

How did Reja die while in police custody?

Investigation must be unbiased and thorough

An appalling incident has been reported in this paper that leaves us in despair regarding the trend of deaths in police custody. Thirty-year-old Rejaul Karim Reja, a law student died Sunday morning at Sher-e-Bangla Medical College (SBMCH) in Barishal while in police custody. Family members have said that his body bore numerous injury marks. The hospital's director has stated that this young man died of excessive bleeding from the rectum and urinary tract.

What do these few facts make us think? That he was tortured while in custody as the family members have claimed? That the injuries were so grievous they led to excessive bleeding causing his death?

According to our report, Reja was arrested around 8:00pm on December 29 while he was at a roadside tea stall near his home. He was then sent to Barisal Central Jail. Reja's father says his son was in good condition at the time of his arrest. The jail superintendent says that when Reja was brought to the jail on December 30, the prison doctor sent him to the prison hospital and by January 1 he was bleeding from his feet so he was sent to the medical hospital. Reja's father says that the jail authorities told him that his son had injured himself when he fell in the bathroom but that there were injury marks on his legs, chest and neck and he was passing blood through stool and urine. Police have said that Reja was a drug addict and dealer and his injuries were caused by complications related to his addiction.

A probe committee headed by the district commissioner of Barishal Metropolitan Police has been formed to investigate the death. Should we be reassured that this will unravel the truth behind Reja's untimely death? While it is obligatory for the police or any other government agency to probe allegations of crime or abuse of power, we cannot help but be sceptical regarding the efficacy of an organisation investigating alleged crimes of its own members.

Deaths after alleged torture by law enforcement members has become a terrifying trend in this country. Ain O Shalish Kendra has recorded 1,426 deaths in custody between January 2017 to July 2020. The Torture and Custodial Death (Prevention) Act-2013 still awaits implementation (except in a few rare cases recently) despite Bangladesh being a signatory to the Committee Against Torture, a UN body, prohibiting cruel, inhuman, degrading punishment or treatment while in law enforcers' custody. Experts have said that families of victims rarely file cases of custodial deaths allegedly out of fear of repercussions from the law enforcers.

If this is the reality can we ever hope that justice will be served? We are cautiously optimistic after the historic verdict last September of the sentencing of three policemen to life imprisonment and seven years jail to two other accused in the case filed over the custodial death of Ishiaq Hossain Jonny in 2014. In Reja's case it is crucial that the investigation is thorough, unbiased and includes statements by the doctors treating Reja as to what specific reasons led to his excessive bleeding and eventually, his death. Whether or not Reja was a drug addict or dealer as police have claimed is not the issue here. What is important to know is whether Reja was mercilessly tortured while in custody causing him to bleed to death.

Can the High Court order save our Buriganga?

The dumping of waste must stop immediately

We applaud the High Court's recent order directed at the Department of Environment (DoE) to lodge a case against 30 washing plants in Keraniganj area within a month's time for polluting the waters of Buriganga in violation of the law and court directives. The HC ordered the authorities concerned to stop the dumping of waste into the Buriganga during the hearing of a writ petition which was filed by rights organisation Human Rights and Peace for Bangladesh (HRPB) in May 2010, seeking necessary directives to save the Buriganga from pollution.

The authorities concerned and the local representatives have been directed to monitor the situation so that no one can dump waste into Buriganga river and to take appropriate legal action if any individual or organisation pollutes its waters and environment. How, despite being shut down twice by the DoE, did the polluting factories have the audacity to restart operations and continue to pollute and damage the environment unceremoniously remains highly questionable, even more so, because the law allows to file cases against such polluting factories, which the DoE did not.

We are optimistic that the DoE will now follow the HC order and act responsibly, and the polluting factories will no longer be able to operate with such impunity. Strict prison terms need to be slapped on such river polluters to resuscitate whatever remaining life there is in our over-exploited rivers. Let us remind ourselves that every river acts as a lifeline, and its death means putting people's health and livelihoods at stake. Such lawful initiatives should not be limited to the Buriganga only, but must be extended to all other rivers across the country.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Don't lose hope

The future has never seemed more uncertain than it does now. While we've learned a lot about Covid-19 and how to live and work through a pandemic, there's still much we don't know about it, especially the new strains that are now spreading in countries like the UK.

It is time for us to adapt to a post-pandemic world and continue to focus on how to strengthen the health sector to tackle future disasters. Whatever the future brings, we must never lose hope and try and live our lives the best we can.

Iftekhar Ahmed Sakib, Dhaka

Why Bangladesh ranks so low in the 2020 Global Knowledge Index

Does anyone care to know?

