

Yet another Rajuk blunder

How can documents of 30,000 customers just vanish from its server?

Rajuk is at it again, dragging itself into a problem that didn't exist and making a terrible job of recovering from it. The latest blunder from the city development authority of Dhaka saw it lose from its server documents of some 30,000 customers seeking approval of building plans. What's worse, even after three weeks have passed, it has made no probe committee to investigate the incident and no breakthrough in recovering lost documents, leaving room for corruption and further harassment of the applicants. This is totally unacceptable.

According to a report by *Prothom Alo*, the lost documents were of customers who had applied for approval of building plans between May 2019 and December 6, 2022. Apparently, the website through which they applied became "inactive" then, wiping all their data. Although the website was reactivated later, there has been no progress in restoring the data. This hardly seems like the result of a simple technical glitch, given the timing of the breach and the lukewarm response of the authorities.

According to sources at Rajuk, this could be an inside job, done potentially to allow some quarters to build higher buildings. As per the latest Rajuk-formulated Detailed Area Plan (DAP), which was approved by the government on August 23, buildings must be of lower height than before in most areas. But following requests from landowners and real estate companies, Rajuk decided that those who had applied for permit before August 23 can construct buildings under previous rules, allowing them increased height/size. On December 4, Rajuk published a notice in this regard. Two days later, its website went down, raising suspicion that this was done intentionally to allow manipulating the process to show a pre-August 23 application date, change building plans, etc.

Whatever the cause or motive may be, questions can be raised about Rajuk's willingness to get to the bottom of the truth: Why has no probe committee been formed yet? Who will take responsibility for the suffering and harassment of applicants? In the absence of verifiable documents, many will also likely have trouble in getting construction loans from banks. And what is the point of putting building services online if there is no guarantee of the safety of documents filed?

This lack of action and accountability for those responsible is but a small example of how Rajuk operates, without any concern for the wellbeing of general customers and residents. Over the years, Rajuk has been frequently at the centre of controversies. Corruption and mismanagement have been its two most enduring bywords, which have sustained even after the digitalisation of its services. Rajuk's failure to formulate a suitable plan for our sprawling capital – or stick to whatever plan there is through proper enforcement – has cost this city dearly, with its flood flow zones indiscriminately filled up, its greenery all but gone, and buildings constructed haphazardly.

Despite that, Rajuk has remained unaccountable. We urge the authorities to address the recent data breach, but also make sure Rajuk is held responsible for its inactions, irregularities and failures.

Digital inclusion still elusive for many

How can we have a Smart Bangladesh with high internet prices?

While the government often boasts of its success in bringing the entire country under phone/internet coverage, the situation on the ground is not as rosy as painted. A recent survey by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) has shed some light into the situation, revealing that only 38.9 percent of people in the country use the internet. While around 63.1 percent of households don't think they need to use the internet, 48.2 percent think that internet services are too expensive for them.

The survey has found a big gap between the urban and rural internet-using households – only 29.7 percent of rural households use the internet, while it is 63 percent for urban households. Among other findings by BBS, what's most significant is the division-wise gap in internet usage: while 54.2 percent households in Dhaka use the internet, in Rajshahi, it is only 19.7 percent.

What we can take away from these findings is that affordability is still a big issue when it comes to accessing the internet. At a time when ordinary people are struggling to cope with the high cost of living, using the internet at high costs is a far-fetched dream for many of them. Understandably, it may be one of the reasons why rural people are using internet less than urban people. And the same reason applies for the people of the northern region where the poverty rate is comparatively higher.

As Bangladesh is said to be transitioning from "Digital Bangladesh" to "Smart Bangladesh", the government needs to seriously look into these gaps, which may be a major barrier to reaching its new goal. Although we must admit that the government made major strides in realising the dream of "Digital Bangladesh" by 2021, it would not be wrong to say that it has failed to reach its goal to a large extent. Although the overall number of internet and mobile phone users has increased over the years – according to BBS, the use of mobile phones at the family level has increased by 9.7 percent in the last 10 years, and their internet usage has also increased by 33.3 percent – that is not enough. The fact that the percentage of internet users is still as low as 39 percent is simply unacceptable.

True, the BBS survey does not reveal the full picture, but it does give us an idea of the overall situation. The government, therefore, must take the findings seriously and find out the real reasons behind the low internet penetration. Making the internet affordable to all and bringing down the prices of necessary devices will go a long way in making our people digitally active. Last but not the least, only making the internet available and affordable to all will not help, unless people are given the necessary trainings – on programming, coding, cybersecurity, etc. – to reap the full benefits of ICT.

