

CCC polls end on a sour note

Why did the EC not address the irregularities and violence?

A mayor has won the Chattogram City Corporation polls by an apparent landslide but the incidents of violence that have taken the life of a young man and caused injury to more than a hundred others, along with voter intimidation, capture of scores of polling centres and false voting, make us question: was it worth it? Does election automatically mean that such incidents will be a given? Why can't violence and irregularities be pre-emptively avoided by those in charge of security and fairness in ballot casting, namely the law enforcers and the Election Commission?

This newspaper sent a team of eight reporters and photojournalists to cover the CCC elections, and the reports and images they brought back give a glimpse of how violent, chaotic and distressing the election scenario was. It is no surprise that the voter turnout was so low—a mere 22.52 percent.

The BNP mayoral candidate has alleged that the police and members of local administration were biased and acted like ruling party activists, and that they were the main rivals. Can we completely dismiss such allegations as the usual complaints of a sore loser when this candidate got only one vote in several polling centres, which is hardly a credible occurrence?

The ritualistic refrain by the Election Commission—that “apart from stray incidents, the CCC election was held peacefully in a free and fair manner”—sounds hollow and is an insult to people's intelligence. How does the fact that one person was killed and more than a hundred were injured (including women) fall under “stray incidents”? What's more disturbing is that the young man was killed during clashes between supporters of candidates of the same party: one an AL-backed councillor candidate and the other an AL rebel candidate. It indicates intense discord within the ruling party that has gone out of control of the party high-ups leading to violence. In fact, the violence started soon after the campaign began with two Awami League men being killed in clashes between the party-supported and rebel candidates and many injured.

It is a conundrum why, despite the presence of 15,000 members of law enforcement and teams of executive and judicial magistrates to maintain law and order, they could not prevent the violent clashes between supporters of opposing candidates of AL or those between supporters of AL and BNP candidates. Why were several groups of people wearing badges of ruling party candidates allowed to stand in front of polling centres and enquire about the identity of those suspected of being loyal to BNP candidates? Why were the polling agents of the BNP-nominated mayoral candidate driven out of almost all the 45 polling centres visited by this paper's correspondents?

These are questions that keep cropping up after each election and are always dismissed by the Election Commission and ignored by the government. Unless these issues, including voter intimidation, throwing out of polling agents from a centre, forcefully casting a ballot of a voter and failure of the law enforcers to prevent violence, are addressed, voter turnout will continue to fall making elections a futile and meaningless exercise.

Protecting the rights of migrant workers

Govt. has the chance to play a historic role

WE agree with the Bangladesh Civil Society for Migrants (BCSM) that the government should develop a common guideline for case evaluation of migrant workers whom host countries have sent back involuntarily. The Covid-19 crisis has exposed just how vulnerable our migrant workers are and how terribly they are neglected during a time of major crisis, even though they too were adversely affected—perhaps even more so, being stuck in a foreign country under harsh conditions, or being forcefully sent back home without having their dues paid.

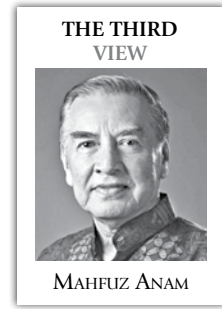
It is with this in mind that the rights group has urged the government to look at whether the visas of workers were expired and if all the dues had been cleared in case of involuntary returns. Using this data, the government with support from the civil society could launch an international campaign for the rightful compensation and payment of migrant workers' wages. BCSM and its member organisation Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU) recently published a book highlighting how Bangladeshi migrant workers have faced overwhelming challenges during the Covid-19 outbreak. The book includes findings of a survey on 200 male and female migrants, interviews of 25 involuntarily returned migrants, and 30 left-behind female members of migrant households—thus on a smaller scale, it already attempted to acquire some data.

The study found an urgent need for framing policies both at origin and destination countries to protect the migrants during emergencies. It also suggested that the Bangladesh missions should conduct the registration process after doing due diligence before the workers are repatriated. And should workers' wages or other benefits remain pending after repatriation—which has happened in hundreds if not thousands of cases following the outbreak of Covid—then the missions can take the power of attorney from the migrants and pursue settlements of claims.

