

## Govt high officials' routine disregard for court orders

It is a clear breach of our constitution, and should be punished

The High Court's frustration at government high officials for not complying with its orders, as well as its decision to refuse to hear a contempt of court petition against a secretary, is well-justified. An HC bench on Sunday said it was "fed up" with the fact that many of the court's orders remained unimplemented, despite the court passing them for the welfare of the country. The bench further stated that government high officials do not pay heed to the court's orders and, ultimately, without their proper implementation, these orders will end up in the trash. The HC bench also rightly observed that government officials display a degree of annoyance if they are summoned to appear before the court in connection with contempt of court petitions, despite being bound as per the constitution to comply with the court's orders – something that another HC bench had previously observed.

The HC bench made the remarks after the placing of a contempt of court petition against the secretary of environment, forest and climate change. In 2013, 23 individuals submitted an application to the environment ministry secretary to reinstate them to their jobs in a ministry project. As the secretary did not respond to their application, the Apex court in 2019 directed the secretary to dispose of the application within a month, following a writ petition. As the application was still not disposed of despite the court ruling, a contempt of court petition was filed with the HC last year.

This is the second time this month that the Hight Court has expressed its frustration with officials at the environment ministry. On February 5, an HC bench rebuked and expressed severe annoyance at the Department of Environment under the environment ministry for failing to take any effective steps to curb air pollution in Dhaka, despite repeated directives. And it observed that citizens were literally being "killed" by such inaction.

However, it is not just the environment ministry that is at fault here. Over the years, we have seen a tendency developing among government authorities to disobey orders of the Supreme Court, as no punishment was handed down for non-compliance with its orders.

The government and other authorities are bound to implement every directive of the Supreme Court, as it is binding on all, according to Article III of the Constitution. Article 112 of the Constitution also says that, "All authorities, executive and judicial, in the Republic shall act in aid of the Supreme Court."

A clear message should be sent to all government officials – particularly of the executive branch – that they are not above the law, as they seem to think they are. This idea that public servants are a "different class of people," as argued by the Attorney General back in November 2022, must be shunned for any substantive change to occur. Such display of clear disobedience to court orders needs to be followed up with severe punishment. The court could, perhaps, suo motu ask the relevant authorities to submit a report of how many court directives in total have been disregarded over the years, and opt for harsher measures.

## Gulshan fire a wake-up call

How many hundreds of establishments are at risk?

We express our sorrow at the deaths of two persons who succumbed to the injuries they sustained during the Sunday night fire that broke out in a residential building in the capital's Gulshan area. We also hope for the speedy recovery of those who are still under treatment. The several fire service units and others working in the rescue mission during that night must be commended for being able to douse the fire by 11pm and averting a much bigger disaster. But this incident has brought to light the need for building developers, owners, and government authorities to review whether the increasing number of high-rises in the country are maintaining necessary measures against such fire incidents.

Fire safety for high-rise buildings is a two-pronged practice: internal and institutional. Internally, there should be fire safety measures in place such as fire extinguishers, separate fire exits, hose cabinet systems, etc. There are ample laws and rules – from the Fire Service and Civil Defence (FSCD) and from Rajdhani Unnayan Karttripakkha (Rajuk) – which direct how these fire safety measures must be put in place. However, according to a 2020 study by the Bangladesh Institute of Planners, 96 percent of the establishments under Rajuk's jurisdiction have been constructed deviating from the designs which had been approved by authorities. Rajuk, too, has been accused of not overseeing buildings before, during, and after their construction as it is supposed to do – to say nothing of the allegations against the organisation of taking bribes to approve buildings even when they have flouted the initial design plans. In 2019, Rajuk's own survey of 1,818 high-rises (over 10 storeys) in Dhaka city found that at least 63 percent lacked adequate or any fire safety measures.

Once a large-scale fire breaks out, all eyes are usually on the fire service units to demand that they douse the fire as soon as possible. But it must also be investigated whether the tens of thousands of establishments in our cities follow the outlined fire safety rules that apply to them. It is also crucial that building owners and buyers of flats themselves are aware of these fire safety rules and the specific design requirements. Additionally, residents themselves must be educated on what to do to not only prevent fires (such as turning off gas sources when not in use and checking for loose ends in electric connections), but also the steps to take to save themselves and others if a fire does break out.

