

Let shrines be sites of devotion, music again

News of devotees and khadems still living in fear is concerning

We are deeply concerned about the lingering fear that haunts pirs, fakirs, khadems, Bauls, and other spiritual practitioners even months after the wave of attacks on shrines, Sufi darbars, and Baul akhras committed in early August. These attacks, which erupted in the wake of the fall of the Awami League government, not only desecrated places of devotion and mystical music but also shook the very foundation of our inclusive spiritual traditions. As per a report by this daily, while the frequency of such attacks has declined, they have not stopped entirely, with the latest incidents occurring as recently as February 20-21 in Noakhali and Manikganj. The result is that the devotees are still living in fear and insecurity.

Our analysis shows that among the various institutions of Islamic mysticism, the shrines of the Pagal-Fakirs have been the most affected. These sites typically welcome people of all faiths, races, and genders, incorporating music as a central element of worship. The destruction of such "spiritual free zones", as an expert stated, not only disrupts the practice of worship through music but also restricts women's entry and expressions of devotion. This forceful imposition of a stricter interpretation of Sharia has also seen other places of devotion being targeted.

The chief adviser's press wing, on January 18, confirmed attacks on at least 40 shrines since August 4. Meanwhile, the Global Sufi Organisation on January 23 claimed that at least 80 shrines had been attacked since August. According to *The Daily Star*'s own findings, corroborated by other media reports, over 70 shrines and akhras across the country were attacked, vandalised, set ablaze, or looted in August and September alone. In some instances, devotees were publicly humiliated by having their hair and beards forcibly shaved off. Although no attacks were recorded in October and December, several shrines were targeted in November as well as January and February. Some of these sites are centuries old, carrying immense historical, archaeological, and religious significance. They stand as living testaments to the role of Sufi traditions in the spread of Islam in this part of the world.

Clearly, the Sufi and Baul traditions are an integral part of our cultural and religious heritage, and as such, need to be protected rather than desecrated. To justify these attacks by citing rigid interpretations of Islam—condemning music or mixed gender prayer gatherings—is nothing but a misguided attempt as these traditions have coexisted with mainstream Islamic practices for centuries, enriching our spiritual landscape. The attacks also go against our constitutional values of pluralism and non-discrimination that were reaffirmed by the July uprising. We, therefore, urge relevant authorities to counter rising intolerance in the country, and ensure that all shrines and akhras can resume their activities without any intimidation or obstruction.

Expedite local government services

Holding local government polls will help regularise service delivery

It is quite concerning that over six months after the political changeover on August 5, the pace of work at the local government ministry and its affiliated bodies—from city corporations to union parishes—remains slow. According to a report in Samakal, not a single new development project has been undertaken at the local level during this period. Besides, essential services such as road repairs, mosquito control, sanitation, water supply, and waste management are not being properly carried out in many areas. Citizens are also experiencing long delays in obtaining basic documents, including birth, and death certificates, from ward offices.

While our local government has never been known for its efficiency, the situation has worsened since August 5 due to the absence of elected representatives, most of whom belonged to Awami League. Although government officials were later reassigned to carry out the duties of political entities, this arrangement has proven largely ineffective. Many of the officials have been given additional responsibilities alongside their existing duties, making them unavailable in ward and local government offices for much of the time. Their lack of familiarity with local residents has also led to unanticipated bureaucratic delays and hurdles.

Reportedly, the situation has been further complicated by the fire incident at the Secretariat on December 25, which disrupted the operations of the ministry. Officials are currently working from two separate locations, causing delays in decision-making. Even inter-ministerial meetings have been stalled due to space constraints. Some files were allegedly damaged in the fire, and many of the retrieved documents remain unopened following the ministry's temporary relocation. The other factor reportedly hampering the work of the ministry is the inexperience of some subordinate officials promoted to replace their superiors, who were made OSD or forced to resign because of their connection with the AL. The ongoing chaos in civil administration is also not helping the situation either.

Given these circumstances, holding local government elections has become urgent, as bureaucrats cannot simultaneously serve as both administrators and public representatives. Local residents need leaders who can voice their concerns and push government agencies to deliver essential services on time. But until elections are held, government officials must operate with greater accountability, recognising that public service delivery is a priority. They must also remember that, like elected leaders, they are answerable to the people whose taxes fund their salaries. In the long run, implementing the recommendations of the Local Government Reform Commission is crucial to ensuring that public services at the grassroots level do not suffer during such political transitions.

