

## Govt should accept students' demands

*There is no alternative to ensuring road safety in Bangladesh*

ON November 24, Notre Dame College student Nayeem Hasan died after being hit by a vehicle of Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC) in the city's Gulistan area. The very next day, three more college students—Urmī Mojmūder, Mahbub Alam and Saddam Hossain—were killed after a CNG-run autorickshaw was hit by a BRTC bus in Chandpur's Kachua upazila. And on Monday night, SSC candidate Mainuddin Islam was added to this grim list after he was crushed under the wheels of an Anabil Paribahan bus in Rampura.

It is no wonder that students have once again been forced to take to the streets to protest for safer roads, as well as for general safety on public transport. Let's not forget that their anger started to build up after a bus driver and helper threatened a female student with rape when she asked to pay half of the bus fare, and snowballed after the student deaths. Although the government accepted certain demands by initiating half bus fares on the state-run BRTC buses—the usefulness of which is limited, since the rest of the bus services are privately owned—the deaths of five students in road accidents, within less than a week, show to what extent the authorities have failed to fulfil the pledges they made during the 2018 road safety movement.

In this context, the students of this country have every right to feel aggrieved and disillusioned. However, the regrettable consequence of their protests is that the already jam-packed streets of Dhaka have suffered even more gridlocks and tailbacks, especially on November 30 morning, when thousands of students from various institutions blocked the roads after hearing of Mainuddin's death. While private vehicles with valid licences, ambulances and other emergency medical vehicles were allowed to pass through, the general public travelling on buses suffered the most from this blockade.

It is unfortunate that, in such situations, it is always the ordinary citizens who bear the brunt. However, it is noteworthy that when bus owners and transportation workers went on a strike to demand higher bus fares, causing great public suffering, the government was very quick to accept their demands. Yet, despite mass student protests in 2018 and continued pressure from concerned citizens since then, 3,222 people were killed in road accidents in the first six months of this year, and the Road Transport Act (RTA), 2018 is yet to be fully formulated, let alone implemented.

As such, the responsibility of the public suffering caused by student blockades rests squarely on the shoulders of the government. It is very clear what the authorities must do now: accept the agitating students' demands, implement the RTA, and fulfil their obligations of protecting the citizens from dying, cruelly and needlessly, on our roads.

## Nexus of evil arrested, now follow due process

*Corrupt officials were sending migrant workers abroad on forged documents*

AT last, the law enforcement agencies have been able to identify and arrest some of the people involved in sending workers abroad on forged documents. In this connection, the Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime (CTTC) unit of police hauled in five people from travel agencies, including an owner, last month, according to a report in this newspaper on December 1. It has been our firm belief—and we have expressed it often—that no one can leave the country through the normal exit routes with forged documents without the help of someone on the inside. The process involves multiple characters, as the recent arrests have exposed.

But the circuit is incomplete, since those arrested are only small cogs in the wheel that operates the illegal system. Documents cannot be forged without the help of those in the Department of Immigration and Passports. And, of course, there are the gatekeepers who have themselves turned into poachers. These are the immigrant officials at the airports who complete the obnoxious circle.

What the report reveals is nothing that has not been known by the general public, and certainly some of those who should know could not have been unaware of what was going on. But unfortunately, nothing was done to stem the outflow of illegal migrants. And the reason is not far to seek. As revealed in the report mentioned above, things in the airport were "managed" by allegedly paying Tk 30,000 to on-duty police officials for every passenger they allowed to pass with forged documents. One may dare suggest that the amount was shared with some of those who matter, so that they "hear no evil, see no evil and speak no evil." Reportedly, every illegal migrant paid between Tk 250,000 and Tk 500,000.

