

Why are teachers being targeted?

On March 20, Hriday Chandra Mondal, a science teacher of Binodpur Ram Kumar High School in Munshiganj, was publicly harassed and sent to jail for allegedly hurting religious sentiment.

On June 17, students and locals forced Swapna Kumar Biswas, acting principal of Mirzapur United College, to wear a garland of shoes around his neck in Narail Sadar Upazila in front of the district administration and police, again for allegedly hurting religious sentiments.

On June 25, Utpal Kumar Sarkar, a teacher of Haji Yunus Ali School and College in Ashulia, was beaten to death by one of his own students for taking disciplinary action against that student.

MD SHAHNAWAZ KHAN CHANDAN

In the first six months of this year, three incidents of violence against teachers became newspaper headlines, showing a disturbing trend that is contrary to our traditional values of respecting and honouring teachers.

Hriday Mondal, a science teacher of Binodpur Ram Kumar High School in Munshiganj, told this correspondent, "I am still living with the trauma. I am always afraid for the security of my family members. The conspirators who tried to harm me at that time are still at large and they can still harm me or my family members. The administration and the mass media cannot protect me all the time."

Swapna Kumar Biswas, acting principal of Mirzapur United College, who has fled from home to avoid further reprisals, told the media, "I wish I could die by suicide after such public humiliation. I don't want to show my face to society. I never hurt any religious sentiment. I tried to take disciplinary action against those who had hurt religious sentiment."

Hriday and Swapna have every reason to be traumatised as they witnessed how the entire community and even the police went against them and supported their humiliation.

According to the plaintiff in Hriday's case, when he was summoned to the police station, he saw that the police officers had already written the complaint without even consulting him. He was ordered by the headmaster to sign the complaint and become the plaintiff.

In Swapna's case too, he was humiliated right in front of the police who took no visible action to protect him from the harassers.

These incidents remind us of the ordeal of another teacher, Shyamal Kanti Bhakta, who was publicly humiliated by Jatiya Party lawmaker Salim Osman six years ago. In this case too, the teacher was accused of hurting religious sentiment.

The lawmaker ordered him to do squats while holding his ears -- an age old form of public disgracing used in schools. The incident was recorded on video and released on social media.

Just after a year, Shyamal Kanti Bhakta was sent to jail in a bribery case and lawmaker Salim Osman was cleared of the case filed for assaulting the teacher, despite the fact that the judicial enquiry had found his involvement. Later, Shyamal was proved not guilty and reinstated to his position in the school.

The repeats of these acts of violence against teachers with no punitive action against the assailants and their abettors has given rise to a permanent sense of fear and self-censorship among school teachers.

This correspondent interviewed 10 school teachers and all of them said they feel nervous when they have to teach certain topics of science, social science and religious studies.

One of the teachers remarked, "I take science class for the students of class 10. I intentionally did not discuss much about evolution as I thought that this might be considered offensive to some of my students' religious sentiments and considering the current trend, I might lose my job."

Another teacher said, "Nowadays I have to think twice before uttering a word in the classroom. I always feel nervous about whether I am hurting someone's religious sentiment or not. We have already banned smartphones in the classroom so that students cannot record anything and use social media in class."

Teachers said many of them have also lost interest in putting extra effort into preparing

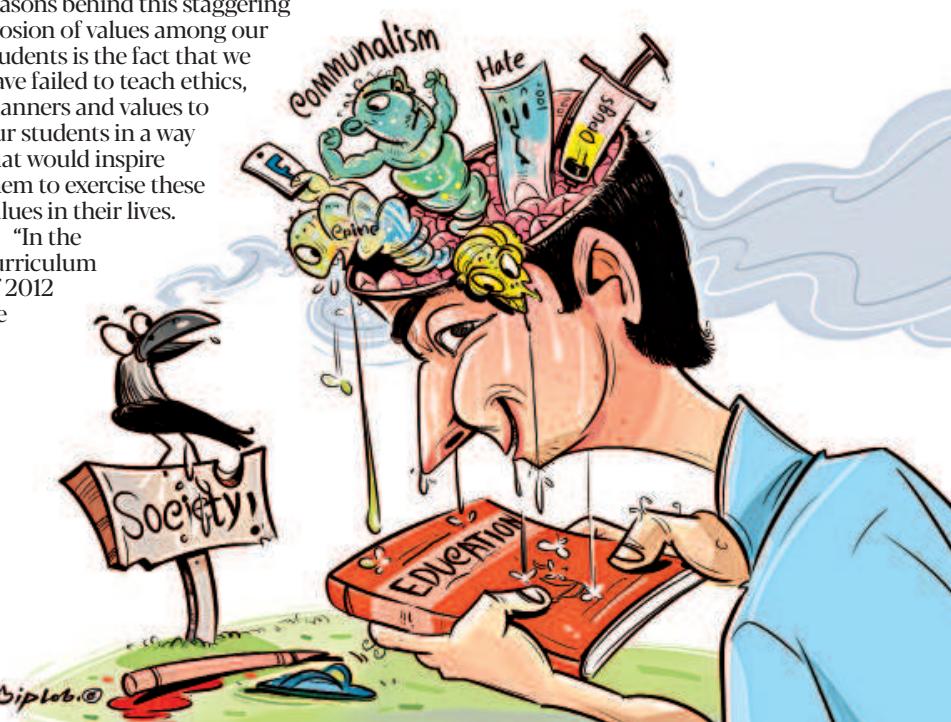
lessons for their students.

