

Felling trees for development can't be the norm

Authorities must protect trees from mindless destruction

WORRYING developments have been reported in the Shahjalal Upashahar area of Sylhet city where 200 trees were recently chopped down. A report by *The Daily Star* on Thursday carried a collage of two photos, one showing logs of freshly cut trees while the other showing trees marked for future felling. While the number reported may not seem alarming in itself, the real picture emerges when you consider how this has been part of an ongoing trend to fell trees indiscriminately—often without any clearance from the forest office, and mostly, if ever, without any consequences faced by those responsible. What's more worrying is that this crime is being committed at the behest of local city corporation authorities, in the name of—in case you still needed a clue—development work.

In fact, the Sylhet City Corporation (SCC) has plans to cut more trees to expand the town's streets and improve its drainage system, and has even asked for clearance from the Forest Department for that purpose. According to a report published by this daily in May, the SCC admitted that it had felled 332 trees in the last five years, although data showed that at least 873 trees were cut down. The tree felling spree has been spotted in various parts of the city. While the bigger goal remains urban development, there have been dubious motives too, as exemplified by a local councillor in Shahjalal Upashahar who sold the recently felled trees without holding an auction, which is also against the law.

The importance of a tree cover in our fast-urbanising landscape cannot be stressed enough. Trees are a vital part of our environment, and cutting them without a new tree cover established in the affected region or elsewhere has serious repercussions for all of us. But when state officials themselves fell trees, without clearance, or collude with local influential people to profit from cutting trees, it sends a wrong message to the public, and also shows the level of impunity enjoyed by the offenders. We have seen similar incidents of cutting trees for various construction purposes across the country.

This can't be the established practice going forward. One may recall that the High Court, not long ago, issued an injunction restraining the government from felling trees for implementing its development projects in forests and forestlands. This should be extended to trees on non-forest land, too. If, indeed, trees are to be cut down for some reason, it must be done with extreme caution, proper authorisation and sufficient preparations for replenishment. And state authorities, including the Forest Department and local administrations, must send the message that they are as compliant with the environmental laws as ordinary citizens are expected to be. Those who fail to do so must be held accountable.

How many more projects will be delayed?

Faulty and prolonged feasibility studies cannot continue to be the order of the day

ONLY two days ago, we wrote in these columns about how time and cost overruns have become the norm in our development projects, wasting crucial time and public resources, and hampering the completion of an unacceptably large number of such projects. Today, we are again forced to express our disappointment at yet another case of such delays.

According to a report in this daily, more than two and a half years ago, the Bangladesh Railway (BR) authorities launched a project to carry out a Tk 9.88 crore feasibility study to connect Sunamganj district headquarters to the railway network. The study was supposed to be finished in October 2020, but was extended till June this year. However, only one-fourth of the work was done by August, and now the deadline has been extended once again—till June next year.

This goes not only against the guidelines of the planning ministry, but that of the prime minister, who earlier this year instructed relevant authorities to take legal action against those responsible for flawed project designs that push up costs. In a 2019 report, the planning ministry pointed out that most ministries prepared projects without proper feasibility studies and technical designs. In Chattogram, we witnessed the repercussions of such negligence and irregularities when four people died this year after falling into open drains—a result of poor planning and faulty feasibility study of a megaproject that, instead of improving the port city's drainage system, has arguably made it worse.

Given how important such preparatory works are for infrastructure projects, it is extremely concerning that the railway authorities failed to finish their feasibility study even after an extension. What will be the risks and repercussions of rushing to finish it by June 2022? And why, despite the project being approved in January 2019, did the railway authorities only sign a contract with a firm for this work a year and a half later? Of the 37 projects the Bangladesh Railway is currently working on, 26 have been revised at least once, and four were taken up at least a decade ago but remain unfinished.

The government's own guidelines from 2016 say that a feasibility study project can be revised only once, and if that raises costs by more than 15 percent, permission from the planning minister is required. However, so far, we have witnessed a completely relaxed attitude from government officials in breaking such rules. This can no longer be allowed. Those responsible for project delays must be held to account. Going forward, there is no alternative to accountability if this culture of delay in publicly funded projects is ever to see any change.



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

SHAMSAD MORTUZA

IS the Bangla word

"porosrikatorota" really untranslatable? Does "envy" or "jealousy" fall short of denoting the condition of feeling down after seeing the success

of others? This particular symptom of jealousy is well-known to psychologists. But to have a simple coinage to describe the nuanced state of the mind is ingenious. Only a Bengali can think of it, while others can wait. Gopal Krishna Gokhale, a senior Congress leader of the Indian independence movement, once quipped, "What Bengal thinks today, India thinks tomorrow." So, I am thinking of *porosrikatorota* today; the rest of the envious lot can wait further to find an equivalent.

