

16 DAYS OF ACTIVISM AGAINST GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

The violence that separates us



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What is our collective responsibility to our women and girls? How do we care for 50.43 percent of our population? What does this year's 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence—which begins on November 25, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, and goes until December 10, Human Rights Day—hope to accomplish? The dates November 25 and December 10 are important in their own rights: they signify the still largely unresolved issue of accepting gender-based violence (GBV) as a human rights

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issue. Curiously, such reluctance is both universal and particular. From the local disinclination to respect women's reserved seats on the bus to the global antipathy towards women's safety issues at the workplace or the denial of wage disparity, women's rights issues are overwhelmingly regarded as a gendered matter, and therein lies one of the fundamental problems of our time.

encourages us to consider ourselves as creatures whose lives are separate from others. It is this individualist and, frankly, Westernised bias that disables us from seeing women's and girls' rights as what they are: an issue that is everyone's. Consider, for instance, some of Bangladesh's recent statistics with regard to GBV. According to Ain O Salish Kendra (ASK), between the



VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

months of January and October this year, 503 women were raped in the country. Within the same time frame, 960 documented cases of violence against children were filed and 421 children were killed, while 183 women were murdered by their husbands. The numbers not only present a dire, terrifying picture, but they also baffle. Even with the knowledge that the real number is much higher

as many cases go unreported, the sheer scale of the horror leads to a kind of incomprehensibility and, in turn, the thinking mind begins the process of actively disavowing the notion that each number represents a person. A person who was killed, raped, maimed, left disfigured and wounded—physically and psychologically. This process of detachment, one

where we separate ourselves from the pain of others, permits us to move past the trauma of GBV endemic to our society. Detaching ourselves from our own collective trauma—for it is ours even when we think we are not actively affected by it—allows us to think only of ourselves, and not of others and others' pain. Historically, here as well as elsewhere, women's rights movements, feminist activism and gender justice movements have attempted to make visible the pain experienced by women and girls. In Bangladesh, whether it is the anti-dowry law, The Hill Women's Foundation's attempt to draw attention to the repression faced by indigenous women, Naripokkho's advocacy towards building a linguistically inclusive and unbiased manner of articulating women's experiences, particularly of trauma, or the Bangladesh Garment and Industrial Workers Federation's demand for a liveable minimum wage as well as safe and fair working conditions—these movements and campaigns have shed important, urgent light on the injustices faced by women and girls. Women's activist movements in our country have undoubtedly made significant strides towards making heard the voices that have been rendered voiceless or, to quote Arundhati Roy, that have been “deliberately silenced, or preferably unheard.” Yet, no amount of feminist activism, whether done through the process of advocacy, protest or a combination of both, is enough to bring an end to GBV when women's and girls' lives are considered less than that of their male counterparts. And no degree of feminist action plans or global calls for action will alter the reality of women's and girls' lives if those directly unaffected by it continue to consider it a non-issue or an issue for someone else. It is everyone's responsibility to challenge our dominant, hegemonically masculinised cultural mindset, and its desire to

keep marginalised the vulnerable of our society. Such a challenge can take many forms, including inclusive activism that goes beyond performative allyship, temporary solidarity, donor-centrism, or even ableism. Beyond activism, quotidian acts of resistance and, in their absence, even a drive towards change can help make significant improvements to the quality of women's and girls' lives. From workplaces ensuring gender-balanced participation in decision-making, to domestic chores not squarely falling on the shoulders of women and girls, to public spaces not attacking women for daring to demand space, to educators and policymakers acquainting themselves with the prevalence of gender-based injustices and attending to curb them, to state- and government-level interventions to ensure such violent actions do not go unpunished, there's so much that can be done. There's so much that needs to be done. Because here's the simplest of truths: we cannot continue to keep thinking about gender-based violence in abstract terms. We can no longer accept the bare minimum from our families, from our workplaces, from our public spaces, from our healthcare system, from our educational institutions, from our faith-based institutions. If we are ever to see an end to this maelstrom of violence against women and girls, we must first acknowledge their humanity, and second, we must confront their pain and actively work towards reducing it. As hard as it might be to empathise with each victim of gender-based violence, the alternative is apathy, and for a country where 51 percent of young women are married in their girlhood (according to a Unicef report), we are in no position to be apathetic. Not caring for women and girls is not an option for us. Not raising our voices against gender-based violence is not an option for us.

All the King’s Men



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

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The idea of a king's party should be an anathema to democracy. Such groups were conspicuous during the period of the military-backed emergency government in Bangladesh in 2007-08. Similar phenomena are regularly observed in Pakistan, where parties are strategically established with the approval of the establishment. Nevertheless, recent developments indicate defectors from the opposition, previously vocal in their resistance to the election, are now forming alliances to impart a semblance of political diversity and inclusivity to the upcoming national election in our country. While this manoeuvre may please the government, it has left the opposition, which is currently fervently campaigning for electoral reform, feeling betrayed. A leader of one such breakaway group openly admitted that, following the unsuccessful protest on October 28, they faced two options: either to withdraw and remain silent or to actively participate in the political process within the parliamentary system. The defectors have opted for the latter, a decision that appears to have weakened the opposition's campaign, as indicated by the response of many social media activists.

