

Are we becoming a selfish, uncaring society?



NO STRINGS
ATTACHED

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We may be shocked by the news story of a woman and her twin daughters who were abandoned by their family, left to starve and waste away. They probably would have died had it not been for a call to the police by someone in the same building, as the family of three had not been outside for around 15 days. Police and social welfare officials who went to the flat to rescue the family found them in horrific conditions. The three were obviously too weak from hunger to speak or even go all the way to the bathroom for their bodily needs. There was no food in the house – only some salt and a source of water. The flat was dark and smelly, the electricity and gas lines cut off because the bills had not been paid.

It was baffling; this was not a family languishing in a low-income housing estate. It was an apartment in a building where residents were fairly well-off. So why was this mother and her two 10-year-old daughters in such desperate conditions?

The Daily Star's correspondents spoke to Shafana Afifa Shemi, the mother, as well as Shemi's cousin and her brother. The latter was the only member of her family to come to see her when he received a call. Shemi and her daughters appeared to be disoriented; the painful refrain, "I have no one" was all that they could get from the mother.

From the report, it is clear that Shemi was from a well-to-do family. Her father, a Supreme Court lawyer, owned the flats the family lived in, and when he passed away in 2018, the flats were supposed to be distributed among the siblings. Relations between Shemi and her brothers deteriorated and became so embittered that they practically left her to fend for herself. When she and her children were rescued, her family members had shifted to another location. Police said Shemi had filed a general diary after one of her brothers hit her.

According to her cousin, Shemi was a divorcee with no apparent support from her ex-husband or her own family, and was forced to survive on only Tk 4,000 per month by renting out the parking space of her flat. During the last 15 days, no one had seen Shemi or her two daughters come out of the flat.

Whatever we know from the news report, Shemi's story echoes the general narrative of what a single mother faces in our society, regardless of what socioeconomic status she belongs to. According to police, the flat had been given to her by her mother through "heba." It seems to be her only possession, although she was not in a position to support herself and her children. Her family is by no means poor: one

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brother lives in Canada, another is a BCS cadre officer, and another owns a business. How could they leave



VISUAL: SUSHMITA S PREETHA

their sister and their 10-year-old nieces to starve? If no one had called the police, surely the three would have died. Who would have been responsible for their deaths?

Shemi's ordeal proves that the ridiculously glamourised notion of the family being the guaranteed support system in drama series and films is grossly overstated. Having a family does not automatically mean unconditional love from them. Family members can be far more toxic than strangers, especially when disputes over inherited property arise. Patriarchy, which is stubbornly entrenched in our society, is designed to keep women perpetually weak by making them dependent on the mercy of a male – either her father, husband, brother, or son.

If Shemi were to work, where would her support system come from? Who would take care of her two children while she would be away? For her to have a babysitter and other staff, she would need a steady, substantial income which, according to the reports, was far from the reality. The fact that she has

daughters and not sons could also be a factor for her being abandoned by everyone.

Shemi and her daughters were supposed to be transferred to the National Institute of Mental Health and Hospital, because the hospital staff thought that Shemi was mentally ill. But Shemi's physical condition was so critical, she had to first be shifted to Suhrawardy Hospital for treatment. It is likely that the sheer deprivation of basic needs and the despair of no escape from this miserable life made the mother and daughters seem mentally unstable. Either way, psychological counselling should be a part of their treatment before a presumptuous conclusion is drawn.

But the real question is: who will take responsibility of the three after they are released? If no family member comes forward, logically it should be the state which has, through its system, actually commendably saved their lives in the immediate sense. We also cannot ignore that hundreds of women from less privileged sections of

society go through this all the time. Not all of them have the grit or the means to survive; only a few manage to get help from government or non-government organisations.

