

In a climate of exploitation, marginalised groups are easy pickings

Dr Iftekharuzzaman, executive director of Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB), speaks to Eresh Omar Jamal of The Daily Star about the discrimination faced by marginalised communities and the rise of fundamentalism in Bangladesh.

What were the findings of TIB’s recent study titled “Access of Marginalised Communities to Public Services: An Assessment of Accountability Mechanisms”?

The study found that when people from marginalised communities tried to access public services, they faced discriminatory attitudes and practices from their mainstream peers, as well as a section of the people who were part of the relevant authority. For instance, in educational institutions, quite often when students from marginalised communities were exposed to inequitable behaviour and treatment, and their parents complained about it, they were told by the teachers that they could not do much about it, and the parents would have to accept it as a reality. Sometimes, such students, especially the Dalits, were forced to clean their schools’ toilets. And if they complained, they were exposed to further intimidation and harassment.

When it comes to the government’s social safety net programmes, from the inclusion of their names into the list of potential recipients to actually receiving the benefits, they are facing discrimination at every step. A major cause for this is the prejudiced attitude of a section of relevant public officials and political leaders.

Another big problem that they face concerns land ownership. Land-grabbing is a big problem in Bangladesh. Powerful quarters are frequently colluding with government officials and the people connected to power in order to grab land. They have made a habit of grabbing land belonging to marginalised communities—because it is easier. We have seen plenty of examples of powerful forces grabbing their land and getting away with it, so it gives the grabbers enough reason to feel emboldened and protected. This problem has become institutionalised. We have seen examples of the Forest Department ousting scores of marginalised families from their ancestral land and homesteads where they had been living for ages, in the name of protecting reserve forests, whereas, in reality, when genuine reserve forests were being grabbed by the mainstream vested groups, effective punitive action was hardly taken, if ever there was any attempt to do so.

What are some of the biggest barriers preventing the members of marginalised communities from receiving these basic services?

One of the biggest barriers is that the general people, as well as individuals from within the

administration and political space, do not see the members of marginalised communities as equal citizens. Our constitution is very clear about recognising the equal rights of all citizens—regardless of their race, religion or identity. It also acknowledges that people are entitled to government benefits and services on an equal footing, regardless of their diverse identities. Constitutionally and legally, there is no scope for discrimination. But there is very little compliance with the constitution and law at the institutional and political levels. Not many effective actions are taken against the violators of the provisions; that is the problem.

What, in your opinion, are the underlying causes of this? When did this problem start?

It is impossible to give a definitive timeline for when this problem started. In some sense,

people with vested interests towards the constitutional rights and obligations of all the citizens of the country is what’s at the root of it. Unfortunately, very little has been done over the years in terms of justice and accountability.

What about the presence of the minority community within the bureaucracy? Can’t they prevent such behaviour?

Within the bureaucracy and political space, there are minority people, but they are relatively few in number; more importantly, their leverage on the treatment of marginalised groups is very limited. They often accept the mistreatment of minority groups as an unchangeable reality, tolerate it, and remain inactive. Peer pressure and a lack of self-confidence also work to keep them silent. Sometimes they may feel like



Dr Iftekharuzzaman PHOTO: STAR

of the changes that we have seen in our political sphere post-1975, which have been nourished over the years, is an ominous transition to collusion, protection and promotion of fundamentalist forces at the expense of our secular aspirations drawn from the Liberation War. This has given space to forces that are engaged in inciteful rhetoric and discriminatory actions. Such forces have unfortunately become beneficiaries of this regressive political culture. It is in this context that discriminating against minorities has, at times, been seen as politically expedient. Politicians have used it to win mileage, while minorities have been taken for granted as vote banks.

Colluding with fundamentalist forces or, at times, protecting and promoting them, has become a common practice across the political spectrum, and at times a key tool for our zero-sum political game. This in turn has led to situations like the one where fundamentalist forces dictated what changes should be made to our national curriculum, and the government, accepting those changes, designed to promote fundamentalist values at the expense of secular values. What signal did that send?

