

How did Sumon Sheikh die?

His family deserves speedy investigation into his death in police custody

IN most cultures and faiths, when there is a death, the custom is to arrange the funeral ritual and burial as soon as possible. It is a crucial element of the process of mourning and getting closure when faced with a devastating loss. So, we can only imagine the pain it has caused Sumon Sheikh's family to not accept his body until a murder case is filed over his suspicious death at the Hatirjheel Police Station.

This is not an easy decision for any family to make. However, circumstances seem to have made it clear to Sumon's family that they have no choice but to take a stand to ensure his death is investigated properly. They maintain that police have framed him, demanded a bribe, and eventually tortured and killed him within a day of picking him up. Police, however, refute these allegations. So, what is stopping the police authorities from setting up an independent investigation to find out what really happened?

Instead, everything points to an attempted obstruction of the process of justice in this latest instance of death in police custody in Bangladesh. Take the fact that when the family reportedly first went to the morgue, they were not allowed to take Sumon's body home. They allege that a police officer told them that the body would be surrendered only if they went straight to their home village, and not to their Rampura residence. Although police have denied this allegation, family members claim this was done to avoid any further protests over his death.

Even if we were to accept the police version, their callous treatment of the demands for justice does not inspire much hope in their ability to investigate the matter properly. Sumon's wife told journalists that police did not allow them to lodge a case at the station. When his death in custody sparked protests in front of the police station on Saturday, instead of promising a speedy and transparent investigation to hold any errant or negligent officers to account, police resorted to a truncheon charge to disperse the crowd. Moreover, members of Chhatra League also allegedly forcefully dispersed protesters who formed a human chain to demand justice.

We cannot help but feel that these actions, as well as the effort to write the whole thing off as a case of suicide, only cast further doubt over police's intentions. Regardless of whether Sumon died by suicide, the circumstances must be investigated. Why was he arrested? Was he framed? Was he tortured in custody? Even if none of these apply, when a person dies in such a mysterious way right under the police's nose, is it not at least a case of negligence? Sumon's family deserves these answers. They certainly do not deserve the treatment that has been meted out to them so far.

Remove barriers to diversifying exports

Commerce ministry must fast-track project to help in diversification

IT'S disheartening that only 11 percent work of an important commerce ministry project, intended to help expand the export capacity of certain sectors and consequently the country's export basket, has been completed despite a one-year extension to the original three-year deadline. The extremely slow pace of work has been attributed to a number of reasons including a weak feasibility study, frequent replacement of project directors, lack of manpower, the outbreak of Covid-19, etc. There has been a clear disconnect between the vision behind the project and the approach of the implementing authorities, who allowed familiar barriers to get in the way of its completion.

Experts say that diversification, besides improving the capacity of local industries, can open up many overseas markets where our traditional and non-traditional products can enjoy good business. The Tk 9.95 crore project of the commerce ministry was meant to do that for the sectors of garments, food-processing and active pharmaceutical ingredients, while also reducing their import dependency. But nothing seems to happen as planned in Bangladesh. During the last four years of the project, its director has been reportedly changed six times. Its feasibility study was also found to be weak, which raises the question: why would the commerce ministry allow such an important project to be derailed by poor preparations? As a result, not only did they miss the deadline twice, they also made only marginal (read: ridiculous) progress in work and potentially squandered public money, which makes the project's future very uncertain.

This is also the latest example of how costly project revisions have become a norm, rather than the exception, in the public sector. We have repeatedly seen this over the past decade, thanks to systematic mismanagement, inefficiency and corruption. The same happening to an export diversification project is particularly unfortunate because of the potential it holds for the country to earn foreign currency which is in short supply at the moment. Experts say that when a country's exports increase, its earnings also increase proportionately while dependency on imports comes down as well. Export diversification is thus vital. It's all the more important to expand our export basket beyond the garments sector, which accounts for about 82 percent of total exports. Bangladesh faces a number of challenges in this respect, including unfriendly tariff regime for exports, capacity and reliability issues, lack of enabling environment for trade, lack of modernisation and diversification of products, etc.

These issues must be addressed to increase the export capacity of various sectors. As for the commerce ministry project, the authorities must fast-track its implementation by addressing the problems it has been facing.

Fairer wages, or more broken promises for tea workers?



Philip Gain is a researcher and director at the Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD).

