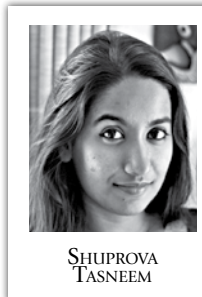


Why is the dream for fair wage and work safety still so distant?



WHAT are the risks associated with workers' protests in modern-day Bangladesh? When workers take to the streets, what sort of treatment should they expect to receive? And what does that treatment tell us about the accountability of law enforcing agencies, the outsized influence exercised by corporate entities in our country, and the situation of workers faced with such asymmetrical systems of power?

Earlier this month, this daily highlighted the story of RMG worker Kanchon Mia, for whom the cost of protesting turned out to be his health, his income and his quality of life. On May 10 this year, while protesting for Eid holidays, he was shot with pellet guns, resulting in life-threatening injuries that may have disabled him for good. The surgeons who treated him at Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH) removed as many as 101 pellets from his intestines. Five months later, Kanchon is still physically incapacitated—he requires gut reconstruction surgery but is too malnourished to be operated on.

Yet Kanchon was, perhaps, "luckier" than the workers of SS Power I Plant in Banskhali, Chattogram—six of whom were killed after police fired shots into their protests on April 17. At least 21 workers were injured. What was their crime? Demands for payment of arrears, one-hour breaks for iftaar, a half day off on Fridays, two Eid bonuses and sanitary living arrangements.

Around a month after the Banskhali incident, a police probe found that "instigation by outsiders, irregular payment of salaries and sanitation problems fuelled labour unrest in the SS Power I Plant in Chattogram's Banskhali upazila," according to a report published by this daily on May 22. The slightest hint of police culpability and the possible use of disproportionate force was absent in the report—it was as if the shots had been fired by the workers themselves. Later, one Engineer Shahnewaz Chowdhury was arrested under the Digital Security Act for posting about the corruption and irregularities that marred the coal-fired

power project. It would appear that criticising corporate negligence and irresponsibility is a far more serious act than firing 332 shots and four teargas shells at protesting workers.

While the grievous injury of Kanchon and the killings of the workers of Banskhali Power Plant were two of the most serious cases of police crackdowns on workers' protests, they are definitely not the only such instances to have occurred in recent times. On August 5 this year, police fired rubber bullets and teargas shells to disperse workers of a garment factory who were protesting the termination of 10 of their colleagues. On July 17, RMG workers who had been protesting for over 10 days in Gazipur to demand outstanding payments were dispersed after police fired 20 rounds of tear gas shells and 16 rounds of sound grenades. On June 13, many were injured as police violently dispersed workers who were demanding their wages at a factory in Dhaka EPZ. On March 16, at least nine people, including a policeman, were injured in clashes with protesting RMG workers in Tejgaon. The list goes on.

Although most of the recent workers' protests have been concentrated in the RMG sector because of the massive repercussions of the global pandemic on the industry, there are many such instances of workers being dispersed forcefully or having tear gas or shells lobbed at them by the police even before the pandemic-induced jip in the economy—such as during the jute mill workers' protests for their arrears and the

regularisation of temporary workers (amongst other demands) in 2019.

That is not to say that in all these cases, the workers were protesting peacefully. There have, of course, been cases of workers blocking roads, burning tyres or throwing bricks at police. The unfortunate truth is that the status quo is automatically assumed to be that of a face-off between law enforcement and protestors—where the responsibility of keeping the peace comes with the assumption that peace can only be kept by removing the

and helmets on, is there not even a possibility of taking on a more mediatory role? Have law enforcers been influenced to pick a side, even before they could figure out what the battle was all about?

What is really notable in almost all of these cases is how far the workers have to go for the simplest of demands. More often than not, the demands are not even for fair wages—but for holidays, weekends, decent work hours, or the payment of wages that they are already owed. Ha-Meem Group,

deduct wages from workers who took a break from work during sehri and iftaar times in Ramadan, and crammed them into crowded living spaces with highly unsanitary facilities that often had no running water. These are the working conditions for a project that, according to the Global Energy Monitor, has an estimated cost of USD 2.4 billion (and, on a side note, will emit an estimated 192,200 million tonnes of carbon dioxide over its operating lifetime).

So where exactly is the money going? While S Alam Group has washed its hands of the affair by blaming contractors for the workers' plight and offering a paltry Tk 5 lakh to the families of each deceased worker—the labour laws of the country require the payment of only Tk 2 lakh for a worker killed in an "industrial accident" (which this was not)—we are yet to receive any explanation of why these workers had to die for something as simple as time off to eat a meal.

