

Will the families of Chawkbazar fire victims ever get compensation?

How soon is soon enough for the government?

WE are shocked to learn that one year after the devastating fire in Chawkbazar killed 71 people, none of the victims' families have yet received any compensation from the government. The only money they received so far was Tk 20,000 to meet the burial expenses of their loved ones.

Immediately after the tragedy, the Ministry of Labour and Employment promised a compensation of Tk 1 lakh each for the families of the deceased, and the Bangladesh Labour Welfare Foundation decided in a board meeting to raise the compensation money to Tk 2 lakh. The ministry also made a list of 27 deceased workers it would be helping out using the foundation's funds. Moreover, the then mayor of Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC) promised city corporation jobs to the families of the deceased. Apparently, all these promises remain unfulfilled, caught up in bureaucratic tangles. Meanwhile, after losing the sole breadwinners in the fire, the victims' families have been struggling to make both ends meet, while poverty has forced many families to stop sending their children to school.

It is simply not understandable why it should take so long to make the victims' list and compensate them. While the DSCC mayor's protocol officer said that it was very difficult to find the victims and that they have managed to get the contacts of only 31 people over the last one year, our correspondents have got the details of the 71 deceased and their family members in a single day. This just shows the apathy of the government agencies concerned towards the victims.

The Daily Star's investigation has further found that the victims' list prepared by the government did not include the names of all the deceased. What is more, when the families of those whose names were on the list went to the ministry for compensation at the call of the ministry officials, they were either told that their names were not enlisted there, or that they wouldn't be getting anything, which is nothing but harassment.

We hope the government will make no further delay in finalising the victims' list and compensating their families. Needless to say, the delay in getting compensation will only increase their miseries.

Syndicate openly providing illegal gas connections

Are the authorities afraid to take action?

WE are alarmed to learn that a syndicate is openly stealing natural gas worth crores of taka from the gas supply lines each month and providing illegal gas connections in three upazilas of Brahmanbaria. According to a report by *The Daily Star*, the syndicate is even issuing fake "demand notes" and "bill books" to clients and collecting bills through accounts in different banks.

What's even more shocking—and what perhaps explains the recklessness with which the crimes are being carried out—is that a Union Parishad chairman as well as local political leaders are involved in the racket, according to locals. An official of the government-owned Bakhraabad Gas Distribution Company Limited (BGDCL), the organisation the syndicate is posing as, said that the criminals are so powerful they even harass and beat up BGDCL officials during disconnection drives.

How is it possible that such a group is allowed to operate so openly and sell at least 15,000 illegal gas connections, each for Tk 60,000-90,000? Are we to believe that the authorities aren't aware of its criminal activities or the involvement of influential people with close connections to the ruling party? Or are they simply too afraid to carry out their duties?

Use of illegal gas connections has become rampant all over the country, despite repeated assurances from the authorities that such connections would be permanently disabled and action would be taken against the fraudulent actors. The fact is, such illegal activities would continue if syndicates are allowed to operate with impunity as they are in Brahmanbaria. The BGDCL official himself has admitted that simply disconnecting the illegal pipes is not enough as the racket lays kilometres of illegal pipeline in one night. There's no alternative to taking stern and immediate action against the syndicate, particularly those who are (mis)using their positions of power.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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For the love of language

We may not have had the good fortune of meeting with the martyrs of the Language Movement of 1952, yet their patriotic spirit remains alive, through those who live today, and I hope it will remain so until the end of time. Growing up in a foreign land, I often tried to fathom the richness of the Bangla language. As an adult now, I feel that our language has always had the essence to enthrall. With such a rich heritage and literature, why wouldn't it?

I try to nurture it as well as I can. However, it seems to me that a segment of the younger generation today—especially those living outside Bangladesh and sadly even some living within—is compromising the authenticity of Bangla for their convenience. To me, their dissonant amalgamation of Bangla with a western accent is nothing short of shameful and demands to be rectified urgently. I earnestly hope that the this situation will change and people will be able to give their language the respect it deserves.

Nafees Ahmed Noor, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia

Cohesive education is key to continued development

AISHA BINTE ABDUR ROB

FROM being dismissed as a "basket case" at birth to being hailed as a "development surprise" for some years now, there are few parallels to the Bangladeshi development success story thus far. However, in scaling new heights of economic growth, Bangladesh must find more footholds beyond garments exports and remittances. The need for a more competitive workforce translates to a demand for greater investments in human capital—and in the economy of the future, human capital will entail more than conventional hard skills. There is now a recognised need for building soft skills pertaining to social cohesion, which the education system is apt to inculcate in new generations of economic actors. Socially cohesive education is, therefore, an imperative for Bangladesh in achieving continued development.

