

Strange scrutiny of nomination papers

Election officials should act prudently

THE record number of nomination papers being rejected may be attributed to the fact that a huge number of candidates are vying to contest this election. However, this does not change the fact that opposition candidates—often the top ones—were declared ineligible by the Election Commission rather disproportionately. So far, the nominations of nearly a quarter of opposition alliance candidates have been revoked, while only three candidates from the ruling party suffered the same fate.

Some nomination papers were rejected because they lacked information that could easily be fixed or verified. Some candidates were declared ineligible because they hold public office, although relevant laws and provisions do not explicitly put any restriction on them. Some nomination papers were cancelled simply because the signature of the candidate was missing.

The candidacy of Reza Kibria, an opposition candidate, for example, was invalidated by election officials for an outstanding credit card payment of Tk 5,500, while a number of serious loan defaulters aligned with the governing party had their nomination papers approved.

Some candidates who defaulted on massive amounts of loans are evading the electoral rules and regulations either with a court stay order or with the connivance of the bank and regulatory authorities, who illegitimately rescheduled the loans.

The people of this country deserve better than unscrupulous individuals to be their representatives. They want honest candidates with impeccable credentials to represent them in the parliament.

We call on the election officials to adhere to the Representation of the People Order (RPO) judiciously but not mechanically. They shouldn't act in a way that will question their neutrality.

Will Rumpa get justice?

Reckless driving continues

DOCTOR Akhter Jahan Rumpa, an optometrist, had arrived in Dhaka from Sylhet on December 4. She had an interview at Bangladesh Eye Hospital in Dhanmondi. Unfortunately, she never got the chance to go to her appointment and her husband didn't get to meet her. A speeding bus rammed the CNG she was in at the Bijoy Sarani crossing. What is tragic in this whole incident is that, according to an eyewitness, the bus had actually stopped and opened the door to see what the damage was. Apparently, as the situation wasn't good, the bus drove away hitting the CNG one more time. By the time Rumpa was rushed to Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH), it was too late.

The victim's family has demanded punishment for this incident and they are terming it as murder. We are told by the officer-in-charge of that area that they are trying to locate the bus and the driver. Despite eyewitness accounts, the bus service officials have denied the presence of any of their buses on that route at that time.

The city has lots of CCTV cameras at vantage points and we expect the police to look at them and get the footage of the incident as soon as possible. How hard can that be? Too many people are losing their lives on our roads and it really is up to law enforcers to bring these perpetrators to justice. Only then can the victims' families can have some form of closure.

LETTERS
TO THE EDITOR

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A cricket team sans pacers—really?

I congratulate the Bangladesh National Cricket Team for winning the test series against the West Indies. One must admit that Bangladesh's spin attacks in both the matches were lethal, leading to the collapse of the batting order of the opponent.

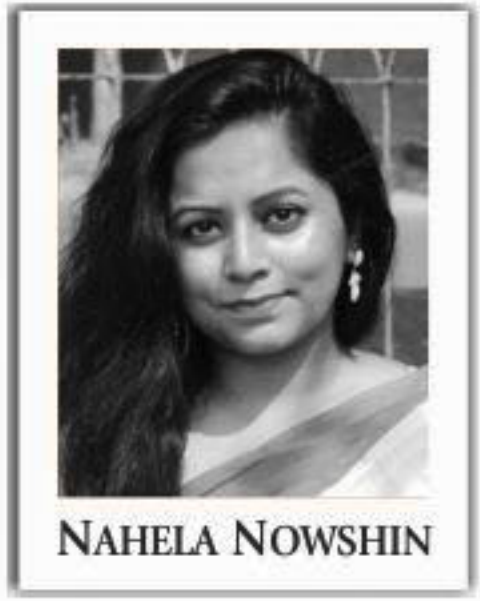
Yet, I wonder why the Bangladesh team did not have a single pacer in the squad. While Bangladesh tried to take home advantage as well as make use of a spin-friendly pitch, I found the team's reliance entirely on spinners to be highly unsporting. Also, they didn't seem to take account of the fact that the pitch conditions could change anytime.

Shafkat Rahman, By email



PHOTO: STAR

Aritry's deafening cry for help



she took her life, Aritry, after being accused of “adopting unfair means” in an exam because a mobile phone was found in her possession, was rebuked and humiliated by the principal and other teachers of Viqarunnisa in front of her parents. The school authorities reportedly asked her parents to collect the transfer certificate the following day, which the principal of the school has denied.

