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End the sufferings of laid-off jute workers

Govt must pay their dues in full and reopen mills as promised

IT'S been two years since the closure of 25 jute mills operated by Bangladesh Jute Mills Corporation (BJMC) and the layoff of about 25,000 workers involved with them. This effectively marked the end of our state-run jute sector. How have the workers been faring since then? Although there has been no extensive research of the aftermath of the closure, a report by *The Daily Star* shows that promises made then are yet to come to fruition, to the detriment of both workers and this once storied industry.

The report, based on a recent visit to at least four mills in Khalishpur, Khulna, highlights how some former workers have been passing their days in hardship, having tried other professions without success. The entire area looks like a "haunted" space, and there was no sign of activity with regard to the promised modernisation and reopening of mills under private or public-private arrangements.

One former substitute worker, now selling vegetables, detailed his struggles after losing his job of 23 years and being displaced from the workers' colony. He got only Tk 1,10,000 and no other benefits. Workers were promised due wages and benefits within "the quickest possible time", along with chances of retraining and reemployment when the mills are reopened. Whatever happened to those promises? So far, according to an official estimate, 14,351 workers out of 14,996 from the seven closed mills in Khulna got a golden handshake of Tk 1,352 crore (out of Tk 1,569 crore), while 13,339 substitute workers out of 14,078 had been given Tk 105 crore (out of Tk 109 crore). Apparently, strange as it may seem, confusion over name spellings halted payment to some workers.

Whatever the case, we're yet to have a full picture of the dues actually owed or paid to jute workers not just in Khulna, but in all the zones. There are reasons to doubt whether those would be paid in full or soon enough, given the history of exploitation of jute workers in Bangladesh. The predicament of laid-off workers, in simple terms, was caused by years of corruption, mismanagement and lack of vision by those running the sector. Will they be ever held accountable? Moreover, payment of dues was meant to be only part of the solution. What progress, if any, has been made in terms of the plan to reopen the mills after modernisation and reemploy former workers as promised?

The government must answer these questions and take better care of the workers. It should come up with an action plan about reopening all closed mills. We already have much of the physical infrastructure. If properly equipped with modern machinery and run with a vision, they can be a game-changer for Bangladesh.

Why do girls fall behind in higher education?

End early marriage, ensure safety so they can reach full potential

While girls' enrolment in schools at the primary and secondary levels has been pretty good in recent years, the picture is quite different in case of college, degree and master's level education. According to latest data by the Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics (Banbeis), girls' enrolment rate starts falling at the college level, and the curve keeps dropping from there on. While they accounted for 53.57 percent of total enrolment at the 9th and 10th grades, their enrolment at the graduation level was only 43.80 percent. This declining trend is concerning, to say the least, and needs immediate attention from the policymakers and other stakeholders.

While poverty and child marriage are generally considered major obstacles in the way of girls, sexual harassment is another impediment that slows or halts their progression to college and university level education. Moreover, a lack of women-friendly public transports and absence of girls' dormitories in the majority of our higher educational institutions contribute to the situation.

In poor households, parents often consider girls as a burden, and when it comes to sending their children to colleges and universities, it is the boys that usually get preference. Thus, while girls outnumber boys at the primary and secondary levels, their numbers dramatically fall after that. The correlation between poverty and early marriage becomes clear when you consider that 51 percent of young women in Bangladesh are married before their 18th birthday, according to Unicef. A majority of these girls cannot continue education after marriage.

There is then the issue of safety. Since many girls from rural areas have to travel a long distance to go to schools or colleges, they often face sexual harassment on the way and even inside public transports. Most colleges and universities neither have their own transportation system nor dormitories to support accommodation of girl students, which could save them from a lot of trouble. Thus, there is a growing sense of insecurity among parents, and it doesn't help either that the state of law enforcement is generally poor. The result is devastating not just for the girls, but for the country as well. Lack of work opportunities for female graduates is another deterring factor.

These barriers must be addressed if we want to reap the full benefit of education and educated women for our society. We urge the government and all relevant agencies and institutions to take note of the above situation. They must take measures to enable and facilitate girls' education up to the tertiary level.

