

Railway remains a neglected sector

Improve coverage, service

THE railway minister recently hinted about the possibility of raising train fares in the future. But before that is done, we suggest that the ministry addresses a few important things that ail the sector. Railway remains the most neglected of all public mass transport systems in the country. We have invested little in expanding upon the vast infrastructure that we inherited in 1947. While the country has invested billions of dollars over the last decade in mega infrastructure projects, very little has been allocated to the most effective mode of public transport in the country that is capable of moving thousands of people daily with little hassle.

While roads and road transport have had the benefit of massive investment, rebuilding the railway sector has been sidelined. Its resources have depleted, its land illegally occupied and most of its rolling stock are in a decrepit state. The development projects so far have been in dribs and patches. Given the tremendous potential of this sector, we feel that return on investment in the sector will far outweigh the return from other sectors.

We would like to know precisely what steps the government is mulling to improve the quality and availability of rail routes over the next few years. What steps are being taken to cut the annual losses in the railway sector? What kind of initiatives of oversight does the ministry intend to undertake to improve the service railway provides to commuters? Is the ministry putting together a strategic plan that will be followed over the next five or more years, outlining investment in both material and personnel to improve connectivity that will facilitate faster movement of people? Or are we simply adding new carriages to replace old ones? Until we address the systemic problems that plague the railway, merely increasing fares will do little to aid this ailing sector.

Protect the rights of migrant workers

Bring brokers and recruiting agencies under a legal framework

ACCORDING to a report in this daily on March 18, around 300 to 400 Bangladeshi migrant workers are being deported every week from Saudi Arabia. In the latest incident, 86 workers were deported by the country this week for various reasons, including for working in companies other than the ones that they were contracted for. What is more, many of them had to serve jail time before being deported to Bangladesh completely penniless. This trend is alarming.

It is unfortunate that our workers who migrate to Gulf countries, particularly to Saudi Arabia, with the assurance of getting a fixed job, are often cheated by brokers and recruiting agencies. Quite often, when they land in a foreign country with a valid visa and work permit, they find that the jobs they were offered actually do not exist. And this happens after paying lakhs of taka to these brokers and agencies.

In 2017, a TIB study found that workers had to pay between Tk 5 lakh and Tk 12 lakh each to get a Saudi visa, but private recruiting agents spent only Tk 1 lakh to Tk 2.5 lakh on each visa. The corruption watchdog also found that the business of sending workers abroad is almost entirely controlled by the brokers. Taking advantage of the ignorance of the workers, brokers often deceive prospective jobseekers. The government must take immediate measures to bring brokers and private recruiting agencies under a legal framework so that they can be held accountable. This will surely help stop the plight of our migrant workers.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Recognising the importance of consumer rights

Although there are lots of organisations working for human rights in Bangladesh, there are barely any consumer rights groups other than Consumers Association of Bangladesh. But we must remember that consumer rights are an integral part of human rights.

Consumer rights are abused in almost every sector in Bangladesh. Generating awareness among consumers about their rights and responsibilities as consumers is a must. Promoting consumer education aiming to empower consumers with the knowledge and skills on protection of their rights is necessary as well. Consumers should be empowered to the extent that they mobilise into organised action. Encouraging and helping develop more consumer associations and consumer activist groups at the rural level can go a long way in empowering the less educated and those who are less aware about consumer rights. The government has a crucial role to play but so do the media, NGOs, and different human rights organisations.

Zubair Khaled Huq, by email



'Women hold up half the sky'

So why are we not investing in them?



ABU AF SARUL HAIDER

WOMEN in Bangladesh have made their mark in multiple fields, from the farms to the peak of the Himalayas, from the sports arena to high-tech jobs, from the handicrafts industry to the Gono Bhaban. Today, Bangladesh is considered a "role model" in the world with respect to its development in economic, social and women's empowerment. The World Economic Forum recently ranked Bangladesh first in gender equality among South Asian nations for the fourth consecutive year. The Forum's "Global Gender Gap Report 2018" highlights Bangladesh's success in four key areas: education, economic participation, health, and political empowerment.

Bangladesh has topped the Gender Gap Index in terms of closing the gap in the primary and secondary education category. In primary and secondary schools, 51 and 53 percent of students respectively are female. Participation of girls in primary schools is increasing as their overall enrollment rose from 57 percent in 2008 to 95.4 percent in 2017. According to data of the Unesco Institute for Statistics (UIS), the literacy rate for women aged between 15 to 24 years has increased to 69.90 percent in 2016, up from 43.74 percent in 2007. Although the current ratio of women in higher education is 33 percent, female students in top government medical colleges have outnumbered the boys in the past few years. According to official statistics, female students make up around 60 percent of enrolled medical students. In the 2013-14 session, 1,602 female students were enrolled in 23 government medical colleges compared to 1,135 male students. Also, more women graduated from medical colleges than men.

