

## Wash, rinse, repeat

### Road accidents, words of assurance and inaction

FOLLOWING the death of university student Abrar Ahmed Chowdhury who was run over and killed by a bus on March 19, the capital city and some other parts of the country have been rocked by student demonstrations. Apart from the fact that students have had to resort to taking to the streets yet again to demand a basic right—safe roads—the developments following the demos give us a hopeless sense of déjà vu. We have heard it all before—that drivers would not be allowed to drive without licences and that buses would not run on daily contracts. Now, after yet another young life has been cut short, assurances being made by the authorities and transport owners and workers can hardly be taken seriously. This tendency to recycle old promises and indulge in ad-hocism—although a good PR strategy—has never worked and will not work this time either. How can the people be expected to trust words of reassurance of transport owners and workers when they openly enjoy political backing? The facts speak for themselves. The number of deaths in road accidents in the country surpassed 7,000 last year. Violation of traffic rules and regulations is rampant. Drivers do not have proper licences—even drivers of some police vehicles had failed to produce licences in the past. Traffic police openly take bribes from errant drivers. Buses routinely stop in the middle of the road to pick up and drop passengers. The Road Transport Act is not yet in effect. So the DMP chief's statement that discipline will be brought on the roads at “any cost” is hardly reassuring because we still don't know what the exact strategy is to address this monumental problem. The collective failure of concerned institutions and a lack of political will are largely to blame for the state of our transport sector, and road safety in this country. Can we for once tackle the root causes? Words of assurance will continue to ring hollow until we see sustained efforts to rein in a profit-hungry sector and enforce existing traffic rules and regulations. It's time the adults paid heed to the children.

## Forest land gobbled up by development projects

### A contradiction to SDG 15

WE are befuddled how the government proposes to increase forest land to 20 percent of the country's total land mass by 2030 when every year various government agencies are taking up forest land for their establishments and development projects. It seems to be a free for all situation where development projects are taking priority over crucial forest conservation. We need these forests to ensure the survival of our wildlife, conserve biodiversity and the environment. We also need them to act as buffers against violent cyclones and flooding that take away lives and leave millions homeless. Thus it is shocking that at a time when we are so aware of the devastating effects of climate change and the need for forestland to mitigate them, these very forests are being denuded to accommodate government development projects. Official numbers say that Bangladesh has 17.62 percent of its landmass covered by forests although this may be an inflated figure say experts as it includes deforested areas and forest land that have already been given over for development projects or are urbanised land or illegally occupied. Apparently, a piece of land with even two to five trees can be called a “forest”, according to the ministry of forests definition. This means the actual area of forestland is even lower than what is officially claimed. Such obfuscating of the facts is not only ludicrous but dangerous as they hide the true picture—severe depletion of our forests. According to this paper's report, at least 22 government projects are on forest land between Mirsharai of Chattogram and Teknaf of Cox's Bazar. These include a special economic zone, a tunnel, an LNG terminal, a road, a rail-line, a power station and some tourist spots. While there is no doubt that we need such development, it is completely contradictory to have such projects at the cost of forest land that is home to a precious biodiversity of wildlife, flora and fauna and is responsible for maintaining ecological balance that is essential for human life. The government must shift such projects to non-forest land. These forests must be preserved at all costs.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Dhaka's pollution problem

Dhaka was ranked the second most polluted city in the world in 2018. Its pollution problem includes air pollution, water pollution and noise pollution. Thousands of people migrate to Dhaka from rural areas every year. This massive influx of people on a yearly basis is putting extra pressure on the city itself. And on top of that, the government is failing to provide city dwellers with the basic amenities. Because of Dhaka's ever-increasing population, the overall number of vehicles plying the roads is also going up year after year. And so are the number of unfit vehicles. The amount of smog and other dangerous chemicals they release such as sulphur, lead, etc. are making the city's air unbreathable. Factories and brick kilns are also major polluters. Despite the fact that all this has been highlighted time and again, the authorities have taken no steps so far to address the problem. When will they wake up? **Mohammad Zonaeed Emran**  
Mutual Trust Bank Limited

# 'We should not use groundwater for the next 15/20 years'

Dr Mohammad Amir Hossain Bhuiyan, professor and chairman, Department of Environmental Sciences, Jahangirnagar University, talks to Naznin Tithi of The Daily Star about why it is absolutely necessary to stop using groundwater and find alternative sources of water for residents of Dhaka.

The depletion of groundwater table in Dhaka has made water crisis in the city acute, especially during the dry season. What are the reasons behind this?

We have conducted many research studies in the last 15/20 years and have found that Dhaka's groundwater table has been gradually depleting at an average rate of one metre or 30/40 centimetres sometimes. Because of the rapid urbanisation of the city, the demand for groundwater has been increasing. In the multi-storied buildings and towers that are being constructed, high-powered pumps are used to extract water from underground. This contributes significantly to the lowering of the groundwater table. In Dhaka, there is no water in the shallow aquifers (50-70 feet deep). Presently, water is being extracted from the intermediate and deep aquifers, which are 600 to 800 feet deep.

