

## Protect female students or protect perpetrators?

It's high time the CU administration picked a side

WE express our solidarity with the students and teachers of Chittagong University (CU) who have been protesting against the sexual harassment of a student and demanding a safe campus since Wednesday. It is deplorable that incidents of sexual violence are occurring with increasing frequency at all campuses in Bangladesh, but what is even more concerning is the ostensible lack of response from the administration to identify the perpetrators and bring an end to misogyny and rape culture on campus. According to reports, the survivor at CU had filed a complaint with the proctorial body before filing a case with the police, but instead of taking prompt measures to punish the perpetrators and assure female students that such incidents would not be allowed to be repeated, the CU authorities instructed them to return to their dormitories by 10pm "to avoid such situations."

The said sexual assault incident took place on July 17, when a group of five men forcibly picked the student and her friend up from Hotashar Mor, took them to the Botanical Garden, beat them up and sexually assaulted her. It has been six days since the incident took place, and yet there have been no arrests, nor any confirmations about the identity of the perpetrators. Police sources and CU BCL insiders confirmed to *The Daily Star* what the survivor and protesters have been claiming from the first day: That members of Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) were involved in the attack. Why is it taking the police and administration so long to officially come to the same conclusion – that, too, with 135 CCTV cameras all over the campus? Are we to believe that they are not equipped to identify them, or are they simply unwilling? Their lacklustre response to the incident is sending a disturbing message to the students and the nation at large: That those entrusted with students' safety are more interested in ensuring the safety of the perpetrators because of their political affiliation.

Unfortunately, it is hardly an isolated incident. Campus administrations all over the country have protected political cadres and, in the process, empowered them to partake in sexual violence without consequence for decades. They have fuelled misogyny, created unsafe spaces for female students and other marginalised groups, and consistently put the blame on the victims for being "bad women" who venture out at the "wrong time" or wear the "wrong clothes." Despite a High Court directive to ensure functional sexual harassment complaints committees in all educational institutions, they are absent in most campuses or remain in name only. According to teachers and students, members of the investigation cells often don't take action fearing repercussions when BCL activists are involved. Although there is a cell to investigate complaints at CU, it has so far failed to resolve any complaints in the four years of its operation – a statistic that speaks volumes about its effectiveness, or lack thereof.

We urge the administration to respond urgently to the students' demand for a safe and sensitive campus, which begins with ensuring exemplary punishment for the perpetrators the July 17 incident. It is also high time we implemented the High Court directive and ensured functional complaints committees that take timely action against perpetrators of sexual violence.

## More project delays, more public suffering

Yet, govt's response is to hold no one accountable

THAT over a third of the 1,543 government projects missed their deadline last fiscal year speaks volume about the poor state of governance in Bangladesh. Shockingly, the number of projects that missed their deadline in the 2021-22 fiscal year is 63 percent higher than that in the previous year, which shows that the excuse that Covid has been slowing down the projects is only partly justifiable – and that mismanagement, corruption, and perhaps outright incompetence on the authorities' part are the main reasons. But none of these reasons lessen the burden that it puts on the people and the nation, nor are they acceptable.

Project delay in Bangladesh comes hand-in-hand with cost escalations, and by massive amounts at that. These costs have to be paid out of the public exchequer – i.e. taxpayers' pockets. At a time when the government has been so vocal in telling people to practise austerity, that huge amounts of public funds are getting wasted by the authorities year in, year out is a grave insult to those they proclaim to represent.

The prime minister, on numerous occasions, gave directives to stop wastage of public resources. But what has the government actually done but pay lip service to stop such corruption and wastage? Has anyone been held accountable for the non-stop delays and cost escalations? None whatsoever. Instead, deadline extensions are handed out like they are nothing. What precedent does that set? That those entrusted with executing these schemes can simply continue to drain public resources, while the public gets denied the benefits they are promised via these projects?

Most of the delayed projects involve construction of roads, bridges and rail lines, while others are technical assistance projects. The failure to complete them on time leads to other external costs, such as traffic congestion, waterlogging and pollution. And the public has to bear them too. That no one in the administration has to answer for this shows the lack of sympathy and legitimate concern that the authorities have for the people.

