

The govt has failed 'family card' recipients

Yet another necessary initiative mired in corruption and poor planning

WHEN the family cards programme was introduced back in March this year to help 10 million poor and ultra-poor families combat the price hike of essentials, it seemed like a great and timely initiative. Essentially, each household was supposed to receive a subsidy of around Tk 550 twice for essential goods during Ramadan. However, a study by Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) – conducted between April and June – has revealed quite the opposite scenario.

According to the TIB report, a staggering 40 percent of the cash transfer beneficiaries did not even receive the family cards. Additionally, about four percent of those who did receive the cards could not do so without facing hurdles, such as having to pay bribes of up to Tk 200 to get their cards. As for actually purchasing essentials using the family cards from the Trading Corporation of Bangladesh (TCB) trucks, the respondents complained of receiving poor quality goods or receiving much less than the amount promised – all while having to wait in line for an average of 1.2 hours to a maximum of 10 hours. And despite having obtained the cards, 7.5 percent of the beneficiaries could actually not afford the TCB goods. Many of the beneficiaries had to sacrifice a day's work (and their income) to stand in line for the TCB supplies. Many fainted from heat and exhaustion after waiting in line for hours.

For the government to take a necessary initiative to assist around 30 percent of the country's population, and to be unsuccessful in it due to internal corruption, irregularities, and a lack of communication, is severely disappointing. This will stand as yet another example of the government's lack of foresight and planning when it comes to any large scale project or programme.

What is most telling of the authorities' apathy is that many people did not even know about family cards when they were first introduced. Before, people could queue up to buy goods at subsidised prices from the TCB trucks. But the introduction of family cards meant that even those who could only afford essentials at the subsidised prices could not purchase them unless they had family cards. And TIB suggests that a significant number of real beneficiaries were left out of the programme due to corruption and political influence.

We would like to draw the authorities' attention to the findings of the TIB study and to take them into consideration when executing a similar programme in the future. The family card programme is highly beneficial in theory. But corruption and the influence of local politicians made it virtually ineffective. Given the rising prices of all goods, the poorest of our population require the government's assistance even more now than they did back in April. As such, we would urge the authorities to conduct all relief and aid programmes in a planned and efficient manner, and to rein in the ever present threat of corruption, so that all deserving beneficiaries can receive the help they need.

Do our forex earners deserve such disrespect?

Airport and Biman officials must provide quality service to all

IT is condemnable that migrant workers are mistreated by the airport and Biman officials and staffers at the Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport (HSIA) in Dhaka when they come home after long stretches abroad. Complaints abound of different types of harassment, ranging from mishandling of luggage to physical and verbal abuse at the airport. The height of misconduct was reported when a customs official slapped a passenger who arrived from Malaysia.

Stories of migrant workers facing disrespectful behaviour at the Dhaka airport surfaced when the Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh (CAAB) organised a mass hearing of grievances at the airport in the presence of top airport and CAAB officials. It is inexcusable that our migrant workers have to face such belittling conduct from their own countrymen – in sharp contrast to the "VIP" treatment provided to rich and powerful quarters – despite the fact that they work hard in foreign lands to earn precious foreign exchange that we need so badly to prop up our economy.

We appreciate the initiative by CAAB to improve passenger service at the country's main international airport. We sincerely hope that it was not a one-off event, but rather the first of a series of much-needed initiatives to hold the airport staff accountable and improve the quality of service. We welcome the CAAB chief's proposal of organising training programmes and preparing a code of conduct for all officials and staffers at the airport. However, we cannot help but wonder why there is no such guideline to begin with. Given the shoddy service that passengers – irrespective of their socioeconomic background – receive at the airport, it is of paramount importance that such a guideline be finalised and implemented immediately. Exemplary action must be taken against those who fail to abide by the guidelines. Most importantly, there must be a change in the mindset of both the authorities and the staff about how they treat passengers, particularly those without the "VIP" status.

During the mass hearing, several passengers highlighted their misfortune with luggage after arrival. What we would like to know is, given that the luggage problem is a perennial issue, what have the airport authorities done so far to improve the situation? Surely, this is not the first time that they have heard of a passenger losing a bag or finding parts of it missing. The mismanagement and anarchy at our top international airport is simply unacceptable and embarrassing for the nation.

