

The Narsingdi incident was a hate crime



NO STRINGS ATTACHED

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If you want to show the contradictions in our society, here is an example to cite. Wasfia Nazreen comes back home, after scaling K2, the world's second highest mountain – the first Bangladeshi to achieve such a feat. The news makes headlines in all the major media outlets and her well-wishers and fans are filled with pride that this fearless young woman has, once again, put Bangladesh on the world map. On the same day, social media is abuzz with outraged posts regarding a comment made by a High Court judge in the case of a young woman being assaulted at a train station in Narsingdi. "The girl was in an objectionable state at the platform which is seen in the CD (containing footage of the incident). Is it your right? Is it your right to dress?" The High Court questioned the choice of attire by the young woman at the station located in such an area.

The judiciary is considered the most respected and honoured institution of a country. It is where people seek justice for all the wrongs that the state and society have failed to protect them from. Given

guarantees citizens the right to life and liberty and Article 36 guarantees freedom of movement.

How is it that we live in a society where a woman must endure humiliating attacks from another woman and her male cohorts in a public place for the clothes she chooses to wear? How is such an assault almost justified by the most respected of institutions echoing the rationale of the assaulters? Does this mean it is okay to verbally and physically abuse a woman if she does not conform to the dress code of particular groups? Does it exempt the state from ensuring her protection in a public place?

We cannot deny that our society is changing in many ways. While there are more people with mobile phones than ever before, and most of them highly active on social media, technological progress has not come hand in hand with a sense of justice and respect for women that is expected of a civilised society. In fact, it is leaning heavily towards regressive ideologies, opening the floodgates of moral policing, its favourite target



PHOTO: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

its exalted position, such a comment or observation is unexpected and disappointing, to say the least.

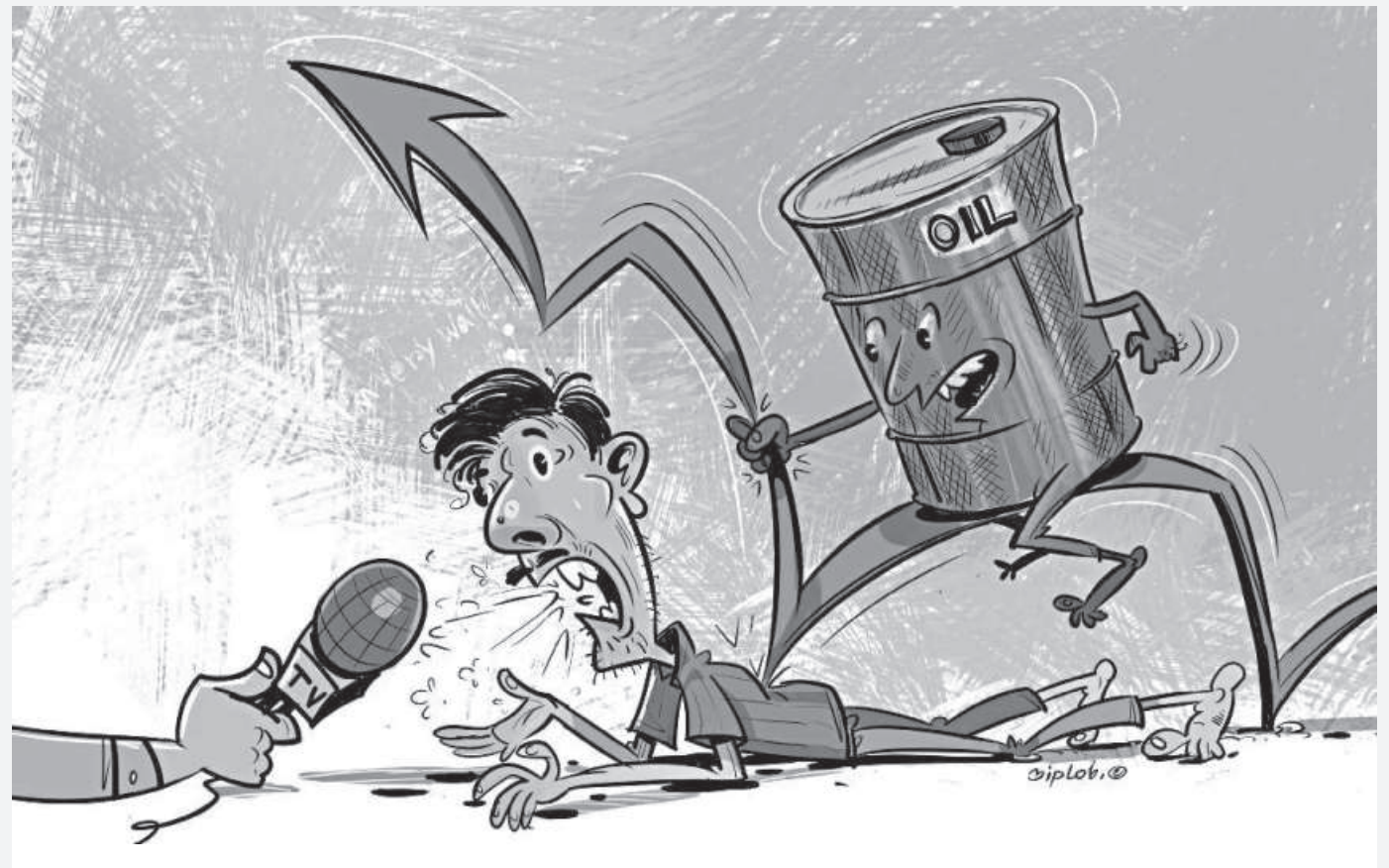
The incident took place on May 18. The university student in question was waiting for a train on the platform of the train station with her friends. The accused, Marzia Akhter, a middle-aged woman (who has now been given anticipatory bail), demanded to know why the female student had worn such "indecent" clothes. Marzia then called other people to the scene, hurling abuses at the young woman and her friends and then started assaulting her, trying to pull her clothes off. The video of the incident that went viral shows the viciousness with which the older woman and her cohorts were terrorising the young woman. One shudders at the thought of what would have happened if she had not found shelter inside the train station's office and if the station officials had not protected her.

