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How hard is it for two ministries to get along?

Apparently very, as the unification bid for two IP offices drags on

It is unfortunate that the ongoing tug-of-war between the cultural affairs ministry and the industries ministry is thwarting the plan to establish a unified and independent intellectual property (IP) office that will provide copyrights, patents, design, and trademark certificates. The planned integration of the cultural ministry's copyright office and the industries ministry's Department of Patents, Designs and Trademarks (DPDT) would not only put Bangladesh on a par with most countries in terms of having a unified office for intellectual property, but would also provide people with a "one-stop centre" for all related services, significantly reducing their hassles. But the continuing tussle between the two ministries is delaying this much-needed reform.

The instruction to unify the two offices first came from the prime minister in 2010. It was once again reiterated in 2014. Then, finally, in October 2015, a decision was taken to unify them. Six years later, despite several discussions and meetings, all efforts to amalgamate the two has fallen through due to the conflict. Meanwhile, it is the people who have been suffering. What excuse, if any, can the two ministries possibly have for the inordinate delay in the execution of the prime minister's instructions for streamlining and simplifying IP-related services? And what have the central authorities been doing about it?

Copyright law protects the interests of creators by giving them property rights over their creations against those who copy, reproduce or otherwise take or use the form in which the original work was expressed. If we are to transform Bangladesh into a knowledge-based and advanced country, we have to urgently sort out our copyright issues. In order to encourage innovation and even attract foreign direct investment, Bangladesh needs to have the appropriate policy for IP rights protection, the legal framework of which is still incomplete. But how can such policies and framework be formulated when the two ministries that deal with IP-related issues cannot even work together in public interest?

At the end of the day, what matters is for the people to receive IP services without hassle. It is for the authorities to figure out how that can be done. Whether that is achieved through unifying the two offices or by forming a separate centralised national office is beside the point. The failure to properly plan, coordinate and execute to achieve the end-goal is unacceptable—but that is exactly what has been happening, and it must change.

Female returnee migrants deserve a respectable life

They need social protection and training to reintegrate into society

WORDS are not enough to express our frustration about the way our female returnee migrant workers are being treated by their families and communities after they have returned home from foreign lands, tortured and abused. A research study conducted by Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies (BILS) has found that the returnee workers are facing social stigma as people in their communities often make disgraceful remarks about them, while their family members do not value their opinions anymore. Strangely, these same women used to be respected in their communities while they were sending hard-earned money back home. The horrifying fact that many female migrant workers had to face sexual assault by their employers in the Middle East has now become a weapon for a section of people to attack them verbally.

Moreover, 25.2 percent of the female returnees face crisis in their conjugal life, while 14.7 percent got divorced and 10.5 percent were left by their husbands after their return, as the research has found. The BILS study has also found that these women have now lost their decision-making power in their families, whereas, previously, they were considered empowered by their communities.

In a society that is generally insensitive towards gender violence and sexual exploitation of women, it is hardly surprising that their communities would also be judgemental or indifferent to their sufferings. But that is where we need to work the most. We need to sensitise these communities about our female migrant workers' struggles, while making them aware of the contribution they made to our society.

Another major challenge that our returnee female migrants are facing is that a large percentage of them are unemployed at present, which makes them even more vulnerable not only at home, but at their communities as well. The BILS study has found that 60 percent of the returnee workers are now unemployed. The government and the organisations concerned should provide them skills training so they can get jobs here, which will definitely boost their confidence, or re-migrate should they choose to. In this regard, the Wage Earners' Welfare Fund, formed with the contributions of the migrant workers, can be very useful. The authorities can use money from this fund to retrain returnee female migrants for income-generating activities or help them in various other ways to improve their socioeconomic conditions.

We also need to form a social protection cell where our female migrants can come and discuss the issues they are facing, and can also lodge complaints when and if they face abusive behaviour in their communities. Taking all these steps are absolutely necessary to reintegrate these women into society and to ensure that they have a chance to live a better life here.



A N untimely flood wreaked havoc on the Teesta basin in Bangladesh, beginning on the night of Wednesday, October 20. A sudden onrush of Teesta water flooded the area to a level that has not been witnessed since 1968. Several people have died, while thousands of people have lost their crops, their houses have been damaged and destroyed, their clothes and other belongings have been washed away, and the infrastructure of the area has been damaged to a large extent.

The apparent cause of the flooding has been unusual rainfall in the upper catchment area of the Teesta River (Sikkim and northern parts of West



The submerged localities of greater Rangpur region after the onrush of water from the Teesta River flooded the area. This photo was taken on Thursday, October 21, 2021.