A social science teacher of a secondary school said, "Whenever I feel that teaching some topics may cause debate among my students, I avoid it. After the recent incidents, I just say to myself, what is the use of teaching these students when we do not get minimum respect from society? I am just doing my job as I do not have any other source of income."

According to experts, this trend of violence against teachers is indicative of the grave crisis of values in society. Experts emphasise that if root causes of the problems cannot be addressed immediately, social fabric, over time will be completely destroyed.

Professor Siddique Rahman, former director of Institute of Education and Research, University of Dhaka and one of the authors of the national education policy 2010 and the national curriculum 2012 said, "We cannot blame our teachers if they are afraid of teaching certain topics in the classroom as we can see the level of intolerance and value crisis in our society. One of the biggest reasons behind this staggering erosion of values among our students is the fact that we have failed to teach ethics, manners and values to our students in a way that would inspire them to exercise these values in their lives."

"In the curriculum of 2012 we



introduced ethics as a compulsory subject along with religious education for the first time in the history of Bangladesh.

Nevertheless, due to overburden of the exams, students memorise the textbooks just to pass the exams but the knowledge does not enter their hearts," he added.

Prof Rahman also emphasised the need for including in the textbooks, literary works of writers from diverse communities to encourage communal tolerance and harmony.

He said, "I had included literary works of many Hindu, Buddhist and Christian scholars in the textbooks so that students learn to celebrate the diversity of our society. I had introduced more pictures of women and pictures of people from different cultures and religions in the textbooks as students also learn many things just by looking at the pages of the textbooks."

However, he regretted the fact that many of his suggestions were omitted in the later editions of the textbooks.

"If you analyse the contents of the textbooks in 2013 and in 2016, you will find that many works of scholars from other religious orientations were removed from the later versions of the textbooks," he added.

"Effects of what we are teaching our children in the textbooks will definitely be reflected in our society."

Muhammed Zafar Iqbal, eminent academician and writer, commented, "Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, children and adolescents have started to spend huge amounts of time on social media where they follow and interact only with people who they like and who have similar perceptions. This may severely affect these children's psychological development and values such as showing respect to others' opinion, tolerance have decayed drastically."

Saying that violence involving school teachers and students was unheard of in the history of Bangladesh, he said, "Why did the police not protect the teachers? Why did the parents try to protect their child knowing that he has committed murder? Why did the school authority not discuss with the parents of the children who were showing problematic behaviour? We need to find answers to these

questions."

Mahabeen Haque, professor of the department of educational and counselling psychology at Dhaka University, said, "The recent incidents indicate that families and schools are also failing to instil values in their children. Children always learn from observing living examples, moving around them, interacting with them. Our society, our education system has failed to create such ideal examples for our children from whom they can learn values and good practices."

Haque suggested that all stakeholders, such as families, sociologists, psychologists, educationists, law enforcement agencies and policy makers must work together to identify the root causes of the problem and to find out the solutions.

Her assessment is that our society is also largely responsible for such a crisis in values. She added, "Widespread injustice, nurturing a culture of impunity and appeasement and widespread corruption in the administration encourage our children to choose the wrong path. Without addressing these issues, we shall not be able to solve this value crisis overnight."

VIOLENCE AGAINST TEACHERS A sickness caused by deterioration of values

GOLAM MORTOZA

They were never part of the political elite. Neither were they among the wealthy. Yet they were always considered the most revered and respected members of society because they were teachers -- high school teachers in particular.

Traditionally, many teachers were practitioners of Hinduism and treated teaching as sacred as a religious ritual.

