

'Revolutionary change needed in existing systems'

Prof Serajul Islam Choudhury, a leading public intellectual and academic of the country, talks to Emran Mahfuz of The Daily Star about the government's handling of the impacts of Covid-19, inequalities and injustices in society, future threats and the need for reforms. The following is a translated excerpt.

Covid-19 has changed our lives and lifestyles in a manner never seen before. There is no certainty about when we will be free from its shackles. How did we come to this point?

This pandemic is unprecedented indeed, but its consequences are partly the result of our ignorance. We have taken nature for granted, and are consequently suffering from climate change, cyclones, rising tides, floods, droughts, etc. The coronavirus is one such outcome. In the last hundred years, humanity has witnessed tremendous progress in terms of science and technology, yet it could not prevent a disaster like Covid-19. We have invested in manufacturing weapons of mass destruction and indulged in material progress. If we had spent even a portion of our energy to the prevention of diseases and treatment, then perhaps this pandemic could have been avoided, or it couldn't have hurt us the way it did.

Many countries have dealt with Covid-19 quite efficiently. Unfortunately, Bangladesh fares poorly in this regard. Many say it's due to the lack of proper coordination and prevention measures. How do you see it?

Certainly, there has been a lack of coordination as well as a lack of sense of responsibility. The state is duty-bound to look after the citizens and ensure their safety. The most basic needs for their survival are food and shelter. Since the authorities are least concerned about our health, treatment has now become more of a commodity available only for those who can afford it. Our healthcare system is in tatters. Such a development was made possible by the state's lack of accountability since no one can dare question those in power. The National Assembly is not effective, there is no functional opposition party, and there is no freedom of the press. In addition, there

is the Digital Security Act which is further choking the voice of the public. If those in power could have been held accountable for their action or lack thereof, then there would be proper coordination in our response and the situation could be turned in favour of the general public.

Healthcare is a basic right but the pandemic has revealed the sorry state of our healthcare system as inequality runs rampant here. How can one align this with the lofty socialist ideals that led to our liberation?

Yes, the Liberation War was fought to establish equal rights and opportunities for all people. Even before the war, there had been certain improvements but those were selective and marred with prejudice—there was vast regional disparity and class inequality. We fought the war not just for the sake of sovereignty, but also to eliminate these inequalities. Unfortunately, discrimination remains firmly in place even today and the pandemic has only exacerbated the situation. The poor seem to be getting poorer as the rich continue to deprive them.

The way forward is to break the system of individual ownership and establish social ownership. This calls for a social revolution as token reforms will no longer work. We need a fundamental change in social relations. It is the people who are deprived that can revolutionise the system along with the support from conscious individuals of the society.

Who should be held accountable for the scandalous developments with regard to issuing of fake Covid-19 certificates in Bangladesh, which suffered an image crisis as a result? Whose responsibility is it to mend the image of our nation now?

The damage done was severe and extensive. It has been proven, once again, that fraudulence



Prof Serajul Islam Choudhury

is widespread across our country even when the question is of life and death. Such fake certificates could be a fatal blow to the general public. What's dreadful is that it happened not just with the knowledge of an influential section at the Directorate General of Health Services, but with their active support.

In order to restore our image and reputation, we have to continue with our "Liberation War" in order to establish a fully democratic state and society. Another name for this democracy is socialism, which we have failed to achieve. The further we drift away from it, the more hardship and miseries we are to suffer. It is our responsibility to march forward with dignity, and that requires a political movement through an organisational approach. We need to clearly set our goals and the leadership will emerge from within the movement.

Many people and families have left the cities, jobless and without aid, in the

wake of the outbreak. Isn't it the state's responsibility to ensure they are taken care of? The intellectuals of our society remain silent while the Fourth Industrial Revolution is almost here. What should be done under such circumstances?

The Fourth Industrial Revolution does not worry me; I'm more concerned about the effects of capitalism. The coronavirus will definitely come under control one day, vaccines will be made available, and the treatment situation will improve as well. But is there any guarantee that a greater threat will not come in the future? It is our responsibility to make sure that a well-organised revolutionary change in existing systems and structures takes place to avoid the looming disorder, and this applies to every nation. Only then can a sense of internationalism be created based on cooperation and sympathy. It will be a world free from war and sustained through social production and distribution and this will restore happiness and comfort in the lives of human beings.

There have a number of high-profile crimes and corruption cases even in the midst of the pandemic, but the authorities remain nonchalant about them. What seems to be the reason behind that?

The reason behind it is that the authorities are least concerned about the interest of the general public as well as public opinion. The injustices that are happening are a matter of grave concern for the people, but not for the state. Many criminals go unpunished, and as a result, the crime rate goes up. Proper investigation will perhaps reveal that government officials and powerful people are often involved with many of the offences being committed. The ruling class does not take the consent of the masses into consideration and often takes power by force. When it comes to voting, deserving

candidates often remain unelected, as those with the most amount of money win the votes.

