

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

Endless wait for Teesta water

When can we expect a concrete water-sharing agreement with India?

The recommendation from an Indian parliamentary committee to its government on addressing the Teesta water-sharing issue, emphasising the need to "initiate meaningful dialogue with Bangladesh on a regular basis," has been hailed as a positive development in this long-standing concern between our two nations. While this may be a step in the right direction, we have every reason to be cautiously optimistic, as the carrot of a Teesta water-sharing agreement has been dangled in front of us for well over a decade now.

The issue has remained unresolved despite the ever-growing urgency for an agreement, propelled forward by reckless hydropower development and irrigation projects in the upper Teesta and the very real impacts of climate change. Regardless, Indian media reports suggest that the West Bengal government has acquired 1,000 acres to dig two new canals and divert even more water from the river to irrigate farms in Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar districts. While Dhaka has issued a note verbale to Delhi seeking information regarding this, they are yet to receive a response.

In the meantime, it is ordinary farmers living in the river basins who are continuing to suffer the consequences, especially in the dry season. Earlier this year, this paper reported on how farmers living in char areas in Lalmonirhat were left with almost no water to irrigate their croplands due to the Teesta Barrage. This has also put the natural biodiversity and ecosystem of the area at risk.

In today's changing world, where climate experts fear many of the world's freshwater sources are being drained faster than they can be replenished, there is no opportunity for countries to put such water-sharing concerns on the back burner. The delay on the Teesta water-sharing agreement has been attributed to a continued impasse between the central government in Delhi and the government of West Bengal, where Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's last minute objection famously derailed talks on water-sharing in 2011, and almost no progress has been made since then. However, it is not fair that Bangladesh should continue to be the victim of the increasingly partisan domestic politics in India, especially since for so long, we have played a positive role in being a friendly.

We hope that this latest development will usher in a new era of diplomatic ties between India and Bangladesh, but the truth is that our hopes have been dashed for many years. How much longer will we have to wait?

Assaulted for playing football

What do such attacks say about women's status in Bangladesh?

A time when the Fifa Women's World Cup 2023 is receiving more attention than it ever has, with major brands tapping into the heightened audience engagement and data suggesting two billion people across the world will have watched the live matches by the end of it, one might argue that we are living in a golden era of women's football.

The success of the Bangladesh team in the 2022 SAFF Women's Championship show that our women have not failed to keep up with the rising tide either. Even a few years ago, it would have been unimaginable to think that the city would come to a standstill because of crowds flocking to the streets to show their support for female footballers who have represented the country.

However, recent events seem to suggest these changes are skin deep. On July 29, at least four female members of the under-17 Khulna divisional football team were attacked by a group of people for playing football at Tentultala village of Khulna's Batiaghata upazila. Of them, one was severely injured and is still receiving treatment at hospital.

It is extremely worrying that, even in this day and age, women can be subjected to physical assault for something as simple as wearing sports attire and playing. Equally worrying is the fact that even after such an assault, the girls are still vulnerable and living in fear: one of the victims reported that the attackers are now threatening them with acid attacks and false cases unless the case against them is withdrawn.

This one incident is a microcosm of the violence that women and girls face in Bangladesh everyday for the simplest of actions. While on one hand we boast about women's role in the country's development, on the other, gender-based violence continues unabated. Too often, these cases are ignored: by communities, law enforcement agencies, and the justice system. What sort of message does that send to perpetrators? What does it say about the rights and status of women in our society?

We demand that the perpetrators of this attack are immediately brought to justice. The authorities must demonstrate their ability to protect women, in public and private spaces, from violence and abuse. We cannot claim to be a progressive and developing country if our women are not able to exercise even their most basic freedoms.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Stop forest grabbing

Despite repeated requests from environmentalists and ordinary people, the concerned ministries have turned a blind eye to the encroachers and influential people who are continuously cutting down trees and hills. As time passes, more of our hills and forests are being cleared up. We urge the authorities to stop wasting any more time and take rigorous action against the grabbers. They must not forget that it is their responsibility to provide us with a clean and green environment.

Fardin
A resident of Dhaka

THE MINIMUM WAGE QUESTION

Owner's profit versus worker's survival



Kallol Mustafa is an engineer and writer who focuses on power, energy, environment and development economics.

