

## Nurture students, don't torture them

Who will answer for the untimely death of a 13-year-old schoolgirl?

WE are shocked and saddened by the death of an eighth grader in Narsingdi, who died by suicide after her teacher harassed her for wearing trousers with her school uniform. According to her classmates, the 13-year-old was reprimanded and publicly humiliated in front of her whole class by one of her teachers at Shibpur Government Pilot High School. She was also slapped and hit with a cane. Unable to bear the humiliation, she reportedly consumed poison, and then went to the police station to lodge a complaint. She collapsed there and was later pronounced dead at the sadar hospital.

The incident is disturbing on many levels. To begin with, why would a teacher torture a student for a seemingly harmless act as wearing trousers? Have we reached such a regressive point in our society that students have to be publicly policed by teachers for wearing clothes that do not conform to antiquated gender norms?

Over the past few months, we have been observing increasingly troubling actions and discussions around women's clothing – from assaulting a woman at a train station in Narsingdi for her attire, to a judge's comment that she was in an "objectionable" state for wearing jeans and a T-shirt, to public demonstrations calling out women's right to dress as they please. We are alarmed that these conversations seem to be spreading to our educational institutions, where we should be questioning entrenched patriarchal values and fostering women's emancipation in our society. As the education minister so aptly put it: now is the time to talk about robotics, not women's clothes. At a time when girls in Bangladesh are breaking barriers and glass ceilings and outperforming boys in almost all major public examinations, such narrow focus on clothing does them – and the country at large – a disservice and threatens to undo the tremendous progress made over the decades.

Even if, for argument's sake, we accept that the child had violated the school's dress code, it is completely unacceptable that a teacher would resort to harassment and capital punishment – which is banned in all educational institutions in Bangladesh – to discipline her. Teachers ought to realise that their role as educators is to nurture, not torture, young and impressionable minds. The teacher who publicly humiliated the 13-year-old, without any consideration of how their action would affect the sensitivities of an emotional teenager, must now answer for her untimely death.

Incidents of suicides have increased at an alarming rate in our educational institutions. Unfortunately, we have done little to address the pressing mental health concerns of adolescents and youth. It is high time we took a look at how the repressive and narrow-minded attitudes of our teachers and our educational institutions at large are contributing to the mental health crisis of our young generation and take effective and urgent measures to address this looming pandemic.

## Children deprived of childhood

What has the government done to eliminate child labour?

THE picture of Sabbir, an 11-year-old child worker, published in the front page of this daily on September 1 reminds us of the present reality of millions of children across Bangladesh. He was a student of Class IV a few months ago, but he had to drop out of school and get a job at a small garment factory to support his struggling family. From another report published in this daily recently, we learnt about another 10-year-old child worker named Shawon, who also had to leave school to support his poverty-stricken family. Shawon now works in the cafeteria of a residential hall of Dhaka University, where he toils away for long hours for a meagre wage of Tk 4,000.

The situation of these two children speaks volumes about the present condition of child labour in the country. During the Covid pandemic, many children were forced to drop out of school and engage in work. And now, with the cost of living soaring out of control over the past few months, many more have been forced to leave school to earn a living. The situation is likely to deteriorate in the coming months. The question that naturally arises is: How can we eradicate child labour from our country if we cannot provide these children and their families with the necessary social and financial support? How can we address the issue of dropouts without also addressing the increasing income inequality in the country?

According to the last survey done by Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) in 2013, there are 3.45 million child workers in the country, 1.28 million of whom are employed in risky and hazardous jobs. Despite the government's commitment to eliminate all forms of child labour from Bangladesh by 2025, and to eradicate child labour from hazardous factories by 2021, children are still employed in the transportation sector, welding factories, automobile workshops, battery recharging shops, tobacco factories, and so on, where there is no oversight and monitoring of occupational safety and health conditions. We remember all too well the tragic deaths of at least 16 child workers during the fire at Hashem Foods Limited last year, but even that, it appears, has failed to stir the conscience of the nation and that of our policymakers.

In order to eradicate child labour from our country once and for all, we first need proper updated data, based on which the government will have to come up with effective plans to re-engage these children in education. There needs to be effective monitoring in all sectors to ensure that children are not engaged in hazardous professions. As child labour is intrinsically tied to the economy, the government must also work towards ensuring an equitable society where people's basic needs are met. We cannot boast of progress and economic development if we leave so many children behind.