Over the last two decades, Bangladesh's impressive development trajectory has earned it accolades from across the world. Our hugely successful RMG export industry and billion-dollar development projects are considered by many to be the symbol of a country that is finally ready to shed its underdog identity and take its rightful place among the leaders of fast-developing Asian countries. But can we truly take pride in this meteoric rise, when the fruits of it are distributed so unevenly in our society?

The pandemic has dragged the stark inequalities in our societies under a light that is now far too bright to ignore. Across the world, we saw the most marginalised workers struggling to make ends meet during this period, living hand-to-mouth while foregoing crucial out-of-pocket expenses like spending on healthcare and education. It has exposed how little we value the labour that keeps our economy running, and how much undue influence we grant to the corporate entities that decide the price of their sweat and toil.

In a country that experienced positive GDP growth rates even during the pandemic, why should fair incomes, workplace security, decent housing, access to healthcare and social protections still be a distant dream for so many of its workers?

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Six workers of SS Power I Plant in Banskhali, Chattogram were killed after police fired shots into their protests on April 17.

PHOTO: TDS

A common accusation against protesting workers is that they are creating "unrest" in the area. But do these actions of "unrest" warrant the use of pellet guns, rubber bullets, tear gas and even live ammunition?

protestors, as opposed to allowing them to express their legitimate demands.

A common accusation against protesting workers is that they are creating "unrest" in the area. But do these actions of "unrest" warrant the use of pellet guns, rubber bullets, tear gas and even live ammunition (as was used in Banskhali)—that too aimed directly at workers, as opposed to near them or above their heads? If law enforcement agencies have a duty to "keep the peace," why is it also not their duty to ensure that workers do not get ignored, and their needs trampled on, by the employers who are profiting from their labour? Instead of going in with batons ready

which owns the factory where Kanchon Mia worked, is one of the largest clothing manufacturers in the country, with clients like Gap and H&M. Yet, according to a statement from the Bangladesh Garments Shramik Samhat, they only offered their workers a three-day Eid holiday, after not giving them a single day off for 1.5 months in order to meet pre-Eid production goals. These workers are part of an industry that earned the country USD 28 billion from apparel exports in 2020.

In a similar vein, the Banskhali power plant, a joint venture involving the corporate heavyweight S Alam Group, decided to

Education is a powerful tool to protect our future

BAN KI-MOON and BAMBANG SUSANTONO

CLIMATE change poses the biggest existential threat to humanity. As world leaders prepare to renew their pledge to combat the crisis amid increasingly frequent natural hazards and the raging pandemic, one measure that so far remains grossly under-tapped is the transformative role that education can play in mitigating climate change.

In the lead-up to COP26, more countries have been committing to achieving carbon neutrality by 2050. This includes using regulation and policy to improve energy efficiency, develop alternative energy sources, reduce overall energy consumption, and minimise wastage.

These measures require financing, public consensus, and lifestyle changes. They will also have profound impacts on countries' industrial structures and economic policies which may lead to a short-term jolt to the global economy.

But these actions are a vital step toward ending the worldwide, indiscriminate exploitation of low-cost natural resources that is now taking its toll on the environment and fuelling the climate crisis. Asia and the Pacific is responsible for nearly half of global greenhouse gas emissions, and more than 60 percent of people in the region work in sectors that are highly susceptible to changing weather patterns. It is clear that the battle against climate change will be won or lost in Asia and the Pacific.

This is why Asia and the Pacific must promote a new paradigm of economic development that can turn climate actions into drivers of economic growth that are



File photo of coastal areas in Patuakhali being inundated during cyclone Amphan.

PHOTO: TDS

ecologically sustainable and climate-friendly. Pursuing this new paradigm requires a fundamental transformation of the mindset and lifestyle of future generations.

Education, in the region and beyond, can and must become an active agent in catalysing climate mitigation and adaptation in line with the global agreements. Education can be transformative in at least three ways.

First, universal values such as global citizenry and sustainable development must be incorporated into mainstream, foundational, and formative years of study. This will help students become self-directed, lifelong learners. It will also help to raise self-awareness, enable a cultural transformation,

and change the mindsets and lifestyles of future global citizens—equipping them with the tools to lead and actively support sustainable development.

This is why young leaders like Greta Thunberg and Malala Yousufzai are inspiring millions of young people around the world to make societies smarter, greener, and more inclusive and resilient.

