

Appalling state of BM College dorm

The situation is unacceptable

WE are appalled to note the dilapidated condition in which students of Government BM College, Barisal, are forced to live because the authorities have failed to complete the building of its new residence on time. It is deeply disturbing that its completion has already taken a couple years longer than was originally planned, and that too after a clear instruction of the concerned minister to quickly ready the building for the use of students. As a result, one of the dorms now house thrice the number it was meant to accommodate, and in conditions, we believe, that are unfit for human habitation.

It is indeed no less shocking that students have to live in a dorm where there are rifts in the walls and cracks in the roof. If such is the state of one of the oldest and most illustrious institutions of the country, it is fair to ponder about the living conditions of the dorms of similar public institutions.

The incident clearly highlights gross negligence on the part of the concerned department. What else, we may ask, can explain the three-year delay in the completion of a building, and that too in the heart of the divisional headquarters?

This cannot be allowed to continue. The authorities should realise the sufferings that the students are going through and immediately ease them by finishing the work of the under construction dormitory. We demand the authorities create a congenial environment for studies not only in this but in all other educational institutions.

Assaults on freedom fighters

Is this how we repay our debt?

MAIH Mashiur Rahman, a freedom fighter in Magura, was brutally assaulted recently by a bunch of criminals for protesting the theft of trees worth about Tk. 3 lakh from his land. Having received death threats from the same group of thugs, his family was too afraid to file a case against the criminals.

A similar assault on another freedom fighter in Hatibandha upazila was reported by this newspaper on the same day. The man named Farid Uddin, was assaulted by local musclemen among whom was a ward unit secretary belonging to the ruling party, who, ironically, served as a ward unit secretary for the Jamaat-e-Islami not long ago.

Detestably, the criminals even evicted MAIH's family from their home, compelling them to live under the open sky. At a time when the government is making homes for indigent freedom fighters, how is it that one of the ruling party members is violently dislodging one?

As shameful as the assaults are for our nation, these are, by no means, rare occurrences. And the fact that this is happening so often should not only bring us shame, but also force us to reflect on our history and contemplate where and why we went wrong. After all, is this any way of repaying the valiant freedom fighters who had given us our freedom and a land to call our own? The authorities must, in the meantime, bring the perpetrators to justice, regardless of their political affiliation.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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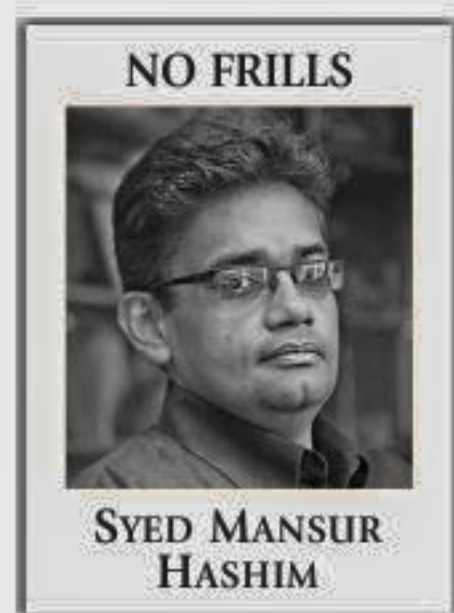
Building youth for the future

The young generation are crazy about becoming popular on the internet. To do so, they engage themselves in various acts which are not suitable for their age. They come in contact with various types of people, and unfortunately some get in touch with people with immoral motives. Apart from all these hazards, many of the kids are bullied, and they hardly have anyone to protect them. In this materialistic world, many parents are too busy in attaining success and establishing a future for their children to spend sufficient quality time with them. The youngsters, feeling an absence of their parents in their day to day lives, employ themselves in various relationships, connect themselves to people older than them, and gradually end up in a position from where they can never return. To make the younger generation feel protected, to make the children feel free, to make the children feel self reliant, the parents surely have tons of things to offer. The young ones today desperately need someone who can understand their problems and give valuable answers to their respective problems. So, to ensure a safe future for the child, a parent's responsibility is not only to work, but also to make the relationship with their children more meaningful.

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BANGLADESHI MIGRANT WORKERS

Why must we pay more?