A teacher and his garland of shoes



OF MAGIC & MADNESS
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BADIUZZAMAN BAY

HERE'S an image that will likely be seared into our memory forever: a teacher being forced to wear a garland of shoes around his neck. Watching the grainy video on YouTube, you could almost mistake him for a leader as he emerged from a building, flanked by police, with his pressed hands high in the air, as if to greet waiting crowds... except it was not. Except the police there were just dummies. Except the crowds gathered outside to witness his ultimate humiliation.

Moments like this can be strangely evocative. In 2008, when an Iraqi journalist threw a shoe in the direction of a US president, it came to represent the pent-up anger of a nation for an unjust war that the US had imposed on it. Pent-up anger was again at work when vindictive crowds in Narail sought to recreate that moment, and it was no coincidence that their target was a Hindu. Regardless of the contrasting symbolism of shoes, enabling heroism in one instance and villainy in another, moments like this, once you see them, are hard to unsee.

What was Swapan Kumar's crime? He tried to save a student, also a Hindu, who wrote a Facebook post in support of Nupur Sharma, a now-suspended leader of India's BJP who had made derogatory comments about Prophet Muhammad. This made ideal fodder for their tormentors whose anger at a faraway enemy was, until that point, restricted to helpless outbursts on social media.

But if we're being honest, many things had to go wrong for a moment this disturbing to be born. Regardless of the communal undertone, it was actually the result of a complex interplay of several factors including the rise of the Muslim Right and shrinking space for diversity, a general anti-India feeling, crumbling of democratic institutions, and moral decadence in a society where long-cherished values – like respect for teachers and elders – are being playfully tossed about. Can we address one without addressing the other?

Swapan Kumar, who has been in hiding since that day, later admitted that after learning what was about to happen, he felt like committing suicide to save himself from the impending humiliation. "But I couldn't do it thinking of my three children, my wife and my mother," he said. In hindsight, he would consider himself "lucky" to have come out of it alive. In India's Rajasthan, not long after, a tailor was beheaded purportedly for a social media post supporting Nupur Sharma. This debate that has caused so much outrage and counter-outrage simply

refuses to be over, in yet another example of the deepening polarisations across the subcontinent.

But should we be happy that the worst was averted in our case, or sad that even such humiliation is somehow not tragic enough? Robbed of their dignity, can teachers do what they have been historically expected to do? While any teacher can be in trouble in a vicious,

emotions run wild, minorities make easy targets. So in India, they tell Muslims and immigrants to go to Pakistan/Bangladesh. In Bangladesh, they tell Biharis and Hindus to go to Pakistan/India. The cycle never ends. It's like we're still haunted by our collective Partition trauma.

But it is possible to defend one's faith or oppose assaults on religious sentiments without condoning violence.



▲ VISUAL: COLLECTED

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lawless climate, minority teachers have had a particularly rough go of it lately, especially when the allegation is "hurting religious sentiments". Before Swapan Kumar Biswas, we had Amodini Paul, Hriday Mondal, Babita Kumar Roy, Shyamal Kanti Bhakta, etc. Last week, Utpal Kumar Sarkar was beaten to death by a student apparently incensed by his disciplinary measures. After that, the University Teachers' Network demanded an end to attacks on teachers.

A fair demand, of course. But moments of grief should not distract us from the wider issues at play here.

Let's face it. Teachers are being attacked not because they are teachers, nor are minority teachers the only ones subjected to the modern-day Inquisition, as evidenced, this Friday, by the brutalisation of Prof Ratan Dique and his family. But there seems to be a narrow, ahistorical sense of victimhood, an illusion that things happen in a vacuum, isolated from other, larger developments. Journalists, activists and social reformers have all felt singled out at different times. The truth is, in an environment where intolerance is encouraged from the highest seats of power, anyone requiring the use of their conscience is fair game.

If there is an innate vulnerability in all this, it is the minority status in a majoritarian tyranny. This is as true in India/Pakistan as in Bangladesh. Islamophobic abuse in one country can result in Hinduphobic abuse in another. There are historical precedents going back decades that show how such reactions have been reciprocated, often with devastating consequences. When majoritarian

It is possible to consider Islamophobia immoral without making it illegal. Unfortunately, despite having the garb of a secular polity, our laws, most notably the Digital Security Act, make "hurting religious sentiments" a punishable offence. Often, though, those are used to serve majoritarian interests and, as in case of people like the Narail student, as a tool to calm frayed nerves.

