

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

## Another attempt to favour civil servants?

Draft service rules may further encourage corruption

The public administration ministry's proposal to relax a rule that requires public servants to submit wealth statements every five years has caught our attention both for the audacity of the attempt and its potential to encourage corruption among the 14 lakh government employees. The ministry has instead suggested collecting such information from employees' annual tax returns to the National Board of Revenue (NBR). While the proposed move—included in the draft amendment to the Government Servant (Conduct) Rules, 1979—may seem to be streamlining the process of wealth monitoring, in reality, the removal of an additional layer of scrutiny could create scope for dishonest officials to engage in illicit activities with little fear of detection.

What's audacious about this attempt is that the five-year requirement, too, was an exercise in relaxation as public officials were previously mandated to submit wealth statements every year. But neither timeframe apparently sat well with officials, prompting the ministry to consider eliminating the necessity altogether. Why should the existence of a rule, no less one so essential for accountability in public service, be subject to the whims of non-compliant officials? We have seen similar instances where the interests of public service took a back seat to that of individual officials, notably when the administration included a provision in the Public Service Act 2018 to shield government employees from arrests on criminal charges by making it mandatory for police to take "prior permission"—a clause subsequently struck down by High Court as "illegal" and in contravention of the constitution.

The draft service rules, far from turning away from that questionable legacy, seem to be extending it. As well as proposing the removal of the obligation to turn in financial reports, the ministry has kept unchanged a provision related to the acquisition or transfer of immovable property abroad. Although it stipulates that an employee needs to obtain permission for such activities, it indirectly implies that they may be permitted to acquire wealth and conduct business abroad, which they cannot while in government employ. All these, in the words of an expert, "may open the floodgates of illicit [wealth] transfers on the one hand, and encourage corruption on the other." Such concessions or privileges not just risk legitimising money laundering and illicit wealth accumulation, but also are discriminatory and unconstitutional in nature.

In light of these concerns, it is crucial that the higher authorities critically examine these provisions and others in the service rules for government employees before making a final decision. They must always uphold the principles of transparency, accountability and fairness in public service, and remove all problematic clauses that can enable corruption and malfeasance.

## Govt must save the Buriganga

Preventing and punishing river encroachers vital for its restoration

A recent study has discovered that a whopping 16-kilometre stretch of the Buriganga has been lost to encroachment by real estate developers and locals. With the use of advanced technology, researchers concluded that the actual length of the river is 41km, but currently, there is flowing water on just 25 kilometres. This once again illustrates the flaws of our so-called development model where nothing seems to matter except concrete structures, least of all our natural resources.

Over the years, influential people have been able to fill up the Buriganga mostly due to the indifference of government agencies. Large parts of the water bodies connected to it have been filled by factories and business establishments. Out of the 1,092 boundary pillars set up to demarcate the river, 718 are broken and 114 are missing. By comparing satellite images from 1990 to 2020, the study found a 37.67 percent of increase in settlements on the river, with the area occupied by residential and commercial buildings growing from 176.46 square kilometres in 1990 to 201.67 square kilometres in 2020. At present, there are 108 factories, 43 shipyards, 23 small factories, 22 industrial establishments, 19 warehouses and 17 brick kilns on its banks.

The government has eight projects worth Tk 3,294 crore for the restoration of the Buriganga. But none of them have produced any meaningful result. So, on the one hand, it has totally failed to restore the river while, on the other, it has wasted thousands of crores of taxpayer's money in the process. Despite a number of High Court directives urging government agencies to save it, the river has literally been used as a dumping ground over the last few decades, polluting it to an extent that it can hardly nurture aquatic life now.

The government must take responsibility for the harm that is being done to the Buriganga, and to us in return. And it must immediately begin a serious drive to evict river grabbers, ensure its proper water flow, and stop all sources of corruption.

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# Are women's reserved seats in parliament only tokens?



