

The Daily Star

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Love for language must go beyond rituals

We must reaffirm our commitment to linguistic diversity

As we observe the 72nd anniversary of the historic Ekushey February, we humbly recall the sacrifices made by the martyrs and all those who were engaged in the fight to put Bangla—and mother tongue—in its rightful place. It was, and remains, a pivotal moment in history, a symbol of people's unwavering commitment to preserve their linguistic heritage and resist linguistic oppression. The sacrifices made all those years ago still resonate profoundly in today's world where globalisation and technological advancements often blur cultural boundaries, making preservation of one's mother tongue that much important. Language is not just a tool for communication; it is a repository of shared history, traditions, and values. It serves as a bridge that connects generations and fosters a sense of belonging and identity.

It is against this backdrop that any celebration of the International Mother Language Day must involve a reflection on the progress made in promoting linguistic rights and addressing language-based inequalities. We must ask: have we done enough to uphold the spirit of the Ekushey? Have there been enough efforts to promote education in mother tongue, preserve indigenous languages, and promote linguistic diversity in media and public discourses? These steps are crucial for building a more inclusive society. Unfortunately, beyond official events and ritualised ceremonies, today's Bangladesh is more a picture of linguistic hegemony than of harmony.

Yes, Bangla remains the official language, but only just. Indigenous languages remain in circulation, but only just. If you look closely enough, the poverty on display in terms of the treatment of local languages cannot be starker. Increasingly, people are drifting away from Bangla: you see its reflection in official correspondences, social settings, classroom lectures or textbooks, especially at the university level. The condition of indigenous languages is worse, with pupils being deprived of textbooks in their own mother tongue. There is hardly any initiative to preserve these languages, many of which are on their deathbed. While a true Ekushey spirit in a country having as many languages as Bangladesh would involve people learning and speaking several local languages, the reality cannot be more different.

The influences of globalisation in this regard cannot be ignored. But the lack of official initiatives is also largely to blame. So on this Ekushey February, let us reaffirm our commitment to preserving and promoting linguistic diversity as a cornerstone of our identity. By embracing this diversity as well as the richness of our cultural heritage, we can pave the way for a more harmonious and equitable society where every individual can celebrate their mother tongue with pride.

Government sites are ripe for breaches

Authorities must protect personal data of citizens

While the government actively collects citizens' data, promising digitisation and improved services, its ability to protect that data remains questionable, to say the least. Following multiple data breaches and website hacks last year, new batches of sensitive data and NID details have again been leaked and used for fraudulent activities. According to a report, the Cyber Crime Investigation Department of Dhaka Metropolitan Police has apprehended a group of individuals running cloned government websites. These websites stored personal data and used it to sell fabricated documents, including land rent certificates, tax identification numbers, employment certificates, expat health certificates, tax certificates, bank statements, etc.

This is not the first time that the NID server, containing data of nearly 12 crore individuals, has been compromised from a government site. It mirrors incidents reported by TechCrunch last year, where hackers gained access to citizens' data through another government website. It was then claimed that appropriate action would be taken, but to no avail so far. Reportedly, about 176 government organisations have access to the central NID server. However, no tangible efforts seem to be in place to prevent any breach from this network. This has already resulted in breaches of at least 25 websites across government and private institutions in 2023 alone. The leaked data included 40,000 records from the central bank, login credentials of police officers, revenue collection data of government hospitals, land tax details and, more disturbingly, very personal information including NID details of at least 50 million Bangladeshis from the NTMC database—much of it collected without their consent.

This is a flagrant violation of citizens' privacy rights, exposing them to risks of exploitation. The government has been using the issue of cyber security to impose repressive laws over the years but, as evident by the repeated data breaches, it is proving to be incapable of protecting the data of citizens. We must ask then, how justified is it to make personal data collection a mandatory criterion for providing national services, only to make those vulnerable to hackers? We urge the authorities to take stern actions to prevent this scenario.

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Preeti Urang and our myopic laws



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PSYMHE WADUD

The death of 15-year-old Indigenous domestic worker Preeti Urang on February 6, upon falling through an opening from the eighth floor residence of *The Daily Star* Executive Editor Syed Ashlaqul Haque, shocked us all. Half a year earlier, nine-year-old Ferdausi, another child domestic worker of the same household, fell off from the same balcony and sustained severe injuries. Another domestic worker, 40-year-old Anwara, who had been working for Md Tariqul Islam, an assistant commissioner of Dhaka Metropolitan Police's (DMP) Detective Branch, died on February 19 upon falling from the roof of a 10-storey building.

