

Time for national unity

We must respond firmly to anti-Bangladesh actions in India

The recent attacks and disruptions targeting Bangladesh's diplomatic missions in India have provoked justifiable anger from government officials, politicians, student leaders, and the public alike. Emotions are running high—as evidenced by the barrage of statements and street protests in Dhaka and elsewhere—but so is the case in India. It is precisely during times like this that cooler heads need to prevail. We agree with the Indian high commissioner that Indo-Bangladesh ties cannot be judged by a single issue. But this is a mess of India's own making, and to extricate itself from it and stabilise bilateral relations, it must help prevent the disinformation campaign over "minority persecution" that is fuelling unrest. And it must stop demonising Bangladesh.

Bangladesh, too, needs to frame its own response, and fast, given the continued fallout of the arrest of Hindu religious leader Chinmoy Krishna Das, with reports emerging of anti-Bangladesh posturing in different parts of India as well as hostile mobilisations along the border. It must be acknowledged that people in Bangladesh have shown commendable restraint so far. But much more needs to be done. The first priority is to reaffirm our commitment to national unity and continue showing restraint, despite the provocations. Chief Advisor Prof Muhammad Yunus's initiation of dialogue with the leaders of student, political and religious bodies shows a constructive approach to this crisis, which will hopefully further consolidate our response.

Unity is also needed to highlight the pluralistic character of Bangladesh in the face of the disinformation campaign run by sections of Indian media, which Hindutva groups and parties have been exploiting to rally domestic support and destabilise Bangladesh since the ouster of India's favoured leader, Sheikh Hasina. In this regard, the role of our religious leaders, particularly those from Hindu community, is particularly important as they can promote a collective vision of coexistence by debunking the false narrative of persecution and showcasing their commitment to national unity and sovereignty. The authorities, at the same time, must take stricter measures to address any rights concerns of minority communities. Official investigations into past violence against minorities must also be more visible and result-oriented.

But perhaps the most important thing to do now is streamline efforts to counter the systemic propaganda on India's side. In recent days, we have seen reports on circulation of videos and pictures that have later been proven to be false. In fact, such attempts have been ongoing since August 5 to exaggerate isolated incidents of minority attacks in order to bolster the narrative of persecution. Unfortunately, the Indian media continues to be a reference point for the Western media and India-linked politicians. This calls for a better and more coordinated response from Bangladesh so that our side of the story gets the coverage it deserves.

The challenge we face is multifaceted, but we must remain united and say no to any divisive tactics. The anti-Bangladesh and anti-Muslim politics in India will likely lose steam if we continue to be vigilant. The Indian authorities, for their part, must match their commitment with meaningful actions that de-escalate tensions and take our relations in a positive direction.

Awami League's legacy of corruption

TIB report reveals how it held the country hostage to bribery, corruption

An estimated Tk 1.46 lakh crore being paid in bribes for services during the 15 years of Awami League rule is truly mindboggling. This estimate was derived by Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) from an analysis of six household surveys conducted between 2010 and 2023. The most recent survey, which assessed the extent of corruption between May 2023 and April 2024, revealed that 70.9 percent of respondents encountered corruption while seeking services, collectively paying a total of Tk 10,902 crore in bribes.

Among the sectors analysed, passport services were identified as the most corrupt (86 percent of respondents), followed by the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (85.2 percent), law enforcement agencies (74.5 percent), judicial services (62.3 percent), and land services (51 percent). Overall, 50.8 percent of surveyed households reported paying bribes or being forced to pay extra for services. These findings underscore how the former regime normalised corruption, compelling citizens to engage in unethical practices to access basic services.

Shockingly, the highest average bribe amount was recorded in the judicial services sector, at Tk 30,972 per household. The fact that individuals were forced to resort to unlawful measures even for legal assistance underscores the extent to which the regime undermined law and order. This not only points to the institutional decay during its tenure but also reveals that, far from maintaining a "zero-tolerance" stance on corruption as claimed, Awami League turned the country into a mafia state. Citizens were left at the mercy of systemic corruption, while mechanisms for accountability completely collapsed. Given this, rebuilding a system of checks and balances to steer the country away from this cesspool of corruption will understandably require substantial time and effort.

The consequences of such widespread corruption were catastrophic, disproportionately affecting low-income and marginalised groups. The survey also found that corruption rates were higher when individuals sought services in person compared to when using online or mixed methods, even though the latter approaches were not without flaws.

Following the ouster of the corrupt and fascist AL regime, the nation has placed high expectations on the interim government. Chief among these is the hope for substantial measures to dismantle institutionalised corruption that spread like cancer. To this end, the current government must strictly implement TIB's recommendations—such as full digitisation of services, introduction of one-stop service systems, and strong legal action against those involved in corruption. Additionally, it must comprehensively reform institutions tasked with combating corruption, such as the Anti-Corruption Commission.

