

Normalise happy divorces, not unhappy marriages



THE SOUND & THE FURY

SUSHMITA S PREETHA

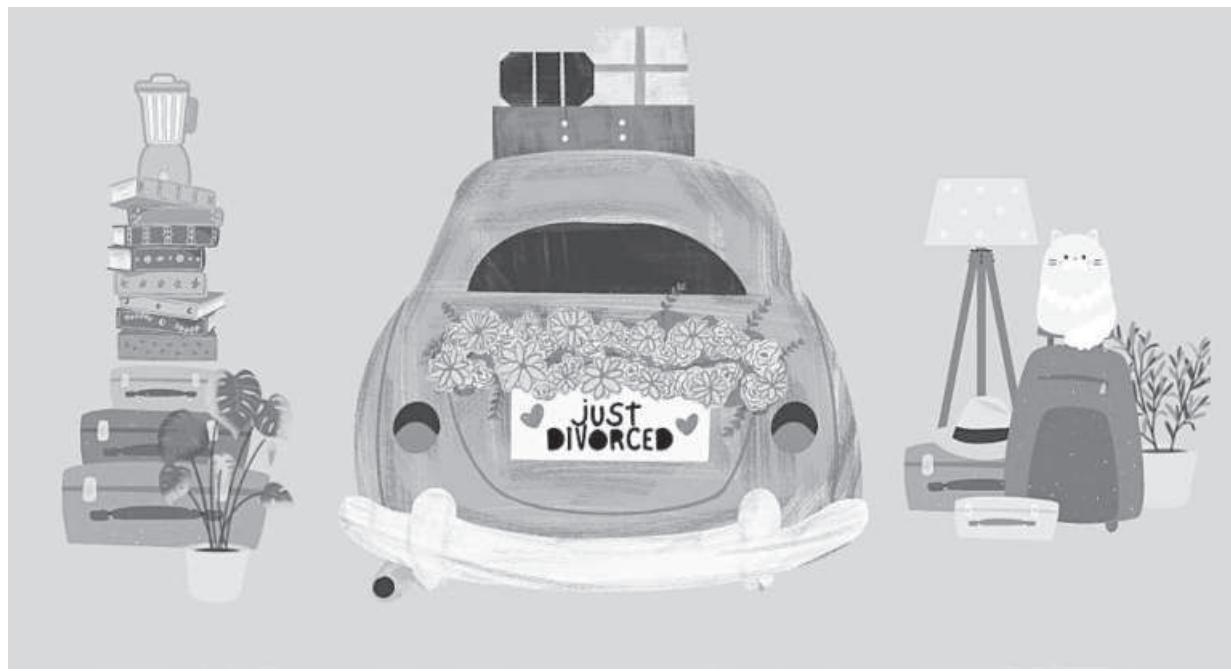
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THE Parliamentary Standing Committee on the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs has reportedly expressed “deep concerns” over the increasing number of divorces in Bangladesh. Following a meeting where this so-called grave issue afflicting the nation was discussed by our lawmakers, one MP went so far as to blame “drugs and TikTok” for the sharp rise in divorces, suggesting that social media sites be banned to save the sanctity of marriage.

In a country where lawmakers can condone crossfires in parliament, it is hardly shocking that MPs would make such ridiculous and reductive comments. Yet, we can’t help but be surprised that a parliamentary committee that is tasked with upholding the rights and dignity of women and girls should find no issue of more urgent socio-political and economic importance to highlight than the rising rate of divorces—that, too, at a time when child marriage rates are at an all-time high, women are being harassed and violated both within and outside home, migrant female workers are returning home abused and empty-handed, and female garment workers are struggling to survive on their meagre wages.

If nothing else, the committee’s statements on the issue depict an alarmingly narrow understanding of an evolving society, the lived realities of women, and the patriarchal structures that continue to constrain women’s true emancipation.

The committee is, however, correct in their observation that divorce rates are increasing across the country at a dramatic rate. The Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) recorded a 34 percent rise in divorce applications in just seven years back in 2018. Since then, the numbers have only shot up, particularly during the pandemic: in 2021, there was almost a 14 percent hike after the Covid outbreak in 2020, with double the number of women serving divorce notices than men. Officials of the city corporations in Dhaka, which register divorces, stated that well-educated, professional and wealthy women were comparatively filing more



divorce suits.

There’s no doubt that many, like the parliamentary committee members, see these numbers as a premonition of the apocalypse. For them, these divorces—especially the ones initiated by women—denote moral decay and the breakdown of long-held cultural values. But as long as we are citing statistics, here’s another one to consider: 51 percent of women aged 15-49 years in Bangladesh have experienced physical or sexual violence by their partners during their lifetimes, according to a report of the World Health Organization (WHO). The question then is not why women are leaving their husbands, but why more women are not leaving their abusers.

