

Fake prisoners pose a real challenge

Disturbing trend of prisoner impersonation reveals systemic flaws

We are deeply troubled by the cases of prisoner impersonation detected across the country in recent months. A report by *Prothom Alo* reveals how easy it apparently is to hire someone to serve prison sentences in place of real convicts. At least 24 such fake prisoners were detected in 2023 till November 11, while 290 prisoners were found to have multiple NID cards. Moreover, the money paid to the impersonators ranged from Tk 3,000 to Tk 50,000.

The extent to which this trend has pervaded our criminal justice system is mind-boggling. In one case, the fake prisoner, a tea stall owner from Dhaka, said he agreed to serve the prison sentence of one of his clients who had been convicted in a cheque dishonour case in Chattogram, in exchange for Tk 3,000. He got caught when his information was run through the Prison Inmate Database System (PIDS). Officials at different jails said the impersonators are now easily detectable because of the PIDS, which has been installed in all prisons and stores elaborate details about inmates.

That is reassuring to know, even though security systems are notoriously unreliable in Bangladesh. Think about its implications: besides the usual mix of fraudsters, extortionists and drug peddlers using impersonators, who's to say there aren't murderers, rapists and such hardened criminals who are also exploiting this abhorrent practice? It sends out an alarming message: it is easy to get away with crimes if you have money, even after convictions. What's equally terrifying is that some people are desperate enough to be willing to admit to crimes they haven't committed, for paltry sums. It would be naïve to assume that no one else is involved in this charade. There must be a network of corrupt law enforcers, lawyers and judicial officials enabling these criminals.

All this, it is safe to say, has been possible because of the systemic flaws in our criminal justice system that have been allowed to fester for a long time. It is a gross violation of justice and human rights, and if not addressed with rigorous measures, it will further erode public trust in our already floundering legal system. We urge the relevant authorities to take immediate action to put a stop to this blatant mockery of justice, and ensure that those who truly deserve punishment are not spared.

Victimised twice, a woman's fight for life

Take urgent action to rescue her, punish rapist/abductors

We are distressed by the news of the abduction of a rape victim from the one-stop crisis centre of Khulna Medical College Hospital—that, too, right in front of rights activists who were waiting outside to offer her legal support. According to one of the activists, who were also beaten up during the incident, about 10-12 individuals were waiting in front of the crisis centre with a microbus, and as soon as the woman came out, they forced her into the vehicle and took her away. Earlier, the victim reportedly told her doctor that Dumuria upazila's chairman, Ejaz Ahmed, had raped her on Saturday night. She also wanted to file a case with the court, not with any police station, as she said she didn't trust the police.

The fact that she did not trust the police is understandable. And who could blame her? Influential people being given a free pass by law enforcers is a longstanding problem in our country. We have seen many times how investigations into sexual abuse cases lost traction when influential people were involved. In fact, there have been instances where the police refused to even lodge complaints of sexual abuse against powerful individuals. The Khulna case shows what happens when people lose faith in the law enforcers. However, as things played out, members of the local police did go to the crisis centre to record the victim's statement. But we fail to understand why they did not take any precautionary measures to protect her. How is it that she could be abducted in broad daylight in front of a government hospital?

This is an example of double victimisation that not only illustrates the true state of law and order in our country, but also exposes the lack of security for ordinary victims of crimes, particularly when they represent a threat for powerful offenders. We call on the authorities to launch an all-out effort to rescue the victim, hold the perpetrators to account, and take appropriate legal action against the accused rapist.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Greenery to fight smog

It's an established fact now that Dhaka has a severe air quality problem. Unfortunately, the visible measures being taken by authorities as of now are not enough. A slow water-sprinkling vehicle plying a busy main road at noon is not enough to keep the dust down for long. What we need is more greenery. The utter absence of grass (which works as an air filter by trapping dust and smoke) in the capital's commercial areas explains why Dhaka regularly tops the list of cities with the worst air. Our city authorities must fix this. Sowing grass seeds in the dustiest parts of Dhaka will certainly make the air there more breathable, thus saving lungs and lives.

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The real comparative advantage of Bangladesh

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What gives Bangladesh an edge? The overwhelming consensus among experts and media professionals is that cheap labour is Bangladesh's primary comparative advantage. Cheap labour has driven the phenomenal growth of the ready-made garment (RMG) industry in Bangladesh, provided employment for millions of female workers, and earned the country billions in foreign exchange. However, low wages are essentially synonymous with poverty. And after 40 years of manufacturing cheaply, is this still a desirable trait?

