

Independent inquiry needed into workers' deaths

We appeal to the HC to ensure justice

RIGHTS organisation Ain O Salish Kendra on April 22 filed a writ petition with the High Court seeking its directive on the authorities concerned to conduct a judicial inquiry into the killings of workers at SS Power I Plant at Chattogram's Banskhali upazila on April 17. We cannot stress how important it is to have such an independent inquiry and we fully support the petition.

On that fateful day, five workers at the under-construction plant were killed and at least 21 injured when police fired live ammunition at the workers, while they were demonstrating to get paid their arrears and some time off for Iftar and Sehri. According to reports, the workers had started their protest peacefully. So why was there a need for the police to fire live bullets? Weren't there multiple other available options for the police that they could have exercised before resorting to such drastic measures? Did they try those? Were all the necessary attempts made by the police to ensure that there was no loss of life? These are questions that must be answered, particularly given our track record when it comes to people being killed at the hands of law enforcers, and also the record of investigating even the most dubious of those cases. The authorities have repeatedly denied any wrongdoing in the past, many times without any investigation—and no independent investigation almost ever sees the light of day. But in order to have justice, there has to be an independent inquiry.

As a report in this newspaper revealed, the workers are having to live in absolutely horrid conditions. How is that being tolerated in regards to the labour laws? Oftentimes, we have seen construction labour being outsourced. Under what law do these workers actually work? Is there any supervision going on? These issues have to be looked into. And there is also the matter of compensation for the dead and injured workers and their families.

For far too long have we seen labour laws being flouted in the country against the most vulnerable workers. And whenever they demand what little is due to them, their demands are crushed with force. There needs to be an independent inquiry to check whether the use of force was justified on this instance, whether the workers' rights were honoured by the law enforcers and the company/companies employing them, and if their terms of employment were fair and being adhered to. We strongly feel that for justice to be done, there has to be an independent inquiry.

Coastal populations still vulnerable to disasters

Embankments must be strengthened fast

ACCORDING to a report published by this daily two days ago, a majority of the 5,700 kilometres of embankments surrounding 19 coastal districts are insufficient in preventing floods, increase in salinity and tidal surges caused by cyclones.

The coastal region is home to 35 million people, that is, 28 percent of the country's total population. According to a World Bank (WB) study, around eight million people in this region are currently vulnerable to severe flooding during cyclones, when the water level becomes more than three metres deep. The international body warns that this number of flood victims may increase to 13.5 million in the next 29 years. Also, a large number of people living in coastal areas have gone below the poverty line in recent times due to increased salinity and displacement caused by natural calamities.

The embankments, which were constructed during the 1960s and 1970s, have been badly damaged by the increasing rate of natural disasters in the coastal region. Urgent steps are needed to bring about necessary repairs to these dilapidated dams.

The report shows that the government secured loans from the WB to improve over 400 kilometres of embankments in six coastal districts, after two back-to-back cyclones, Sidr and Aila, caused serious damage to the coastal region in 2007 and 2009, respectively. Although implementation of the project was to have started in 2013, it took two more years to take off and unfortunately, in the last half a decade, only 65 percent progress has been made. Without finishing up the first phase (which is already behind schedule), the government has already started discussions with its various development partners to initiate the second phase of this project. Getting on with a new scheme without figuring out the challenges faced by a previous one isn't going to bring forth any sustainable changes in the lives of the people there and/or the coastal environment.

Experts have suggested bureaucratic red tape, irregularities in repairing embankments, purposeful destruction of dams by shrimp farming and challenges of land acquisition as some of the problems hindering ongoing coastal development projects. The respective authorities have to listen to the numerous solutions laid out by environmental experts for their programmes to create lasting impacts. These include mitigating the challenge of land acquisition by paying compensation well ahead of beginning a project's implementation, making updates with international standard designs supervising the projects' implementation by third parties, afforestation along the embankments, keeping proper flushing and drainage sluices, regular dredging of the rivers and excavation of the canals. Delay in improving the coastal embankments, apart from increasing project costs, will keep millions of people vulnerable to future catastrophes and prolong their existing sufferings.

