



FOUNDER EDITOR
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Since when is peaceful protest a crime?

Police attacks on garment workers, madrasa teachers are reprehensible

WE condemn the attacks by police on several groups of peaceful protesters on the sidewalks outside the Jatiya Press Club at dawn on Monday. According to reports quoting victims and eyewitnesses, police charged the protesters with batons, teargas shells and water cannons while they were asleep and beat them “like animals”, according to one victim, which left around 54 of them injured. Among them were former workers of Tazreen Fashions Limited—who had been staging a protest demanding proper compensation, rehabilitation and treatment for injuries sustained during a devastating fire at the factory in 2012—as well as the sacked workers of another factory called A One BD Ltd and independent Ebtedayee madrasa teachers, all demonstrating there with their own demands and for different lengths of time. Before being driven off the sidewalks, female workers were allegedly groped, and their clothes ripped off. Even elderly protesters and children weren’t spared.

It hardly seemed to matter that all these people were representing their communities and peers as they voiced their grievances that needed to be heard and acted upon, not to be left unaddressed for 80 days, as was the case for the Tazreen workers. It hardly seemed to matter that they wouldn’t have to occupy the sidewalks for so long if the state and those responsible for their fate had performed their duties in the first place. What happened instead looked a lot like retaliation for exposing their failures and inefficiencies so glaringly. It also amounted to protecting the interests of the powerful at the expense of the powerless. Police, unfortunately, have been used for such extrajudicial purposes for so long. It seems about time that the republic redefined the role of the police force to better represent what it has been brought down to do, or clarified to the uninformed citizens whether the constitution forbids peaceful protests.

Monday’s incidents are a reminder, once again, of the dangerous slide in democratic norms and traditions in Bangladesh. Citizens have a right to express their legitimate grievances and the state has a responsibility to address them. While certain issues may take time to be resolved, there is no alternative to persuasion and fruitful engagement. The government must answer for what happened on Monday and find a way to responsibly engage and meet the demands of the protesters. Police brutality on peaceful protesters must stop.

International Anti-corruption Day

Transform precept into example

AS we observe International Anti-Corruption Day today, there are good reasons for us as a nation to devote some of our time to deep introspection of the issue that has eaten deep into the very fabric of the nation. Nothing very much has changed since the time Bangabandhu remarked that he was surrounded by a group of corrupt people. Actors have changed, modus have changed but the phenomenon has thrived like a pandemic virus. Every year on December 9, the world observes International Anti-Corruption Day, and this year we observe the day in the backdrop of the world pulverised by the most damaging disease in the last 100 years. Like all international days that we observe under UN auspices, the purpose of this day is to educate the public on issues of concern, and to mobilise political will and resources to address the problem.

What the UN Secretary General has said in his message on this day this year is extremely appropriate and relevant to us, particularly when we are struggling to combat the pandemic. Apart from the deleterious criminal character of corruption, it is an ultimate betrayal of public trust, even more damaging in times of crisis. He has hit the nail on the head by saying that the pandemic is creating new opportunities to exploit weak oversight and inadequate transparency, diverting funds away from people in their hour of greatest need. This is only too applicable to us. In Bangladesh, we are witness to the way the pandemic has been exploited without compunction to reap a windfall profit at the expense of public health.

As per the Corruption Perceptions Index 2019, Bangladesh scored 26 out of 100 points and was ranked 14th from the bottom and 146th from the top among 180 countries. We have scored far below than the global average score (43) and our position remains the second lowest for the seventh consecutive year among eight South Asian countries—lower than all except Afghanistan. The government may bin the report as much as it likes, but the reality cannot be wished away.

Opportunities for corruption and making black money, crony capitalism, and lack of oversight can easily be tackled if the administration wants to. The foreign minister has spilled the beans by revealing that politicians and bureaucrats are vying with one another in laundering ill-gotten money abroad. Corruption is bad, but corruption in high places is more damaging to national interest and state security. It needs political will to combat. Will it be forthcoming?

