

## Golden Monir's golden enablers

*Con artistes need corrupt officials to win*

THE story of Monir Khan, popularly known as Golden Monir, is a jaw-dropping tale of decades of looting people's land, gold smuggling and money laundering, among other crimes, and of amassing unbelievable amounts of wealth—all with the alleged patronage from the highups in Rajuk and the public works ministry. The most remarkable part of this story is that Monir started grabbing land since 2001 and continued to do so until recently, when Rab arrested him and its investigation revealed his ill gotten wealth.

During the BNP-led government, Monir rose to power with the help of a minister and the then Rajuk chairman. This is because he knew how to grease the right palms. When the ruling party changed, he managed to get the same kind of "support" from the existing public officials. It would be interesting to find out why he presented an SUV to an incumbent minister and how he managed to acquire Tk 200 crore worth of plots in various areas of Dhaka, as well as 25 bank accounts with Tk 930 crore in transactions. Or how he bought a car for 1.3 crore from an MP who, by law, cannot transfer ownership of his duty free vehicle within five years of its purchase.

Rab has unraveled Monir's lucrative relations with top Rajuk officials, which allowed him to be involved in recruitments within Rajuk as well as with land deals. Using forged land ownership documents, including forged Rajuk documents and fake official seals, Monir would take over land belonging to other people, accumulating wealth of over Tk 1,050 crore.

So how does a former salesman of crockery and luggage end up being a billionaire? As Rab has revealed, it is because of his steady and close connections with all the right people in the right places. For the public, this is not really a huge revelation. Many ordinary citizens have lost their land to grabbers connected with public officials. What is not so usual is for these robbers and smugglers to be caught in the game, with their patrons being exposed.

We welcome the work of Rab in arresting Monir and revealing the extent of his crimes, as well as those in public service who have enabled him to carry them out unhindered. Rajuk highups, former and present have, as expected, denied any knowledge of any irregularities but this time, it will not be easy to explain away how one person could be the owner of plots worth Tk 200 crore without raising eyebrows. We hope Rab continues its investigation and that its request for four relevant agencies to investigate Monir will be honoured. These drives against criminals and corrupt officials is certainly something the public would like to see and is therefore laudable. We hope this will apply to all public officials who are involved in corruption that has deprived citizens of land, property and other assets that are rightfully theirs.

## Poor air quality will make combatting Covid-19 more difficult

*Children and those with respiratory conditions face a dangerous winter*

AIR pollution led to 1,73,500 deaths in Bangladesh last year, according to a global report. The country's air is becoming increasingly poisonous in the absence of effective measures to control the release of pollutants. We remain among the countries with the poorest air in the world during winter. Despite witnessing fresh air and clear skies during the lockdown early this year, it seems pollution has come back for the worse. We are witnessing a worrying surge in Covid-19 cases again, even though winter is yet to set in. Poor quality air causes inflammation in the lungs, making people more vulnerable to respiratory diseases and infections like Covid-19. Researchers at Harvard University associated an increase of only one microgram per cubic metre of air in fine particulate matter called PM 2.5 with an eight percent increase in Covid-19 morbidity.

Why have we allowed air pollution levels to deteriorate to such an extent? What is more worrying is the fact that a study from last year found the air quality in surveyed schools to be hazardous for children—affecting their neurodevelopment and cognitive ability, damaging their lung function, and putting them at greater risk of chronic diseases. Even though the educational institutions are closed, the AQI is around 10 percent higher than it was a year ago, which makes indoor pollution quite high.

There are a number of things that reduce air quality. As traffic has picked up with the reopening of the economy, vehicle exhaust fumes cause high concentration of NO<sub>2</sub>. Noxious fumes are emitted from brick kilns and traditional stoves, which affect women especially. Dust from construction sites is also a major contributor to both outdoor and indoor pollution. Thus, children and adults with respiratory problems such as asthma are at greater risk during this pandemic.

It is high time that our policymakers take concerted steps to improve air quality. The number of vehicles on the roads must be reduced; unfit vehicles emitting toxic smoke must be taken off the streets, there should be regular water spraying on the roads to reduce dust, particularly during winter, brick kilns cannot be built near schools or homes and widespread use of fuel efficient stoves have to be initiated. These are not ambitious tasks and can be implemented with proper coordination. At a time when we are in the grips of a virus that viciously attacks the lungs, poor quality air that weakens the respiratory system will be even more deadly.



SHUPROVA TASNEM

THE CCTV footage showing the killing of senior ASP Anisul Karim at Mind Aid Psychiatry and De-Addiction Hospital on November 9 has created a renewed focus on the mostly unlicensed and unregulated private clinics that have cropped up across the city in recent years to cater to a "market" of patients who are easy to take advantage of because of the social stigma surrounding their ailment—drug addiction and related psychological or mental health issues.

