

Financial anomaly at EC demands full investigation

Activities of such a crucial organisation must be fully transparent

WE must appreciate the work of The Office of the Comptroller and Audit General (CAG), which has detected significant financial anomalies in the Election Commission's expenditure on paying many of its trainers ahead of the last parliamentary polls and upazila elections. Objections were also raised against giving allowances for special positions that were not approved by the finance ministry.

According to EC documents, audit objections involving Tk 1.5 crore was raised on giving allowances to "special speakers" and "course advisers"—unapproved positions that were held by the chief election commissioner, election commissioners and top officials of the EC secretariat, including its secretary. These position holders had also collected training allowances without showing any proof of attendance, apart from their signatures on the acquittance role. Further objections were raised involving Tk 47.44 lakh for training programmes at the Electoral Training Institute, of which the same person had collected allowances for different trainings that took place at different corners of the country on the same day—even though that is physically impossible. All of these led to the government incurring substantial losses.

The EC's response so far has been to say that such objections cannot be raised since the commission is not under any ministry or government division, and so does not need approval from anyone for its expenditures. Really? Does that mean that the EC, which is responsible for auditing the country's democratic elections, does not believe that it should be the target of any audits? That it does not have to answer to the public? Surely the public has a right to know about the EC's expenditures, given that the money being spent comes from the public exchequer—i.e., the public.

Thus far, the CAG has only asked the EC to either send it a satisfactory answer or refund the money. However, given that the EC is responsible for holding and monitoring the highest democratic activity in the country—the parliamentary elections—any anomaly or suspected corruption will naturally cast doubts on all its undertakings and is thus cause for serious concern. That is why we believe the matter demands urgent investigation. Given the immense amount of public trust that is required in the election commission and its members for any democracy to properly function, the public has a right to verify through full investigation whether members of the commission responsible for safeguarding the country's democracy is involved in any corruption or not.

Tangail sari industry must be saved

Urgent support needed to revive our tradition

FAMOUS for the high quality weaves that are part of our heritage, Tangail saris have earned quite the reputation over the years. Weavers produce saris of different types and qualities, such as cotton, Jamdani, silk, half-silk, Benarasi and so on, with prices ranging from Tk 300 to Tk 20,000. However, the pandemic has affected all businesses, big and small, across the country, and it has now brought Tangail's sari industry to its knees. Moreover, traditional sari weavers in the district were already going through difficult times as sales of saris dropped drastically in the last few years due to various reasons.

Major festivals like Eid, Puja and Pahela Baishakh are the times when demand for such saris peak. But due to the pandemic, several lakh saris that were produced last year have remained unsold. While most local factory owners were already deeply in debt, devastating and prolonged flooding during the July-September period badly damaged many factories. According to weavers, the number of the handlooms were around 75,000 and more than two lakh workers were engaged in the industry about a decade ago. Since then, the number of handlooms have decreased due to different reasons, including the declining demand for saris and an increase in the number of power looms. Other factors that contributed to the downfall include the price hike of raw materials, women's dwindling interest in local saris and the availability of imported saris. Unfortunately, many skilled weavers are now leaving this ancestral profession for other occupations.

While we appreciate the success of the government in implementing the various stimulus packages to tackle the pandemic, we must also mention here that not all sectors have received similar levels of attention. The government must find ways to support the industry during such crisis periods. The existing weaknesses need to be identified so that the government can make adjustments to the stimulus packages, implementation of which is lagging behind. The government can help the owners to settle their debts and give quickly delivered financial incentives to the weavers so that they can survive during these difficult times and also be persuaded to stay in the trade. It is a pity that such an important part of our heritage is on the verge of destruction and so little is being done. We must be committed to reviving this precious industry and preventing it from disappearing, along with the livelihoods of thousands of people.

Sexualising and policing girls' bodies

The need for critical social thought in Bangladeshi classrooms

SARZAH YEASMIN

THE recent spate of debates around the rape and death of an O-level student has yet again illustrated the problems with Bangladeshi schooling and the chronic need for sex education in classrooms. When I was going to school, I remember that the only formal sex education we had was in the class five biology textbook, with a picture of a bare man and woman. Having menstruation in those days and leaving the "evidence of shame" on the school uniform and the seat amounted to stares and laughter from other students. These were the least cruel reactions. The teachers punished girls for wearing eyeliner, the wrong colour hairband, nail polish, or having longer nails. Teachers hovered with their piercing vision and fixed the girls' uniforms or drew them out of the class in a whispering command to go to the bathroom to fix their uniforms. Boys had their share of trials for low hanging pants and gel slapped hair, but the questions, scrutiny and curiosity always landed on the girls' bodies.