The Covid-induced stress factors impacting our students



BLOWN' IN THE WIND

SHAMSAD MORTUZA

THERE have been changes in the way we live and the way we die. We have learned to live carefully during this time of the pandemic, yet we have been dying carelessly. We have learned to live in isolation, yet death seems to be in no mood to spare us alone. News of death reaches us through social media. Facebook newsfeeds now run like a bottomless obituary page of a regular newspaper; you get tired of writing condolence messages or posting RIP or sad emoticons. You keep on sharing sympathies only to realise that the negativity has sucked the emotion out of you, and in the digital space, you are simply writing codes that lack human empathy.

As an educator, who has been teaching at the university level for the last 27 years, I had to jump through hoops to move from physical to digital classrooms due to this pandemic. The new tricks for old bones have been overwhelming for many senior faculty members. The transition has made me realise how the last 13 months have turned me into an automaton. Teachers are performers who get their performative energy from their classrooms by interacting with their students. The interaction in a virtual classroom is not the same as in a physical classroom. Most of our students do not turn on their videos during our Meet or Zoom sessions due to privacy or bandwidth reasons. The techniques that you learn from the internet or pedagogical experts for breakout interactive sessions often do not apply in our circumstance because of the lack

of digital resources. For instance, many students may not have the data to watch a video that you want them to watch, or they may not have the apps and features on their devices to take full advantage of the e-classes. I know of a student who had to type three 2000-word assignments for his mid-term on his phone as he did not have a laptop.

Although the classroom screen is equally apportioned, each participating member has a unique tale to tell. The

was saying how these online classes have brought her academically closer to her husband, who is an anatomy professor. The couple have never seen each other in their classroom settings as they belong to two different disciplines. While the wife was lecturing on the Middle Age response to plague, the husband listened. And when the husband was lecturing on what disease can do to the body, the wife listened. They realised how literature and historical narratives aptly captured the

see their parents going through lifestyle compromises or adjustments due to this disease. They are in a stage of life where they have the desire to help their parents during this time of need, yet they are not fully ready for the workforce. A study on the mental health of students during Covid-19 in Bangladesh found an association of depression-anxiety-stress (DAS) with older (25–29 years) rather than younger (18–24 years) students. This is not hard to discern as the disease has evidently delayed or stalled the academic life of many.

As a nation, we were all set to leverage demographic dividends, taking full advantage of the high number of the population in their prime age to contribute to society. The pandemic has suddenly brought the same age group under extreme duress. Their hopelessness and frustrations can have a long-term effect on our social fabric. I do not think we are addressing the issue enough in our Covid-19 responses.

At my university, ULAB, we are working with two professional bodies—Maya and Moner Bandhu—to give round the clock counselling services to our students. In addition, we have included mental health as essential skills in our curricula. We also have a unique partnership with an international leadership programme with a project called "My sister's keepers", where female students form a self-support group. The more we invest in the psychosocial wellbeing of our students, the more we learn how little we are doing to take care of the mental health of our young generations.

A pre-pandemic study showed that 16.18 percent of people in Bangladesh suffer from mental disorder. This was in 2019. We do not know how the number has changed in the last two years, but we do know that 94 percent of them do not get support from psychiatrists. There is still stigma attached with going to a "shrink". But when you hear that in a country of 16 crore you have a little over 200 trained mental health doctors—there are reasons to be worried.

Once we see the full picture of the havoc wrought by the coronavirus, we will realise the need for a multi-sectoral response. Supplying oxygen and ventilators or handing out Eid relief can only scratch the surface of the problem. What lies beneath is a bigger problem that will require a humane solution. The pandemic has made us turn to machines. But if we do not want to turn into machines, we better start searching for ways to deal with the stress factors.