PHILIP GAIN

WHAT happened this month turned out to be one of the biggest shut-downs of the tea gardens in the history of Bangladesh's tea industry. Tea workers started strikes in all tea gardens in Sylhet and Chattogram divisions upon the call of their lone union, Bangladesh Cha Sramik Union (BCSU). The passivity of the tea gardens owners' organisation, Bangladesh Tea Association (BTA), about the daily two-hour strike and demonstrations for four days (August 9-12) led strikes full-time from August 13 to 21. Their key demand was a daily wage of Tk 300.

We witnessed a workers' revolt that shook the nation, and inspired huge media attention and public sympathy. Six generations ago, these workers, belonging to the lowest rungs of the Hindu caste system and from Indigenous communities, had been brought by British companies from different parts of India to work on the tea gardens. They were among the



Protest rally in Sreemangal town for Tk 300 in daily wages.

PHOTO: SANJOY KAIRI

not be suppressed. In defiance of their leaders and government functionaries, who decided to end the strike for the daily cash wage of Tk 145, tea workers decided to continue striking until their lone demand was met. This was the scenario up until Saturday (August 20).

However, the workers' strike was brought to an end yesterday after a one-page statement was issued. The brief statement contained a memorandum of understanding (MoU) between Bangladesh Cha Sramik Union leaders and three government officials – the DC of Moulvibazar, Mir Nahid Ahsan, Police Super of Moulvibazar, Mohammad Zakaria, and deputy director of the Divisional Labour Office in Sreemangal, Moulvibazar, Mohammad Nahidul Islam. Workers' representatives who signed the MoU include eight top central committee members of BCSU, including its acting general secretary, Nripen Paul. It is surprising that the Bangladesh Tea Association is absent in the statement.

One of the most astonishing statements in the MoU, signed on the Moulvibazar DC's stationary, is that the prime minister will now guide the fixing of tea workers' wages. Yet nobody knows what exactly these wages will be – Tk 150? More? Less? The tea workers who were, up to August 21, determined to continue demanding daily wages of Tk 300 have now been thrown into confusion. After everything that has

happened from August 9, they are now being asked to go back to work for a daily cash payment of Tk 120 until there is a decision from the prime minister. When we checked yesterday, we found all 23 tea gardens in Habiganj district remained closed, whereas all 23 gardens in Chattogram Valley had reopened. However, many other tea gardens were still shut. While we hope most tea

garden owners and government functionaries should promote true trade unionism. The lone trade union in the tea sector, BCSU, is cut off, isolated and unable to pursue appropriate strategies to establish the rights of tea workers. It even depends on the owners to collect the workers' monthly subscriptions to the union, which are then periodically sent to its account. This is known as the "check-off" system and makes BCSU dependant on tea garden owners. For its elections, BCSU depends on the government, which provides funds and the manpower to run it. It has many other limitations, and the owners and government agencies have a responsibility to help them become an independent and well-connected entity. This situation is far from ideal, with only one union being heavily dependent on the government and owners, and no opportunity to initiate other trade unions in the tea sector.

There are lessons for owners, trade union leaders and the government in this August revolt in the tea gardens. The tea workers have been mistreated and taken advantage of for generations, first at the hands of colonial owners, and then at the hands of their own countrymen at different periods. Such systematic abuse must stop. The ethics of fair business must be maintained in the tea sector.

First and foremost, the Bangladesh Tea Association should calculate fair wages in open discussions with BCSU, government functionaries and, most importantly, economists and social scientists. BTA's calculation of the Tk

403 daily wages and benefits that it claims to give to workers is seriously flawed. According to sub-section 45 in section 2 of the labour law, it must exclude around half of what they are including as part of the "payment" from wage calculations, such as festival leave and sick leave. The BCSU also needs to be less ambiguous and clarify whether the demand of Tk 300 is just daily cash pay.

Tapan Datta, a veteran trade union leader and a long-time adviser of BCSU, welcomed the decision to end the strike and reopen the tea gardens. However, he said, "I do not support anything less than Tk 200 in daily cash pay. If the tea workers are not happy with solutions guided by the prime minister, they can take appropriate measures including strikes, which is their legitimate right."

It is natural for the tea workers to be wary in this situation. There is enough evidence of owners hijacking the Minimum Wage Board to ensure wages don't increase at all. The Minimum Wage Board's recommendations and failed negotiations between BTA and BCSU fuelled the unrest in the tea gardens. Its complete failure means there is no longer any ground for the government to consider the recommendations it has forwarded to the labour ministry.