This was a hate crime that took the form of sexual harassment. A railway official filed a case under the Women and Children Repression Prevention Act and we hope that the law will take its course and punish the attackers.

But the court's comment has elicited strong objections from many, including women's rights groups, for going against women's equal rights, against their constitutional rights as well as against the government's policies to empower women. Article 32 of the constitution

being, of course, women. So when a woman wears clothes that are deemed "provocative" or "immodest," getting attacked, being groped or even raped is only to be expected. The fact that she is a citizen of a free and independent country and has equal rights according to her country's constitution, rights that the state is mandated to protect, all this seems to evaporate in the domination of sanctimonious proclamations of the moral police.

Instead of chastising and punishing the older woman who took part in the assault and instigated others to join in, society seems to condone her violence and even applaud her for it as a defender of "propriety." Instead of calling out the men who shamelessly ogled and made obscene comments when they see a woman/girl pass by, instead of punishing those (men and unfortunately, some women) who have the audacity to assault a woman even in a public place, society at large is busy placing the onus of security solely on the woman's adherence to certain dress codes it considers "proper" or "decent," which, by the way, does not guarantee safety. And when the most eminent seats of power make comments that seem to endorse this perception, it can encourage others to become such self-appointed defenders of virtue who may feel obliged to "teach the woman a lesson." Surely, that is a contradiction of the very concept of justice.



PUBLIC SPEAKS

Rising costs of living: The common citizen's perspective

For several months, Bangladesh has been grappling with a price hike of fuels, foods and other essentials – the apparent consequence of a global inflation. How has the public been faring? What are their thoughts and opinions about the government measures to tackle this economic crisis? The Daily Star asked, and they responded.

"[Fuel price hike] has negatively impacted all sectors, particularly the agricultural sector. Farmers are already struggling to break even, and such inconsiderate decisions have made it worse for them. As for producers, if they calculate their production costs only in terms of wages, they will surely incur losses. Most farmers also have other jobs. If they don't do farming, the land will remain unutilised. But they also cannot live off of farming alone. The higher price of diesel will also make cultivation, irrigation, and transportation of crops costlier. But farmers cannot increase the prices of their harvest as easily as transport owners can raise transportation fees. Only hoarders can increase the prices of agricultural goods, but not that of raw materials. This is why we often see the heartbreaking scene of fresh vegetables being dumped on the roadside."

- Nazmussakib Sojib

"Given that there seems to be no need for the ruling party to get votes from the public to stay in government, they have free reign to do anything they want. Even the police have turned into a force for the ruling party. There is no level of the government, low or high, which is not submerged in corruption. They are using the country's people to build lavish lives for themselves abroad. It is the unchecked corruption of government officials that has brought the country to the brink of desperation. Why have oil prices increased in Bangladesh when they are decreasing elsewhere? How will the poor survive? All the government high-ups do is sit in their air-conditioned rooms, increase prices arbitrarily, and think about which projects to steal exorbitant amounts of money from and smuggle it out of the country. They don't love Bangladesh – they wish to loot it. And when we try to protest these price hikes, we have to face police batons or even get shot. Every citizen is feeling resentment towards the authorities."

- Mokshudul Momin

"The unbearable increase in the prices of all things has been causing me a lot of mental distress. As a university student, I used to be able to meet my daily expenses with Tk 100. That is not possible anymore. Why is the government forcing the burden of its debts onto the general public, given that people's incomes are so limited?"