BACK in April 2015, the World Bank (WB) released a Migration and Development Brief where it was found that Bangladeshi migrants pay the highest recruitment costs worldwide. According to WB data, worker-paid-recruitment costs averaged USD 1,955 in Kuwait with Bangladeshis paying anywhere between USD 1,675 and USD 5,154. "Recruitment costs by migrant workers to recruitment agents, on top of the fees paid by the employers, are a major drain on poor migrants' incomes and remittance." Indeed, over and above the direct fees that were paid to recruiters, migrant workers are often "subject to usurious interest rates of 50 percent on loans to cover the costs of migration.... Recruitment agents are also often reported to offer bribes to the employing company personnel, with amounts ranging between USD 300 and USD 1,000 per worker and these costs are recovered from the workers."

So, we have multifarious actors in this unholy mix to rip off Bangladeshi overseas workers. It is not just unscrupulous recruiting agencies, but officials of some foreign companies who must be "compensated" to take our workers. To add salt to injury, Bangladeshi expatriate workers earn much less than migrant workers from other countries. According to a report published in this paper on December 9, the average cost of migration to Saudi Arabia vis-à-vis average monthly wage, we find that in 1985, it cost Tk. 20,000 to go to that country and average monthly income was Tk. 8,000. Fast-forward to 2016; it now costs a migrant worker Tk. 600,000 to enter the Saudi labour market but average monthly wage is a measly Tk. 15,000. So over the course of two decades, cost of economic migration to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has gone up 30 times while the income level has not even doubled!

A study by Malaysian NGO Tenaganita in 2007 found that the average Bangladeshi migrant worker spent anywhere between Tk. 160,000 – Tk. 220,000. Here too we have the same scenario where less than half the amount goes into recruiters' coffers whilst the rest is used in Malaysia to pay bribes. According to migration experts all these costs including airfare should be the employers' headache and not the migrant worker's. However, as things stand now, it is the headache of poor workers who often sell their worldly possessions to seek our fortunes in foreign lands, only to wake up to the sad reality that not only have they been fleeced at home, but often get fleeced when they get over there.

This is the other half of the grim tale of the life of the average Bangladeshi migrant worker. We have been bombarded over the years of the trials and tribulations of our fellow countrymen, who find out (the hard way)



All in the hope of a better life.

PHOTO: STAR

that they are to be paid a fraction of what was agreed upon. Often, they have no rights as their passports are confiscated by employers and their existence reduced to a life of near-servitude. But then why do they stay on? Why do millions of new aspiring economic migrant workers brave these seemingly insurmountable odds to go to lands from whence thousands have returned with tales of horror? The sad reality is that eking out a mere living push people to take risks that defy common sense, and the lure of a "better life" for those living on the borderlines will always prove to be a pull too great to resist.

The government has been trying to work out State-to-State deals with a number of major markets including Malaysia. This is a laudable effort, but it is also a work in progress. The private recruitment empire is not about to let this multi-billion dollar industry slip out of its fingers without a fight. Nor is the government ready to offset the services offered by private recruiters as it will take time to develop the expertise to handle the economic migration process that involves millions of people every year. Having said that, there are a number of steps authorities can take to lessen the illegal activities of crooked agencies. As we take stock of the Malaysia-Bangladesh G-2-G deal, a landmark agreement despite hiccups, newspaper reports inform us that many Malaysian companies have resorted to hiring undocumented workers. The case for this is purely

financial. Under the agreement, major cost heads including airfare have to be borne by the employers and benefits (including salary) will have to be paid as per terms of agreement.

No such niceties have to be followed in the case of illegal migrant workers. These poor men and women have no rights under the law. The constant danger of being apprehended by Malaysian authorities that guarantee their deportation back to the home country almost certainly guarantees their silence on issues of pay and less than satisfactory working conditions. While illegal workers are deported without much ado, no action is taken against employers. This is one area that has to be looked into seriously and it requires government to government negotiations. Until this loophole is plugged, the problems associated with migrant workers' rights and costs can hardly be addressed. We can actually take lesson from ASEAN countries which signed the Cebu Declaration that provides the grounds for workers' protection from member countries. It makes it obligatory for each nation to live up to legal commitments for both sending and receiving countries. It is time to stop with the slogans and start work on policy frameworks that ensure the rights of our workers at home and the foreign labour markets they are going to if we are at all serious about the issue.