PHOTO: FARIDUL ISLAM

Bengal), leading to a sudden increase in the river flow, which was then passed on to Bangladesh by the Gajoldoba Barrage operators by opening all the gates. According to local sources, the water reached the Teesta Barrage at Dalia by the evening of Wednesday, though the Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB) officials did not wake up to the information and the situation till Thursday morning, when they too decided to open the gates of the Teesta Barrage. However, by that time, the water accumulated at the head of this barrage had burst out of the river confines and

resources, the relief and rehabilitation operations will probably go well, and the situation will be stabilised. However, greater questions still remain: What is the guarantee that a similar frightful episode will not happen again soon? What can Bangladesh do to avoid such catastrophic floods and manage to cope with them when they actually happen?

Bangladesh's rivers and water resources face threats from three sources: global, regional, and domestic. All these combined to produce the latest nightmare in the Teesta basin. The global threat worked through climate change, causing

the untimely torrential rainfall in the Teesta upper catchment area. The regional threat worked through the decision of the Gajoldoba Barrage operators to open all the gates, apparently without timely and adequate consultation with the BWDB officials of the Teesta Barrage. The domestic threat found manifestation in the fact that the country is not prepared to accommodate unexpected large volumes of river overflow in a safe and controlled way. What can Bangladesh do to mitigate threats from these three sources?

Regarding climate change, there is no doubt that Bangladesh has to make its voice stronger in the international fora, and as the chair of the Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF), Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has an important role to play in view of the upcoming COP26. It can be hoped that Bangladesh will live up to its expected role at this conference. However, one does not have to be too pessimistic to realise that the impact of Bangladesh's initiatives in halting and reversing climate change and its various effects is going to be limited. That being the case, it is important to think what Bangladesh can do to mitigate the regional and domestic threats.

Regarding the regional threats to the Teesta River, it is well-known that Bangladesh has been striving for a long time to reach a treaty with India. The focus of the proposed treaty has been, however, on the share of the dry season flow—as was the case with the Ganges sharing treaty signed in 1996. What the recent event has shown is that this focus needs to be extended to cover river control throughout the year. It is not appropriate for India to build a controlling structure and then use it for its own interest only. Bangladesh should have a say in its management, because it has to bear the brunt of the decisions made. To add force to this demand, Bangladesh needs to sign the 1997 UN Convention on Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses. Article 7 of this convention forbids upstream countries from carrying out such interventions in shared rivers that cause "significant harm" to lower riparian countries. Other articles—such as Articles 20 and 23—also provide protection to lower riparian countries.

Of course, signing the UN convention alone will not solve the problem. It will also be necessary to bring about some changes in Bangladesh's water diplomacy with India. So far, Bangladesh has conducted this diplomacy relying on goodwill. However, as German statesman Otto von Bismarck said, international relations are based on interests. Just as India is leveraging its upstream location to impose its will on Bangladesh regarding

rivers, Bangladesh may also leverage its geographical location to reconsider issues of transit, trans-shipment, port facilities, and even trade and employment. Otherwise, Bangladesh will be increasingly at the mercy of the barrage operators of India.

While Bangladesh has limitations regarding what it can do to mitigate global and regional threats, it does not face such limitations regarding domestic threats, which are unfortunately self-created. What the recent Teesta flood episode has shown is that Bangladesh has to have a lot of storage space for river overflows. The active floodplains of the country used to serve as this storage space. They also served as additional passageways for the overflow to pass on to the sea. Unfortunately, following the Cordon Approach for the past 70 years, Bangladesh increasingly disconnected the floodplains from the rivers. To cope with the new normal created by climate change, Bangladesh has to reverse this process and reconnect the floodplains with rivers by adopting the Open Approach. It has to adjust the living conditions and economic activities in the floodplains to suit the open conditions.

The recent Teesta flood also shows the inappropriateness of the proposed Teesta River Comprehensive Management and Restoration Project (TRCMRP). According to a YouTube video prepared by the vendor company, Power China, the Teesta River, under this project, will be artificially narrowed from its current average width of about 3km to only 0.8km. Though it has been suggested that the depth of the river will be increased to 10 metres through dredging, analysis makes it clear that this gain in depth will be nullified in a few years by about 49 million tonnes of sediment that the river carries each year. What that means is that the river will be incapable of holding normal peak season flows, not to speak of the unexpected large volumes like the one we saw a few days ago. Going ahead with this project will therefore only make matters worse.

What is instead necessary is to rejuvenate the connections of the Teesta River with all its tributaries, distributaries and waterbodies of its basin so that wider storage capacity is restored. Meanwhile, the changed strategy of water diplomacy may help to restore the dry season flow of the river, thus triggering a natural process of restoration of the original, healthy morphology of the river. These are the few lessons from the current usual Teesta flooding.

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Why be ashamed, why not protest?

We must actively condemn and stand against communal violence



there have been numerous attacks on the Hindu, Buddhist, Santal, Chakma and Karma communities on this land; many people from these communities have been killed or lost everything they had to vandalism and arson. How many of these incidents have been properly investigated, and how many perpetrators have been caught and prosecuted?