This is how the community these women are a part of has totally failed them. The myriad of high rises in our cities may provide housing for people, but the sense of neighbourhood where people made it a point to know each other and be there during crises is fast disappearing. Why did it take 15 days for someone to notice that no one from the family had come out of the house? Some people in the building had heard the children crying; nobody cared enough to find out why. We cannot deny that this indifference and lack of empathy are diseases that are destroying our society, leaving individuals isolated and in a state of despair. Mental illness is an inevitable consequence of such isolation that can lead to suicide or violent crime.

Shemi's plight reminds us of two sisters famously known as Rita, a medical graduate, and Mita, an engineering graduate, who decided

to cut off ties with the outside world for 10 years because of the indifference they had faced from their relatives. When they were discovered in 2005, they were found to have some mental disorder and were living in extreme privation. It was eight years later that they were taken in by their older sister, after they had gone missing for months from the flat they had been staying in. They were found at a hotel when the management called the police as they had not paid their bills for a few days and had not come out of their room for three days.

We hope that the social welfare department will make sure that Shemi and her daughters get the treatment they need, and will also find a way so that they can survive and their rights are protected.

But we as a society must realise that we are collectively all responsible for such individuals, regardless of where they are on the social ladder. When an individual is abandoned by their biological family, it is the state and the community that must act as the family and protect their own.

A dangerous time for history



THE GRUDGING
URBANIST

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Globally, it is not a good time for the profession of history. Governments around the world are increasingly trying to control what could or could not be taught about their past. Opportunities to see history as an open-ended mode of inquiry into the past are diminishing. Dominant groups or invested parties are stifling alternative historical views with the dogmatic belief that such views pose a threat to their power base or ideological foundation. Teaching history – especially of people who have long been subjugated and oppressed, or of contested issues of the past – has indeed become a vexing political challenge.

Think, for instance, about the complicated history of slavery in the US. The 1619 Project, *The New York Times Magazine* initiative that began in August 2019 to mark the 400th anniversary of the beginning of American slavery, became a right-wing target from the outset. The project sought "to reframe the country's history by placing the consequences of slavery and the contributions of black Americans at the very center of our national narrative," with the hope that it would inspire a more granular and holistic national conversation on racial justice. Instead, conservative backlash was swift. Then, in 2020, President Donald Trump formed a commission to write a triumphalist counter-history. The 1776 Report, to emphasise the "core principles of the American founding and how these principles may be understood to further enjoyment of 'the blessings of liberty'." In other words, teach "patriotic education." Inevitably, conservative states passed new legislation adopting draconian measures to regulate how the nation's teachers can discuss racism and issues of systemic inequities in



VISUAL: TEENI AND TUNI

the classroom.

During these anxious times, the epicentre of conservative fury has been what is known as critical race theory (CRT). What is CRT? It is essentially an academic concept to understand and explain how racism and other exclusionary practices plague American social, cultural, judicial, financial, and educational systems. An author explains, "Simply put, critical race theory states that US social institutions (e.g. the criminal justice system, education system, labour market, housing market, and healthcare system) are laced with racism embedded in laws, regulations, rules, and procedures that lead to differential outcomes by race. Sociologists and other scholars have long noted that racism can exist without racists."

These are not easy topics to teach. They pose highly divisive questions. What would be the role of current

governments and institutions to right the wrongs of the past? How does a teacher discuss painful histories of racial violence in the classroom, particularly in middle and high schools, without traumatising young students or burdening them with moral guilt? The unease and discomfort these questions cause

revolution," falsely sanitising the country's deep wound to advance an ultra-nationalist political agenda. History was weaponised to brainwash the people of Brazil, outraging many of those who lost loved ones to torture and murder during the time of military autocracy.

In South Asia, the government

nationalist agenda is the Central Vista Redevelopment Project, the controversial USD 1.8 billion urban scheme seeking to redevelop 86 acres of land along what has long been viewed as Delhi's defining urban axis – Rajpath – that terminates in the Rashtrapati Bhavan (1927) designed by British imperial architect Edwin Lutyens. A key goal of this mammoth urban project is to "Indianise" the image and experience of the capital's political heartland. The India Gate memorial now has a new companion: a 28-foot tall statue of Indian independence figure Subhas Chandra Bose.

