

Four years since Taqi's murder

Why the delay in proceedings?

It is perhaps the most injustice when parents of a slain child have to suffer the agony of knowing that the murderers are allowed to walk freely because they have the protection of powerful individuals. That is the fate of the parents of Tanwir Muhammad Taqi, the 17-year-old brilliant student who was killed, his body being later found floating in the Shitalakkhya river. It has been four years since the gruesome murder and still no charge sheet has been submitted. This -- despite complaints to the Narayanganj police accusing seven people, including two lawmakers and their sons.

The apparent reluctance of the authorities to start the proceedings indicates the impunity enjoyed by political elites so that even if their names come up in investigations, the cases often get halted because of interference or unexplained delays in the due process. Leaked drafts of the investigation report included comments from top ranking Rab officials about the involvement of a dozen people in the murder. This was reported in several newspapers. If this is so then why has there been no charge sheet against these individuals? This is a question the answer to which Taqi's parents and the entire nation are waiting for.

It is tragic that the cries for justice by the public have gone unheeded. Taqi's parents, human rights and cultural activists, even the mayor of Narayanganj believe that the law enforcers have all the information regarding who killed Taqi yet there has been a deliberate delay in the murder investigation and hence in apprehending the suspects.

In the wake of such blatant disregard for justice, we can only hope that the government will intervene and make sure that the trial proceedings start with sincerity and without further delay.

Classes in school veranda!

Renovate the school immediately

It is unsettling to note that classes for students of a primary school in Jhalakathi are being conducted on the school veranda for the last two years because of the dilapidated condition of their classrooms. That this is going on after the school authority's repeated plea to the concerned department is simply shocking. On several occasions, the local officials, too, have appealed to the relevant authorities to mitigate the sufferings of the students. It all has fallen on deaf ears. It is a shame that students in present-day Bangladesh are forced to take lessons in such condition. Regrettably, this is fairly representative of many primary schools in the country.

We are indeed at a loss to understand how long it will take the authorities to understand that two years is indeed too long a time for students to make do without a classroom and to study out in the veranda, braving unfavourable weather conditions. Must we remind the concerned officials that students can only concentrate in their studies when the physical space in which they are given lessons is secure and free from unnecessary distractions? Is this not the least we can ask for to build a meritocratic society?

We demand that the government launch an inquiry into this incident of neglect. Renovations to the classrooms need to be made on an immediate basis. Meanwhile, students have to be moved to a safer location so as to make sure their studies can go on uninterrupted. The concerned authorities should launch an investigation into the state of school structures across the country and renovate the unsafe ones without delay.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Brutality in the name of remittance

I was very concerned by the report titled "The plight of Aleya" published in your newspaper on March 5, describing the horrible experience of an expat domestic worker who has just returned from Saudi Arabia.

We are hoping to become a middle income country soon, but at what cost? What about the values and dignity of our citizens? In the name of earning foreign currency, we are pushing our underprivileged citizens into terrible conditions. Around 1,000 women have come back home from Saudi Arabia due to various reasons till February this year.

Hundreds of families have submitted written applications to the Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training (BMET) and the Wage Earners Welfare Board (WEWB) in the past few months, asking them to bring their relatives back from Saudi Arabia. Officials at the Bangladesh missions in Riyadh and Jeddah have reported more than 400 female migrants staying at separate safe houses after leaving their employers on allegations of abuse and illness.

Our embassies are so overwhelmed with so many complaints that they are struggling to handle the pressure.

If we cannot train our workers properly and arm them with the knowledge and ability to protect themselves in a foreign land, then we have no right to push them into the darkness this way. I hope our authorities will pay heed to this outcry and immediately stop these cruel trends.