The motivation behind these defections remains unknown, but leaked audio clips attempting character assassination of the defectors suggest a political tactic to lure some dissidents into the electoral loop with the hope of legitimising the forthcoming national election. One thing is clear, though: the utilisation of defectors in the national election restricts the choices available to the electorate. This manipulation of the system conceals a lack of genuine political competition and democratic processes. A barrage of false information and disinformation further sways voters' perceptions of their options. Social media plays a pivotal role in the current electoral landscape. In a country where democratic institutions have lost credibility due to overtly partisan stances, social media serves as a surrogate platform for organising social movements

and activism. While it offers a space for citizens to express grievances and coordinate protests, it also poses risks such as the spread of misinformation, coordination of malicious activities, and promotion of divisive narratives that may undermine national interests. Divisive narratives contribute to the creation of echo chambers, where individuals are exposed primarily to information aligning with their existing beliefs. This insular environment hampers the healthy exchange of ideas, leading to rapid emotional reactions and hasty judgements of political figures without a thorough examination of facts. We hear the rants of exiled activists, thinking they have a better understanding of our political reality from their vantage point. We are too close to our own reality to see what is unfolding around us. When we speak, we hear our own interior monologues, as no dialogue is possible in a world gripped with the fear of paranoia, suspicion, and surveillance. The transformation of a leader with a

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previously untarnished image, admired for religious convictions and conceptual clarity, makes us wonder about the space left for any form of dissent. The

gracefully decorated war hero now faces potential disgrace due to his shift in political allegiances. This shift is likely to be subjected to a trial by social media, with selective scandals used to tarnish the individual's political career. The incident raises concerns about the message conveyed to first-time voters. There is no place for ideologies, only self-interest and opportunism. What option does a first-time voter have? A national cricketer with no prior



There is a lack of genuine political competition and democratic processes in Bangladesh that has led to violent and instable political climate, especially in the lead-up to the elections. FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

political engagement, a retired bureaucrat with the track record of serving the establishment, a uniformed man freshly off his national duties, a university professor buoyed by his ability to manage student politics—all of them have one goal in common: a ticket to power. It seems the location of power has shifted from the people to the policymakers. And everyone wants it easy. Everyone is dressed up to treat or trick. The emergence of proxy parties reflects a deficiency in national dialogues, reconciliation processes, and weak democratic institutions. These deficiencies have further allowed foreign interference in domestic affairs, with opposition parties at times aligning with foreign interests for short-term political gain, disregarding the long-term damage to the national image. The portrayal of some foreign powers as saviours indicates a dent in democratic norms, creating a vacuum for external forces to operate. We have seen how our diplomatic envoys have

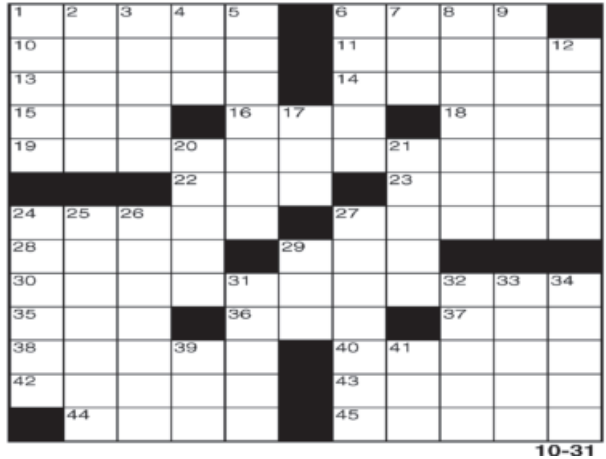
gone beyond their protocols to advocate for issues that do not concern them. It is the chink in our system that has allowed them to sneak into our daily affairs. The lack of democratic practices shelves us in different glass boxes. From within our echo chambers, we either hear hymns or groans, reinforcing our existing positions. The perceived reluctance of political leaders to engage in dialogue may erode trust in democratic processes, potentially leading citizens to seek

alternative forms of governance. The government's vision for a smart Bangladesh by 2041 emphasises cost-effective, sustainable, innovative and knowledge-based policies, transforming various sectors into a smart system. However, the commitment to meaningful electoral reforms seems to have taken a back seat, reverting to pre-election tactics that have characterised previous electoral processes. It is crucial for the government to recognise that the citizens of the country are smart enough to discern any manipulative strategies. In a smart nation, the imperative is to establish a system that allows citizens to exercise their franchise intelligently, selecting candidates through a political process of checks and balances, rather than through manipulation tied to corrupt practices or deceitful schemes. A smart country can only come through a smart consciousness, and the precondition for a smart condition is to be free in its thoughts and expressions.

CROSSWORD

BY THOMAS JOSEPH

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THURSDAY’S ANSWERS



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