

The Daily Star

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The vulnerable need food support

Why cut back on public food distribution programmes when they are needed the most?

That ordinary people in Bangladesh are struggling with a cost of living crisis seems like an obvious statement to make. In recent months, this daily has, many times, reported on the soaring prices of essentials, energy and fuel price hikes, and growing food insecurity for households struggling to deal with economic shocks.

However, it seems that this struggle is not so obvious to our policymakers. Why else would they, instead of scaling up public food distribution programmes for the poor, be cutting back on them instead? Yet, according to the food ministry's own data, that is exactly what has happened. The amount of rice given out in this fiscal year so far – 15 lakh tonnes – is down by six percent compared to the previous year.

Just a cursory look at the numbers demonstrates how misguided this is. In December, inflation stood at 8.71 percent (8.86 percent in rural areas), and economic forecasts suggest it is likely to go up further. During the same period, the wage rate grew at 7.03 percent, meaning even less disposable income in people's hands. And, in a report released in the same month, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) listed Bangladesh as one of 45 countries that require external assistance for food – a result of severe localised food insecurity, created by a perfect storm of economic constraints, climatic upheavals, and high prices of important food items.

In such a situation, ensuring food security should be a top priority for the government. In fact, in November last year, the prime minister said as much, and instructed Bangladesh Bank to intervene if any bank faced a dollar shortage while opening letters of credit for importing food, fertiliser, and other agricultural inputs. All of these measures were meant to ensure uninterrupted food supply; yet, a top official of the Directorate General of Food cited supply chain disruptions, brought on by the pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine war, as one of the reasons behind reduced food distribution.

However, this excuse does not hold up when we consider that the government currently has 19 lakh metric tonnes of food stock, whereas 12 lakh is considered adequate. While it is true that wheat stocks have been disrupted, and it may explain why the government has scaled back wheat distribution by 27.5 percent, why hasn't this been replaced with rice instead?

In fact, the same official also said that the government saved about 75,000 tonnes of rice after getting rid of "fake beneficiaries" who were taking advantage of food distribution programmes. So, why has this surplus not been given to the people who really need them?

Whenever the issue of food insecurity has come up, government officials have provided reassurances of having sufficient food stock in hand. So it is beyond our comprehension why, in this time of need, authorities have failed to expand social safety nets and provide adequate food support to vulnerable populations. It is imperative that the government expand public expenditure and implement pro-poor policies. While long-term policies must be there to ensure uninterrupted food supply, in the short run, authorities must provide immediate food support to the people who need it the most.

Will Nadia's tragic death change anything?

Road safety remains a neglected issue

More than four years after the Road Safety Movement, where the death of two students in a road crash led to mass protests and pushed authorities to formulate the Road Transport Act (RTA) 2018, we are deeply saddened to witness the same kinds of unjust and tragic deaths continue to occur on our roads. The latest victim is Nadia Sultana, a 19-year-old student of Northern University, who was killed on January 23 when a bus of Victor Paribahan hit the motorbike she was on near Jamuna Future Park in the capital's Bhatara area.

After her death, hundreds of students blocked roads with their demands, which included arrests of the driver and helper, and compensation for the victim's family. The question is, how many more times will we have to see the same events be repeated? Why are people still needlessly dying in road crashes?

Despite government promises to seriously and urgently deal with the issue, the country continues to witness an alarming surge in road crashes and deaths, year after year. According to Jatri Kalyan Samity, 9,951 people were killed in 6,749 road crashes in 2022, while the number of deaths and crashes, reported by the Road Safety Foundation, were 7,713 and 6,829 respectively. Last year's numbers were much higher compared to 2021.

What have our transport authorities done to check the rising number of road crashes? Apparently, nothing noticeable. They have not only failed to check the number of unfit and unregistered vehicles on the roads, but have also been largely unable to take underage and unlicensed drivers off the roads. Although the driver and helper of the bus that killed Nadia have been apprehended, we are yet to know any details regarding the driver's license, his ability to operate the bus, and the fitness of the vehicle itself.

However, the issue here is not just the culpability of one driver or the fitness of one vehicle, but the fact that the entire transport industry is highly undisciplined and mostly unregulated. It is unacceptable that, this entire time, the RTA has been practically defunct in the absence of necessary rules, which were formulated only last month. How can there be change if the laws to bring about change are not enforced properly? The last four years of inaction have cost the country dearly, and have brought into serious question the government's ability and will to hold those responsible to account.

