

What does it say about our society when a child bride sets herself on fire?



AFIA JAHIN

UPON reading the news headline for the incident I am about to discuss, I only felt a momentary, dull pain in my gut or thereabouts. Because while it is a shocking incident that would rob you of hope, the elements of the story are all too familiar to us all.

A girl of 16 years—a college fresher named Suraiya Newaz Labonno—was married off in Netrakona, after which her in-laws demanded a hefty dowry. When her family was unable to pay the dowry, she was taunted by her in-laws constantly. A few months into the marriage, Labonno got pregnant. A year on and the taunting only worsened. In August, according to the news report, Labonno left her husband's home and moved back in with her parents.

But October 9 proved to be the last straw. According to Labonno's family, a visit from her husband—meaning renewed verbal and physical abuse to force her to pay up the dowry he had demanded—resulted in her dousing herself in kerosene and setting her own body on fire. Sustaining 90 percent burn injuries, Labonno gave birth to a stillborn baby on October 14. Twelve hours later, she succumbed to her injuries while on life support. As per a report by the daily *Samakal* published on October 16, her family filed a case against her husband and five other people, but no one was arrested at the time.

When all of this blows over, with or without justice, what happened to Labonno will be just another story—a statistic. But it does prove, once again, that when Bangladeshi women and girls face gender violence, it is usually from those closest to them and that it comes in more than one form at a time.

First and foremost, the fact that a person as young as 16 years was married off and also

conceived a child soon after is not surprising in the context of our culture—especially given the rise in child marriage during the last year and a half of Covid-19 pandemic.

According to Brac's Gender Justice and Diversity programme, child marriage increased by at least 13 percent during the pandemic. Another assessment report by the rights organisation Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF) from March said that at least 13,886 girls in 21 districts became victims of child marriage between April and October of 2020; 48 percent of these girls were aged between 13 and 15 years.

This rise in child marriages starts making sense when one factors in the proportion of people who were pushed below the poverty line. According to a survey by the Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC) and the Brac Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD) from April 2021, at least 40 percent of our population may currently be living in poverty. This number was 20.5 percent before the pandemic hit. Many people lost their jobs, and children



Labonno's death once again brings home how we have collectively failed our girl children by failing to stop the menace of child marriage.

ILLUSTRATION: WALKFREE

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of lower-income families—who did not have access to necessary digital learning materials—were kept out of school. In most cases, one of two things happened: either the child had no choice but to join the workforce to help out their family financially, or the girl child was married off by parents in the hope that their burden would lessen. But what happens when a girl's family marries her off while giving the impression that she is a kind of nuisance who is transferable and can be done without?

Usually, it prompts the girl's in-laws to also treat her that way. In most cases, the groom is much older than the (child) bride and much more capable of earning a living. This, coupled with the embedded patriarchal values in Bangladeshi families, puts the victim of child marriage at the end of the chain of both her families. Take into account the practically non-existent implementation of child marriage preventive laws in our country, and you have someone who is at

tremendous risk of facing violence of any and all forms.

Unfortunately, the risk is a reality in the cases of many, if not most, child brides. Besides a halting of their education, other common problems they face include reproductive health issues due to early pregnancies, inability to acquire financial independence, loss of connection with peers (that is, having no personal social circle besides those approved by her family), dowry demands, and physical and/or mental torture by the in-laws.

It is not that laws are not in place to provide justice to the victims of child marriage—and of the resulting abuse. But that's just it: the laws mostly focus on getting justice to those who have already been made victims. Shouldn't our focus be on prevention as well? What is the point of harping about laws being in place after the fact? What use would it be to Labonno, for example, if her

husband and others are now arrested and punished under the Dowry Prohibition Act or the Child Marriage Restraint Act, when her life and ambitions are already lost?

The years of advocacy and rectification that have gone into forming these laws must be appreciated. However, punishment of crimes committed against child brides does not solve the issue of why there are still so many child brides in our country. Even before the pandemic, over half of the marriages taking place in Bangladesh were cases of child marriage, according to the United Nations.

As already mentioned, poverty plays a major role in perpetuating the practice of parents marrying off their daughters under the age of 18 years. But there is also a major lack of awareness about the dangers of child marriage; too many aspects of our society also help enable this practice.