Fundamentalist groups have been allowed into the mainstream by the major political parties. Having come into the mainstream, these groups have been targeting young people and getting them to buy into their radical ideologies. This whole situation should be extremely concerning for us all, particularly because a big part of what they promote is hatred against minority

groups, including the Hindus. Those who are participating in their programmes and listening to what they promote are becoming increasingly radicalised and intolerant.

The most obvious sign that this is happening can be seen on social media, which is being used by fundamentalist forces to get people agitated towards marginalised groups. But the people or groups that are doing this are hardly ever held accountable.

Have government policies and general politics in any way contributed to the increased communal violence that we have seen?

They may not be linked directly, but during the most recent attacks on the Hindus, some of the people who have been identified have been found to be connected to different political parties or their affiliated groups in some capacity. That does show that there is a connection. But I think the main issue here is that our overall political space has seen an anti-minority bias seep into it, which has created a pro-fundamentalist environment. And these biases have, over time, trickled down across society.

Interestingly, those who use social media to promote freedom of speech and liberal and secular ideas and values are often harassed and chastised by the authorities. Yet, we see fundamentalist forces openly using social media platforms to promote hate, without the government so much as lifting a finger to stop them. What does that indicate? That these people are protected in a way that people who are trying to uphold liberal ideas are not?

So, would you say that the measures being implemented, using the justification that they are there to discourage fundamentalist forces, are actually being used to silence moderate voices?

Absolutely; just look at how the Digital Security Act (DSA) is being used. It is the people who are promoting freedom of speech and expression and other democratic and secular values who are being harassed by the authorities through the use of the DSA and other such tools. Compared to that, people who are spreading fundamentalist ideologies are barely being noticed by the authorities or held accountable for spreading hateful and inciteful messages. That itself should give us a good idea of where the government’s priorities lie—not stopping hateful and racist messages and ideas from spreading, but harassing people for using their right to freedom of expression to promote democratic values.

Let’s build the RMG park of the future



Landscape: The Challenge of Growth.” To prepare the report, McKinsey collaborated with the Bangladesh-German Chamber of Commerce and Industry and interviewed many leaders in our RMG industry. The landscape then was clearly different from what it is now, especially given the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic for the past 18 months. It was, therefore, interesting to read an update to this study, which was published earlier this year.

The conclusions drawn by McKinsey’s 2021 report on Bangladesh’s RMG industry are that it is faced with major challenges brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic as well as the shifts in global markets. McKinsey said the RMG sector in Bangladesh would need to innovate, upgrade, and diversify moving forward. This will require investing in flexibility, sustainability, worker welfare, and infrastructure. In short, there is still much work to be done.

The report lauded our greater capacity to produce garment products with synthetic fibres, and manufacture more complex products such as outerwear, tailored items and lingerie. It also praised our ability to provide new washes, prints, and laser finishes, while noting some increase in vertical integration of the supply chain, with the result being that more suppliers are now able to offer lead times below the standard 90 days.

But the overriding message is clear: we must go further.

In another 10 years’ time, do we want to receive this same message? How can we turn our RMG industry into a leading, innovative, sustainable powerhouse in the world, with a heavy focus on R&D and rapid product turnaround?

Perhaps it is time for us to start imagining the RMG industry of tomorrow in order to future-proof our most valuable export sector. Actually, let’s go a step further: perhaps, it is time to start building that industry.

Underpinning such an industry, I believe, will need smart and sustainable business parks. It can be challenging to “retrofit” futuristic technologies into existing factories or locations. This is because so many changes have happened in terms of sustainability-related technology in the past two decades—sometimes, it is just easier to start from scratch.

The new sustainable business parks, which could be developed with public-private partnerships, would be characterised by a number of features.

Firstly, they would be developed sustainably from the ground up. Each business could follow the guidance of an environmentally-friendly site master plan, drawing heavily on the best international practices in such areas. All of the buildings would adhere to the highest international standards for green design and layout. In fact, many RMG factories in Bangladesh are already Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design-certified, but there are additional measures that can be taken with a specific garment-production focus.