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Save our rivers

It’s a pity that illegal occupation of our rivers, canals, and other waterbodies continue to run rampant despite the many directives by the High Court. What is even worse is that many of these grabbers comprise of politicians and lawmakers. While the National River Conservation Commission is doing its part, all other river-related authorities need to cooperate to ensure river protection, navigability and development. Appropriate plans and policies need to be set immediately. Grabbers and polluters alike must be brought to book. As it is, we have already made many rivers lifeless. Hopefully, we won’t kill whatever is remaining of our rivers.

Tanzila Akhter, Dhaka

ROKEYA DAY

Rokeya’s vision for women

FIRDIOUS AZIM

THE streets of Dhaka have been animated by women marching in protest and rage against rape and the continued violence against women. The demand for women’s freedoms—of movement, of expression, of choice—have found a new radical vocabulary and expression.

It is at this moment that December 9, Rokeya Day, marking both the birth and death anniversary of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, acquires greater significance. Looking back at the life and works of this great woman, the beacon of the feminist movement in Bengal, enables us to trace the history and the contexts in which women have struggled, written, conjured up visions of new forms of living, and continue to inspire us.

Let us begin by situating Rokeya, or Begum Rokeya as she is popularly known, in her own context and times. It is well to remind ourselves of the changes that accrue through time—she spelt her name as Roquiah, which has been “Bengalised” into the later Rokeya or even Begum Rokeya. This change is emblematic of the changes in time, pronunciation but most crucially in the forms of address applied to Bengali Muslims and more specifically in our case, the Bengali Muslim woman.

Identifying Rokeya as a Bengali Muslim woman draws attention not only to the time and place in which she was writing, that is early twentieth century Bengal, but also to the many factors that combine to create national and communal identity, with repercussions on how gender is conceived and gender identities formed. A spate of Muslim-edited journals made their appearance in that period, such as *Mohammedi* or *Nabanoor*, or the later *Saugat*. Making their debut in the first decades of the twentieth century, these journals were engaged in delineating a place for the Bengali Muslim in the anti-colonial struggles, and in the independent nations being imagined. The hotly-contested first partition of Bengal had taken place, the Muslim League had just

been formed, and the creation of Dhaka as a capital of the new province had created new centres of administration and was soon to see a new university. It is in this context that the flurry of intellectual activity and publication, mainly centred in Kolkata, but with smaller publications in Dhaka and the other cities of East Bengal, started to appear. This period and these activities marked the entry of the Bengali Muslim into the mainstream national and intellectual debates.

One of the most striking features of



this efflorescence of writing was the call to women writers. The editorial of the first edition of *Nabanoor* called to women to come out of the *antahpur* or the inner quarters and to grace the pages of the journal just as they graced the homes. And one of the first writers to respond to this call was Rokeya, whose 1906 article *Strijatir Abanati*, later edited into *Amader Abanati*, can be seen as a clarion call to all of us. Crucially, her call and address is not to Muslim women alone, but to all women, and she asks them to cast off the trappings of the patriarchy and to fulfil their duties as individuals. She says that God will call on all human beings to justify their existence on earth, and how will the women answer? This

depiction of women as autonomous and sovereign, as responsible for themselves, is indeed striking, and the couching of it in religious imagery, gives it a potency and an appeal that goes beyond sectarian divides.

Therein perhaps lies Rokeya’s greatness: her ability to situate herself in the social and political realities, but to transcend them in her vision for a new and brighter future for women. It is this vision that propelled her through her life, in her writings, in her social activism and in the school for girls that she established in Kolkata. She imagines women as “judges and barristers”, she draws examples from Turkey and Egypt, from the Parsi women in Bombay, to acquaint her readers with the larger world they inhabit. The contrast is with the denizens of *Aborodh Bashini* who are not allowed to raise their eyes to see beyond the walls of their houses.

