

Gazipur fire: Another tragedy due to negligence

An alarming pattern that keeps repeating

DAYS after a fire broke out in a plastic factory in Keraniganj which killed 19 workers, another fire in a Gazipur electric fan and light bulb factory claimed at least 10 lives. After the Keraniganj fire incident occurred, it was discovered that the factory had only one gate which made exit difficult. Similarly, the factory in Gazipur also had only one gate which made exit and entry impossible once the fire started to spread, leading to the high number of casualties.

Again, the Gazipur factory was located in a residential area at a building not meant for industrial use—a pattern we have seen repeating itself time and again. And despite their best efforts, inhabitants of nearby buildings could not reach the workers who were trapped inside, as there were flames near the staircase leading up to the only point of entry and exit (the factory had no fire exit either). This, too, we have seen before, not only in the case of the Keraniganj fire, but in many more cases before that.

While the factory management's negligence should definitely be blamed for these tragic deaths, what have the authorities been doing to ensure that factories do not operate without properly following the building codes? Why are factories being allowed to operate without having the necessary fire exits and other mechanisms of fire preventions in place? Despite their lofty promises, the authorities have learned nothing from previous fire outbreaks. The lives of workers, it seems, do not mean much to anyone—not to the factory owners nor the authorities concerned.

This cannot be allowed to continue. Factories must be removed from residential areas. Officials in charge of ensuring building and workplace safety must monitor these establishments and confirm that safety codes are followed properly by all factories to avoid such unfortunate occurrences.

Bangladesh should look for new job markets

Check irregularities in the recruitment process

AS the demand for foreign workers in the Gulf countries has been in decline due to various reasons, such as malpractices in the recruitment process, it is crucial for Bangladesh to look for new labour markets. Over the last few years, thousands of our workers have returned from the Gulf countries, including Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates, and from Malaysia. Malaysia, the third largest job market for Bangladesh, suspended recruiting Bangladeshis since September last year, and the UAE, the second largest job market for Bangladesh after Saudi Arabia, had imposed a ban on recruiting Bangladeshi workers since 2012. Besides, the number of workers who have gone to Lebanon, Jordan and Oman this year has decreased significantly. Apparently, corruption and malpractices of the recruitment agencies are the main reasons for the shrinking job markets.

It is good to note that the Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment Minister has pointed out the problems that have been affecting our labour markets abroad and sought coordination among all concerned to handle the issue. The issue of safety of female migrant workers in Saudi Arabia was also addressed by the minister. However, only discussing the problem will not help; action is urgently needed.

According to Brac, between 2016 and June this year, dead bodies of 311 women workers were sent to Bangladesh from the Gulf countries, mostly from Saudi Arabia. And 119 dead bodies of women workers have arrived home this year alone. Others have come back with horrific tales of torture at the hands of their employers. The government must immediately come to a decision regarding sending our female workers to the Gulf country immediately. Moreover, it needs to take action against the unruly recruiting agencies who have been luring women from remote corners of the country to go to Saudi Arabia with the promise of a good job.

Around one crore Bangladeshis working abroad had sent home around USD 15 billion in 2018. If the malpractices in recruitment can be checked and the migrant rights are ensured, the remittance would be much higher. We hope the government would consider all these issues and also explore new markets for our workers.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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The true spirit of our Victory Day

On December 16, 1971, we won our long-cherished freedom. Millions of people lost their lives for our liberty while many were subjected to unimaginable suffering by the Pakistani army and their local collaborators. It is our duty to remember and honour these heroes.

We have surely progressed a lot since the war. With a booming economy, we also made improvements in terms of gender equity, health care, education, living standard, child mortality, etc. But we still have a long way to go as our nation still remains one of the most corrupt in the world, our cities are overburdened, a large number of educated people are jobless, freedom of expression and the right to vote remain a big concern, etc. We have a multitude of problems which need solutions, and these solutions can only come through honouring the true spirit of our Liberation War in a manner befitting it—through realising the vision of our fallen heroes.

Md Zillur Rahaman, Dhaka

Winners and losers in the Fourth Industrial Revolution



FAHMIDA KHATUN

As a citizen of a less developed economy, I am sometimes taken aback with such fast pace of changes. We are still used to getting personalised services! Starting from simple things such as airline check-in to train tickets to restaurant reservations to getting coffee from machines, technology has now become the service provider. Immigration clearance in advanced countries is now a matter of two to three minutes, while bank transfer takes only a few seconds. We see fewer people, faster service. So technology is our new way of life. This will continue to unfold with further technological revolution in the coming days.

Modern economies have been observing a technological revolution for more than half a century. Now artificial intelligence, robotics, internet-of-things, block chain, etc. are rapidly changing their economies, societies and cultures. The Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) is changing every spectrum of human life.

The most significant impact of 4IR will be felt in the labour market. Low-skilled and repetitive work will be carried out by machines. Machines will be able to work better and faster. Of course, new types of jobs will emerge with higher productivity and higher pay. New products and services will be in demand. So, new skills and new jobs will be required. But who will get those jobs and how the labour market will cope with the technological "disruption" are important issues that should be explored.