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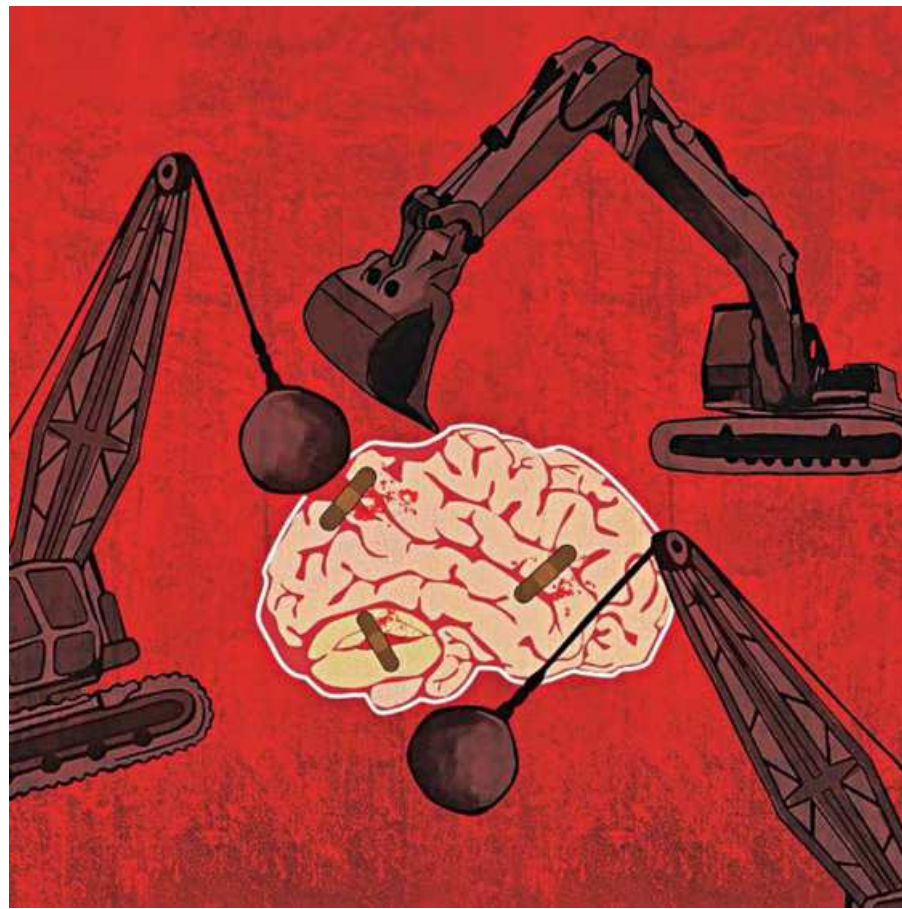


ILLUSTRATION: NAHFIA JAHAN MONNI

semblance of equity that you see on your screen belies the inequity that exists on the other side of the black mirror of our computers or phones. We do not know how many people are crammed in a small room from where the student is attending the class; by the same token, a teacher does not know that his lecture is being heard by many unintended listeners. A classroom is no longer a protected space to liberate your minds, it is in the world wide web, where a teacher does not have any control over the contents being shared. As a teacher, I must be extra careful about what I am saying or not saying in a classroom.

I was attending an e-summit recently where one history professor in the US

effect of the disease in images or artefacts. This is a serendipity for the couple who found new ways of collaborating in research, bridging medical science and humanities. The accidental participation in each other's classes created a new familial bond.

On the other side of the spectrum, we come across many stories that underline the lack of family bonding in coping with mental health disorders. We have heard about the increased number of cases of anxiety, depression, insomnia and suicidal thoughts that grew out of the lack of family support. Covid-impacted low-income, poverty or joblessness has created unprecedented frustration. Many university students feel helpless as they

PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

Modi's war on the press



SHASHI THAROOR

A flurry of assaults on freedom of the press in recent months has raised troubling questions about the state of India's democracy under Prime Minister Narendra Modi. India has long had a free and often raucous press. But the situation has changed dramatically since Modi's government came to power in 2014.

In late January, police filed criminal charges—including sedition, which carries a life sentence—against eight journalists who covered a protest in Delhi that turned violent. Their crime: reporting the claims of a dead protester's family that he had been shot and killed by the police. I face the same charges for having tweeted their claim when it was reported.

