

A move to prevent Santals from reclaiming their land

Why sugar production despite losses?

We are surprised and disappointed that despite incurring continuing losses for the last three years, and a track record of more loss than profit, the Rangpur Sugar Mills Ltd in Gaibandha is increasing production which clearly contradicts common sense. More importantly, it reflects the mill's rigid stance to keep Santals away from their lands. It is a continuation of the saga that unfolded three years ago with mill authorities and local influential brutally evicting the Santals that left three Santals dead, many of them injured and missing in November 2016. Video footage circulated in the media have shown law enforcement members setting fire to Santal homes. The result has been 1,200 Santal families being left homeless and in a state of painful uncertainty. The question is why has this issue not been resolved yet and why have the Santals not been given back their land?

According to a land acquisition agreement in 1962 it was stated that if the mills produced any crop other than raw materials for the mills the land will be given back to the Santals who had been evicted before after the land was acquired by the then government. Since then the mills failed time and again, so it would have been logical to give them back the land.

Instead, mill authorities violated the agreement when the mill shut down, by leasing the land to local influential groups who subleased it to farmers to grow crops. It goes without saying that those who leased the land out made a fortune. Why were such clear violations of the agreement allowed? In fact, even after a letter was sent to the mills by the governing authority criticising the move, even after the deputy commissioner of Gaibanda investigated and found the Santals' claim to be true, the Santals are still deprived of their ancestral land.

We urge the government, which had initiated the investigation after an appeal from the Santals, to intervene in this crisis and allow the Santals to go back to their homes. The Santals, like most such minority communities, are vulnerable and often in financial hardship. All too often they become helpless at the hands of greedy land grabbers. Their only hope is for the state to protect their rights and ensure that they can stay in the lands where they have lived for generations.

Gross anomalies in procurement at FMCH

Take action against those responsible

THE level of corruption that took place in the procurement of machines and equipment for the Faridpur Medical College and Hospital's (FMCH) Intensive Care Unit in 2014 is outrageous. Reportedly, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare had allocated Tk 10 crore to FMCH for the 2014-15 fiscal year and with the money the hospital authorities were supposed to buy various machines and equipment. They gave the job of supplying the equipment to a local trader who, after supplying the required machines and equipment, submitted an inflated bill to the authorities. The trader charged Tk 28.25 lakh for only a set of curtains, which should not cost more than Tk 20,000. Besides, the prices of the machines were shown to be several times higher than the market price and some of the machines were not supplied as per the specifications.

The financial anomalies in procurement were only revealed after the bill of Tk 10 crore was submitted to the health ministry and the ministry declined to pay the bill. When the ACC went to investigate the case at the High Court's order this year, numerous irregularities of similar nature at the hospital surfaced. It was found that the hospital authorities had submitted a bill of Tk 52.66 crore for buying several other machines which should not have cost more than Tk 11 crore.

The extent of corruption that took place in FMCH speaks volumes about what might be happening in other government hospitals and institutions. The procurement scandal in Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant—where a pillow was bought for Tk 5,957—is still fresh in our memory.

Similar instances of financial anomalies at various government institutions have been reported by the media. All these incidents bring to light the fact that there is no monitoring mechanism in the government institutions especially regarding expenditures. In the case of FMCH, it is simply not understandable how this scale of corruption went unnoticed by the hospital's higher authorities. Such a waste of public money by a government institution is unacceptable.

However, it is good to know that the ACC has filed a case against six people involved in the scam. We now hope that they will be punished according to the law. As for the government, it needs to make sure that there is an overseeing mechanism in place to strictly monitor the procurement activities at various government institutions, including hospitals.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Strict supervision for E-commerce

As we progress as a nation towards development, many positive changes have occurred over time. One of the most convenient approaches taken to digitise Bangladesh was the introduction of E-commerce. Even though the initiatives were taken long ago to familiarise the public about the benefits of such services, it took us a while to further develop the idea and practice.

Now almost the majority of city dwellers are accustomed to E-commerce. The possibilities of such services are abundant too. However, some people out there are trying to take advantage of the situation. There are many pages or sites on the internet that display certain products, but upon ordering, the products that are delivered turn out to vary in size, shape or even quality.

As a victim myself, and on behalf of others, I would like to request the concerned authorities to strictly regulate the E-commerce industry. That way, not only will this industry flourish, but it will also contribute to the growth of our economy.

Md Arifur Rahman Sumon, Savar, Dhaka

A CLOSER LOOK



TASNEEM TAYEB

BETWEEN January and October 2019, 173 women have been killed by their husbands in Bangladesh, 37 have been murdered by the husband's family, while 36 have been killed by their own family members. As fictitious and inflated as these numbers may appear, these figures—documented by Ain o Salish Kendra—are real, portraying the harrowing extent of the rot that pervades our social fabric.