Jokes apart, I am trying to make sense of the so-called fun activities of



Is it mere excitement or jealousy born out of helplessness that drives pelters to throw stones at moving trains, injuring—and sometimes killing—those who are privileged to ride the locomotives?

PHOTO: IFTHEKHAR OMER/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

throwing stones at moving trains that left 29 people injured this year. In June 2018, a railway inspector died from an injury caused by a flying stone. A five-year-old boy losing one of his eyes to a similar incident earned public sympathy in August this year. At least 110 incidents of stone-throwing have been reported in 2021, in which 103 windows have shattered or bodies of the locomotives have been damaged. In 2018, the Bangladesh Railway authority estimated the damage related to stone-pelting incidents to be Tk 1.45 crore. Last week, a railway police constable nabbed three teenagers after they had thrown stones at train carriages. The perpetrators in most cases are thrill-seeking young offenders or drug addicts who live in the nearby slums.

a disturbing and violent turn. According to psychologists, there are three flavours of *porosrikatorota* (i.e. when it doesn't feel good when someone else succeeds): depressive envy, hostile envy, and benign envy. A train running on a line to go to a faraway land with the promise of mobility and freedom can warp the perception of a bystander who reflects on his own stationary and hapless situation. They can show signs of hostility by pelting stones at a moving train to vent their deep-seated anxiety. This, then, is a case of hostile envy. Depressive envy is when you feel like a loser seeing the success of others, while benign envy is when you pay unnecessary attention to the success of others, even if you stay neutral in your reaction. A discerning reader might ask: Why am I

projected in terms of mobility and immobility. The stone pelters need to have a better sense of purpose in life for them to refrain from such apparent whimsical acts. Pelting stones should not be the only action in their life to make it meaningful and exciting.

In any anti-establishment movement, politicians normally employ pickets from the poor segments of society to patronise and unleash anarchy. They are paid to ransack both public and private properties. They are given free licences to be hostile. Their hostility is orchestrated and can impact the mindset of the participants. They have been initiated into a hostile variant of *porosrikatorota*. I use the Bangla term to imply that the opposition is hurt by the perks of their opponents. But

the hostility exposes the social underbelly where inequality looms large. Often, you do not even need an opponent to sabotage your success; there are enough people within your cohorts who can do that. The green-eyed monster of jealousy does not need a beautiful Bangla name to thrive.

On the flip side, there is narcissism. There is a growing craving for being successful or being under the spotlight. Even professionals, who are trained to serve as a cog in the wheel, are now seen becoming media-savvy. I do not remember a time when junior civil servants would hit the headlines for doing their daily jobs. With the social media epidemic, everyone today wants to be a celebrity. A magistrate before TV cameras is seen humiliating ordinary people for not wearing masks. Many UNOs are crowdsourcing funds to do social activism with follow-up news coverage. Police bosses are giving TV ads with social messages. All are parading in the vanity fair, seeking attention and admiration. Everything has become a photo-op now—an Instagram moment, or a Facebook post. But what pains me is when these glory-seekers become over-enthusiasts and indulge in activities that add to the social angst. Their exertion of power causes another segment of society to feel helpless and hapless. Behind their success is the failure of others.

Think of the lean period of Hilsa fishing. During the spawning season, when fishermen were asked not to catch Hilsa, the fishermen were given a meagre compensation of rice. The supply was not enough for them to see through the embargo period. Many of them were forced to violate the restrictions and ride the waves. Their hunger was real, not media-driven. In response, fishing nets worth crores of taka were seized and burned down by law enforcement agencies. If you have ever seen a group of people knitting a net together, you will know how much time and money are needed to make one. And you burn down the efforts of an entire community in one fell swoop, for one act of violation? How about the big fish taking chartered flights to fly away from your net? Why burn the net when you can simply impound them? So that you can become a social media hero! Can you not simply penalise the offenders? Once you change the optic, you realise that the net, too, is a national property. The imported nylons purchased through foreign currencies are paid for by ordinary citizens like us. The smoke that rises up to the sky sends the silent sighs of all the people who are deprived and oppressed. There is no glory in oppressing the weak, and feeling high and mighty.

Am I being *porosrikator* of the success of our powerful social media celebrities? I am a Bengali, after all.

