

A tale of horror

Investigation reveals how Bangladeshi women are forced into sex work in India

Harrowing details are coming out through an investigative report by this daily about how Bangladeshi women and girls end up entrapped into involuntary sex work after being trafficked to India. Budhwar Peth, located in Pune, is the third largest red-light district in India—an 18th century establishment that is home to around 110 brothels. It is also the workplace of 800-900 commercial sex workers, 200-250 of whom are from Bangladesh, our investigation has found.

According to the report, many girls and young women, duped by false promises of a better life and livelihood options than what's available at home, are trafficked across the border and then supplied to the brothels in India. Those who try to fight back are starved and tortured into submission. Many such victims, having spent a considerable amount of time as sex workers there, become brothel managers themselves and employ other Bangladeshi women. Some others become traffickers, luring young women out of Bangladesh and into the clutches of these brothels, according to our report. Thus, this utterly vicious cycle continues.

It is curious how easy it is to smuggle Bangladeshi women and girls through one of the most dangerous international borders in the world. There are pockets on the border that provide easy passage, and as our report reveals, local law enforcers on both sides are involved in this supply chain, smoothening the process for the traffickers. The Maheshpur border area in Jhenaidah, for example, is notoriously vulnerable. According to the Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB), between January 1 and May 15 this year, 75 people, including 22 women and three traffickers, were apprehended while crossing over to India. Last year, BGB detained 1,186 people trying to cross over, as well as 53 traffickers. But these are only a fraction of the numbers of people who simply walk in and out of the country through this border area, undetected.

That Bangladesh is a source country for sex workers in Indian red-light districts is no news. But what is disconcerting is how easy it is, in this day and age, to traffic our women into India and forced into sex work. This report is the first part of a series that will surely reveal more distressing details about our women suffering in Indian brothels. We hope the firsthand accounts unveiled by this investigation will stir the authorities here into action. We urge them to promptly take steps to bring our women back home as soon as possible, with full dignity and rehabilitation ensured.

Using public money for vested interests

Authorities must look into Sikder Insurance's IPO approval

Time and again, we have seen how company boards manipulate financial dealings for personal benefits, and Sikder Insurance investing most of its assets in the scandal-ridden National Bank Ltd (NBL) is just the latest example. Despite breaching multiple regulations, the insurer has received approval from the Bangladesh Securities and Exchange Commission (BSEC) to raise funds from the public. To this end, the rating agency, auditor, and Insurance Development and Regulatory Authority (IDRA), all ignored the inconsistencies to give Sikder Insurance the green light. All these highlight the level of irregularities plaguing the financial sector.

According to regulations, an insurer can invest a maximum of 25 percent of its funds in stocks, but Sikder Insurance has injected 72.8 percent of its funds into the stock market. To make matters worse, 99.9 percent of the funds have been invested in NBL, which is mired in financial crisis. Meanwhile, IDRA rules stipulate that a non-life insurance company cannot invest more than five percent of its assets in a single stock.

There should be no financial incentive to invest in NBL. As of September 2023, the bank's total bad loans stood at Tk 13,514 crore, the highest among private banks in Bangladesh. It was unable to provide any dividends in 2021 and 2022, as it was reeling from huge losses—Tk 1,123 crore in the first nine months of 2023 and Tk 3,260 crore in 2022. And yet, apart from the aforementioned gambles, Sikder Insurance kept most of its fixed deposits in the ailing bank.

It is, however, clear why the insurer took such decisions. Till December 21 this year, four members of the Sikder family were on the bank's board, and this overwhelming investment was made to retain the family's control in the bank. Unsurprisingly, two members of the Sikder family, which controls NBL, are also owners of Sikder Insurance.

