

Poverty's Third Frontier

Addressing the challenges of exclusion and marginalisation

Taqi's murder in the list of unsolved mysteries

Why has no charge sheet been submitted in six years?

IT has been six years since the body of 17-year-old Tanwir Muhammad Taqi, a brilliant student, was found on the bank of the river Shitalakhyia after he had gone missing for two days in March 2013. According to his family, his murder is the result of a personal vendetta against Taqi's father, cultural activist Rafiqur Rabbi, for his political views. The fact that investigators did not submit a charge sheet before the court over the murder case filed by Taqi's family gives rise to disturbing questions. Why has there been no charge sheet submitted after six years of this murder? Why have the law enforcement officers failed to arrest the people who have been accused by Taqi's family? There have been rallies and discussions demanding justice for Taqi and his family, yet these have fallen on deaf ears.

There is little doubt that the murderers are being protected by the culture of impunity enjoyed by the politically well-connected. There have been allegations against certain political leaders but because of their powerful connections, there has been no attempt to arrest them. Such inordinate delay in the investigation reflects an indifference on the part of the state to get to the bottom of the mystery. For ordinary people, when there is no justice for these horrendous crimes, it erodes confidence in the judicial system. Unfortunately for Bangladesh, there have been too many unsolved murders—Taqi, Tonu, Shagor-Runi— with no sign of progress in the investigations.

Now that the government seems to be trying to clamp down on corruption and crime committed by those associated with the ruling party, it would only be befitting if these unsolved murders are investigated properly and the culprits brought to book, regardless of their political connections. For Taqi's family and the families of other such victims, only when the murderers are meted exemplary punishment will there be some closure. This is also the only way that public confidence in the state's ability to ensure justice for its citizens can be restored.

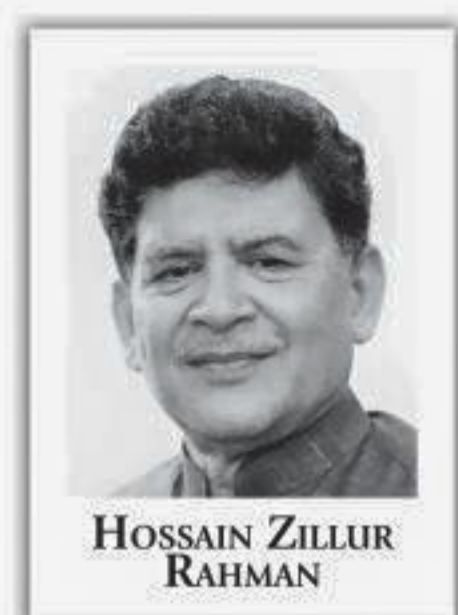
Why should it take years to repair roads?

15,000 inhabitants continue to suffer

WHILE most government agencies remain focused on the problems of the big cities, we seldom see what is happening in rural areas. That explains the lack of interest of the authorities in repairing the approach roads of two bridges in Barkhapon union under Kalmakanda upazila of Netrokona. Flash floods damaged the roads—one got affected four years ago, and the other, one and a half years ago. The road from the bridges leads to Netrokona district headquarters through Thakurakona. Some 15,000 inhabitants of adjacent unions need to use the road, including some 400 students of various educational institutions, but the pleas of people affected by its poor condition have fallen on deaf ears.

Indeed, it is not just these approach roads that lie in disrepair. There are four bridges in Barkhapon and Ranagaon on the Barkhapon-Gutura road that are also suffering from neglect. The LGED officials tell us that only the Barkhapon Bridge is under its authority and the rest were constructed under different projects. We are further informed by the local officials that the administration is aware of the situation but is waiting for the final approval of a priority project under the local engineering department before they commence work on their restoration. While all that is going on, heavier vehicles can no longer ply on the bridges.

What this illustrates is the bureaucratic approach to connectivity projects which, once completed, often end up in a dilapidated state because there is no real pressure from any influential quarter to prioritise their upkeep. All the while, people living in the vicinity of these important bridges and roads continue to use them despite their vulnerable state. We can only hope that the local administration will expedite the file work to get them repaired for the benefit of the public.



Hossain Zillur Rahman

WHEN Bangladesh gained independence nearly five decades ago, poverty was the default condition for over 80 percent of the population. Over the course of the 70s, 80s and 90s, the anti-poverty efforts of the state and society were directed against this general state of poverty. By the turn of the century, the poverty rate had been brought down to below 50 percent and again to below 33 percent by 2010, and further to around 25 percent by 2016. This was a significant achievement in which multiple actors including government, NGOs, social actors as well as ordinary citizens—women, farmers, entrepreneurs, youth, workers—played their roles.

