

VISUAL: KAZI TAHSSIN AGAZ APURBO

Spare Fardin the burden of social judgement



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One of our fundamental rights, as enshrined in the constitution, is that all citizens are entitled to equal protection of the law, and have the right to a speedy and public trial by an independent and impartial court or tribunal established by law.

Nowhere in our constitution – or in any legal document, for that matter – does it say that before the wheels of justice have barely begun to turn, and before there has been a proper investigation into whatever crime has been committed or law has been broken, the facts of that case should be wide open to the public for a trial by media.

Yet, that is what we continue to witness, time and again, during high-profile criminal cases in Bangladesh.

A case in point is the Banani Raintree Hotel rape investigation, where instead of scrutinising the rapists, we put the victims under a microscope – so much so that even the judge in her verdict felt compelled to mention their social lives and how they had gone swimming at the hotel. As if somehow exercising their personal liberties and engaging in behaviour that would only be considered inappropriate in a patriarchal society had expunged them of their innocence.

This is not the first time that those involved in criminal cases – not just suspects, but also victims – have been pre-judged and stigmatised for their background/behaviour. Too often, we see the tides of sympathy turn against people who are considered “delinquents,” long before they face trial. This happened widely in 2018, when the government’s anti-narcotics drive led to 466 extrajudicial deaths, but demands for justice only really surfaced when it was recorded that an “innocent” person (i.e. not someone linked with the drug trade) was killed.

An involvement with drugs specifically creates a lot of stigma in our society, where we are yet to acknowledge addiction as a public health issue. We still view it through the lenses of crime and anti-social behaviour, with no sympathy for the psychological (and often, physiological) battles being fought by a person addicted to substance abuse. And we have seen far too many examples of drug peddlers and addicts not being treated as equal in the eyes of the law, while the drug lords making millions from this trade

continue to be above it.

Perhaps that is why it was so heartbreaking to see murdered BUET student Fardin Noor’s father tearfully proclaim to the media that his son could never have been buying drugs before he died, after a number of media outlets quoted an anonymous source claiming that his death was the result of a quarrel with drug dealers in Chonpara.

In the midst of mourning their son’s sudden death, this family is now being forced to also defend his character in a judgemental and often unforgiving society.

I have zero proof to claim that Fardin was completely sober, or an addict, or a casual user. But what is

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of concern is that these media outlets have no way to substantiate these claims either. In fact, on November 12, the additional commissioner of the Detective Branch of Dhaka Metropolitan Police told the press, “We are still not saying he was killed (while) trying to buy drugs.”

So, who exactly was the source who confirmed that he was buying drugs, and why did they share this information with the media? And to what end did some sections of the media choose to make this information public?

There is a valid argument to be made that the media has a responsibility to share details of police investigations to create a check and balance against abuse of power, to guard against those with pull using the system to make their crimes

disappear. But we also have a responsibility to use our judgement on whether the information shared is hashing out sensationalist details of a crime, or whether it is highlighting patterns and contexts at an institutional level to add something meaningful to the conversation.

I personally feel we are wasting time by discussing Fardin’s activities in a way that, as his father put it, “breaks the morale of those demanding trial.” Instead, couldn’t we be questioning why known Chonpara drug gang member City Shaheen – who certain media outlets have claimed could be a key witness and possibly a potential suspect – was killed in crossfire on November 10, instead of being brought in for questioning?

There is an urgent need for us to discuss the role the media can play while reporting on crime. We must draw a line between reporting that is in the public interest and that holds the police and the justice system to account, and reporting that reproduces sensationalist details and unnecessarily impinges on the right to privacy of everyone involved.

It is also high time that the police showed some level of professionalism in protecting the confidentiality of those involved in criminal cases while ensuring that their investigations maintain openness and transparency.

We need to acknowledge that suspects, until they are proven to be criminals, should also be accorded certain rights.