It is called domestic violence. Truth is often stranger than fiction, and for us the truth is that even in the 21st century—a time when we beat the drums of women empowerment—women are being tortured, maimed and killed by their intimate partners and at times even their families.

And not just in Bangladesh, domestic violence is distorting the social makeup of many developed countries around the world, including France, Germany and the US. According to a *France 24* report, this year alone, 116 women had been killed by their intimate partners. In Germany, a woman is killed every three days in incidents related to domestic violence, as per a report by *Deutsche Welle*, Germany's international broadcaster. And in the US, according to the National Domestic Violence Hotline, nearly 1 in 10 women have experienced rape, physical violence and/or stalking by a partner and have reported a related impact on their lives.

The protests on the streets of Paris, Brussels, and other cities in the world against femicide and violence against women are a testament to the sufferings of women at the hands of men on account of their gender.

And a research released in December 2018, suggested that 66 percent—or two thirds—of women in Bangladesh, become victims of domestic violence, and a staggering 72 percent of them have never shared their plight with another person. The research further revealed that only 2.1 percent women had informed local leaders of the domestic abuse they were facing, while a meagre 1.1 percent of women sought help from the police. The 32 percent probability that a court will dismiss a case and allow the perpetrator

to go scot free, might be the reason why most women choose to remain silent in the face of domestic violence.

And even when domestic violence is perpetrated out in the open by the husband and his family—as in the case of the woman in Bogura, who was tied to a tree by her husband and in-laws and given a medieval-style beating for allegedly damaging their cabbage field—it is often the victim who is harassed by the law enforcers.

In this case, the victim, Shilpi Begum had been handed over to the police by Shibganj Raynagar Union Parishad

perpetrators of the violence against Shilpi, under the Women and Children Repression Prevention Act with Shibganj Police Station—when justice will be served remains uncertain.

So what is the role of the law enforcement agencies in combating domestic violence? According to Mahmuda Afroz Lucky, Additional Deputy Commissioner of Police, Detective Branch-Dhaka Metropolitan Police, the major problem faced by the police is the reluctance of the victims to initiate formal procedure against their husbands and in-laws for the violence perpetrated on them.



A mural against violence towards women, in Ankara, Turkey.

victims' decision to seek legal support, or the law enforcement agencies' involvement in such 'personal matters.' And since we do not have the authority to pursue incidents of domestic violence until the victim initiates the official process by lodging written complaints, we are often left with no choice other than letting go of these incidents."

And under pressure from family and fearing social stigma, women often choose to endure domestic abuse in silence, making it a part of their lives. The government has, however, established victim support centres at divisional level to provide support and counselling to female victims of violence. The problem is, these support centres are not accessible to the women living in the rural areas, because it is simply often not possible for them to travel all the way from their villages to the victim support centres and seek help from law enforcement agencies against domestic violence.

"The problem is, the definition of domestic violence remains unclear in our society. Majority of the people don't even know what constitutes domestic violence," Mahmuda Afroz Lucky says while discussing the problem of awareness. She suggests the collaboration of local NGOs working in this field with the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs to promote awareness about this at the grassroots level. "It is important to let the women living in rural areas know what domestic violence means and how they can seek legal help to address this problem," she adds.

And while it is important to raise awareness about domestic violence among rural women, access to law enforcement is crucial, which is why Mahmuda Afroz Lucky suggests more mobility for the victim support centres. "If we can make the victim support cells mobile and empower and equip them to reach and counsel the victims on the spot, it will boost the mental strength of the victims and allow them to make rational decisions about how to address their circumstances."

Domestic abuse exists in every sphere of our society, it has remained rooted to our patriarchal mind-set like a parasite, sucking the lifeblood out of our society. For how long must we endure? Why must we endure at all? Questions that deserve our collective introspection.

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their political leaders. Not surprisingly, populism is on the rise.

In South Korea, President Moon Jae-in's administration has pursued policies that include sharp increases in the minimum wage and social welfare spending. As Latin America's experience has starkly demonstrated, while fiscal transfers may help to bolster a sluggish economy and strengthen the social safety net, a rapid increase in unproductive spending could weaken economic fundamentals in the longer term.

The situation in Hong Kong—which has been roiled by nearly six months of increasingly violent protests—is somewhat different. There, the target of protesters' ire is China's central government, which they argue is violating the "one country, two systems" framework that defines the city's relationship with the mainland. But key sources of popular frustration—such as soaring property prices, which exacerbate inequality—are familiar.

To avoid Latin America-style political crises, East Asian governments must ensure that their economic policies support equitable growth. Their priorities should include boosting productivity, strengthening export competitiveness, encouraging technological progress, nurturing domestic demand and service industries, building robust social safety nets, and implementing redistributive tax-and-transfer policies.

