

A poor score in the corruption perception index is a wake-up call

Zero tolerance for corruption must be enforced, not just announced

RANKING 146th and scoring 26 out of 100 in the Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index 2020 is a disheartening position for Bangladesh, which is currently on a positive development trajectory. That it has performed worse than the previous year indicates that the malaise of corruption has actually intensified and the government's zero tolerance policy towards corruption is far from being implemented. Bangladesh's score is the second lowest among eight South Asian countries and the fourth lowest among 31 countries in the Asia Pacific region. We are only ahead of war-torn Afghanistan among the South Asian nations in the index.

Corruption has always plagued Bangladesh and acutely hampered its development goals. In many cases it has become institutionalised, affecting vital sectors of the country. Politicisation of key institutions and lack of accountability of those holding positions of power have been major reasons for this surge in graft. Last year when the pandemic started, we saw widespread corruption in the health sector, with horrifying scandals involving fake protective gear and fake Covid-19 tests. We also saw how unscrupulous individuals managed to carry out their illegal activities with the help of political connections. The financial and banking sector has been riddled with default loans, fraud and money laundering, making them weak and vulnerable and actively debilitating our development goals. Again, political connections and lack of accountability were the drivers. Even directives from the Prime Minister to stop corruption in various sectors have gone unheeded.

The role of the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) has also been a significant factor in our poor performance in the corruption index. As pointed out by TIB, while the ACC has unraveled quite a few cases of corruption by officials or those with political affiliations, it has not played its expected role in bringing high-profile corruption cases to justice by holding the "big fish" accountable.

The shrinking space for media and civil society, the draconian measures to restrict freedom of speech and the deficit of tolerance of dissent has also led to an increase in corruption. Without critics to point out where the corruption is taking place, the government is blindsided and many of its developmental endeavours will go to waste. We can take the example of how relief for the poor during the early months of the pandemic were mismanaged by unscrupulous public officials sabotaging the work of the government. Irregularities in public procurement has always been a big thorn in the flesh for the government, leading to precious resources being wasted and depriving the public of essential services.

The lowering position in the international corruption index should serve as a wake-up call for the government. It can be the catalyst for the government to initiate a shift in political culture and the role of public institutions. Critics, whether in the media or civil society, should be seen as aides and not enemies—as part of the support system that will identify the leakages, bottlenecks, irregularities and criminality within public institutions and organisations. It is only when the faults and cracks are identified that the repairs can be made.

Unrepaired, Lalmonirhat-Burimari highway claims 25 lives in a year

Free the highway from the clutch of death

WE are disheartened to learn from a recent report published in this daily that 25 people lost their lives in 15 accidents on the highway connecting Lalmonirhat with Burimari land port over the last 12 months. The carpeting has worn out on nearly 40 kilometres of the 100 kilometre highway; along with the many potholes that developed overtime, this has made the journey dangerous for the thousands of vehicles that regularly use this road, especially cargo trucks that ply the highway every day, risking accidents and fatalities.

Even well-experienced truckers dread this highway and are reluctant to use it, as they consider it among the worst in the country. Drivers remain extremely worried about getting killed or killing others while on this road. Not only is the highway fatal for drivers and passengers of various vehicles, but it also poses risks for pedestrians as well—two members of the police were killed when a truck carrying stones from Burimari ran them over earlier this month. The highway is a deathtrap, to say the least, but there is no alternative as it is the only road for transporting goods in and out of the land port.