# Citizens' fundamental rights are not the executive's choice



BLACK, WHITE AND GREY

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ALI RIAZ

CAN the implementation of fundamental rights enshrined in the constitution be a matter of a choice for the executive? Can citizens be told that their rights, such as the rights to assembly, speak and conscience, are now available because the executive branch of the state is offering them as a gift? Answers to these questions essentially reveal whether a country is democratic or not. Answers to these – not only on paper or as rhetorical, but as a practice – are important in understanding the state of governance. Understandably, when the ruling party claims the system as democratic, both the answers are bound to be negative. This discussion has become more pertinent in the context of the events in Bangladesh in the last few weeks as the country is witnessing wanton attacks by the police and activists of the Awami League on the demonstrations and assemblies of the political opposition, Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP).

Interestingly, these attacks came after Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's assurance that the opposition will be allowed to hold demonstrations and assemble. Sheikh Hasina, during a meeting with her party's organising secretaries recently, said she had instructed that opposition parties not be "disturbed" if they hold demonstrations and rallies. "Our opposition party has an opportunity; they will agitate, let them do it. Even today, I have instructed that none of those who are agitating should be arrested or disturbed," she said (*Prothom Alo*, August 14, 2022). Although it was not clear whom she instructed, presumably the order was meant for the police and civil administration. Why this particular order was mentioned in the party meeting held at Ganabhaban remains a question. It is also imperative that we ask why the head of the executive branch had to specifically "instruct" that the opposition be allowed to demonstrate. Isn't it right already enshrined in the constitution?

The Bangladesh Constitution has guaranteed the right to assembly of the citizens as a fundamental right. But those who followed Bangladeshi politics over the years, especially since 2014, know how the right has been curtailed and how the combination of law enforcement agencies and



PHOTO: COLLECTED

Police charge baton on a procession of BNP activists in Narayanganj, brought out on the occasion of the party's 44th founding anniversary, on September 1, 2022.

the ruling party activists have foiled various demonstrations. In many instances, opposition activists were violently attacked. But what the prime minister's "instruction" revealed is that the individual's power has transcended the constitution – a classic example of executive aggrandisement, personalisation of power, and a hallmark of authoritarianism. This is not an aberration, but a pattern of governance of the past years. Although the prime minister has "assured" the opposition, her party leaders have consistently spoken against letting the BNP take to the streets. It seems the "instruction" was rhetoric and the party leaders read between the lines.

The prime minister's speech came in the wake of protests on load-shedding, price hikes and incredible suffering befallen on the citizens lately. The rising cost of essentials have badly hit the poor, lower-middle class, and middle class while the ruling party leaders and its supporters are enjoying the fruits of corruption and rent-seeking. Capital flight has reached an unprecedented level, and a small group of businessmen, apparently close to the ruling party, are benefiting from the misery of the people.

In July, simmering anger started to be expressed. On July 31, one BNP activist was shot dead during a procession

in Bhola; three days later, another succumbed to his injuries. There were protests elsewhere as well. Instead of trying to address the concerns of the citizens, the government increased the price of fuel on August 5, which added insult to injury. Consequently, the price of essentials faced another round of hikes, and opposition parties tried to take to the streets. As police and

reported in the media that Shaon was killed in police firing, and that firing was targeted at the demonstrators.

It is not only the BNP rallies that are being attacked; other opposition parties have also been prevented from gatherings too. Over the past years, the rights stipulated in the constitution seem to have become something only on paper. The head of the executive branch determines the rights the citizens enjoy and when they can enjoy them.

The government, in recent months, has been under pressure, including from the international community, for its abysmal human rights record. The sanctions imposed on the Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) and its officers have been followed by harsh criticism. Michele Bachelet, the UN high commissioner for human rights, during her visit to Bangladesh last month, criticised the government for the human rights situation. In the wake of the condemnations, the government wants to show that the situation is not as bad as the human rights activists are claiming. That seems to have prompted the prime minister's assurance and some space for the opposition parties. Presumably, the ruling party also wants to show that the situation is good enough for a participatory election scheduled for the coming year.

But given the troubling development of the last few weeks, and the attacks on the opposition rallies, nothing has changed. It also demonstrates how the rights of the citizens are being trampled by force. Those who think that they should remain silent because they do not subscribe to the politics of BNP, and that these attacks are being carried out against the BNP, should think twice. It is a continuation of the assaults on the fundamental rights of the citizens. Citizens' fundamental rights are not something the executive can give or take away at will.

Indeed, the use of force to suppress the opposition and undermine the rights of the citizens did not start in the past weeks; over the past decade, we have witnessed erosion of democracy in a spectacular manner. Dissent has been criminalised; lawful political activities have been described as "conspiracy" – not only against the government, but also against the state. In such a context, these relentless attacks are not only a message to the BNP, but also to all political parties that they, too, will be dealt with in a similar manner if they take to the streets. Imparting fear in society, engaging in intimidation of the dissenting voices and outright assaulting those who dare to speak are hallmarks of autocracy. Hopefully, the opposition politicians understand the message, and decide what role they need to play.

