

What message did we get from Rangpur election?

Are we going to kill Dhaleswari too?

Let it not be another Buriganga

WE have been expressing our alarm about the continued degradation of the Dhaleswari river for an unpeep number of times and yet our concerns have fallen on deaf ears. All we know the reason - indiscriminate toxic waste being dumped into the river by the relocated tannery industry in the Savar area. The main point of the relocation was to stop the severe pollution of the Buriganga river caused by the tannery factories in Hazaribagh leaving it practically dead. If the leather factories continue to pollute another river despite the shifting, the entire process has been meaningless and counterproductive. This newspaper and many other environmentalist groups fiercely supported and pushed the government's bid to relocate the tannery industry to Savar because we hoped that it would allow the valuable industry to operate in an environment-friendly manner. However, the news that the central effluent treatment plant (CETP) continues to function due to the electricity shortage and does not treat the waste and all harmful substances, comes as a major disappointment.

The relocation process has already been mired in controversy due to gross mismanagement, unpreparedness, and gas and electricity crisis, but the pollution of the Dhaleswari river should be of our primary concern. If this pollution continues unabated, the Dhaleswari will meet the same fate as the Buriganga.

We urge the government to address the issue immediately by ensuring that electricity is available in the industrial area and persuading the company responsible for the CETP to provide necessary chemicals to about all the hazardous wastes and waste of the factories. The government must act before it is too late to save the Dhaleswari.

Taking the sheen off implementation

Some ministries move at snail's pace

THE government's Economic Relations Division has found that slow implementation in several ministries has sat on the back burner several important projects. Some 28 foreign-aided projects fall in this category with some half a dozen involving Tk 6,000 crore were included in the current annual development programme (ADP) without confirming finance. This lack of professionalism has resulted in not only making the government look bad but put into jeopardy development in some crucial areas. We have been talking about these problems for some years now and they are not unknown to policymakers. The lacklustre performance by various branches of the government including departments and ministries have never really been addressed and we keep coming back to revisit them every year.

How some projects can be included in the ADP before ensuring finance, is something that eludes us completely. Then of course there are projects that have finance, but there is no movement on them. Then there are others like the Padma Bridge rail that is supposed to connect the capital city with the southern districts via the bridge itself hasn't progressed satisfactorily despite having an understanding that was supposed to end in a loan agreement with China's Exim Bank, but which has not materialised as yet.

And every year, our ADP keeps getting bigger and more ambitious whilst not commensurate effort is made to address core deficiency areas, i.e. increasing the capacity of institutions to materialise projects undertaken. While it is agreed that the highest implementation rate was achieved in the current fiscal (USD\$3.5 billion), the fact remains that there is a mismatch between targets and ability to deliver on those targets. Project management remains a sore point for policymakers and performance will keep lagging unless efforts are made to address efficiency bottlenecks in administration.



BADRUL ALAM MAJUMDAR

Now that the Rangpur election is over, some questions come up: How was the election? What message does it convey? What influence, if any, will it have on our upcoming elections?

According to all observers, the Rangpur city election was free, fair and peaceful. This is because the EC was serious and neutral. The government, specifically the bureaucracy and law enforcement agencies, made no attempt to influence the election. The political parties acted responsibly. The civil society and the media also played very active roles. For example, SHUIAN: Citizens for Good Governance and Peace Ambassadors organised "Face the Voters" meetings for the mayoral candidates and commissioner candidates of 15 wards in which thousands of people participated. In these events, comparative statements highlighting the education, profession, criminal record, income, wealth and tax-related information taken from the affidavits submitted by candidates were distributed to empower the voters to make informed choices.

In these meetings, the candidates made a written declaration to refrain from election rigging, vote buying and indulging in violence. Voters also took an oath to vote for clean candidates and candidates who renounce violence. In addition, a cultural team went to every nook and cranny of the city to create voter awareness. Social media was used to create public awareness about free, fair and peaceful election. Clearly, the credible Rangpur City election is the result of the combined efforts of all of the above stakeholders.

Both the 2012 and 2017 elections of Rangpur City Corporation were credible. In both, three major political parties—Awami League, BNP and Jatiya Party—participated. The only difference between the two elections is the use of party symbols. In other words, in both elections, the same political parties contested with the same candidates and in the same location, the only difference being the use of party symbols. Because of the similarity of the parties, candidates and location, the recent election became a contest of the popularity of three party symbols.