The labour-market implications of the 4IR are very important for Bangladesh, a country that has a large labour force. This is all the more important because, despite having high growth, the economy has not been able to create enough jobs.

On the other hand, the country has not been able to benefit from the structural change in terms of employment generation. For example, the contribution of agriculture to our gross domestic product (GDP)

has reduced to 13.7 percent in 2018, compared to 28.7 percent in 1990. Contrary to this, the share of industrial sector has increased from 20.2 percent in 1991 to 32.3 percent in 2018. Similarly, the contribution of the services sector has gone up from 48.3 percent in 1991 to 50 percent in 2018. However, employment generation does not follow the same trend. Agriculture, being the lowest contributor to GDP, creates 40.6 percent of total employment. Industry creates 20.4 percent and services sector creates 39 percent of total jobs. Besides, more than 80 percent of employment is in the informal sector with low and unpredictable income without job

efficiency. Technology has enabled us to be more productive and expand our economy. We can use technology for improving almost every sphere of our lives, if we use it in the right manner. We can expect to have a pollution-free, cleaner and smarter city, we can save time being more efficient and have more leisure time, just to name a few prospects.

But technology can also be a source of inequality and discrimination. During the Third Industrial Revolution, which is about information and communications technology (ICT), we have observed a "digital divide". The privileged individuals with access to technology

expand the size of digital economy. The distributional aspects of 4IR are to be ensured through well-designed policies, such as education policy, labour policy, industrial policy, digital policy, competition policy, tax policy, etc. In case of education, the policymakers should move beyond mere numbers, such as enrolment rates and gender parity. More focus should be on the quality of education, and opportunity for reskilling, retraining and relearning. To improve the quality of education, adequate public resources should be made available. The current allocation of only 2 percent of GDP for education is inadequate to bring any positive change



security. Some sectors of late are increasingly resorting to automation to increase efficiency and productivity. The export-oriented readymade garments (RMG) sector is one of them. Though the adoption of technology in the RMG sector is still slow, the impact is already visible. The share of female labour force has declined in the sector since they have least technological skills. This indicates to the differential impact of technology on workers. Not everyone will experience the impact in the same manner. Not everyone will benefit from the technological change in the same way. No doubt, technology has made life smooth, saved time, and improved

and education could grab the new jobs. They could earn a lot more than those who did not have access to technology. So if technology is in the hands of a few rich people and if the benefits of technology are not distributed fairly, it worsens the inequality situation.

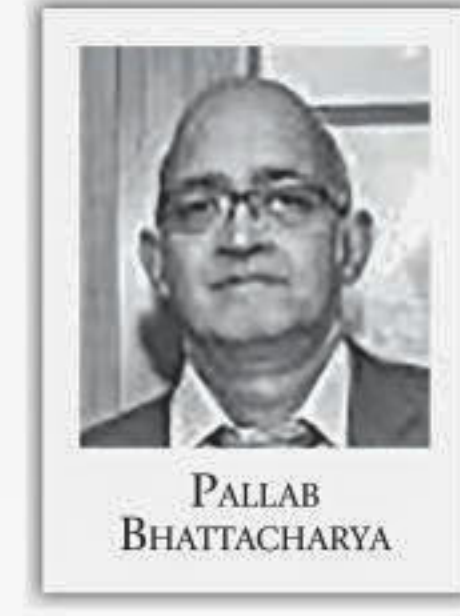
The other issue related to technology is the quality of jobs. Our attention is more on economic growth, less on the quality of growth. We do not know whether those working in digital platforms, such as e-commerce, have basic labour rights that guarantee a minimum wage and bargaining power. Ensuring quality of jobs and maximisation of decent employment should receive more importance, as we

in the education outcome. But the tax-GDP ratio is only about 9 percent. The number of people under the tax net is much lower than that of the potential taxpayers. Tax avoidance is high. As a result, resources from tax collection cannot be ploughed back to sectors such as education, health and social protection.

So the distributional aspect of 4IR should be at the forefront. And the realisation of technological opportunities to everyone's benefit will hinge on appropriate policy response by the government.

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INDIAN CITIZENSHIP LAW Delving into the past for a future



PALLAB BHATTACHARYA

the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha after a total of nearly fourteen hours of a polarising and consequently heated debate among the lawmakers.

The stormy debate was expected given that the subject of citizenship on the basis of religion is divisive by itself. The law amended the Citizenship Act of 1955. It should be noted that even before the CAB, India had granted citizenship to people of different faiths from time to time including 566 Muslims, from Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan, in the last seventy years.

It is not often that one sees lawmakers belonging to the opposite sides of the political and ideological spectrum delving into the past—the vivisection of the Indian sub-continent in 1947, the emergence of an independent Bangladesh twenty-four years later, and India's immediate neighbourhood—to discuss the future of India in the light of the law that offers Indian citizenship to six religious minorities: Hindus, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains and Parsis who migrated to India after facing persecution, real or perceived, in those countries. In the process, both sides tried to score political brownie points. References to the troubled history of the partition were galore in the debate. One saw BJP President and Home Minister Amit Shah recalling the 1950 pact between Jawaharlal Nehru and Liaquat Ali Khan about the treatment of minorities and how Mahatma Gandhi had, in September 1947, favoured India accepting Sikhs and Hindus in Pakistan. He also referred to Manmohan Singh as the leader of the opposition in Rajya Sabha making a case for India's "moral responsibility" towards minorities facing "persecution" in Bangladesh.

