

# The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

## Better utilise social safety schemes

### Govt must address issues with its effectiveness and distribution

We appreciate any form of expansion in social security, and needless to say, the government's decision to increase the number of beneficiaries under its social safety net programmes is commendable. Reportedly, the government has decided to increase the number of beneficiaries in two major schemes—the old age allowance, and the allowance for widows, deserted, or destitute women. However, the allocated stipend per individual remains the same—Tk 600 per month for the elderly, and Tk 550 per month for the other group—apparently due to budget constraints. Such a meagre amount cannot sustain an individual throughout a week, let alone a month, in the worst cost of living crisis in the country in over a decade.

On paper, the budget allocated for social security for the current fiscal year is fairly sizable—Tk 1,26,272 crore, or 2.52 percent of the country's total GDP, though still falling short of the recommended 3 percent. However, the government includes several unconventional items in its social safety net budget—pensions for retired government employees and their families, interest payments for national savings certificates, agriculture subsidies, interest subsidies for SMEs, and allocation for health risk and natural shock management. Out of a total budget of Tk 1,26,272 crore, Tk 43,389 crore is allocated for social allowances to 13.86 million people. Notably, Tk 27,414 crore (63 percent) of this allowance goes to just 5.77 percent of beneficiaries (800,000 retired government employees). In reality, only around 1 percent of the GDP reaches the actual vulnerable groups. There is also a stark urban-rural divide.

On top of that, there are widespread practices of both wrongful exclusions and inclusions—mostly because of corruption and biases in recipient selection, especially by rural chairmen and members of the Union Parishads who prioritise potential voters and family ties, according to a recent Planning Commission report.

It is commendable that the finance ministry has ordered all ministries concerned to submit reports on the list of beneficiaries and goals of the programme by April 30, and we hope that necessary actions will be followed. However, we also recommend more targeted social support schemes for those truly in need and increasing the amount allotted to each individual. We also urge the government to consider developing a social insurance system to be included in social security planning to provide financial support during life events like illness, retirement, or job loss to ease the financial burden on vulnerable individuals and families.

## End extrajudicial deaths

### Investigate the events leading to Ramij Miah's demise

We are alarmed by the allegation that a 53-year-old convenience store owner in Sunamganj's Tahirpur upazila died on Tuesday after being beaten up by the police during an arrest attempt. According to Romij Miah's wife, Josna Begum, two people, who identified themselves as policemen, appeared at his shop in front of their home on a motorcycle and started hitting him in the chest. They grabbed him and continued to beat him up as they tried to mount him on the motorcycle. However, once he started bleeding from the nose and collapsed on the ground, the policemen left without arresting him, as locals in the area confronted them. Shortly after, he was pronounced dead at a nearby pharmacy.

Meanwhile—and perhaps predictably—the police have a different story. Denying allegations of physical torture, they claimed that the deceased died of exhaustion as he was running away from the police. Additional superintendent of police (crime and operations) of Sunamganj District Police told this daily that Romij Miah was suffering from breathing and heart issues and that they had found no sign of him being beaten up.

Romij's family confirmed that he was, indeed, suffering from health complications, which is why he was unable to withstand the physical abuse prior to his attempted arrest. Other eye witnesses at the time echoed Josna Begum's allegation that he was beaten up before he collapsed. Given the conflicting versions of events, it is imperative that an independent investigation is conducted into what really happened in Tahirpur upazila on Tuesday evening. But the question, as always, remains: who will conduct the investigation when the police themselves are the accused? What guarantee is there that they will not abuse their power to influence the post-mortem or investigation report?

There are clear sets of rules and laws demarcating what the police is allowed to do prior to an arrest and during police custody. Unfortunately, however, we have seen too many occasions where law enforcement agencies carried out judicial excesses, and too few instances where they were held accountable for it. If we are to end this culture of impunity, we must thoroughly investigate allegations such as Ramij's and take exemplary action against those found guilty.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Will waterlogging end this year?

Every year, during summer and monsoon seasons, heavy rain inevitably causes severe waterlogging in many parts of Dhaka, especially in Old Dhaka. People struggle to move, cars and bikes become immobile, water enters houses and shops, and filth from drains spreads across roads and homes. Additionally, unsafe electrical wires pose a risk of electrocution. Interestingly, the DSCC mayor recently assured us that there will be no waterlogging this year. However, based on what I've observed, there haven't been enough actions taken to address this issue in our city. As much as I want to believe our mayor, I remain concerned about the upcoming months. I hope the mayor can substantiate their claim through concrete actions, ultimately providing relief from this persistent difficulty.