Rokeya’s literary style has often been commented on, from her use of satire to the rhetorical devices she uses to criticise and inspire. Her use of language is indeed remarkable. Writing in Bangla could not have come easily to her, having been schooled in Quranic Arabic and the Urdu of the upper-class, aristocratic or *ashraf* Bengali at home. The Bangla that she had gleaned from her brother is polished and taken to another level, making her a wonderful example of the language and identity debate of the period. The Bengali Muslim writer was making a place for him/herself in the literary sphere of Bangla writing. Hitherto, the language of the Bengali Muslim had been sidelined by communal and class considerations. The Muslim gentry in Bengal spoke and perhaps wrote in Urdu, failing to place itself in the Sanskritised literary language that had emerged during the mid-nineteenth century Bengal Renaissance. The *atraf* or the Muslim peasantry spoke and wrote in dialects that were not part of this literary scene, and the older (and still popular) language of *punthis* were hardly recognised by the literary establishment. The pages of the journals under consideration were involved

in a lively debate about language and the place of the Muslim writer. Rokeya enters this scene, writing confidently and unhesitatingly in clear and crisp Bangla prose. Her ability to transcend sectarian divides also gives her this ease and comfort with language.

And perhaps this ease is nowhere more visible than in *Sultana’s Dream* (1905). Written originally in English, this is perhaps one of the earliest examples of a woman writing in English from our region. The subject matter of this short story continues to amaze us. It is read as a feminist utopia, where women rule, where scientific rationality reigns, where work and leisure are perfectly balanced. Gender roles are overturned, men are kept in the *murdana*, making the streets perfectly safe for women, where women are not taught to be demure and shy, but to be bold and confident, and peace and happiness reign supreme.

So right at the beginning of the last century, when the lineaments of the new nation(s) in the making were being laid down, Rokeya gave us a vision of freedom, of a world that is free of strife and conflict, where lives are ordered and cater to every need, where scientific innovations such as the harnessing of solar energy gives us a clean environment, and that is ruled by women. This vision of a just and compassionate society has continued to inspire us for over a hundred years.

Written in English as it was, it found publication in a women’s journal in Madras, opening her readership beyond the borders of Bengal. My attention has been drawn to an anthology of science fiction published in Sweden a couple of years back, the first story of which is *Sultana’s Dream*.

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain stands as a beacon for the feminist struggle, for the struggle against injustice, and as we hold up the torch today, it is wonderful to have such an inspiring foremother to turn to.

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Decentralising public health for post-Covid recovery

SHAWKAT ALAM

THE coronavirus has had a disproportionate impact on developing countries such as Bangladesh. Although the number of cases and fatalities has been higher in developed countries, the absence of a sufficient surveillance and reporting infrastructure has meant that the toll of the virus in informal communities, peri-urban areas and secondary cities remains untold. Developing countries are also disproportionately impacted economically, with many poor households losing their jobs due to the coronavirus induced slowdown of the global economy, and not possessing the kind of jobs or technological capacity to engage in working from home, or the assets to buffer against economic shocks. Bangladesh in particular remains highly vulnerable in being able to address both the health and economic issues relating to the coronavirus.

Despite this, secondary cities (cities with populations in between 50,000 and three million) can improve Bangladesh’ resilience to external shocks by diversifying economic opportunities and supporting the social environment. Critically, Bangladesh’s secondary cities can relieve demand pressures on existing urban infrastructure in places such as Dhaka. This does not entail a relocation policy, but rather local investment and providing the stimulus to allow these cities to establish their own comparative advantages. Above all and in light of the pandemic, significant investment must be made in health infrastructure to create an enabling environment for growth in these areas and provide an opportunity for populations becoming increasingly displaced and disenfranchised by climate change.

In terms of healthcare, Bangladesh is crippled by an overwhelmed health infrastructure that remains highly concentrated in major metropolitan areas such as Dhaka or Chattogram. Although secondary cities constitute 40 percent of Bangladesh’s urban population, state investment in its health infrastructure remains lacking. The absence of healthcare services has meant that citizens have been denied healthcare during a pandemic. The lack of healthcare in secondary cities presents a bidirectional problem; it prevents access to coronavirus-related treatment but also compromises the ability for epidemiologists to undertake effective surveillance of the coronavirus or other endemic diseases. In secondary cities such as Dinajpur, the absence of public hospitals has resulted in the private sector filling this void, leading to large out of pocket expenses and denying most people access to healthcare.