We would like to stress that all passengers, especially those who earn foreign exchange for the country, must be treated with respect. The image of Biman and CAAB largely depends on what kind of services they offer to the passengers. They must act with humility, dignity, and efficiency as they are the first point of contact for those entering or returning to the country.

EDITORIAL

We need independent census evaluation



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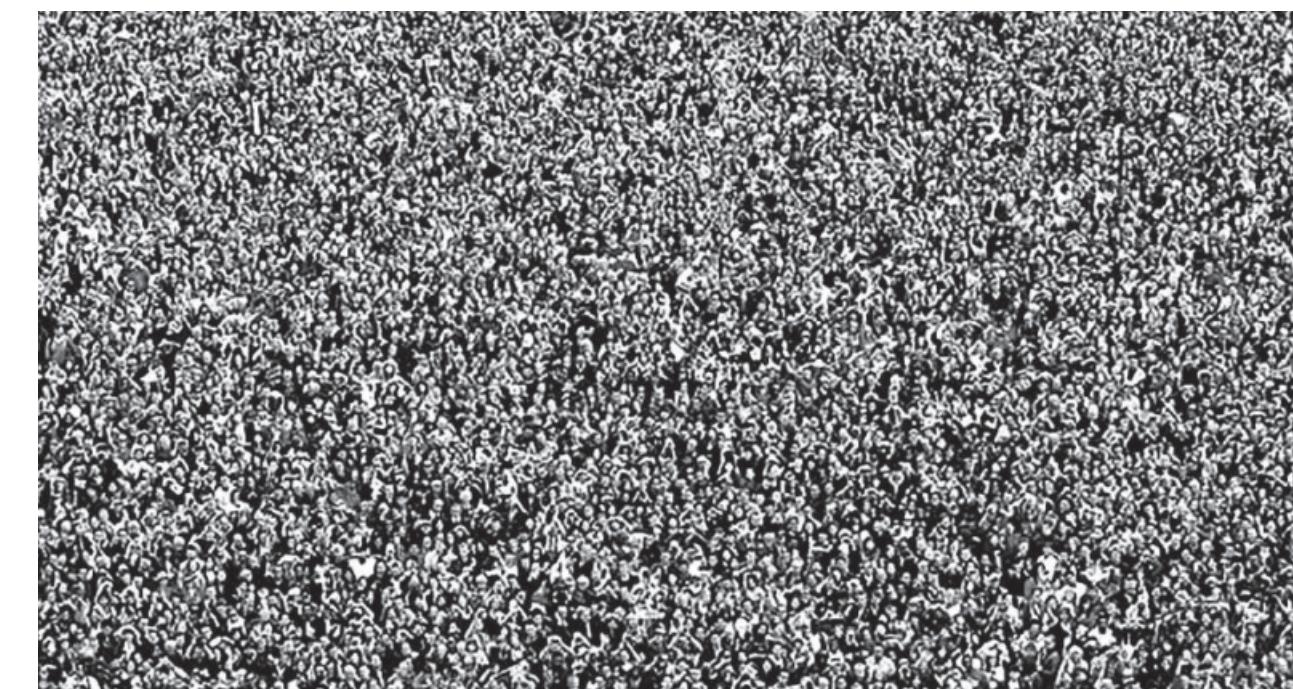
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POPULATION and housing census in any country is critical as it is the source of reliable, updated, and comprehensive data about a population's size, distribution, and structure. The quality of census data is crucial for many reasons, including building public trust and understanding the national statistical system. Thus, the government needs to ensure that the census provides accurate, result giving data that is required for future plans and policies.

The main objective of the census is to count all the population and households residing within a nation's territory at a point in time, from where the socioeconomic and demographic characteristics of the people and the households are reflected. The Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) under the planning ministry conducted the sixth decennial and first digital population and housing census of Bangladesh on June 15-21, 2022, which was extended for a week for data collection in the flood affected areas of Sylhet, Sunamganj, Moulvibazar and Netrakona districts. The Computer-Assisted Personal Interviewing (CAPI) process was used for the digital census.

