

## The rot in our job market

### Why hasn't recent economic growth led to better employment opportunities?

The rise in the number of unemployed people by 2.70 lakh within a span of one quarter is alarming. In December 2022, the number of total unemployed people stood at 23.2 lakh, according to the quarterly data from the Labour Force Survey of the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS). That has now gone up to 25.9 lakh – increasing the unemployment rate to 3.51 percent from 3.2 percent back in December, according to official data which, many economists argue is a deflated number, compared to the real rate of unemployment in Bangladesh to begin with.

The total number of people employed in the country now stands at 7.11 crore. Among them, 3.19 crore are employed in the agriculture sector, 1.22 crore in the industrial sector, and 2.69 crore in the service sector. According to the state minister for planning, much of the decline in the number of employed in the last quarter came down to seasonal factors. The period between January-March is usually a lean one for the agriculture sector, which is what has driven the rise in the number of unemployed people. Thus, the state minister said that the increase should not cause an alarm. While that may be true in one sense, if seen from a broader perspective, it should still be a cause for concern.

As evident from the numbers, agriculture continues to be our chief source of employment. In 2016-17, the sector accounted for 40.6 percent of employment, which increased to 45.33 percent in 2022. During this period, the share of manufacturing jobs declined from 20.4 percent to 17.02 percent. As an economy develops, traditionally, more people move from agriculture to the manufacturing sector. In the next stage of transformation, workers move out of manufacturing to join the service sector. The fact that such transitions are not happening in Bangladesh is puzzling – and not a good sign.

In 2022, the total number of people employed in the manufacturing sector stood at 1.21 crore, down from 1.24 crore in 2016-17. During that same period, industry and manufacturing in particular was the fastest growing sector in the country. The fact that production in the sector grew at nearly double-digits, while the number of employed decreased does not make any sense – especially since automation has not happened to an extent that could fully explain the decline.

When there are no other employment opportunities, people tend to go back to doing agricultural work such as farming. And while there is no doubt that we need people to work in this sector, the fact that employment in other sectors of the economy is stagnating brings into question the quality of our economic growth.

This once again brings to fore the issue of whether Bangladesh is experiencing jobless growth, and why that might be. Without creating more quality and sustainable jobs for our people, what is the point of economic growth? The government needs to rethink its economic and developmental models so that they align with the aspirations of our people and provide them with better opportunities.

## A promising anti-bullying policy

### But a policy is only as good as its implementation

We applaud the government for issuing an anti-bullying policy for educational institutions, which provides a clear definition of verbal, physical and cyber-bullying and contains provisions for punishment of students, teachers and members of the governing body who engage in such aggressive behaviour. Depending on the severity of the violence, criminal cases can also be filed against perpetrators. Given how pervasive bullying is across educational institutions in Bangladesh, and the debilitating impact such normalised violence has on children and young adults, there is no doubt that the policy, if implemented, can help create a safe environment in which students can learn and thrive, without fear of harassment, humiliation and violence.

The High Court directed the concerned authorities to formulate such a policy following the suicide of a ninth grader at Vigarunnisa Noon School and College – who reportedly took her life, unable to bear the humiliation of her parents by a teacher. Although it has taken the authorities concerned four and a half years to comply with the directive, we are glad that steps have finally been taken to address the issue in a holistic manner. The policy, for instance, proposes that CCTV cameras be set up, complaint boxes be installed, anti-bullying and anti-ragging days be observed, and bullying and ragging prevention committees be formed in all institutions. Moreover, it mandates hall authorities to inform the higher authorities about any incident of ragging and bullying.

Undoubtedly, the policy is a promising one on paper. The question moving forward, however, is: will it be implemented? More than a decade has passed since the High Court mandated that sexual harassment prevention committees be formed in educational institutions, but only a handful of schools and universities have thus far formed and operationalised such committees, in the absence of any initiative or monitoring from relevant authorities to ensure compliance with the HC directive. How can we be confident that the anti-bullying policy will not meet the same fate? It is essential that the authorities concerned take adequate steps to create awareness about the policy, monitor its effective implementation across the country and take action against administrations which fail to act accordingly.

The other pressing concern when it comes to bullying and ragging is the identity of the perpetrators: what happens if they are found to be students or teachers affiliated with the ruling party? We have witnessed the widespread impunity enjoyed by ruling party cadres across campuses in the country, with the administration, in an over-welcoming majority of cases, turning a blind eye towards their "rule of terror." Who exactly will ensure compliance with the policy if the authorities themselves condone such condemnable practices? Policies alone, no matter how progressive they are, cannot make our campuses safer.