In the case of Sunday's Gulshan incident, as of writing this editorial, fire service officials are primarily suspecting that a short circuit in the elevator sparked the fire, which then spread quickly due to the plywood floor of the elevator. We hope that further investigation will reveal how this fire could have been prevented. We also urge the relevant government authorities to take this incident as a wake-up call and be stricter when it comes to ensuring the implementation of fire safety measures in establishments. As we have seen too often, building owners'/developers' tendency to cut corners by not accommodating fire safety and certain authorities' willingness to allow this can spell tragedy for many innocent people.

# Whatever happened to Bengali being our state language?



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In the month of February, there's a lot of discourse around the Bengali language and literature. We see people from across the country – from Dhaka to rural areas – paying their respects to the martyrs of the Language Movement in numerous Shaheed Minars. There's a renaissance of memories, and on February 21, we get to discuss our sense of consideration, our thoughts, the ins and outs of our fight in a new light. Ekushey means not bowing our heads – that is the prevailing motto of February 21.

In the intellectual world, asking questions is the norm. The Language Movement is intimately related to the language, thoughts, and society's anti-discriminatory politics, culture, and ideals. The fight was against the persecution of a nation, and the slogan was, "We want the state language to be Bengali." Over time, the spirit was cultivated, the fight against discrimination and for freedom was fought, and that culminated to the Mass Uprising. Since then, 50 years have passed, and now we must ask the question: what happened to Bengali becoming the state language?

According to the constitution, Bengali is the state language of Bangladesh. But looking at what the state has been doing – Bangladesh's five-year plan, the state fuel policy, its 100-year delta plan, its health policy, and policies related to water resources or communication – none of it is in Bangla. All of it is in English. All the research that is being conducted about Bangladesh's people and rivers, about the state of women in this country or the eradication of poverty, are in English. Decisions are being made and contracts are being signed on Bangladesh's resources with multinational companies and foreign countries – to take on foreign debt, for example – in English.

Even those who know English find it difficult to obtain these contracts and agreements, and they have to work really hard to understand these documents. These documents not being available in Bangla means that they are detached from the people of Bangladesh. And this leads to the people of Bangladesh not knowing what is being done with their lives, with their resources, or how their future is being decided. They don't know what the government is saying about them at international forums, what promises are being made, and what sort of contracts are being signed that affect their lives and resources.

It is being said that the state language is Bengali, but there is no



ILLUSTRATION: BIPLOB CHAKROBORTY

usage of Bengali by the state, and it is being pushed to the periphery. When it comes to the languages of indigenous peoples, the situation is even worse – they are being pushed even further to the periphery. What the state should have done right after independence was undertaking efforts to maintain communication with the knowledge creation and creative processes around the world. This communication can't be limited to those with the privilege, resources and international connections to do so; its access needs to be on a national scale, given to everyone.

To ensure these things, there should have been a massive push towards translating everything to the prominent language in the country: Bengali. Textbooks needed to be printed in Bengali on a massive scale. An institutional mechanism needed to be put in place where any practice of knowledge across the world is translated to Bengali as soon as it's created. Universal education should have been ensured in Bengali.

But at the same time, it has to be ensured that everyone knows and understands English because of its global acceptance. Other languages should also be taught and learnt. But one of the main objectives after the Liberation War should have been to

ensure the institutional processes were such that the practice of knowledge for all was available in their mother tongue, Bengali for Bengalis, and the same for people of indigenous communities. This was not done.

When February 21 became International Mother Language Day, the prominent mother tongue of this region, Bengali, was in a state of

spread, that it is controlled by a small number of people so that they can exert influence.

All the scholars that this country has ever seen, starting from Rabindranath Tagore to Dr Md Shahidullah, or even world-famous scientists such as Satyendra Nath Bose or Dr Qudrat-i-Khuda, have said that if the mother

extreme neglect. Bengali had no place in seminars, symposiums, education, healthcare, courthouses or government policy. There was no place for Bengali in the training of administration officers. The Bangla Academy needed to be a strong institution to lobby the state to do what was required. But their contribution and responsibilities have shrunk to such an extent that they have strayed far away from taking on these tasks. The directors of this institution are now engaged in a competition of servility, or wanting to please the government. This sort of competition has led to the Bangla Academy taking permission from police about displaying books at the book fair that may contain criticism of the government or may be provocative in some way.