These are not isolated incidents, but part of a larger pattern that makes us look critically into the legal regime for workers toiling in the informal sector, particularly the households. Overall, the legal regime on domestic workers in the country is a patchwork, and while we have apparently laudable child- and women-friendly laws, Supreme Court decisions, and policies from the past, they all unfortunately fail miserably in addressing the plight of informal sector workers, including—but not limited to—domestic aides.

An important judicial decision in this regard is *Bangladesh National Women Lawyers Association (BNWLA) vs the Cabinet Division, Represented by Cabinet Secretary and Others*. In this decision, the High Court Division laid down elaborate guidelines for upholding the rights of child domestic workers. Crucially, among others, the court directed the government to include domestic workers within the definition of "worker" in the Bangladesh Labour Act, 2006. The court particularly emphasised monitoring and prosecuting cases related to violence upon domestic workers, noting with dismay that often the prosecution investigates and tries perpetrators in disinterested and at times motivated ways, resulting in them being acquitted or discharged, or even remaining unscathed.

The decision is praiseworthy on many counts, especially because it takes a rights-based stance, as opposed to an

uncritically protectionist one. Indeed, workers in the informal sector are not essential victims in need of getting "saved." They are individual rights holders whose rights (and not them) need protection and enforcement. It also emphatically strikes at the root of public-private dichotomy by laying down guidelines to regulate the "cult of domesticity."

A major problem with the decision, however, is that it sees "child domestic workers" as a monolithic category. Although the court urged that the domestic workers come from a poverty-stricken background and deserve all the more attention from the government



ILLUSTRATION: REHNUMA PROSHOON

and the authorities concerned, it did not really dig deeper into this loosely thrown statement. For many marginalised children, at the intersection of multiple overlapping identities, a unique harm is produced. Their socioeconomic background, ethnic or religious identity, gender identity or expression, all play a determinant role in their identity formation and the kind of harms they in fact have to sustain. Sweeping laws, policies or guidelines that imagine every child as the same miserably fail to address the different kinds of harms that they undergo. The

same goes for women and men working as domestic aides.

Despite the passage of a substantive period, the otherwise useful guidelines have not really been put into effect. The only development in this regard was laying down of the Domestic Workers Protection and Welfare Policy, 2015. The "policy," while non-binding, unsurprisingly does not go far enough. Furthermore, it has some inherent lacunae as well—for instance, the policy is subject to subjective interpretation of employers with regard to work and recess hours of domestic workers. Also, the policy entrusts the government with the responsibility to deal with abuses of domestic workers, and despite meaning well, creates an accountability deficit on part of the employers in question.

In this context, many argue that the Nari O Shishu Nirjatan Daman Ain, 2000 comes in aid of domestic workers who are predominantly women and children in our country. However, the said law plays only a remedial role in this context—it does not as such create a preventive or positive protection regime

the guidelines do not really help in this regard.

On the international plane, a significant instrument on the rights of domestic workers is the Domestic Workers Convention, 2011. Bangladesh, however, is yet to ratify this important piece of instrument, and to move proactively into the rights-based domain for the domestic workers.

Overall, the patchwork around the domestic workers suggests that they are yet to be deemed as "equals" of others who are subjects of specific laws. We have special laws for women and children, but "domestic workers" is a different class on its own, predominantly constituting a subclass within women and children. They are the paradigmatic subalterns within our society where different strata are defined and hierarchised by power. As a corrective, a specific law regulating the minimum age, wage, standards of living, workloads, benefits, social welfare, civil and criminal wrongs committed against such workers, and their specific remedies need to be there. It is particularly important to put in

place a binding framework for live-in domestic workers for whom a decent work environment, safety, security, and support are all the more important. A framework can be potentially helpful for the employers as well, in terms of ensuring compliance with the minimum standards with legal certainty and due diligence. The law also needs to draw in the interconnected webs of sex, class, age, and ethnicity together, in order to challenge the multi-layered dominance and hegemony in play, with a multi-axis intersectional approach.