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# Student politics, Buet and 'Smart Bangladesh'

THE THIRD VIEW

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MAHFUZ ANAM

Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL), AI's student wing, recently decided to restart its party politics in Buet, our premier university for engineering and technology. The High Court, in response to a writ petition, "stayed" the university's notice that banned student politics from its campus. Meanwhile, the general students of Buet have been vehemently opposing the reintroduction of student politics on their campus, the reasons for which are powerful, painful, and obvious.

They don't want any repeat of what is vividly etched in their minds—the fate of the second year student of electrical and electronic engineering (EEE), Abrar Fahad, who, according to doctors, died from excessive pain and internal bleeding caused by several hours-long, incessant and brutal beatings with cricket stumps by BCL leaders.

This happened within hours of him visiting his mother in Kushtia. His only "crime" was a critical Facebook post.

It was not a one-off incident. It was the result of a culture built around the unquestioned and unmonitored power of the Chhatra League, which ran a parallel administration that dealt with the day-to-day lives of students, especially the junior ones. They decided which hall and which seats new students would occupy, how regularly they would have to attend party activities, how many times they would have to "show respect" to leaders, and in what "manner." Room 2011, a virtual torture cell, served to bring the not-so-obedient ones in line. We may have forgotten that when BNP was in power, its student wing, Chhatra Dal, did the same thing. Hence the revulsion of the general students at even the remotest prospect of such days returning.

Was it student politics that prevailed in Buet? Does it in any way reflect our glorious history of student politics that we feel so very proud of? Are the present-day student politicians the torchbearers of the past? Where is the vision, the ideology, and self-sacrifice? Today, what masquerades as student politics is power, wealth, and personal aggrandisement. Will our institutions of higher learning have any future if the present nature of student politics is not reformed?

Student politics of the late forties

(after the birth of Pakistan) fifties, sixties, and the preparatory stage of the Liberation War (keeping the story of students' role in our Muktiyuddho separate) were fully based on ideology, commitment, sacrifice, honesty, and public service. The role of students in our Language Movement was far more significant than that of any political party. The same is true for the anti-Ayub and anti-Yahya uprisings. Bangabandhu's Six Points programme was taken to the grassroots as much



ILLUSTRATION: BIPLOB CHAKROBORTY

by Awami League as it was by Chhatra League. The Eleven Points programme of '69, mostly organised by leftist student bodies, of which Chhatra League was an integral part, stands out as one of the most significant transformative student and mass uprisings that encompassed a vision of social change far more comprehensive than that of any political party.

The history and tradition of our student movements of pre-liberation days are not only glorious and inspiring, but they constitute a stunning example of how the student community was able to lead the people on fundamental issues of democracy, economic, social, and cultural rights, and rights of the peasants and all disadvantaged communities. Student politics played the role of national political parties and forced politicians to adopt students' programmes as their own.

The truth is, none of that exists now.

Three years ago, we celebrated the 50th anniversary of our independence. Many things have changed, especially when it comes to the economy and infrastructure. Bridges, roads, elevated expressways, metros, ports, power plants, and other vital requirements have been built. The prime minister's latest call to transition from a "Digital Bangladesh" to a "Smart Bangladesh" can be our starting point for an examination of what sort of student politics we need at this moment.

A "Smart Bangladesh" needs smart students, smart students need smart teachers and smart teachers need smart universities to get the free, creative, and research environment to help guide the future generation of thinkers, researchers, writers, critiques, inventors, entrepreneurs and leaders who can bring to reality the opportunities that the 21st century will bring to our doorstep.

receiving the recognition that we need if we are to make any dent in the "knowledge world."

This brings us to the specific question of Buet, which is really our only showpiece institution in engineering and technology. It is our closest equivalent to India's Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs). We know what contribution the IITs have made to give India the global reach and prestige that it has.

All the renowned universities of the world have student politics that are very effective in protecting the rights and interests of the students. They operate through student representative bodies that are regularly and timely elected, and are compliant to their founding principles and by-laws. These student bodies have active and effective interaction with teachers, deans, and university administrations to uphold what is in the best interest of the students.

If we are to ever build globally respected educational institutions, we must rethink and reformulate, among other things, our teacher and student politics. The crux of the problem is that all of the above-referred student bodies serve the interest of the students, and ours serve the interest of their parent political parties. This is where the thought of modernising our student politics gets mired in the short-term interests of the political parties in power.

