

## The rising horror of sexual violence

Collective actions needed to ensure safety of women and children

Every year, the one statistic that strikes at the core of women's safety in Bangladesh is the ever-soaring number of rape cases. Within the first six months of this year, the number of reported rape cases reached 481, just 35 fewer than the total number of rape cases reported between January and December last year, according to Bangladesh Mahila Parishad data.

What is more concerning is that children were victims in almost 72 percent of the cases. Worse still, 106 of the 481 reported cases involved gang rape. When one reads these statistics alongside the incidents of rape in Muradnagar, Bhola, or Magura, the severity of the situation becomes even more apparent. The level of perversion displayed in many of these cases is beyond shocking. Moreover, the way these crimes are reported by the media and weaponised by certain quarters, including political parties, the way victims are vilified on social media platforms and put on trial in the people's court, raises serious questions about our collective sense of civility, ethics, and values.

Although the government has taken some steps to expedite the trial process in the Magura rape case, we do not see similar actions or urgency in many other cases. A recent report published in this daily revealed that 35,262 cases filed under the Women and Children Repression Prevention Act currently remain pending with courts across the country for over five years. The reasons behind the delay—which include incomplete police investigations, overburdened special tribunals, lack of dedicated prosecutors, and intimidation of witnesses and victims by the accused—culminate in creating a culture of impunity for perpetrators. There is also the tendency in our society to stigmatise the victims and blame them for the crime, instead of the rapist. That is why even a criminal offence like rape is often settled out of court, with victims often being married off to their rapists, subjecting the former to further trauma.

Under these circumstances, the government alone cannot deter sexual violence against women by enacting stricter laws. Proper implementation, institutional practice, and integrity are required to bring perpetrators to justice. Beyond that, we need to change our perception of rape and other sexual crimes. Society at large—and men in particular—must first see women as human beings with agency over their minds and bodies, not as objects. For this, education on equality and rights from the primary level is necessary. Traditional patriarchal practices must be challenged. However, nothing can be achieved unless all political and non-political stakeholders come on board to ensure the safety of women and children, without exception.

## A warning sign for democracy

Young people's disillusionment with politics must be reversed

After a youth-led uprising that toppled the autocratic Awami League regime of 15 years, we expected that young people would be more engaged in politics. However, a survey conducted by the South Asian Network on Economic Modelling (SANEM) reveals a different reality: an overwhelming 82.7 percent of our youth population, particularly first time voters, are not interested in joining politics or participating in political activities. Shockingly, only 1.6 percent of young people are currently involved in any form of political activity, the survey reveals. At a time when the country is awaiting a meaningful democratic transition, the widespread political disengagement among our youth is deeply concerning. The question is: what is driving their disillusionment with politics, even after a successful uprising that they led?

The survey revealed that the fear of political violence or backlash was a major reason for their disinterest in politics, cited by 58.7 percent of respondents, while 56.4 percent expressed concerns about corruption and lack of ethics in politics. A large majority—80.2 percent—were alarmed by the rising incidents of arson, robbery, and theft, while many pointed to mob violence, politically motivated arrests and legal proceedings. Gender-based violence, hostility towards feminist or liberal views, and unsafe public spaces, especially for women, have further disappointed the youth.

We think these concerns are entirely valid in the present circumstances. In the 11 months since the interim government took office, the country has seen a surge in mob and political violence, alongside a troubling rise in violence against women and children, including rape. The state's shocking failure to uphold the rule of law in these cases has deeply disillusioned young people. Although a new youth-led political party has emerged, it remains uncertain how much youth support it will get. However, despite young people's reluctance to engage directly in political activities, it is encouraging that 76.8 percent expressed willingness to vote in the upcoming election.

In order to encourage our youth towards politics, our entire political system and the state institutions must undergo meaningful reforms, with young people actively involved in the process. Our policymakers must also identify and address the most pressing concerns facing today's youth. According to the survey, an overwhelming 94 percent of young people viewed education system reform as "very urgent", while 90 percent prioritised labour market reforms. They also called for political party reforms, demanding greater transparency in party funding and an end to patronage, nepotism, and political violence. All these issues must be urgently addressed to reverse the growing disillusionment among our youth towards politics.

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

### Telstar 1 launched

On this day in 1962, Telstar 1, the first communications satellite to transmit live television signals and telephone conversations across the Atlantic Ocean, was launched, inaugurating a new age in electronic communications.

# EDITORIAL

## Dhaka's drains, dengue, and denial



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What is the capital of Bangladesh known for?

Ask this question on a dry winter morning, and you will hear a chorus: "Biryanil!" "Traffic!" "Overpopulation!"—with someone perhaps adding "resilience" as a compliment or a curse. But ask the same question during monsoon season, and the answer will change faster than the city's disappearing footpaths. Dhaka becomes less of a city and more of a soggy simulation—an accidental water park where rickshaws float like Venetian gondolas, and office-goers reenact scenes from *Titanic*, minus the romance and with the added thrill of catching leptospirosis.

