

Identify unsafe school buildings

Mansura's death could have been avoided if authorities acted timely

No student should have to fear death, or even injury, while at school. It is almost inconceivable for the parents to think that the place they are sending their children to for education would turn out to be fatal. The death of nine-year-old Mansura in Barguna's Taltali Upazila on Saturday is tragic and was completely avoidable. Mansura died when chunks of ceiling plaster fell on her; 10 other students of the class were injured. Was this accident, if it even can be called one, not foreseeable?

It is good that the High Court has issued a rule asking why compensation should not be paid to the families and why the failure to ensure safety should not be declared illegal. But a fundamental question here is: why should we react only after such incidents occur? The petition which prompted the rule also asked that a survey be conducted to identify vulnerable structures of government and non-government schools across the country. The Upazila Education Officer says that he had sent a list of risky buildings in the area—which included the school building in question—in 2018 to the higher authorities. If that is indeed the case, then it is wilful negligence that is to blame for this death; not only was action not taken to fix the building, but classes were allowed to continue as if there was no danger at all.

All the action being taken now, from the surveys to the probe reports, are welcome. But the problem goes much deeper. We witnessed its consequences in the fires at FR Tower and DCC Market leading to deaths and losses. The risks and safety concerns were not unknown in any of the cases—it was our complete disregard for preventive action that led to such terrible consequences. We hope that beyond the post-incident efforts that we always see, the authorities will start prioritising preventive measures. Children should never have to fear that they could come to any harm in the place where they are supposed to go to acquire knowledge—not for lack of oversight, and not for lack of funding for repairs.

Overuse of antibiotics creating resistance

National policy needed to combat it

THE misuse and overuse of antibiotics is causing a rise to antimicrobial resistance (AMR) amongst patients, particularly in intensive care units (ICUs) of hospitals, where fatalities are up by as much as 70 percent. The World Health Organization linked the spread of "superbugs" or AMR to the excessive use of antibiotics by sick patients in ICUs. Leading health experts in the country have warned that the tendency of overconsumption and improper consumption of antibiotics over the last decade (2010-2018) is that patients are simply not responding to drugs and the number of deaths is rising. According to an analysis by the Department of Microbiology and Immunology at Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Rahman University, 6.5 percent patients were resistant to superbugs in 2010 and this percentage increased to anywhere between 11 and 14 in 2018. Health practitioners blame a number of reasons for this. Poor treatment adherence, non-therapeutic use of antibiotics for fattening of farm animals, rising tendency of self-medication and, of course, over-the-counter sale of antibiotics are to blame for this situation.

The fact that the pharmaceutical industry is now worth Tk 22,000 crore where 18 percent of sales come from antibiotic drugs, also points to a tendency of "indiscriminate use of antibiotic drugs" being prescribed. This is indeed supported by a 2015 study conducted by four Bangladeshi researchers on 1,500 patients, a third of whom had been prescribed antibiotics by unauthorised doctors. When we take into account that AMR bacteria can be transmitted to humans through livestock, the situation becomes more serious because the poultry and fisheries industry gets fed 19 types of antibiotics, but there is no authority to oversee how much of it is overprescribed.

Health experts advocate that the government must come up with a national policy to govern the use of antibiotics in the health sector. Without a policy in place, it will be increasingly difficult to counteract the harmful effects that indiscriminate use of antibiotics is causing to humans, and no party can be held liable for the public health hazard caused.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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A culture of loan default

Despite the fact that default loans in the country have been soaring, and the established fact that the banking sector is in a precarious position, no visible action has so far been taken against either the loan defaulters or bank officials responsible for enabling these defaulters. It is a paradox, to say the least, that we keep going on and on about economic growth on the one hand, while there is deafening silence on the issue of rising NPLs on the other. No one seems to care that at the end of the day, it's taxpayers' money. It seems that as long as you have friends in high places, you can get away with anything in this country.