Fortunately, there are honest officials—the majority, we would like to believe—who work with due diligence. That is why many passengers with forged or illegal documents were detected before they could leave the country. We believe that apart from a powerful syndicate involved in illegal human trafficking, there is a strong syndicate which is involved in the smuggling of gold. What gets caught from time to time is but minuscule when compared to what manages to enter the country. And that cannot happen without a strong nexus between all those involved in the immigration process. These syndicates must be identified, and those involved must face the strictest of punishments to deter others from indulging in such anti-national activities in future.

# 16 DAYS OF ACTIVISM AGAINST GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

## Understanding the manifold oppression of Indigenous women



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TWENTY-five years ago, on June 12, 1996, Kalpana Chakma, organising secretary of the Hill Women's Federation, was abducted in the dead of the night. There has been no

trace of her ever since. The perpetrators who raped two teenage Marma sisters in 2018 walk free today, and violence against Indigenous women continues. In August 2019, local high school headmaster Samor Kanti Datto, from Ruma upazila in Bandarban, raped a Marma girl and recorded the act on his phone, but it wasn't until September this year that he was arrested.

Writing about gender-based violence against Indigenous women who were

However, the woes of land loss didn't stop there. Exploiting the lack of documented ownership, non-Indigenous settlers continue with land-grabbing, and without their land, Indigenous communities cannot survive. A report by Kapaeng Foundation revealed that between March and June 2020, at least 6,504 acres of Indigenous land were either fully occupied or under a process of occupation. A lot of gender-based violence in the CHT region is driven by unresolved land disputes. Perpetrators use terror and rape as the main weapon to suppress Indigenous peoples' land claims. Kapaeng Foundation also found that, only in 2017, an estimated 56 Indigenous women were assaulted by 75 alleged perpetrators—most of them non-Indigenous.

Lack of access to medical and legal services in remote areas deter Indigenous women and girls from reporting violence against them. They navigate a justice

District Council and Regional Council. In her article "Indigenous Women: A Gender Perspective," Chandra K Roy writes that Indigenous women were targeted for their ethnicity and gender, which centred on their central role as the transmitters of their culture to future generations. In analysing the use of rape as an instrument in the struggle for power, she mentions a cultural significance of raping "enemy women"—especially women of a different race, religion or political affiliation. The otherisation of Indigenous women is evident in more subtle instances of exoticisation, such as in 2019, when a vlogger posted a video on Facebook where he interviewed a minor Mro girl on her marital status, what a viewer needed to do to marry her, and whether she could dance for him.

When we're taught about social constructs in predominantly Bengali institutions, we learn that women are stereotyped as weak, in need of protection, and kept at home. If we think about sexism centring Indigenous women, we come up against entirely different stereotypes: The exotic breed, the mountain climbers.

This exoticisation demotes them into a subhuman status linked to hypersexualisation. On July 14, 2020, a domestic help agency based in Uttara, Dhaka circulated a flyer featuring a Garo woman that read "Delivery within 24 hours, once booked." The insidiousness of this racist undertone, comparing the Garo women to products, is all the more obvious when you realise how vulnerable such domestic workers can be—in February 2019, a Garo teenager was raped by the man who employed her as a domestic worker at his house in Kalachandpur, Gulshan.

While the community faces a gradual loss of ownership of resources, male members often become sole inheritors of property. In this way, Indigenous women face a double burden of discrimination—from settlers and also within their own communities. According to rights activist Muktasree Chakma Sathi, with the exception of Garos and Khasis, most Indigenous communities are patriarchal. Hence, most women lack inheritance rights to properties. "What if women marry non-Indigenous men, and Indigenous properties are further lost?" is used as a common justification. As such, forced and early marriages are rationalised as necessary to ensure cultural preservation. "Marrying out" for Indigenous women indicates an exile from their communities and identities. Denying them the right to make autonomous decisions regarding their own sexuality and marriage is seen as a solution to conserve Indigenous populations. Furthermore, women are not even paid equally for their labour in cultivation.

