

The Daily Star

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DHAKA SATURDAY NOVEMBER 13, 2021, KARTIK 28, 1428 BS

## Isn't it a case of victimising the victim?

*The suggestion of '72 hours' limit will benefit the criminals, and not serve justice*

A number of women's rights groups as well as legal experts have disagreed with the recommendation of a Dhaka court to the police to not accept any rape case if a complainant goes to the police station 72 hours after the incident. We believe that this would further risk victimising the victims. For many women, it takes months—even years—to come to the conclusion that they want to fight such a case. In many cases, it may not even be logical to expect a victim to overcome her trauma within 72 hours. Then how can we expect them to make the decision to fight the case and, having made up their mind, make a complaint to the police, all within a 72-hour timeframe?

Given how unfriendly our police and justice system are toward victims of rape—as evident in numerous past cases—making the decision to fight such a case is even more difficult for women. On top of that, such preconditions might discourage victims from seeking legal help altogether. That is clearly not something that we would want.

Rape is one of the most serious crimes on the books. And women who are victims to it suffer from serious mental and physical trauma. That trauma can easily take a long time to heal. The social stigma that is often associated with rape means that any complainant has to muster up a huge amount of courage before stepping up and lodging an FIR and then fight the case—which often requires them to once again live through that trauma. Because of all these reasons, the justice system should be shaped in a way that encourages rape victims to pursue justice, not shy away from it. And the same applies when it comes to the attitude of law enforcement agencies towards any victim. Thus, the recommendation could well impact both and tip the balance of power against the victims.

As some activists have pointed out, what happens if a woman is raped and then forcefully held by the perpetrator for 72 hours? Will she never get the chance to seek justice?

As such, we humbly state, with all due respect to the judge, that the court's recommendations will not only not serve justice, but they will have the very opposite effects. With less than three percent of rape cases ending in convictions in Bangladesh, we request the courts to address the loopholes in the legal system and make it more friendly towards rape victims who, because of various social, cultural, economic and other reasons, have an extremely tough time pursuing and getting the justice they deserve.

## Schools in rural areas need urgent govt assistance

*A glaring example of authorities neglecting children's education*

THE dire condition of the Dayarampur Government Primary School at Dayarampur village, under Haripur union of Pabna's Chatmohar upazila, is worrisome and it represents the state of many other schools across Bangladesh. The school has been in operation since 1991, with the current headcount of students being 154. It was only nationalised in 2017, but has seen no development since then. Due to being situated in the middle of Chalanbeel, it is already inaccessible, except by boat, for a few months every year. During other times, the students must reach the mere 40-feet-long tin-shed establishment on muddy paths. The school often teaches students of multiple grades in one room, and also has no toilet available for use.

It was only in September that schools finally reopened for physical classes across the country, after being closed for a year and a half due to the Covid-19 pandemic. An analysis by Unicef in August found that over 40 million Bangladeshi students from pre-primary to higher education levels had been adversely affected by this prolonged closure. While children from urban and semi-urban areas were still able to somewhat access education through digital learning materials and online classes during this time, it was the children in remote areas who fell victim to severe learning loss, child labour, and/or child marriage.

The authorities' lack of care for schools such as the Dayarampur Government Primary School represent a bigger picture of how the education sector is not prioritised, time and again. A glaring example of this is that, despite the impact the pandemic has had on this sector, of the total proposed national budget for 2021-22 fiscal year, only 11.9 percent was allocated to education. This is even lower than the 12.3 percent in the revised budget for 2020-21 fiscal year.

If the government is paying no heed to the development of schools in remote areas, how are students supposed to feel encouraged to study there? Given the recent surge in unemployment and increase in poverty, parents in poorer districts are already demotivated to send their children back to school. If schools themselves are also kept inaccessible, there is a high possibility that the country will see even greater numbers of dropouts.

