

The sorry state of our green passports



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

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The immigration lines in most developed countries are smooth as most passengers simply scan their e-cards and walk through. Bangladeshi passport holders, however, often appear to be a spanner in the wheel that blocks the flow. The queue behind us grows longer and more restless. Officials need time to verify our documents. Occasionally, their superiors surface from hidden cubicles to cast more suspicious eyes. Once cleared, our bags come under a fresh round of random profiling. Our alien-coloured green passport is a symbol of exclusion. While the image driven media creates a hearty narrative of global mobility full of opportunities and connectivity, the aspirations of most Bangladeshis are met with resistance through no fault of their own. Bangladeshi passports are ranked among the weakest in the world. According to the latest edition of the Henley Passport Index, our passport stands at 100th, with war-torn states like Libya and the Palestinian territories in our cohort. The weak status of our passport is a reality check for many who suffer from false-inflated egos. It exposes

visa applications by Bangladeshis, against the global average of 21 percent. The figure is nearly the same for Schengen states. Last month, the Malaysian airport authority denied entry to 51 Bangladeshi nationals despite their having valid visas, allegedly for “loitering suspiciously in the arrival hall.” The difficulty in getting visas has contributed to the rise of an “industry” that profits from complexity and opacity. Many embassies employ middlemen or agents who levy hefty consultation or processing fees. In some instances, digital slots are allegedly monopolised by syndicates and sold by informed insiders. Then there is the added trouble of travelling to a third country to obtain consular services. If things are less than favourable there, you may encounter additional challenges in obtaining a second visa before attending your main interviews. Even licensed visa service firms are not beyond criticism, being accused of delaying regular punters to encourage the purchase of premier services. A recent exposé revealed that a renowned visa agency held onto Italian

zone of legality. Victims have hardly any legal protection from these scheming agents and scammers. The reason is simple: the state does not value its citizens enough. In most cases, we consider visa rejection to be a personal failure. But it is time for our state, particularly our diplomats, to realise that the refusal is often a failure of our soft power diplomacy. The state must stand by its citizens to reclaim the narrative.



VISUAL: STAR

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us to dehumanising processes that include visa hassles, exploitative syndicates, and immigration humiliation. It affects our global mobility in business, education, family visits, and tourism. In the year up to March 2024, the UK Home Office rejected 53 percent of

visas for over a year, demanding heavier fees. On the other hand, freelancers entice visa-seekers with promises of guaranteed visas. First-time travellers and those unfamiliar with the digital protocol are easy targets. These visa consultants operate in the shadow

If Bangladeshis are considered burdens or threats, it will affect our labour market, trade, education, and cultural exchanges. As a country with a high unemployment rate, many see the outside world as a provider of life-changing opportunities. Yet, they are frustrated by the obstinacy of the legal channels. Aspiring immigrants frequently fall prey to scammers, who encourage them to undertake perilous journeys involving smugglers, fake documents, and alternative travel routes through forests, hills, or oceans. The popular code used for such a process is known as “game.” In recent years, thousands of Bangladeshis have reportedly tried to enter Europe through gaming. Some of

attending international events, and sending children to overseas institutions. Genuine students with scholarships or businessmen with all-paid-for trips are denied visas for no apparent reason. The stated reasons, such as “low income” or “insufficient ties to home,” often exacerbate the situation. The weak positioning of our travel document is due to weak diplomatic initiatives, inefficient migration services, and a non-existent passport strategy.

With a global icon now at the helm of the government, the time is right for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to push for fair visa policies for Bangladeshi nationals. The ministry must take proactive steps to establish bilateral visa

facilitation agreements with key partners, particularly for students, businesses, and migrant labourers. There should be advocacy for establishing more embassies in Dhaka, joint application centres, and long-term visa processing setups. We must examine the reasons behind Dhaka’s status as a challenging posting for overseas envoys and enhance the basic amenities provided to them. Conversely, we need to upgrade our documentation process to enhance the credibility of our certificates and paper trails. Additionally, the Ministry of Expatriates’ Welfare must coordinate with law enforcement, civil aviation, and anti-corruption bodies to end the nefarious “visa industry.” Government-run support portals must be empathetic and supportive to promote transparency and reduce dependency on middlemen. There should be steps to increase our skilled labour pool, targeting specific countries for fast-track mobility arrangements. Already, the chief adviser has mentioned the need for nurses and carers in the global market. We can follow bilateral models like the Indo-German skilled workers’ agreement or the Sri Lanka-Japan Specified Skilled Worker (SSW) programme to curate a niche market. The foreign ministry also has a mandate to raise the fair visa issue through diplomatic and multilateral channels. We must remind the Global North of its touted moral high ground and emphasise that mobility is a development right, not a privilege. The time has come to promote our culture through public diplomacy. We need a database of our diaspora talent and showcase them to promote national reputation before the host countries, replacing the “risk” label. At the same time, we need to invest in our youth so they become globally informed citizens of the world. It is our duty to give them the freedom to study, to love, to work, and to dream beyond borders. We must train them to export our ideas, forge partnerships, and bring knowledge home. But first, we need to unlock our windows before expecting the world to open its gates for us. It’s time to reclaim the dignity of our green passports, not with misplaced patriotism, but with strategic interventions. We look forward to the day when Bangladeshis walk through green channels, proud of their green passports.

When will women be safe?