This unfairness has roots beyond what meets the eye. In February 2020,

Manusher Jonno Foundation published a report titled "Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and access to justice for ethnic women and girls in CHT." It reported 45 percent of respondents faced gender-based violence at their workplace, and 44 percent were subjected to domestic abuse. The respondents identified perpetrators to be local thugs, political elites and co-workers. Eighty-two percent of those experiencing domestic violence saw the husband as the main perpetrator.

Patriarchy within Indigenous communities proclaims women's rights as private, cultural and domestic affairs. They are considered divisive and disruptive. Indigenous women exercising agency are accused of being disloyal to their communities. Education is deemed a double-edged sword that only knives the women. "If a woman is 'too' educated, they will make their own decisions!" they say. Where will our women go?

What only adds to the disproportionate pressure faced by Indigenous women is that they are seen as the carriers of group identity. A glance on social media shows Indigenous women being harassed simply for wearing clothes of other cultures. Strikingly, nothing is said to Indigenous men doing the same!

Is it okay to justify violations of women's human rights in the name of upholding culture? Is it culture that lies at the root of women's oppression, or the practices that deny women equity? While culture can be used as an excuse to violate human rights, it can also be used to promote rights by emphasising cultural values of fairness.

Women's rights have been formally codified as human rights in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Indigenous peoples' human rights have been codified in the recently adopted UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Yet, rights of Indigenous women remain a contentious issue—domestically and internationally.

Activist Catharine MacKinnon's definition of violence against women incorporates two dimensions: we are women systemically and systematically. Systemic means socially patterned, including harassment, rape and abuse of children. Systematic hints at intentionally organised exploitation. Indigenous women are targets of both gendered forms of violence, and gendered effects of violence that targets Indigenous communities as a whole. Their reality is a particularly racialised form of misogyny and a particularly misogynistic form of racism that targets only them.

The experience of Indigenous women often remains beyond comprehension to the world around them. Can we fight or heal what we can't understand or articulate?

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The violence that Indigenous women face are unique to them and needs better understanding on our part.

FILE PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

violated in ways that are unique to them is an emotionally taxing task. It makes me helplessly question when it will ever stop, or whether I can just divert my attention away. Yet, there is no better time to address gender-based violence against Indigenous women, an issue that is multidimensional—tied to our lands and identity.

Natural resource management in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) is complex and incredibly political. The traditionally *jhum* land is owned by the village rather than an individual, managed according to Indigenous customs. The construction of Kaptai dam in the early 1960s was a catastrophic event for Indigenous communities—it submerged 54,000 acres of arable land. The International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs reports that 100,000 people lost their principal economic base because of it.

system that doesn't recognise their Indigenous language and traditions. Discriminatory practices such as non-cooperation of local administrations add to the human rights violations. On top of that, non-Indigenous settlers bring with them their patriarchal social codes, and make sense of Indigenous society through patriarchal lenses. Many settlers hold onto beliefs that Indigenous women are exotic and delicate. Women's clothes have grown longer, and scarves are now wrapped around them to avoid the eyes of the non-Indigenous. Indigenous women are also faced with verbal and physical harassment, subjected to frequent checks on their commute to markets.

Even in the 1997 Peace Accord, gender issues were not directly addressed, although it can be argued that gender equity is addressed in an indirect manner through "reserved" seats for women in the

## When will the anarchy on our roads end?



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ACCORDING to a study conducted by Nirapad Sarak Chai, a road safety movement led by actor and activist Ilias Kanchan, based on reports published by different media outlets, as many

as 4,092 road accidents took place across Bangladesh in 2020, taking 4,969 lives and injuring 5,058 more people. Meanwhile, in the first eight months of 2021, 3,701 road accidents took place across the country, killing at least 3,502 people and injuring 3,479 others, according to a report by the Bangladesh Police.

The fact that the number of fatalities caused by road accidents between January 2020 and August 2021 is nearly one-third of the deaths caused by the coronavirus pandemic in the country since March last year reveals the true horror when it comes to safety—or lack thereof—in our roads.

