

# No teacher should have to suffer such barbarity

## Recent attacks on teachers deeply alarming

WE'RE alarmed by the recent series of attacks on teachers that saw at least two brutalised within the space of a week. First, there was a college principal in Narail Sadar Upazila who, on June 18, was forced to wear a garland of shoes for apparently trying to protect a student who ran into trouble after a Facebook post backing a controversial leader of India's ruling party. Then, on June 25, a teacher in Ashulia was beaten to death by a student apparently incensed by his disciplinary measures. Regardless of the circumstances of these events, the fact that such cruelty could be meted out to teachers, of all people, is deeply disturbing.

There have been some disturbing revelations since the two events came to our notice. In Narail, for example, the shoe incident reportedly occurred right before the eyes of the police. Apparently, the deputy commissioner (DC) and superintendent of police (SP) were present on the scene. There were also announcements made via a microphone of the principal's impending humiliation, yet no one came forward to save him. In Ashulia, police have yet to apprehend the accused (although they did arrest his father). Equally distressingly, police tried to pass him off as a minor – by mentioning his age in the case file as 16 – apparently to make him eligible to be tried in a juvenile court. But school authorities told *The Daily Star* that he is actually 19 years and six months old.

We fail to understand the role of the police in these incidents. Their failure to act properly and responsibly only makes the consequent experience more traumatic. Also, in Narail, it didn't help that both teacher and student had a minority religion in common, which further angered their majoritarian tormentors – a pattern of marginalisation that deserves scrutiny. But let's not lose sight of the bigger picture here: the crumbling of social values as well as increasing vulnerability of teachers who want to do their job with sincerity. Add to that the suffocating environment that prevails in most public universities and colleges thanks to their politicisation. In a statement condemning the attacks, the University Teachers' Network also decried this environment, saying that teachers are often being harassed and assaulted, which is partly to blame for the poor state of education in Bangladesh.

This is a bad sign for a country trying to develop a knowledge-based society to face the challenges of the future. We urge the authorities to help create an environment in which teachers are properly treated, protected, rewarded, and empowered to do their nation-building work. Teachers must be given all the safety they need, especially while on campus, and those who endanger it must be dealt with.

# A glaring example of bureaucratic botch-ups!

## Long-delayed Bapex letter exposes poor state of governance

WE often come across stories of human follies that bear no rhyme or reason. The smaller ones can be dismissed as mere faux pas, but when it reaches the border of absurdity, one begins to wonder at the level of mental fitness of those concerned. One such story that came to our notice involves Bangladesh Petroleum Exploration and Production Company Limited (Bapex), which reportedly invited job-seekers for a written test for the assistant manager post nearly eight years after they had applied! Yes, you heard it right. Those job-seekers had applied in 2014/15, and a lot of water has flown under the bridge since then. Many of them are now working at different government and private organisations.

But nothing seems to have changed in the world of Bapex which, in a letter, thanked the applicants for applying for the above post, and informed them that they had been selected for the written test after primary evaluation. Signed by the general manager (admin) of Bapex, the letter also asked them to submit their personal details, photos and copies of the "calling letter" by July 14, stressing that, otherwise, it will not be possible to send them admit cards for the written test.

Not that any of them are likely to attend the test, nor many are eligible any longer to attend it, even if they want to. One recipient of the letter is now working in a state-run bank as a senior officer. He said he had completely forgotten about his application. Another recipient said his age limit for the job had expired in 2016. How is it possible that Bapex failed to assess their eligibility before sending that letter? Those who moved from their former addresses heard about it from social media posts or old acquaintances.

Not surprisingly, the Bapex general manager said that the delay may have happened due to "administrative complications," and refused to take responsibility for the long delay or concerns of the applicants. This is, frankly, the definition of a disaster. The whole episode is a lesson in what *not* to do as an institution, especially one as important as Bapex. The mismanagement and incompetence demonstrated by this incident are typical of government offices which are, more often than not, slowed or encumbered by the bureaucratic deadweight. And that there are hardly any functional instruments of accountability only makes the situation worse.