We urge the authorities to bring the alleged killers of Nadia to justice and to compensate her family according to the RTA 2018. We are also keenly aware that, to this day, the authorities have more or less failed in carrying out their responsibilities in upholding said law. Will the government finally take action, or will we only continue to witness history repeat itself?

'Special train' for Awami League, 'transport strike' for BNP



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GOLAM MORTOZA

Public property mean's the "public's" property – it doesn't belong to any individual or political party. But recent examples tell a different story. The ruling Awami League is going to create an extraordinary example in a soon-to-be held rally in Rajshahi, where a special train has been earmarked for this occasion. The question is: can a political party use a national asset in this way?

It must be clarified that even though we criticise politicians and the parties they represent, at the end of the day, we have to – or want to – go to them for solutions. It's a proven fact that when politicians lead a country through a political process, the country benefits the most. There are ample examples of how non-political forces steer a nation, with Pakistan being a prominent example; a country that is on the verge of bankruptcy. Comparatively, India has no fewer internal problems. But as they are ruled by a politician-led democratic process, they have still managed to create a strong footing.

Our everlasting hope is that political parties will govern Bangladesh through a proper, acceptable and independent election. Unfortunately, as time goes by, a gross lack of equality, justice and good governance is gaining institutional acceptance.

The Daily Star Bangla reported that the Awami League will hold a rally in Rajshahi Madrasa Public Speaking Ground on January 29. This is a rally organised by the political party AL, and not by the AL government. Still, a special train has been arranged for this "political party's" rally.

Now, why is this a problem? What harm is there in arranging a special train for those attending a specific party's rally?

Well, firstly, why should there be a special arrangement for this, when there aren't even enough trains to service the general populace, and when the passenger to train ratio is quite low?

Secondly, can we recall what the ruling party's attitude and the transport situation were like when the BNP tried organising a rally in Rajshahi? Last year, on September 28, BNP announced that they would organise a rally in Rajshahi on December 3. Before it, a transport strike was called in eight districts of the division, and enforced from 6am on December 1. In fact, the strike was