Dear teachers, who think that regulating girls would produce a righteous society, dear students, who laugh and bully, and dear school administrators, who choose to help maintain the status quo for the cadre of influential elites in the education system and beyond, I respectfully ask you, what is the point of punishing and micromanaging girls' and women's bodies? When children and adolescents spend the most productive hours of their day and life in classrooms, can we solely blame porn culture and parents for children's upbringing and its monstrous

consequences? Pedagogy steeped in puritanical disciplinary norms cannot instill moral values. Our curricula are bereft of substance. Superficial disciplining does not help our students to develop the moral and spiritual compass that education should inculcate. We need to engage in critical social thought along with mandatory sex education, and this is only one of the many changes necessary for us to move forward.

Bangladeshi schooling were an utter failure. The political consciousness and moral education that I received were outside of classrooms. Schools train students to compete, to gossip, to scapegoat people who are different, and to be the passive recipients of a system that serves the elite. We cannot even fathom entertaining thoughts or conversations that speak truth to power. Rape is not only a gender issue and it does not happen in a microcosm—

with her life.

We police our girls in schools to protect our boys. We cover our girls, so our boys don't lose their integrity. There is something abhorrently odd about girls' school uniforms. As girls hit puberty, they are made to put on designated cross drapes over their breasts as a part of the uniform, as if to deter the outlines of new breasts from titillating infantile boys from committing crimes or "acts of pleasure". Even these

toxic school culture. Although this is part of a larger ongoing national conversation, I want to bring your attention to how coercion and gendered policing and sexualising of girls are normalised in schools through petty disciplining.

We need to put an end to the culture of penalty and shame in the education system and create brave spaces to practice critical social thought, emphasise social sciences and liberal arts, practice communal values and empathy, expose ourselves to ideas and people we disagree with and teach and learn to critique social orders, learn to listen, and have a dialogue. Rape is about power; we must question and unite to uproot age old institutional practices that are stifling our education system. Let us remind ourselves that school must be a place for learning, rooted in compassion, faith, love and empowerment. Education cannot exist in a space that routinises and inflicts trauma and I can attest to that as a student and as a woman who remains troubled by the experiences of bad schooling. We must duly and respectfully do away with petty disciplinary practices and social hierarchies. With the one-dimensional focus on test-grades and micro-disciplining, we cannot hope for sustainable change through empty promises of blind pieces of legislations.

Sex education is necessary, practicing critical social thought is existential, and change must start from a place where youth spend the most time—the classroom.

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PHOTO: STAR

Whilst most of our efforts and school resources are expended on producing doctors, engineers, lawyers and heirs to nepotistic business dynasties, we severely lack critical education in civics, history, geography, philosophy and ethics. How many more BBA holders do we need to run our economy? When our chemistry and physics books fall out of our knapsack as we struggle to lift their heavy weights onto our straining adolescent backs, our ethics classes are non-existent. There is zero discourse, and zero tolerance for alternative viewpoints. My 12 years of

the entire society takes part in the rape. Somehow questioning injustice becomes radical, unpatriotic or just another "women's issue" that is pushed under the rug. In the end, mechanistic, regimented and score-based education becomes a tool to create more inequality, to further marginalise the ones living on the margins. Great strides in girl's education fall egregiously short of creating a just society if the girl's journey to womanhood is so harrowing, and in cases like this, if the girl pays for her freedom, her mobility and her education,

drapes on the girls' chests are not enough to appease the prudish gaze of disciplinary teachers. The drapes on the chest mark the girl's body as territory that is off limits, only to be vilified and violated at inopportune moments. The death penalty and jail time will not deter acts of gendered violence in a society where the education system fails both its men and women. We needed this well-publicised death of an English medium school student to pull our fleeting attention back to the topic of the preposterous curriculum and

Climate change ambitions at the end of 2020: Good news and bad



SALEEMUL HUQ

CONVENTION on Climate Change (UNFCCC) held in Paris, France in December 2015—was that every country would prepare and submit their respective plans to take action to tackle climate change every five years, with the expectation that the level of ambition would be enhanced at each five-year cycle. These plans were called Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) and had a mandatory component with regards to the level of mitigation measures to be adopted, and a voluntary component with regards to adaptation, which may or may not be included.

