, and

her experience of being inundated with questions such as "How long can a Hijra person live?", "Why do we fear Hijra?", "Who is a real Hijra?", "Do they have the necessary sexual organs?" etc. Most people seem to think that these individuals are born with ambiguous genitalia. They have no inkling of the concept of acquired gender or the non-binary construction of sexuality.

It is, then, unsurprising that the granting of a legal status has

election, the Hijras failed to vote as Hijras because they were not recognised as such in the ballot papers. Clearly, the formal recognition by the state minus supporting laws and directives covering all aspects of their life didn't amount to a fuller recognition of their constitutionally guaranteed rights as citizens of this country. The magnitude of the problem is such that even the ongoing projects by the Department of Social Services to integrate them into the wider social network seem like a drop in the ocean.

We need to understand that the Hijras are just like any other individual or citizen. Those taking the moral high ground to reject them because of the objectionable behaviour by certain members of the community are failing to realise that we are only as good as our surroundings allow us to be. They are also forgetting the fact that nothing—no amount of socially deviant behaviour—deprives an individual of basic rights inherent to all human beings, regardless of race, sex, ethnicity, language, religion, or any other status. The Hijras have the right to food, employment and education. They have the right to identify anyway they want to. And it is the responsibility of the state, and the society in general, to create the necessary conditions for those rights to be delivered.

I have had the opportunity to hear the stories of Hijras from their own mouth. These stories provide details of torture, harassment and discrimination facing the community, of being abandoned by family and finding a new home away from home. One Hijra told me how she was gang-raped by some 20 men. As she described the gruesome experience, she was quite elaborate and laughing occasionally as if she was reading from a comic book. The unbelievable strength and fortitude that she displayed could only be achieved through living a life of suffering. There were also stories of fun and laughter and adventure. These stories put them in the same bracket as any other human being. It's time we acknowledged their innate humanness beyond the narrow considerations of appearance and sexual orientation.

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PHOTO: SK ENAMUL HAQ

Lack of knowledge on sexual orientation and gender identity helps perpetuate the discrimination facing the Hijras.

estimate of the number of people who identify as transgender. According to an estimate by the Department of Social Services, there are nearly 11,000 individuals belonging to the community, but Hijra activists believe the actual number is much higher. This lack of verifiable data is demonstrative of the lack of interest, knowledge and initiative by state and non-state actors working on inclusivity and diversity in Bangladesh. It contrasts the enthusiasm that followed the official recognition of the Hijra as a "Hijra sex" in November 2013, and their first annual Pride

born with ambiguous genitalia. According to Zobaida Nasreen, an associate professor of anthropology at Dhaka University and one of a small group of activists campaigning for transgender rights, including social and economic justice and appropriate psychological care, thinks that this approach and its resultant effects prove that the root of the problem lies in the lack of basic knowledge on sexual orientation and gender identity in our society. In a yet-unpublished paper on the construction of the identity of transgender women, she described

hardly changed the condition of the transgender people in our society. They continue to endure transphobic slurs and attacks, they are cast away by their own family, they are deprived of their inheritance since the inheritance law only recognises males and females, and are not considered for jobs or other rights and services taken for granted by most men and women. Although the community has been increasingly vocal about their rights in recent years, most of them are still forced to choose professions that are generally frowned upon. In the 2018 national

Time to open the tourism land route to Nepal

WITH stunning Himalayan vistas and historic towns on offer, there are few international destinations that can be as attractive to the Bangladeshi tourist as Nepal. Airfare prices to Kathmandu are reasonable. Travel costs inside Nepal

are affordable. E-visa and visa-on-arrival arrangements available to Bangladeshi passport holders are convenient. Yet more could be done to increase tourist traffic, for the benefit of both nations.

In the case of India, Bangladeshi tourists account for approximately one-in-five tourist arrivals. By comparison, the Bangladeshi segment of Nepal's tourist arrivals is around 2.2 percent. In 2018, of the almost 1.2 million tourists to visit Nepal, only 26,255 were Bangladeshis. That number was fewer than the number of tourists that had visited the year before.

As Nepal gears up to celebrate its "Visit Nepal 2020" year, and in light of the recent four-day visit to Kathmandu by the Bangladeshi president, Mohammad Abdul Hamid, to discuss trade, transit and tourism, it's an opportune time to look at why the country that at its nearest point is just over 20 kilometres distant from Bangladesh, hasn't been able to entice larger tourist numbers.

