

## BIWTA stands up to a lawmaker and river encroacher

*Sincerity of public officials can work wonders!*

WE are more than pleased to learn about the brave and determined stance of officials of the BIWTA (Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority) who stood up to a lawmaker who has encroached upon a large and crucial area of the Buriganga River in Charwashpur. During the eviction drive, the lawmaker came to the spot with around 80 people, no doubt to intimidate the BIWTA officials. But laudably the BIWTA team was ready to confront them and refused to budge and they were helped by the law enforcers who chased away the cohorts of the lawmaker.

We commend the BIWTA for being so resolute in carrying out the eviction drive of illegal structures despite them belonging to someone in such a powerful position. We need such public officials who are not intimidated or influenced by political figures who abuse their power for self-aggrandisement. And that is how it should be in the case of all government drives to stop encroachment of rivers that have rendered many of them beyond saving.

According to this paper, the lawmaker filled up around 20 acres of the river to make two extensions to his Maisha power plant along with a sprawling leisure retreat. This has blocked the entire breadth of Buriganga offshoot that eventually converges with the Dhaleswari River. This, in turn, has rendered that branch of the Buriganga dead with other encroachers grabbing the area. It is a tragedy that a lawmaker would violate the law so blatantly with no regard for the damage to a river that is a lifeline for the city. By encroaching that particular area, he has violated the Water Body Conservation Act 2000 and the Bangladesh Environmental Protection Act 1995, not to mention disregarded the High Court's declaration that rivers are living entities and legal persons and the government must protect them. The PM has also called for joint initiatives to save Buriganga and has asked for severe action against all river grabbers.

It is therefore a significant victory of the BIWTA team that they have managed to withstand the pressure of a lawmaker for the sake of saving a vital part of the Buriganga. It demonstrates what public officials can accomplish if they are sincere about their duties. There are around 450 rivers and countless other waterbodies in this country, most of them threatened by illegal land grabbing. We hope that this instance of courage and honesty will be replicated all throughout the country during such eviction drives by the BIWTA so that our rivers and water bodies can once again flow freely and become the lifelines of the cities and villages they once were.

## Healthcare facilities with poor hygiene

*98 percent of centres yet to establish WASH*

WE are dismayed by a recent report published in this daily which refers to a government study according to which, 98 percent of the healthcare centres in the districts lack water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) facilities. The study shockingly reveals the poor state in which most of the healthcare facilities are in—many of which, where WASH is non-existent—whereas cleanliness and hygiene are basic prerequisites of healthcare.

Hospitals with no basic amenities have been operating for long and we have also reported extensively on the sorry state of such institutions. Providing quality healthcare should be a top priority. Yet, it is astounding how general healthcare, which is a basic human right, is being compromised, even more so, in the rural corners of our country. It can be said that inefficiency and inertia of the responsible authorities are to blame for this.

It is to be noted that WASH is also a prime component of one of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals established by the United Nations General Assembly. So if we are to win in the race for development—for which staying healthy is essential—failure to meet the goals will further delay the process and will also put the wellbeing of citizens at risk. The report has given insightful recommendations including the proper allocation and management of more public finance in this regard. The Directorate General of Health Services must take cognisance of the matter and ensure that every health complex and hospital maintain the basic standard of cleanliness and sanitation. Establishing WASH facilities will significantly help in our fight against infectious diseases and must be made mandatory across all healthcare facilities.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Learn to live in peace

The world was shaken by the recent brutality of the ruling party's supporters in India, against those who were protesting against India's Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019. The rioters set fire to houses belonging to Muslim families. They vandalised shops and damaged property, all in the name of stopping peaceful demonstrations against the Act.

It has been alleged that law enforcers had silently watched all of this, without attempting to save those who were being attacked. BJP's rule has undoubtedly affected communal harmony in India. For the sake of peace, that loss of harmony has to be regained.

What has happened in India should be a lesson for us all. We must remember to not go down the same path, and instead, learn to live peacefully with each other, despite whatever differences we may have.

Advocate Golam Azam, Natore

# Economics and its love-hate relationship with corruption

AN OPEN DIALOGUE



ABDULLAH SHIBLI

ABHIJIT Banerjee, who was awarded the Nobel Prize in Economics in 2019, made his mark with some early work on corruption in government. However, Banerjee is not just an armchair wrestler. During the 30 years of his professional life, Banerjee, often in collaboration with his wife and fellow Nobel Laureate Esther Duflo, has conducted scientific experiments to capture the impact of corruption and identify the best intervention methods. However, as with many economic theories, the results from research are not always clean and dry.

