

## The dark side of e-commerce

*No law to protect compliance, consumer rights and brand reputation*

A silver lining of Covid-19, which has had a devastating impact on the national and global economy, has been the rapid and unprecedented rise of e-commerce platforms and online transactions in the country. Online grocery stores, in particular, have experienced double-digit growth, while other e-service and e-commerce industries have had to diversify their products in an attempt to stay relevant to their customers during the pandemic. According to news reports, Bangladesh now has 2,500 e-commerce sites selling products worth USD 2.07 billion, and it is the 46th largest in the world in terms of e-commerce revenue.

While all of this is no doubt encouraging, a recent discussion of industry experts highlighted the existing road blocks to the sector's continued growth, in particular the challenges to ensuring consumers' rights and compliance in an unregulated e-commerce market. For one thing, crores of transactions are taking place on a daily basis, circumventing proper legal procedures and in violation of consumer rights. Unauthorised sellers are selling counterfeit products which are hurting the image of reputed brands, but on a broader scale, also shaking people's confidence and trust in the sector in general. Even bigger platforms, such as well-known superstores, are flouting the rules. There's also no proper mechanism through which to resolve consumer dissatisfaction in products or services. With e-commerce platforms mushrooming around the country, it's difficult, if not impossible, to monitor such illegal behaviours and practices and take appropriate action, especially as Bangladesh is yet to formulate an e-commerce act to protect consumer rights and brand reputation.

If the government is to truly implement its "Vision 2021" to build a "Digital Bangladesh," it must pay critical attention to the needs and challenges of the sector and formulate appropriate national policies and ecosystems for e-commerce to develop and flourish. As of now, e-commerce is catering to a predominantly urban populace, and if it is to reach the masses, the government and public sector must work together to develop financial, legal and digital infrastructures and invest accordingly for a future that is truly digital but also accessible. Consumers must be an integral part of the process and their concerns and trust deficits must be addressed accordingly if e-commerce is to be embraced by the public.

## Padma devours Daulatdia ferry terminal

*Immediate embankment essential to prevent further damage*

DAULATDIA ferry terminal, once again, is under threat posed by river erosion, a natural calamity faced by the region year in and year out. The mighty Padma has a ruthless record when it comes to erosion. A recent report reveals that a part of terminal-3 and its adjacent area have already been engulfed by the river over the last few days. Approach roads to pontoon 1, 2 and 3 and over 500 nearby houses were also damaged. Without immediate action, more land remains at risk. Since last year's erosion, terminal 1 and 2 still remain closed.

While it is reassuring that Water Development Board in Rajbari and Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA) jointly started dumping geo-bags to prevent further erosion, it is at best, a temporary solution. What will happen later?

Disruption of ferry services at Daulatdia as a result of river erosion has been occurring from as early as 2013. Yet, after so many years, why have the authorities failed to reach a sustainable solution? Not only does the severity of the problem impact the locomotion within the region, but it also ruins the lives of countless families living in the area as their homesteads and croplands are swallowed up, stripping them of their shelter and belongings.

Erosion at Daulatdia ferry terminal has been a topic of discussion for quite some time now. The geo-bags are of no match for the strong currents of the river. Thus, the authorities must facilitate the swift implementation of the project taken up to modernise Daulatdia and Paturia ferry terminals, which will include the construction of a 6km dam—4km upstream from the Daulatdia ferry terminal and 2km downstream—to prevent further erosion. And while that is underway, building new embankments will also help ease the woes. Constructing a new approach road and a terminal will also help curb the disruption of ferry services and prevent the never-ending tailbacks, restoring some stability to the area and the people living there. We hope that the project to strengthen the terminals will be done efficiently and without delay.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Pay attention to mental health

Recently, we have seen a steady rise in the number of suicide cases. Due to lockdown, social distancing and social isolation, people are facing some very difficult times which can lead to mental health problems.

This year, the suicide rate among university students has been quite noticeable. Though there are different workshops being held on mental health issues, they do not appear to have helped much.

Family members and friends can play a vital role here by encouraging each other to share their feelings and thereby helping others cope with their troubles. If our actions can help save even one life, we must consider it strongly.

Sweetie Akter, by email

# A game of kabadi against corruption



BLOWN' IN THE WIND

SHAMSAD MORTUZA

As the old joke has it, there is no lid in the mouth of hell where the Bengalis are kept. After all, we are the proverbial crabs who are quite efficient in dragging each other down and have no intention of seeing one of our fellow species making it to the top. For the doubters, just ponder over the fact that our national game is kabadi, which is all about either poking others while holding your breath or pulling others back when they are out of breath.