In recent times of course, the tragedy of the US-Bangla Airlines plane crash at Kathmandu's Tribhuvan International Airport on March 12, 2018, in which 51 people lost their lives,



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PHOTO: COURTESY

understandably instilled a sense of trepidation among would-be visitors. This incident might well explain the almost 3,000 fewer Bangladeshi tourists to visit Nepal that year as compared to the year before.

When considering longer term tourist exchange, however, other factors are at play. Perhaps foremost among them is the question of road connectivity.

By road, the distance between the Banglaphanda land port in the north-western tip of Bangladesh and the entry point to eastern Nepal across the Siliguri Corridor at Kakarbhita is around 40 kilometres. Theoretically, such a short distance should

make even day trips possible.

But between the two points is India, for which Bangladeshi would need a dual entry transit visa, arranged in advance, to cross the corridor and return. The Nepalese, meanwhile, enjoy visa-free entry to India but need a visa for Bangladesh. It is unavailable at the border. Thus, for a resident of eastern Nepal to visit Bangladesh, they would first need to travel either by air or for around 12 hours by road to Kathmandu, to process their visa. With direct transport, within 12 hours they could reach

agreement, from which Bhutan subsequently withdrew, and to media fanfare in both Bangladesh and Nepal, a trial bus service was run between Dhaka and Kathmandu.

The service was supposed to identify challenges passengers using such a route may face, including visa issues. Unfortunately, the experiment has thus far come to nothing.

Indeed, to maximise the tourism potential for both countries, any bus link would need not only to streamline the visa issues but also provide flexibility for passengers to get on and off the service along the way.

The 2018 bus journey from Dhaka included an impractical overnight stay in Siliguri and took two days to reach Kathmandu. While some passengers may wish to undertake the entirety of such a long journey, particularly in order to avoid flying, many more may wish to travel for shorter distances, such as Dhaka to eastern Nepal, or from Nepal to north-western Bangladesh.

Enabling tourism across these shorter distances could become an economic boon to both the eastern Nepalese region, and to Rangpur and Rajshahi Divisions in Bangladesh.

Of course, alongside the opening of a land route for passengers, better tourism marketing is required. For Bangladeshis,

the most famous Nepali destinations are the Kathmandu Valley, Pokhara and Nagarkot in West Nepal. Yet in eastern Nepal there is the chance to take scenic flights over Everest or to visit the base camp. There are ample opportunities for trekking and rafting, as well as the chance to experience local cultures that are unique to the east.

For Nepali tourists to Bangladesh, meanwhile, who thus far are not significant in number, the best-known attractions are Dhaka and, of course, the sea. For just as many Bangladeshis hope to experience the Himalayas, the landlocked Nepalese have a fascination for the coast. With better marketing alongside a smooth transport route, The Nepalese might also be tempted by the highlights of the northwest such as Kantajew Temple, Paharpur and Tajhat Palace.

As living standards in both countries rise, the potential for tourism is growing. For every year that passenger transport across the Siliguri Corridor remains impractical, there is for both Bangladesh and Nepal a loss in tourism revenue. It is a loss made all the more significant for tourism's potential to positively impact the economies of regional areas in both countries.

Birat Anupam is a freelance journalist based in the East Nepali town of Itahari.

In May 2018, under the then Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal (BBIN) transport