If one were to ask you, "What is the most common problem in every modern society?", your answer is likely to be income inequality or the lack of universal healthcare. However, a recent survey revealed that one problem that has become a plague across the league of nations today is corruption. There is almost a consensus that corruption is endemic and spreading. "It exists in all countries, both developed and developing, in the public and private sectors, as well as in non-profit and charitable organisations," according to U Myint, a research scholar.

From a historical perspective, corruption has been a problem in every society and economists have grappled with it for ages. In his seminal treatise on economic system and market forces—"An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations"—Adam Smith considered corruption as an abuse of power and detrimental to society. Some of the modern world's topmost economists including the earliest recipients of the Nobel Prize in Economics—Gunnar Myrdal, Gary Becker, and George Stigler—have made their mark with scientific papers on the impact of corruption.

Unfortunately, economists have not been very forthcoming when asked to offer solutions for the problem of corruption. This attitude reminds me of Mark Twain who is often reputed to have said, "Everyone talks about the weather, but nobody does anything about it." Whatever the provenance of this interesting phrase, it has recently been adapted to engender another very apt and more modern adage: "Everyone talks about corruption, but nobody does anything about it."

Economist and Nobel Prize winner Gunnar Myrdal was puzzled by this lack of interest. In 1968, Myrdal pointed out that many rulers in developing countries "came to power on the promise that rampant bribery and nepotism would be eradicated". Myrdal concluded that academics were silent about corruption because they were embarrassed to probe

corruption in developing countries, many of which had just emerged from hundreds of years of colonial rule. Things have changed since then. A report in the *Guardian* newspaper of UK pointed out that research on corruption, both in developing and developed countries, is mainstream now, and economists are probing into where and among whom corruption is prevalent, how it works, who profits and who loses from it.

In one of his earliest papers in a prestigious scientific journal, Banerjee tries to explain why government bureaucracies are associated with red-tape, corruption, and lack of incentives. In the paper "A Theory of Misgovernance" published in the *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, he uses a simple model to consider the possible benefits of red-tape and corrupt bureaucrats who might be using

as citizens attempting to register cases. Only two of these, training and decoy visits, had robust impacts. A lesson from these experiments and other research is that government agencies could try small policy changes rather than go for major or radical institutional reform.

Samuel Fleischacker of the University of Illinois at Chicago raises another possibility which may offer some clue as to why economists have a hard time capturing corruption in a mathematical model and they lack any clear policy measures to clean up corruption. He offers a sampling of cases that point to a wide range of corruption we witness.

i) A low-paid constable offers a deal to a smuggler at the border post: the police will ignore its activities in return for a cut of his profits.

ii) A government minister appoints

not believe those tax breaks to be in the best interest of their constituencies as a whole.

Ironically, economists have also argued that corruption has a beneficial effect since it allows the entrepreneurs to get around red-tape and this increases investment. Banerjee and Duflo feel that the culture of corruption in poor countries is at least partly a result of underdeveloped institutions, including lack of democracy.

Economists attribute some of the problems they encounter in investigating the connection between corruption and GDP growth to the difficulty inherent in measuring corruption. As an example, both the businessman who offers a bribe to seek a contract and the official who takes money will try to hide or under-report the amount and nature of corruption.



"grease money" to foster better allocation of scarce resources. In other words, corruption performs the role of a lubricant to turn the wheels of economic growth. Unfortunately, Banerjee did not test his theory or predictions with real data.

However, once Banerjee and other economists refined the tools of randomised control trials (RCT), they used them to test the efficacy of various anti-corruption options. In a paper entitled, "Improving Police Performance in Rajasthan, India: Experimental Evidence on Incentives, Managerial Autonomy and Training", he and his fellow researchers tested five interventions recommended by police reform panels: limitations of arbitrary transfers, rotation of duty assignments and days off, increased community involvement, on-duty training, and visits by field officers posing

someone to a job in return for a contribution to his election campaign.

iii) A prime minister offers a judgeship to a legislator in return for the latter's support on a key vote in the parliament.

iv) A political party with a majority in the parliament passes electoral laws to enhance its chances of winning future elections.

v) A garments company makes a generous contribution to the electoral campaign of key legislators, in order to get laws crafted in its favour.

vi) A "mega project" incurs cost overruns but is not penalised because the contractors exercise their political influence at the highest levels of power.

vii) Parliament members who relied heavily on rich donors to win their electoral campaigns vote for large tax breaks for the rich, even though they do

In the end, one has to point out that corruption is not just an economic issue but also political and social. Regardless of the difficulties in measuring corruption, a multitude of studies reveal that corruption in the public sector erodes tax compliance and leads to higher tax evasion. Moreover, corrupt public officials abuse their public power to extort bribes from the private agents. In these instances, "the private agents are bound to face uncertainty with respect to their disposable incomes. Most importantly, it is demonstrated that the increase in corruption via higher uncertainty exerts adverse effects on capital accumulation, thus leading to lower growth rates."