It happens every year—rain falls, drains fail, city halts. And each year, officials act as if the sky has done something outrageously unexpected. "Heavy rainfall was unforeseen," they say, as though clouds haven't been part of the Bangladeshi climate since the Pala Empire. But the real surprise isn't the rain—it's our ever-deepening incompetence in dealing with it.

Take the drainage system. Legends say it exists. The Dhaka South City Corporation claims to maintain 3,000 km of drains. Dhaka North boasts another 1,500 km. That's 4,500 km in total—enough to stretch across Bangladesh from Teknaf to Tetulia multiple times. And yet, when the first heavy downpour arrives, those drains behave like introverts at a party: overwhelmed, unresponsive, and quick to disappear.

The Institute of Water Modelling reported that almost 70 percent of Dhaka's stormwater drains are clogged—choked not only by plastic bags and household waste but also by layers of concrete apathy, construction debris, and the crumbled remains of political promises. These are not drains anymore; they are time capsules filled with everything we have chosen to ignore.

So, when it rains, water doesn't flow. It lingers. It pools in alleyways, reminiscing about the flood from last year, and the year before, and the one before that. You can practically host rowing competitions on Mirpur Road, or perhaps inaugurate a wetland research institute on Panthapath.

This aquatic chaos isn't just a nuisance—it's an open invitation for disease. The Aedes mosquito,

that airborne agent of doom, thrives in stagnant water. And Dhaka, during monsoon, becomes its dream honeymoon resort. Flowerpots, construction sites, rooftops, potholes, plastic cups—every puddle is an incubator.

In 2023-24, dengue didn't just visit—it unpacked its bags and moved in. Over 1,700 people died, making it one of the deadliest outbreaks in the country's history. And yet, preventive measures remain as rare as a government meeting that starts on time. Public announcements are

cocktail of memes, madness, and mild dysentery.

photo-ops in knee-deep water.

And yet, no one ever seems to resign.

What's more absurd is how quickly the cycle resets. After every "flood," there's a press conference. A "special task force" is declared. The task force holds several "urgent meetings." A thick report is written—possibly water-resistant. It's shelved. A new committee is formed. Consultants are flown in. Samosas are served. Recommendations are made: "elevated walkways," "mobile pumping stations," "awareness campaigns." Then...silence.

Until the next monsoon arrives and the entire performance repeats, like a tragic opera directed by Kafka and choreographed by Monty Python.

Accountability, it seems, floats away faster than the floodwater.

This isn't just about governance—it's about the normalisation of dysfunction. When children grow up thinking that a flooded school is normal, that electricity should vanish with the first thunderclap, that mosquitoes are as inevitable as midterms, then we have moved beyond negligence. We have institutionalised absurdity.

And what's our long-term vision? Dhaka, at the mercy of rain, keeps expanding vertically and horizontally with little regard for drainage, green zones, or water reservoirs. The canals that once breathed life into the city have been choked into oblivion. Wetlands have been encroached on by real estate greed. Every bit of concrete laid without planning becomes a future flood zone.

Yet amid all this, we remain resilient. Or is it numb? Maybe both.

There's something heartbreakingly poetic in our ability to carry on. A city submerged in failure, yet floating on sheer stubbornness. A place where people laugh while knee deep in water because crying won't keep them dry. Where a shopkeeper rescues floating packets of Maggi noodles and tells a passer-by, "Now we sell seafood flavour."

Dhaka doesn't sink. It limps, floats, laughs, and curses. It becomes a case study in how a city can grow without growing up.

So, bring the rain. Let the clouds burst and the rivers rise. Let the drains hide in shame. Let Dhaka drown again, not because it has to—but because it always does.

Because in this city, infrastructure is seasonal, promises are waterproof, and accountability is amphibious.

We will endure. Not because we are prepared, but because we have no other choice.

So, dear Dhaka, until the next monsoon: keep your raincoat, your boots, your memes, and your gallows humour. Above all, keep your hope afloat. Because, in the city of waterlogged dreams, hope is the only thing we haven't learned to drain.



Dhaka, at the mercy of rain, keeps expanding vertically and horizontally with little regard for drainage, green zones, or water reservoirs.

FILE PHOTO: STAR

made. Sprays are sprayed—often into the air, never the water. And when questioned, health officials fumble between statistics and statements like, "We are taking steps," which in Dhaka's bureaucratese translates to: "We are waiting for the rain to stop and the news cycle to move on."

Meanwhile, as dengue breeds in puddles and rats enjoy their waterfront condos, the people of Dhaka do what they always do—adapt.