Another reason for this depletion is our total dependency on groundwater. The whole city depends on groundwater. Although we have Sayedabad Water Treatment Plant, which uses the water from Shitalakhya, the capacity of the plant and the quality of water it produces are not satisfactory. Because of industrial pollution, the amount of heavy metals and other harmful elements in the Shitalakhya has increased to dangerous proportions. The Sayedabad plant does not have the required efficiency to treat such extremely polluted water. This treated water is not safe to drink. So we are left with the water supplied through pipelines by the Wasa.

Moreover, industries inside Dhaka use excessive amounts of groundwater. So the shortage of water in the city is particularly acute in industrial areas such as Tejgaon and Old Dhaka.

The World Bank in a recent report found that the sources of water are contaminated with E.Coli and arsenic. Also, harmful bacteria were found in 82 percent of supplied water. What are the reasons for this contamination?

Through my research study, I found that even the deep layers of water have been contaminated with excessive amounts of heavy metals and other pollutants. So even after boiling the water supplied by Wasa and purifying it through regular water filters, the heavy metals cannot be removed. There are pathogens and hookworms in the water supplied by



Dr Mohammad Amir Hossain Bhuiyan

Wasa. When you boil this water, you will notice some residue which looks like white thread. These are nothing but worms. Moreover, the water supplied by Wasa has Faecal Coliform, Escherichia Coli (E.Coli) and many other bacteria.

Contaminants enter the water pipelines in so many ways. The reserved tanks of Wasa, where 50,000 gallons or more water are stored, are not cleaned regularly. Then the water pipelines are getting connected with the sewerage lines. Sewerage lines are filled with faecal coliform which enters the water pipelines through leakages.

Moreover, groundwater gets contaminated during the construction of high-rise buildings. When the soil is dug up for building construction, some weak joints are created in the ground. The pollutants from the surface seep into these weak joints and contaminate underground water, especially when high-powered pumps are used to extract water from underground, the pollutants from the surface seep in through the weak joints. Underground water also gets polluted by pollutants from the rivers.

Can't anything be done to ensure that the water remains safe throughout the whole process—from extraction to supply?

In the developed countries, when water is extracted from underground, it is boiled to kill the pathogens, bacteria and other pollutants. After this water is cooled, it is distributed for people's use. But in Bangladesh, after the water is

extracted from underground, it is supplied to the pipelines straight away. Although this is a very expensive process, if we can do what developed countries do, the water quality will be better. We should also clean and replace the pipelines from time to time. In addition, if chlorination is done following the proper method, a lot of germs can be killed.

Researchers have also found that bottled and jar water are polluted with E.Coli and other pollutants. Who should be held accountable for this?

The BSTI has been looking after this at present. But the BSTI is not the relevant authority here. Everything related to water, including the quality of bottled water, should be checked by the Department of Public Health and Engineering. Carrying out random drives and fining some illegal businessmen will not solve the problem. The sources of the illegal businesses must be identified and addressed.

I think the government should take a policy decision to ban bottled water, say, after 10 years. Bottled water can be used for drinking purposes, only for the time being. But the use of jar water should be banned. Because if it is not banned, no sincere efforts will be made to make the Effluent Treatment Plants (ETPs) work, and the pollution of the rivers will not stop. This is not possible for the government to do at one go but this can be done in phases. The use of bottled and jar water should be discouraged and

the use of river water after proper treatment should be given priority.

The government has been talking about reducing the use of groundwater for quite some time now. What should be done to reduce our dependency on groundwater and ensure optimal use of surface water?

The government has set a target of ensuring safe water for all by 2021. There's only two years until 2021 but not much progress has been made to ensure this. Immediate steps should be taken to reduce the use of groundwater and ensure the maximum use of surface water. The use of groundwater in the industrial and agricultural sector should also stop.

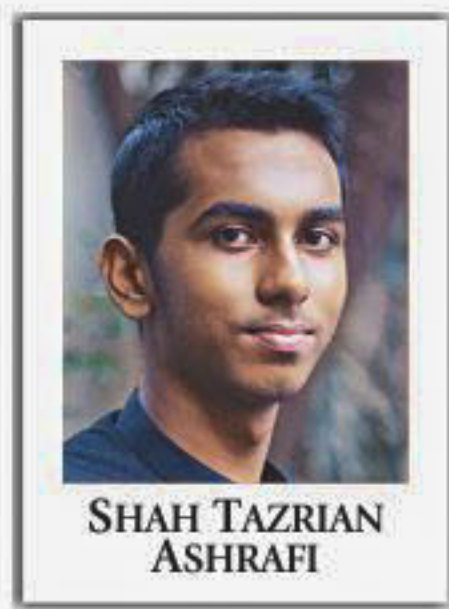
We have no other alternatives to using river water for all purposes. We have to bring water from the rivers where industrial pollution is much less. The water of Buriganga, Turag, Shitalakhya and Balu cannot be used because these rivers are extremely polluted. If we treat this water and supply it to the consumers, it will create a public health disaster. We have also carried out research on the Meghna river and found its water to be contaminated with the pollutants from nearby factories. However, the water quality of Padma and Jamuna is relatively better. This water can be brought to Dhaka through pipelines and after treatment can be used by the residents of Dhaka.