We urge the Bapex authorities to investigate this incident and hold to account those responsible for it. The government should also ensure that such botch-ups never happen again.

# Another ring in the shackle to gag the media



## STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

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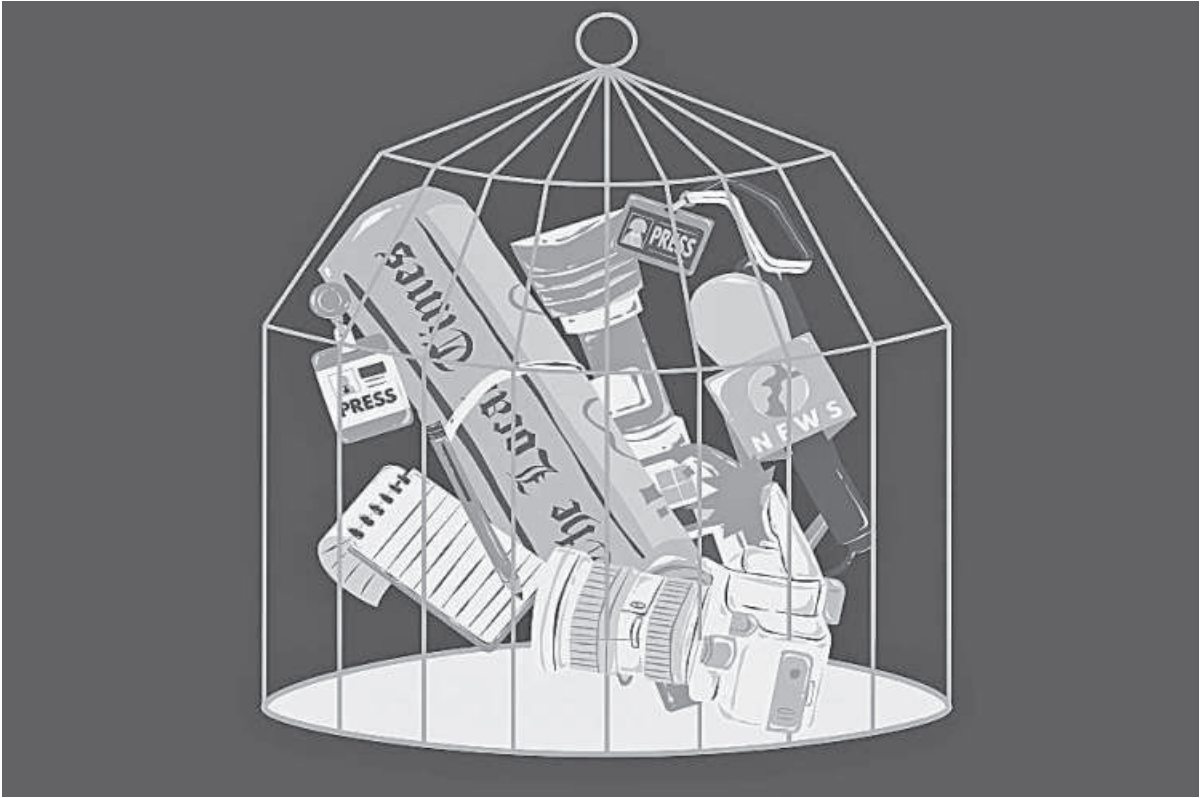
BRIG GEN SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN, NDC, PSC (RETD)

IS not the media already under duress, and its function heavily encumbered by the Digital Security Act (DSA), without needing a new law which is now on the anvil of the Bangladesh Press Council (BPC)? The draft law provides for a Tk 10 lakh fine for participating in "illegal activities."