It is impossible to know what was going through her mind. Perhaps Aritry felt responsible for the humiliation her parents had to endure. Perhaps she was already braving a mental toll of a host of other things and the obnoxious behaviour of Viqarunnisa School authorities was the final straw. But whatever the case, Aritry's suicide has yet again laid bare one of the less-talked-about issues plaguing our educational institutions: a complete disregard for students' mental health. It goes to show just how ignorant school authorities, including teachers and principals, in the country are when it comes to ensuring students' mental wellbeing. It also raises questions about the environment of educational institutions, no matter how “prestigious”, which is supposed to be a safe space for students.

Aritry is not the first to take her own life being unable to cope with humiliation and mental pressure and trauma. But we have repeatedly ignored the signs and failed to address them from an institutional point of view. Because if we had, teachers would know better than to break a child's spirit and self-confidence in such a cruel manner.

Not a single teacher stood up for her or thought to intervene and suggest that the actions being taken by the school were a bit extreme. No one seems to have spoken up and said that there are less harsh ways in which her transgression could be dealt with. Not a single school authority figure rebuking her seemed to understand what that kind of humiliation does to a child.

All this time we had been crying hoarse about the lack of qualified teachers in our schools. But what Aritry went through, and similar situations that countless children face on a daily basis, only prove that the need for empathetic, compassionate teachers in our schools who are attuned to the needs of a student's emotional wellbeing is much more urgent than teachers with educational qualifications alone.

What this also points to is a toxic culture of learning. Aritry's grief-stricken father said, “Although my daughter offered apology several times, the teachers didn't listen to her; rather they asked us to get out of the office.” This is typical of educational institutions that operate on outdated modes of learning where strict punishments and “no-nonsense” policies are equated with a school's prestige and excellence. Harsh punishments disproportionate to the offence are

supposed to be a “life lesson” of some kind. But this defeats the very purpose of what a school should strive to be: a place where children can learn from their mistakes and grow without being ridiculed or degraded. Such arbitrary use of punitive measures without considering the specific circumstances and the effects they can have on a child's psyche goes to show that even the most reputed schools can be filled with insensitive personnel unfit to do their job.

It also makes you wonder how at this day and age, some of the most well-renowned schools in the country have people in positions of authority who have an embarrassingly narrow view of education—people who have no idea that education goes beyond rules and results. Because what they are essentially doing is killing children's spirit under the pretext of “enforcing rules”, no matter how illogical

have come forward and small preventive measures have been taken to minimise the effects. But most schools under the national curriculum still don't provide counselling services. Teachers think they can play the role of counsellors because they guide students. So there is a fundamental misconception about what counselling entails and why it's so important. It requires skilled persons with years of practice.”

The need for trained school psychologists in our schools has never been more urgent. Cut-throat competition in the education system means that teachers have higher expectations from students and students, too, have higher expectations from themselves, said Dr Haque.

Moreover, school teachers and authorities who rely on extreme punitive action have no idea, it seems, about the basics of child development. Because development of a child or adolescent's clinical, emotional, social, or



Outraged Viqarunnisa Noon School and College students demonstrating in front of campus on December 5, 2018.

or unfair those rules may be. We can hardly take solace in the fact that suspension of three teachers of Viqarunnisa has been ordered by the education ministry because mere suspension cannot fix decades of mistreatment and abuse of schoolchildren.

With so much ignorance prevailing, it is no wonder that schools are so ill-equipped to deal with students' mental health issues. When asked about the state of facilities in schools for providing students with counselling services, Dr Mahjabeen Haque, chairperson of Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology, University of Dhaka, unequivocally said, “It's poor. Some English-medium schools and some schools under the national curriculum have counsellors. They've slowly begun to see the need for it. Students who have been dealing with bullying, depression, etc.,

intellectual maturity does not always happen at the same pace, according to Dr Haque. This means that each child has to be nurtured differently. And the life stage that Aritry was in, is an especially sensitive period for all adolescents, where emotions and impulses are constantly in a flux. This is when extra care and patience are needed when dealing with adolescents so as not to drive them over the edge.