As we graduate to the status of a developing country, our need for qualified human resources will grow by leaps and bounds. Do we have knowledge centres that will produce the scholars that will guide us forward? We need to make Buet a far superior centre of learning than it is now. At the same time, we need dozens of new institutions of equal standing to supply the human resources that we will need.

The traditional type of student politics cannot lead us into the future. As student politics is reintroduced in Buet, can we think forward and introduce what prevails in quality educational institutes elsewhere?

As reported in the press, the short order of the High Court effectively reintroduces student politics in Buet. It is our ardent and sincere hope that the full verdict will contain strict directives as to what can and cannot be done in the name of student politics. While upholding students' right to indulge in politics, the High Court, through its full verdict, could admonish intimidation, verbal and physical abuse, and violence of any sort, and trigger an overdue reform in campus politics both for the students and the teachers.

The moment is now for a serious rethinking of this vital matter—our future.

# Why laws and campaigns are failing to stop child marriage



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In the background of the child marriage problem lies a stark paradox—the primal, evolutionary instinct of parents to protect their offspring is at odds with decisions that compromise their children's futures.

This apparent contradiction raises important questions. What drives parents to resort to child marriage, and how do these decisions align or conflict with the innate desire to ensure the well-being of their children? To delve into the heart of this paradox, let us examine the evidence from a recent study by the Institute of Informatics and Development (IID).

The Bangladesh Sample Vital Statistics 2023, published in March 2024 by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, disclosed a worrying increase in child marriages over the past three years. The 2022 report revealed that 40.9 percent of women were married before turning 18, a notable rise from 32.4 percent in 2021 and 31.3 percent in 2020. The Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey 2022 conducted by the National Institute of Population Research and Training (NIPORT), on the other hand, further reveals that more than half of the country's girls

are wed before their 18th birthday.

Child marriage undeniably triggers a myriad of negative outcomes, stunting educational progress, compromising health, and limiting opportunities for personal and economic independence. But does this not counter the parents' evolutionary drive to ensure their offspring's survival and success?

The answer may lie in the desperate measures taken by parents who, despite potential legal repercussions, clandestinely marry off their daughters, sometimes on isolated boats under the cover of night.

A 2022 report published in the daily Prothom Alo highlighted this desperation, showing that despite efforts by the Women's Directorate to stop 88 child marriages in Tala upazila of Satkhira, an astonishing 74 percent of the girls were later secretly married off anyway.

Why, then, despite the Child Marriage Restraint Act 2017 and the National Plan of Action to End Child Marriage (2018-2030), does this issue persist?

It seems as though Bangladesh's escalating child marriage rates mark a crisis beyond the reach of legislation

and awareness campaigns.

The IID's survey of over 3,000 parents sheds light on the motivations behind child marriages. A significant segment (39 percent) cited the lack of girls' security as the primary factor, including harassment by miscreants on the streets (17 percent), the urge to protect family honour (16.4 percent), and fears for personal safety even

of protection, despite the profound negative implications for the child's health, education, and overall well-being.

Our conventional approach to this crisis, focusing on legal penalties and awareness campaigns, is inadequate for addressing the root causes. Simply targeting parents for legal prosecution continues the cycle of secrecy in child marriage practices.

Given that sexual harassment remains unaddressed even in universities in urban areas, the lack of security for girls in rural areas becomes glaringly apparent.

What is needed is a strategy that directly tackles these issues, safeguarding the safety and dignity of girls in every aspect of their lives. This should include stricter measures against harassers and the dismantling of their political protection. Safety for girls in schools, on the streets, and at home must be a priority.

Additionally, social campaigns should aim to shift the narrative, challenging the notion of the child bride, while also addressing the underlying issue of poverty as a critical factor in combating child marriage.

At this critical moment, the well-being of countless young girls and the future direction of our nation hang in the balance.

Our actions today will determine the society of tomorrow. Let us revisit our existing strategies and commit to a path that leads away from the shadow of child marriage, towards a future where every girl can aspire to her full potential.

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within the home (5 percent).

Moreover, 32 percent of parents pointed to societal norms as a driving force, encompassing religious obligations (7 percent), concerns about securing a suitable match later (8 percent), and difficulties in finding grooms for older girls (9.7 percent). Poverty was also a significant concern, with 24 percent of parents identifying financial hardship as the main reason for child marriages.

This reveals the desperation that drives parents to marry off their children, and the fact that they perceive child marriage as a means