

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR  
LATE S. M. ALI

DHAKA FRIDAY OCTOBER 1, 2021, ASHWIN 16, 1428 BS

# Rein in corruption before it assumes the reins of our future

Government apathy to corruption is morally bankrupting the education sector

IT has long been alleged that corruption and irregularities have become commonplace in our education sector. The media and other watchdog bodies have regularly covered specific instances of such depravity. But every time such reports come out, the government tends to hunker back into its denial mode. However, a recent bombshell study by Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) has once again brought to light just how morally bankrupt our education sector has become.

The study discovered that the secondary education sector is mired in different corrupt practices, including illegal financial transactions for the appointment of head teachers and officials in other positions. Aspiring head teachers or assistant head teachers had to pay between Tk 3.5 lakh and Tk 15 lakh to get employed in schools. Transfer of teachers, their inclusion to the Monthly Pay Order (MPO) scheme, schools' academic approval, school inspections, etc also involved plenty of instances of corruption, according to the study.

Despite there being an online process for non-government teachers to apply for MPO benefits, the study found that they still had to pay money at four stages. This is just one example of how ingrained corruption has become in the sector. Another example of this lies in the fact that many government schoolteachers and upazila education officers have been working at the same place for more than 10 years, despite there being a provision that allows an officer to stay at the same station for a maximum of three years. And while all this is going on, there is a serious lack of manpower when it comes to supervisors of secondary schools at field-level offices, adding to the lack of good governance, transparency, and accountability in the sector that we see. How can we expect anything good for our nation to happen when our education sector has become so rotten to the core?

When teachers, who are expected to instil values into our children, are involved in such systemic corruption, what values will our children learn from them? What ideals will our society embrace? These are questions that we all must ask, because so far, the authorities have shown a woeful apathetical tendency to such corruption, and have too often turned a blind eye. This environment of apathy and inaction has only emboldened the offenders.

Instead of denying the allegations made in the study—which the government has a habit of doing in the face of unflattering revelations—it should launch an investigation into the matter and seriously start cracking down on corruption in this sector, as well as in others. Moreover, the government should listen to the recommendations made by the TIB, educationists and other experts, and try to plug the holes that are allowing corrupt individuals to take over and pollute the entire education sector.

# How much bribe does a land office need?

The government must crack down on corrupt officers

THE stories of corruption at the land offices are, unfortunately, many. Just on Wednesday, the state minister for rural development and cooperatives, Swapan Bhattacharjee, revealed in a public meeting in Jashore how he could not get a piece of land registered because he had not paid a bribe to the local sub-registrar's office. Being a public official—he said in a video clip that has since gone viral—he had kept the story to himself for a week due to his embarrassment at the state of the land office's services.


Shockingly, though, he is not the first high-level government official to come out as a victim of misdeeds in the land offices. Earlier in June, two employees of Kushtia Sub-Registrar's Office demanded a bribe of Tk 30,000 from Deputy Attorney General (DAG) BM Abdur Rafel for preparing the deeds of his family land. Even after learning of his identity, the employees had the gall to offer him a concession of Tk 5,000 instead of withdrawing their corrupt offer. The DAG's brother had to pay Tk 10,000 to get the job done anyway, while one of the two land office employees was later suspended.

If this is the state of professionalism (or lack thereof) displayed by land office employees towards government officials, one can only wonder at the extent of their corruption when it comes to ordinary citizens. In fact, the arrests by the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) of Chakaria sub-registrar and another employee of the office in Cox's Bazar in April with Tk 642,100 of bribe money give us an inkling of just how much money these people are able to extort from the people, and how corruption goes on unabated in an environment of inaction—and even complicity—by those responsible.

A report by the Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) has found that people are made to pay bribes from Tk 500 to Tk 5 lakh at every step of the process of getting land-related services. One solution to this is to create a way for land disputes to be handled officially, and not informally through local arbitrators or land officers. The digitisation drive should also be expedited to make access to land services easier, and remove the scope for mid-level interventions. But most importantly, the government needs to make it a priority to take proper administrative and legal actions against corrupt employees at the land offices. These measures are long overdue, and can help create a culture of accountability and transparency at the land offices, so that people have hassle-free services.

# Why is individual freedom such a plaything in our legal system?

THE THIRD VIEW



MAHFUZ ANAM

Hefazat-e-Islam leader Mamunul Haque. Ironically, Mamunul is himself now in detention and has nearly 27 cases against him, including those for instigating violence, terrorism, torching vehicles, vandalising shops, etc. So why was a citizen of Bangladesh who criticised a person, against whom the state has lodged more than two dozen cases, sent to jail in the first place, and why would his bail take six months to materialise—and that, too, necessitating his coming to the High Court for it?