Rakib Ahmed, by email

What the rising GDP and per capita income are not telling us



ABU AF SARUL HAIDER

On April 4, 2019, the World Bank presented its latest economic forecast that Bangladesh's economy will grow at 7.3 percent in the fiscal 2019. Whereas a day

earlier, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) predicted that the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth would be 8 percent. On the other hand, Finance Minister AHM Mustafa Kamal is more confident and expects that GDP growth in fiscal 2018-19 will be higher than 8 percent—more likely 8.13 percent—and he is also anticipating an increase in the country's per capita income to USD 1,909 in the current fiscal year, up from USD 1,751 in the previous fiscal year (2017-18). While a debate over the GDP growth target is going on, one might ask, "Is the GDP growth or per capita income a clear indicator of the level of well-being in a country?"

To answer the question, let's start with the basic economics 101. In economic literature, economic growth and economic development are often used interchangeably but there is a difference. Growth and development are two different economic phenomena. Growth refers to the simple increase in a country's GDP, in percentage terms. It shows how much the production of goods and services has increased compared to last year in a quantitative manner. In other words, economic growth is just a measure of how fast the GDP is growing.

By contrast, economic development is a qualitative process and refers to the structural change of economic and social infrastructure in an economy, which allows an increase in the standard of living of a nation's population. In short, it focuses more on the progress in the socio-economic structure of an economy rather than just a quantitative increase in production. On the other hand, per capita income indicates the income each person would have if GDP were equally divided among the population of a country. It is an average estimate.

Undoubtedly, GDP, GDP growth and per capita income are most prominent indexes used to measure the economy of a country. But there are lots of shortcomings—these indexes do not tell us the full story of an economy. GDP is a broad measurement of a nation's overall economic activity that includes all private and public consumption, government outlays, investments and export minus imports, but does not distinguish between those activities that promote well-being and those that degrade well-being. It does not tell us anything about the crucial aspects of well-being such as public health, nutrition, growing disparity between rural and urban incomes, low standard of living, hazardous urbanisation and its social costs and environmental impacts, rising unemployment, political freedom, etc.

In a famous speech in 1968, Robert F Kennedy made this comment about GDP: "Our gross national product...counts air pollution and cigarette advertising and ambulances to clear our highways of carnage. It counts the destruction of our redwoods... Yet it does not allow for the health of our children, the quality of their

education or the strength of our marriages; neither our wisdom nor our learning; neither our compassion nor our devotion to our country which makes life worthwhile."

Likewise, nowadays our leaders never miss an opportunity to talk about rising GDP and per capita income but they never speak about the impact of this growth which has actually bypassed the majority of the population while higher-income groups have been the main beneficiaries. A report titled "Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) 2016," published by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), shows that the rich-poor gap in terms of wealth accumulation has been widening in the country. The poorest five percent had 0.78 percent of the national income in their possession back in 2010, and now their share is only 0.23 percent. By contrast, the richest five percent, who had 24.61 percent of the national income in 2010, now have a higher share—27.89 percent, to be precise. In other words, the bottom five percent's share of national income has decreased whereas the richest five percent's share has increased.

Unfortunately, the unemployment rate is higher among the higher educated

and equitable distribution of wealth for the greater populace.

Moreover, even with high growth, there's no guarantee that growth will cause higher employment. As a matter of fact, the economic growth achieved by Bangladesh over the past few years has been what is referred to as "jobless growth". It has failed to create enough jobs for the millions of young Bangladeshis joining the workforce every year. Different studies show that between 2013 and 2017, while the average annual GDP growth was 6.6 percent, the average annual growth of jobs was only 0.9 percent. The employment share of the manufacturing sector actually declined from 16.4 percent to 14.4 percent. According to a report published by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), some 47.6 million or 30 percent of the total population are young (10-24 years), and of them, 25 percent—numbering around 11 million—are currently inactive, i.e. they are neither in the education cycle nor involved with any economic activity.

Unfortunately, the unemployment rate is higher among the higher educated

independence, the country's healthcare sector is in a shambles. Every year, a large number of people including politicians, businessmen and even common people go to Singapore, Thailand and India for their medical treatment, due to a lack of confidence in our healthcare system. A recent estimate by Bangladesh Investment Development Authority (BIDA), which was prepared using the data of Health Bulletin, says that Bangladeshis spend around USD 2.04 billion annually on healthcare abroad.