It is good to state that, for the first time, the BBS was quite fast to release the preliminary report within a month of the census operation. Still, questions have been raised from different corners in terms of the figure of the total population of the country (165,158,616). There are also a few striking features reflected in the findings, like the sex ratio (98 males per 100 females) for the first time in history, floating population (only 22,185), slum population (1,800,486), partial information of households (17,507) or partial information of population (85,957), residents of Dhaka city corporations (10,278,822), etc, which drew massive attention on social media as well as print and electronic media over the exclusion of people on counting. Currently, the preliminary report lacks information on the size of the population living abroad or remittance-receiving households, number of foreigners, etc, but it is expected to include such important information later in the final report.

It is well-recognised that a population census is not perfect. No one can claim that a census is error-free. The errors



Census provides crucial data about a population, on which plans and policies at different levels of both the public and private sectors are dependent.

FILE PHOTO: BBC

can be categorised into two types: coverage errors and content errors. Coverage errors occur due to omissions or duplication of persons or housing units in the census enumeration, whereas content errors are those that arise in the incorrect reporting or recording of the characteristics of the persons, households, and housing units enumerated in the census. In this regard, many countries, including Bangladesh, have recognised the need to evaluate the overall quality of their census results.

Generally, census errors are omissions, duplication, erroneous inclusions, and gross versus net errors. It is crucial to conduct the post enumeration check (PEC) following the operation guidelines of the United Nations Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses (Rev 2), mainly for an independent evaluation of the quality and coverage of the primary census conducted. Independence, quality assurance, control of non-sampling errors, etc are good PEC data collection programme attributes.

As the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS) has been assigned to conduct the PEC, they should be meticulous and cautious in this

regard. They should be given complete independence to conduct the PEC as its purpose is to give users confidence when utilising the data and to explain errors in the census result. As a result, field enumerators and supervisors in the PEC should not be BBS employees, but people from the BIDS. Considering the flood in the localities and other matters, the enumeration areas (EAs)

years, the number of foreigners in the country, etc. There were 35 questions, and we need to examine if all of them were asked. If not, the government needs to know how the data collectors acquired the information from unasked questions. What is the female household response rate during the enumeration? In this regard, the PEC is important, because it will show how

should be determined and kept secret from all field staff. The current census is digital so that the PEC can be done within a limited time interval.

For a census to be successful, three things need to be looked at: how the data was collected, how it was compiled, and whether it was published or not. First, we need to look into how the data was collected. The BBS decision to conduct the census during the rainy season was not prudent. Floods in the northern regions meant data could not be collected on time. This was not a population but also a housing census; what happens when people's houses are washed away by flood? There was also the Cumilla city election, which coincided with the census. Given the above scenarios, were we able to count all the people and the households accurately?

The census needs to answer questions about both individuals and households, like the number of people per household, age and sex, the type of households they live in, the kind of electricity they use, education level, access to water, sources of fuel, sources of drinking water and types of sanitation, if anyone is abroad, remittance received in the last two

many people have been left behind in the primary census and how they can be considered to adjust the total size of the population. For example, in 2011, our fifth census primarily showed that we had a population of 144,043,697. After the PEC, the population increased to 149,772,352, including an additional 5,728,655. So now, we see the primary census as a first step.

The second step will be the PEC conducted by the BIDS as a completely independent agency to ensure public trust under the demanding situation. Then the BBS will complete the socioeconomic and demographic survey on a sample population. The PEC will reveal how well the census was conducted. We need it to be of quality, and it has to be correct. We cannot work with a faulty census, so the quality cannot be compromised. The PEC will adjust the errors and give a more precise picture. If we don't have the correct data, we won't know the ground reality to gauge our progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030 and beyond, and to undertake the right policies and plans, seeing as the population is at the centre of development.

'Saturday Afternoon' and our obsession with image



Ashfaque Nipun
is a filmmaker.

ASHFAQE NIPUN

BANGLADESH is strapped to a strange bandwagon. What is this bandwagon, you ask? It's the bandwagon of "image." This particular bandwagon needs dirt roads to be driven on. That's why our once-glorious, "paved" cultural arena has turned into dirt roads – to make way for this bandwagon. You can't stray from this path, thanks to the different quarters that lurk around us.

