

# AVOIDING AN URBAN NIGHTMARE: TIME TO GET PLANNING RIGHT

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## A golden era for the construction industry

Dr AFM Saiful Amin, Professor, Civil Engineering Department, BUET, talks to Nihad Nowsher about the state of the construction industry in Bangladesh and what the industry can do to adopt best practices

There is currently a construction boom going on all over the country. How would you evaluate it from an engineer's perspective? The infrastructure of a country is one of the major wheels needed to keep an economy moving towards further growth. Development, nourishment and maintaining the infrastructure are important for keeping the wheels rolling. All disciplines of engineering contribute to development, whether it is ground, water or air transportation, electricity generation, transmission or distribution, telecommunication and informatics, or light to heavy industries

in the fields of materials, textile engineering, agricultural engineering or food engineering. We need proper infrastructure built, operated and maintained by capable engineers to support the targeted economic growth. Otherwise, the economic growth will be either stalled or slowed down. Post-independence Bangladesh has seen remarkable growth in the diversification and mechanisation of the agricultural sector and garments industry, which are heavily dependent on human labour. These two wings—agriculture and industry—should deliver a balanced lift

to keep the economy moving toward its destination. If our farmers do not have the means of transportation or marketing facilities to maximise their incomes, this will affect the entire agro-economy.

The quest for safe but affordable housing and transportation is becoming an emerging challenge when it comes to meeting dwelling and physical connectivity demands. Such connectivity can keep society linked with development, not only in the virtual world but also in practical situations. Digitisation and telecommunication often reduce the need for physical connectivity and space, but the need for transportation of goods and products, and above all, for maintaining societal bonds can never be ignored.

Foresighted planning was not always used in the past to secure spaces for sustainable infrastructure development. We have seen trials rather than solid far-out planning. Thus, investment demands exist in these sectors, with the goal of helping the future economy to be better than it is at present.

Affordability must go hand-in-hand with the level at which bars are set for each sector. Our densely populated country depends on its agro-economy for food security, and such a scenario leads to a limited budget and space for the government to work with physical infrastructure due to the scarcity of land. We need to pay a high price for the land.

Budget constraints are causing Bangladesh to turn to foreign aid or investment to support various national causes. Development choices are often governed by their affordability for low-income groups, as they can't always afford services that are readily available at market prices. Once projects are completed, operation and maintenance



Dr AFM Saiful Amin

costs must be covered for a long time before we see it break-even. Hence a vicious cycle can be said to exist.