Historically, Rangpur has been the stronghold of Ershad's Jatiya Party. In the 2012 election, the combined votes of two candidates belonging to Jatiya party, Messrs Mostafizur Rahman and Abdur Rouf Manik, were 11,501, which were 8,758 more than the votes for winner Sharfuddin Ahmed's. Since Jatiya Party has continued to be the most dominant party, the recent election essentially boiled down to a contest between the



Women line up to exercise their franchise in front of a polling centre at Kelabandhi Government Primary School in Rangpur city on December 21, 2017.

Awami League's boat and the BNP's sheaf of paddy.

In this contest, the number of votes for Sharfuddin Ahmed, with the boat symbol, declined from 106,255 to 62,400 votes, registering a 41 percent fall. Despite the fact that the number of voters of the city has increased by 10.13 percent over the last five years. In addition, Rangpur city has about 60,000 Hindu minority voters, who traditionally vote for Awami League. In contrast, the number of votes for Kausar Zaman, with the symbol of the sheaf of paddy, increased from 21,235 in 2012 to 35,136, showing an increase of 65 percent. Incidentally, the number of votes for Jatiya Party's candidate, Mostafizur Rahman, who won the recent election, increased by 106 percent, from 77,805 in 2012 to 160,489 in 2017. Thus, Mostafizur Rahman defeated Sharfuddin Ahmed by a whopping margin of 98,089 votes.

It is to be remembered that, historically, BNP's position in Rangpur has been weak. BNP's share of votes of Rangpur-3, which includes the city, was only 4.8 percent in the 2001 Parliamentary election. In 2008, it was a paltry 7.24 percent.

The 41 percent decline in support for Sharfuddin Ahmed, despite a 10.13 percent increase in the voter roll and nearly 60,000 minority voters in Rangpur city, represents a setback of disastrous proportions for Awami League. According to Tushar Kanti Mondol, the President of the Rangpur City Awami League, Sharfuddin Ahmed received the vote of Awami League supporters and the religious minorities, but not the common people (Pratham Alam, December 23, 2017). This assertion, if true, carries an important message for Awami League which has created a false tradeoff between democracy and development, and has been practising patronage-based politics, ignoring good governance and social justice. Thus, it appears that the voters of Rangpur City sent a rude wakeup call to the

ruling party. Will the leaders pay heed? Another much-ignored message from Rangpur City election is that the number of votes for Islami Andolon Bangladesh's candidate ATM Golam Mostafa increased from 15,681 in 2012 to 24,006, registering an increase of 53 percent. The major political parties should take serious note of such a sharp rise in the support of an Islamist party.

Does the free, fair and peaceful election in Rangpur provide any guarantee that the future elections, especially the national election, will be credible? One may recall that all five city corporation elections, namely Rajshahi, Kulina, Barisal, Sylhet and Gazipur, held in 2013 under the Rákibuddin Commission, were credible. Yet we had a much controversial, one-sided national election on January 5, 2014 under the same commission. Thus, Rangpur's success does not guarantee that future elections will be at the same level.

It should be noted that credible elections do not depend on the EC alone. It requires the neutrality, responsible behaviour, activism and watchdog role of other stakeholders, such as the government, particularly the bureaucracy and law enforcement agencies, the civil society and the media. In fact, the neutrality of the EC is a necessary but not sufficient condition for free, fair and peaceful elections. Such elections require the good behaviour and positive contributions of all others. Thus, although the credible election of Rangpur City has created optimism, there is no certainty that it will be reflected in the future elections also. Rather, the naked politicisation—or "partisanisation"—of the bureaucracy and law enforcement agencies increases the odds against good elections, especially the next national election.

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When saying "No" to a man is a death sentence



SHAGUFE HOSSAIN

S TALKING wasn't considered a crime until 2011. The High Court declared stalking of girls and women illegal, and directed the government to consider the offence as sexual harassment in 2011. Until then sexual harassment was referred to as "eve-teasing", still socially referred to as such, has been commonly and conveniently used across South Asia, for public sexual harassment or molestation of women by men, the name "eve" alluding to the very first woman, according to the Biblical creation story. The woman, who infamously tempted the man to eat the forbidden fruit of the tree, and consequently caused him to err and transgress.