In order to remedy these issues, additional healthcare infrastructure is required in Bangladesh’s secondary cities. These cities can act as crucial sites for applying therapeutic treatments for

complex and critical-level coronavirus cases. With secondary and tertiary healthcare services in major metropolitan cities already reaching capacity, building healthcare infrastructure in secondary cities can reduce the demand for specialised healthcare services in Dhaka, and reduce the need for patients to unnecessarily contribute to the community spread of coronavirus whilst seeking treatment.

In addition, deploying healthcare services in secondary cities will contribute to the monitoring and surveillance capacity of epidemiologists. By boosting local testing capabilities and providing additional healthcare services which can identify and report new coronavirus cases, epidemiologists will have more eyes on the ground to determine the prevalence, extent and severity of the disease on the local population. The clustering of private healthcare services around public healthcare institutions can directly address capacity constraints surrounding testing.



However, investments must be made in secondary cities so that an enabling environment is created for new private healthcare firms that can effectively complement healthcare service delivery. In addition, these services must be coordinated so that duplication of services do not occur, and that healthcare services can be delivered at a competitive price to the consumer.

Importantly, this decentralisation of healthcare services in secondary cities must be supported with consistent health guidance, policy and standard operating procedures that are enforced across public, private and NGO healthcare providers. Given the extent of fragmentation in the Bangladesh healthcare system across public, private and NGO providers, this will provide an added layer of complexity. However, failure to develop policy coherence can hamper healthcare delivery and surveillance, provide poor data to develop health policy and result in negative patient outcomes for communities in secondary cities and remote areas. Health authorities not only perform infrastructure building, but also provide

policy coherence at a national level.

From an economic perspective, the outbreak of the coronavirus has had a significant impact on Bangladesh’s economy, especially in cities that are export-oriented. The lack of job opportunities in secondary cities have resulted in a concentration of people in the major metropolitan centres of Dhaka and Chattogram for work. The liberalisation of Bangladesh’s economy has fuelled a demand for labour in export-orientated industries such as the garments sector. For decades, the supply has been met by rural migration resulting from declining agricultural productivity due to climate change. With the economic shutdown associated with the coronavirus, disrupted supply chains and reduced demand have heavily impacted Bangladesh’s export-oriented industries, resulting in many urban households migrating back to rural areas in search for alternative sources of income and due to pre-existing social ties to the

to be in the forefront of the minds of policymakers and government officials alike, particularly within the present climate. With Dhaka already reaching its limit in terms of carrying capacity, secondary cities across Bangladesh are well placed to absorb climate change migrants and create diverse economic opportunities. The coronavirus makes addressing displacement, particularly with respect to resettlement, public health and employment, more urgent than ever.

It is to be noted that although planned resettlement may appear a novel policy solution, planned relocations have been implemented by other developing country governments to mixed success. According to the World Bank, regional development policies such as Export Processing Zones have fared well where there is already close proximity to established markets, with isolated zones performing poorly in Bangladesh. A revision of existing policy to help build a supportive environment to encourage voluntary resettlement to secondary cities is vital. Critically, adequate investment in human capital and innovation, as well as supporting infrastructure such as healthcare, promote local economic activity and can generate employment and allow secondary cities to identify their natural competitive advantages.

In this context, Bangladesh’s secondary cities will play a critical role towards the transition to a middle-income economy and post-coronavirus recovery. The Bangladesh government has initiated a broad-based urban development policy which has focused on building Bangladesh’s secondary cities to provide new job opportunities and build upon health infrastructure. The seventh Five Year Plan outlines a stronger emphasis on developing integrated health and urban planning policy, improved healthcare service delivery and the decentralisation of facility management. The Perspective Plan of Bangladesh 2010-21 also calls for health facilities to be taken to the people’s doorstep by constructing new local primary healthcare services in rural communities. These policies are a step in the right direction to address many of the drivers that have contributed to the disproportionate impact of the coronavirus in Bangladesh, both from a public health and economic perspective.

The new challenge is how to implement such an ambitious programme in the context of the coronavirus, which has impeded the ability of the government to implement new, integrated healthcare and urban renewal policies. However, with a focus on good governance and ensuring policy coherence and mobilisation, Bangladesh can begin to take steps to implement the necessary integrated urban renewal and healthcare service delivery reforms in its secondary cities.

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