



ILLUSTRATION: NOOR US SAFA ANIK

The man behind the BELL

NILIMA JAHAN

Last week, a peon, who was also a night guard, of Poradanga Government Primary School of Kulotia Union of Moniram-pur upazila, Jashore took his own life by hanging. According to Tushar Imran, the president of the Peon cum Night Guard Samity of Jashore, the peons of Maniram-pur upazila, Hiron had not been paid for the last two months.

"Hiron had a quarrel with his mother about the financial crisis in their family. And later he committed suicide. Seeing Hiron's corpse, his mother also drank poison. Her condition is also deteriorating," he adds.

Hiron's untimely demise may be an exception, but his desperation is shared by nearly 37,000 peons cum night guards

of government primary schools. They are overworked and underpaid. They have simultaneously been performing the tasks of sweeper, peon, office assistant, and night guard. In some cases, they even do personal favours for the headmasters, such as buying groceries and delivering them to their houses.

"We need to be at school from seven in the morning, clean the classrooms, office rooms, fields and toilets, collect water for the office room and toilets, lift the flag, do all the official tasks, until the school day ends. Most of us even work as a servant of the headmasters to keep them happy. From the evening, we start our duty as night guards and sleep on the school premises," says Mamun

Sardar, secretary of the Peon/Night Guard Samity.

For this, they get an all-inclusive salary of Tk 14,450; before 2015 this was Tk 10,200. However, they don't get any annual increment or promotion. "We are not given any extra payment for all the additional work we do. The teachers who are given exam duty get money for that. But although we seal every script, bind them, and follow every command from everyone, we still don't receive a single amount. We don't have pensions, provident funds or other benefits," says Mamun.

The saddest part is that these employees are obligated to work 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year. To reiterate, this means they don't enjoy any leave throughout the year.

"Even on May Day or Eid day, we must sign our attendance sheets. And during Qurbani Eid, we need to clean the field, because most of the people slaughter their animals in the school compound," adds Mamun.

Since the school doesn't provide these workers with food, they usually go home for dinner. But within this short period if an accident happens, they are held accountable. There are cases where the workers need to replace stolen things in order to keep their jobs. One such incident happened with Mahbubur Rahman Fakir, a peon cum night guard of the Madai Government Primary School of Joy-purhat's Kalai upazila. Last year, he had to go home for an emergency one night. A few minutes later, when he returned to the school, he found that two locks of the office room were broken. The multimedia projector used for the students was missing. Plates, jugs and other office supplies were also gone.

The next day, when he informed the matter to the school authorities (the headmaster and the chairman and members of the managing committee),

"Even on May Day or Eid day, we must sign our attendance sheets. And during Qurbani Eid, we need to clean the field."

the committee sat informally and decided that he would have to pay for a new projector for the school rather than the school undertaking an investigation or referring the theft to the police.

But how would Mahbubur even afford a projector, given that he had not received a single month's wage for this job, which he started back in 2014? Until mid-2018, the headmaster and the managing committee, who had hired Mahbubur, kept promising that he would be given his pay and benefits "soon". To protect that opportunity, Mahbubur's wife's paternal uncle, who was the chairman of the Madai union council, bought a projector for the school on behalf of him.

Mahbub started getting his salary from June 2018 after completing a new recruit-

ment procedure.

Star Weekend contacted Abu Mannan, the headmaster of his school, but he couldn't provide any clear explanation for why Mahbubur wasn't getting his salary. When asked why Mahbubur had to buy a new projector, he said, "We both informally settled the matter after the chairman advised me to not to report the matter to the [upazila education] office or file any police case," he says. When asked whether there was any proof that Mahbubur had been involved in the theft, the headmaster replied in the negative.

Star Weekend also contacted Eti Ara Parvin, the upazila education officer of Kalai, Joypurhat about the recruitment process through which Mahbubur was hired. She explains that Mahbubur's recruitment was cancelled by the Kalai upazila education office, as the managing committee and the headmaster had locally recruited him after the actual deadline of the recruitment process had passed. "If the managing committee appoints someone on their own and asks him to start working, the department cannot take any responsibility for that," says Parvin.

"But it was not fair to locally settle the matter of the theft informally by taking a new projector from the peon. It should have been handled through a systematic procedure," she admits.

A similar incident happened with Md Milon, a night guard at Sholla Dhar-mapur Government Primary School of Noakhali Sadar upazila, who had to pay for locks, pre-primary teaching materials, a bell, and other such supplies just to protect his job. According to Milon, one night, he went home to have his dinner and when he came back, he found that the bell, attendance sheet, and register sheet were missing. "I was told to buy those; otherwise it would affect my job. If two to three more complaints cropped up, I would eventually lose my job. Nobody wants to understand—from where do I get the money to buy these things? How can one work 24 hours at stretch without taking any rest?" he asks.

The association also claims that they don't have required safety at their workplaces. In 2016, peon/night guard Sagar Dutta, who worked at the Bajua Danga Government Primary School in Jashore Sadar upazila was found hanging from the stair railings. Although he was reportedly killed and hanged following an altercation with a teacher at the school, who was also arrested after the incident, it was later declared that Sagar had committed suicide.

Tushar Imran informs us that they talked to his family, and found no reasons for him committing suicide. "Sagar's family members were scared to protest as they are Hindu [a minority] and thus the incident was passed off as suicide. We demanded proper investigation of his death, but nothing worked in our favour," he says.

Peons cum night guards have been coming to Dhaka to protest—forming human chains on the Press Club premises—demanding nationalisation of their jobs. If their jobs were nationalised, they would receive salaries and other benefits like other Members of Lower Subordinate Staff (MLSS) in the country. The Directorate of Primary Education (DPE) has yet to take any measures to address their longstanding demands, say the samity.