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EDITORIAL

Protect our farmers from their grievances



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MOSTAFA SHABUJ

The July uprising revealed two distinct images: one of an urban political massacre and the other of silent observation from the villages. Though the clashes during the July protests did not spread to the countryside, its messages were conveyed to the rural people, especially the farmers. Those farmers began envisioning a future free from exploitative input costs, unfair crop pricing, and bureaucratic corruption. Sadly, those dreams remain largely unfulfilled. The benefits of government subsidies for essential agricultural inputs like fuel, electricity, and fertilisers are still not reaching the farmers, who need them most. Who enjoys those benefits, then?

Let's look at a few examples.

Cauliflower growers in Bogura have faced hardship this winter. On December 28, the price of cauliflowers was Tk 2.3 per kg at Mohasthan wholesale market. On the same day,

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I visited a kitchen market in Dhaka's Mirpur area, where cauliflower were selling at Tk 30-40 per kg. A Mohasthan trader explained that transport to Dhaka raises the cost of one kg of cauliflower by Tk 8-9, suggesting a retail price of Tk 12-15 per kg in the capital. The additional Tk 15 charged in Dhaka goes entirely to the market middlemen. Meanwhile, farmers in Bogura lose Tk 15,000-20,000 per bigha (33 decimals) due to low prices.

According to the field wing of the Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE), potato cultivation this season reached record levels, with 5.24 lakh hectares planted nationwide, compared to 4.56 lakh hectares last season. Driven by past high prices, farmers expanded potato acreage, hoping for greater profits. However, current prices are so low that farmers can't recover their investments. In the northern districts,



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FILE PHOTO: KONGKON KARMAKER

various kinds of potatoes are being sold at Tk 8-10 per kg, while production costs are around Tk 15-17 per kg.

On the other hand, potato storage costs have risen by Tk 1 per kg, from Tk 7 to Tk 8, as announced by the Bangladesh Cold Storage Association (BCSA). Due to the sudden fall in prices and the increase in storage costs, farmers in the northern region protested the move by throwing potatoes on the streets recently.

According to the DAE, Bangladesh's annual potato demand is around 90 lakh tonnes, but this year's production is projected to be around 1.20 crore tonnes, creating a potential surplus of 30 lakh tonnes. According to the BCSA, the country's 350 functioning cold storage facilities have a combined capacity of only 45 lakh tonnes. Historically, potato exports have been minimal, averaging just 50,000 tonnes annually over the past nine years, per the DAE data. Even doubling the exports to 100,000 tonnes this year leaves a staggering 29-lakh-tonne surplus. Farmers and cold storage owners are left wondering how this surplus will be managed.

On February 8, at a press conference, BCSA President Mostafa Azad Chowdhury Babu claimed that potato prices would not exceed Tk 40 per kg this year, asserting no price manipulation. This raises a serious question: when the wholesale market price of potatoes is now Tk 10 per kg on average, why will the price rise to Tk 40? Farmers are incurring losses by

selling potatoes at Tk 10 per kg, while middlemen and traders are making profit of Tk 30 per kg.

Similar struggles plague farmers of other crops. Onion growers in Kushtia and Pabna, for instance, have suffered losses of Tk 50,000-60,000 per bigha, according to a recent report in this daily.

Rice cultivation offers little profit to

Bangladeshi farmers. Over the past two years, farmers have struggled to cover expenses of growing rice. According to the auto rice mill owners and farmers in the northern districts, producing rice from paddy costs only Tk 40-42 per kg, yet consumers have to pay Tk 65-70 per kg at the retail market right now. The disparity is even greater with fragrant rice (Chinigura). In Dinajpur, farmers told me that the production cost of fragrant rice is Tk 50-52 per kg, while packaged rice sells at a staggering Tk 145-150 per kg. This massive price difference remains unexplained by traders and government agencies alike, raising questions about the government's role in addressing this market anomaly.

Is that all? The production cost is increasing year after year in every sector, from buying seeds to producing crops. Market players, against whom the government takes little action, benefit from inflated market prices, incentivising farmers to cultivate more land, often leading to losses.

According to recent media reports, this year, seed and fertiliser prices have surged for potato and Boro paddy cultivation. Even under the interim government, potato growers bought seeds from the government at nearly double the fixed price. During the potato season, farmers from the northern area bought TSP fertiliser at a price that is Tk 350 more per sack than the government fixed price. Alleged artificial shortages are driving up prices, while government oversight

(surveillance) remains ineffective, while farmers bear the brunt of it. Even in the current Boro paddy planting season, farmers have to spend almost Tk 3-4 per kg more than the price set by the government to buy almost every variety of fertiliser.

Even two decades ago, Bangladeshi farmers relied on traditional methods to grow crops, using their seeds, organic fertilisers, and Indigenous technology. Pest infestation was less severe, resulting in lower production costs. Today, the irony is that technological advancements have paradoxically made farmers more vulnerable in terms of increasing production costs. They are now more dependent on external inputs (technologies) for everything, from hybrid seeds to threshing crops. Now, big industrial enterprises have created a big profit market in these places by supplying technologies and other facilities. Thus, both farmers and consumers are trapped in an inflated commodity market.