On July 29, 2018, the death of two college students after being hit by an unlicensed driver, who was driving his bus recklessly, sparked a nationwide protest by school and college students that challenged the traffic system and demanded safety on roads. Students made demands to curb violation of traffic rules and reckless driving, besides fixing other irregularities on our roads and highways.

In response to the protest, the government promised to bring discipline to the streets. It has been more than three years since then, but there has hardly been any effective change.

Now, students have taken to the streets in Dhaka again as bus owners are refusing to allow "half pass" or 50 percent discount on bus fares for the students. The Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) is in a dilemma in this situation as they cannot officially force the privately run bus services to give concessions to students.

The disorder that we see on our roads are the symptoms caused by some

underlying diseases—political influence and corruption in the transportation sector. Over the past several decades, the budget for developing communication infrastructure has been increased every year. In the 2020-21 fiscal year, the allocation proposed for developing roads, bridges, railways, waterways, airways and the overall communication infrastructure sector was Tk 64,580 crore. Despite such a huge expenditure, this sector remains

extra hours in traffic jams and extra money for servicing and maintenance of their vehicles because of these poorly constructed roads.

Another source of pain and suffering is the corruption committed by some of the officials in the BRTA. According to Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) reports in the past several years, the BRTA has emerged as one of the most corrupt agencies in the country. From



What the students are demanding for road safety is not unreasonable. This photo was taken on November 30, 2021, during their ongoing protest in Dhaka.

PHOTO:  
PRABIR DAS

in shambles because of the corruption in the responsible departments. Most of the roads and highways in the country are poorly constructed, at high costs, by some politically backed contractors with no accountability. Consequently, Bangladesh has one of the worst road communication infrastructures in Asia—second only to Nepal—according to a World Economic Forum survey released in 2018.

As the roads and highways are constructed with substandard materials, the surfaces are damaged quickly. Many vehicle owners, drivers and conductors believe that they are forced to spend

vehicle registration and route permit to transfer of ownership and issuing driving licence, vehicle owners and drivers have to pay up to Tk 20,000 to BRTA personnel and brokers. Around 61 percent of drivers get a driving licence without even taking a driving test—just by paying a bribe of Tk 1,000 to Tk 7,000.

Even though the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) has sued several BRTA officials for irregular activities, the rampant corruption that takes place in this agency has yet to stop.

According to numerous vehicle owners, drivers and conductors, extortion and

bribery on the roads by some traffic police officials and corrupt local leaders are daily phenomena. Several reports by newspapers and TV channels suggest that a section of traffic police collects money from all commercial vehicles in the name of "beats." Bus owners have to pay Tk 10,000 to Tk 30,000 in bribes to enter the metropolitan areas.

While workers in the transport sector—having suffered devastating losses due to the countrywide lockdowns and the impacts of the pandemic—are struggling to recover from said loss, the Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation (BPC) suddenly raised the price of diesel by Tk 15 per litre. People related to this sector reacted belligerently after the government's decision to increase the fuel price. Finally, through negotiation, they managed to convince the government to increase the bus fare but refused to give any concession to students.

Political influence, widespread corruption, mismanagement and poor policies make commercial vehicle owners and transportation workers reckless and indifferent to the law, which leads to chaos and anarchy on the roads. Consequently, the middle- and low-income people, for whom public transport is the only means of communication, suffer endlessly on the roads and highways. As the rich and the powerful use their private transports, there is no one to empathise with the suffering of public transport users.

Therefore, the relevant authority should take immediate measures to bring order to the chaos in our roads, and abolish corruption and political influence from the transportation sector. When it comes to a 50 percent discount for students on bus fares, the government should develop ways to provide incentives to this sector so that the vehicle owners, drivers, conductors and the people related to this sector can survive, and at the same time can offer a concession to the students. We must make our roads and highways safe for our future generations.

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