Here is a brief account of events that led to Jhumon's months in jail. On March 15, Hefazat organised a rally in Derai upazila of Sunamganj. The following day, Jhumon posted a status on Facebook criticising the Hefazat leader, whose supporters later demanded his arrest, threatening to attack his village—inhabited by a Hindu community—otherwise. The local UP chairman obliged the protesters and handed Jhumon over to the police.

Still, Jhumon's village was attacked on March 17 and several houses were looted and four temples damaged. On March 20, one UP member from Sarmangal union was arrested along with 18 others.

The prime accused in the case over vandalising and damaging temples was released on bail after two months, on June 21. Eighteen other arrestees were also granted bail at different times. Jhumon, whose wife and community suffered the violence and terror on March 17, was kept in jail till September 28, making for almost seven months in detention.

While he was first charged under Section 54 of the Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC), at some stage during his detention he was also charged under the notorious Digital Security Act (DSA), the majority provisions of which are non-bailable, greatly complicating Jhumon's chance of getting bail. He was refused bail six to seven times before it was finally granted.

When Jhumon was first arrested, it was said that he had been taken into police custody for his own safety and to protect his fellow villagers from attack by Hefazat activists. But his village was attacked, his wife faced assault, several homes including his own were vandalised, four of their temples were damaged. And yet, it

was he who spent more than six months in jail, while his tormentors—who actually committed criminal offenses—were freed in two months, and are now roaming around posing further threat to Jhumon, his family, and his community. All this for criticising someone that the government itself has filed 27 cases against.

Individual freedom appears to account for so little in our system. More than six months of Jhumon's life has been

while in custody. The Bangladesh Penal Code, Women and Children Repression Prevention Act, Explosive Substances Act, Arms Act, Narcotics Control Act, Human Trafficking Act, Special Powers Act, and the infamous DSA all give the police enormous power to arrest. Getting bail under all the laws above is difficult, complex and involves quite a lengthy process. Most of the punitive clauses under the DSA are non-bailable, which makes it extremely difficult for anyone to

of law, fundamental human rights and freedom, equality and justice, political, economic and social, will be secured for all citizens." Part III of our constitution is titled "Fundamental Rights" and has many articles—26 to 47A—covering a whole range of freedoms, starting from equality before law and right, to protection of law, right to life and personal liberty, right to freedom of movement, freedom of assembly, freedom of association, freedom of religion, freedom of thought and conscience and speech, and many others.

There is Article 32 that says, "No person shall be deprived of life or personal liberty save in accordance with law," and Article 33 that deals with safeguards against unlawful arrest and detention. The later article, in Paragraph 1, elaborates that every person arrested must be informed as to the grounds for his arrest and be allowed to be defended by a legal practitioner of his choice; in Paragraph 2, it states that every person detained in custody shall be produced before a magistrate within 24 hours of arrest, and that no person shall be detained in custody beyond that period without the authority of a magistrate.

With such clear guarantees for individual liberty, why is it that the citizens of Bangladesh have to suffer an unspecified amount of time in prison while their bail processes take place? With all these "rights" enshrined in our constitution, why are personal liberties such a plaything in the hands of our rulers, law enforcement agencies, and at the lowest practical level, in the hands of our police? The answer lies in some of the laws, but more so in their implementation. Like so many things in Bangladesh, what is written in the books is not what is practised on the ground.

Over the years, the sanctity of personal liberty, the place of individual freedom, the centrality of fundamental right to life and liberty, and the right to freedom of conscience, thought and speech have greatly corroded in Bangladesh. We are not even aware of our rights given in our own constitution, and not too bothered when these rights are violated. What is most tragic is that we are far less inclined to fight for them as we were before, leading to an overall sense of pessimism about our state of democracy.

Every time a person's liberty is denied, our constitution is violated. We seem to have forgotten that laws exist to strengthen the hands of the citizens, and not that of the government. Today, we have too many bad laws in our books, whose main purpose is to curtail freedoms. And with their arbitrary implementation, all our freedoms stand significantly compromised.

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Mahfuz Anam is editor and publisher of *The Daily Star*.



Jhumon Das was released on bail after over six months in jail on September 28, 2021.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

lost forever for a "crime" he does not know about, and for a "guilt" that has not been established. Ultimately, he may be found not guilty. So, who will account for the loss of this period of his life, not to mention the cost, the hassle and the stigma of carrying on with this case, which may go on indefinitely? Cartoonist Ahmed Kabir Kishore was in jail for 10 months, and his bail was rejected six times before he was granted bail. Photojournalist Shafiqul Islam Kajol also came out 10 months after his arrest, while his bail petition was rejected 13 times. Sirajum Munira, a highly respected teacher of Begum Rokeya University, Rangpur, was arrested late at night from her home for an innocuous Facebook post, and got her bail after two months. She also lost her job.

Police have the unlimited power to arrest and detain a citizen, at least for the first 24 hours. During this period, how the police will treat him or her is anybody's guess. As cases of custodial deaths and torture have shown time and again, there is literally no guarantee of life, and certainly no certainty of personal safety

get bail once arrested under it.