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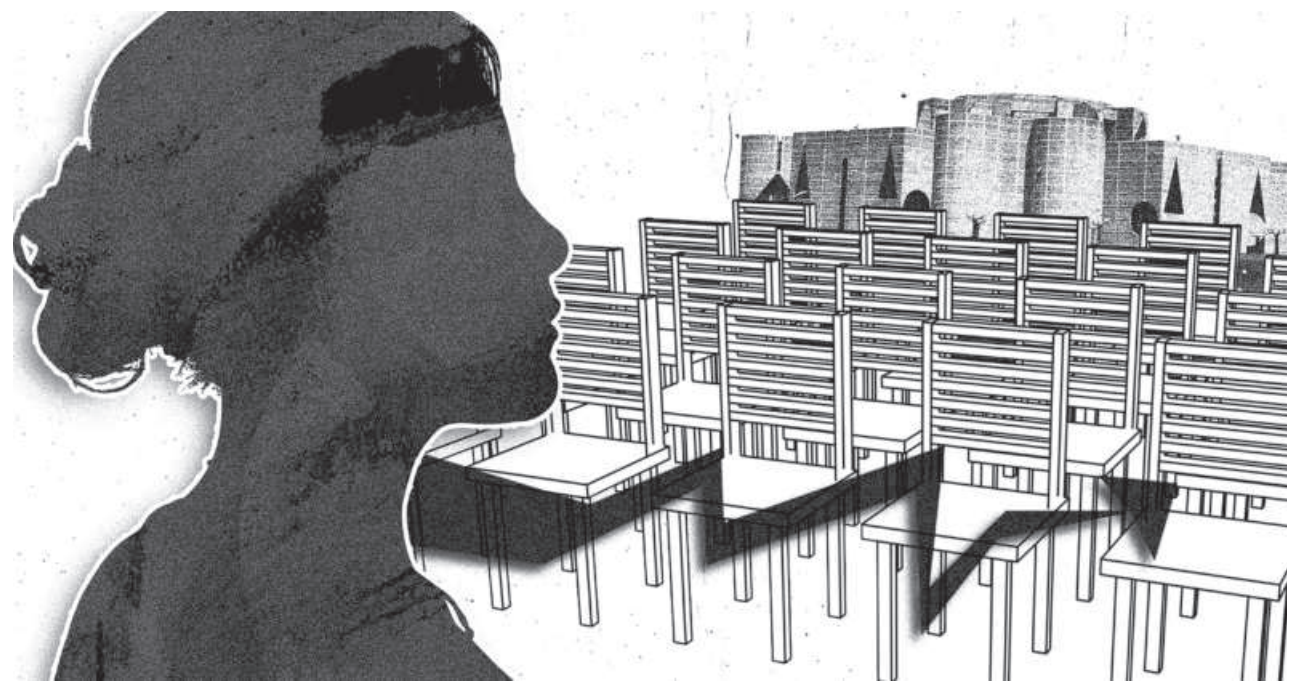
BADIUL ALAM MAJUMDAR

As per Article 65(3) of our Constitution, 50 women took oath as Members of Parliament (MPs) for the seats reserved for women, some of whom have also become ministers. Reserved seats are intended to politically empower women. But does our present reservation system really promote the empowerment of women politicians?

Meaningful participation in political activities and decision-making is an essential prerequisite for gender equality and for a genuine democracy based on adult franchise. Bangladesh's parliament features 300 MPs who are elected from single territorial constituencies by direct election. An additional 50 seats are reserved for women who are elected by the 300 directly elected MPs. Such representation unfortunately is not consistent with the much-coveted goal of politically empowering women.

For the reservation system to be effective, the representation of women needs to be both adequate and meaningful. In the 12th Parliament, women's representation from election to the 50 reserved seats amounts to 14.3 percent. If we add this to the representation by 20 women who were elected from open seats, women's total representation in parliament increases to 20 percent. This is grossly inadequate and unfair given that women make up half of our population. If we are to achieve true gender equality, to which we are committed as a nation and have done better in many areas compared to many other countries, women's rightful representation in the national parliament must be no less than 50 percent.

In order to be meaningful, the existing seat reservation system must meet several important conditions. First, the system must not reflect tokenism; that is, the generosity of the political bosses. Second, the reservation system must adhere to the democratic principle of direct election based on adult franchise. Third, members elected to the reserved seats must be accountable to the people rather than to the party high-ups. Fourth, women on reserved



VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

seats must not have overlapping representation. Fifth, women MPs from reserved seats must have equal rights, responsibilities, and authority as those of their female counterparts elected to the open seats. Sixth, competence and electability must be the basis of nominating women politicians to the reserved seats. Seventh, nomination of members to the reserved seats must not be a tool for patronage distribution by party bosses.

Unfortunately, the current system of reserved seats does not meet any of these conditions in order to ensure the meaningful representation of women in our parliament. For one, 50 seats out of 350 is not an equitable representation of women and clearly reflects tokenism, as if it were a kind of favour being bestowed on women politicians by the party supremos. Members for the reserved seats are also selected by the 300 MPs who have been elected to regular seats, rather than by the people themselves of specific constituencies. It may be noted that in its election manifesto, titled *Dinbodoler Sanad* (Charter for Change), published prior to the 2008

election, Awami League made the commitment to reserve 100 seats for women to be filled via direct election, which it failed to keep.

In a democratic polity, elected officials are accountable to the voters who elect them and who can also vote them out of office. But in the reservation system, party higher-ups nominate women for the 50 seats and the rest of the elected MPs merely

in the parliament does not help to create a cadre of dedicated women leaders for the future.

An alternative to this regressive mechanism could be a rotational system, presently employed in India's local government elections. Under the rotational system, with a third of the seats mandated as reserved for women, in the first term one-third of the seats will be reserved for women,

rubber-stamp those nominations. Ultimately, the politicians from the reserved seats are, for all practical purposes, answerable to those bosses. In fact, the voting public have nothing to do with either the election or their continuation as MPs on the reserved seats.