While Sikder Insurance has actively manipulated financial dealings, all other parties are culpable for looking the other way. A rating agency attached a higher credit rating to the insurance company, while the auditor and IDRA did not object to the breaches. These combined have allowed such a dubious insurer to go for an initial public offering. We urge regulators to thoroughly investigate this matter and hold all related organisations accountable, for the sake of people's hard-earned money.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Laser lights for traffic control

Recently, traffic police have been using laser lights to instruct vehicles on the roads. It may be convenient for the traffic police to use laser lights over using hands or traffic batons, but in the chaotic streets, it can be dangerously distracting if it is pointed at the drivers' eyes. I think the traffic control authorities should stop using laser lights and find safer solutions to convey signals effectively before there are any tragic accidents.

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Voters without choice are just glorified dummies



OF MAGIC & MADNESS

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On January 7, many people will not vote, but many probably will. There are voters, not just first-timers, who are aching to go out even if just to see the inside of that hallowed ground called a polling booth. Having been twice disenfranchised through elections that have since passed into the annals of democracy as examples of "managed elections" or "elections without choice," it is safe to assume that these people would be desperate, seeking, even seething. Partisans will be happy to oblige calls for casting their ballot and add bodies to the count, like tin soldiers on a game board; dissenters will be there to make a point; and those in between will be there because, well, they just would like to.

You've already met the dummy candidates, aka independents. Now, meet dummy voters.

For what are voters without any real choice, or power, if not glorified dummies? Now that BNP and like-minded parties are out of the race and unable to scupper its re-election plan, Awami League can again safely trust the voters. People can have the satisfaction, however temporary, of voting against it, or for it, and the party can have the satisfaction of still coming out victorious. In a climate described by a columnist as being "of the AL, for the AL, and by the AL," with it handpicking both its candidates and rivals, the outcome is a foregone conclusion. The dummies are just there to make the inevitable happen.

It is, therefore, no longer the sole responsibility of the Election Commission to ensure voters' presence at the polling booths. It is Awami League's too, and the party is going out of its way to get them to the booths—even those who are not happy with the government. Speaking to reporters, an influential leader from Narayanganj said, "Our appeal to voters is, vote for whomever you want. Don't vote for me [if you don't want to], but do still come to the polling station and vote, because it is your right. Don't squander your right. You have no right to criticise the government if you don't vote." Regardless of the problematic line of reasoning, the call to vote, for once, seems genuine.

But there is still a tightrope to



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FILE PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

walk lest the motley assortment of independents, fake challengers, and allies in-disguise somehow outperform Awami League in the final vote count, thus staging the biggest coup in the history of managed elections. It will be something of a disaster for the party's rank and file if, after all the scheming and browbeating and in the absence of any real opposition, it doesn't have a landslide victory. But it will be equally disastrous if it does—at least for its attempt to show a competitive election to the outside world. So voters have their job cut out for them: they will be expected to vote against AL, but not too zealously, so that a decent, respectable-looking victory can be achieved in the end.

It must be acknowledged that, in such a hazy situation, we can only speculate about what the minds behind Awami League's re-election campaign are really thinking. But it is a testament to the complexities of this election, and the expanding AL multiverse, that so many conflicting theories seem plausible at the same

total population ready to vote for it. So, there seems to be a "carrot and stick" policy afoot to both court and intimidate general voters.

Officially, besides frequent entreaties to vote, Awami League has already trained over 200,000 campaign workers, each responsible for bringing 200 voters to their local polling station, as part of an offline scheme. Unofficially, there have been a number of instances of threats being issued to noncompliant voters since the election campaign began. Among them were threats of breaking the hands and legs of opposition supporters, cutting non-voters or dissenting voters off from social safety net benefits, cutting off utility lines, etc. These warnings are not to be taken lightly considering how swift and decisive past retributions were, and how a big party like BNP was all but incapacitated within mere months through mass arrests, ghost cases, and rushed convictions. According to the finance ministry, there were more

than 1.28 crore beneficiaries of social safety net programmes in the 2022-23 fiscal year. BNP has alleged that the government is "targeting" these beneficiaries to fill up polling booths. How much of a choice do general voters really have in this suffocating situation? Even if we disregard the "fear" factor playing in the background, voters, in a democracy, are entitled to have credible options to choose from, which clearly they don't at the moment. Their role has been reduced to that of a helpless participant, treasured so long as they are useful, with no guarantee of even coming out of this fruitless exercise unscathed. In other words, not only are people not getting to vote for whomever they want, but they cannot even *not* cast their votes. Even dissenters who are planning to vote as a protest will inevitably be strengthening the hands of the orchestrators of this catch-22 situation.