Once Section 54 of the CrPC was known for its widespread abuse. This prompted the High Court to give clear directives on using this provision in order to reduce its misuse, including disallowing arrest by plain-clothed law enforcers—which emerged as a tremendous source of fear when people used to be picked up at the dead of the night, without warrant and without specifying the reasons as to why they were being picked up. These plain-clothed law enforcers would refuse even to identify which agencies they belonged to. Insistence on knowing would lead to threats of bad consequences later. The High Court directives greatly reduced the use of this provision. Of course, in cases of enforced disappearances, these High Court directives hardly seem to matter as the victims are unable to register their complaint.

The third paragraph of the preamble to our constitution says, "Further pledging that it shall be a fundamental aim of the State to realise through the democratic process ... a society in which the rule

## INTERNATIONAL DAY OF OLDER PERSONS

# Is Asia Pacific prepared to take care of its elderly?

The region is home to the world's most rapidly growing elderly population



BJÖRN ANDERSSON

IMAGINE it is the year 2050. In Asia Pacific, one in four people will be over the age of 60 years—three times the number of older people in 2010. With close to 1.3 billion senior citizens in less than 30 years from now, are countries in the region prepared to fully address the needs of their older populations, so that they age with dignity?

Let's rewind.

Today, 72-year-old Ping sells three kilograms of sticky rice every day at her remote village in a Southeast Asian country, earning barely enough for a basic living. She's been doing this for more than 10 years, ever since her husband passed away. Her son died two months ago, and her two daughters have married and moved to another province. Ping gets some consolation from the health insurance she is entitled to, as maintaining good health in her old age is her main concern.

Back in the day, Ping and other women in numerous countries across the Asia Pacific region might have been supported by their families and communities. But times are changing. Migration and urbanisation have shifted traditional support systems for the elderly, and more and more governments are grappling with increasing healthcare costs and a shrinking workforce. While less than a third of older persons in the region currently receive a pension of some sort, pension payments are increasing as the older populations grow, straining the governments further.

As the world observes the International Day of Older Persons today, there is an urgent need for policy reform in

addressing population ageing now more than ever. This must be driven by a shift in mindset to convert the challenges into a demographic opportunity.

**Population ageing is not a threat, but an opportunity**

We must rethink population ageing, celebrating it as the triumph of development that it truly is. More and more people are living longer due to the result of successive advancements in healthcare, nutrition, and economic

This is why governments must act now. Policymakers must work together with academics and civil society to incorporate rights-based ageing policies and systems into national development plans. While some countries in Asia Pacific have already taken such steps, implementation must be strengthened, particularly within the contexts of Covid-19 and the escalating humanitarian crises that increase vulnerabilities of older people.

**Adapting a life-cycle approach with**

men due to generally lower education levels and unpaid work, having often carried the burden of being the family caregiver. Investing in each stage of life, starting from before a girl is born, determines the path of her life course. When a woman is able to safely deliver her baby, this in turn improves the long-term health of both mother and child. When a girl has access to quality education, including comprehensive sex education, it helps her make informed decisions about life-changing matters as she transitions from childhood to adolescence, and on to adulthood.

When a woman has equal opportunity to contribute to the workforce and has bodily autonomy, she has the power to shape her own future. The decisions she makes, and is allowed to make, at every stage of her life paves the way towards a healthier and more financially secure silver age.

**There is little time to lose**

We need to take action now. The megatrend of rapid demographic shifts is altering Asia Pacific as well as the entire world. This is why the years 2021-2030 have been declared the UN Decade for Healthy Ageing, complementing the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (MIPAA), the 20th anniversary of which is next year, and will bring together governments in Asia Pacific and the world to review the progress made and make better plans for the challenges ahead.

While there is no single comprehensive policy that can address population ageing, we must invest in forward-thinking, rights-based and gender-sensitive policies that focus on the needs of people at every stage of their lives. In doing so, countries in the Asia Pacific region can aspire to and achieve a better future for all, where no one is left behind.

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Björn Andersson is Asia Pacific regional director at the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA).



By 2050, one in four people in the Asia Pacific region will be above the age of 60 years.

PHOTO: UNFPA BANGLADESH

and social well-being. Along with longer life expectancy, couples are having fewer babies. This is due to a variety of reasons, such as the challenges couples face in striking a work-life balance, and not being able to afford having more children. However, low fertility and longer life expectancy are not the problem. The real problem is not being ready to face this rapidly changing demographic shift.

**gender equality in focus**

In Asia Pacific, with more than half of the older population being women, it is crucial to adapt a life-cycle approach to population ageing, grounded in gender equality and human rights.

Life-long gender discrimination leaves women even more disadvantaged in an ageing society. Older women are often more financially dependent than older