The meteoric rise of Bangladesh's economy certainly traces a stunning developmental trajectory. However, as Bangladesh approaches the prospect of graduating from the "Least Developed Country" status in 2024, new challenges loom on the horizon. Not only will the economy have to grapple with the loss of substantial LDC privileges, it will also find itself pitted against stronger competitors. This transition is made more complex and uncertain by the onset of the Fourth Industrial Revolution which portends transformative shifts in economies around the globe.

The World Bank's Development Update on Bangladesh (October 2019) underscores the importance of improving labour productivity and filling the current skills gap for maintaining the country's economic momentum. Thus, human capital will be key to Bangladesh's sustained economic growth in this new climate of possibilities and challenges. As stated by the World Bank's Country Director for Bangladesh and Bhutan, human capital development is now the critical stepping stone to realising Bangladesh's vision for growth.

The nexus between improved education and enhanced human capital is well-established in both development theory and practice. The policy emphasis on educating for human capital is also common across developed and developing countries. This rests on a strong evidentiary base that links improved schooling to increased earnings, better income distribution and overall economic growth. Therefore, in directing the future course of its development trajectory through investment in human capital, Bangladesh must renew the focus on education.

While there is remarkable progress in this regard in quantitative terms, as evidenced by consistently rising levels of primary and secondary enrolment (World Bank 2016), serious and persistent questions on quality have also arisen. For instance, research by

Save the Children in 2018 revealed that 44 percent of first graders were unable to read their first word and 27 percent of third graders were reading without comprehension. Quality is now increasingly more important for Bangladesh; as Eric Hanushek's research demonstrates, it is the quality of education, more than educational attainment in quantitative terms, that enables developing countries to close the gap with developed countries in long-term economic performance.

Assessing education's role in building human capital requires an exploration of the evolved meaning of human capital in the contemporary global economic scene. According to the World Development Report 2019, enhanced human capital depends not only on

The third and most pervasive impact of education as a socialising force is through its reduction of the "social distance" between economic actors in society. Across contexts as diverse as Africa and the United States, economists have demonstrated that cultural polarisation renders economies inefficient and weakens their long-term performance. Hence, where education instils values of social cohesion, this can catalyse economic engagement within and across all factions of society, increasing the efficiency of production and exchange and thereby augmenting economic growth.

In Bangladesh, much advocacy and activism efforts have been expended on quantitative progress in education and some also on qualitative improvements

schooling and can play a principal role in enhancing soft skills-based human capital. This is because textbooks can reproduce social constructs and advance the enterprise of nation-building. Correspondingly, textbooks shape the worldviews of the upcoming generation of economic actors whose interactions in the economic sphere will set the pace of development for years to come.

An analysis of a selection of NCTB textbooks against the criteria of social cohesion reveals some deeply concerning trends—majority ethnic and religious identities obscuring the heterogeneity of Bangladeshi society, gender stereotyping and tokenism, limited recognition of social inequality and injustice and few expressions of fundamental values like equality, human dignity and non-discrimination.



Textbooks can play a principal role in enhancing soft skills-based human capital.

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improving the conventionally important hard skills, but also soft skills such as empathy and collaboration. There is a substantial body of research that makes these implicit links between education, social cohesion and economic growth more explicit.

In addition to transmitting knowledge and skills, education can make a vital contribution to economic growth through its role as a socialising force. As Mark Gradstein and Moshe Justman have argued, education can potentially diminish the costs of norm enforcement, by inculcating such norms through education, and avoiding costs arising from conflicts between diverse social groups. In both senses, cohesive education carries substantial benefit from the development perspective.

However, there has been scant attention to education's potential to socialise. There is thus a dearth of empirical evidence on the extent to which education in Bangladesh is cohesive and can bridge across social divides for a progressive economy.

Research undertaken at the Centre for Peace and Justice, Brac University, in collaboration with the World Faiths Development Dialogue, Georgetown University, USA, addresses this dearth by studying textbooks under the National Curriculum and Textbook Board, which is the state-owned publishing house for textbooks. The study assesses the content of these textbooks based on criteria of social cohesion.

Textbooks have a central role in

The study marks the need for a new focus on the quality of education measured against the demand for improved human capital, recognising socially cohesive education as a catalyst for economic growth. To conclude, therefore, Bangladesh's economic future pivots on its preparedness for impending challenges and adaptivity to evolving global markets. Education is the prime site for investment in this future and thus, the delivery of socially cohesive education is an imperative that must be met at all levels of Bangladesh's governance, advocacy and activism.

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PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

Reform or Revolution



DANIEL CHIROT

THE best-known modern revolutions have invariably been preceded by increasing polarisation and an inability to solve pressing social and economic problems. Growing hostility and mistrust fuel protest, eventually leading to violence. Extremism increases because moderates find themselves forced to ally themselves with those farther to the left or right. Those who try to find compromises with moderate forces on the other side wind up being vilified and excluded. That is happening today in much of the world, including the United States. The US is not about to have another revolution, but it may be creeping closer as the political centre collapses.