Growth based on cheap labour is neither desirable nor stable. Eventually, another country with even lower wages could supersede Bangladesh's RMG industry. In fact, if not for its civil war, Sri Lanka might have been the top choice for RMG production globally instead of Bangladesh. Historically, textile manufacturing moved from Britain to cost-competitive Japan, and later Japan lost its market to lower-cost countries like China, Bangladesh, and Vietnam. As labour costs rise, labour-intensive manufacturing shifts to cheaper countries, and Bangladesh is not immune to this reality.

Technological advancements and rising protectionism threaten cheap labour's comparative advantage. A 2019 McKinsey report showed that trade reliant on labour cost differences is declining notably in labour-intensive manufacturing, wherein the share of such trade dropped from 55 percent in 2005 to 43 percent in 2017. Automation and artificial intelligence will likely accelerate this shift towards capital-focused manufacturing. This raises the question: what will be Bangladesh's development pathway as its labour cost advantages diminish?

Bangladesh's primary comparative advantage is actually its fertility—a gift of nature. Annually, over 50 rivers from India flow into Bangladesh, carrying an astonishing 650 billion cubic metres of water and depositing fertile silt to form a massive river delta. In the words of Willem van Schendel, "Bangladesh is the Himalayas, flattened out." Unless India diverts the waters, this remains a major advantage for Bangladesh. How can Bangladesh utilise this permanent comparative advantage?

Hitherto, nature's bounty to Bangladesh has been needed just to provide enough rice to feed its

population of 170 million—and growing. Will using the land for income generation mean starving someone? Both demand and supply considerations state otherwise. Wealthier people consume less rice. For example, after peaking in 1962, Japan's per capita rice consumption more than halved as wealth increased, dropping from 118kg to 50.8kg in 2020. If Bangladesh's rice demand mirrors Japan's, up to half of the land can be freed for high-value, non-traditional agriculture. Recent data has shown a 10 percent drop in Bangladesh's per capita rice consumption between 2016 and 2022. If the country's economic growth had been more evenly distributed, the decrease in rice consumption would have happened

Bangladesh could even become a rice exporter, a potential that first emerged way back in 1991.

Due to the horizontal expansion of homesteads, Bangladesh loses about 0.2 percent to one percent of its agricultural land annually. Making more profitable use of the land will automatically induce people to conserve land and make the shift to compact, multi-level homes.

When this happens we will first see that, as the use of land becomes more lucrative, the value of agricultural land will rise. Consequently, individuals will think twice before constructing new homes on profitable agricultural land. This shift will naturally create pressure to build homes vertically, conserving land and enabling residents to live

rice harvest. For Bangladesh, diversifying into climate-resilient, high-value non-traditional agriculture will not only increase income but will also reduce risks and address local food security.

The move towards cash crops such as fruits and vegetables appears both desirable and inevitable. Crop diversification and agro-processing have proven to be effective ways to secure rural agricultural livelihoods, promote faster growth, and reduce rural poverty. Beyond diversifying exports away from RMG, this strategy involves leveraging Bangladesh's warm climate and fertile land to meet the year-round demands of Western consumers. The aim should extend beyond earning foreign currency



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FILE PHOTO: SYED RIFAT HOSSAIN

even faster.

With Bangladesh's population projected to exceed 200 million by 2050, simply relying on lower rice consumption per head is precarious. Increasing domestic rice production is vital to ensuring a stable supply. Fortunately, there is considerable potential for increasing supply, thanks to a significant gap between the potential and actual yields of rice. Bangladesh's rice productivity growth, currently at just one percent, lags behind India's 2.4 percent, Thailand and Vietnam's 1.9 percent, and China's 3.7 percent. Modernisation and optimisation could boost yields and reduce the demand for land devoted to rice cultivation. With due care,

closer to amenities such as electricity and water. Rural landlords and farmers will both benefit from the higher land values, positively impacting rural areas overall. Secondly, Bangladeshi farmers may well eye the global rice market. Being paid in dollars will drive maximum effort and productivity on rice farms, paving the way for sustained long-term growth.

Global challenges such as climate change further highlight the need for agricultural diversification. Heavy reliance on monocropping with rice or wheat is fraught with risks—from plant pandemics to the devastating impacts of climate change, as evidenced by the 2022 floods in Pakistan which destroyed 15 percent of the country's

and include protecting against the unpredictable threats posed by climate change.

Unlike RMG, Bangladesh's fertile arable land is an enduring asset that is barely susceptible to competition. Bangladesh must increase production on its diminishing fertile land as improved land use could yield significant rewards for the country. The middle-income trap has emerged as the newest catchphrase in the context of Bangladesh. Whether it is a reality or not, or how we can escape it, remains without consensus. Either way, the solution may be a return to high-value agriculture, leveraging Bangladesh's lasting comparative advantage.

