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FOUNDER EDITOR  
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# A planned annihilation of our brightest minds

*They will remain an eternal inspiration*

**K**ILLING of our intellectuals was conceived and planned by the Pakistan military and aided by local collaborators and abettors, the Razakars and Al Badrs. It was one among many acts of calculated, cold blooded killings that the occupation army of Yahiya Khan perpetrated in Bangladesh. Carried out on the very eve of our glorious independence and just before the surrender of the army of the much vaunted martial Pakistanis to the joint Bangladesh-India command, its sole objective was to deprive the nascent nation of the intellectual guidance that was so badly required to tide over the seminal but extremely crucial period of its independent existence.

Among them were litterateurs, politicians, journalists—in short, luminaries of the intellectual firmament who were targeted during the nine painful months under the rapacious occupation army. There were thinkers among our intellectuals and it is the thinker who controls our future, as one eminent American jurist had so wisely pronounced. And it was our future that the Pakistani army wanted to obliterate and force us to stumble upon even before we could take the first step forward in rebuilding a ravished country and healing a nation left intellectually impoverished.

We have traversed a long path, albeit chequered in many respect, in the last 50 years, and as we recall them and their sacrifices, we must admit our deep debt of gratitude to them for being icons of inspiration for us as a nation. The four fundamental articles of our national existence, the fundamental principles of the republic—Bengali nationalism, socialism, democracy and secularism—admittedly were inspired by their ideals left behind in their work. But regrettably, it seems that the idea of nation which our intellectuals had espoused, a nation that would be made up of syncretic traditions, cultures and mores, an inclusive society living in a harmonious milieu, is coming under strain by those who want to see our culture or our creed in purely binary terms.

As we mourn our martyred intellectuals, we as individuals should spare a few short moments to ponder whether we have lived up to the ideals of our martyred intellectuals. If we have gone wrong where is it that we have faltered? It requires our collective efforts to thwart the multi-pronged coercive forces eating away at the very fundamentals of our existence.

# Sustainable livelihood for ending poverty

*Hogla pata's potentials must be explored in Barishal*

**A** report published in *The Daily Star* yesterday portrayed how poverty-stricken people in Barishal are making a living by producing mats from elephant grass, locally known as hogla pata. Around 3,000 families are currently engaged in making mats from this grass in Barishal. It is also the main source of income for many women in the district. Hogla pata is easy to grow as its requirement for water and nutrients is low and it can be harvested a couple of times a year and stored all-year-round after being dried under the sun. Thus, if we can properly explore the potentials of this grass, we can ensure sustainable livelihoods for people living in poverty in the district.

Hogla pata can be woven into elegant handicraft items such as baskets, ropes, hats and can also be used for roofing and fencing. However, its current use is mostly limited to making mats due to the huge demand during Eid-ul-Azha and the business usually makes little profit due to the lack of product variety. Although it takes an entire day for a single person to make a mat, it only sells for about Tk 60 to Tk 80 depending on its size. We think, with proper support from the government, this sector can make a huge difference in ending poverty in Barishal's remote areas. Many more families can earn a living by making diversified products from this grass if they can be marketed properly. The government can help the rural artisans by providing them skills development training. If they can be trained on different designs, their income will increase significantly. According to the secretary of Barishal Business Forum, if hogla mats were considered as traditional products, the business would have accommodated at least 10,000 more people. And it is possible to earn Tk 50 crore annually from this sector if a variety of products can be made from hogla.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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No signs of Covid-19 receding

The number of Covid-19 deaths crossed the 7,000 mark recently and yet, we are not following the health and safety guidelines like we ought to. Whenever I step outside, it seems as if the pandemic is a thing of the past—no social distancing is being maintained whatsoever and many people have also given up on wearing masks. When there is an ongoing spike in the number of infections and deaths all over, especially with the winter wave, such lackadaisical behaviour is a matter of grave concern.

We must all maintain safety precautions at all cost, as it could be the difference between life and death.

Tanzila Hossain, Dhaka

# Padma Bridge and the pursuit of inclusive growth

MACRO MIRROR



FAHMIDA KHATUN

**O**N the eve of its 50th birthday, Bangladesh basks with glory and pride. The country has crossed several milestones along the way and is set to achieve many more in the coming years. With a high growth of its gross domestic product (GDP) the country has increased its per capita income much more than many of its peers and reduced the rate of poverty. Bangladesh is also ahead of South Asian and other least developed countries (LDCs) in several social indicators. This has helped Bangladesh to qualify for graduation from the LDC category in 2018 by fulfilling all three criteria set by the United Nations. In 2015, Bangladesh became a lower middle-income country from a low-income country as per the World Bank's classification of countries. The country made a spectacular performance in achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) between 2000-2015. Now Bangladesh aspires to become a developed country by 2041. And by 2024, Bangladesh is expected to come out of the LDC category. Since 2015, Bangladesh has been working towards fulfilling the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030.