HALIMUR R KHAN

In every comparative survey among countries—be it a survey of the economy, transparency, university rankings, etc.—Bangladesh almost always ranks at the very bottom. Just a couple of weeks ago, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) along with the Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Knowledge Foundation (MBRF) jointly released the 2020 Global Knowledge Index (GKI) that placed Bangladesh at 112th out of 133 nations, behind every other South Asian nation!

What has been troubling, and what should make us very uncomfortable, is that our national leaders do not seem to particularly care about this, or that it has become a national embarrassment! Several newspapers reported on it, and only a couple of education experts, among them the eminent educationalist professor Serajul Islam Choudhury, identified the lack of investment in education and the ubiquitous presence of raw information rather than the kindling of knowledge as the main reasons for this calamity. Professor Rasheda K Chowdhury mentioned the difficulties arising from multiple tracks of basic learning and the lack of trained teachers, among others.

However, in less than two weeks, we seem to have forgotten all about it. There seems to be no concern anymore about why we are in the bottom rung of almost every index that compares nations of the world, year after year. We're 135th out of 189 countries in the Human Development Index, 119th out of 193 in the Global Development Index, 139th

out of 162 in the Human Freedom Index, 151st out of 180 in the Press Freedom Index, and 116th out of 131 in the Global Innovation Index—all for 2020. We were almost in the same position in 2019, and in 2018 and so on. So, what's happening? Is anyone (who matters) paying attention to these numbers and doing anything about them? Are the responsible agencies now planning to improve our standing in the world? Will we see ourselves behind all our neighbours in 2021 again?

To improve the situation, several things need to happen: i) understand why the problems persist; ii) find solutions; iii) implement the solutions; iv) evaluate; and v) revise.

cultural values.

The average GDP spending among the 197 countries of the world on national education is 4.5 percent. Bangladesh spends only 1.3 percent—less than 182 countries in the world. Only 15 countries in the world invest less than 2 percent of their GDP on education, and Bangladesh is almost at the bottom of even those 15 nations, only ahead of countries like South Sudan, Nigeria, Somalia, etc. Bangladesh spends less than every South Asian (SA) country. In the categories of the number of children per primary school, and number of students per university compared with the population, Bangladesh is in 5th place out of those

indifferent or simply incapable of conceptualising and materialising plans for educational development.

Finally, and in my opinion, the most important reason for our failed education system is, perhaps, our own culture. How often have we experienced in our lives that being educated does not pay? The neighbour's kid who never attended school, but instead turned into a hoodlum, who, perhaps, joined a political party, etc., was the one who in the end became successful—a big businessman, local party leader, or even perhaps a member of the parliament. Would this example encourage anyone to learn? We tolerate the law-breakers, the thieves, who



The average GDP spending among the 197 countries of the world on national education is 4.5 percent. Bangladesh spends only 1.3 percent—less than 182 countries in the world.

What has been troubling, and what should make us very uncomfortable, is that our national leaders do not seem to particularly care about this, or that it has become a national embarrassment!

All, except item number one, fall within the purview of the government. So let me provide my understanding of the reasons why we are so far behind, and hope that it will be helpful to the government.

GKI attempts to measure the overall knowledge of a country to see how its people use it to benefit themselves. In other words, how capable are the people of a country to improve their lives based on the knowledge they acquire throughout their lives. The areas the GKI looked at (the sources of knowledge for the people) were places like schools, universities, technology, etc.

It is my understanding that, like GDP growth, the knowledge of a nation is also the result of a country's long-term economic policies, political will and

6 SA countries. So, is it any wonder that we're dead last among SA countries?

Education, clearly, is not the priority for our government. Lack of political commitment contributes heavily to the status of knowledge in Bangladesh. The decision to invest resources is made by those in power. But, how often have we seen our politicians, those responsible for working to improve our education so to speak up, demand and work to make education a priority? Despite decades of systematic flaws, when was the last time that our leaders demanded that our education needs to be fixed? Perhaps, it's not a priority for the politicians since most of them have very little of it, and since they've become "successful" without a good education, why should they find it important? Typically, they're completely

brutalise and even murder others, etc. These are the ones who win in life—at least in Bangladesh. Since this is our attitude towards knowledge and how we see its usefulness has developed, we have never valued education. We give lip-service to learning, but we never mean it, we don't live by it. Education has never been our thing—even historically, we always shied away from doing the hard work of learning and gaining knowledge.

Given these conditions, is it surprising that we rank so low in the Global Knowledge Index? However, the more important question is: What are the authorities doing about it?

