

A Long March to Brutalities



OF MAGIC & MADNESS

I could have been just another episode in the regular show of police and ruling party men merrily clamping down on the “disturbance” of public peace” who love to play with people’s emotions with their pesky ideas and noisy chants of human rights abuses. Usually, there would be the clean-up after that, with the cheerleaders stepping in and going through the ritual of handing out half-baked stories about who attacked whom first, and that would be the end of it. No subtlety would be expected, because there would be none.

But this particular episode went off the rails to become a farce so incongruous and so bleak that it tests the mind. It took place on Saturday, in Feni, although the story began a day earlier. On Friday, hundreds of demonstrators led by some left-leaning parties embarked on a two-day Long March from Dhaka to Noakhali to protest against the growing incidents of rape in the country. Their spray-painted slogans—“Silence is unjust when humanity is affected”, “End the culture of impunity”, “Rape and crossfire are the government’s weapons”, “Say no to victim blaming”, and “We want the resignation of the failed home minister” (*The Daily Star*)—offered a condensed history of yet another tumultuous week in Bangladesh which began after the brutal assault and gang rape of a Noakhali woman, on video, by men loyal to the ruling Awami League. For many in the crowd, it was the final spark to a reservoir of pent-up anger and despair.

At around 11:30 am on Saturday, the demonstrators came under attack allegedly from the activists of local Awami League, Jubo League and Chhatra League units after they had concluded a rally in the Shaheed

Minar area of Feni. According to media reports, the attackers used sticks and rods to beat the protesters and vandalised several buses carrying them. Police have given a different version of the story, however. Mainul Islam, an additional superintendent of police in Feni, told *The Daily Star* that it was not an attack but a “scuffle” that broke out after “derogatory comments” were made against the local MP at the rally.



At around 11:30 am on Saturday, the demonstrators came under attack allegedly from the activists of local Awami League, Jubo League and Chhatra League units after they had concluded a rally in the Shaheed Minar area of Feni. PHOTO: STAR

“In protest, his followers brought out a procession. Activists from the Long March chased the followers of the lawmaker and a scuffle ensued,” he said.

If you have seen the video clips that surfaced on social media following the attack, you may have different ideas about what really transpired, but the glib label of “scuffle” will surely not be one of them. One somewhat graphic clip takes us inside one of the buses where a protester lay unconscious, with several others with cuts and bruises, and blood stains visible on the floor of the bus. The camera then cuts to a scene in a hospital where you hear the wailing of the injured, and then to another scene showing shards of broken glass strewn

across the road near the buses. What police described as a scuffle initiated by anti-rape protesters ended up injuring at least 35 of them, 10 suffering severe injuries. Equally shockingly, it was the police that reportedly abetted the ruling party thugs to launch their attacks and ransack the buses.

With “friends” like these, who needs enemies, right?

The juxtaposition of the three

irony thickens when, the next day, the DMP commissioner claims that more than 95 percent of people “expressed satisfaction with the police service in filing GDs and cases with police stations”, although police have yet to file a case against Saturday’s attackers in Feni. All this throws into sharp relief the enormous divide between what the police say and what they do in terms of law enforcement.

Moving onto the next protagonist—men from the Extended AL Universe, particularly Chhatra League. No one would like to hold Chhatra League to its word, but if you closely observe its responses during the last three nationwide movements—road safety, quota reforms, and now rape—a chilling pattern emerges. Let me just lay out the facts and you can have your own conclusion.

The organisation that was allegedly behind the assaults on anti-rape protesters in Feni and has had allegations of rape slapped against many of its members is also one that, just last week, brought out a “celebration rally” after the cabinet’s approval of an amendment to our central law on women and children repression (with the provision for death penalty as the maximum punishment for single perpetrator rape). In August 2018, this same organisation allegedly caused immense sufferings to the students involved in the movement for safer roads, and yet it had the nerve to bring out a celebration rally after the cabinet’s approval of the draft of Road Transport Act 2018, which literally ended the movement. In April 2018, this very organisation again allegedly tried to derail the quota reform movement, and yet it was the one that brought out a celebration rally after the provision for quota in government jobs was abolished.