By the 1990s, there was additionally an important new element in the fight against poverty, namely a recognition that while the instruments and policy approaches to combat general poverty must continue, there was a need to consider additional and specific steps for a worse-off group within the generally poor group. In an earlier publication *Rethinking Rural Poverty* (SAGE, 1995), we had termed this group "extreme poor", i.e. people who were not just poor but subsisted considerably below the poverty line. Our early research at Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS), for example, had shown that microcredit, which was an important instrument to combat poverty, was excluding the extreme poor because they often lacked critical capacities to make effective use of general microcredit. Out of such a realisation, from the 1990s onward, new programming initiatives both by government and NGO sectors emerged which were specifically designed for the extreme poor. These too have borne fruits because not only has general poverty come down, the rate of extreme poverty too has come down from a high of 34.3 percent in 2000 to 12.9 percent in 2016.

Notwithstanding this impressive achievement in combating poverty, the poverty challenge still remains large. In absolute terms, the number of poor by the 2016 data stood at around 39 million, while the number of extreme poor stood at just under 20 million. These are undoubtedly very large numbers which call for sustained continuation of anti-poverty efforts. However, beyond the large unfinished business of general and extreme poverty *per se*, there is a third poverty frontier that now merits attention. This is the hitherto largely out-of-focus but entrenched problem of exclusion and marginalisation.

Economists have understood the problem of poverty and extreme poverty in terms of a lack—lack of income or lack of resources or, as Amartya Sen pointed out, lack of capabilities. The excluded and marginalised groups may also be lacking all of the above, but what distinguishes them from the general category of poor and extreme poor are the walls of discrimination and highly negative social perceptions that not only often render them socially and statistically invisible, but also serve to downgrade their own sense of self-worth and their sense of agency. Not surprisingly, while many among the poor have embraced an aspirational mindset which refuses to accept that "poverty is destiny", the excluded and marginalised groups struggle to make a transition



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to such a mindset. Having won significant victories in the fight against poverty and extreme poverty despite the challenges that remain, the policy moment is right for policymakers, analysts and implementing agencies alike to take cognisance of—and prioritise—poverty's third frontier, namely, exclusion and marginalisation. It is not surprising that the World Bank's 2018 poverty assessment points towards a slowing down in the rate of poverty reduction after 2010. Arguably this is partly due to the nature of the growth strategy being pursued particularly over the last decade, but equally arguably, this is also due to those strata of extreme poverty who are caught in entrenched poverty traps because of exclusion and marginalisation.

The "No One Left Behind" slogan of SDGs is not merely a programmatic guideline. To my mind, this slogan is the philosophical bedrock on which the ambitions of SDGs stand. The focus has to be not just on those who are racing ahead but also on those at the farthest end of the line, often entrapped by statistical invisibility and prevalent negative attitudes within society. It is these groups who constitute the third poverty frontier which has now to be transformed into a priority if the momentum on combating poverty is to be sustained.

For a long time, the discussion on excluded and marginalised communities has tended to narrowly focus on the plight of hill peoples, particularly in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Extensive research by the Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD), Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC), and other partners has clearly established the necessity of a broader focus particularly covering a plethora of small communities across the plains of Bangladesh. Many of these communities are numerically small and thus struggle to project a collective identity, but together comprise a sizeable population group upward

of five million. They include tea workers and Khasis in north-east, Santals in north-west, Jaladas in south-east, Bede along major rivers, sweepers in cities, Koira and Rishi in central and south-west and many others. Their marginality and exclusion are driven by multiple factors: social and economic discrimination of ethnic minorities such as tea workers, khasis, Santals; stigmatised occupations such as those of sex workers and sweepers; disappearing traditional occupations due to urbanisation and economic modernisation such as those of Bede, Rishi, Koira, Jaladas; and finally, marginalisation due to political displacement such as Biharis.

Addressing the third frontier of poverty requires a multi-pronged approach as championed by SEHD, PPRC and partners. The multi-year research and consultations pursued by these agencies over the preceding years have underscored, if anything, the critical need for making the excluded groups statistically visible through credible research as an essential first step to scale up policy and programmatic attention. It is indeed with this objective in mind that SEHD and PPRC are launching the Report on the State of the Excluded and Marginalised, as the start of a possible annual series. The report combines a comprehensive mapping of excluded and marginalised groups, analysis of their specific vulnerabilities and needs, and strategies to overcome the traps of exclusion and marginalisation including capacity development for self-advocacy. As the government begins the process of formulating the 8th Five-Year Plan, it may be useful and indeed necessary to take cognisance of such findings and analysis of poverty's third frontier, for the latter to be effectively addressed.

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Increasing accessibility for the disabled

Not just a moral obligation



Moon Moon Hossain

RECENTLY, I was travelling from Dhaka Sadarghat Terminal to Barishal by one of the three-storied vessels that are available on this route. Before the journey started, I was waiting on the deck and saw a young woman in a wheelchair being boarded on the vessel. At first, three people tried to lift the wheelchair along with her, and were unsuccessful. Then one of them lifted her and took her into his arms and entered the vessel. Anyone who was around could understand the young woman's discomfiture in being lifted by a stranger but there was simply no other way! I couldn't help but wonder how she would use the washroom during the nine-hour journey.