For a brighter tomorrow, put an end to corruption today



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"I will not tolerate any kind of corruption and irregularity. My goal is to ensure transparency and accountability in all areas, including government procurement." Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina declared during her introductory speech at the cabinet meeting of the new government. During her speech, she acknowledged the pervasive presence of corruption in governance, recognising it as a serious stain on the otherwise commendable reputation of the country.

From a global perspective, Bangladesh is ranked 149th out of 180 countries in the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) 2023 by Transparency International. However, it is important to recognise that this ranking does not implicate every citizen in the web of corruption. I firmly believe that the majority of Bangladeshis are honest and possess integrity. Only a handful of individuals within key sectors such as government offices, businesses, healthcare, education, and political institutions are involved in corrupt practices, tarnishing the image of the entire country. Nevertheless, the PM's commitment to combat "corruption in any form" is welcome news.

When we think of corruption, bribery often comes to mind first. However, bribery is just one facet of this complex problem, which manifests in various forms. Notable figures such as businessmen, politicians, government

officials, and celebrities are involved in various forms of corruption, including bank loan scams, tax evasion, embezzlement of public funds, money laundering, under- and/or over-invoicing, and accepting kickbacks from international contracts. Furthermore, corruption expands its influence to cover illegal promotions, postings and recruitment of public officials and employees. Some individuals even engage in the adulteration of food and drugs, massive wetland seizures for mega construction projects and deception of the public through various unfair means.

According to Genevan philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the belief holds that individuals are inherently pure at birth; it is the influence of political and social institutions that makes them bad and corrupt. People frequently look up to individuals in high-status positions, such as politicians, teachers, business leaders, and celebrities, considering them as ethical role models. Notably, ethical values, including honesty, are often transmitted from these influential figures. Conversely, the potential for corruption exists when these authority figures engage in dishonest practices, setting unfavourable examples. For instance, when politicians resort to fraudulent tactics like election rigging, nepotism or bribery, or when prominent business leaders exhibit high levels of tax evasion and loan

fraud, or doctors take kickbacks from pharmaceutical companies for prescribing their medications, such reprehensible behaviour has a trickle down effect on the general population. The repercussions of such actions contribute to a broader erosion of moral values within society. Hence, the actions of those in positions of "power" play a pivotal role in determining the moral trajectory of society.

Unfortunately, over the years, we have observed a disheartening trend where specific business entities and individuals, responsible for causing considerable harm to our economy, continue to enjoy official favour. We have seen how certain officials and politically influential figures, including public representatives, exploit their connections and take advantage of weak institutional safeguards, and then go unpunished. A striking example is the alarming increase in non-performing loans (NPLs) in the banking sector, attributed to lax policies, political interference, and a pervasive lack of good governance. Rather than holding the most powerful or influential loan defaulters accountable, laws have been repeatedly amended to protect their interests. And this protective stance extends beyond the banking sector, covering individuals engaged in misconduct across non-bank financial institutions, capital market, insurance sector, health sector, market syndicates, and those involved in illegal land grabbing.

The intricate connection between politics and corruption in Bangladesh raises profound concerns that demand immediate attention. It should be noted that when citizens lose faith in their leaders, it undermines the democratic process and hinders the development of a robust and accountable political system. Moreover, corruption creates an uneven playing

field in the business sector, favouring those with connections and financial resources. This discourages foreign investments, hinders economic growth, and perpetuates income inequality. Bangladesh could have achieved greater and more inclusive growth and development for its people if accompanied by higher standards of governance and improved control over corruption.

Therefore, it is high time for the government to address institutional and structural corruption, which currently holds the nation and the economy hostage. It is crucial to note that instances of overlooking or condoning corrupt practices among associates, friends, and political supporters not only undermine the foundations of trust, but also contribute to the perpetuation of a culture where dishonesty is seemingly justifiable. Social scientists argue that human goodness thrives on positive influences. Hence, holding powerful wrongdoers accountable, regardless of political affiliations, and implementing stringent anti-corruption measures are crucial steps. Going after individuals at the pinnacle of power sends a potent signal that resonates throughout society, reinforcing the principle that "no one is above the law."

This unwavering commitment to justice serves as a guiding light, inspiring both citizens and future leaders to uphold the highest ethical standards and support the creation of a community built on principles of honesty and integrity. Therefore, to achieve meaningful progress, the new government must ensure that those involved in corruption face justice, and that the culture of impunity is dismantled. Doing so will pave the way for sustainable development, creating a brighter and more promising future for our country.