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Pay farmers the due price

Govt should intervene to ensure fair deal

SUCCESS in production normally brings a bonanza in profit, but not so in Bangladesh. Every time there is a good harvest of rice, the farmers have to brace for a shock of fall in the price. This time the high yield of Boro paddy is a cause for worry for the farmers who are having to count a loss of as much as Tk 300 per maund (37 kg). And a glut of rice on the market causes them to be held virtually hostage to the middlemen, and they are forced to sell at the asking price.

Understandably, the price of rice is a seasonal phenomenon coinciding with the harvesting season of the three main crops. But while the Aman harvest saw a rise in the wholesale price of rice in January, encouraging the farmers to invest more in rice production, the situation now is very discouraging. We feel the rice procurement drive this year should commence sooner than other years. And this is where we feel the government should step in by procuring the bulk of the product directly from the farmers at an equitable price, without the middlemen coming in. In fact, it was time the administration edged the middleman out of the matrix and created conditions to allow direct market access to the farmers. It is the middlemen who manipulate the market and rob both the producers and the consumers of fair price, selling in wholesale market at almost double the cost of purchase.

In this context, we find the agriculture minister's remarks that procuring rice would not be of much help rather surprising. He feels that a syndicate of the politically powerful, food department officials and large rice traders hogs the procurement process and sells rice to the government. We are constrained to say that it is the ministry's responsibility to prevent the syndicate(s) from controlling the market. It is also the ministry's job to monitor the situation constantly. The high yield was predictable and it is the ministry's concern to protect the interests of both the farmers as well as the consumers.

Where is the lacuna?

Tax collection nowhere near budgetary target

PERHAPS not to anyone's great surprise, revenue collection is once again set to fall short of the target this year. The government assigned the National Board of Revenue to collect a total of Tk 296,201 crore in FY 2018-19. But the NBR managed to collect only about Tk 153,419 so far, which means that it will have to collect more than Tk 142,000 crore in the remaining three months to meet the government's aim—an impossible task. The Centre for Policy Dialogue, in an analysis last month, said the total revenue shortfall comprising both tax and non-tax revenue might reach about Tk 85,000 crore if the current trend in revenue collection continues.

The ramification of this massive shortfall will obviously be manifold. And the government will have to make up for the shortfall, most likely, through borrowing. Which may "overheat" the loan market. Apart from that, there are other economic consequences of this deficiency—including implications for budgetary policy. And the government may have to forgo certain projects if it fails to make up the budgetary gap.

The question may arise as to how the NBR failed so miserably to get even close to the targeted revenue collection. But the fact is that the government, like previous years, has set a target that was impossible to achieve from the very beginning. This begs the question why it continues to set such unrealistic revenue targets—as failure to meet them only creates chaos and uncertainty in the end.

The government should set more realistic objectives for the NBR in future to stop this from recurring. And if it wants the NBR to succeed in the types of targets it has been setting, then it must recognise the need for reforms, which haven't been possible because of the government's own shortcomings.

FIGHT AGAINST SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Has anything changed after Nusrat?

"My silences had not protected me. Your silences will not protect you."

-Audre Lorde, *Your Silence Will Not Protect You* (2017)



ZORAIDA NASREEN

THE horrific murder of Nusrat Jahan Rafi, a student of Sonagazi Islamia Senior Fazil Madrasa in Feni, had caused a massive outcry from the public and intensive media coverage. The 18-year-old was set ablaze on April 6 for refusing to withdraw a case filed against the principal of her religious school for sexually harassing her. In the last week of her life, the story of her fight for justice broke through our endemic

numbness and brought the issue of sexual violence into our everyday public discourse.

What set her story apart was the courage and determination to keep on fighting till the end to resist sexual harassment. Even as she lay critically injured in hospital bed with burns to 80 percent of her body, she displayed her fighting spirit. She had her brother record her account of the attack and said, "The teacher touched me, I will fight this crime till my last breath." She did not give up.

The viciousness of the crime against Nusrat, its supposedly "safe" setting of a religious school where the violence occurred, and the indifferent attitude of the police led to the eruption of popular anger in social media. When Nusrat died on April 10, her fight-unto-death ignited intense discussion on sexual violence. Many people called for punishment of the culprits and some felt the need for a long struggle to change the patriarchal culture. For a fleeting moment, there was a feeling that Nusrat's tragedy would lead to a transformation of our society's attitude to sexual violence.

The government responded to the public outcry by cracking down on the culprits. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina vowed that none of the culprits would be spared. Her government also took over the responsibility for her treatment. In addition, she handed over a job appointment letter to Nusrat's brother Mahmudul Hassan Noman. However, as we look into the state discourses and responses, we find that the government took only a sympathy-producing approach and has not done anything systemic to suggest these were not mere charitable gestures in one single case. While those were laudable moves, the process of responding did not address the real causes of sexual violence and the possible solutions.

