

## Meet the jute mill workers’ just demands

*Pay them their dues, let them live*

WE are worried to learn that 20 jute mill workers had to be taken to hospital in Khulna as they fell sick while continuing their fast-unto-death programme while at least 576 others became ill in the last few days as they had to stay on roads in cold temperatures. Workers of the nine state-owned jute mills in Khulna have been demonstrating for the last few months to press home their 11-point demand which include cancellation of public-private ownership of jute mills, payment of provident fund and gratuity for retired workers, regularisation of weekly wages, implementation of the 2015 wage commission and payment of their arrears. The workers had to take to the street several times last year with the same demands because despite repeated assurances from the government, their demands were not met. And now the situation has worsened.

It is shocking to see the children of the workers taking to the streets with their parents, many of whom will have to leave school if their parents are not paid their salaries. While with the meagre salary a jute worker gets, it is not possible to ensure three square meals for their children and bear their educational expenses, when they are not paid for months in a row it will be impossible for them to survive at all.

Needless to say, our jute sector is in a shambles. The state-run jute mills have been running at a loss for decades and so it has become difficult for the Bangladesh Jute Mills Corporations (BJMC) to pay its workers regularly. But the question is, what steps has the BJMC taken so far to make this sector profitable again? If the privately-run jute mills can make profit, why can't the state-run ones? Here the issues of corruption, bad planning and poor management come in.

Reportedly, a lot of money is wasted every year in purchasing raw jute because the money is never allocated at the proper time by the government. Efficiency of the mills is also not satisfactory because they are running with old machinery. In addition, no substantial steps have been visible on part of the BJMC for diversifying the jute goods to attract the international market. These are just some of the issues that need to be addressed by the government to revitalise the sector. If that can be done, lakhs of people depending on this sector will be able to live a decent life.

Meanwhile, to solve the present crisis, the BJMC should immediately pay the workers their dues so that the workers and their families do not have to go hungry.

## A public cancer hospital crippled by negligence

*Waste of public money*

A report in this paper regarding the sorry state of the National Institute of Cancer Research and Hospital has left us aghast at the extent of negligence of those in charge of the institution. Crucial, expensive equipment to treat such a serious disease as cancer, had been purchased but were allowed to sit idle for years. Either an essential component is missing and has not been replaced for years or the machines are rotting in a corner of the storeroom. The result is that many cancer patients, most of them in low income brackets, cannot get the treatment they need to survive. It is literally a matter of life and death which makes such irregularities all the more shocking. How could those in charge of the hospital sit on such serious lapses in management and operations that have rendered the hospital practically dysfunctional in some very important departments?

Our reporter's investigation has found that eight, high-end ventilators for the Intensive Care Unit, bought 12 years ago, have never been installed which means the ICU department has been reduced to a four-bed unit from an eight-bed unit depriving critical patients who need ventilators of such care. Meanwhile the motherboards of the ventilators have been stolen leaving the machines completely useless. The report has also identified other essential equipment required for cancer detection and treatment lying idle or non-functional because some part was missing due to theft.

How can an institution that is the lone specialised public hospital for cancer treatment be riddled with such blatant irregularities? According to the investigation, the ICU in charge had written several letters to the hospital's director requesting him to take initiatives to install the machines but nothing was done. Can the director absolve himself of responsibility by just saying that the machines had been purchased before he took over? What did he do when he did take over and found the state of the equipment? We are quite shocked at his answer regarding how the ICU will function without ventilators—that putting cancer patients on ICU does not really improve their condition, rather just adds to the cost. Such glib and insensitive answers are not befitting of someone in his position.

It goes without saying that the government must demand answers for such gross lapses in management and waste of public money. The health sector is one that is badly in need of reform. One of the most primary measures should be to make sure existing resources and capacities are fully utilised. This will require a stringent system of accountability and internal control within each institution. The media has published innumerable cases of such waste of existing resources in public hospitals. The health ministry should investigate each and every public hospital and healthcare complex to remove such irregularities, address the deficiency in resources and manpower and make these establishments fully functional.

# NRC, CAA and Bangladesh

*Fallacy of unsuspecting trust*



C R ABRAR

FINALLY the tides of uncertainty and insecurity generated by the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in India have begun to strike the shores of Bangladesh. On December 30 under instruction of the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC), the country's mobile phone operators had suspended their network coverage within a kilometre in areas adjacent to Bangladesh-India border. The BTRC instruction issued on Sunday stated that the sanction would remain in operation until further instruction "for the sake of state security". The BTRC in its turn informed that it was imposed "in view of the high-level directives of the government".