Six journalists and I (a Congress party MP) are accused of "misreporting" facts surrounding the death. We face charges in four states ruled by Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The publisher, editor, and executive editor of the investigative news magazine *The Caravan* face ten sedition cases in five states for reporting the story, and the magazine's Twitter account was briefly suspended by government order.

Ours is hardly an isolated case. In 2020 alone, 67 journalists were arrested, while nearly 200 were physically attacked in the 2014-19 period, including 36 in 2019, according to a study by the Free Speech Collective. A journalist arrested on his way to report on the aftermath of a gang rape in Uttar Pradesh state has been in jail for six months, being allowed out briefly only to visit his ailing mother in Kerala state, more than 2,000 kilometres (1,243 miles) away.

Conversely, reporting that is sympathetic to the government proceeds unchecked, even if it is inaccurate, propagandistic, or inflammatory, particularly in retailing bigotry against minorities or discrediting the political opposition. The mainstream media, whether print or television, has been cajoled and coddled into cheerleading for Modi's government.

Once dominated by government

programming, India's visual media landscape is now brimming with numerous private offerings, with over a hundred 24-hour television news channels today in multiple languages. My state of Kerala alone has 13 all-news channels in the regional language, Malayalam.

But competition has fuelled a race for eyeballs and advertising revenue that has steadily eroded the quality of Indian journalism. Whereas the Fourth Estate once placed a premium on editorial standards and journalistic ethics, it has

morning they must reach readers who have watched TV and read WhatsApp already. So, newspapers feel the need to "break" news in order to outdo their TV and social media competitors.

The result is that India's media, in its rush to run a story, has fallen prey to predictable hazards, often becoming a willing accomplice of the motivated leak and the malicious allegation, trading integrity for access to well-placed government sources. In this environment, the BJP has undermined the free press through co-optation and intimidation,



Protests in New Delhi over the arrest of an Indian journalist in 2019.

PHOTO: REUTERS FILE/ANUSHREE FADNAVIS

morphed into a grotesque platform driven by sensationalism and vilification. The news must be broken—and so, it seems, must the newsmaker. The government and its stalwarts are almost never the targets: the opposition, civil society, and dissenting individuals are.

As more Indians enjoy the fruits of literacy and the increasing affordability of smartphones and reduced data costs, India has witnessed a boom in print circulation as well as in social media as a news source, especially among young people. But newspapers are also conscious that they must compete in a tight media environment, where TV and digital media set the pace. They know that every

thus ensuring that much of the press produces only news that is sympathetic to the causes the ruling party holds dear, or that distracts the public's attention from government failings.

India's news media ought to be holding the government accountable, not kowtowing to it. The good news is that not everyone has forgotten the watchdog responsibility that free media must exercise in a democracy. The Editors Guild of India has asked Modi to revoke the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021, arguing that the new rules undermine press freedom.

The bad news is that such

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developments are a major reason for the recent decisions of democracy watchdogs Freedom House (which downgraded India from "free" to "partly free") and the V-Dem Institute (which now calls India an "electoral autocracy") to express alarm about the health of the country's democracy. "India, the world's most populous democracy, is also sending signals that holding the government accountable is not part of the press's responsibility," wrote Freedom House.

The Modi government's weapon of choice is the colonial-era sedition law: an overwhelming majority of sedition cases have been filed in the seven years since Modi and his BJP came to power, according to data compiled by the website article14. In a criminal justice system that has changed little since the colonial era, detentions, charges, police investigations, and trials ensure that even if actual convictions are rare, the process itself is the punishment.

Freedom of the press is ultimately the best guarantee of liberty and progress. It is the mortar that binds together a free society—and it is also the open window that, in Mahatma Gandhi's famous metaphor, allows the winds of the world to blow freely through the house. If Modi's efforts to de-institutionalise what used to be a dynamic and independent Fourth Estate persists, public confidence in the media will steadily decline, along with confidence in Indian democracy.

Shashi Tharoor, a former UN under-secretary-general and former Indian Minister of State for External Affairs and Minister of State for Human Resource Development, is an MP for the Indian National Congress.

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