When the intellectuals in our society speak, it is seen that one group among them supports the government—either because they have already benefitted from government action or will soon—while another criticises it. The latter also remains optimistic that there is a chance to receive benefits in the future. However, their arguments are not strong. Even most of the media do not give them coverage in order to avoid any altercation with the authorities. Also, the government does not encourage dissent, and is therefore happy to silence the voice of the opposition. Unfortunately, neither the government nor the opposition want to explore the deeper issues of public life which are intimately linked with the state and the social system. They refuse to accept that the persisting problems are the manifestation of the existing capitalist economy and ideology, and they do so for their own benefits.

From the social perspective, how would you describe the overall state of our society?

The present condition does not seem favourable at all. Whatever improvement we see is the external view. Inside there is a whole different picture—one of increasing inequalities and injustices. It has somewhat become a norm that with progress, inequality tends to rise. Such wide-ranging inequality had never been there in our society before. This is worsening the state of poverty and making people deeply frustrated. The rich have set examples with their lack of patriotism and consumerism, which is worryingly spreading among the deprived people too.

The interview has been translated from Bangla by Minam Haq of The Daily Star.

Rayhan Kabir's arrest and the systemic exploitation of migrant workers in Malaysia



SHUPROVA TASNEEM

As early as March 2020, Human Rights Watch warned that migrants and stateless people are more at risk of virus transmission in Malaysia, and that Malaysia needs to ensure health care for all without discrimination. In

the eastern state of Sabah—home to a large population of irregular migrants, stateless people, and holders of various refugee passes who tend to live in small, crowded houses with inadequate sanitation and serious barriers to access to healthcare—the police commissioner asked all foreigners to come forward for coronavirus testing, saying, "Don't be afraid because the police will not arrest them... the most important thing is the health screening and if they are found to be healthy, then they will be allowed to go home." This same assurance was also repeated by the Malaysian national authorities.

The arrest and imminent deportation of Bangladeshi student-turned-migrant worker Mohamed Rayhan Kabir—because he dared to criticise the Malaysian government's policies towards migrant workers in a documentary by Al Jazeera—expose just how hollow those words were. Since the outbreak of the pandemic, undocumented migrant workers and refugees have been rounded up in a military-style crackdown and detained in camps under the pretext of safety measures and quarantine. Rights groups have criticised Malaysia's indiscriminate and heavy-handed approach that has ignored the rights of workers, put migrant workers at greater risk of infection in crowded detention facilities, and deterred others from seeking testing and treatment out of fear of deportation.

In the Al Jazeera documentary, a Pakistani man described how, despite being a documented worker, his family (including his children) were handcuffed and chained together under the hot sun for hours, and were only released after their documents were

verified. In his interview, Rayhan also referred to the same atmosphere of fear, saying the illegal detentions were "a clear act of racism and clear act of humiliating people. I feel scared of the future of migrants."

Rayhan's words clearly hit a little too close to home—Malaysia's track record with migrant workers is hardly one to be proud of. As early as 1998, links between state officials and the "immigration industry" had been found, where syndicates were supplying false

journalist recently spoke to *The Wire* about the collusion between law enforcement agencies and companies hiring undocumented migrant workers who are at the mercy of human traffickers and loan sharks, and how the pandemic-induced economic downturn has influenced the Malaysian authorities to take a more populist, anti-immigration stance.

The general feeling of ill-will towards migrant workers is also reflected in the Al Jazeera documentary, where an employer in

down upon them too, calling them 'dirty' or 'smelly', whether it's because of their darker skin or the perceived 'lowly' jobs that they do."

This racial discrimination is an add-on to the existing poverty and exploitation faced by migrant workers. A 2015 World Bank study showed that while Bangladeshi migrants pay the largest sum of money for recruitment, they receive the lowest wages and are most likely to be struggling with debt. In September 2019, the *Malaysiakini* reported how Bangladeshi migrant workers were allegedly being traded between firms in slave-like conditions that violated Malaysian labour laws; another report found that 96 Bangladeshis had died in Malaysia in January 2019 alone, with the Migrant Workers Right to Redress Coalition (MWR2R) raising questions about poor living conditions and barriers to seeking healthcare.