The most obvious historical examples show how this has happened in the past. The French Revolution of 1789 was at first guided by liberal Enlightenment ideals. But the King and aristocracy resisted losing their privileges. Foreign powers intervened against the Revolution; moderate leaders like Lafayette, a hero of the American Revolution who wanted to establish a constitutional monarchy, were increasingly reviled by the left as royalist tools and by the right as revolutionary traitors. That played into the hands of the Jacobins, who instituted a reign of terror and provoked a brutal civil war that killed hundreds of thousands.

In the Russian Revolution of 1917, at first more liberal and moderate socialists, led by Alexander Kerensky, took power. They made the mistake of not getting Russia out of World War I, and when challenged by right-wing generals trying to restore the monarchy, they panicked and distributed arms to Lenin's Bolsheviks, who took advantage of the situation. In so polarised a situation, moderate socialists remained allied with the Bolsheviks until

they found out, too late, that they, too, were destined for extermination.

In Iran in 1978 and 1979, as the Shah rejected moderate democratic reforms until it was too late, Islamists overthrew the prime minister, Shapour Bakhtiar, a long-time liberal who sought a compromise solution, and forced him into exile in France (where Iranian agents murdered him in 1991). Bakhtiar was followed by an alliance of more moderate Islamists and radicals. But Ayatollah

A unifying thread of such situations is that societies become politically so divided only after a long period in which it is increasingly clear that reforms are necessary, but those in power, oblivious to how dire the situation has become, block the measures that could save the regime.

Ruhollah Khomeini skilfully used the threat of outside interference and the naïveté of the moderates to impeach and exile the centrist Islamist president, Abolhassan Banisadr. Once in full control, Khomeini's regime unleashed a wave of bloody repression.

One could cite many other cases: Mexico in 1910, anti-colonial revolutions after World War II, Cuba in 1959, and Afghanistan when it fell first under communist control in 1978, before being

taken over by the Taliban in 1996 after a long series of civil and international wars.

William Butler Yeats captured it best with one of his most famous poems, *The Second Coming*, written about Ireland's revolt against British rule in 1919: "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world / The blood-dimmed tide is loosed... The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity."

A unifying thread of such situations is that societies become politically so divided only after a long period in which it is increasingly clear that reforms are necessary, but those in power, oblivious to how dire the situation has become, block the measures that could save the regime. There are few better examples of this than interviews with the Shah a few years before his violent overthrow. His people loved him, he insisted, and his paternalistic rule was far better than undisciplined Western democracy. Czar Nicholas II thought he could ignore the extent of discontent before he entered World War I. In the 1920s and 1930s, and in some cases even later, colonial European powers refused to relinquish control in their dominions by excluding moderate proposals to move toward gradual self-rule. In all these cases, repressing or marginalising moderate compromisers led only to extremism.

Of course, not all, or even most, analogous situations lead to actual revolutions, but there is a lesson to be learned from the most extreme outcomes. Delaying reforms, or pursuing reforms that do not go far enough to solve growing social and economic problems, leads to increased polarisation. The centre cannot hold, and the moderates have to choose: join with more extreme political leaders and ideologies or accept political (if not actual) exile.

A catastrophic example was Hitler's rise to power in 1933. Conventional conservative (today called "neoliberal") solutions to unemployment were not working. Conservatives so feared and

hated moderate social democrats that instead of trying to ally with them to create what in the US became Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, they chose to put the Nazis in power. Their assumption that they could easily control Hitler did not survive that decision.

Today, similar tendencies and accompanying violence have already led to the terrible civil war in Syria and are making compromise ever more difficult in India, Bolivia and elsewhere in Latin America, and in Iraq, Iran, and Lebanon. Hong Kong, where an impossible dream of independence has made reasonable compromise extremely difficult, may be another example.

But wasn't the American Revolutionary War of 1775-1783 different? The Americans had a genuine political revolution, but no social revolution, as the established elites who led it retained power. Tragically, they did not successfully address the issue of slavery. Some leading figures assumed it would gradually die out on its own. Instead, after about 1820, American society became increasingly polarised. In the South, led by South Carolina, extremists took over, eventually making impossible any compromise that would have gradually ended slavery. The result was an extraordinarily vicious civil war. Today, that division remains unresolved. The continuing division about the persistent legacy of race-based slavery is a principal, though certainly not the only, cause of growing political polarisation today.

So, if the past counsels anything about the present and future for much of the world (certainly including the US), it is that there is no stable alternative to sustaining the centre, even when doing so requires overcoming elite resistance to reforms.

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