A woman carrying her baby through waist-deep water in Mohammadpur shrugs and says, "Well, at least it's not hot today." A rickshaw-puller adds an extra Tk 50 for "water surcharge." Foodpanda riders contemplate swimming lessons.

Our coping mechanism? A

spent nearly Tk 1,000 crore on waterlogging and canal-cleaning projects. Yet, with every rain, Dhaka drowns again—quicker than ever. Where did the money go? Some say it evaporated. Others suggest it floated away with the drains. Rumour has it a large chunk was spent on "training" abroad—perhaps to study how Paris or Amsterdam handles its drainage, forgetting that Dhaka has neither its rivers nor its reason.

Transparency International Bangladesh reported that up to 30 percent of urban infrastructure budgets are lost to corruption. That's not a footnote—that's a confession. It's no longer a matter of inefficiency. It's institutionalised failure, propped up by excuses, committee reports, and

## THE DIGITAL STRIP SEARCH

# How America's visa edicts redraw colonial borders in cyberspace



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First, they demand our gold, then our spices, now our selfies. But the ledger always settles.

### Act I: The notification

The alerts hit Kathmandu and Dhaka within 24 hours of each other—twin seismic pulses in the geopolitical nervous system. First, Nepal: "Effective immediately, all applicants for F, M, or J visas must set social media accounts to PUBLIC." Then Bangladesh: identical language, identical demand. No velvet gloves, no diplomatic sugarcoating. Just the sterile click of a bureaucratic mouse that echoed like a vault sealing shut.

In the monsoon-drenched lanes of Dhaka, medical student Arifa Rahman (not her real name) stared at her phone. "They want my family WhatsApp jokes? My cousin's wedding photos?" In Kathmandu, engineering aspirant Bikram Joshi (not his real name) scrolled through years of Tibetan solidarity posts. Both knew this wasn't vetting. This was digital strip search

under open skies.

### Act II: The algorithmic Raj

Let's be clear: 21st-century imperialism wears algorithmic robes. When the US State Department orders South Asian students to bare their digital souls, while exempting German or Japanese applicants, it resurrects the colonial "natives vs Europeans" divide. The platforms enabling this? Facebook, Twitter, Instagram—Western digital fields born from Pentagon partnerships and Silicon Valley venture capital. As Centre for International Governance Innovation (CIGI) scholars note, these are not neutral tools but "geo-economic weapons" where "winner takes all."

"Every visa adjudication is a national security decision," declares the notice from the US Embassy in Kathmandu. Translation: your dreams are now contingent on your Instagram likes.

This is a connectivity weaponised. This is America deploying its platform architecture. The brilliance? Forcing

self-colonisation. Students now scrub profiles preemptively—deleting Palestine solidarity posts, hiding climate activism, and burying critiques of US drone strikes. The chilling effect is the feature, not the bug.

### Act III: The multipolar counterpoint

Enters the subplot: a world rebalancing. As American soft power wanes, alternatives surge. Germany reports a 58 percent spike in South Asian students; Finland waives social media checks entirely. Meanwhile, Dhaka negotiates digital partnerships with Delhi—India's Unified Payments Interface (UPI) payment system now processes cross-border education fees in seconds.

The irony? The US condemns China's "social credit system" while implementing behavioural vetting via visa forms. Yet, as Carnegie scholars note, the Global South increasingly rejects this hypocrisy: "The central divide remains between the dominant North and the aggrieved South."

### Act IV: Resistance in minor key

How to fight back? Nepal's foreign ministry quietly circulates a draft note: "Reciprocity demanded: US applicants must publish tax returns and gun ownership records." Bangladeshi hackers launch #EncryptTheSouth tutorials—teaching students to archive "private" profile versions before compliance.

Scholars at Dhaka University trace

the policy's lineage: from British colonial "Thuggee Files" to Facebook's Cambridge Analytica scandal.

Their weapon? Dark humour. Memes flood Telegram: "My ancestors gave spices to colonisers. Now I give Zuckerberg my DMs."

### Final: The unsilenced South

This isn't just about visas. It's about whose digital bodies are deemed legible, harvestable, and disposable. When Arifa toggles her profile to "public," she hears echoes of her grandmother's stories: "The British measured our skulls to prove inferiority." Today's metrics are likes and network graphs.

Yet the revolt is subtle. Students create decoy accounts—carefully curated performances of apolitical banality. Others flood feeds with Tagore poetry or Bhutanese throat-singing videos, encrypting dissent in cultural noise. As one Kathmandu tweet goes viral: "You want my data? Here's a sonnet."

### Epilogue

The embassies framed this as "security." But in the bazaars of Dhaka and the cybercafes of Kathmandu, they know the truth: data is the new spice, silicon the new soil. As the post-American world stirs, South Asia's response blends poetic defiance with technological pragmatism—a digital *satyagraha* unfolding one privacy setting at a time.