In a culture that thinks a woman’s primary goal in life is marriage, a premature end to it is logically seen as the worst possible outcome—not a lifetime of unhappiness and compromises, not physical and verbal abuse, not even death. That’s why we’d rather see a woman rot in a violent marriage, bearing the brunt of a toxic partner’s whims and abuses for a lifetime, than have the courage to call it quits and dream of a better life for herself. We’d rather have a woman’s nose and eyes gouged out in front of her five-year-old daughter, than her make the “selfish” decision to leave him. We’d rather have a woman be publicly policed and humiliated by her husband in front of their son, than stand up to him and demand that she be treated with respect. After all, isn’t that

▲ VISUAL: STAR

This is not to say that marriage isn’t hard work, and that we should simply give up—divorce should be and most often is the last case scenario—but marriage shouldn’t be a prison from which there is no escape.

what women have done for centuries—sacrifice their lives at the altar of men’s egos?

Despite what the numbers might imply, divorce is still a taboo in Bangladesh. Even for educated women who come from privileged families, the decision to end a marriage is a difficult one, not least because it is a lonely, convoluted and emotionally draining process for everyone involved. The endless barrage of prying and insensitive questions from family, friends and not-so-well-wishers are enough to push even the most grounded of women into depression, anxiety and a host of other mental health disorders. The omnipresent fear of “what will people say” deters many women from doing what they know deep down they should. I know too many women—all educated and successful in their fields—stuck in unhappy marriages, who are constantly performing the part of the happy and dutiful wife to avoid public scrutiny and criticism at tremendous cost to their mental and physical health.

If society is this harsh against women in abusive marriages, can you imagine its reaction when a woman decides to end her marriage—or when two people in a marriage make a mutual decision—because they are no longer in love or feel they are incompatible with each other? Society insists on reducing a personal decision between two people into a melodramatic public event requiring endless investigation: Was he violent? Was

he having an affair? Is he on drugs? Was she a bad wife? Did she have an affair? Is she too focused on her career? It is inconceivable to us that two people can reach a logical conclusion to end their marriage because it’s simply not working out. This is not to say that marriage isn’t hard work, and that we should simply give up—divorce should be and most often is the last case scenario—but marriage shouldn’t be a prison from which there is no escape.

People often ask: What about the children? Won’t they be broken if they come from broken families? I do not disagree that divorces can have grave psychological impacts on children, but so can seeing their parents constantly fight and squabble with each other, or suffer from clinical depression, or worse, witnessing their mother violently beaten or berated by their father. Why do we never question the psychological impact on children stuck between two parents in an unhappy marriage? More often than not, it is society that insists on “othering” and bullying the children who come from divorced families. Instead of normalising unhappy marriages, we ought to normalise happy separations. Instead of making a child from a divorced family feel “broken,” we ought to make them understand that there are many computations of happy families. If we really care about children, then we should shake off our own prejudices and create a conducive environment for them to flourish.

We should, if not celebrate, at least appreciate the fact that, despite the taboo surrounding divorce, even in urban areas and among privileged classes, more and more women are now brave enough to decide what the best course of action for them and their children is, instead of suffering in silence to appease society. More importantly, more and more women now have the financial independence to carry out these difficult decisions—they no longer have to remain subservient to the whims of their husbands or wishes of their parents because they have nowhere else to go.

If the parliamentary committee really wants to bring down the rate of divorces, their focus should be on sensitising men to be better and more sensitive partners and fathers. Instead of forcing young people to rush into marriage, we as a society should enable them to be emotionally and financially capable before they choose their partners. Marriage should be a choice, not a compulsion.

India’s Sri Lanka policy faces challenge



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PALLAB BHATTACHARYA

INDIA’S Neighbourhood First Policy once again faces a challenge in view of the economic meltdown and consequent political turmoil in Sri Lanka. India’s approach in dealing with the crisis in the island nation has been calibrated and cautious.

There are two components of the crisis in Sri Lanka: one on the economic front, and the other on the political one. India has been generous in opening its purse strings to bail out Sri Lanka not only with money, but also by deferring loan repayments and currency swap as well as supplies of fuel and medicines.

But the real task cut out for India lies in tackling the political dimension. It is here that India has been extremely cautious and chosen not to weigh in on Sri Lanka’s ongoing political crisis. It made an attempt to distance itself from the Rajapaksa family-led Sri Lankan government, pledging support to the “people of Sri Lanka.”

A glimpse of the challenge that India faces is given in two Twitter comments by the Indian High Commission in Sri Lanka on May 10 and 11. On May 11, the diplomatic mission refuted “speculative” Sri Lankan media reports about India sending its troops to Colombo and said “these reports and such views are not in keeping with the position of the Government of India.” The categorical denial by the high commission came a day after it dismissed social media speculations in Sri Lanka that former Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa and his family members had fled to India as “fake and blatantly false.” This is a phenomenon not restricted to Sri Lanka; it is applicable for all its other South Asian neighbours where rumours, speculations and weird theories relating to India abound the moment any crisis breaks out there. This is a problem India has faced for decades and will have to navigate in future, too, through

consistent engagement with the South Asian countries at all levels. Perhaps, this is the “price” India will always be asked to pay for being the biggest country in South Asia.