The risks of turning symbols into battlegrounds



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Flags hold a special place in the hearts of nations. They are not just pieces of cloth fluttering in the wind—they carry the weight of collective memory, identity, and pride. When someone burns or desecrates a flag, it's more than an act of protest; it's a statement that can cut deep and spark anger, sometimes even chaos.

Recent incidents involving the desecration of national flags in both India and Bangladesh have turned into flashpoints, threatening to unravel delicate ties between the two neighbours. These actions, whether deliberate or impulsive, are a reminder of how fragile relationships can be when symbols of identity are treated carelessly. Let's talk about why these symbols matter so much, how such actions deepen divides, and what lessons history can teach us about handling these situations better.

Tensions have been running high between Bangladesh and India after a few troubling events. In Kolkata, protesters outside the Deputy High Commission of Bangladesh set fire to the Bangladeshi flag along with an effigy of the chief adviser. In Agartala, protesters attacked the Assistant High Commission of Bangladesh. Meanwhile in Bangladesh, reports emerged of students walking over images of the Indian tricolour painted on the ground in some prestigious educational institutions.

These acts have triggered outrage on both sides. Bangladesh's foreign ministry issued statements expressing serious concerns and resentment about the attacks on its diplomatic missions, noting that such protests breached security arrangements and made their staff feel unsafe. In India, some hospitals and medical associations reacted by declaring that they would stop treating Bangladeshi patients, a move that could have serious human consequences for people who seek medical help across borders. Meanwhile, the hotel and restaurant owners' association in Tripura announced they were temporarily banning Bangladeshi tourists.

These retaliatory moves show how quickly emotions can escalate and turn minor incidents into major controversies, deepening mistrust

and threatening the goodwill between neighbouring countries that share a long history and complex ties.

The history and power of flags

Flags, as a concept, are relatively new in the grand sweep of history. They became widely recognised symbols of nationhood in the 18th and 19th centuries. As political theorist Benedict Anderson explains in *Imagined Communities*, nations are constructed through shared



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symbols and stories. A flag is one such symbol that embodies the collective imagination of a country's people.

But that same power also makes flags easy targets. Throughout history, flag desecration has been a provocative form of protest. During the Vietnam War, the United States saw widespread flag burning as an act of defiance against its government. In South Africa, during apartheid, anti-government activists burnt the national flag to reject the regime's legitimacy.

The emotions tied to flags vary by country. In the US, the First Amendment protects flag desecration as a form of free speech. But in countries like Bangladesh and India, where the national identity is closely tied to hard-won independence struggles, such acts are seen as deeply offensive and often lead to severe backlash. The recent incidents show how such provocations can lead to a ripple effect. On the surface, these acts

may appear as isolated incidents, but they tap into deeper insecurities and grievances. The emotional reactions they provoke often blur the lines between rational discourse and blind outrage.

The role of sensationalist media in fanning the flames is impossible to ignore. For example, in Bangladesh, the arrest of a former ISKCON member was widely misrepresented by sections of the Indian media as an attack on Hindu minorities, despite evidence showing that it was unrelated. The tragic murder of a lawyer in Chattogram during clashes between the former ISKCON member's followers and police was also sensationalised to create religious tensions.

These skewed narratives don't just inflame tempers, they shift public focus from genuine issues to symbolic conflicts, making peaceful resolutions even harder to achieve.

The role of the law

The Flag Act, 1972 in Bangladesh and its 2010 amendment impose penalties for flag desecration, including up to two years of imprisonment and a fine. India also has stringent guidelines under its Flag Code, dictating how the flag must be treated and prescribing punishment for violations.

In countries like Denmark, burning a foreign flag is illegal, while burning the national flag is allowed under free speech rights. In Saudi Arabia, desecrating the flag, which features Islamic scripture, is considered both a religious and national offence.

Laws like these reflect a nation's values, but they can only go so far in preventing symbolic provocations. Addressing the root causes of such acts—be it political dissatisfaction, social unrest or inter-group tensions—requires broader efforts beyond legislation.

When emotions boil over symbols like flags, they risk diverting

attention from more pressing issues. For Bangladesh and India, this includes vital concerns like Sheikh Hasina, water-sharing agreements, trade partnerships, and border management.

In George Orwell's *1984*, the manipulation of symbols is central to maintaining control over society. Likewise, in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, a group of boys descends into chaos partly because of their obsession with symbols of power and fear.

These examples emphasise the importance of handling symbols carefully. Symbols can unite, but when misused or misunderstood, they can also tear societies apart.

What's the way forward?

Both the governments and civil societies must take responsibility for defusing tensions. This means avoiding knee-jerk reactions to incidents and focusing on long-term solutions. Leaders on both sides should address the root causes of such acts, be it misinformation, cultural misunderstandings or political grievances.