Commuters claim that the highway has been in such a dilapidated state for a long time now. Then why has it not been repaired? Isn't it obvious that had the road been mended, many lives could have been saved? It is most unfortunate that despite Tk 40 crore being allocated for the repair of the dilapidated highway by the Roads and Highways Department, they are yet to select a contractor for the work. This is unacceptable and quite befuddling. We urge the concerned authorities to take the necessary steps to immediately repair the road. The government should conduct regular drives to identify all such major roads all over the country and ensure maintenance, as broken roads are a major cause of road crashes.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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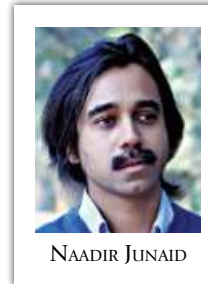
Protect the poor in winter

The poor and needy in the northern and southern regions of Bangladesh have been suffering miserably due to the bitter winter cold. With no sunshine and lack of warm clothes, they are facing extreme difficulties. Many are also suffering from cold-related diseases. Experts predict that the cold spell will continue. I request my fellow citizens and the government to come forward and help those in dire need.

Izaz Hoq, Jashore

ZAHIR RAIHAN DISAPPEARANCE DAY

Dreams devoured: The tragic disappearance of Zahir Raihan



NAADIR JUNAID

EMINENT novelist and filmmaker Zahir Raihan left for Kolkata after the Pakistani military crackdown in Dhaka on March 25, 1971. He played a crucial role in the cultural front of the Liberation War. His elder brother Shahidullah Kaiser, renowned novelist and journalist, refused to depart Dhaka during the war, saying that if everyone leaves for India, who would fight the Pakistani army from within the city? But three days before the surrender of the Pakistani army, Shahidullah Kaiser was abducted from his house by pro-Pakistani Bengalis. On his return to Dhaka after independence, Zahir Raihan was devastated when he heard about the abduction of his brother.

As the body of Shahidullah Kaiser was not recovered, Zahir Raihan held to the belief that his brother was alive. With a view to identifying and capturing the people responsible for the murder of prominent Bengali intellectuals, he formed an investigating committee and started collecting information about the

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killings. After a few days, an unknown caller informed him over the telephone that Shahidullah Kaiser was being kept prisoner in a house in Mirpur. At that time, Mirpur had a large Bihari population, a section of whom actively supported the Pakistani army during the Liberation War. At the end of January 1972, Bangladeshi security forces were given the responsibility of maintaining law and order in Mirpur.

Zahir Raihan was the only civilian who accompanied army and police units to Mirpur on January 30, 1972. As they stood in an open area, some assailants suddenly started firing at them from nearby houses using heavy weapons. Most of the Bangladeshi soldiers were hit by bullets. A group of attackers then hacked the wounded soldiers with machetes and dragged their bodies away. On that day, the Bangladesh army lost 40 members, including an officer, whose bodies were never found. A few soldiers who managed to escape said that the sole civilian accompanying them was also shot

when the firing began. We suspect that the civilian was Zahir Raihan. Thus, the most celebrated Bangladeshi filmmaker of that time and one of the finest novelists of our country disappeared so sadly in independent Bangladesh, never to be seen again.

Zahir Raihan's tragic disappearance was a serious blow for the endeavour to produce socially-committed films in the newly-liberated country. He

As the military administration was not tolerant of political criticisms in cinema, Bengali filmmakers did not dare depict the troubles and turbulence of contemporary reality. In that decade marked by worldwide social movements, politically-alert and formally-innovative films were in vogue throughout the world, whereas rather than exploring present-day problems, Bengali films made in East Pakistan revolved around popular

the Pakistani government, patriotic and rebellious songs, and consciousness-raising dialogues. The military administration tried to ban this film in its pre-production stage. But due to popular demand for the release of this film, the authorities could not stop the screening of *Jiban Theke Neyra*.

The subject matter of the film inspired Bengalis to resist injustice and oppression, and the following year, the Bengalis fought the Pakistani army bravely in the Liberation War. Eminent filmmaker Alamgir Kabir rightly observed that, "politically, *Jiban Theke Neyra* played a role that no other film in the history of cinema had ever played in shaping the destiny of a nation." During the Liberation War, Zahir Raihan made his impassioned documentary *Stop Genocide*, which was an angry denunciation of the atrocities and genocide committed by the Pakistani army in Bangladesh. Despite having insufficient technical facilities, he made his seminal documentary aesthetically-developed and politically purposive.