How many times have you seen a person with disability travelling by launch? Did you ever realise that in your old age, you might also have to face the same situation? Data from Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA) shows that in 2017-18, around 4.5 million journeys were undertaken by persons with disabilities (PWDs) through the Sadarghat-Barishal launch terminal. What have we done to make the journey easy for these 4.5 million people?

Everyone is likely to experience some form of disability or have a family member who experiences difficulties in functioning at some point in his or her life, particularly when they grow older. Despite this, disability inclusion has not been a priority in policy making. The concept of disability inclusion and mainstreaming is still evolving and is perhaps not adequate on its own to lead the path towards sustainable development. A large number of people remain unproductive due to lack of proper accessibility and inclusion in our society. Laws have been passed, a United Nations (UN) convention has been ratified, but these are not being implemented well or monitored as needed.

Article 9 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities specifically focuses on the accessibility of PWDs to the physical environment, transportation, information and communications technologies and systems, and to other facilities and services open or provided to the public, both in urban and rural areas. As one of the signatories to the convention, the question for Bangladesh is, where does it stand in designing the products, the environment, programmes and services for the PWDs? There is no doubt that access to public transportation for these individuals in Bangladesh, particularly in Dhaka, is a great challenge. Though section 32 of the Rights and Protection of Persons with Disability Act, 2013, directs that 5 percent of seats in any public transport should be reserved for persons with disabilities, the reality is



PHOTO: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

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different. In most cases, bus, train or launch stations do not have necessary infrastructure and support systems in place for these individuals. The vehicular designs are such that most of the persons with disabilities, especially those who use wheelchair, cannot get into a vehicle. This inaccessibility also creates barriers to receiving education, healthcare services and of course employment, which again are a violation of their human rights.

Ensuring accessibility for persons with disabilities is often thought to be expensive and inconvenient. We tend to forget that if 9.1 percent of the population of a country are left behind because of inaccessibility, it hinders the overall progress of its economy. Lack of awareness as well as of interest moves us towards this kind of false assumption. The reality is, some accessibility accommodations are simple, some are complex, but all are very important. Increasing access

means creating an environment that can be used by all people, including those who have disabilities. But when we talk about accessibility, people often assume that we mean making buildings or other spaces accessible to wheelchair-bound people and we don't think beyond that point. Whereas, including signage, visual or auditory announcements, assistive services, slip-resistant paths and so on are also important to ensure accessibility for persons with disabilities.

In an overpopulated country like Bangladesh, taking action to ensure accessibility for these persons may seem like a luxury. But all people with disabilities have the equal right to access the physical environment, including buildings, roads, schools, medical facilities, workplaces, and other facilities and services that are generally open or provided to the public. These people also have the right to live independently and be included fully in their communities. They also have the right to the highest attainable standard of health, including rehabilitation and services specific to their disabilities. The government also has an obligation to raise awareness about the rights and dignity of people with disabilities and to combat stereotypes, prejudices, and harmful practices.

Moreover, taking measures for ensuring accessibility is not even expensive! For example, introducing an assistance service corner for helping the elderly or persons with disabilities for a smooth journey will not cost much and can be a source of income for a few people too. Introducing washroom facilities for persons with disabilities can be used by other people too. Making the launch terminals, gangways and pontoons slip-resistant and maintaining the slope measurement of universal design will also help pregnant women, elderly people and other individuals to have a smooth journey. Visual and auditory signage and announcements will lessen the hassle of other people's journey too. All the necessary changes we can think of will not only ensure accessibility for persons with disabilities but also help other people in various ways. In a riverine country like Bangladesh, where journey by launch is supposed to be the most convenient, comfortable and accessible one, we are still failing to ensure the minimum facilities to make our public transport an inclusive one.

By becoming eligible for graduation from the list of Least Developed Countries (LDC), Bangladesh has taken its status to a new level. We are on the verge of attaining sustainable development goals and committed to leaving no one behind to ensure an inclusive and caring society. Persons with disabilities constitute one of the most marginalised groups in our country. It is important to create opportunities for all of them and mobilise them for their empowerment.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Justice must prevail

It surely is a matter of relief that all 16 of the accused in the Nusrat murder case were sentenced to death by a Feni court. While the nation applauds the fact that justice is being served, we should also take note of the reality that the two members of the police, who were also involved in this crime, were not given any punishment. Reportedly, disciplinary actions were taken against them from the police department, but is that enough?

Had the then superintendent of police in Feni SM Jahangir Alam Sarkar and officer-in-charge of Sonagazi Model Police Station Moazzem Hossain taken the right action at the right time, the horrific incident might have been avoided. But their negligence, along with Moazzem's attempt to harass Nusrat by posting offensive material on social media, exacerbated the situation.

It is of utmost importance that the police identify the members within the force whose actions demean the law enforcement agency and bring them to justice. Only when every wrongdoer, regardless of their position in society, is brought to book, can the citizens proudly proclaim that justice has truly been served.

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