In recent times, women in Bangladesh have also made huge progress in terms of participation in the labour force. Compared to four percent in 1974, female participation in the labour force has increased to 36.3 percent in 2017. The Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) Labour Force Survey (2016-17) showed that 20 million women were in

the labour force who contributed actively to different socio-economic sectors that have changed the face of the economy. Statistics also show that labour force participation among rural women is much higher (37.6 percent) than urban women (30.8 percent), and women played a crucial role in cultivation and post-harvest operations, managing livestock, horticulture, fisheries, etc., thus improving the economic stability of their households. At present, about 65 percent of women work in agriculture, around 22 percent are in the service sector, and 13.32 percent are in industry. Currently,



PHOTO: STAR

more than 60 percent of fish farmers in Bangladesh are women.

But unfortunately, in our society, the economic value of much of women's work and their overall contribution go mostly unrecognised and this work remains unpaid. Usually, unpaid work is considered as "voluntary work" or looked upon as "family obligations". According to a study by the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), women who do household chores contribute 76.8 percent to the gross domestic product (GDP), but the cost of their labour is not calculated in the national economy.

We all know that women in the readymade garment (RMG) sector contribute immensely to the economy and are the backbone of the apparel industry's workforce. More than 80 percent of our garment workers are women. Women with little or no education work as domestic help or as day-labourers in the construction of

roads, bridges, buildings, etc. They also work in husking mills, weaving factories and in different government and non-government offices and business organisations.

Those who are more educated work as teachers in different educational institutions. Others serve in government offices, healthcare sector, etc. The number of women physicians, engineers, and lawyers is also on the rise and, lately, more and more women have begun to be recruited in military service and in UN peacekeeping operations. They are excelling in government administration

total number of women parliamentarians who have been directly elected is 22, including the prime minister. But unfortunately, at a time when women's empowerment has gained momentum, violence against women has steadily been increasing in the country, giving way to doubts about our achievements in women's empowerment. Nearly two out of every three women in the country have been victims of some form of violence or the other. According to a database of the monitoring cell of the police headquarters, 18,668 rape cases were filed across the country between 2012 and 2016. Evidence suggests that acts of violence committed regularly against women include dowry killings, rape, sexual harassment and stalking, acid attacks, physical and mental abuse, and sex trafficking. Early marriage is another factor that does not allow girls to continue with their studies and enter the workforce. At present, 59 percent of girls in Bangladesh are married off before they reach the age of 18 and 22 percent are married off before they are 15.

There is a Chinese proverb that goes, "Women hold up half the sky." But unfortunately, there are many in our society who consider women to be weak and incapable to work and earn an income on their own—according to these people, women are an "economic burden". They try to confine them within the four walls. But what they do not understand is that no nation can tackle the development challenges unless its women are given equal access to opportunities and adequate safety and security. Different surveys have shown that when women earn an income, they reinvest 90 percent of it in looking after their families and spending on food, housing and education. All these components are vital for poverty reduction and promoting sustainable development.

Additionally, educated girls have fewer, healthier and more educated children, who help build healthier communities, accelerate economic activity, arrest major health issues and break cycles of poverty. Therefore, it is imperative that we, as a society, change our primitive mindset that a woman should stay at home and depend on the man to bring food to the table. We need to create a society where women are free to choose, and can live without fear and speak without restrictions.

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This is how blockchain can radically reshape the future

Here's what it presently tells us about human civilisation and the history of our social structures

THE OVERTON WINDOW



ERESH OMAR JAMAL

ACCORDING to the Fall 2018 issue of MIT's *Sloan Review Magazine*,

"Blockchain technology is set to be a major player of the future digital economy." Increasing numbers of independent experts and specialists from top institutions have begun to agree with this. But some are going further to say that it can even reshape how civilisation functions in more ways. Last year, the

Electronic Frontier Foundation said that, "the amount of energy required to download tweets, articles, and instant messages which describe what 'the blockchain' is and how 'decentralised' currencies are 'the future' will soon eclipse the total amount of power used by the country of Denmark."

But what is a blockchain?

As Edward Snowden explains, blockchain is basically a new kind of database "backed by fancy math." Yes, it's simply that boring. And there is nothing revolutionary about the technology itself, per se. What is revolutionary is a certain unique characteristic.