So, in the month of February, we have to take a closer look at things. We have Shaheed Minars in this country; they are there so we can gather the strength to review things closely. Our young generation will see what their lives and futures are amounting to. They can examine what sort of state they have in front of them. A state that has detached everyone from its promise of a state language. There is such a gap in the levels of knowledge that like wealth, it too is being hoarded by a select few. There is an ongoing process to make sure knowledge is not

tongue is not the basis for a person, their breadth of knowledge cannot expand to its fullest. This is what is happening to our nation.

There is so much excitement about Bengali to be seen on television and at the Shaheed Minars in February, but other than poetry, literature, stories and novels, there is little to be said about philosophy, sociology or science being published in Bengali. The commercialisation and privatisation of education and culture and the neglect of Bengali – almost pushing it into a state where it has no space in our lives – are happening in tandem.

So, what needs to be done now is to pose these questions at the Shaheed Minars and other programmes that are being held in February.

The Bangla Academy is currently in a woeful state. That must change. The obstacles in the way of people's ownership of this country must be eradicated. When we are reminiscing the memories of 1952, we should look to the future and talk about the determination, the promise, and the plans to change this situation.

*Transcribed and translated by Azmin Azran.*

## United in diversity

### The United Nations country office congratulates Bangladesh on International Mother Language Day

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On February 21, we mark International Mother Language Day, a celebration of the world's linguistic and socio-cultural diversity. We are particularly honoured to mark this day here in Bangladesh as this day is also a worldwide tribute to the people of this country who have courageously fought for recognition of the Bangla language.

To commemorate the Bangladeshi martyrs who sacrificed their lives on this very day in 1952, the General Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Unesco) unanimously proclaimed February 21 as International Mother Language Day in 1999. This is a significant contribution of Bangladesh to the world. On this day, we mark our linguistic and cultural diversity, the core of our identity, and aim "to promote the preservation and protection of all languages used by peoples of the world."

Looking back at history, it is important to reflect on the significance of Mother Language Day to respect and protect all languages of the world. Unfortunately, about every

two weeks a language disappears, and when a language disappears, the entire world loses a part of its traditions, memories, and experiences that make our societies so culturally and intellectually diverse.

According to recent Unesco estimates, at least 43 percent of more than 6,000 languages spoken in the world are endangered. Due to globalisation processes, many languages, particularly indigenous ones, are on the verge of extinction. As fewer than a hundred of the world's languages are used in the digital world, and only a few hundred widely-spoken languages have been taught in schools, this trend is likely to increase in the future.

To tackle this, UN agencies encourage multilingual education to be based on the mother tongue or first language. This not only serves to keep languages alive, but has a range of additional benefits in terms of learning outcomes. To emphasise the importance of this, last year was the beginning of the International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022-2032).

This decade highlights the revival and promotion of indigenous and mother-tongue languages. Preserving language is at the heart of preserving identity, culture and diversity, and hence the

**Embracing and protecting our linguistic diversity must be reinforced by not allowing anyone to use language as a tool to provoke conflicts and any forms of discrimination. It is important to respect all languages: big and small, widely and less spoken, indigenous and foreign.**

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

In Bangladesh, the Bangla language is flourishing. Events such as the annual Ekushey Book Fair promote writing and reading in Bangla. The development of educational resource materials for teaching at primary grades in Bangladesh's indigenous languages has started, initially with the five languages

of Chakma, Garo, Marma, Sadri, and Tripura. Additional languages will be added each year to eventually cover all the languages of the country.

On February 21, we remember the Bangla Language Movement martyrs Abdus Salam, Rafiq Uddin Ahmed, Abul Barkat, Abdul Jabbar, and Ohiiullah for sacrificing their lives to speak their mother tongues. We should not forget the significance of this day.

Embracing and protecting our linguistic diversity must be reinforced by not allowing anyone to use language as a tool to provoke conflicts and any forms of discrimination. It is important to respect all languages: big and small, widely and less spoken, indigenous and foreign. The diversity of languages is vital in intercultural dialogue to build inclusive societies.

On behalf of the staff of the United Nations in Bangladesh, representing hundreds of foreign and indigenous languages of different states and parts of the country from Teknaf to Panchagarh, we wish the people of Bangladesh a happy International Mother Language Day. The day the country courageously fought for, and the legacy of which should not be forgotten.

Happy International Mother Language Day!