In the chilling video that revealed the moments before Anisul's death, he is seen being wrestled to the ground by five to six people, who tie his hands behind his back and push him into a small room. During this attack, he becomes increasingly motionless; later, a woman in an apron performs CPR, but to no avail. It was revealed later that Mind Aid did not have the papers to operate a psychiatric clinic or rehab, nor did it have the full-time doctors, psychiatrists and trained nurses that a rehabilitation centre is meant to have, as outlined in a home ministry gazette from 2005. All the people who assaulted Anisul at Mind Aid were staffers, ward boys and cleaners—no medically trained personnel were present.

However, Mind Aid is hardly the only psychiatric/de-addiction "hospital" operating without permission, below capacity and with little to no technical expertise. Media reports suggest that while there are 351 registered residential rehabs across the country, the actual number could be around 1,200 if you include the unlicensed ones. In almost all of these places, we have no idea what sort of "treatment" is being given.

Yet these centres are handling patients who require utmost sensitivity and care—all over the world, there is a growing acknowledgment of drug addiction as a public health issue. According to the World Health Organization, "people with drug disorders deserve the same level of care as patients with any other health condition... For people suffering from drug dependence, health systems have to provide access to comprehensive treatment, including psychosocial support, pharmacotherapy (including opioid substitution therapy for people dependant on opioids) and the prevention and management of associated health problems such as HIV, tuberculosis, viral hepatitis, mental health disorders and drug overdose."

Almost none of the rehabilitation centres in the country are equipped to provide this kind of comprehensive treatment. In fact, in most of these places, the substance abusers are treated less like patients and more like incarcerated inmates. In a recent report in this daily, recovering addicts spoke about being

beaten, starved, isolated and given sleeping pills as the sole treatment. Last year, this daily also reported on the prison-like conditions in certain rehabilitation centres, where patients spoke of being tortured, force-fed medication, confined and being given expired food and drugs.

In the last three years, at least 17 bodies have been recovered from rehabs across the country, according to police data, many of which had marks of injuries and torture—such as 30-year-old Jahangir Mia, who was tortured to death only hours after he arrived at a rehab in Savar in February, and 37-year-old Jalal Uddin, whose body was discovered in the parking lot of a rehabilitation centre in Moulvibazaar in 2018. All of these incidents point to a method of treatment where the recovering addict is disciplined into following the "right path" and

drug policy—almost all measures to deal with substance abuse are punitive, not rehabilitative, and fail to address the causes behind drug abuse.

This is reflected in the increasing number of drug users in Bangladesh despite our hardline policy towards drugs—according to a DNC report, an average of 114 patients per day sought treatment at public and private rehabilitation centres in 2019, up from an average of 104 in 2018, and 69 in 2017. And these are only the people who had the opportunity and the means to seek treatment in a society where drug users are shamed, excluded and ostracised. The DNC report suggested that only a little over 41,000 people sought treatment for substance abuse last year, but a 2017 report from the Association of Prohibiting Drug Abuse (MANAS) estimated that around 7.5 million people could be

new approach is needed, one that strips out the profits that accompany drug sales while ensuring the basic human rights and public health of all citizens," adding that the "application of severe penalties and extrajudicial violence against drug consumers makes it almost impossible for people with drug addiction problems to find treatment."

According to the GCDP, there are five pathways to drug policies that actually work—putting people's health and safety first, ensuring access to essential medicines and pain control, ending the criminalisation and incarceration of people who use drugs, refocusing enforcement responses to drug trafficking and organised crime, and regulating drugs markets to put government in control. However, so far, Bangladesh's policy has been fixated on drugs and its relationship with crime, without an equal level of attention on public health, human rights and economic development.

Last month, the government announced the formation of an independent institution to carry out dope tests as a part of intensifying and strengthening narcotics control. This new "Bangladesh Drug Testing Institute" will be set up in 19 districts for an expanded dope testing project that will apply to all job sectors and educational institutes, and will cost the government Tk 62.83 crore in taxpayers' money. But what exactly will be done with all the "addicts" identified by these tests? Will people lose their jobs, and will students be expelled from educational institutions? Who will be responsible for rehabilitating these drug users and bringing them back to being useful members of society?

It has been made amply clear that mass arrests and killings of drug traffickers, especially the low-level actors, can do little to stem the widespread use of drugs, which were widely available in Bangladesh even during the lockdown. It is also clear that recovering addicts are not being given the medical and psychosocial care they need—they are being put into the same box as drug traffickers and locked away like criminals. As long as addicts continue to have their rights taken away, and we continue to stigmatise and discriminate against people who have become victims of drug abuse, we will not be able to deal with what is an urgent and fast growing social problem in our country.