When we compare this reality with the government's proclamation of how fast Bangladesh is developing, all the talk seems hollow. Without transparency and accountability in governance, Bangladesh's development, in its truest sense, will remain incomplete. Therefore, we once again call on the government to abandon its habit of doing nothing when it comes to the failure of its members and different arms to execute projects on time and within their cost estimates. And to hold individuals responsible, which is the only thing that can change this culture of project delays.

# Bangladesh Railway and the political dynamite



### BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

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REMEMBER the biblical story of David versus Goliath, in which a young boy used a slingshot to defeat a giant of an opponent? Call it willpower, faith, creativity or cleverness, David's unlikely victory still thrills us. Deep down, we all want the underdogs to win. But what happens when underdogs use the playbook of a giant as their ploy?

Mohiuddin Roni, a fourth-year student of theatre and performance studies at Dhaka University, has been staging a remarkable protest ever since he fell victim to a non-transparent e-ticketing system of Bangladesh Railway. He launched a one-man peaceful demonstration at Kamalapur Railway Station from July 7 to July 19. At the height of media coverage, he had two breakthroughs. First, based on Roni's complaint, the consumer rights protection agency imposed the e-ticketing agency Shohoz with a fine of Tk 2 lakh. Second, the High Court summoned the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) to ask what steps they had taken to address Roni's allegations of the railway's irregularities and mismanagement.

Roni's actions are political dynamite. One can only marvel at the ingenuity with which this young man has performed his creative resistance and practised his freedom in the context of disciplinary and regulatory power. He is treading a thin line, swinging from one location to another like a trapeze artist. From our central railway station to the railway headquarters, from the DU "campus shadow" to cyberspace, Roni is displaying his bravado, restoring our faith in student activism. He is alone, yet not alone, in his endeavour. He voices out the frustrations and articulates a protest against the humiliations we face on a daily basis. His solo voice has the potential to become a chorus as thousands of others join him in their thoughts, if not actions.

Like an installation artist, he uses chains (around his wrists) and a placard as his props. He sings Kazi Nazrul Islam's patriotic song *Shikol Porar Gaan*, which the rebel poet wrote when he was in Hooghly Jail in 1923. Roni uses the anti-colonial song, which says, "This chain-wearing is our trick; this is our chain-wearing trick. In these chains, we will render your shackles inoperative" (Translation by



Roni's disruptive action can be used to dismantle the dysfunctional system plaguing the railway.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

Haroonuzzaman). The loaded image of the chain as a trick/ploy explains Roni's artistic commitment. He throws the chain like a wrench in the wheel of the administrative system to make it stop, and makes us think of the other mental chains that bind us. It reminds us of our own apathy, ambivalence, and inaction.

Like a political activist, he lists his demands to echo the historic Six-Point Demand of Bangabandhu. He identifies himself as a member of the student wing of the ruling party. And after his initial victory at the negotiation meeting with the e-ticketing agency, he even mentioned that he would now meet the prime minister with all the documents ("missiles," in his coinage) of irregularities. He thus presents his activism as kosher, and conjures a lifeline for his next round of battle.

It will be interesting to see how long he can sustain. His demands are not illogical or irrational. He wants to secure his right to travel in a safe, hygienic, and timely manner. He wants

relative for travelling in an upscaled compartment with an economy class ticket. Roni's scratching of the surface of a deep-rooted systemic crisis has reopened the wound.

The onus is on the government. It will have to decide whether it wants to embalm it or allow it to bleed further. We live at a time, as Stephenie Meyer puts it in her novel *New Moon*, when we are "forbidden to remember, terrified to forget." People are often too afraid to speak out and say what they think about social or political issues. Such fear is not healthy for democracy. And it seems even a lonely protest ends up being a supplication to the prime minister. Not so long ago, we saw the solitary protest of a woman who was later joined by her son to protect a playground in the capital's Kalabagan. The prime minister had to intervene to allocate the abandoned plot, which had been taken over by the police for their office, to the local community.

Let's now look at the inefficiency of the system that allowed Roni to be an unlikely hero. Roni booked a train

blocked tickets, such as his, to cash-paying customers. The transaction should have never gone through as the booking had expired. In any civilised country, this technical glitch would have been handled differently.

Instead, we allowed the seed of grievance to grow in a soil filled with fertile filth. Who will clean the dirt? Instead of asking the top to clean the bottom, can't we bring about a bottom-up change? Roni is a peripheral hero who has taken the centre stage and caught the audience by surprise. I hail him for his courage, perseverance, and passion. At the same time, I think a serious lack of professionalism has caused the fugue to have such dangerous sparks. This can soon spread to other sectors.