 Zubair Khaled Huq
 Dhaka

Asia's massive infrastructure gap

NO FRILLS



SYED MANSUR HASHIM

ASIA is suffering from a USD 26 trillion infrastructure gap that threatens future growth. That is the subject matter of a recent report titled "Meeting Asia's

Infrastructure Needs" by the Asian Development Bank (ADB). Fast growing economies have been urged to double their spending on transport, power and sanitation. China spends 90 percent of the projected spending which perhaps explains that nation's phenomenal economic growth. However, as pointed out by *The Financial Times* in a recent article, "This requires countries across the region to double total annual spending to about \$1.7 trillion in areas ranging from transport to basic sanitation. The warning signals that even a big improvement in infrastructure in the past two decades has failed to keep pace with the rapid growth of economies, population and urbanization. The shortfall is most acute outside China." Indeed, as pointed out by Takehiko Nakao, president of ADB, "There is a huge gap still to provide power and roads and railways. All these things are missing."

According to ADB, more than half the estimated spending should go to transport and a third to power which translates into upgrading and building new ports, expanding railways and rail links, and highways that connect countries to regional and global markets. An additional USD 800 billion will be needed for projects that will help an estimated 1.5 billion people who currently have no access to basic sanitation and the other 300 million who are bereft of safe drinking water. One of the largest infrastructure projects of recent times, the East-West Economic Corridor that spans across the Mekon subregion between the coasts of Myanmar and Vietnam, has hit bureaucratic bottlenecks and other regional tensions -- critics say, the rate of implementation has not been as expected and hence the obvious benefits have been slow in materialising. Transnational political tensions and bureaucratic wrangling have helped slow down a slew of critical projects like the high-speed rail line that would link

Kunming with the Lao capital of Vientiane, Bangkok and Thai coast.

Moving to the South Asian region, we find that Public Private Partnerships (PPPs) could play a major role in advancing many of the envisaged mega projects, but for that to happen some things need to change and change rapidly. There is need for regulatory and institutional reforms that would make it appealing for private investors and open up the prospect of banking finance for PPPs. Countries in our region, including Bangladesh, would have to enact PPP

trickier for private sector investment to fill up the rest of the gap (three percent of GDP), which would require an increase in investments from the current USD 63 billion to as much as USD 250 billion a year over the 2016-2020 period.

With the public sector financing up to 92 percent of all infrastructure needs, it becomes imperative to look into expanding tax and non-tax revenues and getting greater support from multilateral development banks (MDBs). In the case of Bangladesh, we now have access to AIIB (the China-led global financial

subsidies which are a major strain on the national exchequer. Bangladesh has been cutting back on energy subsidies of late, and although it is an unpopular move, sometimes one must swallow the bitter pill because those financial resources can be better spent elsewhere.

Much emphasis has been placed on private sector investments and not without reason. The ADB study states that these investments are important in many sectors including power. Private sector investments can be expanded to other areas including transport and water



Fast growing economies in Asia should double their spending on transport, power and sanitation to spur growth.

laws, streamline PPP procurement and bidding processes, put into place dispute resolution mechanisms and more importantly, establish independent PPP government units.

There is a significant gap between actual investments and what is needed. What is of import is that the ADB believes the gap must be filled by both public and private sectors. We find that a lot of emphasis has been put on finance reforms which, if implemented, is projected to free up additional revenues that could potentially meet up to 40 percent of the gap (or two percent of the GDP) for 24 economies (excluding China). The situation gets much

institution), along with ADB and World Bank (WB). In the Asian context, the ADB and WB have long held sway, with the IFC (WB's private sector development financing unit) committing up to USD 3 billion (which is nearly a third of WB's USD 10 billion commitment to the region). Obviously, this is a spit in the ocean, given Asia's needs (including Bangladesh). Hence, there is no recourse but to increase revenues through tax reform, which does not necessarily mean increasing the tax slabs, but rather calls for improving the tax administration to tap into untapped areas and broadening the tax base. There is also need to narrow

supply because cost recovery is possible in these areas. But for any significant rise in private investments to happen, countries like ours will have to provide an enabling environment, and put a regulatory regime in place that allows for private finance to play a greater role. There is only so much the public sector can do, given that the national budget in developing countries like Bangladesh must contend with so many different sectors, and financing for all major infrastructure projects cannot be met. Hence it is no longer an option to discount private sector investment.

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Desperation and aspiration in UP's east

People want out of their sub-Saharan trap. Politicians, including the PM, don't get it.