On many occasions, economists have discussed how important it is to invest in human capital in a country with a population as large as ours. If we truly want to invest in people, we need to ensure that recovering addicts are also not left behind. We must invest in proper rehabilitation centres that focus on prevention, harm reduction and treatment, not on punishment, and we must collectively come together to support (not shame) recovering addicts so they can learn to live without drugs.

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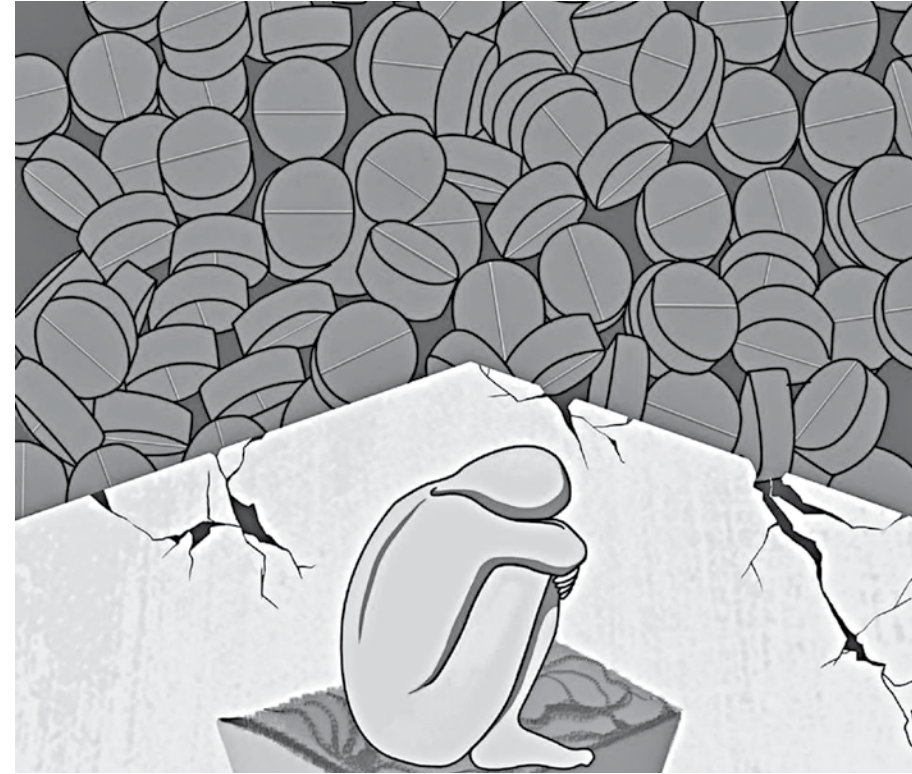


ILLUSTRATION: NAHFIZ JAHAN MONNI

punished if they cannot quit cold turkey, regardless of the very real physical impacts of substance withdrawal (especially in the case of opioids), rather than exploring the psychological, social and even economic conditions that could have led to the drug abuse in the first place.

Every time stories of abuse at rehabilitation centres surface, some immediate steps are taken, such as the arrest of the owners or the involved staff. After Anisul Karim's death at Mind Aid, the Department of Narcotics Control (DNC) raided and closed five unlicensed rehabs in Dhaka on November 18. However, the odd raid after a tragedy is a short-sighted solution that not only does little to deal with the unlicensed and underprepared rehabs mushrooming across the country and operating with very little regulation; it fails to tackle a crucial miscalculation in our national

addicted to drugs in Bangladesh, which means that only 0.5 percent of substance abusers were able to reach out for help.

The criminalisation of drug abusers and dealers and a punitive drug policy only adds to this ostracisation. In 2018, 466 drug dealers were killed in incidents of "crossfire" as part of Bangladesh's "war on drugs", quite possibly the highest number of extrajudicial killings in the country's history, and the Narcotics Control Bill 2018 was passed, which introduced the death penalty for possessing as little as three tablespoons of heroin. However, examples from across the world show that a "war on drugs" is not one that can be won—in 2017, Cesar Gaviria, former president of Colombia and founding member of the Global Commission on Drug Policy (GCDP), wrote in the *New York Times*, "The war on drugs is essentially a war on people... a

## Essentials of pro-people policing

STRAIGHT LINE



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

ON November 20, the editor of *The Daily Star* Mahfuz Anam, in a column in this daily, urged for the transformation of the Bangladesh Police into a pro-people outfit. He wrote—"The police, as they are presently used, are not enforcers of law but rather implementers of the politics of the day, including and especially its vengeful aspects... Are we never going to have a neutral and professional force fully committed to the people, whose taxes pay for their service?"