During the 2022 inauguration of the project's first phase, it was announced that Rajpath would be renamed as Kartavya Path. The word "*kartavya*" is found in ancient inscriptions commonly written in Sanskrit, Prakrit or Dravidian languages. The centrepiece of the ambitious Central Vista project is the new parliament building that would be the symbol of 21st-century India – or rather Modi's India.

There is nothing wrong in postcolonial nation-states trying to rediscover their heritage as a way to showcase their new aspirations of nationhood. But trouble begins when

What would be the role of current governments and institutions to right the wrongs of the past? How does a teacher discuss painful histories in the classroom, particularly in middle and high schools, without traumatising young students or burdening them with moral guilt? The unease and discomfort these questions cause often become a pretext for banning such teaching altogether.

that "rediscovery" is weaponised to fortify narrow and jingoistic ambitions of a dominant group within the nation-state.

often become a pretext for not teaching about race at all or banning such teaching all together. Virginia Governor Glenn Youngkin favours banning such topics, arguing that CRT instructs "students to only view life through the lens of race and presumes that some students are consciously or unconsciously racist, sexist, or oppressive, and that other students are victims." Governors and lawmakers in Idaho, Iowa, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Tennessee, Florida, and New Hampshire have banned teaching CRT in their states' K-12 classrooms. Ban is in progress in 16 other states.

Let's move south. When in office, Brazil's former President Jair Bolsonaro, a former army officer, sought to reframe the brutal history of the country's 1964 military coup and the dictatorship that it spawned. His regime orchestrated the portrayal of the coup as a "democratic

of Prime Minister Narendra Modi has co-opted history as the most potent political tool to create a Hindu nationalist image of India. He appointed a committee of scholars to "rewrite the history of the nation." One of the key tasks of the committee was "to use evidence such as archaeological finds and DNA to prove that today's Hindus are directly descended from the land's first inhabitants many thousands of years ago and make the case that ancient Hindu scriptures are fact not myth." The neo-Brahmanism of this exclusionary political intention is unmistakable: how to reframe India as "a nation of and for Hindus." What is being sacrificed at the altar of this ultra-nationalist machination is the rich tapestry of multiculturalism, histories of multi-faith, multi-ethnic coexistence, and migration that have historically defined India.

An essential part of Modi's

In the post-truth age, history has become a political tool to advance megalomaniacal, ultra-nationalist, and pro-oligarchy agendas. The best resistance to the abuse, misuse, and distortion of history is to develop an evidence-based, collective consciousness of historiography, which is – simply put – the writing of history.

How are we doing in Bangladesh in terms of history and its awareness? How do we assess the quality of history teaching in our schools? Are we creating a learning environment in which to champion a fact-based history pedagogy? Good historians critically examine sources, select authentic materials from those sources, and synthesise those materials into a narrative that itself must always be subject to critical inquiry. To do that, the historian must be dispassionate and able to resist the lure of hagiography, arguably a national disease of the Bangladeshi character.

Our students deserve to learn from good histories of our land and the complex evolution of its people, their amalgamation, their political thoughts, and their cultural formation, none of which are straightforward or self-evident truth. A competent and unbiased historian interprets the processes through which people develop their worldviews, identities, and perceptions of culture and politics.

Our students should be able to admire Rabindranath Tagore and Kazi Nazrul Islam, while also subjecting them to multidisciplinary and critical research inquiries. The same should be for Siraj ud-Daulah, Gandhi, Bangabandhu, and Lalon Fakir. We can learn from great figures of history only when we research them. Deifying them does not produce enduring historical knowledge. Our students have the right to be patriotic – not sartorially, but introspectively – after reading a good history of 1971, while also critically learning from its complex entanglements with regional, global, and Cold War politics.

We can protect ourselves from the abuse of history only when we develop a critical consciousness of it as a national character.