The reality is, farmers are taking out loans to cultivate crops, and they have to sell them at low prices without taking the crops home to pay off the loan as soon as possible. As a result, the crops that the farmers are producing, they themselves are not able to consume. At the beginning of the season, after selling their own produced crops at low prices, they have to buy them from the market again at higher prices for the rest of the year. What could be a bigger grievance for a farmer's family than this?

The interim government has formed several reform commissions to address public demands. However, these commissions have been formed on issues raised by intellectuals and government affiliates, neglecting the distant voices of farmers.

There is no doubt that the agricultural system of Bangladesh is going through an uncontrolled, mismanaged situation. Farmers, tempted by the previous year's high prices, often overproduce, leading to losses. Essential imports are often ill-timed, exacerbating market imbalances. Government offices struggle to accurately convey field-level realities to policymakers. Farmers are disconnected from the government, lacking timely support, even during natural disasters. The absence of a strong national-level farmers' organisation and effective political representation further silences their concerns. The suffering of marginal farmers is not reaching the government.

The reality is, our farmers are not doing well. We should remember that if the farmer suffers, every citizen in the country will suffer. Therefore, protecting our farmers and, if necessary, creating a permanent commission to solve their grievances are the need of the hour now.

What is next after the KUET clash?



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RAHAT MINHAZ

On the path to restoring democracy in Bangladesh, student politics based on civil rights has a significant role to play. However, we cannot ignore or overlook its dark and violent side. I believe that the helmet and hockey stick-wielding goons of Chhatri League were one of the main reasons behind the fall of Sheikh Hasina's regime. People had grown tired of their crimes and terrorist-like activities within educational institutions and beyond. Hasina has fallen and fled, but crime and violence in educational institutions continue.

There are three major political student wings in the educational institutions of Bangladesh: Chhatri Dal, Chhatri Shibir, and Chhatri League (which is now banned). These groups have dominated universities and other institutions for a long time, and none have been free from criminal activities. However, a few leftist student organisations have been striving to establish meritocracy and advocate for students' rights instead of engaging in tender manipulation or lobbying for recruitment. Unfortunately, they remain weak and fragmented,

allowing criminal forces to maintain dominance.

I want to share one of my personal experiences. As a student of Dhaka University, I was a resident of Zia Hall, staying in room 407. In 2007, during the tenure of the caretaker government, student wings of the BNP and Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh clashed over seat allocations in the hall rooms, notoriously known as "gono rooms." One night in December 2007, tensions escalated into violence. Chhatri Shibir leaders were in the room of the Chhatri Dal hall president, engaged in a heated argument over seat distribution. What followed was a brutal fight. I can still vividly recall the

harrowing cries of one of the student leaders—it was terrifying to hear on that cold, dark night. That night, one student leader even jumped from the seventh floor of our north-side building to the ground in an attempt to save his life. Can you imagine the extent of brutality students can inflict on each other when driven by personal and political interests?

With Awami League's ruthless and barbaric student wing now out of the picture, we had hoped for peace and stability in our educational institutions. However, to our deep disappointment, other student organisations are already stepping into Chhatri League's role—despite having fought shoulder-to-shoulder against the oppressive Sheikh Hasina regime just a few months ago.

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The violent clashes at Khulna University of Engineering and Technology (KUET) between anti-discrimination student activists and members of Chhatri Dal have revived memories of the bloody brutality once synonymous with the Chhatri League

era. This incident has raised serious concerns about the state of student politics across the country. Seeing injured students and men wielding large scythes and machetes on a university campus is utterly shocking and condemnable. No justification can excuse such violence. The tensions from the KUET clash quickly spread to other campuses, strongly influencing the future trajectory of student politics.

The KUET incident exposed the inherent brutality of student politics on our campuses. Following this, alleged Chhatri Shibir activists also brutally tortured MC College students over a Facebook comment. These Chhatri League-style crimes are an alarming sign. Such acts of violence must be stopped immediately, and law enforcement agencies must take swift action against the perpetrators.

We must remember that if this brutality is not curtailed now, it will spread to universities and colleges across the country, ultimately undermining the spirit of the July uprising. Most importantly, urgent steps must be taken to eliminate partisan politics from campuses through appropriate laws and policies.

I do not know how much longer students' blood will be used as a tool for political gain. But it is essential to try and put an immediate stop to it. We must ensure that our educational institutions are free from helmets, hockey sticks, scythes, machetes, and homemade sharp weapons once and for all.

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