How did Bangladeshi women fare in 2022?



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For a country in the grips of an epidemic of sexual violence, and which witnessed mass protests demanding an end to impunity for rapists – the amendment of the Evidence Act, 1872 was perhaps the year's most important event in terms of gender justice.

For decades, activists campaigned against probing questions about survivors' "immoral character" in rape trials – including on sexual history – arguing it causes trauma and deters women from speaking out. The repeal of Section 155(4), which allowed this practice, is thus historic, although Section 146(3), which allows cross-examination that may "injure the character of the witness in order to verify their credibility" is still allowed.

The amendment of the Labour Rules, 2015 is another milestone; the most significant being the new rule that clearly defines sexual harassment, and imposes a duty on employers to implement a process of complaint and redress.

Unfortunately, when it comes to women's rights, one step forward can lead to another in the wrong direction. It has been argued that the new method of calculating maternity benefits may actually reduce them, although the provision to give leave for miscarriages is appreciated.

The High Court this year also asked some key questions regarding the unconstitutional nature of legal gender inequalities, such as why Hindu women cannot inherit paternal property. While it's interesting that similar questions on other personal laws governing inheritance were not asked, it did question why the law allows only the sons of marriage registrars (kazi) to become kazis.

Unfortunately, in terms of macro-changes, this is where the positives end, and 2022 has, predictably, been a violent year. According to Ain O Salish Kendra (ASK), 886 cases of rape were reported till November, and the real

number is likely to be far higher. Media reports point to a disturbing trend of not only gangs and miscreants committing violence, but teachers, cousins, classmates, colleagues and family friends being perpetrators too. There were also 236 known cases of domestic violence, with abusers ranging from truck drivers and policemen to actors and ex-state ministers.



PHOTO: SK ENAMUL HAQ

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This corroborates the well-known fact that women are equally vulnerable in private spaces, even though there is a common perception that public spaces are more unsafe. Having said that, a survey found that 36 percent of over 5,000 respondents faced sexual harassment regularly on public transport, and nearly 87 percent faced some form of harassment at least once in their lives – an issue that remains largely unaddressed.

It was disturbing to find just how many perpetrators occupied positions of power, including in law enforcement

agencies. This was epitomised in June, when a 15-year-old girl appeared in front of the High Court bench with the simple plea: "Sir, I have been raped. We have no money for moving the case. I want justice from you... I have been raped by a member of the BGB. The lower court in Nilphamari has acquitted the offender."

There were even instances where

protests in January, which started as a women-led movement for an improved campus environment, university authorities used police force to suppress legitimate protests. And the VC's sexist comments – on how no one wants to marry women who roam around at night – reflected the misogyny in our society, and how women's rights continue to be trivialised by those in power.

From the 88 percent of female migrant workers who had no written job contracts, putting them at the mercy of recruitment agencies and making them vulnerable to abuse, to the 84 percent of women whose complaints to police cyber support went unaddressed – 2022 was full of far too many examples of Bangladeshi women being deprived of their rights.

Even when an issue affected a specific population, women faced greater disadvantages, whether it's coastal communities bearing the brunt of climate change, tea workers from fighting for a living wage, or households struggling with the cost of living crisis. The rising rates of child marriage and adolescent pregnancy post-pandemic is testament to how women continue to be disproportionately affected during times of turmoil.

Against this bleak backdrop, it is amazing to see what Bangladeshi women can still achieve when exercising their agency. Bangladeshi women worked on the James Webb Space Telescope, received recognition for working in genome sequencing, operated the country's first ever metro, and became pioneers in climate-resilient farming. The women's football team made history by winning the SAFF Championships (although even here, the Bangladesh Football Federation failed to treat them with any respect).

At the beginning of the year, 12-year-old Poly Khatun and 15-year-old Mimi Akhter, inhabitants of Mirpur's informal settlements, defeated internationally rated chess players after only three months of training.

Now that the year is ending, how many more Polys and Mims are out there, deprived of living their fullest lives, because we have failed to correct even the most blatant gender inequalities in the country?

ADVERTORIAL

Leaving no one behind

A new turn in PKSF, EU's joint efforts to eradicate poverty



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NOMITA HALDER

IN a remarkable achievement, Bangladesh has fulfilled all three eligibility criteria for graduation from the UN's Least Developed Countries (LDC) list for the first time and is on track for being officially recognised as a developing country in 2024. Poverty rates in recent years have demonstrated an impressive steady improvement, falling by about 1.7 percentage points per year.

