

A flyover becomes a thorn for BRT

Please listen to the experts!

We are baffled and disappointed to know that the much-hyped Bus Rapid Transit route that was supposed to cover 22 km of road and relieve much of the traffic congestion of Dhaka city will actually cover only a 10 km stretch. What's more, even this much curtailed goal will not be accomplished before 2024. And the reason why we are getting only half our dreams come true (if they do at all) is that a number of arbitrarily built flyovers are blocking the BRT proposed routes.

This dismal situation is directly the result of poor planning and disregard for expert advice regarding the location of these flyovers. Despite repeated warnings from experts the Mohakhali-Mouchak flyover was built, even though it was clear that it would block the BRT route. Why, when a committee led by technical experts, recommended dedicated lanes on the Moghbazar-Mouchak flyover for BRT, the LGED ministry, the implementing authority to build the flyover, completely ignored their advice? Instead, the flyover was extended time and again, further blocking the proposed BRT route.

It is beyond comprehension that the concerned ministry would prioritise car-oriented flyovers over a mass transport facility that would have provided transport to thousands of people, largely easing the traffic congestions we experience due to too many cars on the road. The BRT solution would have provided affordable, comfortable, safe transport to the people—if it could be fully implemented. Cutting the route by half will actually cause more problems for travellers as they will have to get off where the BRT route ends and look for another mode of transport to get to their destination. How does this make sense?

This rather costly lesson should awaken the concerned ministry to the fact that uncoordinated, unplanned projects are destined to cause irreparable damage, in this case a halved, much needed BRT route. For the future, we urge the authorities to please, listen to the experts.

Nurses' behaviour condemnable

An expectant mother denied admission to hospital

We are deeply disturbed by the insensitive behaviour of two nurses of a government health complex who, reportedly, refused to admit an expectant mother, who was in labour, for reasons unknown. Having been driven away from the hospital, the unfortunate woman had to give birth in the hospital compound under a tree without any medical assistance.

What we do not understand is who gave the nurses the authority to drive away the woman from the hospital? Were there no doctors present at the hospital at the time to serve the woman? The woman and her husband came from a long distance just to avail the service of the healthcare professionals and instead of getting treatment, they had to face such insensate behaviour from the staff present there. While getting ante-natal care at government hospitals is a right of all expectant mothers, such attitude of nurses towards a woman who was in labour is shocking.

Also, when there is a serious lack of awareness among people, particularly in the rural areas, about the importance of giving birth at hospitals and while different government and non-government organisations are trying hard to raise that awareness, such behaviour of nurses will only discourage expectant mothers to go to public hospitals for safe deliveries. We hope the hospital authorities would investigate the matter and take punitive actions against the nurses and staff involved so that this serves as a deterrent, in this and in other government health complexes.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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PHOTO: STAR

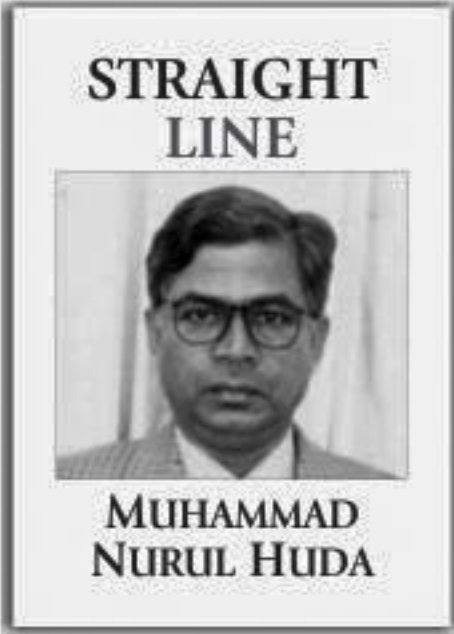
Streamlining CNG service

Along with buses, it is now time to streamline the city's CNG service as well. The authorities have declared that all CNGs plying the roads must have functional pay-metres installed in them. And for passengers to be charged fares accordingly. Yet, most CNG drivers refuse to accept fares as per the metre and the most common excuse is almost always that the roads are congested. The other most common excuse is that the owners of the CNG they are driving are charging them unreasonably high amounts, which forces them to charge passengers more.

This practice must stop. The authorities should ensure that CNG drivers comply with their directive. But they must also be mindful to address the problem they are having with CNG owners who too must not be allowed to exploit passengers or drivers.

AKM Ehsanul Haque, Dhaka

What young Bangladeshis ought to know of Bangabandhu



along with most of his family members, it is only proper that the post-liberation generations, particularly the younger segment amongst them, get to know the real dimension of the towering Bangabandhu. Events need to be put in the correct historical perspective to enable proper understanding of the lifelong struggle of this iconic leader.

Bangladeshis need to gratefully appreciate that Bangabandhu is incomparable because he was courageous, and it was his moral and physical courage combined that was unprecedented in the annals of our historic political struggle. One needs to know that he spent almost the best part of his youth in prison for the liberation of his people.