Thus far there has not been any clear indication from the administration as to why such a measure became necessary. While the foreign minister and the home minister informed the media that they had no prior knowledge about the directive, the Chair of BTRC stated that the step was taken to stop the circulation of rumours in the region. "There are reports frequently circulating... that Bangladeshi people have been killed here and there in the border area with the potential to cause law and order problem... We have suspended the mobile networks there to control the rumour", he informed a foreign wire agency. Such reasoning does not hold

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water. Although 2019 witnessed a three-fold increase in incidents of border killing over the previous year, linking the telecom ban with such killing is somewhat outlandish. It is believed by some that the prohibition is tied to the likelihood of further influx of Muslims from India in the wake of the adoption of the NRC.

The decision to restrict telecom has resulted in the closure of around 2,000 base transceiver stations in 32 districts that share border with India and Myanmar. It has adversely impacted millions of subscribers. Those people were out of voice, internet and other online services for an indefinite period.



PHOTO: DIBYANGSHU SARKAR/AFP

The citizenship law has sparked days of protests, clashes and riots across India.

"Shutdown to services within one-kilometre area means that people of the additional half-kilometre area will get weak network," observed an industry official. Therefore, for three days the move deprived more than 10 million people out of mobile network causing immeasurable hardship in pursuing their livelihood, accessing services including emergency healthcare and education, and maintaining social relations. On January 2 the decision was revoked.

The restriction came into force after border crossings from the Indian side were reported in the media. In early December the Bangladesh home minister stated that there had been attempts to deport people from India and the border guards of Bangladesh had detained 238 Indian citizens who illegally entered Bangladesh through Jhenaidah district border.

In its effort to make India a Hindu dominated state the BJP leadership pursued a policy of changing the special status of Kashmir and securing the Babri

mosque site for a Hindu temple. To whip up right-wing support it ceaselessly engaged in securitising the so-called illegal migrant issue.

The NRC controversy has been brewing for years. BJP General Secretary Amit Shah, also the home minister, has been unambiguous and persistent in his diatribe against what he terms as "illegal Bangladeshi intruders". In almost every party and public meeting the ruling party stalwarts drum up anti-immigrant sentiment. Terming the so-called migrants "termites", the second most powerful leader of India, Shah, declared his resolve to chase and drown all of them in the sea.

Such persistent emission of anti-Bangladeshi vitriolic statements of the Indian ruling elite triggered little concern in Bangladesh. The government of Bangladesh appeared to be oblivious to the stirring up of anti-Bangladesh sentiments. Until quite recently, the statements of the ministers, advisers and senior functionaries gave the signal that the government was quite comfortable with the Indian assertion that the NRC was indeed an "internal matter" of that country. Dhaka seemed to be satisfied with the "assurances" of "the friendliest state" that Bangladesh would not be adversely affected by the NRC fallout. The high ups in the foreign office found no reason to critically examine, let alone contest such commitment. After all, in its assessment the "very-sweet" Bangladesh-India relationship has now reached "the golden age".

The partisan stance of the mainstream civil society in Bangladesh has precluded it from taking a stand against the NRC and CAA. There is little debate about the

# Will the National Human Rights Commission fulfil our expectations?

TAMANNA HOQ RITI and MAIMUNA SYED AHMED

AT a recent dialogue between civil society members and the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), the newly appointed Chairperson, Nasima Begum, ndc, NHRC opined that there exists no legal bar for the Commission to investigate cases of human rights violations committed by law enforcement agencies. This dialogue was organised by Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK) with the participation of stakeholders at both grassroots, local and national levels.

The Chairperson stressed that there exists no room for any debate regarding the interpretation of Section 18 of the NHRC Act 2009, as she does not believe there to be any barriers to investigate complaints against law enforcing agencies. Rather, she said that since she had taken office, the Commission has been working on investigating such grievances. Coming directly from the Commission Chair, this ray of hope given to civil society members was a positive development. It was interpreted as a significant step to cut short the lengthy periods of time spent waiting for a mere response from the Ministry of Home Affairs, and thus, allow the Commission to commence investigation immediately after a complaint of human rights violations by security forces is lodged.

Unfortunately, this newly kindled hope was extinguished quite abruptly when the Chairperson, on Human Rights Day, was quoted as saying, "There is a specific department allocated to investigate extrajudicial killings. I [Commission] do not have sufficient human resource to do such investigation" (Prothom Alo, December 10, 2019). A similar opinion was expressed again in an interview by the Chairperson in another Bangla newspaper.

However, it must be noted that when an extrajudicial killing takes place at the hands of the law enforcement agencies, and there is nobody to delve into the issue of human rights violation besides the executive department (which only takes departmental disciplinary measures), the check and balance to ensure accountability

of these law enforcement agencies is grossly frustrated. It is due to the lack of confidence the public has on the fairness, independence and neutrality of the inquiries conducted by the executive department which necessitated the involvement of the Commission through its founding Act. The recent review of Bangladesh under Convention against Torture (CAT) also reiterated this.