On December 10, 2020, another feather in the cap was added. The dream of having a bridge over the mighty Padma river is going to be fulfilled finally. The last span of the Padma Multipurpose Bridge was installed. This will connect both sides of the Padma river. Started in December 2015, the bridge is expected to be completed by 2021. This long-awaited bridge carries significance for Bangladesh on several accounts.

**Economic and social transformation will be enormous**

Reliable infrastructure plays a key role in economic growth. Studies have found positive relationship between infrastructure and economic output in many countries. This happens through gross domestic capital formation, employment, trade and human capital. Good infrastructure enhances productive capacity and improves competitiveness of a country. There is ample evidence that infrastructure and output are mutually beneficial. That is, infrastructure boosts output and higher output also leads to better infrastructure.

The Padma Bridge is estimated to increase the GDP of the country by more than one percent. It will benefit about three crore people across 21 south-western districts of Bangladesh. These districts will be connected with the growth centres through better connectivity. They can be used as economic corridors. This will create opportunities for employment and income. The transportation system will be improved as movement of people will be enhanced. Supply chains within the country will be connected better.

Goods and services will move smoothly from one place to another. People from the south-western parts of the country are also expected to have better access to education, healthcare and other services.

Not only will people move to the urban areas easily, opportunities will also come to the rural areas. This will change the rural economy which is already undergoing transformation. The share of the agriculture sector to the GDP of the country has declined significantly with the

One of the preconditions is the development of all regions including the rural areas and creating opportunities for people everywhere. Decentralisation of services and opportunities is critical for reaping benefits from such infrastructure. For example, setting up of industries in the newly connected districts will help stop migration from the rural areas to the big cities for work. Better access to finance for small and medium businesses such as agro-processing, handicrafts and

development of the rural areas.

Cost of the infrastructure is an important factor for realising the benefits. Back in 2007, the cost of the Padma bridge was estimated to be Tk 10,161 crores. However, after several revisions, the cost has been revised upward to Tk 30,193 crores. Delay in project implementation has escalated costs as usual. Some additional features have been added to this bridge which were not originally planned. Also,



Started in December 2015, the Padma bridge is expected to be completed by 2021.

PHOTO: SK ENAMUL HAQ

emergence of non-farm activities in the rural areas. This was facilitated by several factors including better communication and connectivity.

**Bangladesh's confidence goes up**

This bridge is a testament on how a country with limited resources can achieve its goal if there is determination. Under the leadership of Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, the Padma Bridge is the outcome of dedicated work of the Bangladeshi people including government officials, engineers, planners, workers and many other concerned persons.

Undoubtedly, the construction of this 6.15 kilometre long double-deck bridge has enhanced the confidence of the country. This will allow policymakers to plan for larger infrastructure. This will also encourage foreign investors to invest in infrastructure and in other sectors in Bangladesh.

**Reaping the benefits is dependent on many factors**

Infrastructure generates economic benefit to the extent they create services for people. In other words, benefits from infrastructure are not automatic and it cannot work in isolation. The return from investitures depends on enabling policy framework and supporting measures.

food industries will also help create jobs. Besides, improvement of facilities such as uninterrupted electricity, internet, education and healthcare in the villages will restrain people from crowding the cities.

Earlier, the Jamuna Bridge which linked the north-western districts with the rest of the country had also created a lot of hope. However, much of that hope remained unfulfilled. With much dismay we observe how farmers of Sirajganj and other districts have to throw milk on the road as they do not get fair prices. Potato and other vegetable producers in the villages have to do the same due to lack of better prices for their produce.

On the other hand, students from the rural areas have to come for higher studies to Dhaka. Critical patients have to be brought to big cities for treatment despite having clinics at district and sub-district levels. Professionals and doctors do not want to live outside Dhaka. In many districts there are medical colleges and universities. Still those places are not the desired destinations due to lack of other essential amenities. Because Dhaka is the centre of all economic, administrative, social and cultural activities, people cannot do without living in and around this mega city. This is deterring the

devaluation of the taka against the US dollar has pushed the cost upwards. But how efficiently resources have been used and how wastage of resources have been managed should also be taken into consideration. This will be the lessons for future infrastructure development. High cost of the bridge could increase the toll for crossing the bridge. Higher transportation cost will raise commodity prices. Cost escalation of the bridge could also delay the recovery of the project cost.

