

## Defaulter within

### A disturbing sign

WE are shocked to know from a report in this daily, that a general manager of Bangladesh Bank has been found to be a loan defaulter of 11 banks. The irony of the central bank having an employee who has violated the basic rules of taking bank loans while it is trying to tackle the unbridled default culture in the banking sector, cannot be emphasised enough. We are mystified that this errant official could have carried on his unethical practice of abusing his position to secure these loans and then not repaid them without any kind of detection until now.

The *Daily Star* report has found that this person has also taken loans amounting to about Tk 1 crore from colleagues on an informal basis. This indicates that people in his workplace were aware of his incorrigible habit of taking money and not repaying it. Why did they not report him?

Whether it is overindulgence of an employee gone astray or negligence to detect such unethical behaviour, the bottom line is that the central bank should have been alerted much earlier that an employee was breaking the most basic conditions of taking a bank loan.

That this man has been found out is good news but we cannot help but wonder whether there are other such corrupt individuals in the central bank's payroll who are misusing their power in a similar way and getting away with it. The central bank must be vigilant of such practices and go hard on individuals found to be violating the very rules they are supposed to enforce on others. If the central bank demands accountability from all other banks, it must do so of its own employees. The image and proper functioning of the central bank is at stake.

## Children at risk

### Eradicate child labour

WHILE child labour has been criminalised in Bangladesh, the social structures are such that engaging children in the labour force is commonplace. The findings from survey titled "Child labour eradication in risky works in Bangladesh (3rd phase)" conducted by the Implementation, Monitoring and Evaluation Division (IMED) under the Ministry of Planning, therefore, are not surprising.

The impact evaluation survey indicated that a staggering 81 percent of children are engaged in risky works to add to the incomes of their families. Around 60 percent of the children work during daytime while 40 percent children work during daytime and nighttime despite the Shishu Ain, 2013 prohibiting it. Under the Shishu Ain, 2013 exploitation of children is a legal offence punishable with imprisonment for up to two years or a fine of up to Tk 50,000 or both. While the Act is not clear on what counts as exploitation, there should be no doubt that letting children engage in work in hazardous situations is not acceptable.

This demonstrates that it is not enough to have legal structures in place. Around 15 percent of the child workers who participated in the study said they are engaged in works on their guardians' interest while 10 percent of the children are at work as they are not enrolled in any school. Therefore, we must take into account economic and social structures that propagate this situation.

In an ideal world, children would be allowed to play, learn and grow. It is disheartening to see that Bangladesh is so far from seeing this ideal. It is time to consider the matter of child labour with the seriousness it deserves.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Severe noise pollution in Dhaka

While I appreciated the editorial on noise pollution published on October 8 in *The Daily Star*, I must point out that if the public does not bother to be conscious, rules cannot make noise pollution go away.

I find it very amusing that while stuck in traffic, many vehicles keep honking their horn despite the fact that it would not even help them at the slightest. The owners or passengers sitting in the back of these vehicles are also least bothered by this.

If the passengers at least ask their drivers to stop doing so, noise pollution would decrease significantly. And the media too can play a constructive role in this regard.

Ziauddin Ahmed, By email

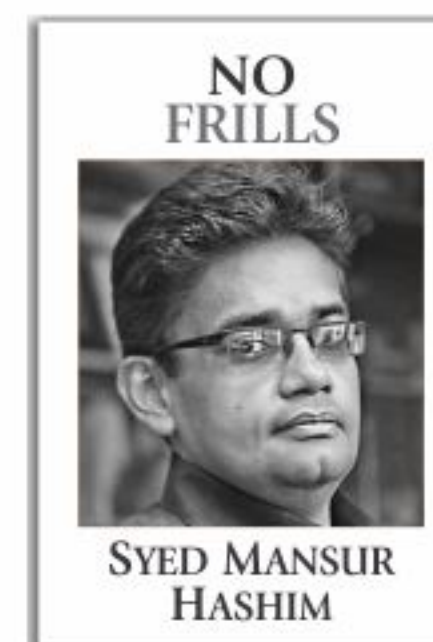
### Reconsider increase of holding tax

It has been reported that holding tax has been increased up to eleven times the previous rate. Surely, this will result in the increase of house rent. Middle or low-income families are already hard-pressed because of the rising prices of food. This sudden rise of house rent will make their lives even more difficult.

One wonders why the city corporation has taken such a radical decision to raise the holding tax to such an extent. We hope that the authorities will reconsider their decision.

Zabed Wali, By email

# The rise of OBOR



NO FRILLS

SYED MANSUR HASHIM

Secretary Shahidul Haque explained at the World Economic Forum (WEF) meeting in Delhi on October 5 that this has everything to do with regional economic integration. Needless to say, much thought must have gone into getting on to OBOR especially in light of the fact that India boycotted the OBOR forum in May this year but which was attended by our representatives.