Now wonder how a driver of health ministry can acquire property over 100 crores of taka without being pulled back? Where are the Zafars (add Mir if you want) to become suspicious of the Aladdin like towers he built in the middle of nowhere? Wasn't there anyone to report the growth of this man into a superman? Or did he get caught because he ran out of breath and became a burden for his team?

Engaged in illegal recruitments, manipulation of transfers and promotions, and fake-currency trade, Abdul Malek alias Badal reportedly amassed millions, according to RAB who nabbed him on Monday. Malek joined as a driver of Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) in 1982. He used his position to get scores of his relatives recruited to the public service, become a union leader, negotiate transfer deals, start his own cattle business using office

proof of his corruption in plain sight. His anomalous growth in wealth probably remained undetected because corruption has now become an integral part of our social fabric; we can no longer distinguish one pattern from the other.

Malek was one of the many employees who were being investigated by the anti-corruption commission. Malek is a mullet compared to the big fish who are having a whale of a time in the health ministry among others. For instance, the rampant

public". He mentioned three stages of corruption: restricted, rampant, and self-destructive.

Although we have managed to keep the Transparency International's champion's wreath of shame for some years now, it does not take a sociologist to understand that the condition of corruption in our country is critical and verging on being self-destructive. According to gainintegrity.com, an investment and risk compliance portal, Bangladesh is red-flagged in the

The bureaucrat can decide to be corrupt or honest. If corrupt, he is detected with probability  $p$ , is fired, and receives outside option  $v$ . If he is undetected, he receives his wage  $w$  plus the bribe  $b$ , less a dishonesty cost  $d$ . In equilibrium, he will be corrupt if and only if " $w-v > (1-p)/p \times (b-d)$ ".

This framework suggests several avenues for reducing corruption. One could increase the returns to staying on the job ( $w$ ), or, equivalently in this



*Unlike the clever ones who can launder their money abroad, Malek was hiding the proof of his corruption in plain sight. His anomalous growth in wealth probably remained undetected because corruption has now become an integral part of our social fabric.*

resources, construct two seven-storied buildings with 24 apartments for his two wives and the list goes on. Malek just had to attend eight-years in school (unless his certificate is fake) to literally ride *gari-ghora* as per one of the maxims that we learned in our nursery primers. However, unlike the clever ones who can launder their money abroad, Malek was hiding the

corruption and graft cases in the DGHS were flagged by an ACC report in January 2019. The report warned the DGHS about the irregularities during the purchase of medicines, surgical equipment and other machines due to the absence of proper monitoring by the government. It added that, "An alleged nexus of contractors and officials from different organisations under the ministry buys many inessential machines and equipment to misappropriate money".

The report was brushed under the carpet and had a dusty return once Covid-19 exposed the sickness of our health sector. The sector is currently undergoing a homeopathic treatment of "like cures like" now that the physical disease has begun to counter its embedded immoral disease. The arrests of a hospital owner Shahed and JKG Healthcare executives Ariful Chowdhury and his wife Dr Sabrina Arif Chowdhury are news that is sweet, albeit mild, like homeopathic pills. Malek is the most recent dose. The cancerous growth of corruption will, however, require much more aggressive and strategic interventions.

In *Sociology of Corruption* (1968), the internationally renowned Malaysian social scientist, late Professor Syed Hussein Alatas defined corruption as, "the subordination of public interests to private aims involving a violation of norms and duty, accompanied by secrecy, betrayal, deception and callous disregard for any consequence suffered by the

judicial system, police, public service, land administration, tax and customs administration and public procurement. It adds that the legislature and civil society are not free to address the situation. In other words, all our public officials are susceptible to corruption, and there is a culture of impunity and indifference.

The government has revised the salary and incentives of public officials, strengthened legislative measures, yet the public interest, as Alatas puts it, is constantly being subordinated by the government officials and politicians with complete disregard for the general public. The carrots and sticks have little effect on the bureaucratic beast. The time has come to rethink our attitudes towards those who deviate from norms for personal gains.