Although reserved seat politicians are not elected from specific constituencies, they are artificially assigned to represent several constituencies which have elected MPs of their own, thus creating an overlap of representation. As MPs from reserved seats are not directly elected, they are considered "extras" or ornamental, and have no responsibility as such to the constituencies to which they are assigned. The nomination to a reserved seat is viewed as a patronage tool, and connection to party bosses rather than competence or popularity is the determining factor behind such nominations. The most recent election to reserved seats served as a consolation prize for some of the women who were defeated on January 7. It is thus clear that the present system of seat reservation for women

for which women politicians will compete against each other to be elected by the people. For the rest of the two-third open seats, both men and women will compete against each other. In the second term, the previously reserved seats will become open, and half of the previous open seats will be reserved for women. In the third term, the remaining open seats will be reserved for women. Thus, over three terms, at least one female MP will be elected from each constituency, creating a pool of 300 women leaders who will be elected directly, competing against other women and based on their competence and popularity. Under such a rotational system, some of the competent women who win reserved seats, based on their competence, will be able to get elected competing against men when their seats become open. As a result, representation of women in parliament will be more effective than via the mandated one-third reservation. It should also be noted that a meaningful system of reservation for women can be crafted in a proportional system of representation.

## Gendered struggles in urban transit



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ANUSHKA ZAFAR

A friend recently shared an anecdote about the new Dhaka MRT Line 6. She said her relative was on a crowded train one morning during rush hour when he witnessed a group of men telling a young woman to go to the women-only carriage at the front. They said her presence was forcing them to stand away from her to avoid unwanted physical contact. They viewed her as an inconvenience because she was taking up space where other men could have been standing. But she stood up for herself and told them to leave her alone. She said the metro was built to accommodate all commuters and that women have the right to choose any carriage of the train for their journey. While her words are true, this incident demonstrates the larger issues of gender inequality in Bangladesh's urban spaces.

Women-only transport is not just a phenomenon in Bangladesh but also available on trains, subways, and buses around the globe, including in Brazil, Egypt, India, Japan, Mexico, and Taiwan, among others. They were initially implemented as a safety measure for women because sexual harassment and assault are all too common on public transport. But the question remains as to whether they actually work to decrease the incidence of violence against women

or if they instead perpetuate the gender discrimination that women face in public spaces.

Dhaka's metro rail may be fairly new, but women have been facing barriers to their urban mobility since long before. With public buses in Dhaka, for instance, the initiative to address issues of women's safety led to mandated women's seats on vehicles from 2018. Yet, many women have complained to me that this policy is barely enforced other than for government-operated transport services. Depending on the bus, the first two to three rows of seats are reserved for women, older persons, and persons with disabilities. But sometimes, young and able men ignore the rule and occupy those seats regardless.

A few weeks ago, I boarded a bus with no seats available and barely any room to stand. I was wedged between multiple people and standing next to a woman sitting in the second row of seats. She turned to me and said she would be getting off after a few stops and that I could take her seat. I thanked her, and just as her stop approached, I moved forward to let her and others behind me disembark. It was so crowded that I had to lean over the women sitting in the first row to make space for others who were squeezing past me. After a minute

or two, as people finished getting off the bus, I moved back expecting to sit down on the seat the woman had offered me earlier. However, I was disappointed to find that a man had conveniently taken a seat there instead. I looked at the man for a few seconds, but he avoided making eye contact. He was typing something

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on his phone. The woman next to him took notice and informed him that he was sitting in a woman's seat and that I had been waiting to sit down. He continued to ignore us both. After the lady repeated herself for the third time, the man became flustered. "Uff!" He exclaimed. "Which women's seats?" he asked loudly. "If you women truly want to be equal to men, why would you want to receive special treatment?" The woman and I looked at each other knowingly.

Nobody else around us said anything. The bus conductor lit a cigarette and continued to stare out the open door.

Experiences on public transport, like mine and of the woman on the metro train, highlight the casual dismissal of women's rights to equal access and treatment in public spaces. Despite the implementation of measures like women-only carriages and reserved seats on public buses, the reality often falls short of intended outcomes. While these measures were initially introduced to counter the prevalence of violence against women in public spaces, their effectiveness remains a subject of debate.

The response of men towards women's presence in public transport reflects deeper societal attitudes towards gender equality. Men's assertion that women should not seek "special treatment" if they strive for equality underscores a pervasive misunderstanding. It suggests that women are seeking preferential treatment rather than striving for a level playing field. Consequently, men continue to resist acknowledging the structural barriers and gendered discrimination. They fail to empathise and instead normalise the prejudice that women face every day.

Ultimately, stories like those mentioned above underscore the urgent need for comprehensive efforts to address gender inequality in cities, including robust enforcement of policies, public awareness campaigns, and the promotion of inclusive attitudes and behaviours. Only through concerted action can we create cities where all individuals can navigate public spaces safely, comfortably, and with dignity.