Halimur R Khan is a university professor and the former Director of Professional Development Center (PDC) at Brac University.
Email: halimurkhan@post.harvard.edu

A better normal for women and girls after Covid-19

BAMBANG SUSANTONO and ANITA BHATIA

2020 was synonymous with the Covid-19 pandemic and the unprecedented crisis it brought across economic, social, and health dimensions. 2021, on the other hand, is already being associated with the promise of the next normal.

For the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and UN Women, our new year's resolution is that we see more Covid-19 recovery strategies that prioritise the needs of women and girls in order to create a

women remain at the centre of Covid-19 response and recovery.

The Indonesian government's approach to implementing direct cash transfers encourages families to use maternal health and nutrition services, and motivates them to send children to school and focus on financial management. Similarly, in the Philippines, psychosocial support and specialised training for health sector workers include recognising and treating domestic violence, and providing referral advice.

manufacturing, textiles, and garments. In some countries in the region, nearly half of women working in the particularly vulnerable informal sectors have lost their jobs since the outbreak began—more than double the rate of men.

Women's difficulty maintaining their paid work is further exacerbated by the increased time they are spending on unpaid care work, such as caring for their families and households. Before the pandemic, the International Labour Organization estimated that men in

pandemic effects on gender equality, including increased rates of domestic violence, maternal and infant mortality, and more girls dropping out of school, to name just a few. Female morbidity rates are lower, but the pandemic's socio-economic impacts seem to be affecting women and girls more, with both short and long-term consequences.

Development partners like ADB and UN Women play a critical role in supporting governments to achieve a gender equality-focused recovery. For this reason, ADB and UN Women are recommitting to strengthen our existing partnership in key areas needed to build back better.

This includes sex-disaggregated data collection to better inform national and regional recovery policies; gender-responsive budgeting to ensure accountability and transparency toward gender goals; gender-responsive procurement to enable more women-owned businesses to access markets, working closely with both private and public sectors to develop tools and knowledge to prioritise gender equality in business and investment decisions; and combating increased gender-based violence, one of the pandemic's most destructive consequences.

Many Asia and Pacific countries are showing that setting strong targets for women and girls in response and recovery programmes, and developing specialised activities to mitigate Covid-19 effects are both realistic and necessary. In all of ADB's emergency Covid-19 pandemic response packages, gender targets have been integrated across health, economic resilience, and social protection domains, reflecting the reality that recovery is not possible if half the population is left (further) behind.

We encourage all governments and development partners to make similar New Year's resolutions to put gender equality front and centre of their Covid-19 recovery. Let's make sure that 2021 really does usher in a better normal for women and girls.

Bambang Susantono is the Vice-President for Knowledge Management and Sustainable Development of the Asian Development Bank. Her Twitter handle is: @bsantono. Anita Bhatia is the Deputy Executive Director of the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women). Her Twitter handle is: @abhataiunwomen



A UN Women survey found that more women in the region were likely to have experienced job loss and reduced paid hours than men.

PHOTO: WINROCK INTERNATIONAL

better and more egalitarian normal.

The Asia and Pacific region is providing some inspiring and concrete lessons on how a new normal can be more effectively achieved when gender equality is fully integrated into strategies, policies, and investments.

Governments across the region have shown that taking decisive and proactive actions can mitigate short-term effects and pave the way toward a better normal for women. An ADB-UN Women high-level ministerial event held in fall 2020 for ministers of finance and gender, and other senior representatives from Fiji, India, Indonesia, Japan, Republic of Korea, Philippines, Samoa, and Thailand, shared good practices and policies to ensure

In India, the government's investments in digital infrastructure over the last six years have enabled 400 million citizens to open a bank account for the first time in their lives. Those bank accounts were leveraged during the pandemic to ensure direct cash transfers to the accounts of 220 million women. This principle reminds us to "leave no one behind" as we look to rebuilding our economies.

Still, there is a great deal of work to be done. A UN Women survey found that more women in the region were likely to have experienced job loss and reduced paid hours than men. This is in line with other data indicating that women are concentrated in the most hard-hit sectors of the pandemic, such as tourism,

Asia and the Pacific performed the least amount of unpaid care work globally (average of 64 minutes per day). As a consequence, women in the world worked the longest hours in the world when their paid (262 minutes per day) and unpaid work (201 minutes per day) are combined.

Women spent an average four times longer than men on unpaid care work like taking care of children and family members and domestic chores. With the Covid-19 lockdown, the volume of unpaid care work has exponentially increased for both women and men, however, women still shoulder most of the burden.

There are many other negative