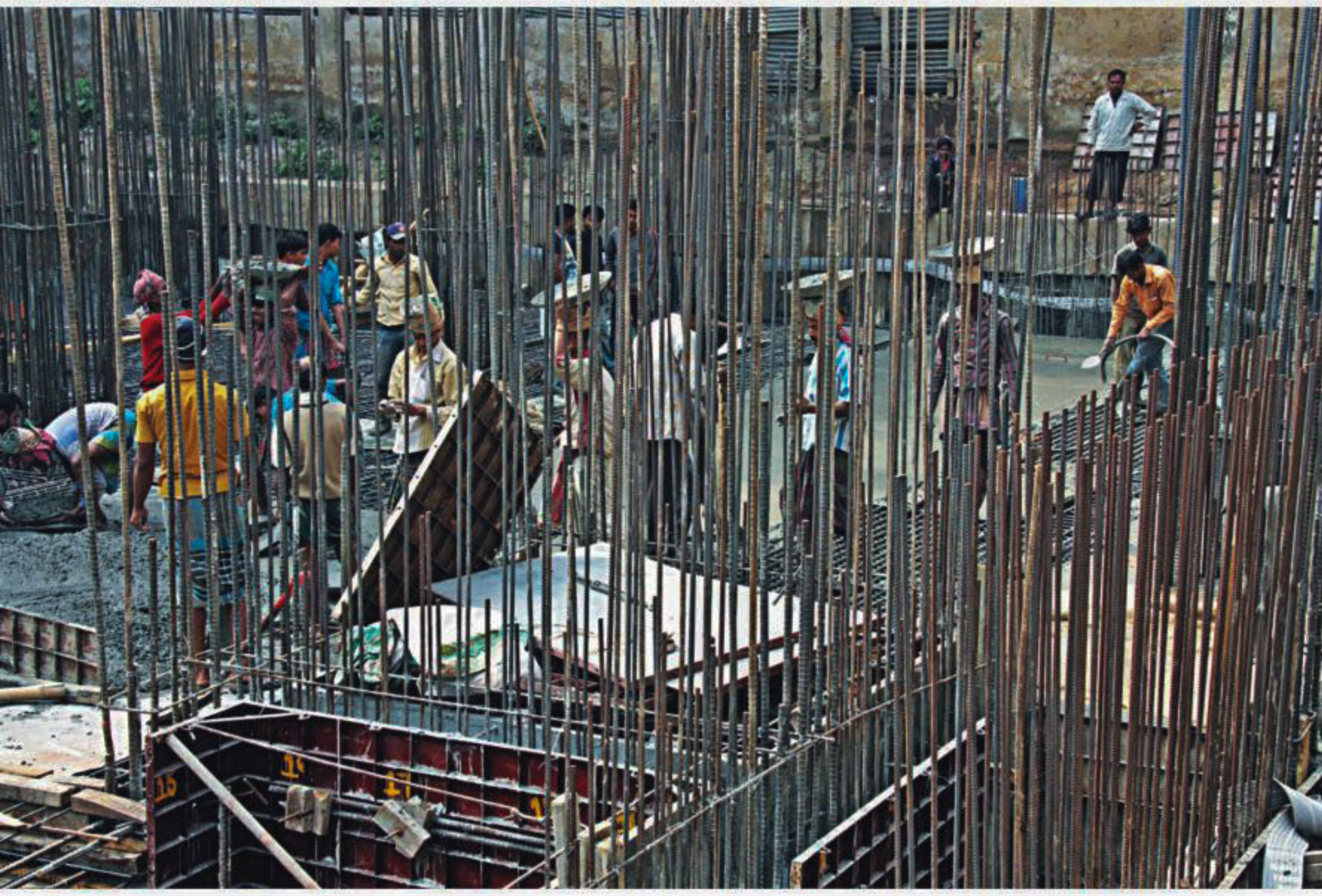
Our country needs the setting of visionary goals and synchronisation of planning. However, the targets of the "construction boom" may not be achieved if progress in all of these sectors does not occur synchronously. Mega-projects will stand as monuments, rather than as rolling wheels with which to transform society. For example, if we want to attract tourists, much work is needed in the tourism sector. When a tourist visits Bangladesh, this individual eventually takes back home his or her memories and experiences in our country. Convenient transportation, safe food, and safe stay are just a few examples of what tourists need in any country. Are we trying to improve these things in a synchronised way, in a planned way for our future guests?

When we speak of the "construction

boom," I would like to also remind you that we now need to depend more on foreign engineers for our mega-projects. What does this imply about our engineering education? Take one of the better-developed ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) countries, Malaysia, for example, whose students used to come to study at BUET (Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology) in the past. Now, the scenario has changed, and Malaysia has become much more self-sufficient than Bangladesh in many ways. We need to build ourselves up as a model for other countries with similar demographic and societal patterns to follow, which should be possible to do at this moment. We must take on projects that shift the mentality of our society. Projects in our country need to be implemented in ways that will complement the everyday lives of our citizens. If one major project is nearing completion but the satellite project that will boost the outcomes of the major project takes a long time to complete, then the benefits of the expensive investment will be of no use.

Now, there are two ways to consider our new development: meeting the bare minimum needs (just about enough to operate to meet the present needs) and meeting flexible needs (often overrunning small budgets but long-lasting). Developed countries can afford higher initial investments with lower lifecycle costs, unlike Bangladesh. In future projects with fewer budgetary constraints, we hope that our engineers will be afforded this flexibility. What would be your assessment from a construction perspective? Design and construction go hand-in-hand in many ways.

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Engineers have the responsibility to regulate construction quality.

### সিঙ্গেল ডিজিট সোনালী ব্যাংক

নিজের পছন্দের নির্মাণ শৈলীতে নির্মিত বাড়ির মালিক হওয়ার সুযোগ দিতে এলো দেশের সর্ববৃহৎ রাষ্ট্রীয় মালিকানাধীন সোনালী ব্যাংক লিমিটেড

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- মাত্র ২ শতাংশ ছুদ ভিত্তিক চাঞ্চল্য গৃহনির্মাণ ঋণ কর্মসূচির আওতায় দেড় বছর হ্রাস পিবিওড মাত্র মার্চ ২০ বছর মেয়াদী এই ঋণ গ্রহণে নিকটস্থ সোনালী ব্যাংকের শাখায় যোগাযোগ করুন।
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