There would be a major focus on the use of renewable energy, including solar and wind energy, in these parks. Solar power, in particular, is one sector of renewable energy where huge technological strides have been made in recent years. In addition to the wide scale adoption of cleaner production and water-saving technologies, a central rainwater harvesting system could be installed, which could be used by all tenants. Water is our most precious natural resource, and Bangladesh is a water-stressed country. We need to start preserving it.

The sustainable business park of the future would be vertically integrated. Vertical integration is the holy grail for any textile manufacturing hub—just ask China. It shortens supply chains, boosts economies of scale, allows a faster turnaround of products, and enables

more export receipts to be retained in exporting countries. What’s there not to like? We have to think more about how we can bring more stages of production under one roof in Bangladesh. If building a structure from scratch is the way to do that, then that is the road we need to take.

There are other arguments in favour of developing business parks of this nature from scratch. For a plethora of reasons, such parks provide a major boon for inward investment, particularly green finance.

Smart and sustainable business parks would include a sludge treatment facility, with further trials already underway for responsible disposal. These include tests using microalgae to break down sludge, as well as utilising sludge to fuel furnaces and as bricks with a biomat mask. The most sophisticated Common Effluent Treatment Plant (CETP) would provide treatment facilities for all tenants.

Finally, there are other aspects of sustainable business parks that could be considered. Could they incorporate a central design facility? What about a central research and development facility on site? The benefits of centralising such facilities—and making them available to all site park tenants—are major economies of scale.

Developing such futuristic parks would enable Bangladesh to think 20, even 30 years ahead—of a time when being fully sustainable will be the norm, rather than the exception to the rule. Our RMG factories are already incorporating many of the ideas and technologies discussed above. But are they all being developed from scratch, in one location, which would surely act as a magnet to an inward investment community that always has one eye on the future?

If we were to begin developing smart and sustainable business parks in Bangladesh, I have no doubt the green investors would sit up and take notice. Together, they could help us build the garment production hub of the future.

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Mostafiz Uddin is the managing director of Denim Expert Limited, and the founder and CEO of Bangladesh Apparel Exchange (BAE) and Bangladesh Denim Expo.

Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh

Ministry of Liberation War Affairs

Govt. Transportation Pool Building (5th and 6th Floor)

Secretariat Link Road, Dhaka-1000

www.molwa.gov.bd

Advertisement to Provide Medical Treatment to 100 Muktiyoddha Patients under “Medical Treatment of Muktiyoddha Patients” Scheme

The Ministry of Liberation War Affairs, with the financial support of the Government of India, is inviting applications in the prescribed form for Bir Muktiyoddhas to provide medical treatment at the earmarked hospital of the Indian Armed Forces under “Medical Treatment of Muktiyoddha Patients” Scheme. This scheme will be implemented through the Ministry of Liberation War Affairs and the Indian Embassy. The cost of passage of Muktiyoddha patients from Bangladesh to earmarked hospital in India will be borne by the Government of Bangladesh. If there is any necessary to transfer from one hospital to another in India, the cost will be borne by the Government of India. TB, mental disorders, AIDS and other chronic diseases that require long-term treatment will be excluded from such programs. Similarly, cases which require only convalescent treatment will also not be covered under this scheme. Medical treatment are applicable only to Bir Muktiyoddha and will not be applicable to family members.

- (1) The application form can be collected from the website of the Ministry of Liberation War Affairs (www.molwa.gov.bd) and also from the Civil Surgeon's Office of the respective districts.
- (2) The application has to be made in the prescribed form along with the Civil Surgeon of the concerned district and the last date for submission of application is 30/11/2021.
- (3) On the envelope it will have to be written “Application under Muktiyoddha Medical Services Scheme provided by the Government of India”.
- (4) Late received and incomplete application shall be deemed to be outright rejected.
- (5) The Authority reserves the power to make any decision at any time.

Md. Jahangir Hossain

Deputy Secretary

Telephone: 02223385317

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