They were people of refined tastes, intellectual prowess and progressive thinking. They were above the biases created by differences in religion, caste and colour. As much as the students feared them, they respected and admired them a lot more.

Their presence was significant even three decades ago. Most of today's middle-aged citizens of Bangladesh have taken lessons from them. When needed, they rebuked their students, and on occasion, didn't spare the cane. The students feared them but never could they even think of disrespecting their teachers.

While they exerted authority, they also knew how to nurture students with love and affection. They would protect their students like their own children. The relationship between students and teachers was one of great respect and affection. Guardians too respected the teachers.

Times, however, have changed quite a bit since Bangladesh gained independence. Politics headed down the wrong path and this created a hostile environment for teachers. As a result, they were gradually forced to leave the country.

But the gap left was never filled. Thus, the main reasons behind the anarchy in our education system can be traced to the dearth of such revered educators.

We claim that the society has changed, but when asked why and how it has changed, we have no acceptable explanation, nor any related research.

In any society, it is always the middle class that plays the most important role in setting the norms and deciding standards.

The student-teacher relationship was based on mutual affection and respect emanating from a value system adopted by the middle class. And politics played an important role when this value system was constructed. The middle class had control over politics, and culture was deeply connected with it. The middle class also led the main cultural activities. In addition to teaching, teachers were directly or indirectly in charge of these cultural activities. Teachers commanded absolute loyalty and respect from the middle class and students eagerly followed the path adopted by their parents.

After gaining independence, Bangladesh's politics went through a lot of change. Honesty continuously eroded from politics. A significant portion of the middle-class leadership has already been lured by the charm of dishonest politics. The principles-based leftist politics and cultural activities, once so prominent in our region, gradually began to weaken.

The leftist politicians and cultural icons were never too influential in terms of the popular vote-based politics. But they always played a central role in defining the middle class's values and tastes. These values were reflected in their day-to-day lives. Thus, the middle class could rally behind them.

That thought process has become virtually extinct. Many of those iconic personalities are bogged down by despair and frustration. Many have compromised their integrity. Thus, the engineers of social reform, the middle class, are in a state of confusion. Their leadership has adopted dishonest politics and become seduced by financial gain.

They continue to hold leadership positions within the middle class but have long abandoned its value system. Today, they are the ones most prominent when talking about anomalies in society. They are vociferous about the moral decay of society and the disappearance of values. They have made the terms "values" and "decay" rather fickle.

The fact that the values did not leave us but have instead been driven away is something that no one has the courage to utter.

There is no platform which can be used to challenge this so-called middle-class leadership, the members of which have long since strayed from their original path -- thanks to politics. Aided by the middle-class leadership, politics of opportunism has managed to obliterate the mainstream educational system to a great extent.

A damaging habit of leaking question papers and not taking any actions against the culprits is in vogue. Teachers of higher educational institutes were lured with promotions and better designations. Obviously, they are suffering from an eroding moral compass.

In today's society, teachers are being oppressed. Politicians are giving them corporal punishments, they are being forced to wear garlands of shoes in presence of members of the police, students are physically assaulting their teachers and killing them. None of these are events disconnected from society. These are inevitable results of the society we have created.

These problems have no instant solutions. Why the student-teacher relationship has deteriorated to this level, why students no longer respect teachers, why students are killing teachers -- these questions have no simple answers.

There are no ad-hoc solutions. This noxious environment wasn't created in a day, it took years to arrive at this point. If we are serious about getting out of this quagmire, we have to start taking steps from today.

HOUNDED EDUCATORS



Shyamal Kanti Bhakta

The headmaster of Piyar Sattar Latif High School in Narayanganj was assaulted on May 13, 2016 by a mob in presence of Jatiya Party lawmaker Salim Osman over allegations that he made derogatory comments about religion while meting out corporal punishment to a student. A judicial probe found him innocent. No charges were pressed against Osman.



Hriday Chandra Mondal

The assistant teacher of Binodpur Ram Kumar High School in Munshiganj was sued for "demeaning Islam" during his class lecture on science and religion on March 20. He was sent to jail. He was released on bail but is still facing trial.



Amodini Paul

A rumour spread that the assistant headteacher at Daul Barbakpur High School in Naogaon "beat



Utpal Kumar Sarkar

A case and arrested a few suspects. The lecturer of political science at Haji Yunus Ali School and College in Ashulia was bludgeoned to death with a cricket stump by a student on June 25 because the teacher had taken disciplinary action against the assaulter for stalking girls. Prime accused Ashraful Islam Jitu has been placed on 5-day remand in the murder case.