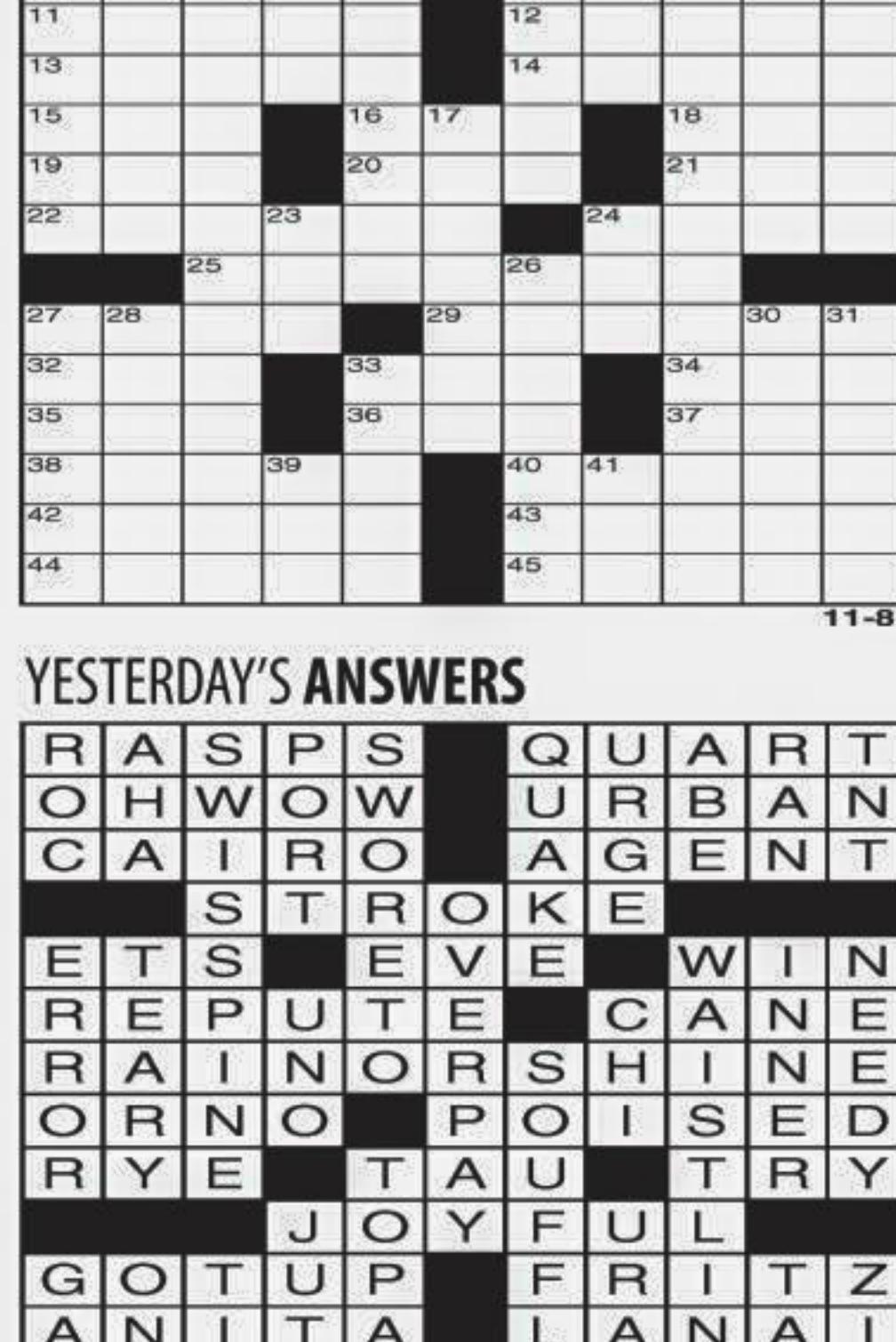
CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Until now
- 6 Removes
- 11 Fuming
- 12 Counting every-thing
- 13 Heaps
- 14 Worth
- 15 Campaign pro
- 16 Aunt, in Aca-pulco
- 18 Director Spike
- 19 Middle Earth
- 20 Powerful people
- 21 Acct. addition
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- 24 Crumb carriers
- 25 Ham it up
- 27 Base group
- 29 Close with a
- 32 Dress (up)
- 33 Rockies tree
- 34 Old hand
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- 36 Clumsy fellow
- 37 Myrna of movies
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- 44 Yorkshire city
- 45 Blissful spots
- 46 Acute
- 47 Resistant to change
- 48 Wall climber
- 49 Tennis feat
- 50 Flight cost
- 51 When one wishes
- 52 Band aide
- 53 Like ice
- 54 Halls
- 55 Picks up, as a bill
- 56 Stashed
- 57 Steamed

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ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY



NOVEMBER 20, 1969

Occupation of Alcatraz Island by Native American activists

Native American activists began an occupation of Alcatraz Island, protesting what they saw as the US government's ongoing economic, social, and political neglect of Native Americans; they were forced off the island in June 1971.