It should cause all of us concern that an MD of a corporate conglomerate can evade any accountability despite having very close ties with a suspected murder victim, whereas the friend of a murder victim can be taken to remand and denied bail for being the last person to see him alive. From where I’m standing, it doesn’t look like the latter was given equal protection of the law.

Again, whether or not Fardin’s friend has any links to his murder is something I cannot speculate on. However, if it turns out her role is more as a witness than a suspect, the memory of being implicated in this crime will continue to hound her, given that police showed no qualms in releasing her name, age, and place of education to the public. Is it any wonder, then, that one of the major reasons cited for the massive delays in the justice system is the near-impossibility of getting witnesses to cooperate with investigations and take the stand?

Public opinion, at the end of the day, can be an extremely partial and brutal court of judgement. When sharing details of criminal investigations, the police and the media need to do their bit to spare everyone involved from being put on public trial.

For security and affordability, we must shore up renewable energy



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The Bangladesh Bank recently withdrew the lending cap for coal-based power plants. The move aims to facilitate the purchase of coal needed to operate new coal-fired power plants of 6,754-megawatt (MW) capacity, which are set to come online in a few years. However, as the decision allows banks to lend beyond their 25 percent cap to a single borrower, it may encourage the private sector to bring forward proposals to build more coal-fuelled power plants.

Easing lending norms for coal-based power plants might dent the country’s recent strides towards a clean energy transition.

In June 2021, amid uncertainty over international funding for new coal-fired plants and environmental concerns, Bangladesh scrapped 10 coal-based power plant projects. The declaration of shoring up renewable energy capacity to 40 percent by 2041, as part of the Mujib Climate Prosperity Plan (MCPP), reinforced

Development Board (BPDB) data, substantiated that the country only utilised 40 percent of the power capacity during 2019-20.

A closer inspection of BPDB data from November 1 to 7 this year shows that the highest demands for electricity during morning and evening peaks were 10,385MW and 11,116MW, respectively. During mid-May 2022, the evening peak demand for electricity was close to 14,000MW against the morning peak of around 11,500MW. Therefore, the country’s power system has a good amount of surplus capacity.

With no sign of a dramatic rise in power demand in the country, surplus power capacity will only rise once the planned 6,754MW of coal-fired plants start operating.

The other key challenge for the sector is rising costs.

A recent report shows that the average cost of per unit electricity generation has soared to Tk 10 (USD 0.095) in 2022, compared to Tk 6.81

for power sector security instead of energy security. The addition of power generation capacity, irrespective of a rational assessment of demand, continues to result in a high level of surplus capacity.

To counter this, Bangladesh could increase the share of renewable energy to cover the morning peak demand and/or reduce fossil fuel usage during the day to minimise the average cost of electricity.

Rough estimates show that the levelised costs of energy from rooftop solar and utility-scale solar are Tk 5.5 (USD 0.052) and Tk 7.6 (USD 0.072), respectively, against the BPDB’s current average electricity generation cost of Tk 10.

Moreover, the Power Cell’s analysis of last year substantiated that the cost per unit of electricity generation at the Payra plant using imported coal would be Tk 7.78 (USD 0.074). The elevated price of coal in the international market suggests that electricity from the Payra coal-fired plant would be costlier than the rate calculated last year.

According to the Infrastructure Development Company Ltd (IDCOL), industrial rooftops could accommodate 5,000MW of solar power systems. Since net metering guidelines are already in place, industries could take advantage of cost-competitive renewable energy



The elevated price of coal in the international market suggests that electricity from the Payra coal-fired plant would be costlier than the rate calculated last year.

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the government’s commitment to clean energy.

Fossil-fuel-based electricity generation has already thrown up several challenges for our power sector. Instead, increasing renewable energy capacity would address some of the sector’s challenges and enhance energy security and affordability in Bangladesh.

One of the key challenges that the power sector is grappling with is overcapacity. In 2022, the government announced 100 percent electricity coverage in the country, following its commendable efforts in ramping up installed power generation capacity five-fold.