SHEKHAR GUPTA

BADLANDS is one of those familiar Americanisms, like ballpark, Wild West and gentrification that feature in our usage more as malapropisms. In

Uttar Pradesh, many zones vie for that description. Barren, eroded valleys along the Yamuna and Chambal in Bundelkhand and Etawah would match it literally and also in the more popularly understood sense of lawless zones.

Further east, landscape is more lush, fed by more orderly and normal water-courses, with fertile banks. But rule of law can decline as fast as quality of life. Open, overflowing drains, sewers, loose wires overhead, permanent stink in the air, potholes, encroachments, stunted children, sunken-cheeked adults, hundreds killed each year by some scourge labelled Japanese Encephalitis. Whatever goes for sidewalks paved comprehensively with garbage, given a kind of durability because of the amount of plastic waste mixed in it, bottles, plates, bags, wrappers. Except late night, when—at least in and around the more "posh" parts of Gorakhpur, where the new shopping malls, restaurants and the odd spa are to be found—it is swept and piled, neatly, in the middle of the road.

Gorakhpur is pretty much the capital of eastern and most hopeless zone of UP. There's the open border with Nepal on the north, rougher eastern districts (including Kushinagar, among the most important Buddhist sites) bordering western Bihar, and even more messed up districts of Deoria, Azamgarh, Ballia, Jaunpur, etc., in the south. We have long accepted that the northeast is India's forgotten zone, out of sight, out of mind. You can also come to Eastern Uttar Pradesh, especially Gorakhpur for that experience.

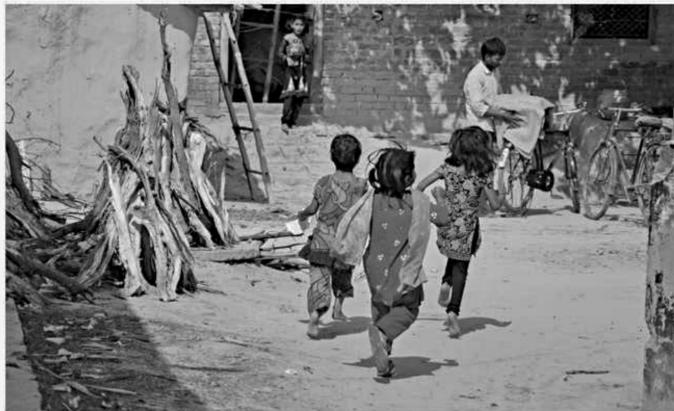
You can have two views of Gorakhpur, depending on where you look, downwards or up, terrestrial or aerial. If under your feet there's just muck, up there, left, right and front at road-junctions, is wherewithal to get away from it all. Writings On The Wall have taken note of the boom in private sector higher education, English-medium schools and coaching centres in the heartland for 15 years now. Education emerged as the most popular consumer product in small-town India, post-1991 reform. In Eastern UP or Purvanchal it has gone to a completely different, unreal level. Hoardings, some the size of Tollywood cinema in Hyderabad, stand wall-to-wall, offering a

ticket to a job far away from here.

On a late night walk in and around Civil Lines area, I counted 200 hoardings of all kinds. A little over 170 of these were about education, training, coaching for competitive examinations, spoken English classes. One mocks you in bold Hindi letters: *Kya aap samajhte hain aapko angrezi ki zaronat nahin hai?* (Do you really think you don't need English skills?). Another presents to you Dr Rahul Roy, whose PMT coaching has "already produced 1012 doctors from Purvanchal in 18 years", a kind of medical equivalent of Patna's famed engineering Super 30. There is nothing the young Purvanchali wants more desperately than to escape to a place with less hopelessness, and some opportunity. A few may crack a coveted competition, rest fill up our rotting metro suburbs and slums, pulling rickshaws, providing labour at

More ironically, it is an error of understanding we have noted Rahul Gandhi making in past campaigns. Like him in the 2012 state election, Modi also spoke of economic migration as the region's curse. Don't all of you young people want jobs within your own janpad (taluka) so you don't have to go far away? Which young person doesn't want to live close to his old parents? He asked these questions and paused, looking for response. If he was surprised by how muted it was, he also doesn't understand the flight-not-flight desperation of Purvanchalis.