What Awami League seems to want is a restaging of the 2014 election minus the stigma of unopposed wins and voter-less polling booths. This is being done "to fool the world," as a columnist of this daily has recently argued. However, it cannot take away from the unfolding farce of an election that will be fair, competitive and participatory on paper but none of the above in reality, whether the world acknowledges it or not.

NATIONAL EXPATRIATES' DAY

We must give our expatriates due recognition



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If any Bangladeshi is asked what their country's most significant achievement is, the first thought that will pop up is the Liberation War of 1971. While the freedom fighters fought in the battlefield, Bangladeshi expatriates played a vital role from afar. But it wasn't just in 1971; the expatriates have always supported this country's development.

After the war, Bangladesh was one of the poorest countries in the world. But over the last decade, we have become one of the fastest-growing economies, heavily fuelled by remittance, among other contributors. In the previous fiscal year, our migrants sent home almost \$22 billion, six times higher than the total foreign aid or foreign direct investment the country received. Because of this remittance, Bangladesh is no longer considered a poor country and is much less dependent on foreign aid.

According to the World Bank and the Global Knowledge Partnership on Migration and Development report, Bangladesh is the world's seventh largest remittance recipient. Now we must ask ourselves: have we been able

to recognise the contribution of our expatriates, who played an essential role starting from the Liberation War to today's prosperity? The reason for asking this question is because today, we are celebrating National Expatriates Day for the first time in the country.

Last year, the cabinet decided to observe the day on December 30 every year to recognise the contribution of expatriates, diaspora, and migrants. On this occasion, programmes have been organised in all the districts, including the capital's Bangabandhu International Conference Center.

But it is important to remember that the day should not be observed just for the day; we need to be more understanding and caring for our expatriates. We can even learn from India in this regard.

India is the world's top country in overseas migration and remittance. It celebrates Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (Expatriate Indian Day) on January 9 annually to mark the contribution of the overseas Indian community towards India's development. The day commemorates the return of

Mahatma Gandhi from South Africa to Mumbai on January 9, 1915.

To observe the day, India's Ministry of External Affairs, the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI), the Confederation of Indian Industries, and the Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region jointly organise a conference on January 8-10 every other year in a selected city of India. This flagship event provides a forum to discuss

who contributed to the freedom movement.

Regrettably, even after 52 years of independence, we have not been able to properly recognise the expatriates who contributed to the Liberation War. It was because of them that countries around the world also supported Bangladesh. These contributions should be highlighted on National Expatriates' Day.

According to the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET), over 12 million Bangladeshis work in different countries, of which 75 percent are in Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman, and Bahrain. Besides, there are Bangladeshi migrants in Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, Jordan, Lebanon, Italy, and South Korea. Meanwhile, diaspora and non-resident Bangladeshis in various countries, including the UK, US, Canada, Australia, Germany, and France, are regularly contributing in different sectors.

Despite contributing so much, expatriate Bangladeshis have to face many hassles to get proper services or recognition, which needs to be addressed. Besides, the state should take steps to use their skills and expertise, and encourage them to invest in Bangladesh. Recognition is the first step. The government can develop a digital portal for our expatriates, especially for those who bring glory to the country. The purpose of National Expatriates' Day will be served only if we can recognise their contribution.

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issues concerning the Indian diaspora. Additionally, the Pravasi Bharatiya Samman awards, the highest Indian award for non-resident Indians and foreign nationals, are given at the event.

Since the first Pravasi Bharatiya Divas in 2003, eminent personalities of Indian origin have been recognised for their contribution. Apart from this, there's a special exhibition at the conference on the diaspora Indians