A question that reveals a grim reality



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Over the past few months, there has been a spat of violence against women, including harassment and rape. According to Manabadhikar Shongskriti Foundation, 42 women and children were raped in January this year; the number rose to 57 in February. For many years, women’s safety in Bangladesh has been a growing concern, and yet the solutions seem far out of reach. So, when will women be safe? From March 6 to March 8 this year, Mongol Deep Foundation, a non-profit organisation dedicated to social development through the arts, launched a campaign to gather public opinion on women’s safety. The social media campaign started on their official Facebook page, posting three thought-provoking questions. The first question was: “when will women be safe?” The options given were: when she stays at home; when she covers; when men change; and never. The second question was: “what can women do to keep themselves safe?” The options were: remain at home after evening; always keep pepper spray or pocketknife; learn self-defence like karate/martial arts; and demand to keep men indoors. The last question was: “were you ever sexually harassed?” Here, the options were: yes; no; and don’t want to answer. This campaign aimed to gather elicited responses along the lines of what would make women and girls feel safe. We chose

social media as the platform because the cyber world often acts as a parallel reality, where people express their opinions more freely than they would in person. Here, intrusive thoughts turn into public



FILE VISUAL: REHNUMA PROSHOON

statements without hesitation. What we got was a predominantly male perspective filled with protectionist rhetoric. The posts reached thousands across Bangladesh, and 1,674 men and women engaged. What was surprising, though, was that most of the

comments came from men—males who felt entitled to dictate the terms of women’s safety. The responses painted a bleak and unsettling picture of how deeply ingrained misogyny is in our society. A staggering 23.4 percent (393 individuals) claimed that women are unsafe because they don’t “cover up,” and of these commenters, 89 percent were men. Meanwhile, the other seven percent (129 individuals) took it further, explicitly blaming revealing clothing for sexual harassment and assault. The message is clear: women’s bodies are the problem, not the men who harass, assault or rape them. Another 186 individuals insisted that women’s safety could only be ensured through

safety. Their suggestions were among the basic measures that should already be in place, like stricter laws, proper enforcement, and women’s financial independence. But in a sea of victim-blaming, these reasonable voices were drowned out. In light of the recent attack on two women for smoking in public, it wasn’t shocking to find 34 individuals (all men) claim that women smoking in public is the reason the entire female population is unsafe. The idea that a woman’s safety is determined by whether she smokes, whereas the habit is equally harmful for all genders, is just another excuse to control and punish women for existing in public spaces. This adds to the critique of how women are unfairly blamed for their own lack of safety in situations where men face no such concerns. Perhaps the most horrifying revelation was that 25 men openly stated that some women don’t deserve to be safe at all. Their reasoning? Women who “freely mix” with men, work outside home, travel at night, or break the so-called societal norms should expect to be assaulted. On the other hand, 149 frustrated individuals, 75 percent of whom are women,

to lower their gazes as well, the responses here clearly highlight how certain religious interpretations are often misused to justify blame on women’s clothing. A silver lining was to find 10.5 percent (176 individuals) of the total commenters offering civic solutions to ensure women’s

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said women will never be safe in Bangladesh. Their responses didn’t just express fear, they expressed resignation. These respondents don’t believe change will come because our society will never evolve, and law enforcement will remain weak. This is not pessimism; this is their lived reality. While this campaign provided valuable insights, it also had limitations. Social media engagement does not represent the entire population, and those who chose to comment were likely individuals with strong opinions, whether in support of or against women’s rights. Additionally, the format of the questions may have influenced responses, as multiple-choice options can sometimes oversimplify complex issues. Despite these limitations, the sheer volume of engagement and the nature of the responses highlight a troubling reality that cannot be ignored. The responses to this campaign are not limited to Facebook. They are reflections of our streets, our homes, and our workplaces. They show us that many still see women’s safety as conditional, dependent on how much they conform to patriarchal norms, how much they cover up, and how much they give up their freedom. The streets remain unsafe, the laws are inadequately enforced, and societal attitudes continue to facilitate this crisis. So, coming back to the original question: when will women be safe? If this campaign has shown us anything, the answer is probably: not anytime soon.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Weary word

5 Record company

10 River sediment

11 Greet a superior

12 Concept

13 Royal heir

14 Spiky flower

16 Bright flower

20 Optimally

23 Mine material

24 Strata

25 Spills the beans

27 Count start

28 Eye parts

29 Showy flower

32 Spring flower

36 Stand up to

39 Marine predator

40 Cave sounds

41 Strong smell

42 Frost creations

43 Flank

DOWN

1 “In your dreams!”

2 Beach resort

3 Baseball’s

Rodriguez

4 React to a punch

5 Tadpole, e.g.

6 Saucer pilot

7 Frank holder

8 List-shortening abbr.

9 Writer Harper

11 Cricket or crew

15 Minus

17 Charged particles

18 Goad

19 Base meal

20 Physics bit

21 Turner of music

22 Keg contents

25 Egotist’s focus

26 Not allfresco

28 Barn areas

30 Figure of speech

31 Nebula makeup

33 Zwei follower

34 Tea type

35 Ontario, for one

36 Workout unit

37 Green prefix

38 That lady

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19

20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29

30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39

40 41 42 43

6-1

YESTERDAY’S ANSWERS

H A Y S S L O W
E L E N A S L O P E
A L L O W T I L E D
T I L H E A T I N G
H E A L I N G T E E
S T I L L B A D
W K E I R A
W E E V E R B S
T E X H E A D I N G
H E A R I N G L O U
I N L E T A D O R E
R I T E S N I X E S
D E S K M I S T