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An indelible mark on our secular history

Humayun Azad verdict to serve long-denied justice

THE verdict in the case of the murder of Humayun Azad is finally out—after long 18 years. That last bit of information perhaps overshadows every other aspect of this case now, as it dragged on year after year, making any verdict in the end more a symbol of justice delayed than one of justice served. This distinction is important because justice is meant to send a message. It is meant to reassure us that no one is above the law and to deter prospective criminals from committing crimes because the justice system is watchful, fair and swift. Long-denied justice dilutes this message.

The verdict saw four members of the banned militant outfit Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) sentenced to death. Two of them are currently absconding. Those who remain will reportedly appeal their conviction. While we hope the verdict will be upheld by the High Court, the appeal process may prolong the wait for justice. In his observation while announcing the verdict, Judge Al Mamun of Dhaka's Fourth Additional Metropolitan Sessions Judge's Court said the murder was "shameful for the entire nation". It truly is. He also said the convicts carried it out to silence freethinkers, destabilise the country and besmirch its image in the world.

Humayun Azad, a torchbearer of the secular ethos of this nation, fearlessly challenged communal and anti-liberation elements through his iconoclastic writing. Despite being targeted by bigots repeatedly, he never gave up the fight. His murder thus was meant to instil fear into all those he inspired, who shared his secular ideals and a vision of humanity beyond the narrow brackets of religion, ethnicity and gender. It was meant to silence believers in free speech and diversity of thought. Unfortunately, the same communal forces are active even today, more powerful than before, more emboldened by the presence of draconian laws and dysfunctional administrative apparatuses. As the society grows more intolerant and polarised along ideological and political lines, it is the freethinkers, activists, rights defenders and religious and language minorities who stand to suffer the most. The growing attacks on them, just like the murder of Humayun Azad, have left an indelible mark on our secular history.

So while we commend the fact that a verdict has finally been reached—whose execution will hopefully give Humayun Azad's family a sense of closure—we must be reasonable about our expectations about how much effect it may have on this environment. It is not nearly enough to punish a few rotten apples when the whole society is apparently infested with them, empowered by the inaction of the authorities. The state, therefore, must aim wider socio-political reforms by actively encouraging a culture of tolerance and diversity, protecting the minorities and the marginalised, and empowering the criminal justice system to deliver swift justice.

Where are the 'missing' students?

We must find a way to bring them back to the classroom

IT is worrisome that about one-third of secondary students and one-fifth of primary students are staying away from in-person attendance in classes since educational institutions opened doors after Covid-induced shut down, according to a research titled "Safe Back to School." The study, conducted by 21 national and international organisations, highlights that the attendance at the secondary level was between 57 and 69 percent whereas it was between 65 and 86 percent at the primary level.

Due to Covid-19, which wreaked havoc on society, students were forced to stay at home on health and safety grounds for 18 long months. By now, it has been widely reported that online classes were not the right solution to impart education to millions of primary and secondary level students during this long stretch, especially for those from economically marginalised and rural backgrounds, who neither had the means nor the technological know-how to follow the courses. Given the long gap in learning, coupled with the economic hardship that families were subjected to during the pandemic, it is not altogether shocking that the drop-out rates are so high.

The study indicates that students in the rural and semi-urban areas are missing from the classrooms because they got involved in economic activities to supplement family income, or their parents had to migrate with their entire family to other places in search of a livelihood; in some cases, they were moved to other educational institutions either because they were cheaper or were nearer to the students' homes.

As for the absence of girl students, the research hit the nail on the head. It was found that the main reason was child/early marriage throughout the country. This aspect has been covered extensively by the media and as a result of the widespread reporting, in many instances, the administration took immediate measures to stop such illegal marriages. It is quite a contrasting revelation that the proportion of girls' attendance was higher than that of the boys during the said survey.

These missing students should be a major cause of concern for policymakers, educationists and social scientists as their continued absence would constitute a big loss to the country in the coming decades. It is of utmost urgency that the ministry of education, in coordination with other ministries and stakeholders, work collectively to address the complex reasons for the students' absence. They must identify the missing students and endeavour to bring them back to the classroom by offering various kinds of incentive packages to children from economically marginalised backgrounds as well as expanding safety net programmes for their families. The government must also focus on reducing the learning gap and make schools interesting again to prevent further dropouts.

Is sanding in Bibiyana a wake-up call?



