



Every day I see lanky lads parking their bicycles in front of six to seven houses in my lane; I call them the “Parcel Brigade”. With huge bags on their backs, they meticulously deliver parcels to almost all the floors of the houses they stop. In my place, my son, my husband, my service people, and I are constantly receiving packages of things we need, not need at all, or might need at some later point in life!



PHOTO: GERO, PAUL'S, ART BY MONIDIPA

The shift from brick-and-mortar to web stores

RBR

The popularity of online shopping is not new. We are constantly browsing our social media handles and getting hooked to sponsored pages. Our inbox is flooded with orders of things such as electronic accessories, designer sunglasses and spectacles, shoes, pet supplies – whatever catches our fancy while browsing.

These whimsical purchases are always made at the dead end of the night. I say this from personal experience. I wonder why are those vendors available at 2:00am with prompt replies and why am I online at that ungodly hour confirming exorbitant purchases I do not need! Well, it is a story for another day.

I am most impressed with the wide range of online businesses Dhaka has to offer now. I recently went to a crafts exhibition and 100 per cent of the stalls had an online presence selling exclusive handmade crafts. The entrepreneurs are mostly students of the Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Dhaka.

Suman Paul's Studio Ceramic is a Facebook page for arts and crafts where

handmade earthenware, stoneware, and glazed ceramic products by the artist are on sale. Paul is a graduate of the Department of Ceramics; Faculty of Fine Arts and he says the clay is his canvas.

"I give my crafts an artistic form. For example, I made a jug and created the lid as a sculptor shaped in the form of a head. My tableware changes colour and design according to the seasons. I have an animal series of planters called metamorphosis," Paul explains.

His online venture is very niche and has a dedicated clientele who understands and appreciates art.

"Gero" or knot when translated into English is a mother daughter venture which started its online business in August 2020. Their expertise is crochet and macrame handicrafts mostly home décor items, bags, wall hangings, plant hangers, etc.

Macrame involves creating decorative knots using cords or threads. The products have a textured, knotted design; crochet, on the other hand, uses a hooked needle to create interlocking loops of yarn to form fabric and can be made into coasters, tops, throws, etc.

"People who like a boho-chic look, love macrame bags, which are trending now. Gero is a green venture where we two are the designers and producers. We cannot make products in bulk and attend very few fairs or sales. We are online based and we do make a profit but frankly, consumers do not appreciate handmade work or value it, so they are not always agreeable to our pricing, which they believe is on the dear side," says Sanjida Islam, co-owner of Gero.

Art by Monidipa is another exceptional online art website and has an Instagram handle as well from where

Monidipa Dasgupta sells her work. A graduate of the Faculty of Fine Arts, Dhaka University her clients contact her through inbox and she then sends the work sold after framing.

Monidipa's artworks are two-dimensional images of urban landscapes influenced by geometrical designs and blended with flora and fauna along with architectural establishments. She loves working across a range of media although she would say she is primarily a nature pattern artist.

To feed our fancy online entrepreneurs, who are artists by profession, are coming up with unique products and handmade crafts that garner major demand. For niche endeavours such as clay products, jewellery made of seed and natural dry flowers, and paintings, these artists ensure that the crafts they put up on offer are of supreme quality and that they meet the needs and preferences of their upscale, aesthetic Dhaka market.

The e-commerce world of Dhaka is as diverse as the city, check these crafts out.



What does the chapter actually deal with?

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NCTB book titled "History and Social Science".

Meanwhile, he spoke about the "threat" of homosexuality and transgenderism at home and abroad.

At one stage, he read out a line from a story in the chapter about a person named Sharifa, who grew up as a boy but eventually realised she was a girl.

Asif drew the conclusion that the story legitimises "homosexuality" – which is illegal in Bangladesh.

The Daily Star found that the section in the book contains no information that rationalises this conclusion.

He ended his speech by encouraging the audience to buy the book, tear up those two pages, return the book to the sellers and ask them to sell it to parents at half price.

On social media, Asif's speech incited many to take vehement stances against the textbook.

The day after this video was posted, he claimed in a Facebook post that he had received a call from BRAC University – where he had taken a class that day – and was told that he was no longer required to take classes.

The discourse on social media, mainly Facebook, has since been dominated by the debate between those expressing outrage over Sharifa's story being included in the textbook, and those who saw the story as an important part of a holistic understanding of society.

THE CHAPTER

Chapter three of the book teaches students about different communities, such as the Bede people (a gypsy community), third gender, and professional communities, through stories.