In April 2020—the month after the first case of Covid-19 infection was detected in Bangladesh—the Child Helpline, 1098 (run in collaboration with Unicef), received at least 450 calls relating to child marriage, as per a *Dhaka Tribune* report from March 2021. Most of these calls were from adolescent girls afraid of being forced into marriage. So, even though young people—and child brides themselves—are aware that what is happening to them is not normal, it is because of the lack of awareness of those who surround them that so many child marriages take place in Bangladesh every year.

It is up to the state, the rights groups, and the community leaders to raise awareness and conduct dialogues regarding how unfavourable a fate the victims of child marriage usually meet. Families must be made to see that it would be far more beneficial for them to let their adolescent daughters stay in school and pursue their own careers in the long run. Otherwise, these child brides will continue to be subjected to violence and will find it easier to escape abuse by death than by law.

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Can the Great Powers avoid war?



ANDREW SHENG

AS tensions over the Taiwan Strait mount, everyone needs to think about whether war is inevitable. Ukrainian revolutionary Leon Trotsky once said: "You may not be interested in war, but war is interested in you."

And if we slip into war by what World War I historian Barbara Tuchman called the March of Folly, can the Great Powers step back from mutual nuclear annihilation?

When the world's unipolar power incurred more pandemic deaths—more than 753,000, at last count—and got defeated in Afghanistan by tribal warriors, no one should be surprised to ask whether America (and by extension Western civilisation) is in decline. The prestigious US magazine *Foreign Affairs* devoted three issues this year to three questions: "Can America Recover?", "Decline and Fall—Can America Ever Lead Again?" and "Can China Keep Rising?". For those reading the endless barrage of invectives against America's rivals, it certainly feels like the Cold War has returned with a vengeance.

However, for Greta Thunberg and fellow climate activists, surely the world leaders' priority is to work together to address our looming climate disaster?

Why are the alphas fighting on a burning planet? Shouldn't we call "time out" to see how to collectively address the urgent and existential issues of human and planetary distress?

Next month, the World Economic Forum (WEF) is meeting in Dubai with an agenda to move from a Great Reset to a Grand Narrative Initiative "to shape the contours of a more prosperous and inclusive future for humanity that is also more respectful of nature." Grand Narratives may sound like a media story, but the reality is that the masses are unlikely to buy an elite-driven dream until they are part of the conversation.

Take Harvard historian Samuel

Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations" narrative. Written in 1996, Huntington seemed prescient in predicting the clash between Western civilisation and the rest: namely Sinic, Japanese, Hindu, Islamic, and Latin American. He asked poignantly: "The central theme for the West is whether, quite apart from our external challenges, it is capable of stopping and reversing the internal process of decay. Can the West renew itself or will sustained internal rot simply accelerate its end and/

like Edward Gibbon (author of "The History of the Decline and Fall of Roman Empire") that collapses are not necessarily due to barbarian invasions, but whether the ruling elite can overcome their own greed or interests to address the new challenges.

In pure economic, financial, technology, and military terms, few question whether the West remains superior in almost all aspects, except in population numbers. According to the Maddison projections of population and

With the American demonisation of Russia and China pushing them closer together, the United States is confronting at least three fronts (including the Middle East) amid a fractious domestic arena, where political polarisation prevents policy cohesion and continuity.



FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

As it deals with a fractious domestic arena, does the United States also face the risk of losing its hold on global supremacy?

or subordination to other economically and demographically more dynamic civilisations?"

Huntington basically reflected the worry of British historian Arnold Toynbee (1889-1975) that since civilisations are born out of primitive societies, the key is whether the elites can respond effectively to new challenges—internal or external. Toynbee saw clearer than other Western historians

GDP, the rich countries—essentially Western Europe plus Western offshoots (US, Canada, Australia, New Zealand) and Japan—would have 947 million people and 36.3 percent of world GDP by 2030, whereas Asia (China, India and the rest) would have a population of 4.7 billion and 49.6 percent of global GDP. This reverses the 2003 position when the West (including Japan) accounted for half of world

GDP, compared to one-third for Asia. This dramatic reversal is due to the rise of China, India and the rest of Asia to higher middle-income levels by 2030, mainly through trade and catch-up in technology.