Beyond semantics, the two-fold connotation of using "eve-teasing" to describe public sexual harassment is so significant. Firstly, "teasing" is playful. There's no significant harm that can come of it. And if it does, the harm caused is a result of overreaction. Of not being able to take a joke. Secondly, it was, after all the Eves who're doing the tempting. The temptress is inviting the teasing. So of course, it is not the fault of the teaser.

But what are the consequences of assault, so casually conducted?

In July 2017 alone, 22 females were stalked according to a report in The Star Weekend magazine. A story in The Daily Star published in July, covered the story of a girl who refused advances of her stalker and as a result was stabbed on her face and hands in Nabiganj upazila. On December 8, The Daily Star reported that a Class IX student in Bhalnambaria was assaulted in her classroom by her stalker when she rejected a proposition he made earlier that day while she was on her way to school.

On December 16, a schoolgirl was stabbed to death allegedly by a young man in Dirai of Sunamganj. A national daily reported the following morning that the victim was Mummy Akter, a class X student of Dirai Girls High School. The victim's relatives said a local miscreant, Yahya, used to stalk Mummy on her way to school. They also said that the matter had been previously settled once in a local arbitration. But Yahya had continued his misconduct.

Yahya entered Mummy's residence around 8:00pm that night, and stabbed her brutally, leaving her critically injured. The victim's relatives said the stalker (Upazila Health Complex and later shifted to Sylhet's MAG Osmani Medical College Hospital. That is where she was declared dead.

Why? I wonder. What causes so much anger that you fear bodies you claim to love? The discipline of psychology advises, while speaking to a child, to avoid using negatives. Our brains aren't wired to take rejection so it cannot process the word "No". Instead, we are told to offer the child an alternative. For example, instead of saying, "Don't sit over there" we say "Sit here". That way the child processes the direction better with little pressure on his brain.

We are also advised to practise something called delayed gratification i.e. the ability to resist the temptation for an immediate reward and wait for a later reward. A person's ability to delay gratification relates to other skills involved in self-regulation such as



patience, impulse control, self-control and willpower. So for instance, if a child is crying for a piece of chocolate, we are advised not to give in to his demands right away. We are advised to wait. To teach him to wait. Teach him that it is good behaviour that merits rewards. So, to not reward a crying child with a chocolate is the ideal thing to do.

My friend and I were discussing Mummy, and she mentioned that she had read somewhere that the SSC examinee happened to be a brilliant student. Her stalker, however, had been described in The Daily Star report as a "rotten egg". There was a time, and maybe this holds true in many cases, an SSC examinee would be forced to drop out of school if she had a suitor, regardless of the suitor's qualifications. She would be asked to

marry instead of continuing her education. She would be told, her dreams could come later.

No. Prevention of Repression against Women and Children Act, 2000, under section under section 10 (2), defines sexual harassment as: "if a man, with a view to fulfilling his sexual desire, commits an offence or makes erotic gestures, such act of a man would amount to sexual harassment". Under Section 9 (ba) of the Act, it warrants a punishment of 5-10 years' jail and an indefinite amount of fine for a person who forces a woman to commit suicide as a consequence of dishonour or sexual harassment or assault.

The law, to me, seems adequate. What about the society we are building?

Two things, I believe. Firstly, we are doing something right with our women. We are raising strong, independent girls who are capable of drawing firm boundaries and saying "No". Secondly, we are doing something terribly wrong with our men. We are raising insecure men who have no idea how to respect boundaries and don't know how to process a "No". Men, who are firstly, unable to approach women in an appropriate manner, and secondly, take as a huge blow to their ego, if a woman happens to be disinterested. And as a result they have no qualms ending lives of those who they claim to love.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Do we deserve better rulers?

We generally tend to blame politics and the politicians for all our problems, as if the rest of the people and professions in the country are faultless. Just fine.

Politicians are not aliens from the Mars. They hail from the very society that everyone else does. Their "actions" represent a version of the collective nature of our society. Maybe we are too proud to admit it, but it is the truth.

French philosopher Joseph de Maistre once observed, "Every nation gets the government it deserves." We ought to ask ourselves whether we deserve better than what we got.

Ferdous Kabir Tipu, London

CORRIGENDUM

On December 27, the headline of an article published in the opinion page on the contributions of Khanabhadar Ansanallah was mistakenly titled "A pioneer of Muslim education in British-India". It should read "A pioneer of Muslim education in British-India". We regret the error.