Does any parent feel safe now if their daughter is out of home in any part of Bangladesh? The answer is no. Even as we were mourning for Nusrat, at least 41 children were raped in the nine days between May 1 and 9, according to Manusher Jonno Foundation (*The Daily Star*). Sexual violence in public spaces remains a largely neglected issue with no or insufficient provisions in place to address it.

It is symptomatic of a crisis fast unfolding in the country. It is sickening that 17,289 incidents of women and child rapes were recorded between January 2014 and December 2017—as revealed by home minister Asaduzzaman Khan in parliament—in a country where rape is not easily reported. ActionAid found that over a half of urban women experience violence, including sexual harassment. Such a high prevalence of sexual violence suggests that the problem is turning into a nation crisis.

Yet, the government is not taking any meaningful step to ensure the safety of all women and girls. Our education system is failing our women and girls. The committee to prevent sexual harassment has not been formed at all educational institutions and workplaces in line with the High Court directives of 2009. No effort has been made to impart sexual education for boys and girls. Our transport system is also failing our women and

girls. There is no effective monitoring and regulation of transport services to make them safe, accessible and available to all.

Our law enforcement and justice delivery systems are also failing our women and girls. The police are largely biased against women and are sometimes hesitant even to register cases of rape and sexual harassment. The fact that women and children repression cases had a conviction rate of as low as 0.3 percent in 2018 shows that the perpetrators enjoy a high or near-complete impunity. We need an overhaul of the systems of investigation, prosecution, and trial of rape and sexual harassment to end this impunity. As long as rapists and abusers think that they can get away with it, women and girls would continue to be raped and abused every day.

Some people describe sexual violence in public places as isolated incidents perpetrated by some psychopaths. They often suggest that the world would be safe for women and girls if those few psychopaths are removed. By drawing the abusers as alien to us, they completely ignore the reality of everyday violence against women and girls. Nusrat's incident clearly shows a terrifying circle

have to fight before our leaders feel that the crimes have continued unabated for long enough?

In recent years, we have seen the phenomenon that no real change was initiated without an outpouring of protests on the streets. It is unfortunate that in Nusrat's case, the protests that took place on social media did not spill onto the streets, and the visibility of public protests against the government for failing to provide adequate security for women and girls was very low. But we should also not forget that public outrage is almost always subjective. The rape of Marma sisters or Hindu women or a poor/uneducated village girl may not stir up as much anger as that of an urban, educated, middle-class woman. When the outrage is too intense, the government steps up, mostly by making a spectacle, as it needs to create an impression of "doing something". Also, in a society where patriarchy is so intensely embedded in our homes, our institutions and in our laws, there is no guarantee that the people would side with the woman or girl victim. Usually, the opposite is the case. So we cannot always rely on public outrage to stop sexual violence.

If women are to participate more fully in our



Protesters in front of National Museum, demanding capital punishment for those responsible for the death of Nusrat Jahan Rafi.

PHOTO: STAR

involving sexual abusers, their influential backers and law enforcement at play in normalising sexual violence. The accused in the incident are neither psychopaths nor loners. They had a whole band of people behind them.

In Nusrat's death, the whole system was complicit—politicians, police, teachers, students, and ordinary men and women. As the story has unfolded, local ruling party leaders supplied money to silence her; the police showed indifference to the case and took the side of the abuser; teachers planned and ordered her killing; students executed the plan and set her on fire; local people came out on the street in support of the perpetrator. This is symptomatic of a disease not just of a few individuals, but of the whole society. So the responses must go beyond the legal measures and enforcement of the law, and hit the patriarchal core of the society.

There is no doubt that we need sexual harassment and witness protection laws. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina said in parliament: "If necessary, we must enact tougher laws and ensure that maximum punishment is given to those who commit sexual harassment." The point is when that "necessity" would be felt. How many lives do we need to see destroyed, how many lonely battles do we

collective life, we must create an environment where they feel free to move on the streets, in public transports, to go to educational institutions and workplaces without fear. But it is deeply worrying that the state, instead of taking the responsibility for its failure to protect women and girls, is putting the burden of protection onto individual women. Just drafting strict laws would not be enough; changes in the patriarchal and misogynistic culture must accompany it.

The way Nusrat's case has been handled does not make us hopeful that a change is going to come. Nevertheless, we need more discussions on sexual violence like the one it had generated. When more people talk about sexual violence in a very public way and we have more Nusrats determined to get justice, real change would follow. At least, we can hope so.

Nusrat fought till the end. She did not give her life in vain. Her struggle should awaken everyone to act for cultural change to ensure respect for women and to make public spaces safe. Let her death spark a revolution in our society's attitude towards sexual violence.