We hope that the plan to allot Tk 3 lakh this fiscal year for administering urgent repair work of the Dayarampur school will be seen through. But we must also urge the government to not neglect schools in remote areas—and the education sector as a whole—now that they need authoritative support the most. The effects of such continued neglect may not seem urgent now, but will reverberate throughout the next few decades.

# Our development and the middle-class dilemma



can be literally translated to “by and by.” The expression has caught on, and social media is rife with the mobility metaphor. While the honourable minister uses it in the context of growth, the respondents feel that they are failing to catch up as their income trajectory has remained rather static. The educated middle class, in particular, has a lot to say about the big blow caused by the price hikes, factored into such economic growth.

THE planning minister recently used an onomatopoe—a word that imitates the things signified. He referred to the economic growth of the country with the sound image of “*shonoi, shonoi*,” which

ordeal last week when the transport operators enforced a strike, protesting the sudden rise in the prices of diesel and kerosene by 23 percent—from Tk 65 to Tk 80. If you ride a CNG or octane-driven vehicle, you would assume that this hike was simply going to affect the lives of “the most disadvantaged segment of society.” Sure enough, your oven no longer uses kerosene; for diesel, there is a different dispenser at the fuelling station that you do not visit. Bad things always happen to other people, right? The announcement came on November 3, and an indefinite transport strike was called on November 5. The cerebral middle class thought over the weekend that there would be a “show no show no” understanding between the government and the private owners of the transport system. It did not.

It was soon obvious that the price hike had affected the supply chain of agricultural goods, export items, and water transport. It was more than a few

there was a serious lack of planning and coordination before the announcement of a price hike was made. Or it could be the other way round. The entire thing was orchestrated and coordinated to benefit a certain group. It is up to the government to clarify the “show no, show no” doubts and suspicions.

Why weren't there any transport services dedicated for export? How responsible is it to look away from the misery of the daily commuters who were asked to pay double for the alternative modes of transport? The comments on Facebook demonstrate the seemingly paradoxical attitudes of the middle class towards democracy, social stability, and reform. The demographic of the group that I am a member of can be characterised as the educated middle class with some exceptions, who from time to time display their knowledge of high-end luxury cars. But by observing the group behaviour, I was intrigued by

pillars of Dhaka Metro Rail or the Padma Bridge, its perceptual basis also needs to be taken into account. I am guided by an interesting 1995 article on relativism that uses two metaphors of “furniture” and “death” to describe different aspects of reality. Furniture (tables, rocks, stones, etc) represents the reality that cannot be denied, whereas death (misery, genocide, poverty, etc) represents the reality that should not be denied. The bricks, metals, and mortars signify one aspect of our economic growth. The living standard of the middle class is going down.

Last month, one of my administrative officers tendered her resignation. During her exit meeting, she conceded that she was spending Tk 500 a day for CNG-run autorickshaw fare as the public buses would require her to be on the road in a traffic jam for six hours. As her mother-in-law had died, she would now require to hire a helping hand to attend to her daughter. With 40 hours in the office, her actual take-home salary would have been less than Tk 5,000. The death logic, thus, upsets the furniture reality.

You hear a garment worker saying that the increased bus fare will cost her an extra Tk 10 each way. She cries out: “Where will this extra Tk 600 a month come from?” The buses that should have been scrapped 25 years ago are still plying on the roads to add to the misery of the commuters. The owners, encouraged by the “show no, show no” rhetoric, will tell you that they cannot help it as the government must adjust the fuel price as per the international market. If you do not increase the fuel price, the diesel will be smuggled out of the country through the porous borders. So, what are we paying the uniformed men for? Running schools, colleges, hospitals, city corporations, government agencies in the cities? A comparative statement showed that we have the highest bus tariffs in the region, despite the subsidised fuel prices. We have the highest expenses in the construction of roads and bridges. The taxes that we pay are not proportionate to the services that we receive.

