

## The lost youth of Chattogram

### Youth gangs signify a full-blown crisis of values in society

The bustling streets of Chattogram now bear witness to a dark reality—at least 200 youth (kishore) gangs are wreaking havoc over the city, according to records from 16 police stations. These gangs, comprising 5-15 members each, have grown to encompass a staggering 1,400 individuals across various neighbourhoods, wielding influence and spreading fear with their criminal activities.

According to a recent report by Prothom Alo, 64 influential figures, including five ward councillors of the Chattogram City Corporation, are actively patronising these gangs. These so-called “big brothers” manipulate the vulnerable youth, coercing them into a life of crime to maintain their dominance over 45 crucial areas in the city. Their grip extends across a spectrum of illegal activities, from murder and land-grabbing to abduction, extortion, and arms trafficking, leaving a trail of devastation in their wake.

While the term “youth gangs” may suggest youthful innocence, the reality is far from it. These groups include individuals in their early teens to those as old as 32, demonstrating the alarming depths of their influence and recruitment tactics. The infamous murder of schoolboy Adnan Isfar in 2018 alerted us to the existence of these gangs, yet their reign of terror has persisted, with police recording as many as 548 crimes attributed to them in the past six years, including 34 murders. Behind the scenes, the “big brothers” manipulate and exploit impressionable youths, using them as pawns in their quest for power and profit. It's a vicious cycle of exploitation and violence that perpetuates itself through fear and intimidation.

Earlier this month, the prime minister herself expressed her concern over the dangerous tide of youth joining these gangs at a time when they should be in school, urging parents to stay vigilant. Yet, we wonder, what can parents or teachers alone do to address the erosion of values across all levels of society? Time and again, we have seen how people associated with the ruling party patronise these gangs, practising and preaching the love of power over the love of country or the people. What other role models exist for the youth in this country, except these “big brothers” who give these otherwise alienated youth a sense of purpose and a direct ladder to power and money?

While we appreciate the efforts of the law enforcement agencies to curb the influence of youth gangs, we urge them to take action against those who facilitate the proliferation of weapons and drugs among our youth, regardless of their political affiliations. The allegations against city corporation councillors such as Nur Mostafa and Wasim Uddin Chowdhury must be urgently investigated. Most important of all, the overall erosion of values in society must be acknowledged and challenged, and alternative role models must be presented to the youth.

## Stop disturbing the Sundarbans!

### Restrain traffic of ships through the forest

It is deeply concerning that on top of projects, megaprojects, illegal occupations and deforestation ravaging the Sundarbans, traffic of ships through the forest has increased dramatically in recent years. A recent report sheds light on how ships, discharging harmful fumes and sound pollution, and often carrying toxic materials through the forest, have nearly doubled in a decade—from 357 trips monthly in 2012 to 837 trips in 2022, and 701 trips monthly so far this year.

Under the first Protocol on Inland Water Transit and Trade between Bangladesh and India, signed in 1972, lighter cargo vessels can operate between the two countries using the waterways mostly through the Sundarbans. A major route for these ships goes through at least 100 km of the river system inside the mangrove forest, which takes around eight hours for the vessels to travel. While any motor vehicle, including boats and ships, is strictly prohibited from operating through the forest after sunset till sunrise, ships continue to operate 24/7 unrestrained. The customs station in Angtiara, the entry point to the forest on this route, only logs the trips of the ships and does not monitor if any laws have been broken. While the customs and immigration in India close off at night, our customs office continues to operate throughout the night.

By allowing these activities, we are now destroying the Sundarbans from the inside. The toxic fumes and loud sounds greatly impact wildlife habitats and breeding environments. The propellers disrupt the marine ecosystem, and the waves cause severe erosions. For instance, the width of rivers on this route has increased from 20-30 metres to 50-60 metres. Most of the ships on this route contain fly ash, coal, and stones from India for our riverside cement factories. In the last seven years, at least 15 such ships have capsized inside the forest, spilling these harmful materials directly into the river.

Bangladesh has now become a land of lost forestlands and dead ecosystems. We have irredeemably destroyed a number of forests and major sources of biodiversity throughout this delta, and even in the hill tracts. The Sundarbans is the last hope for any unique and great population of wildlife to survive. The government must ensure that any activity harming this forest is halted immediately, and look for an alternative route for maritime trade with India as well as consider moving major power plants and factories from the area.