Sharifa's story is about a woman who has been ostracised by her family and society.

In it, she shares her journey of self-discovery, expressing that despite having a male body, she was actually a girl. Ultimately, Sharifa finds acceptance and a sense of belonging within a community of people who share similar experiences.

The story highlights the hardships of the "third gender" community, as referred to in the textbook, and the formation of supportive bonds within it.

Additionally, the section touches upon the fact that the Bangladesh government recognised the rights of individuals like Sharifa in 2013.

It mentions the efforts by both government and non-government organisations to provide education and employment to members of this community and bring change in the societal attitudes towards them.

Mentions of successful third gender individuals like Nazrul Islam Ritu, Rani Chowdhury, Linima Shammii, and Bipul Barman emphasise the positive contributions this community can bring to society when given equal opportunities.

The chapter also includes a classroom discussion of sex diversity and the concept of "gender".

The teacher explains to students that society assigns "appearances, behaviours, actions or other characteristics" for men and women, but there are no absolute rules.

The conclusion it reaches is that everyone has the freedom to express their opinions, feelings, likes and dislikes, as long as they do not harm anyone.

Nowhere in the chapter is the word "homosexuality", or the idea of it, mentioned in any way.

WHY IT WAS INCLUDED

The Daily Star spoke to Abul Momen, an editor of the textbook, who explained the rationale behind including Sharifa's story.

"Our intention is to promote inclusivity, to represent all sorts of people in society. Not many students get to meet people of the Hijra community, so this section was written from the point of view of inclusivity.

"Our society has the tendency to view people from this community in a negative light. In the context of the government's recognition of the third gender, if we sensitise students at a young age to the existence of this community, then this negative

perception won't continue."

He added, "Of course, there is a lot of discussion and debate on the sub-divisions within this community. However, the larger identity of third gender that has been recognised by the government is what we are introducing to children."

Educationist Rasheda K Chowdhury told The Daily Star that inclusivity is entrenched in every policy of the state, even in the constitution.

"It's a part of human rights. Upholding human dignity is a part of every international charter Bangladesh is party to.

"Those speaking against the story of Sharifa have an agenda. I'm forced to wonder if those using religion to spread hate on social media might fall under the scope of the Cyber Security Act. Freedom of speech is a right for all, but that freedom must respect human rights."

WILL THE TEXTBOOK BE CHANGED?

As the discourse came to the government's notice, Education Minister Mohibul Hassan Chowdhury on Tuesday told reporters, "I will engage in discussions with officials from the National Curriculum and Textbook Board [NCTB]. If there's confusion regarding this content, we'll look into the reasons."

On Wednesday, a five-member committee was formed by his ministry to help the NCTB review the textbook's contents thoroughly.

About the possibility of an amendment, Abul Momen said, "I'm not of the opinion that we have to be immovable when it comes to the content of the textbook. The society must be considered and the public must be heard as the government is a political one.

"A compromise might be made considering this, but that'll be the government's decision. However, there's no technical or scientific reason to make an amendment."

Rasheda K Chowdhury added, "If a change is made, my concern will be about what message is being sent by doing so."

Health, education got way less than outlined

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population, said Manzoor Ahmed, the founder of BRAC University Institute of Educational Development

"The gap between projection in five-year plan and actual allocation shows that there is an inconsistency between planning and implementation – such a gap upsets the total planning."

The authorities are by and large failing to understand what are the priorities for the country, said Ahmed, now an emeritus professor of BRAC University.

The low budget for the health sector is a "historical concern" in Bangladesh, the midterm review report said.

It has failed to allocate an adequate budget of around 3 percent of GDP for the health sector, with the allocation remaining less than 1 percent of GDP.

It went up slightly to 0.89 percent of GDP in 2021 but again dropped to 0.8 percent the following year.

Low budget allocation has serious implications on the health budget of an individual in Bangladesh, as reflected in high and increasing out-of-pocket expenses on healthcare,

Israeli tanks batter hospital districts

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tracts of the heavily built-up enclave flattened by Israeli bombing.

The International Committee of the Red Cross said less than 20 percent of the narrow coastal enclave – around 60 square km (23 sq miles) – was now refuge to more than 1.5 million people in the south "where the dramatic escalation of fighting threatens their survival".

Thomas White, director of the UN agency for Palestinian refugees in Gaza, yesterday deplored Israel's military operations in neighbourhoods teeming with vulnerable civilians.

the review said.