Imagine a chain (resembling a database) made up of separate blocks (resembling entries). The unique characteristic of blockchain is that any update to the chain is added at the end. And no previous block (entry) in the chain (database) can ever be modified or deleted. For example, if you send USD 100 to a friend, you cannot simply delete or undo the block (your transaction and its record) once it is done. Your friend has to send back the USD 100 to you, which will be recorded as a new transaction that will be entered at the end of the database. Now, let's say you sent USD 100 but you want to send USD 110 instead. For that, you cannot simply just modify your USD 100 transaction and add another USD 10 to it. You have to complete a new transaction transferring another USD 10 that will again be added at the end of the chain as a separate entry—thereby preserving the sanctity of the historical record in its truest form. In the old database, any entry can be changed by simply typing over it.

What makes this characteristic valuable? In one word, according to Snowden: "trust".

To understand the significance of that through one real-life example, let's consider what happened in Cyprus after the 2008 global financial crisis. After the crisis, unlike countries where their governments decided to bail banks out, banks in Cyprus were allowed to "bail in"—which means they were allowed to confiscate depositors' accounts to save themselves. And although the seized funds were converted to equity—giving people bank shares in exchange for their

confiscated funds—it cost depositors billions of euros in just one fell swoop.

The problem this illustrates with the old system is that it allows someone to change the history of a database with just one keystroke. What blockchain does is remove the ability of someone to do this. So "blockchains are an effort to create a history that can't be manipulated."

But how do you authenticate whether entries have been preserved in their original form?

This is where it gets technical so I won't go into too much detail. But that is achieved using something called a "cryptographic hash function", which uses math to ensure the "uniqueness" of each entry—as even the slightest change in an entry will give a much different "hash" than what was assigned to the original entry, even if the original entry and the new entry are entries of, let's say, the same picture. Therefore, besides maintaining transaction records, blockchains can be used to record "blog posts, cat pictures, download links, or even moves in the world's most over-engineered game of chess."

Another thing to note here is that these records are "time-stamped"—a "high-tech version of public notary." So once the "freshly notarised records" are distributed "to members of the network, who verify them and update their independent copies of this new history... no one person or small group can fudge the numbers, because too many people have copies of the original." "It's this decentralisation that some hope can provide a new lever to unseat today's status quo of censorship and entrenched monopolies," says Snowden.

To truly appreciate why this can potentially revolutionise human societies, we have to understand some basic facts about societies—past and present.

After the death of Stalin and the falling out of favour of Lavrentiy Beria, there was an amendment made to the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia* in 1954. Beria's entry in the encyclopedia had become politically unfavourable, and so an amendment was sent out to every holder of the great encyclopedia. But in those days, because the amendment required a copy to be pasted in, it was obvious what was happening. One could easily see where the paper had been plastered on, and which page had been torn out.

In our times, there are no tear-lines and seams anymore—as the vast majority of material today is published online. History, nevertheless, is being redacted quickly and at an ever-progressive rate, without us even knowing about it.

To take just one example, a juridical basis that has been used to take down material published online is a ruling by the Human Rights Court in Strasbourg, which says that every time someone reads something on the

internet, it has been re-published. This means the liability for publishers reoccurs every time someone reads something (unless individual countries have their own statute of limitation law). This has often been used by the powerful to force publishers to take down material from the internet, sometimes years after it had been published. Such instances include court cases against the powerful published by influential publishers such as *The Guardian*, even when the verdict of the case was never reversed and the material was adjudged to have been published "in the public interest"—with powerful groups or individuals using US stipulations in British courts to force British publishers to take down material concerning British citizens.

In 2010, UK media lawyers estimated that there were 200-300 secret gag-orders in the UK—the number has obviously gone up considerably since then. According to Julian Assange, "These are not just injunctions to say you can't talk about something, these are injunctions to say that you cannot talk about whatever the subject is, together with the fact that you cannot talk about the fact that you cannot talk about it."

If we truly understand the history of our civilisation, then we'd understand that traditionally, our civilisation has tended to manipulate and falsify its own history. With every new innovative technique in preserving that history—for example, through the invention of writing—we have gone through an initial phase of having access to more accurate historical records, before the process of manipulating that particular technique was eventually mastered.

For the sake of brevity, I will not go into the details of why that is a problem, but ask you instead to settle for a quote and draw your own conclusions from it: "The truth about the world is the only useful ingredient in human decision-making... If we want a rich, complex, civilised civilisation then we need to have this robust intellectual ingredient—historical record. So we can use it to understand our world, adapt to it, engage in the democratic process. Without that, we're sailing in the dark."

So to summarise, blockchain could potentially reshape our world because it decentralises control over how we interact with each other, financially and in other ways—by changing and decentralising the process of how the historical records of our civilisation are maintained and the process of verifying its authenticity. And, to an extent, by changing how we speak and interact with history itself in a way that, all the best technical experts till now agree, negates many of the problems we have faced and are currently facing, in regards to our civilisation and its social structures throughout history, as mentioned above.

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