It was on May 10 that India broke its silence on the recent developments with a carefully-worded, three-paragraph statement from MEA spokesman Arindam Bagchi in response to “media queries” by the Ministry of External Affairs. “India will always be guided by the best interests of the people of Sri Lanka expressed through democratic processes. As a close neighbour of Sri Lanka, with historical ties, India is fully supportive of its democracy, stability and economic recovery.”

Bagchi also took the occasion to recall India’s economic aid to Sri Lanka to help the island nation tide over its worst financial crisis, and placed the assistance in the context of India’s Neighbourhood First Policy. This year alone, India has extended support worth over USD 3.5 billion to the people of Sri Lanka for helping them overcome their current difficulties. In addition, the people of India have provided assistance to mitigate the shortages of essential items such as food and medicine, he pointed out. India’s economic support to Sri Lanka also includes a USD-1-billion credit line for essential imports, a USD-500-million credit line for fuel, debt payment postponement, and a USD 400 million currency swap that has been extended until mid-July.

The MEA spokesman’s remarks have been broadly interpreted as India’s keenness to see a continuance of the democratic process in Sri Lanka and a gentle nudge against anything, including military intervention, contrary to that process. The mention of the words “democratic processes” refers to India’s desire for seeing peaceful protests and possible elections and discomfiture with the Sri Lankan government’s handling of the political crisis.

New Delhi’s ties with Mahinda Rajapaksa in the decade he was president from 2005 has seen ups and downs. When the civil war in Sri Lanka ended in 2009 with the defeat of Tamil separatist outfit LTTE, India had backed the Rajapaksas because the LTTE had assassinated Rajiv Gandhi. Mahinda also promised



▲ FILE PHOTO: AFP

India has made it clear that all its assistance provided to Sri Lanka during its ongoing economic crisis is directed towards the Sri Lankan people.

to address a key concern of India by implementing the 13th amendment of the constitution that was part of the 1987 India-Sri Lanka accord, as it promised greater autonomy to all provinces,

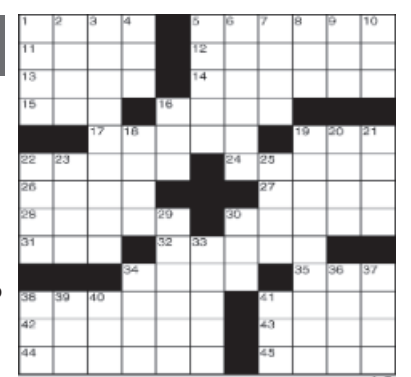
including Sri Lankan Tamils. But Mahinda Rajapaksa did not implement it.

There was a time when Mahinda was chummy with the Chinese and handed over the strategic Hambantota port to a Chinese company to run. However, on his return as prime minister in 2019, with brother Gotabaya as president, India quickly reached out to Colombo to reset bilateral relations.

With the Rajapaksas now down in the dumps amid Sri Lanka’s worst economic crisis, India has measured its actions with extreme care. New Delhi did not want to give any impression that its generous aid to Colombo at the time of an economic crisis was reflective of support for the Rajapaksas or their handling of the economy. Instead, India made it clear that its assistance in cash and kind was directed at the people of Sri Lanka. Caution will be the buzz word in India’s Sri Lanka strategy till political stability returns to the island nation.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Trunk tool
 - 5 Sudden storm
 - 11 Sore spot
 - 12 Down Under denizen
 - 13 Amused look
 - 14 Sounded the alarm?
 - 15 Aug. follower
 - 16 Weary sigh
 - 17 Makes healthy
 - 19 Lawn material
 - 22 Mocking comments
 - 24 Boorish fellow
 - 26 Manor head
 - 27 Tag info
 - 28 Make sense
 - 30 Uses a sponge
 - 31 Agreeable answer
 - 32 Bring
- DOWN**
- 1 Benders
 - 2 Lot unit
 - 3 They may be tapped instead of swiped
 - 4 Boxer Norton
 - 5 Dark fur
 - 6 Nauseated
 - 7 Calls on
 - 8 Nile serpent
 - 9 Tell tales
 - 10 Was a pioneer
 - 16 Noah’s boat
 - 18 Pakistan language
 - 19 Where boats get built
 - 20 Seep
 - 21 Female rabbits
 - 22 Wow ‘em at the comedy club
 - 23 Network junction
 - 25 “Like that’ll happen!”
 - 29 Strict grammarian
 - 30 Fake locks
 - 33 Vetoes
 - 34 Muffin makeup
 - 36 Bride’s wear
 - 37 Part of A.D.
 - 38 Subway aid
 - 39 Georgia airport code
 - 40 Earl Grey, e.g.
 - 41 Court



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