Roni's disruptive action can be used to dismantle the dysfunctional system plaguing the Bangladesh Railway and, by extension, other sectors. For that, the government needs to use creative destruction to ensure progress. I will not be surprised to see a controlled explosion of "political dynamite" soon.

## PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

# America's dangerous descent into violence



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THE mass shootings that regularly disrupt American life should not be viewed simply as random acts. They reflect a steady unravelling of the sovereign authority of the state. Sovereignty, as the ultimate claim to authority, insists on at least two precepts: indivisibility, and a monopoly on the legitimate exercise of force. Only the state, through its police power, is permitted to use violence in the state's defence (whether from a foreign attack or from domestic terror and criminality).

A loss of faith in state police power is dangerous, not least because it invites self-reliance in response to perceived insecurity or injustice. When the state is no longer trusted to provide security and justice – to preserve the fabric of society – self-reliance represents a potential rival to the state's sovereignty. Historically, the emergence of fascist political movements has been associated with a parallel rise of private militias: Mussolini's Blackshirts, Hitler's Brownshirts, the Brazilian Greenshirts, and Irish fascist leader Eoin O'Duffy's Blueshirts. In the US today, isolated acts of domestic terror coexist alongside more organised forms of violence. Amid the January 6, 2021 insurrection at the US Capitol,

the surge of gun sales to an already weapons-saturated public, and the growth and normalisation of extreme right-wing political organisations and militias, there is ample evidence of an accelerating breakdown of shared belief in state sovereignty.

Right-wing "deep state" conspiracy theories and the Republican Party's lies about election-rigging reflect a common purpose: to challenge the legitimacy of the state. As that challenge spreads through traditional and social media, non-state sources of violence become increasingly acceptable. Violence is simultaneously condemned and romanticised. Again, this is a familiar pattern in the rise of fascism.

Pervasive violence is self-reinforcing. It demonstrates that the old sovereignty is dead or dying, and thus no longer capable of preserving the indivisibility of sovereign power or maintaining its monopoly on the legitimate use of force. From that premise, it follows that a viable counterforce must enter the fray. As Donald Trump put it on January 6, "If you don't fight like hell, you won't have a country anymore."

The best way to shield liberal democracy against this growing threat is to mobilise the institutions

that still function: the press, peaceful assembly, and the electoral process. But this must happen quickly, because all three are increasingly at risk. Facebook, Twitter and TikTok are now our dominant sources of news; but, owing to their "attention economy" business models, profit has priority over truth. Because lies spread faster and hold attention longer than facts, they ultimately

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are worth more to companies that depend on users' attention time for advertising.

Meanwhile, the right of public assembly is being threatened by new state laws that open the door to committing violence against peaceful protesters. In Oklahoma, for example, drivers who strike – or even kill – someone with their car will no longer be held liable if they are "fleeing from a riot... under a reasonable belief that fleeing was necessary to protect the motor vehicle operator from serious injury or death." The same measure also creates new penalties for protesters who obstruct streets or vehicle traffic, including fines of up

to USD 5,000 and as much as a year in jail. The danger posed by such laws should be obvious.

Lastly, the electoral process is being threatened by state laws that could empower (Republican-led) state legislatures to ignore presidential election outcomes by substituting their own Electoral College electors in place of the ones chosen by the state's voters. Ominously, the US Supreme Court recently gestured toward endorsing a fringe legal doctrine that would immunise state legislatures from state or federal judicial review – meaning that there would be no lawful means of blocking legislatively substituted Electoral College votes.

Given these mounting threats, the defence of core democratic institutions – a free press, the right to peaceful assembly, and free and fair elections – will require not only increased collective engagement, but also real courage. It will take the kind of courage shown by former slaves in the face of Jim Crow and the rise of the Ku Klux Klan after the Civil War. And it will take the kind of courage shown by women who fought to win the right to vote, and who now must fight anew for the right to make their own reproductive choices.

The stakes this time may be as high as they have ever been, but the essential lesson remains the same. In a free republic, fundamental rights must be earned anew whenever the sovereign authority of the state is threatened. The violence erupting across the US today presses against the guardrails of civil discourse and the rule of law, testing whether the struggle for shared identity can peacefully continue.