Out-of-pocket expenditure of 72 percent on healthcare is very high and is more than in India, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

"This is also an indicator of high inequality in healthcare services and a cause of poverty and vulnerability," the review said.

Meanwhile, families bear 71 percent of the total education expenditure in Bangladesh, as per Unesco's Global Education Monitoring Report 2022.

The issue of financing education remains the core of the problem in the education sector.

While the government has increased its budget for education in recent years, there is still a need for greater investment in the sector.

In 2023, government expenditure on education was only 1.64 percent of GDP whereas most upper middle-income countries spend around 5-6 percent of their GDP on education, the review said.

If public funding cannot be managed, the government must explore innovative financing mechanisms such as public-private partnerships to mobilise additional

resources for the education sector, it said.

"The situation is like that people who can afford will get the education and health care facilities," Ahmed said.

Planning commission officials maintain the lower allocations for the two sectors are due to the ministries' inability to spend their budgets. Cost overruns and delays in implementing the projects are also to blame.

Shamsul Alam, who was a pivotal figure in the drafting of the 8th five-year plan, acknowledged that many ministries like health cannot spend all their allocations.

Asked about why ADP allocation was less than the projection, Alam, who is the immediate past state minister for planning, said the government makes allocations keeping its priorities in mind.

"We needed to change our priorities following the pandemic and the Ukraine war."

Due to the pandemic, resources had to be diverted to the stimulus packages.

"That was unforeseen and as a result, the allocations for education and others needed to be changed."

6 Rohingyas detained

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Moulvibazar

Six Rohingyas, including women and children, were detained in Moulvibazar's Kamalganj upazila on Wednesday night.

Seeing them moving suspiciously near Munsibazar around 10:30pm, locals caught them and informed the local union parishad chairman, said Saiful Alam, officer-in-charge of Kamalganj Police Station.

As locals found Rohingya ID cards in their possession, they were handed over to the police, the OC said.

Nahid Ahmed Tarafdar, chairman of Munsibazar Union Parishad, said a Rohingya woman is pregnant. Some manpower brokers brought them from the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar for sending them to India, he added, citing the Rohingyas.

The OC said the detainees during primary interrogation told police that they fled the Kutupalong refugee camp in Cox's Bazar's Ukhia on January 23 with an aim to enter India.

The six are Mohammad Shaha, 19, Noor Fatema, 17, Akhlina, 7, Junayed, 23, Tahura, 24, and Umayer, 4.

The OC added that the detainees would be sent back to their camp.

Six of a family burnt in house fire

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Narayanganj

Six members of a family suffered burn injuries in a fiery explosion presumably caused by a gas leak at their residence in the Baghpara area of Narayanganj's Siddhirganj around 10:30pm on Wednesday.

The injured were Sukhi Akhter, 33; her daughter Sadia Akhter, 10; sister Jannati Akhter, 18; brother Arif Hawladar, 21; cousin Rahima, 32; and her daughter Ritu, 13.

They are currently undergoing treatment at the Sheikh Hasina National Institute of Burn and Plastic Surgery, said Toriqul Islam, resident surgeon of the hospital.

"Rahima has sustained burns on over 45 percent of her body. She has been admitted to the ICU."

Sukhi has 17 percent burns, and Jannati has 15 percent burns, while the three others have minor burns that are less than 10 percent, the doctor added.

Siddhirganj Police Station's Officer-in-Charge Abu Bakar Siddique said the injured were taken to the hospital immediately.

College student crushed between train, platform

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Dinajpur

A young man was crushed to death when he fell into the gap between the platform and the train at Birampur Railway Station in Dinajpur last morning.

The victim, Golam Rabbani, 20, from Daudpur union of the district's Nawabganj upazila, was a first-year student at Joypurhat Government College.

His cousin, Rakibul Islam, said, "Rabbani boarded the Panchagarh Express from Joypurhat Railway Station early in the morning to return home."

"He wanted to get off at Birampur Railway Station, where the Panchagarh Express does not make a stop. "So, as the train was crossing Birampur, he tried to jump onto the station's platform from the speeding train."

"But, he slipped and ended up falling into the crack between the platform and the train, sustaining critical injuries."

Informed, local firefighters arrived at the spot and took him to Birampur Upazila Health Complex, where the on-duty doctor at the emergency department declared him dead, said Birampur Police Station Officer-in-Charge (OC) Subrata Kumar Sarkar.