It's like correcting a wrong with another wrong, only it doesn't work. Forget the right to freedom of speech. By enacting such laws and still letting zealots have their satisfaction before the law is allowed to intervene, we're basically trying to force-stop all ideological debates. We're so invested in the short-term gain of such tactics that we fail to realise that matters of the heart cannot be resolved by force, legal or physical. Our ideological differences will perhaps never go away, but we can learn to sit together and find a way through compromise.

The Swapan story shows how this simple wisdom is getting harder to follow with the whole state set on a collision course with the pursuits of reason, fairness and justice. Increasingly, police are indistinguishable from criminals; politicians are stoking divisions and hatred to serve vested interests; and democratic institutions are being run on an exploit-first-serve-later basis. A suffocating environment prevails everywhere you look, in nearly every sector, because of the corrupting influence of politics.

We need to fix this state of affairs before we have a chance of fixing how teachers are being treated.

The (Questionable) March of Progress



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DEBRA EFROYMSON

PEOPLE tend to believe in progress. As the decades advance, we become more civilised. We expand important freedoms, like voting rights. We expand safety nets and other benefits so that people don't have to live in horrific poverty. We learn from the mistakes of the past and move steadily towards a better future.

Except that time and time again, some events prove otherwise. Consider the recent US Supreme Court case overturning 49 years of a legal precedent. Women who have been raped (including victims of incest), whose birth control method failed, or who just made a mistake, will now be forced (depending on which state they live in and how much money they have) to carry a pregnancy to term and deliver a baby they perhaps cannot afford to raise and/or did not want. Girls will drop out of school and young women out of university, some never to return. Some women will be unable to work to provide for their families. Many will be physically as well as mentally damaged: pregnancy complications disable 50,000 Americans each year. And given that the US ranks 55th in maternal deaths (the highest

among wealthy countries and the only one where the rate is rising), many women will die. Women who have miscarriages will be suspected of murder.

As for the men who impregnate them? If they care about the woman, they too will suffer. If they are rapists, they get off scot-free.

These very same politicians offer cynical responses to the lack of exceptions for the victims of rape. Greg Abbott, governor of Texas, says he will end rape. This despite Texas having the highest number of rapes in the country. Other politicians falsely claim that rape does not cause pregnancy.

Now, you might be thinking: What about those poor unborn children? Sure, the rights of women have been turned back by decades, but fetuses finally have gained rights. Yet, even the Vatican has pointed out the hypocrisy of being against the issue of abortion, but not elsewhere. The same people who are outlawing abortion think it's fine for teenagers to buy assault weapons, for children to be murdered in schools, for people not to have access to the support they need to have a healthy pregnancy and delivery, or for children to thrive. Really want to save babies? How about addressing the infant mortality rate, where the US ranks 50th in the world, and 33rd out of 36 OECD countries? Want fewer abortions? Improve access to sex education and modern birth control. And why do they care about the unborn more than about a 12-year-old girl who has been raped and now must endure a pregnancy and potentially deadly delivery?

Pro-life is really pro-forced birth. It's misogyny.

And the majority of Americans disagree. Depending on how you ask the question, 61-71 percent support legal

abortion.

So how did we get here? As I've written before in these pages, we cannot take democracy for granted. The explosion of social media has created an unprecedented danger: vast amounts of misinformation convincing people not to wear masks, not to get vaccinated, that the 2020 election in the US was stolen from the rightful winner, and that an attack on the Capitol was thus justified. That the climate crisis is a hoax. That not pollution, not guns, not the climate crisis, but transgender people are the greatest threat to society.

Republican presidents who lost the popular vote appointed unqualified justices to the Supreme Court, who lied under oath and are now acting based on their personal prejudices and the whims of their corporate friends. And the majority of Americans are powerless to do anything about it. Watching the protests and the creative signs ("You didn't like wearing a mask, imagine being forced to have a baby") is gratifying, but also depressing in its futility.

I can only hope that the absurd lengths to which this court is going, the fact that it has lost its credibility, and that the majority of Americans disagree with many of its decisions, means that positive change will happen eventually.

Meanwhile, this all serves as a useful lesson not to be overly optimistic about the march of progress. Our modern, comfortable lives have created deadly pollution, mass extinctions, and the climate crisis. We cannot solve these problems without acknowledging that the modern is not always better, that sometimes civilisations move in the wrong direction and then collapse, and that the bulwark of democracy and civilisation is active, involved citizens.

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