

The Daily Star

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## Tk 150 for shooting a man in the foot?

### Disciplinary action against trigger-happy policemen must match their crime

A constable has been fined Tk 150 and five days' drill as disciplinary action for shooting a young man in the foot, leaving him crippled. This happened in 2019 in Keraniganj; and even after five years, it is still not clear why 20-year-old Shahadat Hossain Shyamol was shot by this policeman. The police's version was that Shyamol and his friends had attacked the policeman and tried to take their firearms, a version totally denied by Shyamol. In fact, the National Human Rights Commission, after its probe, recommended that Shyamol be given Tk 2 lakh as compensation, but till date the government has not complied. Is this yet another case of a trigger-happy policeman who knew he could get away with shooting an innocent citizen?

Shyamol's version is that after stopping him at the checkpoint, without saying anything, the constable shot him in the right leg. The constable allowed his friend to take him to the hospital which contradicts the claim of them attacking the policeman.

The day after the incident, Shyamol and his friends were accused in a case for trying to snatch firearms from the cops.

The three-member investigating committee's report stated that it was Constable Saiful's carelessness, lack of skills and negligence in duty that led to this incident. The same report also stated that Shyamol and his friends had attacked the policeman. Why would the constable be found "negligent" or "careless," since it would be his duty to prevent anyone from attacking him and his colleagues and snatching their firearms? Also, why would he be fined or given punishment, as mild as it was, if he was innocent? The facts don't line up.

Shyamol's case reminds us of the ordeal of another young man Limon who, in March 2011, lost his leg after a Rab team shot him at Shaturia village in Khalakathi, mistaking him for a notorious criminal they were looking for. Instead of compensating Limon for maiming him, Rab filed two cases against him, one for possessing arms and another for obstructing law enforcers. They even provided 'evidence'—a worn out revolver and a used bullet cap. Thanks to the then NHRC chairman, the government withdrew both cases in 2013. But Limon had to have his leg amputated and the case filed against the Rab personnel did not provide him justice.

It is deplorable that this is how easily some law enforcers abuse their power and violate ordinary people's rights with impunity. The NHRC's stance shows that Shyamol is innocent, which behoves the government to not only adequately compensate him but also take disciplinary action against the constable that matches his crime. Law enforcers are mandated to protect people's rights and when they violate those rights, they must be held accountable and punished accordingly. It is the basic premise of the rule of law.

## Free up our footpaths!

### We need a walkable city, not just grand infrastructures

There is no denying that Dhaka is undergoing massive infrastructural changes, some of which—like the metro rail—have dramatically changed the landscapes and lives of those in specific areas of the capital for the better. But, sadly, the more Dhaka changes, the more it remains the same, with the perennial problems of the city now all the more prominent when juxtaposed against these new developments. Take, for instance, the experience of commuters boarding the metro train to reach what would have been a two-hour long bus ride in 15 minutes—only to spend the next 15 to 20 minutes navigating what ought to be a five-minute walk through the circus that consists of Dhaka's footpaths. From vendors with various goods on their pushcarts to open potholes and overflowing dumpsters, from never-ending work on utility lines to construction materials blocking the way, the footpaths of Dhaka have been held hostage for far too long, failing to provide the basic service it was meant to: allow people to walk in peace.

It is unfortunate that despite being an overcrowded metropolis, we have failed to recognise the role that pedestrian- and gender-friendly footpaths can play to ease commuters' sufferings and make walking in Dhaka a faster and actually enjoyable experience. The government and our urban planners have not prioritised a walkable metropolis in their imagining of Dhaka's present and future, failing to understand that lavish infrastructures alone do not make a city "modern" and liveable. It is high time we find a way to connect the grand structures to the ground realities of the city and to people's lived struggles. Currently, there are 13 agencies across five ministries which have various responsibilities to ensure a pedestrian-friendly environment. But as so often happens in Bangladesh when too many people are in charge, no one really takes any responsibility.

We urge the city corporations to take charge and clear up the footpaths under their respective jurisdictions. Random drives, which we see from time to time, against street vendors are unlikely to bring about long-lasting changes if, in a few days' time, administration-backed nexuses are given leeway to set up shops and extort street vendors again. Urban planners and policymakers need to overhaul how they envision Dhaka. Footpaths may not sound as glamorous as an underground metro route, but a walkable metropolis can be even more of a game-changer for city-dwellers.

New Message

To: \_\_\_\_\_

Subject: \_\_\_\_\_

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# Why is our tannery industry stunted?



