

Irregularities in land acquisition in Cox's Bazar revealed

Bring syndicate of land grabbers to justice, compensate evicted land owners

An investigative report in *The Daily Star* on September 19 revealed that a nexus of district land officials, politicians, journalists and middlemen are feasting on land acquisition for 21 development projects of the government in Cox's Bazar. According to government documents, land acquisition for the Single Mooring Point Project being implemented by Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation began in Sonapara village under Kalamarchhara union of Moheshkhali upazila on September 18. Forty acres of land were acquired there, leading to eviction of at least 400 poor families. While under the Acquisition and Requisition of Immovable Property Act, 2017, the government is supposed to pay three times the market value of land acquired in compensation for the owners, these families were not even paid the market price of their land.

The same happened in the land acquisition process for 20 other big development projects in the district. And all of these were only made public after Rab recently arrested one person in relation to this with cash and diaries. An investigation by the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) found that a huge nexus comprising big shots of the district—the land acquisition branch of Cox's Bazar district administration, top political leaders of the district, local journalists and middlemen—held people hostage throughout the land acquisition process. The ACC also found that the syndicates not only forced the landowners to sell their land at low prices but also compelled them to pay huge sums of bribes to get necessary documents.

We call upon the government to immediately identify and break these syndicates who have been leeching off of government projects and evicting the local people unlawfully. It is good to know that the ACC has already identified the nexus and have frozen the bank accounts of the Cox's Bazar mayor, Mojibor Rahman, councillors and officials who were actively involved in the racket. We hope all other high-level government officials, political leaders and the middlemen involved in this will be identified and held to account. Action should be taken against them according to the law for corruption on such a large scale. At the same time, the evicted land owners should be compensated for their sufferings. They should at least get the fair price of their land according to the law.

India's special permission to export 25,000 tonnes of onions to Bangladesh

But we could do with more

COMING on the heels of the ban on onion exports from India, the report that the Indian government is likely to grant special permission to export 25,000 tonnes of onion to Bangladesh, comes as some respite. Bangladesh was caught completely off-guard by this abrupt ban. The embargo was bound to have an adverse effect on prices, since there is no dearth of unscrupulous traders who jump at every opportunity to reap a whirlwind profit. And that indeed was the case, with the price of onions going up manifold in the matter of 24 hours.

While we hope that the special permission would be effective without further loss of time, we also feel that the Indian government should allow movement of the more than 800 trucks stranded on various border points for the last few days. If we understand correctly, the relevant Indian rules put this shipment out of the purview of the ban. Time is of essence here, since with every passing day, the conditions of the onions loaded on trucks will worsen, and most of the nearly 16,000 tons of onions, purchased and paid for by Bangladeshi importers, might be beyond human consumption.

We accept that a country may have its own reasons for taking decisions related to external trade, but if that comes without adequate notice, it upsets the plans of the country importing a particular commodity from it, especially if that happens to be an essential and fast-moving item. We believe that the Bangladesh diplomatic missive to India adequately reflects Bangladesh's position.

While we welcome the Indian decision to grant special permission to export onion to Bangladesh, we would hope that Bangladesh would have the benefit of an advance notice of any Indian decision concerning changes in its export policy, particularly if that is related to very essential items.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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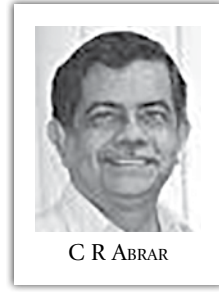
No end to accidents

Day after day, whether there is a pandemic or not, one killer that has remained active for too long is road accidents. According to a report, at least 7,855 people were killed and 13,330 others injured in 5,516 road accidents across the country last year. Reckless driving, dilapidated roads, unfit vehicles, unskilled drivers, using mobile phones while driving vehicles, and lack of awareness among road users are some of the main reasons behind the incessant fatalities. This year too, saw many deaths from road accidents, even during the lockdown when there was much less traffic on the roads and highways. It's a pity that while road crashes continue to claim lives, we just sit and watch. When will we realise the seriousness of it? When one of our own becomes a victim, or even worse, when we do?

Sajida Sultana, Chattogram

Shrinking space for cultural and artistic freedoms

Twin fangs of bigotry and intolerance of dissent



C R ABRAR

It was a peaceful cultural exhibition on a burning issue; an issue that has been haunting thousands of families of victims and resonating among millions of conscientious citizens of the land and beyond. Prudent organisers shifted the venue of the event to the plinth of the nearby *Raju Bhashkorjo* at the University of Dhaka premises, although it was originally planned in front of the national museum at Shabbagh (by now an established site to express dissent) on August 24. They had to do so as a large number of supporters of the ruling party had already gathered at Shabbagh to protest the pernicious August 21, 2004 carnage.