This sounds completely reasonable and a fair thing to do. The kind of mistreatment of migrant workers that we have seen during this emergency is likely to continue to happen unless the international community comes to an agreement that properly protects their rights at all times—especially during emergencies. And we hope the Bangladesh government will courageously lead that campaign and bring it to the attention of the international community until a truly concrete agreement is established.

A constable's curiosity and a lucky mother

A very happy ending that brings vital social issues to the fore



THE THIRD VIEW

MAHFUZ ANAM

THE happy ending of this story came about due to a mixture of pure chance and the laudable inquisitiveness of a Detective Branch (DB) police constable, Mahfuzur Rahman. He stopped by

a roadside tea stall on his way to office. While sipping his tea, he overheard others talking about a woman in a nearby slum suddenly having a baby although no one ever saw or heard anything about her being pregnant. It piqued his curiosity, so he asked a few questions and decided to pay a visit to the “mother”.

Upon arriving there, he found Mousumi Begum, 23, and her husband Md. Sajiv cuddling the two-day-old, as all parents would do. He was told that the sudden birth of the baby was caused by an accident while Mousumi was returning home in a rickshaw. The obvious gaps in the narrative further aroused his suspicions. He reported this to his superiors at the office where he learned that, on the previous day, a newborn baby had gone missing after delivery from Rajshahi Medical College Hospital (RMCH). CCTV footage extracted from the hospital showed a woman going into the children's ward and walking away with a baby. So DB officials formed a team, visited Mousumi, found her looks to match that of the woman in video footage, arrested the couple and returned the baby to her real mother, Shilpa Rani Das, and her husband Masum Rabi Das. The distraught couple couldn't believe their luck. When the child was reunited with the weeping mother, the whole ward cheered and celebrated it.

Constable Mahfuzur Rahman and the whole DB team of Rajshahi deserve our sincere felicitations for their diligent work and prompt action. Even a day's or a few hours' delay could have resulted in the baby being shifted somewhere else.

The above incident naturally drives one to think of the many infants that are stolen from our hospitals and clinics and the personal agonies and sorrow that befall all those parents whose infants are never recovered.

There was a time when there used to be many cases of newborn babies being stolen from our hospitals. Things have greatly improved since then, especially with the beefing up of security at the hospitals and the installation of CCTVs.

According to an online search, which is not exhaustive, from April 2012 till December 2020, a total of 13 cases of

infant abduction took place—three in Dhaka, three in Bogura, two in Rajshahi and one each in Barishal, Faridpur, Natore, Noakhali and Pabna. The good news is that police were able to recover eight of the 13 stolen infants. The bad news, obviously, is that even after years of search, we still have no idea what happened to the other five.

The relatively small number in this regard can be deceiving. Underneath the story of criminal gangs, hospital negligence, police ineptness and the administration's connivance that often contribute to children going missing, there is a more nuanced reality that keeps the “missing” infant phenomenon running. It is the demand created by childless couples who genuinely want to adopt babies but cannot do so because of the cumbersome and complicated nature

underground players can find many people who would be willing to have a child for themselves and pay large sums for that.

Tragically, there is neither any government initiative nor any social awareness among citizens as to how to address the plight of childless couples and find a legal, safe, open, dependable and widely accepted process of solving what is a very painful reality that these people have to live with.

In Bangladesh, adoption falls under family laws in which religious practices have a definitive say. According to the Hindu and Christian religious laws, adoption is permitted. For the Muslims, what is permitted, under the Guardians and Wards Act of 1890, is legal guardianship of children but not adoption in the Western sense of the word. It means that a Muslim couple

shunned by the family and ostracised by their community. Except in the case of urban elites—and here the discrimination could be subtler but equally painful—childless women generally suffer from emotional and psychological trauma including the constant fear, if not threat, of marital break-up as the wife is solely held responsible for the couple's failure to have children.

Thus a tremendous pressure is created within the family, and especially on the women, to get a child “by any means” to stabilise their marriage and gain social acceptability, leading the couple and especially the wife to fall prey to the child traffickers.

Without delving into the issue deeper—there are excellent studies on the subject—it can be said without hesitation that the government needs to come out far stronger in favour of “legal guardianship” for Muslims and adoption for followers of other religions so that the practice becomes easier and far wider.