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Violence: An inevitable outcome of a world unequal



like buses? Do you think about the criminal justice system? Do you think of incarcerated women? Do you think about workplace harassment of women? Do you think of violence taking place within institutions – schools, hospitals, universities, churches, and mosques? Or do you think about domestic violence? Marital rape? Wife-beating?

If you answered yes to more than one of the above, congratulations! You are among those few who recognise that violence against women is structurally produced – and the forms of abuse you see depend on your social location, and your identity – or plural – identities.

When I asked you to think about violence against women, the first thing that most of you thought about is probably domestic violence. One reason is perhaps the high prevalence rate of domestic violence. Recent reports suggest

that about 80 percent of women in Bangladesh experience domestic violence. But, another reason is that the social structure – and its politics – hides violence against women by conflating violence against women with domestic violence, unfortunately limiting it to that, and eliding over structural and institutional violence.

In other words, we forget or suppress from consciousness, as Joshua Price puts it, that women are violated in many other spaces – including spaces that are meant to be safe. This should be no surprise, however – given that we know that women are so often abused at home – even though the dominant narrative of the home is surrounding safety.

Another way in which structural violence is hidden (in plain sight, if you will) is by creating the illusion that violence against women is a homogeneous phenomenon, when it is not, suggests Beth Richie (2000). Let us think about intersectionality – or multiple identities – as a way to understand how violence is heterogeneous across groups. In the context of Bangladesh, it is perhaps not difficult to imagine that a low-income Santal woman in Gaibandha is more likely to experience violence than a high income Muslim man, or even woman,

in urban Dhaka, highlighting that identities intersect in ways that often marginalise individuals, and increase their risk of adverse experiences of violence. It highlights that racism and sexism can and does occur at the same time. This violence against Santals is structurally produced; this violence is institutional. Much like how violence against Kashmiris by the Indian Army is structurally produced. Much like how police shootings of black men in the United States is an example of institutional violence.

Clearly, the difference between these experiences are not merely location in terms of geography but location on the basis of their identities – be it racial, ethnic, religious, socioeconomic status, gender, age, mental health, disability, sexual orientation, and/or gender.

Yet another way in which structural violence is suppressed is by creating a victim-perpetrator dichotomy where the "victim" is supposed to be innocent and the "perpetrator" guilty (Price, 2012). Indeed, innocence and guilt are important in criminal activities – but when criminalisation becomes a tool of state oppression, this labelling is problematic. An excellent example is the War on Drugs that treat heroine use as a public health issue and cocaine as a legal issue (1), which some say is related

to the fact that in the United States affluent whites use more heroin and low-income blacks use cocaine. So if we view cocaine users as perpetrator of crime we miss the larger picture of discrimination and racial injustice.

This victim-perpetrator dichotomy gets complicated when multiple identities come into play. And, further complicated when violence is structural, taking place within various structures. For example, when state actors – such as policemen – become "perpetrators" they are often found to be "not guilty" as the dominant narrative would suggest, and when the "victim" is a sex worker, she is no longer "innocent" because of the nature of her work. The many cases of policemen raping women (and men) in police custody speak to the legitimisation of such violence. The many cases of policemen killing people, particularly minority groups are recently seen in Gaibandha, with impunity speak to such a culture of legitimising violence. The problem is not merely the violence they perpetrate themselves but the violence that they ignore, and thus condone – and we know that it's often violence against minority groups – such as low-income, from a minority community, women – that is ignored. It is problematic because it reinforces the idea that violence, particularly against minorities – be it women or minority group members – is justified, while the state (and state actors) are absolved of violence, because they do so in the name of "protection." And when that violence is public – e.g. on the streets – it furthers the idea that certain groups of individuals – for example women – are unsafe on the streets, and should remain at home, furthering the agenda of those interested in repressing women's rights.

At the same time, the disproportionality in terms of who gets arrested and who doesn't (for example, a low-income rickshaw puller is more likely to be arrested for hitting his wife or child than a high-income businessman) should not be lost on us. That his arrest may have adverse effects on his low-income family should be a reminder of how certain groups are kept within their social class without any real hope of upward mobility.

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