At the fresh site, the event began as planned with speakers expressing their concern on the increased incidents of crossfires or encounters. Some activists displayed poignant photographs and others held placards reiterating messages of the constitutional guarantee of the right to life, the right to be treated in accordance with the law, and the like. Within a short time, the peaceful exhibition was disrupted by the councillor of Ward 26 of Dhaka city corporation, a member of the ruling party. The councillor forced his way into the crowd with a band of followers and demanded that "the deliberations should cease immediately". In unequivocal terms, he declared that "first justice has to be ensured for August 21 killings and until then, demands for justice for all other cases must be kept in abeyance".

The ruling party men stood in front of the Drik Gallery's banner wielding their own placards, and also laid a siege of the site. The councillor and his supporters refused to respond when they were asked why a single crime should be privileged over the other, why demands for justice cannot be raised for all wrongdoings simultaneously and whether he or his party endorsed crossfire as a method of law enforcement.

During the entire episode, the members of law enforcement agencies stood still nearby, acting like bystanders and refusing to step in to dissuade, let alone stop, the intruders. They failed to give protection to the organisers to carry out their programme uninterrupted. Faced with a situation of likely outbreak of violence, the Drik event was cut short.

The Drik experience is not a one-off incident. Rather, it is a stark example of how hard it has become for free thinking cultural activists to express their views and display their exhibits in current day Bangladesh. A plethora of examples indicate that artists, singers and cartoonists have also been targeted as objects of violence. A number of Baul singers have been subjected to degrading treatment and intimidation, and their instruments and music rooms have been vandalised and torched. In most cases, state agencies failed to provide any protection and were unable to bring the perpetrators to justice.

Within a year of the passing away of legendary Baul singer Shah Abdul Karim of Shunamganj, extremists and bigots attacked and vandalised his premises in 2010. In a life spanning 93 years, Karim composed about 1500 songs and authored

six important books. His songs inspired the nation to demand due rights, including during the 1954 Jukta Front elections, 1969 mass uprising, 1971 Liberation War and 1990s anti-dictatorship movement. The perpetrators remain at large.

Noted Baul singer Shariat (Sarker) Bayati was arrested for his performance in Dhamrai on December 24, 2019. After his recorded concert was broadcast on Youtube, he was charged under the much contested Digital Security Act for "hurting religious sentiments". He was denied bail and remains incarcerated to this day.

In mid-May this year, the *ashor ghor* (music room) of another noted Baul exponent Ronesh Thakur was torched. Many musical instruments including drums, harmonium and monochord kept in the room were burnt to ashes with the room. To carry forward the Baul philosophy of peace, harmony and fraternity, Thakur set up his *Bidhyapeeth*

In the above cases, including that of the Shabbagh melee, the actions of those in administration and law enforcement agencies have been disappointing. In most instances, the perpetrators are yet to be identified, let alone charged and punished. Examples are aplenty when on the grounds of "maintaining public order", organisers and artists have been advised by state agencies to desist from holding their programmes if and when they were approached for protection. In other instances, when complaints are lodged by those purportedly "hurt" by the songs or displays of artists or cultural activists, little time is wasted before police apprehend the latter and put them behind bars and seek remand. Needless to say, all these further embolden the forces that stand for a single ideology and are intolerant of dissent and freethinking, or those who promote a variant of faith that is exogenous to this land.

protest and hope", notes UNESCO. The organisation also acknowledges that "artistic freedom is the freedom to imagine, create and distribute diverse cultural expressions free of governmental censorship, political interference or the pressures of non-state actors". The UN Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights notes "Artistic expression is not a luxury; it is a necessity—a defining element of our humanity and a fundamental human right enabling everyone to develop and express their humanity".

The state has a duty to recognise the essential role of art in the life and development of the individual and of society, and accordingly has a duty to protect, defend and assist artists and their freedom of creation, according to the UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Status of the Artist, 1980.

The rise of obscurantism, coupled with political expediency by the ruling



Baul Ronesh Thakur standing in the middle of his torched music room.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

(school) and organises regular soirees. The school attracts Baul fans from all over the country.

The incidents of assault on Baul festivals by obscurantist elements appear to have become a common occurrence. In 2011, in Pangsha of Rajbari district, the heads and beards of 24 Bauls were forcibly shaved on the grounds that they turned heretic. Religious fanatics took them to a mosque and made them perform "tawba" (repent). When his attention was drawn to the incident, the then member of parliament of the constituency dismissed it as a "trivial incident". A similar incident took place in July 2016, when criminals assaulted Bauls and set their *akhra* (den) on fire at a remote village in Damurhuda upazila of Chuadanga. In this incident, about 20 criminals blindfolded and tied up three Bauls to a tree, including a woman, and cut their hair with a sharp knife before setting fire to the tin-shed *akhra*.

Even Baul enthusiasts have become targets of the dogmatists. Two teachers of Rajshahi University were allegedly murdered by extremists in 2014 and 2016. A physician was attacked in Kushtia in 2014.