To change the disparaging social mindset, the government, political parties, civil society, NGOs, academicians and the educated class in general should launch a massive social movement encouraging childless couples to take on such children in a legal way and help them fight all the prejudices and stigma that currently exist. For the Muslims, the biggest example lies in their own religion. The Prophet of Islam himself had an adopted son and there are numerous pronouncements by him about the virtues of coming to the aid of orphans. And what could be a greater gesture of help than bringing such a child into one's own family?

In fact, we should consider “guardianship” or adoption as a social responsibility and encourage able families, especially the more fortunate ones, to adopt parentless, homeless and destitute children. They can save thousands, if not lakhs, of young lives and provide a bright future for them and at the same time help realise the dream for a poverty-free Bangladesh.

Such a move will remove the “demand pull”—the most important factor—that is working to perpetuate the tragedy of child theft. As for the morality of such an act, nothing could be more exemplary, ethical, correct, healing, joyous, and humane than providing a loving and caring home for an orphan or an unwanted child, or one who is rendered parentless due to accident, poverty, and disease (Covid-19, for example). And for the parents who will get the child, it will bring endless joy and happiness to them.

Nothing can be a more powerful social healer than such an act.

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Mahfuz Anam is Editor and Publisher, *The Daily Star*.



Representational image.

FILE PHOTO: COLLECTED

of our legal process as well as the stiflingly prejudiced social mindset that looks down upon adopted children as if they're inferior in some way, totally ignoring the tragic circumstances that lie hidden behind every such case.

Desperate to have babies, these otherwise decent and law-abiding citizens either take the help of the very few legal outlets available or are lured by a large number of agents into the dark world of infant theft that sells them to ordinary childless couples. They are not criminally minded but are drawn into that world due to a very human desire to be parents and have their lives fulfilled through raising children.

In the absence of any official statistics, it is estimated that nearly 10 percent of married couples in Bangladesh are childless. Even if the percentage is a mere one fourth of that, it is still large enough to generate a huge demand for which the

wanting to adopt a boy or girl child can, through family courts, become legal guardians of one or more children they want to raise. The difference between normal adoption and legal guardianship is that in the latter case, children do not automatically inherit parental property as they do in case of adoption. This limitation can, however, be overcome through the process of *hiba* or gifting property during the lifetime of the guardians to the children over whom they have the legal guardianship.

The legal obstacles, though a bit cumbersome, are not insurmountable. The bigger problem, however, is the mindset of people in general. It's centred on women who cannot bear children. They are looked upon as abnormal and even “cursed”. There is a huge stigma attached to such women in both urban and rural areas, especially in the latter, so much so that they are sometimes

THE ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE PROJECT

Insecurity: A foreboding shadow for female students

The Academic Experience Project is a faculty-student collaborative work aimed to glean insights about the experiences of tertiary-level students. Each Friday, The Daily Star publishes an op-ed highlighting its findings. This is the thirteenth article of the series.

ABU SUMAIYA and SYED SAAD ANDALEEB

B UET students still remember Sabequn Nahar Sony who was killed in June 2002 during a fight between two rival political groups. Tragically, she died at the hands of a few wayward “students” at the very campus where she went to fulfil her dreams. In 2019, an undergrad student of Chittagong University was raped by a senior student of the same university. And in Sylhet's MC College, a gang-rape episode was again prime news recently. Campus violence has badly stained the academic environment for decades and women have often borne the brunt of such inhuman assaults.

The presence of female students in our higher education landscape goes back to 1921 when the University of Dhaka opened its doors. In the following 100 years, their presence has grown remarkably on campus as an index of equity, which is also a constitutional right. Unfortunately, their safety and security in the tertiary education environment remains uncertain. For many female students and their parents, the university campuses are not considered safe.

In a survey carried out by The Academic Experience Project, among other issues, safety concerns were also addressed. Overall satisfaction with education was the same for both males and females. However, there were large differences on the safety issue, which stood out as a sore marker. While it was not so much a concern for male students, their female peers were apprehensive. The significant gender differences in perceptions reflecting fear, insecurity, perceived risks, etc. show that the measures adopted by the authorities do not garner female students' confidence that they are safe on campus.