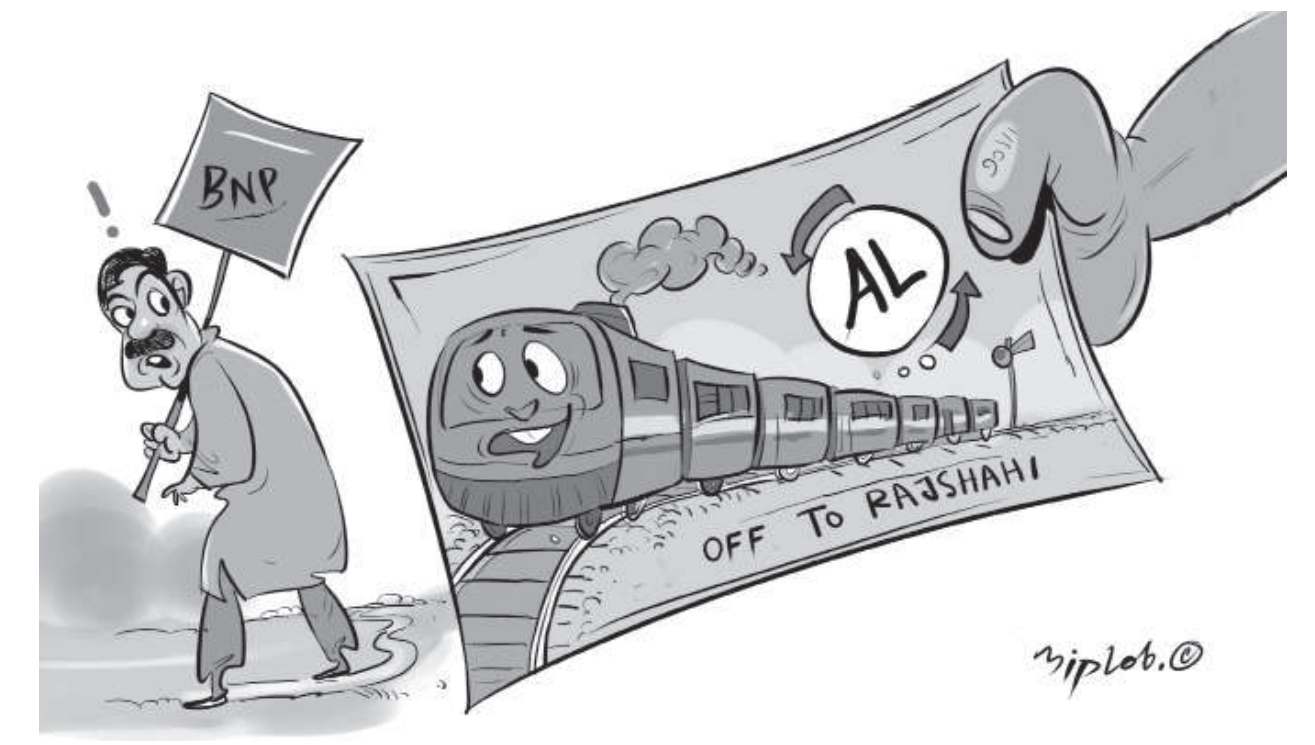


ILLUSTRATION: BIPOB CHAKROBORTY

underway even before its stipulated starting time.

This strike saw the ceasing of movement for all kinds of vehicles, including buses, trucks and three-wheelers. Rajshahi was virtually cut off from all adjacent districts. Thus, it became very hard for BNP leaders and activists to join the rally from neighbouring districts. It was evident that the transport strike was devised in order to impede BNP supporters from attending. Although the government announced that the strike was called by transport owners and that they had nothing to do with it, any conscious being can gauge that the reality was the contrary.

At one end, we see people being actively prevented from attending a BNP rally using transport strikes, police checkpoints being put up every couple of kilometres, and BNP leaders/activists' homes being raided, and them being arrested. On another end, special trains are to be arranged for the AL's rallies. Why should two political parties of the same nation receive polar opposite treatments?

We take for granted that the ruling party will get some added benefits. But does that mean they can misuse public resources? Can they act against another political party in this way?

What of the tall talks on equality and justice we hear so often?

When there's a BNP rally, 3G and 4G services for mobile networks are usually halted around the venue. But the government doesn't even bother to explain the reasons behind this. On December 3, 2022, Rajshahi did not have 3G and 4G services. Queries revealed that the BTRC had given a

networks are disrupted? Do transport strikes serve the people? What does "serving the people" actually mean to the ruling party? Does it mean only serving their own leaders, activists and supporters? Aren't opposition party affiliates a part of this country, too? Don't they also deserve to be served by the government?

People are losing voting rights, they

"directive" to carry this out.

Did the BTRC's directive only harm and deprive BNP leaders and activists? Did not the general population also suffer? When the transport strike prevented BNP supporters from travelling between districts, were they the only ones affected? Did the whole region consist of BNP supporters, leaders and activists? Is there any explanation for such government actions, which cause the people to suffer?

It can be uncomfortable to have these pointed out, but even when we do, the government pays no heed. When a political party is elected by the popular vote, but then becomes an authoritarian regime, getting re-elected via night votes and voter-less polls, the general people start feeling bitter towards said party. People start comparing such political governments with military dictatorships, which is by no means a positive sign for our politics, or for politicians in general.

The ruling AL's politicians claim they have no aspirations of holding on to power and that they do not want any personal achievements, either – they simply want to serve the public.

Undoubtedly, serving the public is a good deed. But what kind of "service" do people get when their mobile

cannot cast votes during polls, the prices of essentials are skyrocketing – and the government seems to be taking no notice. Ignoring the public's pleas, it is instead increasing the prices of fuel, gas and electricity. Each development project is seeing a cost increase, which is affecting the economy. We are experiencing an acute US dollar crisis and yet, money laundering persists. The government is not even taking effective steps against people who have been found responsible for causing these issues.

I want to end this piece with an example. Back when the military dictator HM Ershad was in power, the 15-party alliance led by the AL, seven-party alliance led by the BNP, and the five-party leftwing alliance, participated in a unified protest. Then, Ershad, who lost all popular support, stopped production in Adamjee Jute Mill and brought in 20,000 to 30,000 workers to join his rallies. That initiated the eventual doom of Adamjee Jute Mill. Later, the BNP came to power and shut down this mill, which once was bursting with potential.