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Patriarchy, give me my country back

A personal account of a survivor of sexual violence and oppression



KATE TANHA

I was four years old when it first happened. A middle-aged man, who ran a small departmental store in the Dhaka neighbourhood I lived in, was babysitting me while my mother went out to fetch some notes from

her university. It was difficult raising a child all on her own, and my single mother was grateful that she could leave me in safe company.

I was sitting cross-legged on the floor opposite my babysitter when he pulled me close to his body and put his tongue down my mouth. At first, I was fascinated—I had seen adults kiss each other in tv shows and films. Children, at that age, are curious about the liberties that adulthood offers. But soon after, a dirty feeling came over me. My mouth froze. He attempted to force his tongue on me a few more times before I pulled away and rushed to the bathroom. I had a rabid compulsion to clean my mouth; I brushed my teeth, again and again, hoping to remove his traces so that my mother would never know, and I could pretend it never happened.

Two years later, a security guard at the apartment complex we shared with my aunt groped my chest and motioned that he would put his "thing" inside me. I thought I should stay quiet, because I was ashamed, but the constant touch from him and the resulting pain became so unbearable that I rushed to my mother as she was boarding a rickshaw to go to the supermarket. "He's hurting me," I told her. She looked at me in surprise. Hurting? How? Where? I eventually revealed all the details to her, and he was dismissed shortly after.

I used to be a very talkative child, but with every experience of physical violation, I grew quieter, more watchful of my words, more concerned about what I could talk about to anyone.

When I was seven, I realised that my parents had separated because my father would physically abuse my mother, the

floor frequently turning bloody.

When I was eight, a law enforcement officer asked my mother to sleep with him. She refused and was sanctioned.

When I was nine, a male relative lay down beside me while I was resting and put his arms around my waist. He turned me around, and there it was, again, a foreign tongue inside my mouth, unwelcome, unwanted. I flinched and immediately left the room.

When I was eleven, construction

locked the room behind us and attempted to pinch my private parts, but I immediately unlocked the door and left the room.

When I was 16, my male cousin confessed that his peers could not see their female counterparts as anything more than sex objects.

When I was 17, a man older than my father proposed a sexual relationship with me in exchange for expensive gifts and financial security.



The concept of women empowerment becomes void when a society cannot ensure safety from violence, sexual or otherwise, for its female population.

ILLUSTRATION:
BIPLOB CHAKROBORTY

workers next door would make untoward gestures every time I went to the veranda, and I eventually completely stopped going outside.

When I was 13, I was severely bullied about my weight and the lack of feminine curves—disparaged for not meeting societal beauty standards.

When I was 14, a teenage crush of mine spread stories about being physically intimate with me, and my classmates hurled numerous insults my way while somehow, in their eyes, he was now "cooler."

When I was 15, my friend's boyfriend

When I was 18, my school's principal, upon my insistence on wearing shorts while playing sports, gawked at me and said, "What will I do if one of the security guards rapes you?"

When I was 19, I left Bangladesh, and I have not returned since.

Begum Rokeya, the prominent feminist thinker and social reformer, once dreamt of a world led by women in her famous short story "*Sultana's Dream*." Kazi Nazrul Islam, the national poet of Bangladesh, wrote, "I sing the song of equality; in my view, there is no disparity between man and woman." Why, then, according to

Bangladesh Mahila Parishad, were there 2,711 incidents of violence against women and children, including rape, between January and October in 2020?

Why, according to a 2015 survey by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), did more than 70 percent of married women or girls face intimate partner abuse, including physical violence? Why indeed, according to Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK), were at least 235 women murdered by their husbands or members of his family in the first nine months of 2020? How, in the country of Begum Rokeya, Kazi Nazrul Islam, Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Sufia Kamal, can rape be justified because of what a woman is wearing?

The consequences of patriarchy are a pervasive reality in Bangladesh. According to a 2018 study by Brac, 94 percent of Bangladeshi women report being sexually harassed while commuting via public transport. Poor women, including those from rural areas, face multiple forms of oppression, including lack of access to quality education and unpaid productive work. Women from religious minorities continue to be persecuted for their beliefs. As part of a community facing landlessness issues and a lack of civil rights, non-Bengali indigenous women in particular face further challenges at the intersection of indigeneity, gender, and food insecurity. Gender-variant people are not spared from these challenges either: hijra people are marginalised in social and economic spheres. In 2015, they were denied government jobs because they "failed" a genitalia-based medical examination.

Despite my personal experiences and the grim statistics on gendered oppression in Bangladesh, I have begun to speak up. I am fortunate to have had the opportunities to study around the world and grow as a person, but I still feel the wound of being a second-class citizen in my own country. I want to reclaim my home. I ask the women reading this article, what about you?

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