Coming to facts, the young men and women need to appreciate that it is only the myopic elements that have focused their attention on the charged protests of March 1971 in Chittagong and credit a military commander with the declaration of independence although the same figure made a proclamation in the name of Bangabandhu. Such deliberate distortion has ignored the broader canvas of our independence movement traversing four decades.

If young Bangladeshis have a caring mind to know the supreme leader and also the proclaimer of our independence, they need to hear Bangabandhu's historic speech of March 7, 1971 wherein he explicitly said, "The struggle this time is for our emancipation. The struggle this time is for independence." What greater clarity could one seek in locating the proclaimer of our independence movement?

Dispassionate Bangladeshis can gauge the intrepidity of Bangabandhu by understanding the socio-economic realities of post-partition East Pakistan. At a time when there was real dearth of educated and conscious Bangali

activists, Bangabandhu was Bengal's fearless spokesperson continuously defying the establishment. Here was a leader who spent two-third of his youth in jail for advocating Bengal's causes. History testifies that he never compromised with his political commitment and the decade of 1960s witnessed proud and forthright Bangalis protesting and dominating Pakistan's political landscape. Bangabandhu's deft political stewardship galvanised the entire Bangali population and the rest is history.



Bangabandhu's historic speech at the Racecourse on March 7, 1971.

PHOTO: JALALUDDIN HAIDER

One has to imagine the initial years of the decade starting 1960, when the military junta took upon itself the task of teaching the nation about the basics of democracy and found spineless collaborators from this part of the world; one has to think of that time when East Bengal's political world was pathetically lackadaisical and courage was in short supply. It was in such circumstances that the Bangalis had to be awakened from their somnolence, if not deep slumber.

One also has to imagine the 1960s when Bangalis of erstwhile East Pakistan were subjected to the most humiliating treatment. It was no exaggeration to say that they were experiencing the tribulations of a colonised people. In an atmosphere of

all-pervasive fear and subjugation, it was Bangabandhu who confronted the mighty Field Marshal Ayub Khan and showed the guts to forcefully advocate the rights of fellow Bangalis. During the trial of the so-called Agartala Conspiracy Case in Dhaka Cantonment, Bangabandhu took to task the rogue Pakistani army personnel and cautioned them to behave. He did not agree to participate in the Round Table Conference as a prisoner. The 1960s were, in fact, a time when all Bangalis could justifiably

despite being cautioned, Bangabandhu shouted at them by threatening that he has not come to Lahore for seeking votes as he had plenty of them in his place, and that they either listen to him or disappear from the meeting area. No Bangali had ever publicly ventured to rebuke the power-obsessed high nosed Punjabis in such a raw manner.

History tells us that when Bangabandhu, the poet of politics, spoke, it had an electrifying impact on the Bangalis whose spirit soared immeasurably in heightened expectations. Their support for their leader was total as evidenced in the historic landslide electoral victory of the nationalist causes in 1970. When the time came for tough talks across the table Bangabandhu did not wilt. In fact, the cabal of Pakistani army generals that accompanied General Yahya Khan for the mischievous meeting in March 1971 were awed and surprised by his forthright presentation.

It is also a fact of history that the post-partition scenario in Pakistan did not witness much of a change. The military-civil bureaucracy conspired with the business oligarchy and the landed gentry to protect their vested interests. People's emancipation did not figure seriously in the politician's scheme of things. It was in these circumstances that Bangabandhu could galvanise a somnolent people into unprecedented political activism for achieving real freedom.

Bangladeshis need to recognise that Bangabandhu was gifted with extraordinary organisational acumen and had the inkling of the mischief of the Pakistani military junta. Accordingly, he exhorted the people for an imminent armed struggle. His historic March 7 speech bears eloquent testimony to that. Precariously positioned as he was in the extremely demanding tumultuous days of March 1971, Bangabandhu acted as a constitutional politician with supreme forbearance.

We need to appreciate that Bangabandhu could never be cowered into submission. The trappings of power did not allure him and he remained a solid rock in the shifting sands. It is time once again for grateful Bangladeshis to remember and pay homage to the great patriarch.

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RTI FOOTPRINTS IN SOUTH ASIA

Tapping its potential for public causes

SHAMSUL BARI and RUHI NAZ

OUR region is well-known for its deep-rooted culture of official secrecy inherited from colonial times. So why the proliferation of a rigorous law that gives citizens a tool to probe their governments and restrain their arbitrary use of power? Nearly all countries in South Asia have now enacted a Right to Information (RTI) Act.

The answer may lie in the fact that the majority of around 115 countries worldwide which have adopted the law so far have done so in little more than two decades following the demise of the Soviet Union and the emergence of newly independent democratic states from its ashes. The world seems to have suddenly discovered the importance of transparent and accountable governance for democracy.

But adopting a law is not the same as using it. This is evident from the extent and nature of the application of the law in the region.