If one or two defiant filmmakers try to pave their own ways out of the dirt, our censor board loses no time in showing them their place. That's exactly what has happened with the film *Saturday Afternoon*, written and directed by Mostofa Sarwar Farooki.

Farooki would be the foremost among the few local filmmakers who are currently making their mark and bearing the country's flag on a global stage. Not even his worst enemy would say that any of his past films have put the country's freedom, sovereignty, or security at any risk. On the contrary, the diverse narratives of his films have made the world see Bangladesh in a new light.

Yet, his films have repeatedly been subjected to a maze of obstacles in the name of censorship. Why is that? My guess is that it's meant to teach us

all a lesson. By obstructing Farooki's film, the "powers that be" want to warn everyone else of the dangers of thinking differently, of creating alternate narratives with cinema; they want to discourage new voices from giving rise to new slogans. This is why *Saturday Afternoon* has been kept waiting in the censor board's waiting room for more than three and a half years.

We say with pride that we are now "Digital Bangladesh." Yet, we have not realised the fact that our censor board is a relic of the past. Film certification is the standard followed around the world today. A "film certification board" certifies movies for different age groups, and based on that certification, the audience decides which movie they want to watch by themselves, which one they'd rather watch with a friend, and which with their families. This shift has happened globally because censorship has no place in art. Art is meant to flow freely. The decision to either go with the flow or to stand idly on the shore and stare at the water is entirely up to the viewer.

The censor board infringes on the freedom of the artiste and the audience in equal parts. Let alone the artiste, the audience's collective intelligence is insulted when, instead of trusting their judgement, a few members of the censor board decide, at their own discretion, whether to let a film pass or fail. In most cases, their weapon of choice is the phrase "tarnish the image." And that weapon has been deployed once more for *Saturday Afternoon*.

Laundering billions of taka abroad does not tarnish Bangladesh's image, extrajudicial killings don't tarnish Bangladesh's image, the news of detaining artistes and releasing them upon signing a bond does not tarnish Bangladesh's image either. Yet, the release of a film based on true events, made with artistes and producers from here and abroad, is supposed to tarnish Bangladesh's image?

The injustice that is being done to *Saturday Afternoon* is unprecedented. Once a film is submitted, the censor board must file a report within 15 days. If the producer and director are not satisfied with the report, they can appeal to the censor board. If the result of the appeal is not in favour either, they can go to the court. But even though there is a 15-day deadline for the censor board, the appeal board is not bound by any similar deadline.

This is the loophole that is being exploited to keep this film locked away for three and a half years now. Officials have come and gone during this time, but the fate of this film remains hanging in the balance. Freedom of thought and conscience is guaranteed under Section 39(l) of the Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh. The state and the government should be responsible for ensuring this freedom, not infringe upon it. It's the right of a filmmaker to make a film as they want, and similarly,

the viewer has a right to either accept or reject it. The state, the government, the police or the censor board has no right to place themselves in the middle of this process. It is unconstitutional for them to do so. But the reality is such that we are having to come to terms with this.

We are not allowed to make films about the hill tracts; we are not allowed to make films about government or private sector corruption. We can't even make films that capture the injustices that ordinary people face from day to day. Why? Because someone sitting on the censor board may be thinking, "I can't kill your art with weapons, but I can kill it with censorship." This is injustice. The imposition of censorship in an independent country is a clear violation of what art stands for.

It didn't matter if, in 1971, the songs of Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra were accused of tarnishing the image of the Pakistani ruling class – those songs today are our national treasure. Today, we are an independent country, a free nation. We make our own decisions now. We have shown the world how quickly we are leveraging our manpower in the race to graduate from a developing country to one that is developed.

Let us make the decision of whether *Saturday Afternoon* makes us laugh or cry. Let us decide whether it tarnishes our image – or the lack of an image. History has proven that this nation cannot be shackled by force. Therefore, we demand the immediate release of *Saturday Afternoon*, and the abolition of censorship in art.

Translated from Bangla by Azmin Azran