Therefore, once the bridge is fully functional, monitoring and evaluation of the infrastructure will be critical to get the expected return. The construction of the bridge has been a landmark achievement of the government. But without its efficient management and governance, the rate of return from this mega project will be low.

Finally, as Bangladesh is working towards reviving the economy from the fallout of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Padma Bridge can help the country fulfil this effort to a great extent. It can also contribute towards achieving sustainable development.

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# Is there an alternative to fast fashion?

RMG NOTES



MOSTAFIZ UDDIN

**A**T present, the RMG industry in Bangladesh employs around four million people, a large majority of them women with dependent families. During the coronavirus pandemic we have witnessed, first-hand, the devastating impact on these workers if we remove orders from factories. Researchers from the US-based Worker Rights Consortium recently carried out a study which found garment workers are going hungry in apparel supply chains. The WRC surveyed nearly 400 workers across 158 garment factories in 9 countries. The survey respondents reported they are increasingly unable to obtain adequate food for their families—and most workers said they expected the crisis to grow worse in the months ahead.

One only needs to follow the local news in Bangladesh to see that the past nine months have been incredibly difficult for garment workers. And we also know that, as a garment production hub, Bangladesh is far more exposed than its competitors as about 84 percent of our exports are from the garment industry.

Who knows how many jobs will be lost because of this pandemic and who knows how things might play out in 2021? What we do know is that the past few months have given us an insight into what might happen if the global fashion industry decided to switch direction and move away from fast fashion. And it makes for a frightening viewing.

As we all know, there is talk in the global fashion industry of becoming more sustainable by producing clothing which lasts longer, and which is more durable. There is also talk of recycling and the circular economy in the apparel industry.

But if the fast fashion tap is turned off that spells seriously bad news for

Bangladesh. Fast fashion might not be great for the environment, but it is brilliant for job creation. It has provided consistent, reliable work for millions of women in Bangladesh. Get rid of fast fashion and move to slow fashion and you shift from an industry which is employing four million workers to one that is employing, say, one million. Perhaps even less. That is the stark reality we are looking at.

The pertinent question is where will

International Labour Organisation (ILO) or other aid agencies will come to their rescue. Bangladesh has to stand on its own two feet. Take away fast fashion, and it is in serious trouble. Have we, as an industry, thought these things through? It is people and planet, remember.

This is why we all need to be thinking about what the future might hold and how we can move towards an industry which is sustainable as well as which supports jobs for workers. The closest



An empty garment factory during a government-imposed lockdown in Ashulia, on the outskirts of Dhaka, on April 7.

PHOTO: MUNIR UZ ZAMAN/AFP

the three million of the four million workers employed in the industry go? Their employment in the country's apparel industry has uplifted them from the abyss of poverty and empowered women in a patriarchal society. These workers are mostly unskilled and uneducated—for whom there is no other viable sector in the country to be employed.

Then what will these workers do for money? Let's not pretend that the

thing I have seen to this is recycling and the circular economy, and the only brand I have seen giving this any serious attention is the Swedish giant, H&M.

H&M is often criticised for developing the fast fashion model but the company has been a true friend to Bangladesh. Moreover, it is the only major retailer which is thinking seriously about how our industry might look 10 years down the line. The company has invested more than any other organisation in supporting

the shift towards circular supply chains. For instance, it recently reached a multi-year agreement with the innovative Swedish textile recycling company Renewcell to supply it with thousands of tonnes of its virgin quality Circulose fibres which are made from unusable textile waste. H&M has now invested more than USD 100 million into textile recycling research. This suggests that it is serious—the company is not just doing this as a PR exercise.

Where does Bangladesh fit into all this? First and foremost, Bangladesh needs to be at the forefront of the recycling revolution. If we move away from fast fashion, we need replacement jobs, and this is where they will come from.

This is why I am encouraged by the recent launch of the Circular Fashion Partnership, a cross-sectoral project aimed at supporting the development of the recycling industry in Bangladesh by converting post-production fashion waste into new fashion products and seeking solutions for Covid-19-related build-up of deadstock.

But this is just a one-year partnership, and we need to be thinking long-term here. We need more initiatives like this and we need to think closely about how we can support H&M in its journey towards a circular economy.

The fashion industry generally is under huge pressure to become more sustainable, and customers are driving that. It is our job as a major production hub to support them along that road, by investing in people, technology and processes.

Fast fashion may disappear one day. Let's not allow millions of jobs in Bangladesh to disappear with it. Let's support our customers as they transition towards recycled products which are better for the environment while providing meaningful, financially rewarding work for our garment workers.

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