

When justice fails the vulnerable

Low conviction rates in crimes against women, children expose deep flaws

It is hard to imagine the shock and trauma a 25-year-old woman experienced when she saw the person who raped her at the tender age of five walk free, due to numerous loopholes in the country's justice-seeking process that failed to provide sufficient evidence. According to a report in this daily, 20 years ago, she was found in a pool of blood at her neighbour's house, screaming in pain. The neighbour was caught by the locals, handed over to the police, and a rape case was filed against him. On July 21 this year, he was acquitted by the court due to insufficient evidence. Sadly, the existing data on conviction and punishment rates of crimes committed against women and children in this country indicates that this woman is not the only one failed by our justice system. There are thousands of others who wait for years, only to never receive justice—or even the hope of it.

To put this in perspective, between January and August this year, the conviction rate for crimes against children was only 0.52 percent, with a punishment rate of just 0.30 percent. For crimes committed against women, the conviction rate during the same period was 2.61 percent and the punishment rate 1.44 percent. These rates are abysmally low compared to the overall conviction rate for all crimes nationwide. In 2023, the conviction rate for child-related and women-related cases was 0.48 percent and 5.06 percent, respectively, while the overall conviction rate for all criminal cases was 28 percent.

When viewed alongside recent reports of child rape, the impact of low conviction rates becomes stark. According to Ain o Salish Kendra, child rape cases surged by nearly 75 percent in the first seven months of 2025 compared to the same period last year. This suggests that low conviction rates may embolden criminals, knowing they are unlikely to face consequences. A similar trend exists in crimes against women. This year, 10,475 such cases have been filed. Yet, convictions have occurred in only 273 cases, with just 331 accused punished. Rarely do convictions happen within a year. When they do, not all accused are held accountable. The situation is worse for women and children from marginalised and ethnic communities, as we have noted before in this column.

The reasons for these low conviction rates are well-known. Lengthy legal processes and severe case backlogs at the courts often discourage survivors and families from pursuing justice. Additionally, uncooperative police, poor investigations, and the lack of safe homes for survivors and witnesses contribute to the problem. Social stigma and the influence of powerful perpetrators also force many families to withdraw cases or settle out of court, particularly in rape cases. What's urgently needed is comprehensive, sustained action: proper budget allocation, more judges and prosecutors, training and monitoring of law enforcers, better evidence collection, courtroom technology, and public campaigns to fight victim-blaming. Above all, what is urgently needed is the political will to act.

Save Savar from toxic air

Waste-burning, brick kilns contaminating air as tannery pollution persists

We cannot stress enough the urgency of tackling the worsening air pollution in Dhaka's Savar. On August 17, the Department of Environment (DoE) declared the upazila a "degraded airshed," citing persistently hazardous air caused by open burning of solid and hazardous waste as well as brick kilns. The DoE also issued a circular banning brick burning in all but Tunnel Kilns and Hybrid Hoffman Kilns, and prohibiting open waste-burning. The ban came into effect on September 1, yet, while kiln operations remain paused due to the rainy season, the open-air burning of tyres, batteries, wood, and even chromium-containing tannery waste continues unabated, according to a report in this daily. Such practices are destroying soil fertility, reducing crop yields, and making life unbearable for the locals. During the dry season, northwestern winds carry these pollutants into Dhaka, aggravating the city dwellers' health risks.

This scenario reflects a pattern we have seen before. The tanneries were moved from Hazaribagh to the Tk 1,015 crore Savar Tannery Industrial Estate to save the Buriganga River. However, the Central Effluent Treatment Plant (CETP) installed there cannot fully treat the waste it receives. As a result, pollution continues. Additionally, most tanneries still flout basic labour and safety standards. On the other hand, in February, the High Court ordered removal of the brick kilns, responsible for an estimated 58 percent of Dhaka's air pollution, if illegal, but many owners failed to submit documents by the March 1 deadline. The DoE's new circular, therefore, means little if the rules to protect the environment are not effectively enforced.

Locals in Savar have demanded stricter monitoring and closure of establishments burning tyres, batteries, and hides. Experts, too, have stressed that unplanned industrial development, poor waste management and unchecked kiln operations together have created a toxic mix. Unless these sectors are brought under firm, transparent regulation, shifting locations or issuing bans will only displace—not resolve—the problem. To ensure real change, the government must publish and implement its action plan with clear deadlines. The CETP must be upgraded and the tanneries must be held accountable for compliance with environmental and labour standards. Illegal kilns must be shut down promptly, a mechanism to track and penalise open waste-burning must be put in place. Without such sustained measures, Savar's "degraded airshed" will continue to be a daily threat to public health, livelihoods, and the environment.