New Message

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# We want harassment-free campuses



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Universities are supposed to facilitate an environment for rigorous academic activities, but that has not been the case in the universities of Bangladesh for a long time. Especially in public universities, we see an overbearing hustle for power and control. This has created an environment that is naturally not student-friendly, and certainly not conducive to learning.

In this context, I would say student harassment, particularly towards female students, has been normalised—in other words, it is systematically allowed to happen.

It goes without saying that the victims or survivors of harassment we are hearing from are just the tip of the iceberg. Those who do come forward are not only subjected to victim-blaming, but are also isolated and ostracised. They are subjected to more harassment, such as being given low marks, failed in class, or threatened. This not only scares the victims in question, but also many other students and deters from complaining. A climate of fear has been created this way.

In most cases, the oppressors are not ostracised; instead, they are supported within the administrative power structure of the institution. For example, in the case of the Department of Film and Television Studies at Jahangirnagar University (JnU), the department chairman assisted the accused teacher. Meanwhile, a student of JnU's law department alleged that the harasser was protected by the proctor. These prove that in universities, the protectors are actually becoming the predators, or at least enablers of predators. Even other teachers of the university or department, who are not directly involved, remain silent and try to save their own skin. They do nothing to stop harassment.

The present condition on university campuses has allowed cases of repeated harassment by single individuals—or, in other words, serial harassers. This is because these individuals do not face adequate repercussions. The students who are the perpetrators are often backed by the political structure of the ruling party, as a result of which they don't face appropriate punishments, and in many cases no consequences at all for their actions. They continue to exert power on campuses.

Student politics is a significant part of the history of this nation and its independence. But now, students



FILE PHOTO: STAR

Merely reacting to cases of harassment after they happen cannot stop this culture of repression in our universities.

involved in politics do not work for the common people; they do not even work to address the issues students are facing, including harassment. They have become power-hungry agents of political parties. Supported by the current ruling party, they are mainly engaged in taking a hold of the campuses and maintaining power. The welfare of general students is not their goal; rather, they exert their strength through torturing and harassing other students.

Students have become tools for the political parties, and those who accept this and get involved in politics supported by the ruling party get seats in the halls, get protection, and many legal and illegal benefits. Those who don't participate live in inhumane conditions. They are physically and mentally tortured in “gono rooms.” They are forced to participate in party programmes. Naturally, they can't rack up the courage to speak against these unethical practices—if they do, they face more torture and harassment.

This crushes the general students' sense of freedom and agency and makes them accept subservience as

the natural state. Protesting or having different thoughts becomes abnormal for them. When this kind of oppressive environment takes over university campuses, all students live under repression—even those who do not get directly abused.

Needless to say, it is even worse for female students. A recent study by Rajshahi University found that

being properly implemented in our universities. In many places, there is no cell to report complaints. Even if there is a cell, it is not created in accordance with the proper rules. Most importantly, all members of the university should be clearly informed about this policy. However, in most universities, students are not informed about it during orientation. They do not even know

90 percent of female students who are victims of harassment do not complain. This is because of multiple reasons: the culture of impunity in universities, political influence, lack of awareness about where to get justice, uncooperative attitude of teachers, shame, social pressure, and fear that their families may stop their education completely. So, many victims decide to bear with the harassment and try to finish their studies without complaining.

Kazi Farzana Mim of Jahangirnagar University, who filed a complaint two years ago, has been fighting alone for so long, and only recently, after appealing to the president, has the authorities put the harassing teacher and associate chairman on trial. For many, the fight becomes extremely difficult. While some live with the trauma throughout their lives, some choose the path of suicide.

There is no precedent for the institution to take action on any complaint at their own initiative. Various news reports show that the 2009 High Court directive on anti-sexual harassment policy is not

where to go if they are harassed. Each department and residential hall of the university must appoint a counsellor so that students can approach them whenever needed.

As soon as teachers and students with cases of harassment are identified, the university should take suo moto action to bring them under accountability. Their past records should be checked and verified in all matters including the appointment and promotion of any teacher.