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BADRUL IMAM

THE Bibiyana gas field in Bangladesh's Habiganj district is the highest quantity gas producer in Bangladesh. Operated by the US-based energy corporation Chevron, it alone produces about 1,250 million cubic feet per day (mmcf) of gas, which is more than 50 percent of the total national gas production (2,370 mmcf). In fact, out of the 20 gas fields in production across the country today, 16 fields cumulatively produce only 15 percent of the total daily production, while the remaining four contribute 85 percent. Next to Bibiyana stands the Titas gas field, which produces about 400 mmcf, just about one-third of what Bibiyana produces daily. While individual wells in the Bibiyana gas field produce about 50-60 mmcf on an average, those in other gas fields produce four to 20 mmcf.

All this data tells us why Bibiyana is considered a safeguard for our national gas supply chain. Obviously, a major production glitch at Bibiyana will cause havoc in our entire gas supply system. This has never been clearer than during the recent gas crisis experienced on the first day of Ramadan. The day before the holy month started, sand and dirt appeared alongside gas through the production tube in the gas flow line. This alerted the production personnel, and six suspected wells in a single pad were closed to identify the affected well. Production is now down by 400 mmcf and its impacts are too major to ignore. Many industrial units recorded low to no gas pressure, which seriously affected their production capability; several power plants switched to oil for fuel; domestic cooking was disrupted; the frustration of people fasting; the CNG transport vehicles could not function due to the lack of gas at the refilling stations. Production resumed at the suspended gas wells a few days later, except for the one well with sand and dirt flowing out with gas. Chevron hinted that gas supply would return to normal in a few days after the well with the sanding problem was fixed.

This is what happened when production from only six gas wells in Bibiyana—which has 26 gas wells in production in total—was temporarily suspended. What would happen if the same thing happened with 10 wells or 15 wells, or if the present production plateau started falling gradually or dipped suddenly to a low level, as experts have predicted? The consequence of a major decline in gas production at Bibiyana will be disastrous due to the fact that there is no alternative to this gas field in

the country at present. In case of such a disaster, the only option for Bangladesh to immediately fill the gap would be to ramp up its LNG import.

But increased LNG import will put more burden on our economy as the price of this fuel is still too high and there is no indication that it may go down any time soon. The Bangladesh Oil, Gas

Petrobangla website—a practice much appreciated in the public domain. The Petrobangla data shows that Bibiyana has a production capacity of 1,200 mmcf, while the actual production is in the range of 1,250 to 1,300 mmcf. Is this not a case of overproduction? When this question was asked to the technical person, again in an unofficial communication, they



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and Mineral Corporation (Petrobangla) estimates that the present level of LNG import accounts for only 20 percent of the total gas supply in the country and costs Tk 44,000 crore annually, while the remaining 80 percent is supplied from local gas fields, costing about Tk 6,000 per annum. Petrobangla already feels the pinch for paying for the high import bill, and has not received the subsidy it requested from the government. The bureaucrats in the administrative corridors do not seem to care much about what kind of economic equation they need to formulate, should they need to import LNG double, triple or quadruple the amount of the present volume!

Is the sanding in the Bibiyana gas well a wake-up call for Bangladesh? Sanding is the unwanted flow of loose sand with gas from an active gas well. This is a problem which, if not controlled properly, may cause equipment failure, production decline, pipeline erosion and so on. Eventually, a gas well may cease to produce and have to be abandoned. There are several causes behind the sanding of a gas well, among which high production rate, also referred to as overproduction, is an important one. High rate of production may cause formation damage and lead to sanding.

Is Chevron overproducing in Bibiyana wells? When this question was raised unofficially, technical personnel said that Chevron maintained international standards of reservoir management and did not overproduce gas in any Bibiyana well. However, data on the daily production of all the gas fields in the country are regularly updated on the

said the production capacity of Bibiyana was 1,300 mmcf, not 1,200. Chevron has supposedly given this information to Petrobangla several times, and has sent a letter requesting a correction on its website, but Petrobangla has not complied yet.

Does Petrobangla accept Chevron's claim that Bibiyana's production capacity is 1,300 mmcf, or does it not? It is a very important question, because if Petrobangla maintains that Bibiyana's production capacity is 1,200 mmcf, then it should direct Chevron not to overproduce gas at that field. This is a crucial technical issue that should be settled amicably between Petrobangla and Chevron. Bangladesh cannot meet its gas demand, and supply shortfall runs between 800 and 900 mmcf. An undersupply gas network system cannot risk overproduction, because it may lead to formation damage and eventually the loss of the active gas wells.