Bangladesh Railway is already riddled with injustice, anomalies, and corruption. Have we considered what ill fate might befall the BR if such political usage of trains, as mentioned above, becomes a recurring trend?

After the deluge



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MILIA ALI

Now that we have stepped into a new year, it may be time to take a brief pause from our hectic schedule. Not to reminisce about the beach vacation in Thailand or the shopping spree in India, but to take a peep into a post-Covid world. Personally, I would like to assess whether or not I have made the life choices that I thought I would once the tsunami subsides. Am I at a place that I visualised I would be in – a less frenzied pace, a sharper awareness of our blessings, and a deeper appreciation of "others" and their needs?

Covid has not just been a deadly virus that spread in our bodies, but much more. It crept into our souls and shook our inner core, giving us a chance to closely examine the technology-driven world we created with the idea that it will make us, humans, invincible. The pandemic extracted a high toll, especially from the underprivileged. Towns and megacities of the world shut businesses and sent working class citizens back to jobless uncertainty. The top few sat in the comfort of their homes, maybe not worrying about the next meal, but counting the minutes and days of unstructured time in the absence of social interactions and family reunions. Barred from hugging an

old friend or kissing a grandchild, our material possessions, closeted in lonely houses, became meaningless. And we realised how we are all interconnected and cannot live our dreams in a bubble. Many thus reflected on the value of compassion and sharing, with the resolute intention of severing their ties with the past and creating a more inclusive and equitable world.

But once Covid somewhat abated, did we succeed in crossing the mental Rubicon? If anything, 2022 indicated that the spiritual lessons learnt lost out to the allure and the glitter of a hardcore material world. We are witnessing the revival of heartless capitalism and conspicuous consumption: opulent wedding celebrations and dinner parties have rebounded, there is a crazy demand for consumer goods, the influx of vacationers in flights and hotels is unrelenting. The extravaganza does not give us much hope that we are ready for a reset in our priorities and lifestyles to create a more humane society. On the contrary, it appears that people have gone back to their pre-Covid lifestyles with renewed frenzy, as if they are making up for the two years lost in forced isolation.

A recent photograph on the front page of The Daily Star caught my

attention and rekindled my thoughts on how little difference the Covid experience has made to our psyche. The evocative picture was captioned: "A woman living on a footpath in the capital...shares her blanket with a street dog she takes care of..." The description may be self-explanatory, but the photo conveyed so much more

Covid has not just been a deadly virus that spread in our bodies. It crept into our souls and shook our inner core, giving us a chance to closely examine the technology-driven world we created with the idea that it will make us, humans, invincible.

– the homeless woman was half asleep, there was neither anger, nor sorrow, but a hollowness in her expression that spoke volumes.

The poignant photo triggered a thought: can empathy, sharing, and selflessness be acquired – and learnt through life's experiences – or are these innate qualities dictated by an inner calling? And is compassion dependent on wealth and resources, or can it flow spontaneously in the way the homeless woman shared her blanket with the dog?

I, for one, believe that kindness and empathy have no race, frontiers, and borders, and can surmount most

obstacles. It's an inner choice we make: a moral choice, because there are no sanitizers or tests that can cleanse our minds or measure our moral compass. We and we alone are responsible for the path we choose. However, at some critical junctures, life does offer us a rare opportunity to choose the "road less travelled" that leads us to a shared humanity.

Alternatively, we can choose the trodden course and become a part of the prejudice, hate, greed, and injustice that prevails! I sincerely believe the pandemic was one such fork in our lives, where each individual could have opted to act on one's best instincts.

Unfortunately, people find it hard to change mental attitudes and their deeply entrenched lifestyles. But it's not impossible. According to "Sapiens" author Yuval Noah Harari, Homo sapiens began to dominate the earth not because of their scientific and technological advancements, but because of their ability to imagine things that didn't exist (religions, nations) and build communities based on shared beliefs. Actually, Harari goes a bit further in arguing convincingly that if we, human beings, collectively decide to alter the myths that dictate our thinking today, we can relatively quickly and dramatically alter human behaviour and change the pattern of history. The question is: shall we?

My head says that men and women are creatures of habit and resistant to change, especially if it means stepping out of their comfort zones and making sacrifices. But my heart says there may be hope, because the human race has the resilience to recreate itself with the very force that breaks it into pieces.