KALLOL MUSTAFA

In a recent interview with BBC Bangla, the UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Olivier de Schutter, said, "The minimum wage in the readymade garment sector is Tk 8,000 per month, which is probably one-third of what would allow a worker in this industry to make a decent living and to support his or her family. Unfortunately, when the unions demand higher wages, the response given to them is that if the wages are not kept low, the big buyers will move to other countries, will cancel their orders, and the competitiveness of Bangladesh in global markets will be threatened. I do not think that the development of a country can be premised on keeping workers in poverty."

As indicated by Schutter, BGMEA President Faruque Hassan has indeed said that if the wages of workers in the garment sector are increased, there will be no buyers for the garments made in Bangladesh. The factories will be closed and the workers will not have jobs altogether.

When garment owners think they may face losses due to the price increase of raw materials or machineries, they either increase the price of their products or decrease the cost of production by increasing productivity. So, while a factory owner readily pays a higher price for all kinds of raw materials and machineries, excuses are only presented when it comes to paying a fair price for the labour purchased from workers.

Such statements by garment owners is nothing new. Whenever the demand for wage increase is raised, they retort that if the wages are increased, their competitiveness will decrease, many of them will have to close shop, and



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PHOTO: TASLIMA AKHTER

as a result, thousands of workers will become unemployed and so on. Some may remember that the same spectre of factory closure was evoked during the wage hike from around Tk 900 to Tk 1,662 in 2006, to Tk 3,000 in 2010, to Tk 5,300 in 2013, and finally to Tk 8,000 in 2018. Did the garment sector really face damages after increasing workers' wages?

The debate over wage increase has risen at a time when the majority of people in the country are suffering due to skyrocketing commodity prices and a massive increase in the costs of living. Notably, as the taka has depreciated by 25.58 percent against the US dollar in the last one year, the garment exporters are now getting Tk 107.5 per dollar instead of Tk 86.45. As a result of taka devaluation, the pressure of inflation is on the workers, but the share of this additional income of the garment exporters is not reaching them.

In response to the demands of garment workers and unions, a new RMG wage board was formed in April this year. Garment workers are demanding that the minimum wage be increased from Tk 8,000 to Tk 25,000. In such a situation, what should be in consideration when revising the

prices of other raw materials increase? When the prices of, say, yarn, dyes, fuel, or machinery increase, do they tell suppliers that they will not pay the increased price because, if they do, they will not be able to survive in the competitive market? Certainly not. This is not how the market works.

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Like other commodities, the price of labour depends on the cost of production. How is the production cost of labour determined? It is calculated as the cost of keeping the worker well and of developing them as a worker. Now, if a labourer is not paid the minimum wages necessary for them to procure adequate amounts of food, clothing, shelter, proper education, health care, entertainment, etc, then the workers will have to reproduce

labour power with less input, for which the worker and his/her family will suffer from malnutrition, their vitality will diminish, their health may deteriorate, and both the worker and their family will become worn out.

Given this background, what is the current condition of working people in Bangladesh? Are the wages they are paid enough for them to live a humane life and reproduce labour properly? According to research by the South Asian Network on Economic Modeling (Sanem), garment workers earn less than half what they need to fulfil the basic needs of food, housing, and healthcare. On average, a worker earned Tk 9,984 per month in the April-June quarter of 2022, while their living wage – the money required to be able to afford a decent standard of living – ranged from Tk 19,200 to Tk 26,000 depending on the areas they resided in. This translates to a gap of 51 to 60 percent between the workers' actual income and their minimum need.

The question may arise as to how workers' families are surviving. The answer is: they are living a barely minimum life by eating less, sleeping in unhealthy and crowded rooms, and suffering from diseases and malnutrition. It is not possible for the workers' families to avail essential materials to live healthy lives, as the wage is much lower than what is necessary. A study by the Bangladesh Garment Sramik Samhati showed that the workers can never afford good quality rice, vegetables, fish, or meat. As the prices of all protein-rich foods were hiked, workers depended more on carbohydrates to meet their calorie requirements. But due to the recent increase in the prices of flour and rice, they now have to reduce their intake of carbohydrates as well.

