

Resurrect the EC’s lost image

Its obligation is to the people only

THE new Election Commission (EC) has been holding a series of talks with various sections of society since its assumption of office on February 27. We would like to believe that such an exercise on the part of the new commission, led by CEC Kazi Habibul Awal, displays its intention to hold a credible election by eliciting opinions from a cross-section of people. We suggest that the EC also invite representatives from outside the so-called gentry and seek opinions of a few commoners, too.

We had earlier commented in these very columns that, our reservations about the selection process of the Election Commission notwithstanding, we would hope that the new commission would work sincerely to hold a national election that would be participatory, free and fair. And that its main task would be to restore the voters’ faith in the electoral system, particularly the EC. The same message was conveyed to the EC when it met with a delegation of journalists on the same issue on April 6.

It is a sad reflection on democracy in Bangladesh that the main stakeholders and beneficiaries of a sound democratic system, the people, have lost interest in elections. And that is because, for a good part of the last decade, voters have been excluded from participating in voting, thus depriving them of their fundamental rights. This happened mostly because the previous election commissions failed miserably to play their due role in conducting free and fair elections. We would like to strongly emphasise that, although the system has lost credibility and that people’s confidence in it has sapped tremendously, people’s faith in democracy remains unwavering. But they feel helpless at the way the system operators and managers have failed them.

We suggest that the EC not forfeit its responsibility insofar as running the election is concerned, as the EC under Nurul Huda sought to do. It should not cede its authority to any supra body. Its main task is to provide a level playing field for all and ensure that the electoral laws are observed in letter and spirit without exception, and take action without fear or favour.

It should not forget that the electoral process is not restricted to the day of voting only. We are waiting to see how independently the EC conducts itself in the two years that we have before the next election. If it can stamp its authority and call the shots, only then will it be able to regain its lost and besmirched credibility. The CEC and his team would do well to remember that they are obligated to the people and people only, and no one else.

Govt should be lauded for Anti-Discrimination Bill

Now it must pass and enforce the bill without delay

WE commend the government for placing the much-awaited Anti-Discrimination Bill in parliament. The bill aims to protect and ensure equal rights and dignity of every citizen in Bangladesh. Once passed into law and enforced, the bill is supposed to prevent all forms of discrimination in light of the constitution. What it means is that if any citizen of the country faces any form of discrimination anywhere in society—be it government or private offices, public places or educational institutions—they will have a scope to lodge complaint under this law and seek redress.

It is good to know that the law will address some basic issues that ordinary people often face while going about their day-to-day activities. According to the draft law, it will be considered discriminatory if a person prevents, controls or restricts the entry or presence of any person or group in public places or government, semi-government, autonomous and private office services. Under this law, no children can be obstructed to enrol in any educational institution or be expelled from it based on discriminatory treatment. Moreover, the house owners will face repercussions if they refuse to rent out to any individual or group or impose any strict conditions on them.

We think this law can also be a powerful tool to ensure the rights and uphold the dignity of the marginalised people, including persons with disabilities, Dalits, Harijans, indigenous peoples of both hills and plains, and the transgender community across the country.

The government’s decision to include representatives from the minority ethnic communities, the Dalit community, and workers’ groups—one of whom will be a tea worker—in the committee to monitor human rights violations is also commendable. We just hope that the committee will be empowered enough to do its job.

Since the bill is now with the parliamentary committee on law ministry for scrutiny, we hope that they will critically analyse it before submitting its report. In the meantime, discussions should be held in parliament and among all the stakeholders concerned to address any loopholes in the law. Most importantly, the bill must be passed without unnecessary delay and ensure its effective implementation in the future.

A SCOOTER AND A TEEP

Misogyny, in public and private



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THAT day, like every other day, I got ready for work at 8am and put on a teep, without giving it much thought. It was the first day of Ramadan; at 8:30am, the traffic was already crazier than usual. I attempted to keep the madness at bay, as we do, by delving into the world of news, on this occasion looking for updates on Maisha Momtaz Meem (21), the NSU student killed by a covered van that hit her scooter while she was on her way to her university on April 1.

What I found instead were zealous netizens—mostly men—dissecting Meem’s attire, cursing her parents for allowing her to own a scooter, and saying she deserved to die for her transgressions. They appointed themselves judge and jury and volunteered for her virtual execution. Hardly anyone addressed the question of road safety, despite having witnessed two massive popular movements demanding safe roads in the last four years. The onus was, once again, on the victim, who happened to be an independent woman. I feel the same “heat” every time I am out on my cycle, with almost every speeding car trying to push me aside.