He ingeniously juxtaposes the sounds of gunshots and the mournful high-pitched cry of a baby, the expressionless face of a rape victim and the anger-filled face of a middle-aged man condemning Yahya Khan, an octogenarian Bengali woman trying to flee from Pakistani atrocities and the still image of a tank. By showing the appalling plight of Bengali refugees, photos of the gory massacre of innocent civilians, and the determination of Bengali freedom fighters, the documentary made the world aware of the Pakistani military brutality in Bangladesh and the courageous resistance of the Bengalis. *Stop Genocide* showed that for an imaginative filmmaker, advanced technical means is of little importance for making a critically-acclaimed film.

Just before the Liberation War, Zahir Raihan started making *Let There Be Light*, a multi-lingual film based on his novel *Aar Koto Din*. The novel is an indictment of man's inhumanity and cruelty to man out of racial and religious hatred. But he could not finish this very important film. During the Liberation War, a group of Bengali filmmakers led by him suggested some guidelines for the nationalisation of the film industry and for ensuring the production of thought-provoking films in post-independence Bangladesh. But the hoped-for changes in the realm of Bangladeshi cinema did not materialise without the bold presence of Zahir Raihan.

Except for a handful of occasional breakthroughs, Bangladeshi films have not been able to attract global attention thus far. Will our contemporary filmmakers be inspired by the courage, political awareness and cultivated aesthetic taste of Zahir Raihan and make films that would be groundbreaking, both artistically and politically? Instead of drawing on clichéd elements and incorporating inconsequential and escapist subject matters, will our new filmmakers attempt to turn Bangladeshi films into the sort of socially-meaningful artistic creations that Zahir Raihan dreamed of? That remains to be seen.

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Zahir Raihan on the set of the film *Kokhono Asheni* (1961).

PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA

departed this life when his filmmaking was at its most political. His politically-aware temperament was also evident in his novels, where he addressed the tribulations and miseries of people tormented by class division and political oppression. From his teenage years, he became associated with the Communist Party. He actively took part in the Language Movement. On February 21, 1952 he was one of the 10 students who first ventured out into the streets in a procession, violating Section 144. He was arrested and taken to prison at that time, along with many other students.

His 1969 novel *Arek Phalgun* depicts the dauntless protest of Bengali students against the oppressive regime in order to establish their mother tongue as the state language. In the same novel, he mentioned the brutality of the British colonisers who arranged for public hangings of native soldiers in Dhaka in 1857. His 1970 novel *Aar Koto Din* begins by condemning murder in the name of religion, colour, nationalism and culture in different corners of the world. In this novel, he refers to the ruthlessness inflicted on helpless people in the Auschwitz and Buchenwald concentration camps, in Hiroshima, Jerusalem, Vietnam, and the colonised African nations. Having seen the perpetuation of exploitation and repression in the social milieu in which he produced his literary works, Zahir consciously took the side of the oppressed. His novels did not allow the readers to escape from the troubled reality. Instead, he disturbed the readers by providing painful portrayals of social injustice, thereby raising their consciousness and motivating them to protest against unjust social circumstances.

It was, however, not very easy in the 1960s to confront burning social issues in films in the then East Pakistan.

stories from local folklore, mythical and historical themes, and entertainment-based narratives showing romances between young boys and girls.

In some of those films, the sufferings of the people were shown through a great deal of sentimentality instead of indicating the class guilty of capitalist exploitation. In spite of making a few films using audience-pleasing elements, in *Kokhono Asheni* (1961) and *Kancher Deyal* (1963), Zahir Raihan dispensed with popular filmic devices, taking the risk that the majority of viewers who are constantly fed mindless entertainment might dislike these films. In his article titled "October Revolution and Soviet Cinema", Zahir Raihan states that in a bourgeois society, at the time of granting money for producing films, the capitalists order that the films must conform to their values and protect their class interests. Zahir asks: How can the directors, then, make artistically-innovative, socially-conscious films in such a system?