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EDITORIAL

Policing the body, governing the soul



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

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There is no short supply of news of attacks on individuals or institutions in Bangladesh these days. On the surface, these acts of violence are unrelated: shrines vandalised and devotees assaulted; top university officials threatened or manhandled; political vendettas unleashed on touring leaders by their opponents abroad, etc. These disparate episodes are more than brutality or indecency. They signify the rise of a culture of moral policing and coercion that reflects the deeper logic of state and society: the biopolitical control of life itself. And the mercy that we can seek is not from the state, but from the divine providence.

Consider the case of Halim Uddin Akand in Mymensingh. A devotee of Hazrat Shahjalal (RA) and Hazrat Shah Param (RA), who retired from the mundane life of being a farmer and dedicated himself to spirituality. For 37 years, he kept his matted hair uncut as a sign of spiritual devotion and minded his own business. There is a video floating on social media that shows the elderly fakir being chased through a market by three men in religious attire. They pinned him down and forcibly shaved his hair. As his locks fell to the ground, Halim cried out, looking at the sky, "Allah, tui dehisi!" (Make note of it, Allah).

For a moment, Halim reminded me of all the persecuted prophets labelled as madmen throughout history. He also reminded me of the Welsh bard jumping off the cliff, cursing the king's army who had come to nab him. Halim's prayer is the cry of every hapless oppressed individual to denote an indictment of a society where victims no longer believe earthly justice is possible. The ones who violated Halim's dignity belong to an organised group called "Human Service Bangladesh." They boast their actions as acts of "cleanliness" and "charity." Now why do they suddenly think Bangladesh is rotten and they

were born to set it right (to allude to Shakespeare, the Bard)?

Parading violence as virtue was seen earlier this month when the tomb of Nura Pagla was desecrated in Rajbari. The freshly buried body was dug out and set to fire on a highway. Punishing an individual even after death is unheard of in our cultural memory. Should we reflect on the grim history of punishing Republicanism in England, particularly when Cromwell's body was disinterred, hanged, and

came under the attack by some expatriate groups who ambushed the delegates, including political figures, outside the airport and hurled abusive words and eggs to turn a political demonstration into a physical confrontation. The export of vendetta into the global arena says a lot about our people, and trust me, it isn't positive. It says that we don't have any respect left in us.

That's why I was not surprised to hear that the pro vice-chancellor of Rajshahi University was manhandled by a mob of students. Factionalism has poisoned our campuses. Earlier, we saw the vice-chancellor of Dhaka University being aggressively threatened by student leaders during a "civil dialogue" on Dussehra. These attacks on the university's top administration imply an assault on the fragile authority of education. Attacks on our top officials leave



VISUAL: SHAIKH SULTANA JAHAN BADHON

beheaded, and his severed head displayed on a pole for 20 years? Can death no longer be the final sanctuary where enmities dissolve? Violation of the body, both live and dead, sends a chilling message of intolerance. It tells the larger community that we live in a country that no longer entertain differences, be it spiritual or cultural, even beyond the grave.

Our current head of government took a bunch of political talismans, tied as amulets in his travelling arms, to ward off the political evil spirits that crossed the border with them. In New York, some of the representatives attending the UN General Assembly

little protection for other teachers. Already, there have been a number of attacks on teachers in various educational institutions. When these institutions become a battleground for intimidation rather than inquiry, the social contract between knowledge and society collapses. The centre cannot hold; things fall apart. The rough beasts retreat into the centre, echoing a Yeatsian "second coming."

Across all these apparently scattered events, there is one hinge: the disciplining of bodies (i.e. of mystics, politicians, or teachers) is becoming normalised. We become aware of what Michel Foucault called

biopolitics. In the olden days, sovereign power reserved the right "to take life or let live." But in modern times, power operates within the capillaries of the social body by regulating, normalising, and disciplining life and death. It polices not only how people behave but also how they appear, how they worship, and how they think. The haircut forced on Halim, the burning of Nura Pagla's corpse, the assault on RU pro-VC, and the attack in New York are far from accidents. They are inscriptions of power onto individual and collective bodies.

The big question is: who is empowered to shore up as a mob or pressure group? Who are the sole agents of morality and culture? How can they function independently of the state system, which includes laws and their enforcing authorities? Groups like Human Service Bangladesh embodies what Foucault called governmentality: citizens turning into vigilantes, policing one another under the guise of moral duty. A Facebook entrepreneur can cut the hair of hundreds of "helpless" people, film it, and monetise it as a "service." Students can attack their teachers and claim they are defending justice. Diaspora activists can ambush leaders abroad and call it accountability. Violence becomes governance, coercion becomes order, and humiliation becomes civic virtue.