What do these facts tell us about this organisation? There can be many explanations. But several stand out to me: first, its moral and ideological fluidity; second, its proclivity to simultaneously sabotage (through attacks) and hijack (through organising

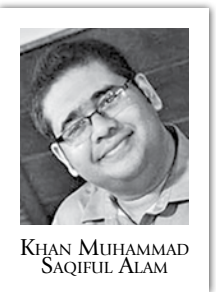
celebration rallies) the biggest student and sociocultural movements of our time; third, its strategic position as the first line of defence against any movement involving students; fourth, its lack of concern for the well-being of general students; fifth, its eagerness to use force and lack of tolerance for critical thoughts; and finally, its immunity as an organisation, regardless of what crimes its members and operatives commit. From the frequent collaborations of law enforcement agencies with the organisations affiliated with the ruling party, it would also appear that the state is outsourcing part of policing tasks to these unruly groups, which is a disturbing development in and of itself.

The Saturday attack marks a dangerous turn in the so far largely peaceful trajectory of protests to end our pervasive rape culture. It lays bare the truth behind the fiction, and portends a long and difficult journey for the anti-rape activists. Some have questioned Chhatra League and Jubo League’s moral organisational stand on rape following the attack. But I think it’s immaterial to the wider question of violence against women, and has more to do with men as individuals.

By announcing the provision of the death penalty for single perpetrator rape in response to the anti-rape movement and then allowing attacks on those protesting rape the government is giving mixed messages to the people. The government has made its sincerity to stop the rape culture clear. Statements by ministers and state officials will attest to that. But we need more in the way of action. Can it walk the rest of the path by bringing in necessary legal and institutional reforms necessary to prevent rape from happening, give boost to rape trials and protect the victims and witnesses? The contrasting pictures that are coming out of its camp do not leave much room for hope.

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Present challenges and future steps for e-commerce in Bangladesh



ONE noticeable change during this Covid-19 pandemic has been the shift of consumer behaviour. The contactless economy has become a necessity for survival, and though once we thought it is the younger generations who will effortlessly shift to e-commerce markets, now even our parents and grandparents have bKash wallets and are ordering through Facebook shops or from ChalDal.com. In fact, the e-commerce retail sector is a significant source of foreign investment, raising approximately USD 41 million and is now the third highest funded sector in Bangladesh, based on the Bangladesh Startup Ecosystem: Funding Landscape dashboard of LightCastle Partners. Though this shows a lot of promise for the future of the e-commerce sector, it also highlights the fact that businesses, platforms, and regulators need to understand the overarching negative issues and challenges with this sector and need to consider potential approaches to go about addressing them at present and in future.

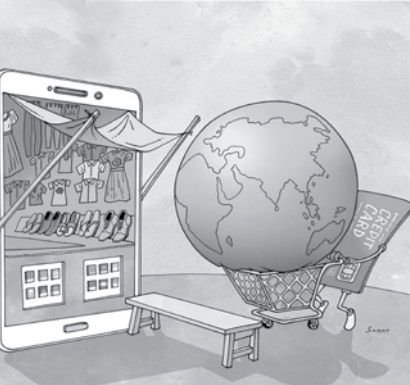
To start with, let’s look at the reason why this boom in e-commerce platforms occurred. Even before the pandemic, there was a demand for these platforms for a few reasons. One key reason is convenience—due a hectic schedules, coupled with traffic jams and long

distances, sometimes it is much more convenient to just order a product online, especially if it’s not an experience product and the brand has a constant reputation of safe and proper delivery. And this sector expanded thanks to the help of secure and easy online payments, with the help of banks and companies like Sslcommerz and now mobile wallets such as bKash. At the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic, online transactions peaked due to the nature of the disease and the fact that contactless economy was no more a luxury but a necessity for survival. And as the world slowly moves to the new normal after the pandemic, it is evident that the e-commerce sector will play a major role in the economy.

So, what are the pressing issues in this sector? One key issue is that of trust. Just as there has been an increase in online consumerism, there has been a significant increase in problems related to fake products, broken products, bad quality, unnatural delay, and severe lack of customer service, at times bordering on rudeness towards the customer. And these issues have increased proportionately during the pandemic. And these led to a significant drop in trust in many of the e-commerce portals and traders. The problems are mostly focused on either retailers who are small, Facebook shops, and at times with larger organisations as well. And though many small (sometimes large) organisations have opted to take advantage of the situation and the need for a contactless economy to offer sub-par services, they need to understand that the damage done will not only have a short-term repercussion, but will echo in the longer

terms as well.