Despite the progress, extreme poverty, discrimination, and exclusion of marginalised people persist. The poverty rate in Bangladesh is 24.3 percent and the extreme poverty rate is 12.9 percent, according to Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS). Around 20 million extremely poor people mostly depend on manual labour, facing difficulties in finding regular employment and consequently in making ends meet. This situation traps them in a vicious cycle of malnutrition.

In regards to gender inequality, women are more likely to live in extreme poverty than men and bear a disproportionate share of the effects. An estimated 12 percent of rural families are female-headed but around 28 percent of them live in extreme poverty in terms of socioeconomic and nutritional status. Despite improvement in children's nutritional status over the past decade, stunting in children under five in the rural areas remains

20 percent higher than in the urban areas.

Besides, more than 70 percent of the population are vulnerable to climatic shocks such as floods, droughts, cyclones, salinity intrusion, and sea-level rise. Some areas are facing specific climatic, economic and socio-political challenges. Water-logging and salinisation compromise the water and land management of the poor in south-west. The north-western parts reel from droughts and river erosion, while the central northern region experiences seasonal flooding.

Then came the Covid-19 pandemic. Apart from causing fatalities and illnesses, it dealt a heavy blow to the world economy, shrinking its growth, according to the IMF, by six percent compared to the previous forecast. Bangladesh lost about 0.2-0.4 percent of its GDP, estimates the Asian Development Bank. Extreme poverty rose by 60 percent with the advent of the pandemic, says a Brac study.

It is the fate of these people – the poor, the extremely poor and the disadvantaged – that Palli Karma Sahayak Foundation (PKSF) has been working to change since its inception in 1990. To generate employment for alleviating poverty in a sustainable manner and ensuring human dignity for all, this government established apex development agency has been

promoting sustained pathways out of extreme poverty since early 2000s. Notable among the PKSF's projects to this end are the Financial Services for the Poorest (FSP), the Micro-finance Support Intervention for FSVG and Ultra-Poor Beneficiaries, the Programmed Initiatives for Monga Eradication (PRIME), and the UPP-Ujjibito.

Enriched with the learnings from these projects, PKSF launched Pathways to Prosperity for Extremely Poor People (PPEPP) project in 2019 with support from the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) and the European Union (EU). Since then, PPEPP has made a remarkable progress. In the participant households, the per capita income rose to Tk 1,968 from Tk 1,162, the per capita expenditures to Tk 1,585 from Tk 1,197, and the average household savings to Tk 2,431 from Tk 2,275. Besides, dietary diversity, food security, and resilience to shocks improved during the period.

Soon after project's inception, the coronavirus pandemic sent the world economy in disarray. As a result, the extremely poor households participating in the PPEPP project faced a more acute financial and food crises alongside already spiking health-related concerns. In response, the project floated an Emergency Assistance Program (EAP) for 30,700 extremely poor households, providing each household with Tk 9,000 in grants, which they used to purchase emergency supplies and defray medical expenses. Over half of them invested the cash in income-generating activities.

In October 2022, the project took up a new name, PPEPP-EU, when the EU became the sole financier, and the objective was slightly modified to enable extremely poor households

to exit from extreme poverty and make significant progress towards prosperity. The specific objectives now include:

- 1) To create enabling environment for 215,000 extremely poor households to increase income through establishing diversified Income Generating Activities and improve their asset base;
- 2) To enable those households to ensure their food security.
- 3) To ensure nutritional support to pregnant and lactating women, adolescent girls, children U-5 of the organised extremely poor households.
- 4) To ensure women of organised extremely poor households experience a significant change in their social status and ability to make decisions about their lives.
- 5) Increase resilience of extremely poor households to climate change and other shocks.

The EU will provide about EUR 23 million to PKSF to implement the PPEPP-EU in 145 unions of 34 upazilas of 12 districts spread over the north-western river basin area, the north-eastern haor area, the south-western salinity-prone coastal area, and some areas inhabited by ethnic minorities. To address the multidimensional nature of poverty, the project is providing carefully sequenced package of livelihoods, nutrition, and community mobilisation services, and is addressing three cross-cutting issues – disaster and climate change, disability inclusion, and women empowerment.

With rising inflation and cost of living, the extremely poor are more vulnerable now than ever. The EU's decision to help the PPEPP continue at this point of time is undoubtedly a blessing for the extremely poor people of Bangladesh.