Fiscal sustainability is also crucial. While economic stagnation demands fiscal expansion, governments must spend wisely. That means investing in long-term growth potential by, say, deepening human capital and strengthening social infrastructure, rather than committing to unsustainable hikes in welfare spending.

Finally, East Asia must make sure that it holds its political leaders accountable. To that end, countries should continue to fortify their institutions (including an independent judiciary), protect free and independent media, and nurture a vibrant civil society.

East Asia has a long tradition of forward-thinking policymaking. At a time of growing economic, political, and social challenges, upholding that tradition has never been more important.

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EDITORIAL

Of bruises and blues

The seal of silence regarding domestic violence must be broken

EVEN though the government has established victim support centres at divisional level to provide support and counselling to female victims of violence, these support centres are not accessible to the women living in the rural areas, because it is simply often not possible for them to travel all the way from their villages to the victim support centres and seek help from law enforcement agencies against domestic violence.

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PROJECT SYNDICATE

East Asia's political vulnerability

POPULAR discontent is fuelling protest and paralysis across Latin America. If East Asia isn't careful, it could be next.

In Ecuador, protests against anti-austerity measures, including the reduction of fuel subsidies, forced President Lenín Moreno to declare a state of emergency. In Chile, it was a modest increase in Santiago's metro fares that triggered large-scale demonstrations, which soon evolved to take aim at inequality and weaknesses in the education and pension systems.

In Argentina, the people expressed their economic frustrations at the ballot box, electing the Peronist presidential candidate Alberto Fernández. In Bolivia, the electoral route was compromised: President Evo Morales violated the constitution by standing for a fourth term, declared victory despite widespread concerns about fraud, and then resigned after weeks of protests.

While the details vary, there is a common thread in all of these movements: the belief that governments are not working for ordinary people. As Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson have observed, the extractive institutions on which many Latin American economies depend protect the interests of the rich and elites. Across the region, inequality has been skyrocketing, and there is little reason to expect political power structures favouring those same privileged people to address it. After years of economic stagnation and even crisis, the public's patience has worn thin.

To be sure, many Latin American leaders have, in recent decades, risen to power on the promise of levelling the playing field. And their interventions—including income redistribution, fiscal and monetary expansion, protectionism, discriminatory regulation, and capital controls—did bring some short-term benefits, particularly to the poor.

But such measures were often plagued by populism and, ultimately, did more harm than good. Relying on commodity revenues to fund their social programmes, these leaders failed to diversify their economies or improve economic fundamentals. Excessive fiscal and monetary expansion made these economies unstable. Current-account deficits grew, resulting in frequent foreign-exchange crises.

The combination of social polarisation, inadequate institutions, and weak economic fundamentals has made it difficult for even reform-minded governments to escape the trap of short-termism and lay the groundwork for long-term development. In this context, "neoliberal" reforms—such as the rapid economic opening and financial liberalisation promoted by the International Monetary Fund—made economies even more vulnerable to external shocks.

Venezuela is a case in point. From 1999 to 2013, the populist Hugo Chávez used the country's oil revenues—bolstered by rising global commodity prices—to finance large-scale welfare programmes, rather than investment in

thereby increasing the economy's vulnerability to external shocks. When Mauricio Macri took over in 2015, the economy was in dire straits, with limited access to international capital markets. Yet voters resisted the needed reforms, owing to their short-term costs. Macri failed to overcome that resistance, and it is far from clear that Fernández—whose vice president is none other than Kirchner—will do any better.

East Asian economies avoided many of these mistakes over the last half-century, implementing carefully designed economic-development plans that fostered export competitiveness and technological progress. Throughout this process, strong and inclusive

Demonstrators in Santiago carried a torn Chilean flag on October 25, 2019, as violent protests over both political and economic demands showed little sign of abating.

new industries. His handpicked successor, Nicolás Maduro, attempted to follow in his footsteps. But when global oil prices plummeted in 2014, the fiscal deficit soared. The subsequent monetary expansion fuelled hyperinflation, making it impossible for millions of Venezuelans to afford basic goods such as food and medicine. Venezuela is now mired in a humanitarian crisis that has already driven more than four million people to flee the country.

A similar story has unfolded in Argentina, where it was the Peronist President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner who, upon taking office in 2007, used commodity revenues to expand welfare spending and public-sector employment,

institutions ensured the effective functioning of markets, supported sound macroeconomic management, and upheld the rule of law.

As a result, East Asian economies achieved "growth with equity," which lifted them from middle- to high-income status. In 1970, per capita incomes in Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan were lower than those in Argentina and Venezuela; today, they are much higher.

But East Asia must not underestimate its potential for political crisis. In recent decades, the region's long-term growth potential has declined and income distribution has worsened—trends that populations blame, at least partly, on