To ensure the growth of a healthy and reliable e-commerce sector, action is required from three different parties. The first and the most important role needs to be played by the online shops or merchants. Both the merchant and the platform need to build trust with the customer, and not just be happy with a completed sale of sub-par quality or customer service. And there are two



reasons to do so. Common wisdom in the field of strategy is that for any policy/decision to be effective, you need a carrot and a stick approach. The carrot stands for incentive and the stick for punishment. The stick, if companies fail to build trust, is that there is an undeniable increase in online consumerism, and the barrier to entry for a new player is not very high. This sector does not need specialised resources or a specific location advantage. With decent funding, any organisation can enter the e-commerce sector. At the same time,

for most of the products which are purchased online, the customers don’t have very high switching costs. Brand loyal customers still prefer to buy from a physical store or the online shop of the brand. So for e-commerce platforms, the customers are mostly buying something that is not too brand specific. So, if a new player comes in to ensure customer service and establish trust, then the platform which is lagging will lose most of the customers at a breakneck speed.

To avoid this, the present E-commerce merchants and platforms need to build trust. In terms of the carrot—the incentive—these organisations should build trust because that is the preliminary step of building lasting brand value, and if we have seen the history of business in the last hundred years, brand value can be a considerably important factor (Apple can be a prime example of that).

For platforms, which connect buyers to sellers, such as Daraz, it is also important to have a “carrot and stick” approach towards their sellers. Bad service and bad quality will not harm only the merchant but will reduce faith in the platform. So, it is very important to improve the ecosystem of the platform. They can create an incentive mechanism through promoting and pushing the products of those merchants and sellers who had high ratings from verified purchasers (purchaser accounts which have been confirmed by the platform that has not been created by the seller to improve ratings). Similarly, seller accounts with complaints can be downranked and showed less when a consumer searches for a product. This

simple mechanism can encourage sellers to be more professional, work on customer service, and reach out to larger markets. At the same time, just like the idea of Amazon Choice, these platforms can have their team of product evaluators recommend some of the sellers’ products, or the sellers account, another incentive to come up with really good products and services.

Finally, a considerable role needs to be played by regulators and policymakers in our country. In a fast-changing entrepreneurship ecosystem, with many challenges, policy aid and enforcement can help a sector to flourish. One key issue can be to establish an online consumer protection act and create an infrastructure to enforce such an act. At present, many of the platforms are trying or develop their versions of consumer protection policies, but unless a regulatory policy level drive is taken to create a uniform set of laws protecting online consumer, scams and frauds will still flourish. This suggestion is further strengthened by the fact that there is a large portion of F-commerce (Facebook based shops) in our e-commerce sector.

These suggestions are neither a complete list of things that can be done, nor are they effective on their own. As mentioned, to ensure a flourishing e-commerce sector, steps need to be taken by multiple parties together. But if these steps succeed, the future of online consumerism and e-commerce is sure to contribute to a healthier economy.

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WAYNE DYER
(1940-2015)
American spiritual author and a motivational speaker.

If you believe it will work out, you'll see opportunities. If you believe it won't you will see obstacles.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Chest muscles, for short

5 Drink, dog-style

10 “Luther” star

12 Singer Cara

13 Easy task

15 Greek vowel

16 Termite’s cousin

17 Tylor of “The Lord of the Rings”

18 Take offense at

20 Heredity unit

21 Judi of “Chocolat”

22 Says further

23 Actions

25 Devious trick

28 Most high

schoolers

31 Surrounded by

32 Useful skills

34 Zodiac cat

35 Enjoy Aspen

36 Obtained

37 Side-winder, for example

40 Loosen, as laces

41 Tribe symbol

42 Get to one’s feet

43 Ties the knot

DOWN

1 Pan, for one

2 Fixed copy

3 Fold

4 Attack command

5 Elevate

6 Pendulum path

7 Rang out

8 Mean

9 Irritates

11 Spooky gathering

14 Accepting bribes

19 Finished

20 Neon and helium

24 Stop

25 Tusked mammal

26 Clarifier’s words

27 Ray of “Good-fellas”

29 Make void

30 Excited

33 Flower parts

35 Winter glider

38 Light metal

39 At present

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YESTERDAY’S ANSWERS

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BEETLE BAILEY

BABY BLUES