But there is another history we must not forget. The land that we have come to call our own was not born from intolerance. Among many things, our cultural identity was shaped by Sufis, Pirs and Bauls, by spiritual leaders, by political activists, and by progressive educators who freed the local people from rigid orthodoxy and taught love as the essence of faith. Shrines were the sites of coexistence, Baul songs were the celebrations of human spirit and depictions of social hypocrisy, teachers were the guardians of enlightenment, and politicians were the chaperons of our democracy. To attack them now is not only a crime against individuals but also an act of self-erasure.

We should be ashamed that a 70-year-old fakir must cry to the heavens for justice. In his cry, we hear a call that highlights our disconnection from the ideals of not only of our Liberation War but also of July, when we sought to make a fresh start.

WORLD TOURISM DAY

Can we transform tourism into a national strength?



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Today, the world observes World Tourism Day with the United Nations World Tourism Organization's theme, "Tourism and Sustainable Transformation." For Bangladesh, this is more than a ceremonial event. It is time to ask the question: can we sail confidently into a sustainable tourism future while safeguarding our heritage and empowering our people?

Moreover, sustainability is more than an environmental issue; it is a survival imperative. Bangladesh is among the most climate-vulnerable countries in the world. Rising seas threaten our coasts, while salinity intrudes into the Sundarbans. If we allow unchecked construction, plastic waste and over-tourism, we will accelerate the risks of losing our natural resources. Besides, global travellers are becoming more discerning. Increasingly, they seek eco-friendly destinations and authentic cultural encounters. If Bangladesh fails to adapt, it risks being sidelined in the global tourism market.

The question then becomes: how do we chart a course towards sustainability? At least three directions deserve attention.

First, green tourism development must be prioritised. Eco-resorts powered by renewable energy, hotels with global green certifications and strict conservation measures are essential. St Martin's Island illustrates the urgency; without limits on visitors and bans on single-use plastics, its fragile ecosystem may collapse. Countries like Nepal, which utilise conservation fees

from trekking in the Annapurna region to fund both environmental protection and community welfare, offer relevant models.

Second, tourism must become community-centred. The benefits should not flow only to large investors but also to ordinary people. Imagine homestays in the Chittagong Hill Tracts where tourists experience indigenous

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culture firsthand, or festivals in rural Bangladesh where Baul music and crafts are celebrated. Such initiatives preserve traditions while generating income. Importantly, women and youth can emerge as entrepreneurs in tour guiding, handicrafts and hospitality. Sri Lanka's tea plantation tours and Nepal's village homestay networks show how communities can successfully drive tourism.

Third, Bangladesh must embrace digital and policy transformation. A national tourism app could showcase maps, heritage stories and multilingual booking systems, while cashless transactions and e-tickets would modernise travel. Yet, technology alone is insufficient without policy. Stronger regulations are needed to curb coastal overdevelopment, reduce pollution and manage visitor flows in

fragile destinations. Here, Bhutan's "high-value, low-impact" model is instructive: by controlling numbers and emphasising sustainability, Bhutan has positioned itself as a global leader in responsible tourism.

Taken together, these pathways highlight that transformation is not a luxury—it is the only way forward. If appropriately managed, tourism can become a third pillar of the economy, alongside garments and remittances. It can diversify growth, create jobs and strengthen "Brand Bangladesh" internationally. By focusing on sustainability, we can reposition ourselves not as a budget destination, but as a nation renowned for its natural beauty, cultural richness and responsible hospitality.

Ultimately, this year's World Tourism Day is more than a commemoration. It is a mirror held up to us, asking whether we are ready to balance growth with responsibility. If we invest in green practices, empower communities and embrace digital innovation, we can transform tourism into a source of resilience and pride. But if we continue on the current path, we risk losing the very treasures that make Bangladesh extraordinary.

The answer to whether Bangladesh can sail into a sustainable tourism future lies in our collective choices today. Policymakers must create stronger frameworks, businesses must adopt greener models, and communities must be empowered to lead. Above all, we must see tourism beyond recreational purposes. It is a reflection of who we are and the future we want to build. The Sundarbans, Cox's Bazar, and Sylhet, as well as the country's cultural traditions, are our living legacies. If we protect and nurture them, tourism will not only thrive but also transform Bangladesh into a global example of sustainable progress.

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