The rhetoric of progress needs to correspond with the reality of progress. We cannot expect our middle class to remain in a vegetative state forever, when the prices of winter vegetables rise because the trucks that were supposed to carry the produce from the rural areas to the cities have raised their fares; the added cost of fuel for shallow engines for irrigation or the tractors has helped the price of vegetables to go up even during the season. The snowball effect of the diesel price hike is fast becoming apparent in a wide range of sectors. And the middle class are transformed into onlookers who are seeing the “show no, show no” growth like a kite being flown from the rooftop of a neighbour. I guess, a kite in hand is worth two in the neighbour's roof.

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Slow response from the government left the general public suffering—some waiting on the road for transport for hours, some forced to pay exorbitant amounts to make it to their destinations, while others walking to where they needed to be—as buses and trucks stayed off the roads protesting the fuel price hike last week.

PHOTO: STAR

Then again, their responses are mostly controlled and measured, as if they are afraid to give voices to their frustrations and anger. As the tug of war between the rhetoric and the reality continues, an increasing sense of entrapment persists among the netizens. For some, the minister's rhetoric has allowed them to negotiate their reality with a touch of humour. After all, there is something peculiar about the sound: “show no, show no.”

I was recently surfing through comments by the members of a traffic alert group. The commuters faced an

bus owners taking the time off to hide their CNG labels and cylinders to take full advantage of the diesel jackpot. Several container ships went away without being loaded as covered vans and trucks were not available. The financial loss is estimated at millions of dollars, and the reputational loss is measured in red flags. Admission seekers missed their examinations as no public transports were available; there was even one story in which a father rode to Dhaka on his motorbike all the way from Bogra to ensure that his child did not miss the university test. These examples show that

their concurrent display of high levels of support for democratic principles and low levels of participation in real-life socio-political events. These members of the middle class respond to real-life situations to show that they are aware of what “should be,” what “could be,” and what “is.” They are, however, reluctant to go beyond their comfort zone to bring reforms, giving their socio-political attitudes a paradoxical appearance while encouraging the government to be indifferent.

While the development myth has some concrete basis that we see in the shape of

# Attracting more investment is key to tackling post-Covid unemployment



MD KAWSAR UDDIN

OUR country is facing an unprecedented challenge in dealing with the post-Covid unemployment problem, despite steady economic growth over the past few years.

The unemployment rate in Bangladesh increased from 3.38 percent in 2010 to 5.3 percent in 2020, according to Statista. More specifically, it jumped to 5.3 percent in 2020—the first year of the pandemic—from 4.22 percent in 2019. A World Bank report published in 2019 revealed that 32 percent of public university graduates and 44 percent of private university graduates were without jobs in the country.

A survey by the Bangladesh Institute for Development Studies (BIDS), conducted between February and June this year, found that 66 percent of the graduates of National University are unemployed. Those (21 percent) who could manage a job have an average salary of Tk 30,000. Seven percent are still pursuing post-graduation, and only three percent have become entrepreneurs.

Another survey jointly conducted by the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) and Oxfam in Bangladesh found that 61.57 percent of working people had lost their jobs in March and April last year due to Covid-related shutdown. Even though 15 percent of them returned to their work in a month, the majority of them remained unemployed for a long time. The poor and marginalised people faced, and still face, an even higher risk of loss of livelihood.

The pandemic has had a long-term negative impact on women's employment in Bangladesh. A survey conducted by Brac Institute for Governance and Development (BIGD) revealed that one-third of the young working women in the country were out of jobs as of January 2021, when economic activities resumed

in Bangladesh.

Several reports have shown that, due to Covid-19, income generation among the working class has fallen remarkably, and the country now has 24.5 million new poor.

Over the past two decades, our working-age population has increased significantly—from 58 percent to 68 percent. About 30 percent of the population is between 15 and 30 years. If the government trains and employs them

A functional approach to expand the job market, foster economic growth and eradicate unemployment would be to attract foreign and domestic investments in various sectors, which is only possible if we create a business-friendly environment. If the government takes necessary initiatives to upgrade the country's position in global business indicators like the Ease of Doing Business (EDB) and the Global Competitiveness Index (GCI), it will boost investor confidence. Once the investors

hurdles in business operations. The policies and terms for obtaining approval papers, utility connections, property handling and other relevant business operations create delays and hidden costs that are avoidable.