By adding up the mitigation measures promised in each country's NDC, the total amount of global mitigation could be calculated and we would know how close we were getting to reach the global temperature goal of 1.5 Degrees Centigrade, which was set out in the Paris Agreement.

Unfortunately, the initial NDCs, which were submitted in 2015, when added up would result in global temperatures going up to nearly 3 Degrees Centigrade. Therefore, it was expected that the second NDC, due for submission by December 31, 2020, would raise the level of ambition to get global temperatures below 2 Degrees Centigrade and as close to 1.5 Degrees as possible.

The relatively good news is that the revised NDCs are indeed moving the global temperature goal in the right direction—with the current aggregate level, the globe is headed towards just over 2 Degrees Centigrade of global warming.

THE Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF), which is a group of nearly 50 of the most vulnerable developing countries, currently chaired by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina of Bangladesh, has been strongly advocating for all countries to submit their revised NDCs by the December 31, 2020 deadline and enhance their respective mitigation measures to reach 1.5 Degrees. The CVF even set up a website to track the submissions made by all the countries before the deadline, and the results are quite mixed.

Let me start with the good news. Many major emitting countries including China, the European Union, Japan and

rather to the end of the calendar year of 2020.

So less than two-thirds of the countries submitted their respective NDC by the deadline, which was quite disappointing. The remaining countries have promised to submit in 2021 before the COP26 is held in November. It is hoped that they will indeed do so; however, the delay is to be regretted and will have consequences. Most of the CVF countries as well as the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) managed to submit their revised NDC on time, as did Bangladesh, but their emissions are not the critical ones. The biggest emitting countries are the ones

below 1.5 Degrees, which is still possible, albeit difficult. These tasks must be completed by 2021, as the next revision of the NDC will not be due until 2025, which will be far too late.

The other major consequence is that failure to move towards net zero emissions as quickly as possible and keep global warming below 1.5 Degrees will mean very significant amounts of loss and damage from the adverse impacts of climate change.

The year 2020 has taken the world over the threshold of visible and scientifically attributable impacts of climate change around the globe due to human induced



PHOTO: COLLECTED

Korea have submitted significant plans to reach net zero emissions by mid-century, which is the minimum target required from every country. There is also the good news that the incoming President-elect Biden of the US has promised to rejoin the Paris Agreement as soon as he is sworn in on January 20, 2021. It is expected that the US would then be able to set a target year for achieving net zero emissions.

However, the bad news is that the US was not able to meet the deadline of December 31, 2020 for submission of their revised NDC and many other countries also missed the deadline. There were two main reasons given for this, namely the Covid-19 pandemic and also that the COP26, which was supposed to have been held in Glasgow, Scotland in November 2020, was postponed to November 2021 due to the pandemic. While the first reason has some validity, the second reason is not an excuse for missing the submission deadline, as it is not related to the holding of COP26 but

whose targets really matter.

The relatively good news is that the revised NDCs are indeed moving the global temperature goal in the right direction—with the current aggregate level, the globe is headed towards just over 2 Degrees Centigrade of global warming. While this is shifting the global temperature target in the right direction, there is still a long way to go in bringing it to below 2 Degrees, and it will be even more difficult to bring it down to 1.5 Degrees.

Hence the CVF countries, under Bangladesh's leadership, must step up its global advocacy, together with the United Kingdom (which has assumed COP26 Presidency), to push the countries that have yet to submit their respective NDC to do so before COP26 and to make their mitigation targets as ambitious as possible.

It is important for all countries to realise the consequences of failing to submit their NDC on time and displaying the ambition to take global temperature

climate change.

Hence, COP26 will now also have to deal with the issue of financing loss and damage from climate change in the vulnerable developing countries, which COP25 failed to address in 2019 in Madrid, Spain. Failure to tackle this issue in Glasgow in November will mean that COP26 will also be a failure as far as the vulnerable developing countries are concerned. The CVF countries, under Bangladesh's leadership, has already decided to make this a "make or break" issue for COP26 and we should engage with the UK as the COP26 President to ensure that there is a satisfactory political settlement of loss and damage at COP26. The time for engaging in this process is now; if we wait until November, it will be too late. The responsibility for taking this issue seriously lies squarely with the COP26 Presidency.

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