

# How can a teacher be treated so disrespectfully?

## Narail incident speaks volumes about rising religious intolerance in the country

WHILE the nation’s attention was fixed on the inauguration of the Padma Bridge – a milestone in our development history – a teacher was assaulted by students and local people in the Narail district. The incident only came to our notice after a video of the teacher being forced to wear a garland of shoes around his neck went viral on social media. Reportedly, this happened in the presence of police at the Mirzapur United College in Narail Sadar Upazila on June 17. The teacher is now in hiding, fearing further harassment.

What we understood from various media reports is that a Hindu student of the college wrote a post on Facebook in support of Nupur Sharma, the expelled BJP leader in India who had made derogatory comments about Prophet Muhammad. This outraged some students of the college who asked him to remove the post from Facebook, which he refused to comply with, further angering the former. After the college principal, also a Hindu, was informed about the situation, he called the police. At this point, rumours spread that the principal took the side of the student on this issue, and subsequently some students and locals forced both to wear garlands of shoes. As the situation became violent, police took the principal out of the campus.

We feel that this incident is not just an insult to the principal, but to the entire nation for we’ve failed to uphold the dignity of teachers again and again. The memory of science teacher Hridoy Chandra Mandal, who was arrested for “hurting religious sentiments” is still fresh in our minds. While writing this editorial, news of yet another incident emerged where a teacher died after being hit with a cricket stump by a student. Such instances of intolerance and violence will only rise if we cannot take action against those responsible.

Coming back to the case of Principal Swapan Kumar Biswas, there are several obvious questions: How could he be assaulted in such a manner in the presence of the police? Why are the police now denying that they have witnessed the incident? Was the principal attacked because of his religious identity? If so, what signal does it send to the nation? We believe those who harassed him must be punished, and he and his family must be given protection so that they can live and work peacefully again. We also should address the underlying causes behind the rise in hatred and intolerance in the country and take measures to uproot them. Unless we do so, such instances may continue to recur.

# Continued hike in rice prices unacceptable

## Govt must find a way to reduce prices and suffering

IT is alarming that rice prices continue to show an upward trend, piling pressure on customers who are already struggling to cope with the increase in cost of living and the prices of almost all food and non-food items. The hike in rice prices comes against a backdrop of heightened uncertainty caused by recent flooding, especially in the rice-growing north-western region, as well as a government move to lower customs tariffs on the import of rice, which was supposed to reduce prices.

A look at the latest market price chart reveals that the price of paddy (fine grain) went up by up to 7 percent to Tk 1,400-1,450 per maund from a couple of days ago in some north-western districts. The prices of medium and coarse paddy also increased. In Dhaka, retailers on Sunday sold fine grain rice at Tk 64-80 per kg, an increase of 3.6 percent from a week ago. The question is, how long before measures taken by the government will actually start to have an impact?

There is apparently a correlation, strange as it may seem, between the hike in paddy prices and the government decision on Thursday to more than halve the tariffs on rice import. Instead of reducing the price, it actually caused a hike as traders claimed that even the reduced rice import cost would not be lower than the current market price. There is a demand for removing the import duty to contain prices. Even if that is not entertained, it may take some time for the tariff cuts to positively impact the market as importers are yet to start the process of importing from India. Other issues like low yield and crop losses in flood-hit areas and pre-existing market realities may also continue to be at play.

Meanwhile, the prices of petrol and gas have been rising since before Ramadan. Though prices of edible oil are coming down a little at the moment, it will not provide much relief if staples remain pricey. There is no denying that food prices need to be kept within the capacity of people, with subsidies if necessary, to ensure peace and order. That hasn’t played very well for us yet, especially with the inflation rising to an eight-year high in May.

All this calls for decisive actions to bring down rice prices in any way possible. The government must fast-track rice import under the new arrangement and must address other destabilising factors to reduce market volatility.

# Why have politicians stopped participating in relief activities?



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MOHAMMAD AL-MASUM MOLLA

BANGLADESH has always been known as a land prone to natural disasters. Over the years, countless floods and cyclones have devastated the lives and livelihoods of its people, especially those living in marginal settings such as the coastal areas or the low-lying districts in the north and the northeast. In fact, frequent natural calamities were one of the main reasons why the rate of poverty remained high for many years.

Although that has changed and we have significantly improved our capacity as a nation to handle disasters, every now and then, a big disaster comes along and tests that ability. When that happens, we get reminded of how humanitarian the people in this country are. It is the ordinary people who inevitably step up to arrange and distribute relief of their own accord. But what about the political leaders and party activists who have historically played an integral role in relief activities?

Unfortunately, very few political leaders have gotten involved in the relief operations for what is now being termed the worst flood in the last 120 years.

As a young leader, the Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman led the historic “hunger procession” during the food crisis in the 1950s. During the devastating floods in 1988 and 1998, political leaders and workers were at the forefront of private relief operations. In 1970, after a devastating cyclone hit the coastal belt right before the national elections, all political parties suspended their campaigns and joined the relief operations. It was important for them to get engaged because the then Pakistani regime did almost nothing to help the cyclone-hit people.

At that time, communication was very poor. Ferries were the only way to reach the millions of people who were left stranded in the coastal districts. Still, political leaders, workers, student activists, including female workers, braved all obstacles and launched relief operations on their own with whatever resources they had.

One might say that it was a political “move” before the election. So what about now? With another national election coming up in a about a year’s time, why aren’t many of the top political leaders

seen anywhere near the relief scene, apart from the prime minister and a handful of other leaders from different political parties? Wouldn’t this have been a good opportunity for them to win the people over with their humanitarian work?

There could be many different explanations for this very unusual behaviour. One could be that the political

But what’s happening now is the opposite – and it cannot be good for the people. What could explain the current situation? Is it that the people have lost faith in politicians after they saw what happened in the last two national elections, which the bureaucrats are taking advantage of to empower themselves? Or is it that political leaders



▲ **Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani sharing his experience of visiting cyclone-affected areas at a huge gathering in Dhaka’s Paltan on November 23, 1970.**

PHOTO: ARCHIVE

leaders do not feel they have enough freedom anymore to go out and get involved, because everything is controlled by bureaucrats. Many lawmakers have openly vented their agitation in the parliament against what they termed “excessive power” wielded by bureaucrats these days.

In recent times, we have seen a number of standoffs between politicians and bureaucrats in different parts of the country, which were clear indications of an increasing power struggle between the two groups. This rift was clearly visible at the beginning of the state of emergency after Covid broke out in early 2020. The government formed committees headed by secretaries in 64 districts to oversee relief operations for the poor and the jobless. Local lawmakers at that time raised flags that the bureaucrats were being given too much power – at the formers’ expense.

Ordinarily, the role of lawmakers – who are elected by the people and are, therefore, well aware of what people want – is to make legislations and take decisions about how the country is run based on the pulse of the people. The role of bureaucrats is to find strategic ways to implement those legislations and decisions. In other words, politicians and bureaucrats must complement each other.

do not feel the need to engage with their vote banks anymore, because there are easier and less expensive ways of winning elections? Has that compromised their ability to understand how people are feeling and make decisions accordingly? You may pick your reasons.

But there is one interesting thing that I noticed this time around. With the proliferation of internet connectivity and the popularity of social media, especially among people in the grassroots, even the smallest of things get noticed. This year, social media celebrities and not-for-profit organisations have cashed in on this opportunity by filling the void created by the absence of political leaders in the relief operations.

It’s hard to tell whether this is good or not, because during disasters like this, even the smallest of contributions can make a world of difference for a family that has been living on just one meal a day for weeks. But the truth is, people always expect political leaders to look out for them, especially when they are in distress – as major political parties like the Awami League and BNP have strong networks in the remotest parts of the country. Similarly, as long as they are in politics, leaders should think about “leading” their people. When that relationship breaks down, you know there is something wrong.