While researching for this piece, I came across a very insightful article by two professors from MIT and Harvard. In *Annual Review of Economics*, Benjamin Olken and Rohini Pande (2012) assessed the prevalence, cost and factors of corruption in developing countries. The report does not include Bangladesh, but it offers scenarios involving bribery and thievery of public officials that are common to our country. For instance, it examines the link between wages and corruption among public officials. Let me quote the authors,

"Suppose that the bureaucrat receives a wage  $w$  from the government and, if fired, can receive an outside option  $v$ .

context, one could decrease the outside option ( $v$ ) by increasing punishments. One could also increase the probability of detection ( $p$ )."

The article also gives examples of the magnitudes of corruption in certain countries. For instance, it reports that in 2005 Pakistan lost 0.3-1.9 percent of its GDP due to politically connected loans. I know a similar analysis of the culture of corruption that is corroding our society will be derring-do in our context. But if we want to become a middle-income country under an inspirational leadership, we need to have the right information to make the necessary informed structural adjustments in the public system. The more transparent the government can become in its dealings, the more aware the citizens will be of their rights. Having an informed public with access to technology will increase the probability of detection of corrupt individuals. People like Malek could have been detected much earlier if we had an informed opinion against corruption in place. Such detection will deter others from becoming another Malek (pun added). Now we need someone who has enough steam inside to foray into the court of corrupts and hit the opponents. We need someone to chant *kabadi kabadi...* and reinvest in our national game. But this time it will be a game against corruption.

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## Are we addicted to prison?

LOUISE ARBOUR, MARIA CATTALU, HELEN CLARK, and RUTH DREIFUSS

WE live in a world of mass incarceration. On this day on the planet, over 11 million people are behind bars. That's about the entire population of Belgium.

A relatively small fraction of these people in prison are women. They are about 700,000 today (or the entire population of Washington DC)—but their numbers are skyrocketing: +834 percent in the United States in the last 40 years, for example, with small drug-related offenses being one of the most significant drivers of global over-incarceration.

Those women involved in the illegal drug trade were, more often than not, coerced into criminal offending—or have few prospects in the legal economy. Their role in drug markets is generally low-level but high-risk, consisting largely of small-scale dealing, transporting drugs, holding drugs for dealers, or buying for someone.

Criminal organisations easily replace these women. When they get caught, their imprisonment does not disrupt trafficking—in other words, it serves no purpose in fighting organised crime.

Even if the imprisonment of women is pointless, it will have heavy consequences. Going to prison destroys lives and families. Over half of all women in prison are mothers—and that number can rise to as many as four out of five in countries such as the USA, Brazil and Thailand. Those incarcerated mothers are often heads of single-parent households, and sole providers for their families.

Incarcerated women also tend to have access to fewer services, including gender-appropriate health facilities. They have less access to vocational training opportunities that are more routinely available in correctional facilities designed for incarcerated males. In other words,

women are more law-abiding, but, ironically, because of their small numbers in prison, they end up being more harshly punished than men! In addition, a high proportion of women in prison have suffered abuse and violence and/or have mental health issues, and a significant number live with HIV and/or hepatitis. Their specific needs are often ignored, revealing that gender inequality does not stop at the prison doors.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, a number of jurisdictions set free nonviolent offenders (but here again, incarcerated women were largely disregarded). This reveals that jails could not guarantee health security for people behind bars. It also suggests they should not have been incarcerated at all.

When released from prison, women rarely receive adequate support. Their housing and employment prospects can be bleak because of their criminal records: in turn, that reinforces a cycle of exposure to violence and poverty, also impacting

their children.

Even the International Narcotics Control Board, the international body in charge of drug treaty compliance, known for its conservative positions, has urged governments to consider alternatives to the punishment of women who have broken the law, including drug laws, but implementation is agonisingly slow.

For almost 60 years now, the international drug control regime has pushed governments into a pattern of punishment and incarceration that is now out of control. Too many people are in jail for non-violent offences in many countries. Increasingly severe penalties, including mandatory minimum sentences, produce grossly unfair results. This is particularly unjust and counterproductive, and has disproportionate adverse impacts on women.

How many decades of failure, marginalisation, and stigmatisation will it take, and how many families will



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have to be torn apart for governments to acknowledge that their approach to incarceration is harmful? Societies have a responsibility to treat all people humanely. Incarcerated women should not be an exception to that.

Progressive law enforcement alternatives to incarceration should begin with women who have been convicted: their small numbers make it feasible, risks are low, and societal benefits would be readily apparent.

Governments must now work on overcoming their own addiction to incarceration, and turn to humane and productive alternatives.

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