Apparently, the idea has been in the works since 2016, and the 1974 statute has to be amended to fit in such a draconian provision. For good reasons, not all members of the BPC are in accord with the suggested amendments. From reports in the print media, it appears that the draft was formulated and subsequent action was taken in a furtive manner. Some of the members were not aware of the proposal, and the necessary procedures, they feel, had not been followed before placing such a proposal to the Cabinet. Certainly, the journalist community had not been consulted either as a group or as members of the Council representing it.

The proposed punitive provisions would do anything but preserve the freedom of the press. The defining clause of the provision is ambiguous and lends itself to interpretation by the agencies involved in the process of law and order. For one thing, what is "illegal activity"? There are existing laws that lay down actions against anyone involved in "illegal activities". Why do we need to have a separate law to govern journalists? Left to the administration and its agencies, the possibility of interpreting the law to suit the circumstances cannot be dismissed out of hand. The DSA is a case in point. The worst sufferers of this very abominable legislation are the journalists. Who defines what constitutes "harm" to the image of the country and how? Is, for example, reporting extrajudicial killings, or instances of gross monetary irregularity or corruption in high places, "harming the state or its freedom or harming the image of the country"?

More often than not, the ruling party or the government has been equated with the state as several cases under the DSA exemplifies, and one cannot be blamed for thinking that the same inclination would work on the psyche of the administration when it comes to the application of the proposed amendment. On the contrary, we believe, withholding such information, in fact, is not only harmful to the image of the country, keeping it from public domain is patently anti-state. After all, corruption, or abridgments of the right to life not only abnegates the country's constitution, it puts the country's interest at stake too.



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Every institution must be guided by some rules and follow certain principles of functioning. But the administration, instead of being an enabler of free flow of information for public good, should not become a hinderer.

There is a raft of laws, namely, the Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC), the DSA, the draft Data Protection Act, and the draft Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission Regulation for Digital, Social Media and OTT Platforms (draft BTRC regulations). One wonders whether the proposed amendment betrays an element of fear or uncertainty of the ruling party and the current government.

has come to be described as the "enemy of the people" by the president [now former president] of a country that holds the First Amendment to its constitution as sacred as the scripture. And in the world's largest democracy, the country's historically free press has been hijacked, according to one commentator, to do the biddings of the ruling party. In our country, too, the DSA is the sword of Damocles.

Why should a government, if it has been duly elected in a fair and free election, and claims to have the support of the majority, be so eager to add another ring in the shackles that bind the media today?

It seems that journalists and their "welfare" are occupying the mind of the administration. Not only the proposed law which, some say, is designed to sort out "errant" journalists or those who do not fall in line (with the exception of a few most have), the government is also contemplating, reportedly, to make a separate database of journalists, according to the information minister, to "restore discipline in journalism".

There is for good reason that the press (there was only the print media then) was dubbed as the "fourth estate". But since the time British politician Edmund Burke made the reference (in more of an apprehensive rather than a deferential tone), the Fourth Estate has become a metaphor for the power of the media that empowers it to hold the government and the political party, which the people have chosen by free will to run their affairs, to account, if the policies of the government run contrary to the interest of the public. But regrettably, in recent times, the media

Admittedly, every institution must be guided by some rules and follow certain principles of functioning. But the administration, instead of being an enabler of free flow of information for public good, should not become a hinderer. Admittedly too, the media has not been able to acquire itself properly, but that is not because of lack of intent, but perhaps due to lack of capability in most cases.

The amendment to the existing law would also need another amendment, since the proposed punishment and the 1974 Act does not contain any punitive clause, and would alter the very underlying purpose of the commission. The preamble to the Act states, "[I]t is expedient to establish a Press Council for the purpose of preserving the freedom of the Press and maintaining and improving the standard of newspapers and news agencies in Bangladesh." And in fulfilling that particular objective of helping newspapers and news agencies to maintain their freedom, the Council, apart from its other tasks, has the duty "to keep under review any development likely to restrict the supply and dissemination of information of public interest and importance." This and the ambiguous amendment are mutually exclusive.