Second, more investment and better quality of expenditure in education to scale up learning—particularly for disadvantaged and marginalised groups including girls and women—is the best strategy to support sustainable development. The more well-educated people there are in a country, the

better the capacity and agility of that country to prevent or mitigate future hazards.

Third, education can be more responsive in producing experts, innovators, and leaders with the skills to tackle climate change and other related development challenges. Such challenges include converting waste to energy, increasing food production and minimising food waste to feed the growing population sustainably, transitioning to clean energy and transport, and creating and preparing for green jobs.

Education is the cornerstone on which the world needs to build a successful transition from effective short-term climate actions to sustained, structural medium- to long-term changes that are underpinned by new mindsets.

Developing this education system will require comprehensive cooperation between central and local governments, schools, universities, communities, non-government organisations (NGOs) and the private sector. This collaboration is critical to develop education policies that will prepare and engage students in sustainable development through science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) projects.

There are already good examples of climate change education led by some governments. Italy requires all students to take more than 33 hours of climate change classes each year in higher secondary education. The Department of Education in the Philippines has committed to intensify climate literacy and support climate action in schools. The Republic of Korea has started a project to transform schools into green campuses that will showcase education programmes for environmental protection and use eco-

friendly energy.

The international community, multinational corporations, and international NGOs are equally critical in harmonising and providing this support. The Paris Agreement calls for its signatories to undertake educational and public awareness campaigns on climate change, and ensure public participation in programmes to achieve its targets.

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) launched the Climate Change Fund in 2008 and has since actively pursued ways to mainstream climate change issues in education. The bank is supporting clean energy in several education projects, including preparing graduates with green skills.

The Ban Ki-moon (BKM) Foundation For a Better Future is urging governments and the international community to prioritise environmental education, encourage enthusiastic young international leaders, and empower women and young people. ADB and BKM Foundation will collaborate closely to mobilise more partners, resources, and expertise to do more and build back better from the pandemic.

At this critical juncture in the history of humanity, we must now reimagine education. This will bring about the early-stage mindset change that will help prepare the global citizens and innovators of tomorrow with the skills to address climate change and nurture the long-term health of our planet.

Ban Ki-moon is Chairman of the Ban Ki-moon Foundation For a Better Future and the eighth Secretary-General of the United Nations. Bambang Susantono is ADB Vice-President for Knowledge Management and Sustainable Development.

QUOTABLE Quote

MICHAEL MOORE
(born April 23, 1954)
American filmmaker

Democracy is not a spectator sport, it's a participatory event. If we don't participate in it, it ceases to be a democracy.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Lynx
- 7 Past due
- 11 Noted cow owner
- 12 Gobi setting
- 13 Spider-Man's alter ego
- 15 Like Santa's suit
- 16 Lobster part
- 18 Finishes
- 21 Churlish sort
- 22 Burdensome
- 24 Museum focus
- 25 Flying mammal
- 26 In addition
- 27 Boards, as a train
- 29 Poker game
- 30 Elevator part
- 31 Edinburgh native
- 32 It's worth ten

DOWN

- 1 Jazz style
- 2 Flamenco cry
- 3 Wager
- 4 Roman ruler
- 5 Cupid's missile
- 6 Keyboard goof
- 7 Voice box
- 8 Inquire
- 9 Even score
- 10 Stirrup setting
- 14 Bothered
- 16 Hollowed out
- 17 State game
- 19 "The same"
- 20 Pig part
- 21 Do a checkout job
- 22 Sandy color
- 23 Zeus or Apollo
- 25 Carried
- 28 Field game
- 29 Perfumes
- 31 Hackneyed
- 33 Follow the rules
- 34 Sleep spot
- 35 "Norma—"
- 36 Take advantage of
- 37 — de guerre
- 38 History stretch
- 39 Friend of Harry and Hermione

WRITE FOR US. SEND US YOUR OPINION PIECES TO dsopinion@gmail.com.

YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

I	C	A	M	E	C	A	K	E	D
L	O	T	U	S	O	X	I	D	E
L	O	A	D	S	R	E	S	I	N
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A	N	A	L	I	T	I	C		
B	I	L	E	S	C	U	B	A	S
C	L	O	D	S	A	D	O	R	E
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T	I	P							
A	D	I	E	U	A	D	A	P	T
L	O	C	A	L	R	U	L	E	R
C	L	A	R	A	S	P	I	N	Y

BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT