

## When will we see effective govt action?

It must ensure incidents like Cumilla’s shrine attacks are not repeated

Yet again we are witnessing attacks on shrines, this time in Cumilla’s Homna upazila, raising urgent questions about whether the government is really doing anything to ensure peaceful co-existence of people of different belief systems in the country. Since August last year, numerous such attacks have occurred, often without any provocation, and statements from the government have done little to prevent them. Instead, anonymous attackers, who often act under the banner of an aggrieved religious group, which opposes Bangladesh’s centuries-old shrine-Sufi culture, seem to be gaining confidence.

Earlier this month, a similar group not only vandalised a shrine and attacked the followers of a self-proclaimed spiritual figure, but exhumed his body and set it on fire on a highway. Though several arrests followed, attacks on four more spiritual sites on Thursday show that reactive arrests are not enough to deter such violence.

Worryingly, legal actions intended to respond to these groups’ grievances are also proving ineffective. This was evident in Homna. On Wednesday morning, police detained a man linked to one of the shrines after locals protested a religiously offensive social media post. But the next morning, a group appeared outside his home, using loudspeakers to rally a crowd. Within an hour, they vandalised two shrines and burned down another shrine and an akhra. Since the custodians of three of these sites had no link to Wednesday’s incident, local villagers and followers are asking what really motivated the attacks. The use of loudspeakers suggests the violence was premeditated, setting a troubling precedent.

In this context, it’s time law enforcement and intelligence units adopted pre-emptive strategies, rather than only reacting after the damage is done. While police acted swiftly on Wednesday, with the rise in mob violence by fringe groups, a continued security presence in the area was needed, given the sensitivity of the circumstances. More broadly, the government must take a stronger stance against far-right ideologies that threaten the country’s pluralistic fabric. Shrines, mazars, and darbars have been part of our religious heritage for centuries. While many may not agree with their mode of worship, such differences in practice cannot justify violence. Grievances—real or perceived—must be addressed through legal means, and this standard should apply equally to all faiths.

Our constitution guarantees every religious community the right to “establish, maintain and manage its religious institutions,” subject to “public order, law and morality.” The government, which took oath under this constitution on August 8, 2024, must uphold these rights for all. We also urge the government to ensure protection of the family members and followers of the shrines’ spiritual leaders, who are scared to return to their homes after Thursday’s incident. Besides, with major religious festivals approaching, security must be strengthened to ensure that no community is intimidated by the self-appointed moral police who, in the absence of stern state action, have come to believe they are above the law.

## Banks must retain female talent

Decline in women’s participation in the banking sector is concerning

The recent data on women’s participation in the country’s banking sector presents a dismal trend. Against a backdrop of steadily increasing female enrolment in higher education and a central bank push for greater gender equity, the proportion of women in the financial workforce has shrunk. A 4.96 percent decline year-on-year in the first half of this year is a worrying indicator of a sector where economic headwinds are colliding with deep-seated social and institutional barriers.

While top bankers point to the immediate catalyst—a slowdown in recruitment driven by global economic turbulence—the downturn in female representation is disproportionately sharp. This trend suggests that in times of uncertainty, the default hiring preference may still favour men. A recent World Bank study found that greater diversity, particularly at senior levels, is correlated with stronger financial performance and better risk management.

According to the latest data, there are only 35,782 women among the sector’s total workforce of 213,267. Private banks employ 24,050 women, while state banks employ 10,700. Foreign banks, despite having the smallest number of female staff at 1,032, maintain the highest proportion of women at 25.18 percent. However, a significant portion of the female workforce is concentrated in urban centres, particularly Dhaka, often due to spouses’ employment and family ties. This urban-centric career preference clashes directly with the sector’s rural expansion, leaving new opportunities unfilled by qualified women. Professional ambitions of educated women are often constrained by traditional expectations of domestic responsibility and family proximity. The societal roles of women can create a powerful, often subconscious, pressure that discourages them from accepting roles that disrupt family life.

Hopefully, the central bank’s directive to ensure a 50 percent female quota for agent banking staff could be a lever to boost women’s participation, particularly in rural areas where such a presence is crucial for financial inclusion. However, real and sustainable progress requires a fundamental shift in institutional behaviour. Banks must move beyond ticking a box and actively create career pathways, offer flexible work arrangements, and foster a culture that supports women through life-cycle events, such as marriage and childbirth. When a qualified woman leaves the workforce, the loss is not merely personal but a setback for the country’s economic and social development. To reverse this concerning trend, banks must invest in new models of recruitment and retention. They must actively address safety concerns, and provide robust training. Also, banks should create mentorship programmes that empower women to ascend to senior leadership and board positions since their numbers drop significantly at mid-level and senior roles in financial institutions. It is imperative to build an ecosystem within the sector where women can thrive, lead and contribute fully.