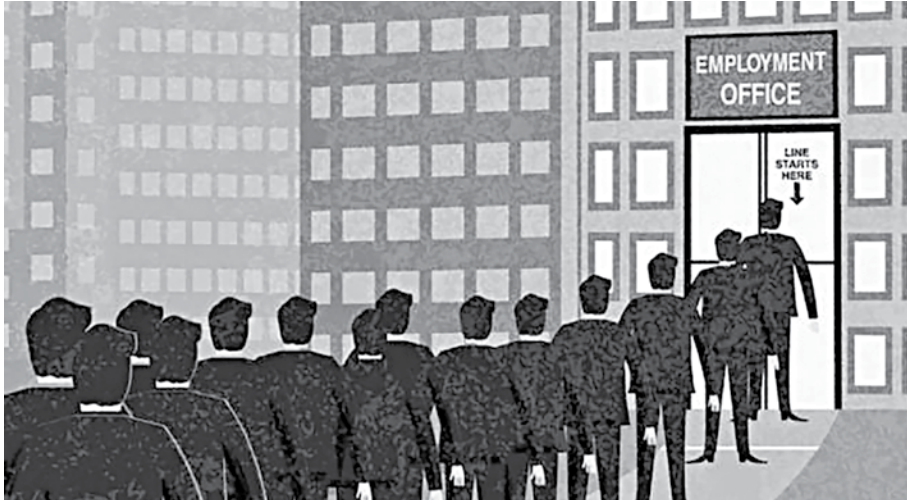
Besides the bureaucratic hassle, corruption and poor infrastructure, and the lack of skilled labour are some other issues that create an investor-averse environment. As our universities and academics are not closely connected to industries, which is how it is in the developed countries, university curricula offer a set of skills that are often irrelevant to modern workplaces.

Moreover, the increasing use of technology and artificial intelligence is a new threat to job security. A company that previously hired hundreds of people can now run its business successfully using advanced software operated by only a few. Consequently, ensuring employment for a mass population is getting challenging day by day.

While the economy has been hit hard by Covid-19, job opportunities have decreased, and the number of unemployed youths has increased, entrepreneurship can be the panacea for all economic ills.

Therefore, we should redesign our education system to empower our youth and create entrepreneurs. The entrepreneurial skills—like taking responsibility, owning a task, management, planning and strategising, leadership, teamwork, problem-solving, critical thinking, financial knowledge, and developing emotional intelligence—should be taught at all levels of higher education, regardless of what the academic programmes are. Simultaneously, foreign policies should focus more on attracting foreign investors. Overall, we must revisit our business policies and improve the ease of doing business in Bangladesh to attract both foreign and local investments.

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In the post-pandemic era, the conventional ways of doing business will no longer work to tackle the country's unemployment problem.

ILLUSTRATION: COLLECTED

appropriately, they can open up new economic opportunities. However, if we cannot utilise them, they will become a burden on the economy, especially when our country is already facing a crisis due to the pandemic.

On the one hand, millions of young university graduates are waiting to enter the job market. On the other hand, numerous people are losing their jobs and daily incomes. Our government jobs are limited, and the private sector is not large enough to provide employment opportunities to such a large number of people. How should we, then, address this pivotal issue?

have confidence in our system, they will create new jobs.

In the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business 2020 ranking, Bangladesh ranked 168th among 190 countries. Likewise, in the World Economic Forum's Global Competitiveness Index (GCI) 2019, Bangladesh was positioned at 105th among 141 countries.

Whereas foreign investors have invested billions of dollars in countries like Vietnam, India, and Indonesia, we have struggled to retain reinvestments from the already existing companies. Investors often complain that the bureaucracy in Bangladesh is too convoluted and creates