One way to promote greater understanding is through education. Teaching young people about the shared histories and struggles of Bangladesh and India can build empathy and mutual respect. Cultural exchanges, joint initiatives, and public dialogues can also help bridge gaps and counteract divisive narratives.

At the same time, media organisations must commit to responsible reporting. Sensationalism may grab attention, but it does so at the cost of trust and truth. As Amartya Sen argues in *The Argumentative Indian*, societies flourish when debates are grounded in reason and respect, not hysteria.

For Bangladesh and India, the stakes are too high to let flag-related controversies derail progress. Both countries face shared challenges, from climate change to economic development, and cooperation is essential for overcoming these hurdles. With careful handling, even the most provocative acts can become opportunities for dialogue and growth.

Ultimately, flags are not just pieces of cloth. They are carriers of collective hope and history. Respecting them means respecting the people and principles they represent. By focusing on what unites rather than what divides, Bangladesh and India can show the world that symbols don't have to become weapons to wield against each other. In a world increasingly fractured by identity politics, we have to look beyond the fabric and focus on the fabric of humanity itself.

Bring back married adolescent girls to schools



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Imagine a future where thousands of girls, married off too young, find their way back to classrooms. This vision is not just aspirational—it's essential. According to the Socioeconomic and Demographic Survey 2023 published by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), marriage accounts for 42 percent of student dropouts. Shockingly, 71 percent of female dropouts cite marriage as the cause, compared to three percent of boys. Girls who leave school due to marriage not only lose educational opportunities but also have lower chances of joining the formal labour market. As adults, they face lifelong economic insecurity and social marginalisation.

Last year, a BRAC survey of 50,000 households in the country, titled "Born to be a Bride," found that child marriage is happening in both poor and rich families. In addition to poverty and lack of social safety for girls, parents mentioned finding a "suitable groom" as one of the main reasons for arranging marriage for their daughters. Weak law enforcement is also responsible for child marriage. Alarming, around one and a half years of Covid pandemic-induced school closures exacerbated the

situation, with poverty pushing more families towards child marriage.

Child marriage is a violation of children's rights and a form of sexual violence. Adolescent brides face heightened health risks, increased domestic violence, and the abrupt end of their childhood. Sadly, Bangladesh has the highest child marriage rate in South Asia. According to Bangladesh Sample Vital Statistics 2023, 41.06 percent of girls under 18 years of age were married last year, a significant rise from 31.3 percent in 2020. This regression is not just disappointing, it's unacceptable.

The dropout statistics are equally bleak. While secondary school enrolment for girls has risen to 83.7 percent, 34.87 percent still drop out, with the majority leaving after primary school (Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics, 2023).

Married adolescents often face discriminatory attitudes from teachers, administrators and other students. It is considered inappropriate to have a married or pregnant girl in the classroom as she is perceived as setting a "bad example" to other students. Besides, caregiving responsibilities

prevent most married girls from continuing their education when they become mothers. They face various challenges after childbirth, which include a lack of affordable childcare, and an inflexible school routine for new mothers. Furthermore, their families, often poor, do not encourage or support their studies. Marriage and motherhood are frequently perceived as incompatible with schooling in Bangladesh, which needs to change.

While there are some efforts to prevent child marriage, hardly any organisation focuses on bringing back married adolescents to schools. They remain almost invisible in our development discourse. But there are programmes in other countries that address the multiple needs of adolescent mothers and build their agency for future planning.

The *Reencontrandome* (Finding myself again) programme in Mexico used a multipronged approach to build support networks for adolescent mothers, run workshops to enhance their skills and agency for returning to school, and gain employment. The programme taught about sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), trained SRHR care providers for providing support to adolescents, monitored the availability of contraception, identified cases of sexual violence, and referred girls to appropriate services.

By the end of the programme, significant improvements were observed: a 30 percent increase in the use of contraception among girls; a 33 percent increase in girls communicating assertively with their

partners; a 40 percent increase in girls attending school or being in paid work; a nearly 70 percent increase in girls having a reliable support network.

In Bangladesh, we should integrate policies to support married girls and adolescent mothers into existing national strategies for education, child marriage and adolescent health. Referral and tracking mechanisms should be created between health, education and child protection systems to identify pregnant adolescents in school and refer them to appropriate maternal health and child protection services. A system to track adolescent girls who have left school due to marriage or pregnancy can be developed to actively reach out to girls after their childbirth and facilitate their reintegration into school.

Moreover, parents, in-laws and community members should be made aware of the importance of education for married girls. Teachers, school staff and students need to be sensitised on the rights of married girls to help them complete their education free from stigma. Finally, married girls should be supported in balancing their caring responsibilities and studies by establishing childcare facilities near schools or offering adolescent mothers flexible school hours.

Girls married too young are more than statistics—they are individuals with dreams deferred. It's time we acknowledged their plight and prioritised their right to education. Our society must rise to this challenge and ensure that marriage is not the end of a girl's journey, but a chapter she can rewrite with dignity and hope.