The fight for 'The Story of Sharifa'

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REZWAN AHMED

Last week, the nation was set ablaze by a very angry man and the two pages of a textbook which he ripped apart. What followed were days of confusion, outrage, and heated debates spanning religion, morality, and human rights. All this culminated in the Ministry of Education forming a five-member probe committee on January 24 to look into and potentially amend *The Story of Sharifa*.

At first, I thought this was perfectly reasonable due diligence by the government in light of the immense controversy surrounding the story. Upon closer inspection, though, I noticed a glaring red flag: all of the members of the probe committee are either education specialists or religious scholars. No sociologist or human rights activist was included. Regrettably, yet unsurprisingly, all of them are also men. More importantly, not one member of any other gender was included, despite the issue at hand most directly impacting a community which is marginalised based on their gender identity.

This is not to imply that the current members of the committee are disingenuous in any way; it is simply a matter of including diverse perspectives while addressing a sensitive, politically charged concern. These five experts have never walked a mile in the shoes of someone belonging to the vulnerable

community in question and likely lack a sufficiently nuanced understanding of their suffering. Yet, these are the same men granted the power to decide whether the fundamental human rights of this group are too "radical" for students of Class 7 history and social science.

This lack of representation is endemic to the political processes in Bangladesh. In the vast majority of instances, the decisions affecting the most underprivileged are made in the absence of those very people. As a result, the perspectives of these groups are left behind in the policies that concern their rights and amenities. It is no wonder how it took Bangladesh nearly half a century before legally acknowledging the Hijra community in 2013 and why they still face persecution to this day.

The recent situation escalated when a Supreme Court lawyer named Md Mahmudul Hasan, on January 25, issued a legal notice addressing all educational institutions and bookstores, demanding that they remove *The Story of Sharifa* from the Class 7 history and social science books along with the book itself within 30 days, threatening legal action otherwise. While media outlets have been busy making headlines of this legal notice, it's important to realise that this is merely a threat at this point—and most likely an empty one, given his track record of ludicrous legal stunts. For instance, Mahmudul infamously attempted to abolish the Mongol Shobhajatra in 2023, claiming the age-old tradition to be "unconstitutional, illegal, and artificially created." While we hope his most recent attempt

at grabbing headlines will meet the same demise as his past one, this does emphasise the precarious dilemma the government is faced with at present: either give in to the backlash and bury *The Story of Sharifa* under an inferno of populist intolerance, or stand its ground for a story that the National Curriculum and Textbook Board itself believed was worth telling.

What also worries me is the potential ramifications of the response to *The Story of Sharifa* on other causes besides gender diversity. We've already witnessed increasing rates of intolerance against minorities in Bangladesh, from the ransacking of Hindu temples to the violent grabbing of Indigenous land. Therefore, Mahmudul's antics and the conservative backlash only serve to douse gasoline on the raging fires of anti-secularism that have been blazing in Bangladesh for the past many years.

During times like this, it's important to remember who we are as a nation. Bangladesh, since its independence in 1971, has been a constitutionally secular state founded on the promise of religious freedom and the separation of faith from the state. However, secularism isn't just an arbitrary political philosophy in the context of Bangladesh; it's our way of renouncing everything the West Pakistani regime represented. From the eradication of Bangla culture to the stifling of rights and the brutalisation of our people, it's our way of redressing these atrocities and promising never to do the same to ourselves again.

Sadly, it seems we're too quick to forget these blood-soaked lessons of our own past.

So, was this large-scale pushback against *The Story of Sharifa* a loss for the forces of progress? Or is there a silver lining to all this? The answers right now are "yes" and "yes." Sure, a lot of the coverage and reactions have been aggressive and intolerant. But on the flip side, the controversy surrounding *The Story of Sharifa* has become a springboard for conversations and discourse where there otherwise would have been indifference. While conversations in and of themselves aren't enough to shift mindsets, they are a much-needed foot through the door. And despite some continuing to accuse the story of "indoctrinating children," there are also many vocalising their support for the cause—something we wouldn't have expected even a few years ago.

The Story of Sharifa controversy has become a litmus test of sorts, bringing sharp relief regarding the progress we've achieved so far but also letting us know how much further there is to go. We might not see change right now, or perhaps even in our lifetimes, but I hope the conversations we've sparked today will soon translate to a tomorrow of inclusivity.

For now, let's focus on ensuring that the future generation grows up learning that all people, regardless of identity and background, are deserving of kindness, respect, and empathy. Let us keep *The Story of Sharifa* alive as we strive for a future where her story has the right to exist amongst the 170 million others in our nation. And no matter how many angry men and their ripped pages tell us otherwise, that is a cause worth fighting for.