# Why have banks failed SMEs?

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EVEN before the pandemic, CFOs of small businesses struggled to get the insights they needed to manage their finances effectively. Even though banks are willing to help, they are facing an increasing number of complex cases of SME clients. It can be stated that identifying the challenges that delay the growth of the SME sector is crucial, and SME relevant policies and regulations should be objectively evaluated. The sector plays a significant role in countries worldwide as SMEs account for the majority of businesses and are one of the main contributors to economic development and employment creation.

Starting an SME requires minimum funding, which makes starting them easy for people. Bangladesh has nearly 10 million SMEs which contribute to 23 percent of the country's GDP, represent 80 percent of the jobs in the industry sector, and employ 25 percent of the total labour force.

In an economy, commercial banks are generally the main source of finance for SMEs. For the sector to expand and flourish, it should have adequate access to bank credits, thus, industrial credit in Bangladesh is financed through government-sponsored industrial banks, such as commercial banks and specialised financial institutions. Despite such facilities, entrepreneurs in the sector cannot invest enough, which is what drives firms' growth strategies. In addition, the loans offered to them usually carry a high-interest rate because banks are not willing to provide small loan amounts with high monitoring costs. There are some rules and regulations

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that cause difficulties for banks to lend to companies that are not registered, cannot show collateral, or cannot provide financial statements. However, SMEs are usually unable to provide sufficient and reliable information to financial institutions. At times, they cannot provide the audited financial information and statements that the banks require, thus creating informational asymmetry. This asymmetric information between the SMEs and financial institutions might prevent the lending transaction from taking place and create serious obstacles for SMEs to obtain credit from formal financial institutions. Moreover, SMEs tend to not maintain proper licensing which makes them difficult to trace, causing further problems for banks to maintain records.

To mitigate such challenges, Bangladesh Bank (BB) has been developing and designing initiatives to aid the SME industry's growth. The sector adopted the Small and Medium Enterprise Credit Policies and Programs in 2011. The policy includes SMEs' borrowing from commercial banks, a refinancing scheme, prioritising SME activities and special emphasis on lending to women entrepreneurs. It also eased the complex procedures and requirements for small enterprises such as relaxation of collateral requirements. BB offers attractive loan provisioning to support SME financing with only 0.25 percent of the general provisioning. Moreover, banks are willing to customise financial solutions by granting loans to SMEs in a cluster which enables the bank to trace SMEs better and lower their cost of capital.

It has been stated by the World Bank in its 2019 report titled, "Financing Solutions For Micro, Small And Medium Enterprises In Bangladesh", that a USD 2.8 billion financing gap exists in the SME sector. Over 60 percent of women entrepreneurs' needs remain unmet, with a lack of access

to collateral being one major obstacle. The country lacked a single-systematic planned policy designed to aid SME financing. One probable recommendation can be building a business case for the financial institutions to provide tailored support for the SME market, especially for women entrepreneurs. Collaboration between the government, BB, and development partners can together encourage the specialisation of the financial institutions to serve the SME sector, where BB can remove some of the regulatory requirements that all financial institutions should comply with, while lending to this sector. Accordingly, lending regulations should be reformed to enable the SMEs to borrow against movable collateral such as equipment, inventories, account receivables, and intellectual property rights, rather than against fixed assets only. This is because the majority of SMEs don't possess fixed assets. Additionally, reforming insolvency laws will reduce legal uncertainties which may increase risks to lenders and constrain the supply of finance.

The SME sector in a developing country is usually subjected to discrimination and negligence in the context of access to government support, access to finance, management, and marketing expertise and technology. SMEs in Bangladesh are operating in a semi-formal manner, while banks are one of the most formal institutions. Notably, the SME financing gap for Bangladesh remains high compared to other South Asian economies. To minimise this gap between SMEs and the banking sector, the banks can relax their banking procedures in regards to SMEs. Furthermore, banks should develop an official credit rating system, which will give them an idea about the reliability of their SME clients, and lower the risks for lenders. In this regard, greater cooperation among banks would be of huge help.