The issue here isn't just education or jobs, but the suboptimal quality of life you are condemned to, way below your means, however modest. Open drains become canals in the monsoon, you endlessly swallow an air laden with dust and so many mosquitoes that you might swallow a



Mijwan is a tiny village of eastern Uttar Pradesh with a population of 600 people, one of the poorest regions in the world.

PHOTO: WWW.MIJWANINDENMARK.DK

construction sites, selling fruit and vegetables on hand-carts, running tiny chai-shops. No filmmaker would even bother to flatter this forgotten zone of more than six crore Indians with something like "Udta Purvanchal" although its young people mostly have one aspiration: to fly away.

To call Prime Minister Narendra Modi a brilliant orator does no justice to his phenomenal talent at engaging with his audience. He knows what they want to hear, when, and in what tone. Add to this his gift of timing, pauses, body language with arms waving in a wide arc, a reversed palm slapping the other when he thinks he has made a good point. You are surprised, therefore, to make that rare discovery: of a false note in his near-perfect campaign script in Deoria, about 60 km away.

few if you talk on the phone while walking. The Prime Minister also read out a passage from UP government's own website admitting that parts of the state had below sub-Saharan social indicators. It could have been talking about Purvanchal.

Some of the region's curse lies in its geography. Gorakhpur is too far from just about anywhere, and doesn't fall on any of the trunk rail or highway grids in the country. Until not too long ago, it was still in the metre-gauge zone. Its people were always talented, hardy and rebellious. The midway stop between Gorakhpur and Deoria is Chauri Chaura, where a mob burnt the police station killing 23 policemen in February 1922 and jolted Mahatma Gandhi into calling off his first non-cooperation

movement and go on a fast in penance. The British declared martial law, and let loose a reign of reprisals and terror. Nehru came to protest, was arrested here, and you wonder how he would have made it to a place so distant now, 94 years later. In Gorakhpur jail, famous revolutionary Ram Prasad Bismil was hanged. But the region was still too far.

Revolutionaries have now been succeeded by mafiosos. Harishankar Tiwari and Virendra Pratap Shahi, who ran storied, brutal and blood-feuding Brahmin and Rajput mafias, are no more. But there are any number of smaller gangs and any time a Supari killing takes place in far cities you'd find some usual suspects from hereabouts. Vishal Bhardwaj's *Ishqiya* captured this in an unforgettable dialogue between Naseeruddin Shah and Arshad Warsi, who play a felonious uncle-nephew duo on the run, hiding around Gorakhpur. "Let's get our backsides out of here, maamu (uncle)," says Warsi. "In our Bhopal only Shias and Sunnis fight. Here Brahmins, Thakurs, Yadavs, Jats all have *senas* (private armies)." This is how Purvanchal also passes the test of the popular meaning of the epithet badlands.

The reigning sovereign of Gorakhpur isn't a feudal or conventional mafioso. It's a well-muscled, articulate, saffron-clad baba, Yogi Adityanath, hereditary chief of the powerful Gorakhnath mutt (which gives Gorakhpur its name). He's been elected from here five times and is expected to deliver BJP bulk of the district's seats. His temple and mutt is the most prominent landmark of the region, and also the cleanest. He gives us an audience in a hall lined with portraits of his ancestors with description of which deity or godly trait each one personified. Why has BJP not fielded any Muslims in this election? Winnability counts, he says, and so what if there are no Muslims in BJP list, because there are never any communal riots here. Why so, we ask. "Because of our fair governance and fear (*bhay*)," he says. Why fear, and whose fear, we ask. The question is ignored.

His eyes light up when the idea of splitting UP into smaller states comes up. One of these would be Purvanchal. This election isn't the time for this, he says, but makes it evident he looks forward to it later and sees himself as its natural chief minister. With such prospects written on the wall, who wouldn't listen to Arshad Warsi's advice? And get his backside out of here.

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