The use of ETPs should be made mandatory for all factories. If the laws are strictly enforced, the rivers will be pollution-free and the water can be used for industrial and agricultural purposes. The government must ensure that those who violate the law face harsh penalty.

Another thing we should do is store water from Dhaka's surrounding rivers during the rainy season. During July-August, even the water of Buriganga gets cleaner. We will have to reserve that water by building polders, reservoirs and ponds all around Dhaka. This water can be used from November till April after proper treatment.

We should take a policy decision to not use groundwater for the next 15/20 years. It has to be done immediately. One of the results would be the groundwater table rising up. Water crisis and pollution are major issues in Dhaka and solving these problems should be given due importance by the government.

# Monsters on the loose



SHAH TAZRIAN ASHRAFI

wheels a little more, I wouldn't have been able to write an op-ed piece today.

I often recount that incident when I reminisce about all the bad things that had happened in the past and which could have led to disastrous outcomes had they been a bit more severe.

On March 19, Abrar Ahmed Chowdhury was brutally killed as a “Suprabhat Poribohon” bus ran over him, that too, on a zebra crossing—something which is bound to keep the passer-by safe. Thus, a bright life was lost at the hands of a law-breaking bus driver.

Next day, a 35-year-old man lost his life to a speeding lorry in Dhaka's Paltan, amid the protests for safer roads which ensued following Abrar's death. Also on the same day, a schoolgirl lost her legs as a lorry hit the rickshaw-van she was in.

In Gaibandha, two schoolgirls were killed in separate road accidents—one by a battery run three-wheeler and another by a truck.

On July 29, 2018, two students were killed when a bus rammed into a bus stop, and it triggered massive outrage. In December of the same year, a promising physician was killed when a speeding bus rammed into the CNG-run-auto-rickshaw she was in.

These are just random incidents I can pick out from my hazy memory. These, like many such incidents, echo how lax our laws regarding unruly driving are.

We don't have enough zebra crossings and overbridges in the city. Most of the time, one has to cross the roads while constantly being on their guard as vehicles speed by them like mad dogs. It is as though we are waiting for more people to get killed so that an over bridge could bloom in their honour, but not strict laws. Never strict laws. It is this poverty that supplies oxygen to the monsters, and enriches them with the



PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

To prevent more tragedies, we need a law which isn't lax and which does not allow monsters to ply our roads anymore.

nutrients to pull off such acts on a regular basis.

Those unworthy of becoming drivers, for the sake of filling their stomachs, get into driving even though they don't fully meet the criteria required. Sometimes, under-aged drivers are in charge of the wheels—or buses are seen racing on our streets.

According to an article published on April 18, 2018, bus drivers vie for more passengers so that they can earn more. In an attempt to accomplish this, they often resort to involuntary racing. They don't care about the soaring death tolls. They don't care about the promising lives that perish under their wheels. They don't care about the lost limbs and shattered dreams. Money has almost made them blind and given them thick skins.

The article further states that racing usually ensues because of the targets that are needed to be fulfilled. A certain amount is thought to be a benchmark,

which is set by some of the companies. The drivers have to meet those targets on a regular basis. And of course, the more the income, the merrier.

According to a daily newspaper in our country, there had been 4,580 fatalities from road accidents in 2018, increasing by 7 percent in the year from 2017.

Although we are a developing country, it will mean nothing in the long run if promising lives continue to be lost because of unruly vehicles in such tragic ways. To prevent more tragedies, we need a law which isn't lax and which does not allow monsters to ply on our roads anymore. A law which mocks their unruliness and tames them. A law which keeps our roads safe rather than letting them become make-shift deathbeds.

We cannot uproot poverty in a night, but surely, by implementing stricter laws to maintain discipline, we can keep citizens safe. If there's severe punishment rather than some small fines issued to company

owners, those who drive recklessly will think twice before driving in the same manner again.

At the end of the day, these are just mere words, just another op-ed, born out from one's observation of the despair hovering above.

How many more deaths will there have to be till we see an effective solution instead of just namesake overbridges? How many more deaths must there be before zebra crossings and bus-stops don't have to become blood soaked anymore? How many more deaths till vehicles can carry their passengers safely to their destinations?

These questions will remain unanswered and so will our call for justice. But let's desperately hope that the tide turns. Let's hope that the monsters on the loose will be tamed soon.

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