Our education system is really disappointing; it is not effectively serving the goals of human development. There is a lack of adequate communication and collaboration between the government, academia and industry. The consequence of this is evident when we find that a substantial chunk of skilled jobs in our industries and other economic enterprises is occupied by professionals from foreign nations. Unfortunately, there is no accurate data on foreign employment in the country or the number of foreign employees. But industry insiders claim that over 500,000 foreign nationals are currently working in several industrial

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Very recently, ADB has presented a paper titled "Spreading equitable development in the countryside" that showed that the per capita income in rural areas of Bangladesh lags far behind that of the two big cities, Dhaka and Chattogram. For example, it showed that the per capita income of districts such as the southeast hill-tracts of Khagrachhari was Tk 24,556 in 2010—36 percent of Dhaka's Tk 66,548—and the per capita income of northeast border district Sunamganj was 42 percent of that of Dhaka. Then, in another report, released jointly by BBS, World Bank and the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP), it was revealed that of a total of 49.4 million poor people of the country, 15.9 million or 32.3 percent live in Dhaka and 8.3 million live in Chattogram. This means that nearly half of the country's total poor population live in these two regions which have the highest contribution to the national GDP—with Dhaka metropolis alone contributing 36 percent and Chattogram 11 percent.

So, the increase in the national per capita income from USD 1,751 to USD 1,909 does not necessarily mean a greater group of the youth. Worrying still is that almost 1 in 4 Bangladeshis (24.3 percent of the population) lives in poverty, and 12.9 percent of the population live in extreme poverty. Yet, our politicians and economists are addicted to GDP, GDP growth and per capita income.

GDP or growth tells us nothing about our unplanned urbanisation, environmental quality, levels of health or education. Bangladesh ranked the second worst country in curbing environmental pollution. A recent study shows that the toxic air that we breathe in Bangladesh led to 1.23 lakh deaths in 2017. While GDP is rising, our cities are growing in an unsustainable manner—parks, open spaces, rivers, canals and water bodies are gradually disappearing. The rivers and waterways are gradually shrinking and drying up due to the huge depositions of silt and waste. As per a survey of the Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB), there are three hundred and ten rivers in Bangladesh. Out of these rivers, the condition of one hundred and seventy-five is miserable, and sixty-five are almost dead.

It is sad that even after 48 years of

sectors like apparel, textile, buying house, telecommunication, information technology, etc.—earning nearly USD 5 billion in remittances that flow out of Bangladesh.

However, I am not saying that GDP or per capita income is useless or means nothing. What I am trying to say is, scoring big in these economic indicators shouldn't be the government's only objective, nor should GDP or per capita income be considered a definitive measurement of human welfare, because excessively focusing on these economic indicators takes our attention away from the real measurement of a country's progress—people's overall well-being. We must put more emphasis on investment in human capital, life-long learning, social protection, and good governance, and need to build people-centred economy where all citizens will have equal access to health and quality education so they can help in the development of society.

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Can BJP retain power in the election?

ZIAUS SHAMS CHOWDHURY

THE populist wave that swept BJP to power in 2014 Indian election, led by Mr Narendra Modi, has waned considerably after five years at the helm. A defining factor of BJP's last victory had to do with Mr Modi's unquestioned skill to construct a winning coalition. In this year's Lok Sabha election, it does not look likely that the ruling party can replicate its spectacular success of 2014. Some aspects of its performance in office became contentious and polarising.

A situation has developed in which the other political party with a nationwide presence, the Congress, has been buoyed by its recent performance: it wrested three heartland states from BJP, namely Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh. In the last general election, the Congress had a disastrous performance as it won only 40 seats in the 545-seat lower house.

There is, however, a broad consensus among analysts that Congress by itself lacks the potential to pose any real threat to BJP. It is much weaker in terms of organisation. In terms of money, which is a big factor, BJP is said to be way ahead of Congress thanks to the support of business tycoons who are lining up behind Mr Modi.