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KALLOL MUSTAFA

The raw materials used to produce garment items in Bangladesh have to be imported in huge quantities. Despite this dependence on imports, garments are our main export, owing massively to the patronage of the government. However, though in a similar vein, Bangladesh's tannery industry could not develop nearly as well, despite having a huge domestic supply of high quality rawhides.

In the last fiscal year, ready-made garments worth \$46.99 billion were exported from Bangladesh, for which \$15.99 billion worth of cotton, yarn, cloth, equipment, and various other raw materials had to be imported. On the other hand, despite having sufficient quantities of rawhide available within the country, the export of leather and leather products only amounted to \$1.22 billion in the last fiscal year.

One of the main reasons behind the underdevelopment of the domestic leather industry is the non-compliance with Environmental, Social, and Quality (ESQ) standards. According to a study by the Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries Corporation (BSCIC), four major factors are responsible for this: 1) low Central Effluent Treatment Plant (CETP) capacity in the Savar tannery estate; 2) lack of awareness among tannery owners about compliance; 3) mismanagement of solid waste; and 4) non-improvement of indoor environmental quality of tanneries. This is why the tanneries in Savar are not getting recognition from the Leather Working Group (LWG), a prominent international organisation that certifies a tannery industry as being sustainable. As a result, leather processed by Bangladesh has to be exported at a lower price to China instead of to Europe.

The pollution problem in the leather industry is a long-standing one. While at Hazaribagh, the tanneries used to dump about 21,600 cubic metres of liquid waste directly into the Buriganga River every day without treatment. To reduce this pollution of the Buriganga, the tannery industrial estate was built—at a cost of Tk 1,015 crore no less—in Savar's Hemayetpur under the leadership of BSCIC, with Tk 521 crore spent on constructing the CETP. Although the tanneries were moved from Hazaribagh to the Savar Tannery Industrial Estate in 2017, the industry has still not been freed from pollution because the CETP—which was built at a hefty cost and over nine years (instead of the initial timeline of two years)—is



FILE PHOTO: STAR

Shifting the tannery industry from Hazaribagh to Savar has not solved the problem of poor working conditions.

not capable of fully treating all types of tannery waste. And this is a sign of extreme negligence and failure on the part of the authorities.

Although 42,000-45,000 cubic metres of waste are generated daily during the peak Eid-ul-Azha season, the treatment capacity of the CETP is only 25,000 cubic metres per day. Moreover, even this quantity of waste is not treated properly because CETP lacks a salt treatment unit. The amount of chromium waste is 5,000 cubic metres, but the capacity of the chromium recovery unit is only 1,050 cubic metres per day. There are also deficiencies when it comes to solid waste management. Meanwhile, the BSCIC has dug ponds for solid waste management, which does not align with environmental standards. As a result, while Buriganga was the one being polluted by the tannery industry in the past, the Dhaleswari River has become the new victim of the same.

Of course, in addition to the BSCIC, tannery owners themselves are also responsible for ESQ non-compliance. According to BSCIC research, the LWG gives out 1,710 points under 17 topics in the assessment protocol, of which 300 points are related to central waste management. The remaining 1,410 points are for operating permits, social responsibility, traceability, energy consumption, water usage, air and noise emissions, chemical management, and operations

management. All of these are the sole responsibility of tannery owners. For example, according to the Bangladesh Environmental Conservation Rules, 2023, the water discharge per ton of rawhide processing should not be more than 30 cubic metres (or 30 tons). However, the tanneries use 50 to 60 tons of water, resulting in wastage and

for the study said they work without proper protective gear, and 79 percent cited lack of training on how to use chemicals safely for tanning work.

Against this backdrop, tannery owners' compliance with the ESQ standards itself will be helpful in acquiring LWG certifications. Tanneries can also set up their own ETPs in order to

create additional pressure on the CETP.

Besides environmental compliance, social compliance is another crucial factor in terms of which Bangladesh's tanneries are lagging far behind. Shifting the tannery industry from Hazaribagh to Savar has not solved the problem of poor working conditions, as most of the tanneries do not comply with local and international labour laws and also do not maintain minimum occupational health and safety standards. Environmental pollution from the tanneries also affects workers' health, living conditions, income, and working environment. According to a study by the Solidarity Center, an international organisation working on labour rights, more than 70 percent of tannery workers in Bangladesh suffer from various health problems due to environmental pollution.