# The Bridge on the River Padma



Shahnoor Wahid is a senior journalist.

SHAHNOOR WAHID

OUR senior citizens with a taste for Hollywood and British classic films will perhaps remember where I have taken the title from. They must have watched the film titled, “The Bridge on the River Kwai” in their youth – a 1952 epic war film directed by David Lean based on the novel by Pierre Boulle. The movie is no doubt a classic of superior quality which depicts how the Prisoners of War (PoW) from the allied troops captured by the Japanese during World War II were forced to construct a railway bridge with big wooden logs to connect Thailand with Burma over the river named Kwai.

The Japanese intention was to extend the reach of their troops to the heartland of Burma and beyond, right up to the eastern border of India. The extreme harsh conditions in the hot and humid jungle coupled with the unabated torture inflicted by the Japanese soldiers on the already famished PoWs made the task more difficult. Despite all the adversities, deaths and deprivation and untold cruelty, the captive soldiers and officers finally built the bridge which became a thing of beauty. It stood on the river Kwai to glorify the ingenuity of the soldiers and officers from the engineering divisions and other units of the US and British army and air force. They showed the enemy that when united for a good cause, even starving people can achieve wonders in a harsh situation. The film that won many Oscars and other international awards remains even today an iconic one worth watching many times over.

The construction of the Padma Bridge seemed like a many times magnified

version of the construction process of the Bridge Kwai. The reel bridge used wooden logs, nails and coir ropes as essential components to build the main structure, but in the real bridge on the river Padma, concrete, steel and iron rods were used. A good number of colossal cranes, lifts and many other modern equipment were needed to build the bridge on the

of handling such a big project. But it took up the challenge and started the work. No amount of negative remarks could dampen the spirit of the people associated with the task, and they kept doing what they were assigned to do with dogged determination. As the bridge began to take shape, those opposing it began to retreat into the shades one by one. Many looked at it with their narrow partisan eyes, never realising, or wanting to realise, that it was a national property that belonged to the country.

Here are some features of the Padma Bridge: “Padma Multipurpose Bridge is considered the most challenging construction project in the history of Bangladesh. The two-level steel truss bridge carries a four-lane highway on the upper level and a single-track railway on a lower level. The bridge’s length is 20,180 feet. It is the longest bridge in Bangladesh, and is the longest over the Ganges in terms of both span and the total length. The highest depth of pile of this bridge is 122 metres, which is highest among all other bridges.”

Well, a bridge like that is not something you build every other day, so it would be looked at and admired by many generations of Bangladeshis. They would also take pride knowing that it was built by their own engineers and that all the raw materials used in it were manufactured by Bangladeshi companies. And that the huge sums of money invested in it have been generated by the Bangladesh government from its own coffer.

The senior citizens have not been able to witness the construction work of some iconic railway structures like the longest railway bridge named the Hardinge Bridge on the Padma River in 1910. But they can now feel content to have been able to witness the construction work of one of the largest bridges in Southeast Asia.

It is always easy to have something – but it is difficult to keep. We have the Padma Bridge now, but the responsibility to maintain it properly rests on us.



▲ **The construction of the Padma Bridge seemed like a many times magnified version of the construction process of the Bridge Kwai.**

PHOTO: COLLECTED

mighty river Padma. But, in the film, there were no cranes or lifts or generators in that gloomy, rain drenched jungle of Thailand, rather the physical strength and bare hands of the prisoners were the only tools available to push, pull and lift heavy logs.

But the pride felt by the engineers, soldiers, and workers in both the cases is just as self-glorifying and profound. Even after creating something for the enemy, the allied officers and soldiers looked at the wooden bridge with great pride. And when one builds something as massive and beautiful as the Padma Bridge, it is only natural that everyone associated with it should feel proud. It was no doubt a big challenge for the government to undertake the enormous work having no previous experience