In a market economy, working people have nothing but their labour to sell. Under the market dynamics of demand and supply, and the collective power of factory owners, workers are often forced to sell their labour at a price lower than the cost of production, just to be able to survive. This may be profitable for the industry owners in the short term. But in the long run, it is not sustainable for either the owners or the overall economy. Rather, if the workers are paid a living wage, their purchasing power will increase and, as a result, the internal market of the country will develop and the economy will grow sustainably.

I cannot but agree with Olivier de Schutter in advocating a new form of development for Bangladesh: one driven by domestic demand rather than exploitative export opportunities. And for this, there is no alternative to fixing a living wage for the working people of the country.

Rhythms of change: Digital platforms elevating Bangladeshi music



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TASLIM AHMED

In a world driven by technology and connectivity, the music industry has undergone a seismic shift with the rise of digital platforms. Bangladesh, renowned for its vibrant musical heritage, has not been immune to this digital revolution. As digital musical platforms gain prominence, they are playing a transformative role in elevating Bangladeshi music to new heights – bridging the gap between artists and audiences, and shaping the future of the country's musical landscape.

Bangladesh's musical heritage is a tapestry woven with diverse threads of tradition, culture, and emotion. Over the years, certain genres and regional musical forms faced challenges in gaining recognition in the mainstream. However, the emergence of digital musical platforms have breathed new life into these invaluable musical treasures. By curating and presenting traditional folk, classical, and regional music, these platforms are rekindling a sense of pride and appreciation for Bangladesh's rich cultural legacy.

Through digital archives and carefully curated playlists, the younger generation can now explore and cherish the timeless melodies that define the essence of their nation.

Historically, independent musicians in Bangladesh faced daunting obstacles in breaking into the mainstream music industry. The emergence of digital media has heralded a sort of democratisation of the music scene, giving independent artists unprecedented platforms to showcase their talents. These platforms enable artists to release their music to a global audience without the constraints of traditional record labels. As a result, musicians from various backgrounds and genres are finding their voices heard, resonating with music enthusiasts worldwide. This democratisation of music has not only transformed the careers of artists but has also enriched the diversity of music available to audiences.

The interconnected nature of digital platforms has fostered a culture of artistic collaboration and genre fusion. As artists from different musical

backgrounds converge on these platforms, they find opportunities to blend traditional Bangladeshi music with contemporary elements, giving rise to fresh and innovative sounds. The fusion of diverse musical styles captivates audiences within the country and garners international recognition. These musical collaborations serve as a testament to the universality of music and its ability to transcend cultural boundaries.

Digital musical platforms have become potent tools of cultural diplomacy, projecting Bangladeshi music onto the global stage. Previously, geographical barriers limited the reach of Bangladeshi musicians beyond the country's borders. Today, thanks to the accessibility of digital platforms, local artists find themselves embraced by international audiences. Bangladeshi music is now celebrated as an ambassador of the nation's cultural heritage, promoting cross-cultural understanding and appreciation. This global recognition fosters pride among Bangladeshi artists and strengthens the nation's position on the global cultural map.

Digital musical platforms have emerged as valuable resources for aspiring musicians and enthusiasts seeking to deepen their understanding of music. These platforms empower individuals to hone their musical skills and learn from experienced professionals through online tutorials, workshops, and educational content. For young artists and students, digital

platforms provide a wealth of learning opportunities that were previously difficult to access. This democratisation of knowledge is nurturing a new generation of talented musicians, ensuring the continuity of Bangladesh's musical heritage.

Despite the positive impact of digital musical platforms, challenges still persist. Ensuring fair compensation for artists in an age of digital piracy and streaming remains a pressing concern. Copyright infringement issues demand robust solutions to protect the intellectual property of musicians. Additionally, addressing the digital divide in Bangladesh is essential to ensure equitable access to these platforms, and empower artists from all corners of the country.

The digital era has opened unique opportunities for Bangladeshi music to thrive and resonate with audiences worldwide. Digital musical platforms are serving as catalysts for change, preserving cultural heritage, empowering independent artists, fostering artistic collaborations, and elevating Bangladeshi music to a global audience. As we embrace this digital transformation, let us recognise the immense potential of these platforms to shape the future of music in Bangladesh positively. By supporting the growth of digital musical ecosystems, nurturing young talents, and championing local artists – we can collectively ensure that Bangladesh music continues to enchant and inspire generations to come.