But in the aftermath of the mass uprising of 1969, neither the pressure from financiers nor the displeasure of the military authorities could deter Zahir Raihan from performing his duty as a socially-conscious artist—he chose to come to grips with contemporary reality head on. He made *Jiban Theke Neyra* (1970), a feature replete with political overtones, where he denounced the country's despotic rule through an allegorical narrative. It was the first film made in East Pakistan that portrayed the politically volatile situation of contemporary society. On the level of form, the film also made a departure from tradition by deploying documentary footage, real photographs of mass protests, paintings depicting the sufferings of Bengalis, placards containing political statements, historical and cultural symbols of Bengali resistance against

The empty bed: Fighting Covid-19 from an ICU



SABEREEN HUQ

NOTHING had prepared us for this. I enter the transition zone to the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) of the British hospital I work in. "Here we go again", I think to myself. A Health Care Assistant (HCA) kindly offers to help me put on my full protective gear. It's heavy and suffocating. But it's there for a reason. Thanking her, I enter the ICU, putting on a brave face.

You must have a brave face. Because you are fighting the odds in here. You leave all your worries, fatigue and fear outside. It's a completely different picture inside. Bed after bed and ward after ward of patients in every direction. Doctors, nurses, HCAs, physiotherapists, pharmacists and even medical students can be seen running around, doing their part. Each patient is holding on for their lives with the help of ventilators and other artificial support. Screens bleep away with their various organ parameters. This is their last line of hope. Only when all methods have failed, do they end up here.

Thus, the stakes multiply exponentially. And as bitter as it may sound, not all of them come back from it. When the team comes to the difficult realisation that all the artificial support being provided to an individual won't bring him/her back, the dreaded call



PHOTO: REUTERS

goes out. We speak to the family on the phone. We try bringing them to the hospital for one last encounter with their loved ones. This is the worst part of it all. Watching helplessly as the family surround their loved ones, one last time. The sorrow, the bitterness, the sense of disbelief in their eyes. No matter how many times you witness this, it never gets any easier.

You think of your near and dear ones. You think of life. It could easily be you in their place. Fate is the only thing preventing it. Some families are not lucky enough to say their final goodbyes.

We had a gentleman who passed away two minutes before the family reached. The sight of the grieving widow, beating on the chest of her deceased husband in her sorrow, was not for the faint-hearted. Stories like these build up as we advance further and further into this dystopia.

The National Health Service (NHS) of the UK prides itself in being one of the best health services in the world. But even the NHS has been stretched thin and pushed to its limit. An ICU should usually have a 1:1 ratio staffing. That has been stretched to 1:4 in most, in some instances even more than that. Clinical

staff from all specialities (including myself) have been brought in to cope with the influx of Covid-19 patients taking a turn for the worst. No work is deemed unsuitable for anyone. We have senior consultants helping to clean the patients. You have second and third year medical students trying their best to help the amazing ICU nurses.

The alarming number of Bangladeshis I have seen in this short time ending up in ICU has left me with a heavy heart. Seeing so many of your own kinsmen suffer the lethal blow from this virus leaves you scarred. Seeing so many beautiful people taken away from their families before their time leaves you wounded. The number of ICU beds in our hospital have increased three fold, with elective theatres shut to make space for more ICU beds. This is a similar theme throughout most hospitals.

An empty bed tells an all too familiar story. An individual who has lost the battle with Covid-19. But the bed won't remain empty for too long. For soon enough, another victim of this ruthless virus will be its occupier. For how long? Impossible to tell. But you can bet we will do everything in our capacity to help him/her win this battle. We will keep on fighting till the empty bed remains empty. Scars, wounds and a heavy heart have to take a back seat for now.

Like I mentioned in the beginning. Nothing had prepared us for this.

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