The above observations are indeed strong words that should demand the attention of all stakeholders committed to ensuring good governance which, we have been told time and again, is the cornerstone of balanced development. Experts opine that pro-people policing or professional policing has a pivotal role in ensuring the rule of law, which in turn makes development durable. Simple common sense and everyday experience tells us what does not constitute pro-people policing. Howsoever strongly we may revile the police outfit for its failings, we cannot live in a police-free society. It is, therefore, necessary to gain an understanding of the essentials of pro-people policing and the related best practices befitting a democratic polity.

In our parlance, references are too often made to the English police, which to many is the epitome of people-friendly modern policing. Therefore, it is relevant to understand the philosophy of English policing, notwithstanding the dissimilarities of the two cultures.

The norms of English policing are, broadly speaking, that the police force should be a body of citizens in uniform, exercising their right to make arrests but so far as possible non-military in appearance, local in their origins, and accountable for their actions. The assumption is that the majority of citizens

would obey the majority of laws for the majority of the time, and that the police would be operating as far as possible by consent and not by force.

The above mentioned consent was bestowed on the English police by the formal democratic process that led to their creation, and more importantly, by the renewable and continual consent that they gain by performing their duties. The philosophy of English policing was clearly formulated in the following comment

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of Sir Robert Mark, Commissioner of London Metropolitan Police in 1970: "The police are not servants of a government at any level. We do not act at the behest of a Minister or any political party, not even the party in government. We act on behalf of the people as a whole."

Coming to the policing styles of the subcontinent of which we are a part, it would be worthwhile to read the comments of KS Subramanian, a former officer of the Indian police service, a Senior Fellow at the Schumacher Centre for Development, New Delhi and author of the book *Political Violence and Police in India*. He says, "The modern Indian State was the product of a freedom struggle. It adopted a written, liberal democratic constitution but retained the colonial administrative police and judicial structures without recasting them to meet the changed situation... The "colonial-repressive" character emerged when the governing elite of a decolonised society decided to retain the inherited police

organisation, ignoring justified demands for change".

Subramanian is also of the opinion that "The blanket power of superintendence vested in the government, by the Police Act 1861, is not appropriate in a democracy. Further, the role of intelligence agencies was not redefined to protect the fundamental right to freedoms of association, expression and movement. The police in India still keep a watch on all political activities without

discrimination and exclude only the ruling party of the day, which gives them authoritarian powers antithetical to the democratic spirit". The Bangladesh Police also operates under the same 1861 law.

The historical, legislative and administrative realities characterising the policing styles of the two different countries perhaps highlight the complex task in establishing a pro-people policing outfit. It would indeed be a long wait before we can achieve the desired goal but that cannot be a damper, for obvious reasons, of our democratic aspirations.

What is necessary to make the police public-friendly is the central issue of any police reform effort. Thus, police reform should be more than just a face-lift; it requires in-depth examination of the police organisation, its mandate, and its functional dynamics. It also underpins the need to put in place effective structures, both to oversee police performance and to ensure realisation of the organisational mission. The reform process has to touch all ranks and has to be all-inclusive,

calling for commitment and a sense of purpose from the political executive, since what is involved is basically a redetermination of the whole governance paradigm.

As no police force can hope to perform its functions efficiently and effectively without enjoying a high degree of support for the integrity of its operations, it is crucial to bring the police under a system of accountability that enjoys public confidence. Once the police are enjoined upon to perform a just and constructive role in the community, their work ethics would start undergoing a radical change. Being subject to law, they would strive to uphold and promote the cause of public interest and a zealous safeguarding of democratic norms based on rule of law, and due process would be their motto.

The police organisation of tomorrow will have to evolve a shared vision and understanding of a common mission, which will increasingly be focused on meeting community expectations. "Putting the people first" would certainly improve the confidence of the public, and an overt commitment to enhancing the standards of both public safety and police accountability will require the police leadership to lead and manage, not simply "run" the force, to get results consistent with their mission.

Historically, policing in South Asia has been, by and large, a one sided affair; with communities having little or no say in local policing plans and strategies that affect them the most. The idea that police are people and people are police has not taken root in the region. Understandably, the Police Act 1861 was silent on the issue of community consultation. Rather, it focused on the responsibility of the community to ensure order and should any member step out of line, the whole community would face vicarious punishment. What is needed is to make improving the quality of law enforcement a permanent and integral part of the national agenda, regardless of which party is in power.

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