A quick sum-up of the main arguments for and against the Citizenship Amendment Bill: Amit Shah contended that the bill was necessitated because the Congress party accepted the partition of India on the basis of religion and the maltreatment of religious minorities in Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan that triggered the refugee problem in India. The opponents of the law argued that it was discriminatory towards

Muslims and violated the constitutional right to equality before law.

The broad strategy of the government contention was that the Citizenship Amendment Law has a context—that of giving citizenship to not just Hindus but also other religious minorities from India's three neighbouring countries. But the opposition did not want to be constrained by the context of illegal immigration, and instead wove its arguments against the legislation around an over-arching ideological framework of secularism and equality before law while trying to ensure that it does not create a perception of anti-majority bias.

One notable feature of the parliamentary showdown between the

West Bengal. Unofficial estimates say that about 72 lakh of the nearly 1.5 crore Hindus who had migrated from Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan in the last seven decades are in West Bengal alone, and they stand to benefit from the citizenship amendment law. It is estimated that many of the refugees who came over to West Bengal from Bangladesh in 1971 did not return. There are already reports of celebrations among Bangla-speaking Hindus in Barak Valley of Assam after the new iteration of the citizenship law was passed.

The law has clearly set off the race for wooing Hindu voters in West Bengal as well as in other parts of the country. The assessment in both the Bharatiya Janata

over 40-50 other constituencies making up 10 to 15 percent of the electorate.

After the final draft of NRC in Assam left out lakhs of Hindus there, West Bengal Chief Minister and Trinamool Congress Chairperson Mamata Banerjee had tapped into the apprehensions among Hindus in the state, and it fetched her party big gains in recent assembly by-polls as the Trinamool Congress won two seats it could never win before. The BJP found itself desperately looking for a turnaround, which it now hopes the citizenship change law would give it. No wonder the saffron party put up five of its lawmakers from West Bengal—Dilip Ghosh, Locket Chatterjee, Raju Bista, Shantanu Thakur and Soumitra Khan—to argue in favour of the law in the Lok Sabha. By contrast, the BJP fielded just three MPs from Assam in the Lok Sabha debate.

Both the BJP and the Trinamool Congress are trying to win over the Matua community voters who are a deciding factor in three assembly constituencies bordering Bangladesh (Gaighata, Bongaon and Swarnnagar). The BJP assesses that the most important fall-out of its bid to send a message to Hindu refugee voters in West Bengal through the CAB is to live down its image of an "anti-Bengali" party which Mamata has of late been projecting by stressing on Bengali sub-nationalism.

The BJP hopes that if the opposition pushes hard on the NRC and CAB issues, it would run the risk of antagonising the majority community, and the biggest challenge for the saffron party's rivals is to avoid that pitfall while not alienating the Muslims. The Mamata government recently announced that it would regularise the ownership of land on which refugees, irrespective of their religion, have been staying for long. The challenge for the Trinamool Congress was acknowledged by a party leader: "The CAB is a double-edged sword. Pushing back at it too hard risks the loss of Hindu votes and supporting it vigorously may not go down well with the minority community voters who have been aligned with the party all along," he said, requesting anonymity.

What is causing some concern in the Trinamool camp is the move by Hyderabad lawmaker and chief of All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen, Asaduddin Owaisi, to contest in the coming assembly polls from some Muslim-dominated constituencies in West Bengal, because that may split Muslim votes.



Protesters take part in a demonstration against the recently passed Citizenship Amendment Bill (CAB) in New Delhi, India.

PHOTO: AFP

government and the opposition was that the latter remained united in resisting the citizenship amendment law. This was in contrast to the situation in the opposition camp when the parliament had passed equally contentious bills—like the abrogation of the special status of Jammu and Kashmir or criminalising the practice of instant "triple talaq"—with a number of opposition parties like Bahujan Samaj Party, Aam Aadmi Party and Telangana Rashtriya Samithi having backed the government.

The north-eastern Indian states may be embroiled in violence over the citizenship legislation but its most profound and visible impact, it is generally agreed, would be in

Party, which is eyeing power in West Bengal, and the Trinamool Congress is how to win over the majority of Hindu voters in the next assembly polls in Bengal in 2021. This is the big change wrought by the citizenship amendment law. If there is one state other than Assam where the NRC and illegal immigrants from Bangladesh resonated the most, it is West Bengal. It was in West Bengal that Amit Shah had in public rallies used some of the harshest words about illegal immigrants (read Muslims). Hindu refugee voters are a key swing factor in 80 of the 294 assembly constituencies in West Bengal, while Muslims have a sizable presence in 90. Besides, some other Hindu refugees are also scattered

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