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## NATIONAL JUTE DAY

# Why using jute bags should be made mandatory

QUAZI SALEH MUSTANZIR

RECENTLY I went to Banani kitchen market for my weekly shopping and I saw, to my astonishment, the retailer putting all the purchased items in several polythene bags which were completely banned in Bangladesh in 2002. How did these banned bags make an entry to our markets despite the government's efforts to popularise jute bags? I believe this is due to the fact that the use of jute bags is not yet mandatory for all products.

It was 1980s when polythene bags first entered the Bangladeshi market. They were light, cheap and could be disposed of after being used only one time. The bags quickly gained popularity and captured the market driving out jute shopping bags. However, our experience with plastic shopping bags is not good at all. The disposed bags find their way to detrimentally affect the environment. They reduce the fertility of soil, kill marine animals and disrupt the drainage system. The longstanding flood of



Researchers found that one hectare of jute plants sequester over 15 tonnes of carbon dioxide.

PHOTO: RASHED SUMAN

1998 was the outcome of water clogging in the sewerage line with heaps of polythene bags.

After that unprecedented flood, the government, in the face of popular demand, enacted the ground-breaking law in parliament to ban plastic shopping bags. This ban left our markets with several alternatives such as bags made of jute, cotton, paper and nylon. Which one do you think is the best? I believe no other alternative is as suitable as jute, given that it has the potential to contribute to our economy and good for the environment.

Jute was our main exporting item until the arrival of plastic shopping bags in the market. The climate and soil of our country is conducive to the production of jute. Thousands of people used to earn their livelihood through farming jute and manufacturing jute products. However, our jute industries started declining due to the

onslaught of polythene bags. But I am sure that we can revive the industry if we can ensure the use of jute shopping bags for packaging all of our daily needs.

The use of jute shopping bags will help us clean our environment. Researchers found that one hectare of jute plants sequester over 15 tonnes of carbon dioxide. Jute is fully bio-degradable, compostable and recyclable. It has no harmful effects on the human body or on Mother Nature. Jute leaves have medicinal properties and are eaten as vegetables. Jute is 100 percent non-toxic and its cultivation requires less pesticides and fertiliser. Jute bags are strong, durable and reusable.

If it has so many economic and eco-friendly attributes, why will people not use jute bags for shopping and packaging? This is because the use of jute bags has not yet been made mandatory for shopping and packaging of all commodities. The

government formulated some rules in 2013 (amended up to 2018) under the provision of Section 22 of the "Mandatory Jute Packaging Act 2010", that require businesses to compulsorily use jute bags for packaging only 19 commodities. Therefore, we do not see jute being used much for wrapping except for these 19 commodities. Owing to their limited use, jute shopping bags are still not cheaper compared to polythene bags. This factor coupled with the laxity in enforcing the law has paved the way for illegal trading of plastic shopping bags in the market.

Then how can people be made to use jute bags for shopping and packaging all goods? We can do that by bringing an amendment to the existing rules 2013 (amended up to 2018) formulated under Section 22 of the Mandatory Jute Packaging Act 2010 so as to make the use of jute bags compulsory for packaging not only 19 products, but also all other products. If we can do so, the demand for jute will rise and farmers will be more encouraged to cultivate jute. To incentivise farmers, the government could disburse microcredit among them. In addition to that, the government may pay a certain amount of subsidy for manufacturing of jute shopping bags at the initial stage to keep their price reasonable. Once the production goes up, the price of jute shopping bags will come down automatically. At the same time, our law enforcing agencies will need to monitor the market strictly to stop the illegal trading of plastic or polythene shopping bags.

Finally, I would like to reiterate that the mandatory use of jute bags can bring back the golden days of our jute sector and stop the illegal trading of plastic shopping bags. The regeneration of jute industries will create more employment opportunities, increase our export earnings, keep our environment clean and advance us towards sustainable development.

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