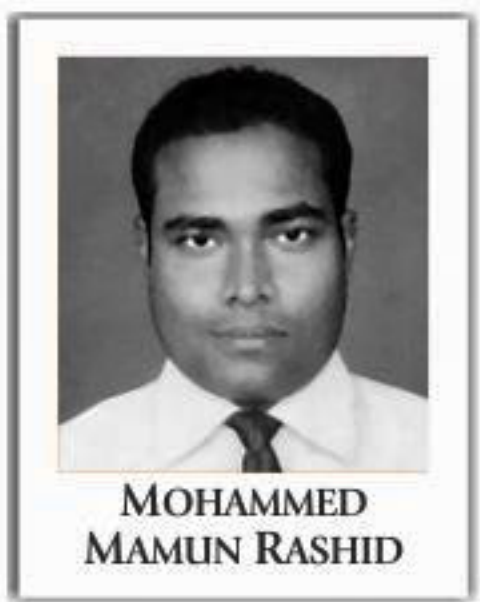
It is not just her educational institution that failed Aritry; it is our collective failure. We have brushed under the carpet, for far too long, the misery of children overburdened with the pressure to succeed by any means necessary, that too with no room for error.

Aritry's death was a cry for help. And let this be a wakeup call.

Nahela Nowshin is a member of the editorial team at The Daily Star.

ELECTION MANIFESTOS

Don't leave behind coastal districts



Awami League has drafted its manifesto with a “forward-looking vision”, which is to be unveiled by December 15. The manifesto incorporates main ideas of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs),

advanced districts. The issue of regional disparity deserves to be a central issue of the development planning and policymaking process.

An important factor that may have contributed to the differences in regional poverty indicators is the issue of the “east-west” divide in terms of access to growth centres. This divide is defined in terms of location of the divisions with reference to the three rivers: the Jamuna, the Padma and the Meghna. Three divisions are on the western side of the rivers: Rajshahi, Rangpur, Khulna and Barishal. The other three divisions, Dhaka, Chattogram and Sylhet, are on the eastern side. Concerning regional disparities, the divisions of

behind.

While national statistics provide information on macro indicators of growth, income, employment, education, health, etc. it does not show the full picture. Information on several micro indicators such as access to water and sanitation, structures of houses, level of solvency and many more is also available. These give us a pretty good idea about the socioeconomic situation of the sections of people across the country. But what we miss in these statistics are the ground realities experienced by the people. We also miss the insights of local people themselves who have a clear understanding of their developmental

Sundarban. Coastal issues were incorporated a bit more in 2001 and 2008. These were mainly issues of land reclamation, irrigation, salinity intrusion, low-cost waterway transportation, deep sea-port construction, health services for people of char lands, Padma bridge construction, loan support for small-scale fishermen, wetland development, expansion of *astrayan* (poverty alleviation through rehabilitation and income generation), coastal forestation and taking prioritised actions for ensuring balanced development of lagging coastal areas.

However, many commitments made in election manifestos remain only in black and white. Aspirations of disadvantaged coastal communities are not fulfilled. Even many crucial issues, such as fishermen affected by robbers at fishing grounds, lack of policy initiative for establishing coastal resource-based industries, youth delinquency, lack of adequate research and replication on climate-smart agriculture, lack of special budget allocation for lagging coastal districts, women's unemployment and insecurity, have not been addressed in policy agendas.

Approximately one-third of our total population lives in coastal districts. It is noteworthy that this zone has a diverse ecosystem: mangrove, marine, estuary, islands, coral, sandy beaches, sand dunes, and both “world heritage sites” and “ecologically critical areas”. The coastal zone offers immense potential for economic growth. Renewable and non-renewable energy, marine resources, and beach minerals tourism are some of the less explored areas. We should see coastal areas as prospective zones. A long-term (minimum 20-25 years) comprehensive plan for development of coastal areas and mainstreaming it with national and sub-national planning documents is needed. It might be helpful to establish a strong coordinating body at the national level for the well-being of coastal communities. Towards that goal, election manifestos should capitalise on coastal potentials—the “Blue Economy”—for poverty reduction and overall development.

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the Perspective Plan (2021-2041) and the Bangladesh Delta Plan 2100. Other political parties like BNP, Jatiya Party and Jatiya Oikyafront are also preparing their manifestos. Because an election manifesto is a set of promises made by political parties to the people at the time of an election, it has a crucial role to play in terms of public policy towards reducing the gap between the advanced and less-

Dhaka, Chattogram and Sylhet seem to do better in terms of both growth and poverty reduction as compared with Rajshahi, Rangpur, Khulna and Barishal. Bangladesh has a coastline of 710 kilometres and an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). The conventional view is that the land that is inundated by the high and low tides is called the coastal belt. Twelve districts, out of our 19 coastal districts, are lagging

problems and the way out.

In 1991, the election manifestos of two major political parties (AL and BNP) of Bangladesh did not especially focus on coastal development issues. In 1996, they focused on *khas* (government-owned) land distribution among landless people, island development, disaster management, riverbank erosion, and development of tourism, including in

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