In India, the law got off to a heady start from the beginning, as evidenced by the large number of RTI requests filed with public authorities annually, at both federal and state levels. That has not been the case in other countries, where the number of requests, both in absolute and relative terms, is much smaller. In terms of the nature of RTI requests, except for India and more recently Sri Lanka, the law is used more for personal reasons than for public causes. Unless the latter happens and RTI footprints in a country deepen, the efficacy of the law will be minimal.

Below are a few recent examples from the region showing how the law has been used to obtain strategic information from public offices.

SRI LANKA: The Airline Pilots Guild of Sri Lanka filed an RTI request to the SriLankan Airlines for all correspondence and information, including profits, losses and damages, related to its entry into a lease agreement with Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) and subsequent termination of that contract; information related to the cancellation of orders for Airbus A350s from another

airline; details of salaries, allowances and other benefits of the CEO, the Head of Human Resources and the Chief Commercial Officer.

After the carrier refused the request citing exemptions, the Pilots Guild lodged an appeal with the Right to Information Commission of Sri Lanka. After hearing arguments from both sides, the RTIC ordered SriLankan Airlines to release nearly all the information sought. It was revealed that SriLankan's CEO received a monthly salary of Rs 3.27 million; his flying training cost the national carrier USD 23,568; he received a company-maintained vehicle and driver; and SriLankan Airlines agreed to pay a total of USD 161 million to terminate the lease agreements for four Airbus A35.

INDIA 1: As in Bangladesh, prisons in Uttar Pradesh (UP), India, are heavily overcrowded, lodging a much larger number of prisoners than they can accommodate comfortably. About 60 percent of the prisoners are under trial, many having stayed in jail longer than the prison terms prescribed under the law for their offences.

In response to an RTI query from a member of the National Campaign for People's Right to Information (NCPRI), the Inspector-General (Prisons) of UP admitted that the total number of prisoners lodged in state jails is more than the maximum population of prisoners they can support. His response was used to file a public interest litigation to the Supreme Court, which issued a notice to the Centre and all states giving them five weeks' time to respond. The SC also issued a notice to the National Crime Records Bureau and urged it "to intervene and direct government to frame a policy to grant bail to prisoners facing trial for offences in which punishment ranges between three and seven years."

INDIA 2: To find out about the incidence of medical negligence in hospitals in the Gurgaon district near New Delhi, an activist filed an RTI request to the district authorities. The disclosed information revealed that from 2016 to

2017, there were 46 cases of gross medical negligence at private and government hospitals in the area. Inspection reports on both small and large hospitals, filed by the Food and Drugs Department of the Haryana government, revealed various lapses. Another damning report resulting from a different RTI request revealed that over 224 private clinics in the Gurugram district were being operated by charlatans. As a result of the revelations, the Haryana government is considering bringing in a Clinical Establishment Act to address the problem.

NEPAL: Nepal is often crippled by shortages of petroleum products. Waiting for hours in long queues for a small amount of



petrol causes hardship to students, office-goers and people from all walks of life. The inability of Nepal Oil Corporation (NOC) to clear debt owed to the Indian Oil Corporation was cited as the reason for the short supply of petroleum products in the country.

However, the statement of the then Supply Minister of Nepal differed with the NOC's claim and exposed that the real reason for the crisis was management, inefficiency and distribution of free coupons by NOC. An activist filed an RTI request seeking the names of free coupon beneficiaries and the criteria for their eligibility. NOC replied that no record was kept of the recipients of free coupons and thus no information was available. On appeal, however, the National Information Commission (NIC) of Nepal ordered NOC to disclose the requested

information, which was done. Since then, there has been a complete halt in free coupon distribution.

PAKISTAN: In Pakistan, an assistant professor of a government college in Lahore filed an RTI request to the Public Information Officer (PIO) of the Higher Education Department of Punjab under the Punjab Transparency and Right to Information Act 2013. He sought copies of the probe report made on him by the Directorate of Public Instruction (DPI) of colleges, the summary of the report sent to the Chief Minister and the latter's order on the summary.

Unhappy with the non-cooperation of the PIO and not receiving the requested information, the applicant filed a complaint to the Punjab Information Commission. At the hearing, the Commission told the PIO that he was duty bound under law to provide the requested information, irrespective of the views of his seniors. The information could only be withheld if its disclosure would harm any of the interests mentioned in the law. And as the summary of the report to the CM was already approved, indicating that the deliberative process on the matter was completed, the disclosure of the information would not be premature.

The above are only a few examples of the varied use of RTI in South Asia. Though the law has not lived up to the expectations of its ardent supporters, except perhaps in India and, more recently, Sri Lanka, it is hoped that once the potential of the law is better known, the situation will change.

While citizens are the prime movers of the law, governments can help by inculcating a sense of confidence in—and ensuring protection of—applicants who fear retaliation from those affected by the disclosure of sensitive information. The Information Commission too can play a decisive role by encouraging prospective users through a teleological application of the law.

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