According to the Chair, the dialogue was her first time attending a civil society event since her appointment in September 2019. Referring to her new appointment, she acknowledged the fact that she preferred knowing the law before delving into its implementation. The Chair also emphasised that she wanted

two Marma sisters in Bandarban, or gang-rape of a woman in Subarnachar during the 11th National Parliamentary Elections in December 2018. Recalling the consequence of these incidents, the independence of the Commission continues to remain questionable. Therefore, after vowing to attempt to strengthen the Commission, the Chair's lack of willingness to not investigate such cases—be it for the scale of importance these incidents received in the eyes of the Commission, or for its lack of human resources—is frankly quite disheartening.

It can be evinced from the Commission's Annual Report of 2018 that it disposed of 589 complaints out of 728, which is a significant



to show positive changes within the area of human rights through her actions and gave her commitment that the new Commission will sincerely work along with civil society to address its existing shortcomings.

There is no denying that the Commission lost the general public's trust significantly due to its inactiveness in investigating violations by law enforcement agencies, as well as controversial investigations in some significant incidents: few cases in point are investigations done on the rape of

improvement when compared to its record from previous years. However, what deserves intensive scrutiny is the nature of complaints addressed by the Commission. Most of the disposed complaints are related to violence against women and children. The disturbing picture of the lack of the Commission's initiative to principally address state violence is evident when a comparison is made with the annual report of the National Human Rights Commission, India; a country whose founding Act of the Commission is similar in text

possible ramification of those exercises for Bangladesh in the public domain. While the students, trade unions, professional and learned bodies, rights organisations and other civil society organisations have mounted a resolute challenge to the NRC and CAA in almost every nook and corner in India, their counterparts in Bangladesh appear to be content with the official explanation. The intellectual luminaries of Bangladesh who have been vocal against the Rohingya influx a couple of years ago appear to have little appetite to engage with an issue that may trigger inflow of a far greater number of aliens to this land. Young activists of Dhaka University under the Vice President of Ducsu and members of left groups who dared to protest the Indian moves were brutally silenced by the goons of the student wing of the ruling establishment and those belonging to Muktiyoddha Moncho (freedom fighters' platform).

Such unsuspecting trust on the neighbour suffered a major setback in the adoption of the CAA in India in early December. The law paves the way for the Indian government to confer citizenship on members of non-Muslim communities fleeing persecution in Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan. In the law Bangladesh was banded with Afghanistan and Pakistan as a nation that oppresses its religious minority. The Act clearly brought into the open how the BJP government of India views Bangladesh. Such negative depiction has been an affront for the people of Bangladesh. Two ministerial visits to India were cancelled following the adoption of the amendment. Indian news website ThePrint on December 30 noted that Bangladesh had sought a written assurance from the Hindu-nationalist Modi government that it would not expel illegal immigrants across the border.

The rolling out of the NRC and the application of CAA are likely to have grave consequences for Bangladesh. Even if India refrains from officially deporting those who would fail in the NRC test, millions of Muslims who would be unable to prove their claims to Indian citizenship and secure protection under the CAA in all likelihood will cross the border and seek shelter in Bangladesh. They would do so to avoid languishing in detention camps in atrocious conditions. The recent border crossings from the Indian side and the concomitant telecom network suspension in Bangladesh may signal the beginning of a difficult time for the country. It is time for those at the helm of the state to discard the rhetoric, take stock of these developments and collectively develop a national strategy to face the likely challenge.

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and language to that of Bangladesh. According to most human rights activists, this statutory body should not play the role of civil society or the government's social welfare department; but rather, it should act as an independent state institution that raises its voice against human rights violations by security officials.

Such dilly-dallying by the Commission with regards to the complaints brings forth the recent disappointment that the civil society had with the selection process and subsequent appointment of the members of the new commission this year. It should be recalled that even before the process of selection began, human rights organisations urged the selection committee to follow a transparent process while ensuring consultation with CSOs, HRDs and other relevant stakeholders. According to members of the civil society, this process has not been transparent, open and participatory, as per the requirements of the Paris Principles which are the international minimum standards for effective and credible National Human Rights Institutions. Like previous appointments, there was no consultation held with regards to it this time either. Instead, civil society members were quite disturbed to see the appointment of ex-government officials as members of the Commission—who have little to no direct experience of working on issues related to human rights.

Next year, the Commission will have existed for 10 years. Members of civil society and human rights defenders hope that by its 10th anniversary, the Commission will overcome the frustration and disappointment people have in regards to its function, face the challenges it continues to face with regards to its mandate, and revive the trust and confidence the public had in this institution to some extent. Regardless of such frustrations, we want to keep alive a sliver of hope that in protecting human rights, the new Commission may be able to take some visible steps to ensure government accountability.

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