In this scenario, how do we provide adequate protection to our migrant workers? The Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment Minister Imran Ahmed's recent comments to BBC Bangla—"We have a responsibility towards Rayhan but also towards the country; we have to think of the thousands of other Bangladeshi workers in Malaysia"—demonstrates the precarious situation our workers are in. There are some eight lakh Bangladeshi migrant workers in Malaysia, of whom an estimated two lakh are undocumented. In September 2018, Malaysia stopped recruiting workers from Bangladesh following allegations of malpractices in the recruitment process and high recruitment costs. While the two countries were engaged in talks to resume the hiring of Bangladeshi workers, the resignation of Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad led to the cancellation of the fourth joint working group meeting due in February this year. After the onset of the pandemic, Malaysia then announced that no foreign workers would be recruited for at least the remainder of this year.

As a result, the talks being held last month between Dhaka and Kuala Lumpur on regularising the huge number of undocumented Bangladeshi workers in Malaysia (thus saving them from deportation)

are a welcome prospect for Bangladesh, and our authorities are in no rush to jeopardise these discussions. However, the heavy-handed approach that Malaysia has taken to Rayhan's "dissent"—arresting him and planning his deportation, revoking his perfectly valid work permit, and putting him at risk in an environment that is already hostile to immigrants—can hardly be ignored either. We must also remember that a majority of Bangladeshi workers in Malaysia are in low-wage, precarious employment that cannot be considered to be "decent work" according to ILO standards, and given the desperate conditions they are being faced with during the pandemic (this daily reported in April how a huge number of Bangladeshi workers in Malaysia were facing acute food shortages), they are likely to become even more vulnerable to exploitation.

In the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, the exploitation of migrant workers across the world has received renewed attention, and it has become clear that Bangladeshi migrant workers specifically are at a great disadvantage in their host countries. We must work with other countries and regional bodies, and fight for our workers on international platforms to ensure that their rights are not routinely ignored. Additionally, the governments of both Bangladesh and Malaysia must take steps to dismantle the lucrative industry that has mushroomed around the recruitment and management of migrant labour, creating a network of syndicates who prey on vulnerable workers, and deal with the rampant corruption that is so often linked to labour migration in both countries. Given that Malaysia relies heavily on migrant labour for low-skilled jobs—according to the ILO, around 20 percent of the country's labour force is made up of documented migrants—and that the Malaysian economy is expected to still require this labour force in the post-pandemic era, now is the time for us to raise our voices and stand by Bangladeshi migrant workers when they need us the most.

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Malaysian police arrested Mohammad Rayhan Kabir, a Bangladeshi student-turned-migrant worker who spoke in a documentary aired by Al Jazeera, on July 24, 2020. PHOTO: COLLECTED

documents to illegal migrants, according to a paper by the Yusof Ishak Institute. The report also detailed how the 1997-1998 Malaysian economic crisis led to the festering of anti-immigration sentiments and nation-wide crackdowns on undocumented migrants, culminating in clashes that left eight migrants and one policeman dead in a detention camp in Kuala Lumpur on April 26, 1998. More than two decades later, the situation seems to have hardly changed. A senior Malay

marketplace speaks of how South Asian migrants are "culturally" different and do not follow the same standards of cleanliness as Malaysians, even while admitting that these low-skilled workers are recruited because they are most likely to do labour-intensive work for long hours. However, the country's race issues are nothing new. Malaysian columnist Sade Dayangku echoed Rayhan's words on racism, writing "Not only are they treated like lesser humans by employers, but our society looks

QUOTABLE Quote



JOHN F. KENNEDY (1917-1963) 35th president of the United States.

Too often we enjoy the comfort of opinion without the discomfort of thought.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Pueblo material
 - 6 Jobs for detectives
 - 11 Yawning, perhaps
 - 12 Cast out
 - 13 Snipping aid
 - 14 Door holder's words
 - 15 Clock reading
 - 17 Soak up
 - 18 Lessen
 - 22 Persia, today
 - 23 Relaxed
 - 27 African nation
 - 29 Raring to go
 - 30 Guarantee
 - 32 Eye drop
 - 33 Concert performers
 - 35 Saloon
- DOWN**
- 1 Crunch targets
 - 2 Period
 - 3 Hockey's Bobby
 - 4 Clobbering
 - 5 Astronomer
 - 6 Hubble
 - 6 Babar's wife
 - 7 Chopping tool
 - 8 Plops down
 - 9 Ticklish Muppet
 - 10 Ooze
 - 16 Steel ingredient
 - 20 Supplies with staff
 - 21 Getting lively
 - 24 Gets older
 - 25 Pants part
 - 26 Makes mistakes
 - 28 Familiarizes
 - 31 Have lunch
 - 34 Inexperienced gamers, in slang
 - 35 Soaking spot
 - 36 Plot unit
 - 37 Lion sound
 - 40 Umbrella part
 - 42 Use a towel
 - 43 Moody music
 - 44 Photographer

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BETLE BAILEY



BY MORT WALKER



BABY BLUES



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