Rahul Gandhi and his sister Priyanka Gandhi have shown promise as leaders who could revive the Congress. However, realistically speaking, they are still in the formative stage of their political life, and hopefully their best years are still ahead. They have never been in power, and from a pragmatic point of view, are no match

for the battle-hardened Mr Modi, Amit Shah and their ilk.

The 2019 general election is widely seen as a verdict on Mr Modi's performance in office, and how much of his promises he has been able to deliver on. A large segment of the electorate thinks that the country is on the right track under his stewardship. They adore him. His party has shown a higher level of discipline compared with other parties. It has close grass-root ties with Hindu nationalist groups, which means more street power.

Despite these favourable aspects, BJP's record in office has alienated many vital constituencies. The businesspeople feel that Mr Modi has failed to translate his strong mandate into worthwhile free-market reforms. BJP has irked many by pursuing some ill-advised policies such as the hasty "demonetisation" of 80 percent of India's currency in 2016. Its imposition of high and complex national sales taxes in 2018 or failure to fix bad-loan problem in state-owned banks has dented Mr. Modi's reputation for fiscal probity and the passage of vital economic laws such as that on bankruptcy.

There are many constituencies that feel they have been neglected. Roughly from the middle of its present tenure, BJP's gloss has faded in some measure. The severe drop in growth rate in 2018 has also attracted criticism.

One can say that the farmers are a disenchanted group. Drop in exports and rise in unemployment have also attracted criticism. Farmers, lower-caste Hindus, and religious minorities have reasons to feel alienated from the Modi government.

During its current tenure, India's less privileged classes, especially Muslims, have had to face violence, usually from groups linked with Hindu ultra-right nationalists. The UN's High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, talked about "increasing harassment and targeting of minorities—in particular Muslims and people from historically disadvantaged and marginalised groups, such as Dalits and Adivasis." Amnesty International also condemned hate crimes and assaults on marginalised groups in India.

The poor sections of society are suffering because of the global rise in oil prices, weaker Indian rupee, and falling prices of farm goods. Intellectuals and the media find Mr Modi's authoritarian style of governance abhorrent.

All this, coupled with the usual anti-incumbency factor, lent some advantage to the Congress. Whether the Congress can fully exploit this advantage, given the lack of experience and skills of its younger generation of leaders, is something that remains to be tested.

The opposition parties say that in order to deflect attention away from his government's inept handling of the economy, Mr Modi seized on the terrorist attack in Kashmir to launch a bombing raid into Pakistan in February.

Modi, it would seem, has a long-term vision of optimism, manifested in his quite audacious dismissal of notable old guards in a bid to revamp the party. His decision to deny nomination to Mr LK Advani, who regularly got elected from the BJP bastion of Gandhinagar, and instead give it to Amit Shah, a rising star and

dynamic organiser, has been a big talking point. The media has been eulogising Shah, and for good reason, considering the fabulous fashion in which he constructed BJP's sweeping victory in UP in 2014.

A very important state with 80 seats out of the total 550, UP is always very crucial in the electoral map. In the 2014 elections, BJP trounced its opponents capturing a whopping 71 seats. This year, it is planning to do even better, targeting 74. An important question is, can the Congress make a comeback from its miserable performance in 2014 when it won only 2 seats in UP? It is contesting in all 80 seats without any alliance, and that could be problematic.

The ten most populous states including UP, Maharashtra, West Bengal, Bihar and Tamil Nadu together account for over 350 seats, which means how the main parties perform in these states will matter hugely.

Critically at issue in the 2019 Lok Sabha polls is whether the Hindutva slogan, hitherto pushed successfully by BJP, will get a new lease of life or the secular and progressive ethos which defined India's independence-era politics will reassert itself. Anyone who watched NDTV on April 1 (from 9.30 to 10.15 pm) could not but be struck by the fiercely acrimonious exchanges between BJP spokespersons and the representatives of opposition parties. Nor could one dispute the characterisation of this election by senior journalist Sagarika Ghose as the most polarising ever seen in India.

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