# Universal, not targeted, social protection is the path forward



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The country’s manufactured “miracle” tapestry, celebrated by the deposed regime and others in glowing terms, is fraying. The nation finds itself navigating a narrow ridge against the chasm of economic vulnerability. At the household level, the story is bleak. The World Bank’s Macro Poverty Outlook projects that extreme poverty will rise from 7.7 percent to 9.3 percent in 2025 in Bangladesh. In plain terms, 30 lakh more Bangladeshis will be pushed below the poverty line within a single year. This is a devastating reckoning.

The Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC)’s study titled the State of the Real Economy, commissioned by the Ministry of Finance, reveals that debt is crushing the poor. The bottom 40 percent of households owe at least double their savings. Underemployment affects 38 percent of workers. The economy is precarious for the labouring class, who sacrificed the most, including their lives, during the mass uprising in July–August last year, in pursuit of a better future.

The latest Labour Force Survey by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) reveals a further setback for the youth, the front-runners of the July uprising. Youth unemployment has been rising steadily since 2016–17, reaching 13 lakh among those aged 15–24, followed by 9.16 lakh in the 25–34 age group and 3.79 lakh aged 35 or older in 2024. The plight is particularly severe for graduates, rising to nine lakh in 2024. One in three graduates cannot secure employment. The situation for the female workforce remains disheartening, accounting for 33.10 percent, while male workers constitute 66.90 percent of the employed

population. Regionally, Dhaka Division has the highest number, with 687,000 unemployed individuals. The statistics should be interpreted with caution, as the definition may mask the true extent of unemployment.

This confluence of evidence exposes an inescapable truth. The existing social protection framework, a fragmented patchwork of targeted programmes, is fundamentally broken.

The current model’s failure is not anecdotal. Its core mechanism is



FILE VISUAL: SHAIKH SULTANA JAHAN BADHON

flawed, which perpetuates exclusion and wastes precious resources. The most damning fiasco is the exclusion error, with the intended beneficiaries left behind. The PPRC findings are shocking: the widow allowance reaches only 15.3 percent of eligible households. The Fair Price Card programme, a cornerstone of food security, deserts a staggering 94.7 percent, serving only 5.3 percent. Millions of the most destitute citizens are rendered invisible

protection is a fundamental right of citizenship, not a form of charity.

A universal life-cycle system provides support at every stage of vulnerability. This framework could consist of certain pillars. For example, universal child benefits can ensure that every child receives adequate nutrition, given that two in three children under five in Bangladesh face food poverty. Second, universal education stipends can guarantee

## The critical need for forensic infrastructure in Bangladesh



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In the complex machinery of the criminal justice system, forensic laboratories are essential pillars, providing scientifically accurate evidence that can make or break a case. From DNA testing to narcotics analysis, these facilities have proven to be indispensable in identifying perpetrators, exonerating the innocent, and ensuring fair trials. Yet in Bangladesh, the potential of forensic science remains largely untapped due to a scarcity of infrastructure, old-fashioned technology, and systemic inefficiencies.

Currently, Bangladesh has a limited number of operational forensic laboratories capable of conducting DNA testing. The National Forensic DNA Profiling Laboratory (NFDPL), set up within the premises of Dhaka Medical College Hospital, serves as the central hub for forensic investigations nationwide. Other institutions, both government-run and private, have begun to expand their capabilities, but the scale remains inadequate for a country of over 17 crore people.

Despite its critical role, NFDPL is marred by challenges such as outdated equipment, a shortage of skilled personnel, and a growing backlog of cases. These constraints have led to significant delays in forensic reporting, which in turn hinders the timely dispensation of justice. According to official records, as of late 2024, investigations into 789 cases were stalled due to delays in obtaining DNA test results.

Courts in Bangladesh regularly require forensic analysis to expedite proceedings, particularly in cases of murder, rape, and drug trafficking. The Ministry of Home Affairs, in

collaboration with the Directorate of Forensic Medicine, has established protocols prioritising urgent cases. The country’s reliance on the single operational DNA lab under the CID, combined with the challenges faced by NFDPL, is a major reason for the systemic delays.

The legal framework for forensic evidence is well established. The Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC), 1898, the Evidence Act, 1872, and the DNA Act, 2014 collectively provide for the collection, admissibility, and regulation of forensic evidence. Notably, Section 45 of the Evidence Act allows expert opinion, including on DNA evidence, to be presented in court. However, the lack of infrastructure has hindered the practical application of these provisions.