In the best interests of the tea sector, tea garden owners and government functionaries should promote true trade unionism. The lone trade union in the tea sector, BCSU, is cut off, isolated and unable to pursue appropriate strategies to establish the rights of tea workers. It even depends on the owners to collect the workers' monthly subscriptions to the union, which are then periodically sent to its account. This is known as the "check-off" system and makes BCSU dependant on tea garden owners. For its elections, BCSU depends on the government, which provides funds and the manpower to run it. It has many other limitations, and the owners and government agencies have a responsibility to help them become an independent and well-connected entity. This situation is far from ideal, with only one union being heavily dependent on the government and owners, and no opportunity to initiate other trade unions in the tea sector.

The August strikes in the tea gardens drew a lot of media attention and sympathy from the public, both in the country and abroad. Yet, what is still little known about the tea workers is that they are not just deprived of fair wages, they are left far behind in accessing education, health services and assets that are essential for them to migrate out of poverty and exclusion. Given that they hold diverse, ethnic identities and the majority of tea workers are lower caste Hindus, they are yet to be treated as equal and dignified citizens of Bangladesh. The August revolt has pointed out some of the insurmountable difficulties that the tea workers of Bangladesh face.

FOREIGN MINISTER'S COMMENTS

Why do they say what they say?



Mohammad Al-Masum Molla is deputy chief reporter at The Daily Star.

MOHAMMAD AL-MASUM MOLLA

THE foreign minister has given the government the perfect recipe for a PR disaster. It's ironic how the expression "being diplomatic" has completely lost its meaning for the top diplomat of the country. When your foreign minister requests the media to be more "considerate", you know he is in deep trouble for his "big mouth".

Even when things are normal, your foreign minister should not speak in public about matters such as price hikes, which he should understand from his "diplomatic responsibilities" are not for him to talk about. You also don't have to be a rocket scientist to know that a foreign minister should not blurt out in public that he has requested a foreign government to help his government stay in power; you only need common sense to know that "open secrets" are also secrets, and they are that way because nobody talks about them in public.

When times are as difficult as they are now, with the government under a lot of pressure with issues such as inflation and low forex reserves, ministers need

to practice much more caution while speaking in public. At such a time, when your foreign minister says such things in public instead of practicing caution, you know this person is anything but "diplomatic".

This is nothing new in Bangladesh. Many ministers (many of whom were not career politicians) have said untoward things in the past and have sometimes gotten away with it. However, the recent proliferation of social media has made things even more difficult for these ministers who "never look before they leap". The expression "nothing is off the record" has never been truer. In fact, with 60 percent of members of the current parliament coming from a business background, these PR disasters are bound to increase in number in the future.

In Bangladesh, most members of the cabinet have their own public relations officers (PROs), whose primary role is to advise their bosses to stick to the tested talking points in order to avoid controversies. But in my experience as a political reporter for more than a

decade now, I have never seen PROs being anything more than glorified personal assistants, whose roles are limited to arranging media coverage for events that the ministers attend. There are two reasons why these PROs never do what they are supposed to.

Firstly, unlike politicians in western democracies, Bangladeshi politicians at the helms of ministries are not used to consulting their PROs (who they probably think are just "lowly" members of their staff and hence find not worth consulting) before going out to speak in public. In fact, many western politicians even have multiple well-trained members of staff to do research and advise them accordingly on what to say and wear, where to go and how to deal with things. Bangladeshi politicians, on the other hand, always tend to think that they themselves know things "better" than anyone else. It's almost twice as hard for a long-time teacher turned politician (like our current foreign minister), because teachers are a lot more used to telling students what to do rather than being told by other people how to do things.

Secondly, the recruitment of PROs in the staff of ministers is almost always inaccurate. People hired for these positions have literally no experience or training in the science of communication, which includes knowing how to do research to prepare appropriate talking points for the ministers, manage reputational crises, and use digital communication

technologies. One big reason behind this is that the government recruiters are also not aware of how important it is for a minister to have a PRO, or for that matter, to listen to PROs' advice.

In Bangladesh, you don't always have to be a career politician in order to become a minister. A career professional (doctor, engineer, teacher, etc) or a businessman can just as easily become a minister if they can prove their loyalty towards the ruling party. This in itself would not have been so much of a problem if the government also thought about giving these people some institutional training on the dos, and more importantly, the don'ts, before putting them at the helm of important ministries. If you taught well in class and if your students liked you as a teacher, it does not necessarily mean that you would also be able to handle yourself well when speaking in public to complex audiences such as foreign diplomats, ministers, politicians, and journalists.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is due in India next month, where she is scheduled to discuss a number of very sensitive long-standing geopolitical issues with her counterpart. We will now have to wait and see if the recent "undiplomatic" comments by the Bangladesh foreign minister have any impact on the ambience and the outcome of the Bangladesh premier's negotiations with our influential neighbour.