## 124TH BIRTH ANNIVERSARY OF ABUL MANSUR AHMAD

# A man who saw the world for what it could be



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EMRAN MAHFUZ

IT was in a most turbulent period of the history of Bengal that Abul Mansur Ahmad (1898-1979) fought hard against social prejudice and religious bigotry. His brilliance in various fields – be it politics, journalism or literature – made him a popular name in undivided Bengal. He was a superb satirist, a thought-provoking essayist and an astute political commentator.

He witnessed and contributed to the rise of political and cultural consciousness of Bangalee Muslims. In his youth, he participated in different social and cultural movements, and in his more mature years, he blossomed as a writer, journalist, politician and, most importantly, as a social thinker.

After completing his studies in Mymensingh and Dhaka, he went to Calcutta (now Kolkata) to study further and follow his dream of writing. He worked in many weekly and daily newspapers and wrote his famous satires during this period. He became involved in anti-British movements, was inspired by Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, and worked under Sher-e-Bangla AK Fazlul Huq and Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy. Abul Mansur started with Swaraj Party led by Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das and later joined the Indian National Congress, attracted by the leadership of Subhas Chandra Bose. He played a significant role in the

Krishak Praja Party of Fazlul Huq and later joined the Pakistan Movement. In 1946, he founded and edited the *Dainik Ittehad* from Calcutta, which was to become one of the fastest growing modern newspapers of the time.

Abul Mansur was a keen observer of his contemporary world, which he saw with the eye of an artist who portrayed life not only as it is, but also as it could be. The many different roles he played made him an exceptional writer, experienced politician and an ace journalist. But it is in the capacity of a litterateur that Abul Mansur shines to this date, and will do so in the future. In the early 40s, when the demand for Pakistan was gathering support, Abul Mansur foresaw the issue and wrote that the state language of East Pakistan must be Bangla, and no other language.

After the 1947 Partition, he returned to his native Mymensingh, restarted his

law practice and continued his political activities. He was one of the early leaders of the Awami League and the principal author of the famous *Ekush Dafa*, the 21-point election manifesto of the United Front in 1954 that routed the Muslim League from East Bengal politics. He later became the education minister in Sher-e-Bangla's short-lived government. In 1956, he became the commerce and industries minister in the central government of Pakistan, headed by Husyen Shaheed Suhrawardy as the prime minister. He used to be named the acting prime minister of Pakistan during Suhrawardy's foreign trips.

Among Abul Mansur's books are his political and personal autobiography *Amar Dekha Rajnitir Panchash Bachhar* and *Atmakatha*, his satires *Ayna*, *Food Conference*, *Guilliverer Safamama*, his book of essays *Sher-e-Bangla theke Bangabandhu*, and many others.

Of all his work, Abul Mansur is most remembered as a satirist. He chose satire as his main genre of literature, but he also wrote several novels depicting social injustice. Through them, he highlighted all forms of bigotry and exploitation in the name of religion and political hypocrisy. Among his satires, *Ayna* is most noteworthy. In *Aynar Frame*, a foreword to *Ayna*,

poet Kazi Nazrul Islam wrote, "Normal mirrors reflect the outward picture of a man. But the *ayna* my friend Abul Mansur Ahmad created has caught the inner picture of man. People who roam around us wearing various masks have had their real face revealed in Abul Mansur's *Ayna*. We met them all the time in temples, mosques, on the dais making public speeches, and also in the literary arena."

His other humour pieces like *Hujur Kebla* and *Nayebe Nabi* are also unparalleled in Bangla literature. He showed his intellectual courage by writing these books in the 1930s and 1940s while the contemporary writers were cowed down by the fundamentalists of the time. What Abul Mansur wrote at that time about religious bigotry, we cannot think of writing in the 21st century.

As a visionary and an intellectual, he was far ahead of his time. Imbued with patriotism, he stood against corruption all his life. He used his mighty pen against all inconsistencies in the society. His belief in democracy was life-long and unshakeable. For him, it was the best form of government, and he wrote relentlessly to build a democratic society.

In Bangla literature, Abul Mansur Ahmad remains a very important figure. Our society is not yet free from the social, political, religious and cultural vices against which he wrote so vigorously. Use of religion in politics, the influence of the *pir-fakirs* in social life, and the hypocrisy in the name of politics still persist. But today, no one is as vocal against these as Abul Mansur was. We now need such writers and thinkers more than ever before.

Translated by Enamul Huq.