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Role of Zakat in poverty alleviation



SYED KAMRUL ISLAM

POVERTY is a complex and multidimensional issue, and will continue to be a problem for us in the near future. To combat poverty, countries have taken different measures. Interest-based microfinance is one of the

popular measures adopted in many parts of the world. It has shown some success but not without heavy indebtedness and struggle of the poor recipients. But one can show how the Islamic Zakat system—based on the guidance of the holy Quran and Hadiths as well as proper marketing—can be utilised across the social spectrum to reduce poverty in Bangladesh. As it is mentioned in the Quran, "Truly, those who believe, and do deeds of righteousness, and perform As-Salat (Iqamat-as-Salat), and give Zakat, they will have their reward with their Lord. On them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve." (Surat: Al-Baqarah, Ayat: 277). Zakat can be used as an alternative approach to poverty reduction and capacity building for the poor to be more productive, thereby contributing more to the economy.

Microfinance is defined as giving small loans to the poor people without any security collateral, people who have been denied loans in a conventional system. The loan amount depends on the nature of the purpose for which a loan is taken out, for example, farming, fishing, poultry, cattle raising, small trade, etc. The main purpose of the microfinance project was to reduce poverty among the rural poor. Later, the establishment of Grameen Bank officially started its microfinance business and earned reputation nationally and internationally, which eventually led its founder Dr Yunus and his organisation to win the Nobel Peace Prize. A number of banks, NGOs, and public and private organisations followed suit and achieved

commercial success. Some studies, however, have found that the income and assets of the borrowers have increased to some extent but microfinance has largely failed to eradicate poverty. Generally, it comes through a high interest rate against any loan amount that the borrowers take. Often, they have trouble paying off the loan because the majority of the recipients are not educated enough to understand the complex math that is involved.

On the other hand, the Islamic Zakat system has the same purpose: to assist the

properly, the recipients can establish for themselves small businesses to produce things and to meet their subsistence needs.

The success of Zakat in reducing poverty depends on the methods used for distributing funds in a particular society. In countries like Malaysia, Indonesia, Egypt, and many other Middle Eastern countries, distribution of Zakat funds has been institutionalised through government and non-government organisations. Recipients of Zakat funds have been benefiting

establishing small cottage industries for the less fortunate people, and create opportunities for common people to sell their goods at the local market. It may also ensure good governance and social justice in a particular society.

Zakat is one of the five pillars in Islam and an important instrument for establishing social justice. However, in Bangladesh, the majority of wealthy Muslims are not well aware of this issue and reluctant to pay Zakat in an appropriate way. It is limited to giving cheap clothes to the poor in the form of sari and lungi, and a few bucks without any proper measure of business revenues and assets, liquid funds or savings, and gold or silver reserve at the basic rate of 2.5 percent. The collection and distribution of Zakat funds are yet to be effective, thanks to the lack of proper Islamic knowledge among the Muslim population and also because the system hasn't been institutionalised publicly and privately. Zakat plays an important role in reducing poverty and promotes equitable sharing of wealth.

An active role by the wealthy Muslims can be vital in alleviating poverty besides the conventional microfinance, tax collection, and other mechanisms. Also, the accountability issue should be taken into consideration during the processes of fund collection, distribution and promotion by individuals, mosques, government and non-government organisations. If we simply take the example of a few major cities in Bangladesh, there are a large number of wealthy Muslims there, and if they pay their due proportion of Zakat to the less fortunate in a meaningful way, poverty can be significantly reduced over time. And with the help of Zakat apps, one can easily calculate their due proportion of Zakat. Islamic scholars should devise a mechanism about how the Zakat system can be more effective for the particular case of Bangladesh.

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poor and alleviate poverty in a country. The Zakat amount doesn't come with any interest attached and the recipients are not required to pay it back either. Zakat is not limited to providing subsistence living for the poor but it rather aims at enriching them. It works as a social charitable giving tool, and if managed

from the institutionalised system. Besides individual and household poverty alleviation, Zakat funds can be used to promote infrastructural development, agriculture, and farming which are the main sources of income for many in our country. It may help to create employment opportunities by

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Public transport becoming increasingly unsafe for women

The recent incident of gang-rape and murder of Shahinor Akter Tania—a nurse at Ibne Sina Hospital's Kalyanpur branch—on a moving bus is just a tragic reminder of how unsafe our public transports are for female travellers. We witnessed a similar atrocity being committed back in 2017 when Rupa Khatun, a law student, was gang-raped and murdered inside a bus by the bus driver and his associates. These kinds of incidents are occurring repeatedly. The reason behind such audacious indifference is the general impunity that most of these sexual predators enjoy. Every day, thousands of women use public bus services, so the authorities must take extra precautions, for instance, by increasing police patrolling at night, installing CCTV cameras in all buses and even appointing female bus drivers, for ensuring their safety. It is absolutely ridiculous that a woman has to fear for her safety in the very bus she is travelling in.

Nasif Shahrear
By e-mail