- Anonymous, Government Titumir College

"Now that fuel prices have been increased, the prices of essentials and food items will also increase abnormally. Public bus owners will raise fares as they please. And the costs of electricity and gas will also increase, citing the government-imposed price hike. This will put members of the general public in a lot of trouble. On the other hand, the price of urea fertiliser has been bumped up, which means costs will also increase for our farmers. Add to this the overall cost increase due to the new diesel prices, and citizens will soon have to deal with higher prices of rice, too. We may soon find no alternative to importing rice. It seems only a miracle can help this tiny, over populous country

– which has few natural resources left anymore and whose economic progress is smuggled abroad – turn around and get back on its feet."

- Shahdat Hossain

"University students are in trouble due to the increase in the prices of daily essentials. Due to the Russia-Ukraine war and the increase in the price of food items as well as fuel in the international market, students have to spend extra money on rice, lentils, edible oil, other groceries, clothing, accommodation, transportation, medicine, etc. But it is not possible for them to set aside more money for everything. So spending on food, entertainment, and other needs have to be cut down. Students from lower- and middle-class families are most affected by this. In every dorm, where the students are staying, one person is assigned the responsibility of handling the meals every month. Usually, each meal would cost Tk 30. But currently, due to the price hikes, even Tk 40 is not enough to buy one meal. Meanwhile, due to increased expenses, such as dorm rent, transportation and other daily expenses, the money that students receive from their homes every month runs out before the month-end, and they have to spend the remaining days of the month in extreme suffering."

- Azizur Rahman, Teacher, Hajee Mohammad Danesh Science and Technology University

"On my round at the kitchen market today, I found that the price for every item had increased by Tk 10-20 per kg. And you can now only get four eggs for Tk 55, while the eggplants I bought for Tk 50 per kg the day before yesterday is now priced at Tk 80 per kg! This scenario holds for the prices of all essentials. And it is the public who has to bear this burden. While we used to experience two hours of power cuts in our area before, today the power went out for four hours altogether. As we swelter in this heat with our families, we are given excuses of the Russia-Ukraine war, of fuel prices rising in the global market and, most recently, our energy minister claimed that fuel is being smuggled to India."

The truth is that the price for unrefined crude oil in the market is Tk 62.40 per litre. It is the rate at which the government has imported it. But even with transport, refinement and other costs, diesel or kerosene can never amount to more than Tk 70 per litre. This should be the price even if the subsidy did not exist. Still, the government has determined the price for a litre of diesel at Tk 115. This means that they are making a profit of Tk 45 per litre of diesel. Who could have thought! And why are they suddenly reaching for this profit while stepping on the backs of the public?

In reality, it is endless corruption and money laundering that is pushing this country towards this crisis. Our reserves are dwindling fast. And the suspiciously ballooning costs of megaprojects are also being imposed on the public. The newest price hike of essentials is just another slap in the face for us."

- Sohel Sami, Journalist

"Transport fares have already increased as a direct result of fuel price hikes. Increased transport fares will raise the cost of transporting raw materials, which in turn will increase the prices of all types of daily necessities. At the same time, Bangladesh's main agricultural crop, Boro paddy, is fully irrigated, and 80 percent of that irrigation is driven by diesel pumps. Fertiliser prices were increased only a few days ago. It is equivalent to rubbing salt on one's wounds. The government is busy saving its own skin; it is least concerned about the people and their living standards, or else the government decision makers would have thought it over 100 times before making such a suicidal decision. Bangladeshis don't want development that cannot give them the assurance of having three meals a day. The price of everything can easily be increased using the international market as an excuse. But corruption, syndicate trading and extortion cannot be suppressed. In the name of developing the power sector, crores of taka are being paid in capacity charges even without any production. Gas prices have been increased; electricity prices may soon be increased, and we won't be able to do anything about it. All these will badly affect the lower- and middle-income people, as well as people with limited income."

- Anonymous jobholder

"The increase in fuel prices is going to affect the price of everything. And people will have to bear it. Common people are struggling to take care of their families as it is. This price hike is just another nail in the coffin."

- Md Romjan Ali

"Even if the prices of all goods and services tripled and people went hungry for three days, the people of Bangladesh still wouldn't take to the streets for fear of being shot or arrested by the police."

- Afzalur Rashid

"Prices of daily essentials have increased. We have a small business, but that is related to transporting goods. Now our business is closed. How will we survive?"

- MA Khan

"Transportation costs have gone up. Alongside that, prices of daily essentials are also increasing. But our monthly salaries are fixed. That is why we are having to reduce spending."

- Md Enamul Hassan

"It is normal that the prices will increase or decrease. But increasing the price suddenly by 50 percent without any discussion is nothing but a unilateral show of power. It shows that there is no one above the ministers in this country. This will be discussed as an example in the future."

- Mir Salah Uddin

"The government is not dependent on public support. Hence, it gives no importance to public suffering. That's why the government does not care about our opinions. This is the harsh reality."

- MD Taleb Ullah Swapon