Bangladesh seems to be ill-prepared to manage a sudden shortfall in gas supply from the existing gas fields. The main reason behind that is, in spite of having highly prospective gas reserves by global standards, the country never undertook robust and sustained exploration of gas in potential land or offshore reserves. Bangladesh's success over securing a large sea area from Myanmar and India was followed by joyful celebration only. We have not learnt from Myanmar and India's successful exploration and discovery of large gas reserves in their respective areas in the Bay of Bengal. We have to wake up and do the needful to begin gas exploration to avoid a major energy crisis.

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Untold tales of RTI successes

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SHAMSUL BARI and RUHI NAZ

TODAY, we present tales that have been gathered from ordinary Bangladeshis. In the absence of a common source of information recording all the right to information (RTI) requests in Bangladesh, we reached out to those who help people submit such requests. These are some of the stories that are inspirational and motivating.

Government office forced to resume work

Muminul Sarkar, an RTI activist from Rangpur, was vexed to find that the Statistics Office in Taraganj upazila remained closed most of the time. He took a picture of the locked office door and attached it with his RTI request, asking for the attendance record of the official concerned. Soon, he discovered that the office was, in fact, kept open regularly, and the official even invited Muminul to visit his office. Upon hearing the story of the sad situation of the official's personal life, which caused him to sometimes neglect his professional duties, Muminul expressed sympathy, but reminded the official that as a good citizen, it was his responsibility to point out this dereliction of duties.

UP financial irregularities out in the open

The same Muminul Sarkar of Rangpur came to know early this year that some grave financial irregularities had taken place at a union parishad under his upazila. He immediately submitted an RTI request to the secretary of the union parishad asking for the audit report of FY2017-18. Upon receiving said report,

he found that auditors had highlighted different types of irregularities in their findings. However, no action had been taken by the authorities concerned in that regard. Mominul sent a follow-up RTI request to the secretary of the local government ministry asking for a response to the audit report. The ministry duly investigated the matter and found that the irregularities were related to projects amounting to a total of Tk 5 crore, out of which work worth Tk 3 crore has not been done at all, and only half of the work worth Tk 2 crore had been done. The ministry directive required those directly in charge of the projects to return the unspent money fully, and said that in the projects where only half of the work had been done, the secretary of the union parishad in question would have to cover the remaining cost.

BTRC compelled to update info in Bangla

Nowshad Hossain of Dinajpur was unhappy about some charges being levied by telephone companies from their users. He wanted to find out the actual rules in this regard from the website of Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC). To his dismay, he found that the information was uploaded in English only. So, he submitted an RTI request to the commission seeking the specific information on the charges, but also asking the reason why the information on the website was not available in Bangla as well. To his great delight, he discovered that in less than 10 days after his RTI request, the website was updated in both Bangla and English.

Unique ID registration by students becomes easy

A recent government decision to introduce unique identification cards for students has caused a great deal of consternation

among both students and their parents. Digitalised birth registration is required for all students. In order to digitalise the students' birth registration, their parents' births have to be registered digitally first. Apart from the hassle of obtaining such documentation, this puts pressure on the servers, slowing them down immensely. This led Shahidul Islam of Fulbari upazila in Dinajpur district to submit an RTI request online to the education ministry, asking for the process to extend the deadline. Immediately upon receiving the request, the ministry reportedly extended the deadline and eased some of the provisions.

Committees to prevent sexual harassment in educational institutions

Hamidul Islam of Nawabganj upazila, Dinajpur submitted an RTI request to the Deputy Commissioner's office in Thakurgaon asking to know how many educational institutions in the district had set up committees to prevent sexual harassment at educational institutions, as required by a High Court directive issued a decade ago. In a prompt action, the DC office attached the RTI request with a forwarding letter to all upazila nirbahi officers (UNOs) asking them to ensure swift action by all educational institutions in the district. Hamidul was later pleased to learn that the required action was initiated in the entire district, albeit long after the High Court directive had been issued.

There are many such stories that warm our hearts and firm up our faith in the people to take the RTI regime forward. We understand that we must set our objectives higher to benefit from the larger goals of the law, but these stories indicate that a good foundation is being laid. We hope the media and other voices share such stories throughout the country on a regular basis, so that others are inspired.

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