Reeling from this onslaught, I logged on to Facebook to find my feed inundated by my feminist friends’ new teep-adorned profile photos, protesting the verbal and physical abuse directed by a policeman, Nazmul Tareque, at Lata Samaddar, a teacher at Tejgaon College, while she was on her way to work. She filed a general diary against the perpetrator, resulting in his suspension. Lata’s bold move was widely appreciated, although many netizens—mostly men—were not quite so thrilled. Once again, they unleashed their rage against women, schooling them on their attire, dispensing fatwas, and calling every teep-wearing woman a prostitute who is “asking for it.” Women’s organisations, feminists and allies, MPs, and cultural activists condemned such violence against women in public spaces—but that did not stop the trolls.

Many protesters saw it as an attack on our cultural heritage—an example of heightened patriarchal-fundamentalist moral policing. Most were vocal about the right to wear whatever one pleases. Some circulated old photos of their parents/grandparents wearing teeps, while some dug out images of Dhaka University students clad in sarees with sleeveless blouses and teeps in the 1970s. Renowned singer Ferdausi Rahman reminisced about how they had protested for their right

to wear teeps and sing in the Pakistan era. Our cultural revolutionaries were an integral part of our independence movement, and it is women whose bodies have been used as repositories of both tradition and modernity, becoming a battleground for ideological domination (hijab/“fundamentalist” vs saree/“secular” and so on).

does not infringe on others’ rights? Or do these people seriously think women must cease to exist in the public realm?

Postcolonial women have for long suffered from a Victorian moral hangover. Women are meant to assume the role of a domestic goddess, a sovereign of the husband’s heart, a nurturing mother, and a sacrificial lamb who will go to any length



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Is it not natural for a woman to do what her heart desires, as long as it doesn’t infringe on others’ rights?

ILLUSTRATION:
TEENI AND TUNI

The attacks reveal a convoluted masculine rage fanned by class angst and other forms of repression that simply cannot accommodate the idea of the independent woman.

Born into a dogmatic secular family and raised by a practising Muslim *Nani* (who was a radical feminist in her own right), I somewhat embody these secular anxieties, although my multiple allegiances keep my politics grounded. I am the fasting-praying, singing-dancing, running cycling, saree jeans wearing academic and a feminist who happens to be a Muslim—an oxymoron in every possible sense. And I have every right to be—the same as Lata or Meem. I don’t find the religious-secular trope useful in thinking about the causes of violence against women—the problem is much larger than that.

The attacks reveal a convoluted masculine rage fanned by class angst and other forms of repression that simply cannot accommodate the idea of the independent woman; their blinding rage is even ready to condone murder. A recent study conducted by Manusher Jonno Foundation and Dnet found that 81 percent of their 518 interlocutors across 16 districts held negative perceptions of free-spirited women. Of them, 39 percent were women; you can imagine what the men had to say.

Who are these women, and why do they pose such a threat to mankind? The trolls reveal quite clearly that these are women who raise their voices and claim the freedom to choose how they want to live their lives. How is this constituted as a threat? Is it not natural for a human being to do what their heart desires, as long as it

to protect her family—in short, become a virtue-signalling, subservient, respectable woman. In return, the husband will provide for her and the family, and protect her from “worldly” affairs. Nevertheless, our predecessors, who experienced and participated in anti-imperialist movements and the Liberation War, brought women’s rights to the centre of revolutionary politics and thereby reconfigured their Victorian morals. Since then, women have taken part in nation-building and fought relentlessly for their equal rights as citizens. And yet, after all these battles, neither education and earning a living, nor conforming to the ideal role of a homemaker allows women to claim private or public spaces as theirs. We have unequal laws, patriarchal families, and the state to blame for it.

Society exists by consuming women’s (underpaid or unpaid) labour, and the state continues to use women’s faces as banners for their development goals. Yet, far from ensuring women’s rights as equal citizens and human beings, both the state and society sanction and benefit from violence against women. We cannot wait around forever. Demand the human right to exist—without being violated, and without the need for protection. We cannot wait for the patriarchy to be fully “smashed” before we can imagine and claim this city as ours.

The full version of this article is available on our website.