Democracy has not been fully established in our country, but we are not under military rule either. Political parties like the Awami League and the BNP have been ruling the country since 1991. For the last 13 years, Awami League has been at the helm of the government. The popular belief is that Awami League shows sensibility towards the minority communities. The very same Awami League is not only in power, but they are also holding on to unchallenged power—almost every Awami League leader boasts that they have no competitors.

But how many times have the minority groups been attacked during the current ruling period of the Awami League? Who is to be blamed for the mayhem at Chattogram's Buddhist colony?

In recent years, attacks have been carried out against Hindus in Abhaynagar of Jashore, Santhia of Pabna, Nasirnagar of Brahmanbaria, and Shalla of Sunamganj. This time around, members of the community in question were attacked in Cumilla and several other parts of the country. After the Awami League was defeated in the 2001 polls by the BNP, the Hindu community was put under siege. Hindu communities in different areas of the country were attacked; some incidents of rape took place. At that time, the whole country was outraged; the citizens were protesting against the attacks. The then BNP government refused to shoulder the responsibility for the attacks, but the blame went to them in the end. The duty of preventing attacks on the citizens falls upon the party in power; BNP failed to perform that duty in 2001, and for

that they have been criticised, and will continue to be criticised in future as well.

However, people who were vocal in 2001 seem to have chosen to stay mute in 2021. The concept of actively protesting injustice has taken a back seat. Now, people react to communal attacks by being *ashamed* on social media, and some seek forgiveness.

As for these attacks, the government sometimes accuses the BNP, and at other times some invisible forces. BNP, in the meantime, solely and directly points fingers at the government.

There are questions about the Cumilla incident that are yet to be answered. Why did the police not respond immediately

any follow-up investigation was conducted regarding those incidents. Three of the accused and implicated individuals behind the attack were recently nominated by the Awami League for union parishad elections, but later on, nominations of two candidates were cancelled. The other accused retained his nomination.

Why should we forget these incidents, refrain from protesting, and feel ashamed or seek forgiveness instead? People who vandalised houses and temples, desecrated idols, and looted and plundered—they are the actual criminals. They attacked people, and people lost lives, which makes the attackers killers too. We should be agitated by them and we should protest



Merely feeling sorry for the senseless attacks against our fellow countrymen is not enough; our duty is to stand by them and raise our voice for their rights.

FILE PHOTO: KONGKON KARMAKER

after receiving information about it? Why was there no response even after a call to the 999 hotline? These are the complaints from the local residents which should get the highest level of priority during the investigation. Is the investigation being conducted accordingly? Did it gain the right momentum? A Hindu community leader pointed his finger towards a local MP of the ruling party; will this accusation be investigated? Considering the past, these accusations hold deep significance.

During the 2016 attack in Nasirnagar, the issue of rivalry between two ruling party lawmakers was reported by the media, but we never got to know whether

against them. We need to demand proper investigation and justice for the recent incidents. We also have to demand explanations for why the perpetrators of the past events did not get prosecuted. We have to hold the government responsible for not investigating the accusations raised, and we have to raise our collective voice in a manner similar to the reaction to the 2001 attacks, when a lot of questions were raised and a significant number of protests were carried out.

When Muslims go through oppression in Palestine or Myanmar, we feel pained and we get agitated. But we, the very same people, proceed to attack our own

countrymen who are a minority. No matter who is ruling the nation, no one prosecutes these attackers. They only do politics. This is not something that should make you or me feel ashamed; it is something worth protesting.

"None of the attackers will be spared"—what is the meaning or significance of this statement? Why are such statements made year after year, instead of delivering justice to the people who are victims?

In certain areas, the UNOs told journalists that they were helpless and could not control the attackers. In that case, why were enough police personnel or the Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) troops not deployed in those areas? Any attempts to initiate a political procession or assembly by the opposition party gets thwarted with strictness and agility, but why was no such action seen in the case of communal vandalism? The attacks continued on because of the submissive attitude of the law enforcement members. Some may point out in this case that when the law enforcement forces take a strict stance, guns are fired and people lose their lives—as was seen in Chandpur where four people were killed. This raises another question: Does the law enforcement agency's strictness directly translate to gunshots and killings? Do they not have any other way to deal with such incidents without violence? Strictness cannot be synonymous with opening fire at people in order to prevent them from ransacking temples. This kind of mindless shooting and killing will only worsen the situation.

The homes and houses of worship of the minority citizens are coming under siege. They are being exposed to heinous crimes like oppression and execution in broad daylight. Some insane individuals are conducting these despicable actions in the name of religion. Some politicians are sheltering, indulging, and controlling these lunatics. The people who are in power have been "hiding" them for the last 30 years. You and I may not have the capability to demolish the walls sheltering them, but we have the capacity to protest their actions and raise questions. If we feel ashamed or ask for forgiveness instead of protesting, then we will not be much different from the people who are providing shelter to the perpetrators of violence.

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