In the landmark case of *Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST) & Ors. vs. Bangladesh*, a division bench of the High Court Division of the Supreme Court issued 18 directives mandating that DNA samples in rape and sexual assault cases be collected within 48 hours of the incident. This decision came after a Garo woman’s rape complaint was delayed due to jurisdictional complications, highlighting systemic failures.

In another notable case, *Bangladesh Jatiyo Mahila Ainjibi Samity vs. Bangladesh*, the High Court Division used a sibling’s DNA during the trial of an attempted child trafficking case, reinforcing the use of forensic science in protecting children’s rights. Additionally, the court ruled that DNA test reports are admissible only if the expert who prepared the report testifies in Court, ensuring the integrity of evidence and

the rights of the accused.

However, there have been some persistent gaps. The Deoxyribonucleic Acid (DNA) Act, 2014 was a legislative milestone that established a legal basis for DNA profiling in criminal and civil cases. It includes provisions for a national DNA database and penalties for tampering with samples. However, critical flaws remain. The

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Act lacks explicit safeguards for informed consent, privacy protection, and independent oversight, raising concerns about misuse and wrongful convictions.

Section 12 of the Act permits DNA collection from suspects and victims but does not mandate judicial authorisation or define consent protocols. Besides, section 15 provides for a national DNA database but fails to set retention timelines for samples collected from acquitted individuals, diverging from international standards.

Countries like the UK, the US, and India have progressed in DNA legislation and application over the years. These developments reflect a shared judicial recognition of DNA’s forensic value, even though disparities in legal infrastructure, enforcement capacity, and technological integration highlight the uneven global evolution of DNA profiling in criminal justice systems. However, the Deoxyribonucleic Acid (DNA) Act, 2014, lacks nuanced provisions, featuring the need for urgent reform to align with global best practices. Experts suggest the incorporation of informed consent mechanisms,

that no child drops out since almost 41 percent of the population aged between 5 and 24 years are not in educational institutions.

Third, for universal healthcare to function effectively, there is a need for a digital health card, an integrated referral platform and a digital logistics system to eliminate waste and inefficiency. Fourth, schemes such as unemployment insurance and maternity benefits could buffer the employment-seeking youth and people employed in unorganised sectors, including farming, cottage, small enterprises, and informal sectors.

Finally, an overarching requirement is a universal pension to ensure dignity for the elderly, a fast-ageing population of 1.5 crore people aged 60 and above.

The most common objection to universality is the cost. This approach, however, ignores the far greater cost of the status quo, particularly in view of the current predicament.

The government has already allocated Tk 116,731 crore to social protection in FY2025–26. The problem is not the size of the budget, but its inefficiency. On the fiscal front, reallocation of resources wasted on targeting errors and pursuing progressive fiscal measures is necessary.

A robust Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI), using the national ID (NID), can be a foundation for a unique identity system, integrated with a payment interface, creating “digital rails” for efficient delivery. Global experiences such as India’s Aadhaar platform could help.

Simultaneously, at the national level, consolidation is vital. At present, multiple ministries run overlapping programmes, breeding duplication. A single social protection agency could harmonise delivery. Implementation can be gradually devolved to local governments. Proximity enhances accountability.

Universal, life-cycle social protection is an architecture of a resilient and just state. It forges a pathway where prosperity is shared. Hence, to protect the future of Bangladesh, universal social protection is the way forward.

strict data protection protocols, and independent regulatory bodies to ensure ethical handling of DNA evidence.

Importantly, calls for reform and expansion have been raised from various stakeholders and social worker groups. To address this issue, in March 2025, the interim government of Bangladesh approved amendments to the Women and Children Repression Prevention Act, 2000, promising to establish specialised Tribunals and additional DNA labs. These reforms are expected to accelerate case resolution and improve access to justice for vulnerable populations in the country.

However, experts argue that piecemeal efforts are insufficient. To meet international benchmarks, Bangladesh should aim to set up at least 8–10 fully equipped forensic labs across key regions, each supported by trained forensic scientists and legal experts. According to international standards, high-density countries should maintain at least one forensic lab for every 10–20 million people, a target that Bangladesh currently falls far short of.

The persistent delay in the establishment of sufficient forensic infrastructure in Bangladesh stems from a combination of bureaucratic inertia, budgetary constraints, and institutional inefficiencies. Despite repeated pledges from successive governments, the development of DNA testing capabilities has lagged, leaving law enforcement agencies and the judiciary to rely on less reliable forms of evidence.

A strategic, data-driven approach to expanding forensic infrastructure, coupled with legal reforms and capacity building, can transform the landscape of criminal justice in Bangladesh. By investing in modern forensic laboratories or DNA labs, training forensic and legal professionals, and revising outmoded laws, we can expedite the resolution of criminal cases, ensure justice for victims, and restore public confidence in our judicial system.