Satirists and cartoonists also have to bear the brunt of state wrath. Scores of citizens have been charged and detained for caricaturing leading public figures and tarnishing the image of the country and relations with friendly countries under the Digital Security Act. In mid-May this year, after raiding the home of cartoonist Ahmed Kabir Kishore and confiscating his phone and computers, RAB alleged that it found "evidence" of him "spreading rumours to create confusion by drawing cartoons of ruling party leaders." Earlier, Kishore had posted a series of cartoons on Facebook titled "Life in the Time of Corona". The satirical cartoons were critical of the government's response to the Covid-19 crisis.

Artists play a vital role in contesting or critiquing political ideologies, religious beliefs and cultural and social preferences. In that way, art makes a vital contribution to reinforcing democracy. The cultural and creative arts play an important role for "ensuring inclusive economic growth, reducing inequalities and achieving goals set out in the Sustainable Development Agenda". "It has the extraordinary capacity to express resistance and rebellion,

elite, has had a harmful effect on the age old tolerant cultural tradition of Bangladesh that promotes spiritualism, communal harmony and humanism. The failure of the state under successive regimes and its attempt to placate religious extremists have exposed the exponents of syncretism and pluralism to unmitigated violence. While a proud secular nation imbued in the spirit of the War of Liberation gradually slithers into the abyss of intolerance and dogmatism, its rulers appear to remain oblivious, if not complicit in this aberration. Artists, singers, art enthusiasts and cultural activists who stand for freedom, diversity and coexistence become the victims. The onus lies on us all to mount a united challenge to this pugnacious deviation and restore the country to the great ideals of freedom, liberty and tolerance, and ensure accountability of those who are tasked to run the state while upholding the freedoms enshrined in the constitution.

C R Abrar is an academic with interest on human rights and migration. He acknowledges the support of rights activist Rezaur Rahman Lenin in writing this article.

PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

How to save nine million children

SAMIR SAHA

LAST year, a child died of pneumonia every 39 seconds, on average. A form of acute respiratory infection, pneumonia is detectable, treatable and preventable. Pneumococcal conjugate vaccines (PCVs)—which protect against the bacteria that cause pneumonia and meningitis (a life-threatening brain infection)—have existed since 2000. But their use has been concentrated largely in developed countries, for a simple reason: they are very expensive. Fortunately, a new vaccine could change that.

As it stands, pneumonia disproportionately affects the most vulnerable: children and the elderly, especially those living in developing countries. In 2019, 70 million children were not fully protected by PCVs. More than 80 percent of them lived in Southeast Asia, the Western Pacific, and Africa. This figure may be even higher in 2020, because many of the countries with large populations of unvaccinated children have reported major disruptions to their immunisation programmes as a result of Covid-19.

Before the pandemic, children in low-income countries were nearly 14 times more likely than children in high-income countries to die before the age of five, owing largely to pneumonia and other acute infections. That rate may be set to rise: new data show that the pandemic-related disruptions to healthcare systems and decreased access to food could cause an additional one million child deaths in low- and middle-income countries.

In this context, ensuring broad, affordable access to critical vaccines,



including PCVs, is more urgent than ever. After all, vaccines have long proved to be the best tool we have to protect children, particularly in poor and fragile countries, where millions of families lack access to high-quality health-care facilities.

Bangladesh, which introduced PCVs into its national immunisation programme in 2015, knows the difference a vaccine can make. Thanks to sustained commitment from the government and health officials, the country rapidly implemented a plan to vaccinate nearly every infant in the country.

The results speak for themselves. In less than five years, cases of severe pneumonia among Bangladeshi children have declined by about 50 percent; meningitis cases have also fallen. This is in line with developed countries' experiences: since introducing PCVs, both the United States and the

United Kingdom have documented sharp declines in the number of children with severe pneumonia caused by the pneumococcus bacteria.

Such progress reflects both direct protection of those who are vaccinated and the development of herd immunity. When the majority of people are vaccinated, the bacteria that cause pneumonia can't spread easily, meaning that people who can't be vaccinated—because they are too young, for example, or have compromised immune systems—are also protected.

By keeping children healthy, pneumococcal vaccines also help to free up additional resources for the health system. In many low-income countries, where hospital beds are limited—and becoming more limited as Covid-19 takes hold—every child who is not in a hospital

for pneumonia means that another, with an illness that may not be preventable, can get the treatment they need.

All children deserve the same protection from disease. And that is what a new vaccine, called Pneumasil—approved by the World Health Organization in December 2019, and by the Indian government in July—promises to offer. Manufactured in India, Pneumasil will be available to low-income countries at a price 30 percent lower than what they are currently paying for pneumococcal vaccines. Middle-income countries will also pay less, making Pneumasil the most affordable vaccine of its kind.

In other words, Pneumasil gives developing countries a cost-effective tool to protect vulnerable children, while boosting the dynamism of vaccine markets. With more options for PCVs available than ever before, political leaders, donors, and advocates must seize the opportunity and quickly launch immunisation programmes wherever they are needed. Failure to do so could mean death for nearly nine million children in the next decade.

When even one child suffers from a preventable disease, it is a tragedy. Allowing millions of children to die from that disease is a crime. We have the tools to save them, and the most powerful of those tools is more accessible than ever before.

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