In the coming decades, the roughly one-billion-rich West must contend with the rising powers of China (1.4 billion), India (1.3 billion) and the Islamic countries (over one billion), which have cultures and ideologies very different from the West. If the planet heats up as expected, expect more Latin Americans, Africans, and Middle East poor arriving on the West's borders to migrate.

At the same time, with the American demonisation of Russia and China pushing them closer together, the United States is confronting at least three fronts (including the Middle East) amid a fractious domestic arena, where political polarisation prevents policy cohesion and continuity.

This current situation reminds Islamic countries, following their great historian Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406), of the cycle of dynasties and empires that Islam went through. When the social cohesion or bonds—*asabiya*—is strong, there is state legitimacy and rise of empires. When it is weak, dynasties fall and empires are lost. After the January 6 insurrection in Washington DC, many are inclined to believe that fratricidal tribalism is happening now inside America.

Similarly, Chinese macro-historians Sima Qian ("Records of the Grand Historian," 146-86 BC) and Sima Guang ("Comprehensive Mirror for Governance," 1019-1086 AD) also recorded that empires fall not so much from external invasion, but from internal decay. In Yale

historian Paul Kennedy's terminology, has the United States arrived at the point of "imperial overreach," when its global ambitions and responsibilities exceed its financial and industrial capacity? After all, the US government debt has reached as high as the end of the World War II level, without even starting World War III.

But all historians know that rise, decline or fall is never pre-ordained. The past is not a scientific linear predictor of the future. The unipolar order has weakened, without any Grand Bargain between the Great Powers on what the new order should even begin to look like. Any Grand Bargain requires the incumbent hegemon to admit that there are equals and peers in power that want the rules of the game reset from the old order. This does not mean that anyone will replace the United States soon, because everyone wants to buy time to set their own house in order after the pandemic.

In short, before any Grand Narrative, we need a whole series of conversations with all sides, from the weakest to the most powerful, on what the post-pandemic order should look like individually and collectively. There can never be one Grand Narrative by the elites, until there are enough dialogues between the many.

When the meek are weak, they suffer because they must. But when the strong are insecure, that is when war begins.

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QUOTABLE Quote

VANDANA SHIVA
(born November 5, 1952)
Indian activist

In nature's economy, the currency is not money; it is life.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Ben Affleck film
- 5 Rough guesses
- 10 Inclines
- 12 Witching group
- 13 License
- 14 Last letter
- 15 Aussie hopper
- 16 Critic's concern
- 18 Wee bite
- 19 Mason of movies
- 21 Phoenix team
- 22 Washables requiring special care
- 24 Justice Kagan
- 25 Commits
- 29 Confession list
- 30 Hollywood bunch

DOWN

- 1 Warning sound
- 2 Do a musketeer's job
- 3 In excess
- 4 Lennon's love
- 5 Paisley person
- 6 Huck's friend
- 7 City way
- 8 Sets in
- 9 Loses it
- 11 Language in which "lion" is "simba"
- 17 Indy auto
- 20 Some coasters
- 21 Declare
- 23 Cone, for once
- 25 Calorie counter
- 26 Lead on
- 27 Salad green
- 28 Hot
- 29 Blue character
- 31 Boat back
- 33 Head features
- 36 Edit out
- 38 Dems.' foes

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SPEEDCAMPO
GERTABNEO
ECONOMYDAN
TRAITSTAND
MECCA EERIE
ETHEL ADDEE

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

GOING SOMEWHERE?
BACK HOME FOR MY BROTHER'S WEDDING
IF HIS FIANCEE SEES YOU IN THAT, SHE MAY CHANGE HER MIND ABOUT JOINING THE FAMILY

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott

WHEN DADDY'S COMPANY PICNIC IS COMING UP, SO HE'S GOING TO BE ACTING WEIRD FOR THE NEXT FEW DAYS.
HE WILL ACTUALLY START BELIEVING THAT HE CAN WIN EVERY ATHLETIC EVENT.
THAT'S NOT TRUE!
FIRST, HE'LL ENTER A STAGE OF DENIAL...