However, while installed capacity has increased considerably, power demand has not been able to keep pace.

Against the installed capacity of 22,512MW, excluding off-grid solar and captive systems, the highest demand served by the national grid was 14,792MW on April 16, 2022. A study by the Institute of Energy Economics and Financial Analysis (IEEFA), based on Bangladesh Power

(USD 0.065) during the 2020-21 fiscal year. This steep rise is mainly because of the high cost of imported diesel, furnace oil, and liquefied natural gas (LNG).

With more coal-fired capacity coming online, concerns remain about the price and affordability of the fuel.

Reportedly, the Asian coal price per tonne hit USD 457.8 in September 2022, which is 3.5 times the effective coal price of USD 130 per tonne, as considered in the BPDB annual report for FY2020-21. While the price of coal is falling, it still hovers around USD 325 per tonne. With 4.12 million tonnes of coal consumed annually in the operational 1,320MW Payra power plant alone, the demand for imported coal will shoot up by an additional 20 million tonnes once the new coal-fired plants begin operations. This would affect Bangladesh’s energy security.

Overall, the challenges the power sector experiences today emanate from the increasing focus on imported fossil-fuel-based development, alongside the quest

and reduce their average energy cost to remain competitive.

In light of the seeming land scarcity, a thorough land resource assessment could help identify the areas for utility-scale renewable energy projects. Finally, Bangladesh has planned for some 97 special economic zones, which could be a good fit for renewable energy projects.

With the risk of coal projects being stranded assets in the coming years, Bangladesh must not invest in new coal-based plants other than those nearing completion. As fiscal pressures mount due to decreasing foreign currency reserves, cost-competitive renewable energy options such as rooftop solar and utility-scale solar power systems are better suited to shore up capacity in the national grid. This would help meet the goals of enhancing energy security and affordability. In addition, it would help relieve fiscal burden on the energy and power sectors. Moreover, surplus capacity in the sector would allow flexibility in operation with the increasing share of renewable energy.

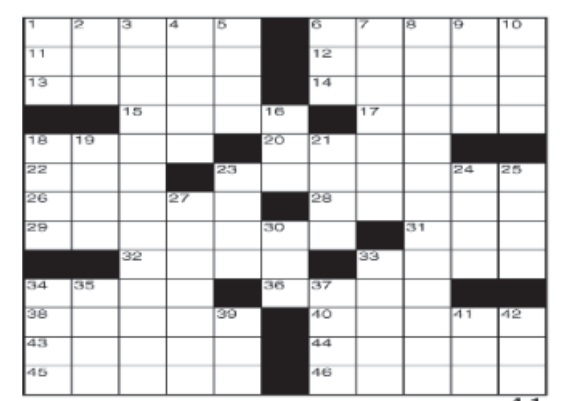
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ACROSS

- 1 Dominant setting
- 6 Clambake
- 11 Sophia of “Two Women”
- 12 Plentiful
- 13 In the know
- 14 Second airing
- 15 Pasture group
- 17 Umbrella parts
- 18 Night fliers
- 20 Milky gem
- 22 Peyton’s brother
- 23 Like December
- 26 Tropical lizard
- 28 Find darling
- 29 Checkout device
- 31 Dressing part
- 32 Lewd look
- 33 Hoof sound

- 34 – California Singer
- 36 Singer
- 38 Battery end
- 40 River of Pakistan
- 43 Comic strip worker
- 44 Stop
- 45 Yorkshire city
- 46 So far

- 10 Coop group
- 16 Boat’s mate
- 18 Implores
- 19 Guinness of film
- 21 Still life fruit
- 23 Musical sound
- 24 Macbeth’s witches, e.g.
- 25 Distress call
- 27 Worked, as dough
- 30 Pitching stat
- 33 Road work markers
- 34 Release money
- 35 Last Stuart ruler
- 37 Layered mineral
- 39 Hosp. sections
- 41 Apply
- 42 Harden



NOVEMBER 8 ANSWERS



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