According to another survey conducted jointly by the Bangladesh Labour Foundation and Research and Policy Integration for Development (RAPID), most of the tannery workers have no formal employment contracts and more than half of the workers receive wages less than the industry minimum of Tk 13,500. Due to environmental pollution and an unsafe working environment, many workers also suffer from skin diseases, shortness of breath, stomach ailments, and headaches. Most concerning, three-quarters of those interviewed

produce leather in an environmentally friendly manner. For example, one tannery in the Savar industrial estate and five others outside the estate have received LWG certificates by installing their own ETPs and complying with the ESQ standards. These tanneries also have good business *because* they have the LWG certification. A recent study by The Asia Foundation found that the likely nominal cost of 10 years' investment in becoming LWG certified for an individual tannery in Bangladesh can range between \$30,908 to \$87,226—depending on the current level of compliance—the estimated benefits of which could range between at least 1.05 to 3.15 times the cost likely to be incurred.

Bangladesh's leather is well-known for its good qualities of fine grain, uniform fibre structure, smooth feel, and natural texture. With the annual supply of 350 million square feet of high quality domestic leather, the potential for the growth of the leather industry in Bangladesh is promising, to say the least. But the development of this industry has been stalled by the negligence and mismanagement of government authorities and also due to the short-term, profit-seeking attitude of tannery owners. Until the government and the tannery owners realise their shortcomings and duly prioritise complying with ESQ standards, our leather industry will not develop sustainably.

## NATIONAL LIBRARY DAY

# Libraries will solidify our foundation as a smart nation



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PRODIP ROY

In an era dominated by technological advancements and digital distractions, the importance of libraries in fostering a reading culture and preserving cultural heritage cannot be overstated. Beyond being traditional repositories of books, libraries in the 21st century have evolved into diverse hubs that address various information needs. In fact, in many countries, libraries and librarians are trusted, community-based entities fostering grassroots development and serving as sustainable local institutions.

Libraries are beacons of ethical and sustainable development, nurturing economic and digital growth, as well as moral and ethical values. As we witness the continuous threat of isolation driven by technological and economic forces, libraries emerge as vital public spaces that connect communities and bridge the gap between knowledge and power.

There are over 9,000 public libraries and more than 125,000 librarians

across the United States, all of which offer a wide variety of resources and services to the communities they serve.

Similarly, Australia has a fantastic network of public libraries across all its states. Users can access an extensive catalogue of print, electronic, and multimedia resources as well as free Wi-Fi, computers, printing services, study spaces, groups, classes, and much more by joining a single library.

According to the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, neighbouring India also has an impressive library network, with approximately 1.5 million libraries, including 1.3 million school libraries—the highest single number of libraries globally. The country also hosts over 160,000 public and community libraries, with one public library for every 8,333 people.

In Sri Lanka, according to the National Library and Document Services Board (NLDSB), there are approximately 1,500 public libraries—

one for every 14,595 people.

Compared to India and Sri Lanka, Bangladesh has only 71 public libraries, a disproportionately low number considering the population—resulting in there being one public library for every 2,402,143 people. Additionally, about 1,400 public and community libraries have been established through private initiatives across the country. But this still means there is one library per 123,538 people. Plus, despite their potential impact, these libraries face inadequate funding.

With increased government support, the existing libraries could offer better services to their respective local communities. The wealthier Bangladeshi citizens could play a crucial role in supporting private libraries, helping to develop a reading culture and a great nation.

In 2023, under the Ministry of Cultural Affairs, grants were distributed to private libraries, with A-category libraries receiving Tk 70,000 (divided equally between bank accounts and book provisions), B-category libraries receiving Tk 55,000, and C-category libraries being allocated Tk 47,500. However, the current annual government funding given to these libraries is a mere drop in the ocean. To address this critical gap, there is an urgent call for a substantial increase in government funding dedicated to rural libraries.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina emphasises the importance of libraries

in building the nation's rich cultural heritage. The government's efforts in setting up Bangabandhu Corners and Mujib Corners in public and private libraries across the country demonstrate a commitment to preserving the correct history of the Liberation War and making libraries more accessible and relevant to future generations.

But while Bangladesh sees a rise in reading habits, a significant percentage only use libraries for studying guidebooks tailored for the highly competitive BCS exams.

With only 71 government libraries for the population of 18 crore, the call for more libraries resonates as a fundamental necessity. It will be an investment in the nation's intellectual capital, ensuring that every citizen can access knowledge within a book's pages regardless of their location or background.

The concept of a smart nation, intertwined with technological advancement and an informed citizenry, is incomplete without addressing the disparities between urban and rural areas. Expanding library facilities in rural Bangladesh will be a strategic step towards building a smart nation from the grassroots. Let this day serve as a reminder that the true wealth of a nation lies not just in its economic and digital prosperity but in the minds and hearts of its people, which are enriched by the treasures found within the walls of libraries.