To the teachers who want a harassment-free university but remain silent, we say: those who tolerate injustice are also complicit in that crime.

Merely reacting to cases of harassment after they happen cannot stop this culture of repression. Rather, we need a democratic culture on the campuses, where the voices and rights of all participants are ensured. And it is the responsibility of the university authorities to create and maintain that environment.

Translated from Bangla by Naimul Alam Alvi.

# Why the proposal to tax social events is ridiculous



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Bangladesh's tax collection has long been a concern. The country maintains a low tax-GDP ratio of eight percent, ranking as the second-lowest in South Asia and lagging behind lower-middle-income countries by nearly five percent. Despite efforts by the National Board of Revenue (NBR) to boost revenue generation, challenges persist. Recently, a proposal by the Institute of Cost and Management Accountants of Bangladesh (ICMAB) to tax social events has stirred controversy and raised questions about the effectiveness and fairness of tax policies.

The proposal made by ICMAB is to apply taxes to the hosts for organising various social events except for business purposes, including bridal showers, birthdays or wedding anniversaries at hotels, restaurants or community centres. Under this proposal, the ICMAB recommends levying a tax of Tk 50 for each additional guest beyond the threshold of 100 attendees. The primary objective of this proposal is to broaden the tax base by encompassing

a larger segment of the population participating in social events, thereby bolstering overall tax collection efforts.

This proposal is both ridiculous and ironic. It overlooks the fundamental principle of taxation. According to The Income Tax Ordinance, 1984 and Income Tax Rules, 1984, income tax is imposed based on the ability to pay. “The more a taxpayer earns the more he should pay” is the basic principle of charging income tax. Thus, taxation should be tied to the benefits provided by the government, not arbitrary expenditures made by individuals. Additionally, taxing social events would not only fail to significantly boost revenue, but could also disrupt economic activity and discourage spending.

Primarily, the question arises: what justifies taxation? Taxation traditionally correlates with the benefits citizens receive in return. The pertinent inquiry remains: what tangible benefits does the country gain when an individual hosts a social gathering? It is incumbent upon the

state to offer commensurate benefits to justify tax imposition. Secondly, inviting guests to social events incurs expenditures. Yet, should taxation be levied merely on account of citizens' expenditures? Such imposition risks failing to bolster government revenue and potentially disrupting economic equilibrium.

Implementing such a tax would introduce complexities regarding its classification and administration. Moreover, it could discourage individuals from spending on special occasions, thereby negatively impacting industries like event management. Instead of targeting individuals, a more effective approach would be to incentivise event management companies' registration and tax filing, tapping into their significant revenue potential.

Presently, there are 1,383 event management companies in Bangladesh. The profitability of such companies cannot be overlooked, rendering their revenue stream a viable source of taxable income. By targeting this sector, substantial revenue gains can be realised, exemplified by the wedding industry alone, valued at a remarkable Tk 2,000 crore market. A modest five percent tax collection from this industry could translate to a noteworthy addition of Tk 100 crore to government coffers.

A more advantageous approach for the NBR would be to prioritise the tax compliance of these entities. Offering incentives for event management

companies to register and fulfil tax obligations would contribute to revenue augmentation and fortify the industry's resilience. Compelling companies to adhere to tax filing procedures is inherently more practicable than targeting individual taxpayers, especially considering the dismal tax return filing rate, with over 63 percent of Taxpayer Identification Number (TIN) holders failing to fulfil their obligations in the current fiscal year.

Sectors like freelancing and wedding planning offer good chances for the NBR to get more taxes. However, before imposing taxes, the NBR should think about what benefits it can offer to freelancers and event managers who pay taxes. If the NBR can offer extra services that show the difference between taxpayers and non-taxpayers, then the industry will see more taxes coming in. This will help increase tax revenue while also supporting the growth of these industries.

As Bangladesh seeks to reduce reliance on external funds and increase domestic revenue generation, tax policies must be carefully crafted to promote equity, economic growth, and compliance. The proposal to tax social events highlights the need for greater rationality and innovation in tax policy formulation. By prioritising incentives for tax compliance among businesses and individuals, Bangladesh can unlock its full revenue potential while fostering a conducive environment for economic development.