Bangladeshi social norms and perceptions have perennially reflected a patriarchal mindset. This has adversely

affected female students, especially in the higher education sector. The rise of political muscle has also raised tensions on campus. Not only has this growing menace hampered overall education, it has also made the situation of female students one of serious concern, especially given the predatory proclivities of these bands of undesirable elements.

One of the most common complaints of female students is the on-campus sexual harassment they experience from their very own male peers and seniors. Female “freshers”, especially in the public universities, are often victims of a pattern of ragging and other forms of harassment that shake the foundations of civic and moral sensitivities. Female students do not even feel safe from the gaze and other inclinations of their male peers in the university transportation they use together. But this is just the tip of the iceberg: matters are actually far worse.

There are reports of rape and assault of women, sometimes at gunpoint. Such acts are mostly committed by students who are politically influential and sheltered. In almost all of the cases, they go unpunished. Victims are also murdered after rape or gang rape. The steps taken by the authorities in such cases are far from satisfactory for which the abused women (and their families) are harassed further. In many situations, the victims are prone to committing suicide because of social shaming and institutional harassment.

A female-centric educational sector is medical and health studies which requires a one-year internship after completion of their academic term. Purportedly, female interns are constantly harassed and threatened by the hospital staff and, sometimes, even attendants of patients. Such incidents have a huge negative mental impact.

Apart from these, political harassment

on campus, especially in the hostels, has also been reported. During the anti-quota movement, female students were attacked by their opponents (themselves female) just for holding a different opinion. But the authorities took no steps to punish the culprits. Such indifferent reactions of the authorities can only help escalate harassment and violence on women.

In some universities, there are “Sunset Laws” for female students which stipulate that they must get back to their residence halls before dusk for their own safety. But a sizeable number of the female students are financially disadvantaged. Not only do they bear their own expenses, they also, in some cases, support their families through tutoring school- or college-going students. The sunset laws place female students at a serious disadvantage in relation to male students. And while there is a High Court ruling (2009) to form sexual harassment prevention committees (SHPC) in every campus, progress has been disappointing.

Adding fuel to the fire, campuses across the nation have turned into a haven for drug addicts and dealers, mostly in the public universities. Female students often face crude remarks and harassment from these addicts. The numbers of these addicts continue to grow according to some estimates.

Delays in investigations and lack of appropriate punishment meted out to the variety of perpetrators have nurtured a culture of immunity and impunity, especially at the public universities. Campus politics in its present avatar also poses a serious threat to higher education in other ways. There are many students from SAARC countries who come to study here. Many feel harassed and unsafe and go back with negative experiences and impressions that can hinder the nation's internationalisation efforts with education. Imagine a future

coalition-building effort by Bangladesh in an international setting where a traumatic memory of a student from another nation comes back to haunt the effort!

With a sizeable female student population in our universities and over 100 medical colleges, as well as other professional and vocational education sectors, there is no effective policy concerning campus safety of female students who are generally mistrusting and afraid of their male peers, their male teachers and even male staff at the universities. Parents, naturally, remain highly concerned about sending their daughters to any campus.

In a nation that started its journey fifty years ago with the promise to give citizens a better society, serious conversation must be restarted to address safety issues of our women who have crossed the threshold and ventured out from their homes to educate themselves.

We could begin by marking a special day of the year to protest and rally support against those who heap indignity, humiliation and other far serious tribulations on young women at any school, college or university. A collective social response is the immediate need of the day to change this obtuse culture of exclusion, harassment and oppression, especially of our academically inclined women. Unless we create for them—in fact, for all Bangladeshis—a safe, positive, nurturing, and friendly environment, the continuing social malaise will make our economic progression to middle-income status seem frivolous and our pride of accomplishment seriously besmirched.

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Abu Sumaiya is working on his MBA degree at IBA, University of Dhaka. Syed Saad Andaleeb is Distinguished Visiting Professor at IBA, University of Dhaka, and former Vice-Chancellor, BRAC University. For more information on The Academic Experience Project, contact Dr Andaleeb at bdresearch422@gmail.com.