We have no doubt that the new policy proposes meaningful interventions. We hope that the education ministry will play an equally commendable role in ensuring its implementation, beginning with raising awareness among students, teachers, parents and administration about what exactly constitutes bullying and why it's wrong.

# DSA was legislated ignoring journalists

## And it is being amended in the same way



THE THIRD VIEW

Mahfuz Anam is the editor and publisher of The Daily Star.

MAHFUZ ANAM

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The law minister said that "we have nearly completed reviewing the technical recommendations on the law made by the UN Human rights wing," which were communicated by UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Turk in March. The minister further revealed that a committee – comprising members from the legal and parliamentary divisions, from home and foreign ministries, from the ICT, law and justice divisions – is working on amending the law and have met "two or three times."

We are delighted to hear it. But where are we – the journalists – in this process?

The group that has suffered many jail terms, innumerable arrests and most harassment, and the profession that has been devastatingly crippled, and which has most virulently objected to this law, have not been involved in this process. No representatives of journalist unions or editors' bodies have so far been invited to be a part of this discussion. Why this shutting out of journalists and editors? From the very start, amending the DSA has been one of the strongest and most persistent demands of the Sampadak Parishad.

The last time some of us were brought into the scene at the Parliamentary Standing Committee discussion stage was in 2018. All the objections we raised and amendments we pleaded for were totally ignored. Later, we realised the ritual was staged to enable the law framers to say that journalists were consulted.

But that was four and a half years ago. After our experience of oppression of journalists since the law was passed, the doublespeak that we saw the ministers indulge in, the numerous false promises that were made about processes to be followed before arresting a journalist and examining those who were victimised over the last four and a half years under the DSA, we have been forced to come to the conclusion that the DSA is such an oppressive law, such an anti-free-press law, and it is so structured that it would be better to make a new law focused on fighting cybercrimes than to amend this one.

And here's why. The DSA has 20

of the information ministry, to further jeopardise the prospect of print media's survival by attempting to restrict the online presence – especially of multimedia – of existing newspapers.

Speaking about the DSA, Information Minister Hasan Mahmud said on Wednesday that "misuse of the law must be stopped." We welcome this statement and would like to know from

Japan and South Korea provide interesting examples in Asia where democracy and free media played a crucial role in building their modern-day societies.

Japan adopted democracy and free media immediately after its defeat in World War II, and stunned the world with its rejuvenating capacity, sustaining success in the 60s, 70s, all



ILLUSTRATION: REHNUMA PROSHOON

provisions for punishment, of which 14 are non-bailable. Can a law start by punishing an accused without due trial? Denying bail means the accused has to suffer imprisonment from the moment he or she is taken into custody, even if he or she is found completely innocent by the court. Bail is denied only to habitual and hardened criminals whose staying out of prison poses a real and immediate threat to society. Are journalists considered to belong to this category? The sentences are on average four to seven years long, with the lowest being one year and the highest being life-term. Making 14 out of 20 sections non-bailable makes the purpose of the law abundantly clear – it is to punish and create fear, not dispense justice. And journalists are to bear the brunt of it.

At present, there are nine laws that directly or indirectly affect media freedom. Three more are in the advanced draft form. The draft of the amendment of the Press Council Act, which has not been shared with the media even after repeated attempts, brings the total to 13. In addition, there are initiatives by the Department of Film and Publications (DFP), an arm

when. As the minister directly dealing with journalists, his pro-action in stopping its misuse – which he himself said he wants – would be most welcome and earn him our gratitude. We bring to his notice that six global rights bodies – Amnesty International, CIVICUS, Committee to Protect Journalists, Human Rights Watch, Reporters without Borders, and International Federation for Human Rights – jointly stated that 56 journalists were targeted in Bangladesh in the first three months of 2023. This makes for more than 18 journalists per month. Dhaka-based Centre for Governance Studies (CGS) reported that, since its inception in 2018, a total of 339 DSA cases have been filed against journalists.

On the occasion of World Press Freedom Day, the UN secretary general said free media is a guarantor of all other freedoms and rights. Conversely, absence of free media sees a definite erosion of all rights, especially human rights and democracy. The whole world is an example of the above. Only countries that have free media provide stable and rights-based societies. The others show many prospects for a while, but generally falter later.

the way till the present day.