A reckoning is due for Dhaka Wasa



A CLOSER
LOOK

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DHAKA is witnessing an early diarrhoea outbreak this year. The hospitals in the city, including the International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh (icddr,b), are treating hundreds of new patients every day. As many as 1,200 patients visited icddr,b alone on March 26. A report published in this daily on Thursday said 57 diarrhoea patients had been admitted to icddr,b on average every hour in the previous 24 hours.

The staggering number of diarrhoea patients has caught the hospitals off guard. “In my 36-year-long career, I have never seen so many diarrhoea patients,” Dr Tahmeed Ahmed, executive director of icddr,b, said when speaking to this daily last month.

Cross-contamination of the water supplied by Dhaka Water Supply and Sewerage Authority (Wasa) has been cited as one of the major reasons behind this diarrhoea outbreak. The mustard, greenish colour of tap water in the affected areas, along with the stench, suggests contamination with sewage water. And this possibility cannot be ruled out, because often when old pipes are replaced, due to negative pressure, sewage water gets into the main water pipelines, resulting in cross-contamination.

This is not the first time that Bangladesh has suffered a diarrhoea or cholera outbreak. Every year, these water-borne diseases come back to haunt the citizens during summer. A 2018 World Bank report suggested that 80 percent of the people who use supply water face the risk of E. coli contamination. And 92 percent of Dhaka’s population drink

water from contaminated water sources—mostly carrying E. coli—due to sanitation problems and industrial pollution of water.

Unfortunately, the Dhaka Wasa authorities seem reluctant to even acknowledge these issues. One would remember the remark by the current Wasa MD in 2019 that the water they supplied was 100 percent drinkable. He later refused to drink a glass of lemonade offered to him by a family from Jurain, made with Wasa water. One cannot blame the Wasa chief, because the yellowish colour of the water would not seem drinkable, yet a segment of Dhaka residents has been forced to have it because of the inefficiencies and laziness of the water authority. Recently, however, the Wasa MD once again claimed that 95 percent of the water supplied by them was pure which, apparently, only got contaminated because of leaks in the pipelines.

Dhaka Wasa is so indifferent to people’s suffering that, despite being aware of the poor quality of the water they supply, they have done little to fix it. Take the case of Jatrabari, for example. In 2019, water samples from Jatrabari was tested by the LGRD ministry, and the result revealed that the water was contaminated with coliform and heterotrophic bacteria. But little has been done to remedy the situation in Jatrabari since then.

Dhaka Wasa’s inefficiencies are hurting not just the consumers, but also the national economy, and it is creating a negative footprint on our SDG attainment agenda. According to a 2019 Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) revelation, 91 percent of Dhaka households burn 363.7 million cubic metres of gas every year to boil water supplied by Dhaka Wasa to make it drinkable. The financial cost of this amounts to more than Tk 332 crore annually.

Constant and repeated requests for project deadline extension and additional funding is another key characteristic of Dhaka Wasa. Even the projects that it has been able to complete since 2009 have

done little to address the problems such as contaminated water and waterlogging. Although Dhaka Wasa spent Tk 7,205.49 crore on various megaprojects since 2009, they have not been able to make any positive impact on the quality of their services (New Age, August 8, 2020). And for obvious reasons, suggestions of systemic corruption have surfaced from time to time.

At this point, one is forced to ask: Why do the Dhaka Wasa authorities increase water tariff so frequently? According to media reports, it has increased water tariff 15 times since 2009. Why do people have to pay more every year to drink contaminated water? Even this year, Dhaka Wasa has proposed a tariff hike of 20 percent, which, if approved, will be effective from July 1. So, where is all the money going? The argument that Dhaka Wasa has to “beg” for money is incorrect, because according to its audited financial report, in FY2020-21, it registered a profit of Tk 49.6 crore with retained earnings of Tk 892 crore.

It is high time the authorities concerned looked into the misadventures of Dhaka Wasa and took steps to alleviate the plight of common people. Its constant shoddy performance points to internal systemic problems and corruption, which is taking a toll on the Dhaka residents as well as the national economy. The consecutive six-time appointment and reappointment of the incumbent MD—a move termed “questionable” by TIB—is a manifestation of the corruption eating at the heart of the organisation.

Dhaka Wasa officials and board members should also be investigated, and the activities of the agency, including the internal mechanisms, protocols and procedures, should be audited for compliance. And based on the findings, the system should be cleaned of corrupt, foul elements and revamped in order to make it efficient and effective. A complete overhaul seems to be the only way forward with Dhaka Wasa. Whether the authorities have the political will to drive this change is what remains to be seen.