The forum meeting was attended by 29 heads of state and government and representatives from 130 countries and 70 international organisations and India's absence was felt loud and clear. The decision to go with the OBOR initiative is a natural choice for the country. Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Dhaka last year ushered in USD 24.45 billion in firm investments—the largest ever investment by one country in our history.

Despite criticism from both home and abroad, the government's decision should be lauded as a pragmatic step in becoming part of something that surpasses the Marshall Plan which the US launched for the reconstruction of a devastated Europe after World War II. When we look at OBOR, it reminds us of other great powers and their ascendance to economic supremacy in the global order. Today, China is essentially following the examples set by UK and later, the US, in their global expansion through acquiring other foreign territories to essentially sell goods that could not be consumed in their respective domestic markets. These were early examples of economic expansion. As we move to the 21st century, the model has changed and the one offered by China today is much bigger than the world has ever seen. The success of OBOR in garnering so much support across continents is perceived by the US as a direct threat to its dominance in the world economic order.

When we look at economic might,

China has indeed overtaken the US as the world's leading manufacturer. As per 2014 World Bank data, China surpassed the US as the largest economy. Undoubtedly, for Washington, such pressures must be telling as it tries to grapple with the rise of both China's economic might and the banking institution it has founded—the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB)—to bankroll initiatives like OBOR that is valued at anywhere between USD 4 to 8 trillion. The Marshall Plan (in 2016 dollar value) is

like to do business with AIIB because it does not come with extra strings attached like "good governance", "transparency and accountability" and promoting "democratic" values—values essentially reflecting Western ideals that may not always find a ready audience in other parts of the world.

Precisely what the US can do to stop countries from the South Asian region (which have valid reasons to join) from joining is of course unclear. It had little success in stopping major European allies from joining AIIB a year ago

water, and road connectivity to cater to its expanding population.

These facts were surely taken into consideration by our policymakers when Bangladesh got on to the OBOR bandwagon. And although it puts Bangladesh into somewhat of an awkward position with its large neighbour India that is opposed to the OBOR initiative, our policy has always been based on "friendship towards all and malice towards none." Bilateral relations between Bangladesh and India have never been so good and



The China-Pakistan Friendship Highway runs over 1,300 kilometres (800 miles) from the far western Chinese city of Kashgar through the world's highest mountain pass and across the border.

PHOTO: AFP

estimated to have amounted to around USD 130 billion.

The US has tried and failed to stop many of its strongest allies from joining AIIB. Today, it is fighting a less than successful battle against OBOR, which is already being rolled out in various parts of the world. The basic reality is that many countries like Bangladesh need billions of dollars in infrastructural investment and OBOR has the potential to make a major contribution here. Again, many countries in Asia and Africa

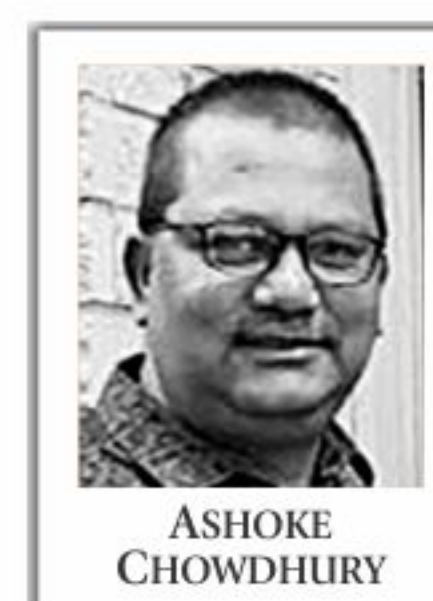
because the signs are quite clear that much of the economic growth in the next decades will come from the Asian region. To become part of that reality, Asian economies like Bangladesh will have to invest significantly in developing its infrastructure. Indeed, according to a World Bank report titled "Reducing Poverty by Closing South Asia's Infrastructure Gap", Bangladesh will have to invest to the tune of USD 7 to 10 billion a year until 2020 to upgrade its infrastructure, which includes power,

regional economic integration with India and beyond is making good progress in a number of ways (e.g. Bangladesh-India-Nepal initiative) that allow for agreements on connectivity of power, transport and infrastructure among other things. OBOR is an opportunity of a lifetime and Bangladesh has taken it because we simply cannot allow ourselves to be left behind.

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 Syed Mansur Hashim is Assistant Editor, *The Daily Star*.

## INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY RIGHTS

# Protecting what is ours



ASHOKE CHOWDHURY

open market economy, free trade and corporate globalisation, multinational companies are legitimising their control over all the vital resources and knowledge. The rich and the powerful are grabbing all inventions and innovations, and making money out of it by patenting them, which is actually tantamount to robbery in broad daylight. And this they are doing by staying within the conventional legal

IN a world dominated by ruthless battles for corporate supremacy, it is the intellectual right or ownership of a product that mostly emerges as the deciding factor. In an age of

are making enormous profits by using international patent laws as their instrument of economic and political exploitations. It is the Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) agreement of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) that allows rich countries to loot poor ones; as the agreement helps neo-imperialists acquire ownership right by inventing a technology or formula of a commodity alone and not by producing the commodity itself.

Making a patent of a life or living being is unfair. Multinational companies are allowed to steal folk knowledge and traditional properties of the so-called third world by turning the latter's biodiversity into commercial products. According to the International Biodiversity Declaration 1992, every country can maintain control over its genetic properties which are included in

brought to the knowledge of the republic so that the inventor could receive its patent right. And it was not until 1911 that a patent law was introduced in the subcontinent and that was done by the British colonisers. Over a century has passed and surprisingly no change has been brought to this law, making it largely ineffective and leaving Bangladeshi innovations at risk of falling into the wrong hands.

For example, the Bangladesh Forest Research Institute boasts more than 100 innovations, but apparently none of them are patented. The same goes for the Bangladesh Forest Industries Development Corporation that claims to have innovated over 50 technologies. Some of these innovations are in bamboo cultivation through twig grafting, creating groves of *golpata* (nipa palm) and other trees in mangrove forests, tissue culture

which historically is a product of Bangladesh. Our behemoth neighbour already has the Geographical Indication (GI) for Fazli mangoes and has filed the same for *nakshi kantha*, a centuries-old heritage of ours. We almost lost the GI of hilsa fish, had it not been for the prompt steps of the authorities. If this patent aggression continues, not only will our scientists and researchers lose interest in innovating, but we will also, once the TRIPS agreement becomes effective, have to pay royalties to some other country or entity for technologies that we had originally invented or innovated in Bangladesh.

But this does not mean we cannot regain the patents. American food grain company Ricetec patented two varieties of Basmati rice of the Indian sub-continent and named them "Kasmati" and "Techsmati". But the Indian authorities acted quickly and, following an international arbitration, got back the patent right of Basmati. The precedence is there. What we need now is to act immediately, starting at the policy level.

Intellectual property rights depend on three acts—Copyright Act, Patents and Designs Act, and Trademarks Act. The Patents and Designs Act was legislated during the British Raj in 1911, and though India and Pakistan rectified the Act long ago, it has remained untouched in Bangladesh. India legislated the Geographical Indication of Goods (Registration & Protection) Act in 1999 and started to patent its products immediately afterwards. But in Bangladesh, the draft of a GI Act has for years been waiting to be finalised.

Besides those already mentioned, we have numerous other products to boast of. These include different varieties of paddy, rice and jute, milk curd of Bogra, Tangail sarees, *kanchagolla* (a sweetmeat) of Natore, *khadi* clothes of Comilla, honey from the Sundarbans, *tiler khaja* (sweetmeat made of sesame seeds and sugar), gunny bags, earthen pitchers, *shitalpati* (mat made of fine cane strips), handloom clothes, *shatranji* (a type of indigenous cotton carpet) of Rangpur, *katan saree* of Mirpur, indigenous musical instruments *ektara* and *dotara*, folk songs like Bhaoyaiya and Bhatiyali, etc.

It is time we took committed steps to protect the intellectual rights of what is ours, and thereby, to make a mark in the world as a nation of rich resources and innovation. And for this, what we need is a synchronised and systematic effort from scientists, researchers and, of course, the concerned government authorities.

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 Ashoke Chowdhury is Head of News, Boishakhi Television.



India already has the Geographical Indication for Fazli mangoes and has filed the same for *nakshi kantha*, a centuries-old heritage of ours.

 SOURCE:  
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structure. When the global scenario is so dire, Bangladesh has no time-befitting law and is putting in barely any visible effort to preserve intellectual property of products invented here.

Profiteering patent aggression is a relatively new phenomenon which poor countries like Bangladesh are easily falling victim to. Neo-imperial powers

its biodiversity. It says that patent rights should not hinder the sustainable use of biodiversity.

The history of patent preservation trails as far back as the Hellenistic period. The modern patent system, however, was first introduced in Italy in 1474. It was written in a declaration of the Republic of Venice that every new invention should be

system, wood seasoning with solar power, preserving electric wire poles, using wood as railway slippers, etc. Due to lack of awareness and weak legal infrastructure on patenting in Bangladesh, patents of many innovative technologies of ours have already been allotted to India. Indian weavers have patented two variants of *jamdani* saree,