South Korea adopted democracy after several bouts of military and quasi-military dictatorship, and proved that a rights-based society that enshrined all freedoms, including freedom of the media, was the best guarantee for sustained development. Being such a small country, it has proved what democracy and freedoms can do even though it has such an aggressive neighbour.

Both these countries allude their brilliant economic success to institutionalising democracy – not only making the appropriate laws but, more importantly, implementing them every day to every aspect of their societies.

We conclude with the two above examples because as we aspire to graduate from the lower-middle-income country status to the upper one, and advance to become a developed country later on. This cannot be achieved with physical infrastructure only. We need, and most crucially so, the infrastructure of the mind, of consciousness, of values, of the spirit – which only freedom can give, with media freedom being its inseparable component.

## PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

# Crime and Punishment in Uttar Pradesh



Shashi Tharoor, a former UN under-secretary-general and former state minister, is an MP for the Indian National Congress.

SHASHI THAROOR

Last month's murder, on live television, of Atiq Ahmed, the notorious gangster and former member of India's parliament, has triggered anguished debates about how such an event could happen in a modern democracy. Along with the killers, who were apprehended on the spot, India's entire criminal justice system is now being put on trial.

On the fateful day, the police took Ahmed from the high security prison where he was serving a life sentence for kidnapping – and awaiting trial for 100 more pending cases, with charges ranging from extortion to murder – for a medical examination. Exiting the police van at the hospital gates, the handcuffed Ahmed was besieged by television cameras and journalists shouting questions at him. Three of those "media personnel" pulled out guns and shot him dead, along with his brother, at point-blank range. Cameras whirred as the victims hit the ground.

The murder left most citizens shocked. But many applauded, particularly in the state of Uttar Pradesh, where it occurred.

The blogger Avay Shukla was horrified by the celebrations. "No sane democracy," he wrote, "would have demonstrated the putrid reaction Indian society did to these murders: Ministers hailing the deliverance of

someone's property), corruption and intimidation of government officials, and murder had all become part of the state's landscape.

Such lawless conduct was facilitated by local political powers. The state's leading parties granted gangsters "tickets" to contest – and usually win – elections, and a slow and inefficient justice system, marked by the apparent inability of police and prosecutors to mount credible cases against wrongdoers, allowed criminality to fester.

It was against this backdrop that Uttar Pradesh's ruthless chief minister, Yogi Adityanath, rose to power in 2017. A representative of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Adityanath has made it his mission to crush the mafia by any means necessary. And, as his admirers point out, he has delivered. But while crime rates are down, India is paying a high price for the Adityanath administration's contempt for the rule of law. Since Adityanath took power in Uttar Pradesh, the police there have killed 183 alleged criminals.

After Ahmed's gruesome public murder, Adityanath vowed to grind "all mafias into dust." Coming from a leader known for dispensing "bulldozer justice" – including literally bulldozing the homes of dissenters and protesters with no due process – it is an ominous pledge. But for citizens living in thrall to gangsters, it appears also to be a comforting one.

The shortcomings of India's criminal justice system extend far beyond Uttar Pradesh. Just last month, the 69 defendants accused of perpetrating the 2002 Naroda Gam massacre in Ahmedabad were all acquitted. In March, the four people

charged in the Jaipur bombings that killed 71 and injured 185 in May 2008 were also acquitted. Both cases represent a double failure: the victims have been denied justice, and the acquitted have spent years in jail.

Cases collapse not because a liberal judiciary is itching to set wrongdoers free, but because the evidence does not meet the legal standards needed to convict. This partly reflects police shortcomings. In northern states like Uttar Pradesh, police are known for conducting shoddy investigations, fabricating evidence, and displaying a general lack of professionalism.

Moreover, witnesses are often poorly prepared to testify and, unable to count on effective police protection, become vulnerable to bribes or intimidation. And because cases can drag on for years or even decades, witnesses may forget key details or even die before trial.

There are structural reasons for these failures. Many police, especially at lower levels, have received no additional training since their induction and rely on outdated investigation techniques and evidence collection protocols. The judiciary follows archaic colonial-era procedures, which no one wants to take responsibility for revamping. And, in states like Uttar Pradesh, politicians and the accused are often associates – or the same people.

Every time a high-profile criminal case collapses, there is renewed clamour for vigilante justice. But what is really needed is deep reform – of police forces, the judiciary, and the political system. In Uttar Pradesh and beyond, Indians face a simple and stark choice: the rule of law or the law of the jungle.