

Gaping inequality

Greater commitment needed to bridge the rich-poor divide

AMONG the myriad challenges lying ahead of the Bangladesh government, tackling rising inequality in society is one of them. Looking behind the veil of GDP growth, which does not fully reflect the socioeconomic realities of the majority, we would see that the benefits of economic growth are accruing in the hands of a few which is deepening the rich-poor divide. The latest Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) of BBS revealed that Bangladesh's Gini coefficient, which is an economic measure of equality, stood at 0.482 in 2016, up from 0.458 in 2010—pointing to the fact that inequality in our society has increased. The poorest five percent today own less than one percent of national income whereas the richest five percent collectively own upwards of 25 percent. The state of inequality could not be any starker in Bangladesh today.

The challenges ahead of us are numerous and daunting: unequal access to affordable health and education and other facilities such as public transport, poor state of public service delivery, project inefficiency, etc. The complete disregard for meritocracy and embrace of political patronisation in our public institutions over the years have paved the way for shunning out individuals who cannot wield influence through wealth or power. This has helped keep out the unprivileged out of the system. Furthermore, unemployment among the educated youth in the country is particularly high as the country undergoes jobless growth. Worst of all, a deeply embedded culture of systematic corruption has led to the rise of an ultra-rich elite class at the expense of the wellbeing of poorer sections of society. The anarchy in the banking sector exemplifies the dizzying heights that corruption has reached in the country.

Promises of good governance—which is essential for tackling inequality—cannot be taken seriously until and unless we see a system of accountability and transparency across all sectors. Social safety net programmes have to be widened to target a wider population of the extreme poor; capacity of public institutions has to be increased; politicisation has to be rooted out of institutions; transparency in public works programmes is needed along with project efficiency; quality health and education services have to be made affordable for all, just to cite a few prescriptions. What we want to see are actions and policies that reflect a wholehearted commitment to reducing inequality.

BSTI cannot avoid its responsibility

It should comply with the HC order

THE High Court's comments on Bangladesh Standards and Testing Institution's (BSTI) statement about unlicensed dairy farms and companies seem very logical, given that the organisation has been trying to shirk its responsibilities. In a recent statement to the HC, it has said that it does not have any responsibility to look into the unlicensed companies that are producing and supplying pasteurised milk and curd across the country. Such a response from BSTI, a major agency responsible for ensuring safe food for people, is unfortunate.

Several recent studies have found the raw cow milk, pasteurised milk and curd in the market to be contaminated with harmful elements. The National Food Safety Laboratory (NFSL) in a recent study has found excessive levels of lead, pesticides, antibiotics and bacteria in raw cow milk, regular consumption of which may pose threats to human health. The study also found high levels of chromium in the fodder. In 2018, an ICDDR,B study also found high levels of bacteria and other harmful elements in 77 percent of pasteurised milk samples. Recently, Bangladesh Food Safety Authority (BFSA) submitted a test report to the HC in which it was said that harmful elements were found in most of the 190 samples of raw and packed liquid milk, curd, and also fodder.

Amid such a situation, all the organisations concerned should work in concert to ensure that the dairy companies ensure end-to-end compliance and products supplied by them is safe for consumption. While the department of agriculture extension as well as the ministry of livestock and fisheries should play their due role, the BSTI should also play its part. Since it is empowered by law to take action against the companies and dairy farms that do not have licenses, it should do so without any hesitation.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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How real are the stories of gunfight?

Drug dealing is one of the most inauspicious topics in our country. These days drug dealers often make headlines in connection with "gunfight" and "crossfire" incidents, with the official narrative always pinning the blame on them for triggering a hostile situation to which law enforcement officials are then forced to respond—in other words, shoot to kill. One often comes across stories of gunfight in the media. However, detailed news regarding such incidents and raids are hard to come by.

The story usually goes like this: law enforcement officials arrest criminals, drug dealers in this case. Then, according to the information given by arrestees, they conduct drives to recover drugs or firearms from the possession of other suspected criminals. Such drives, in most cases, lead the latter to open fire on the raiding officers, which ends up in a gunfight. The story ends with the drug dealers getting killed in the process, and the lawmen recovering the said drugs or weapons.

As all the tales of gunfight are more or less the same, they have become quite controversial with the public getting more and more reluctant to believe them. I think conducting raids in broad daylight, instead of the wee hours, and doing that in the presence of journalists/observers can ensure accountability of the law enforcement and bring some much-needed clarity to the mystery of crossfire.

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The calculus of heritage preservation



ADNAN ZILLUR MORSHED

THE clandestine demolition of Jahaj Bari in Old Dhaka on the night of Eid-ul-Fitr reveals the precarious state of historic preservation in Bangladesh. Such a senseless act of destruction—a kind of cultural violence—was possible because of a host of interrelated reasons. Among them are: a lack of clear policy guidelines for the preservation of "historic" buildings in private hands or waqf custodianship; a policy marginality of the very idea of historic preservation within government bureaucracies; pervasive lack of knowledge of heritage buildings (a newspaper journalist called Jahaj Bari an "ancient" building; there is no consensus as to when exactly the building was built); absence of broad public heritage awareness, further weakened by a disjointed culture of sentimental attitude toward preservation, often falsely isolated from the economics of preservation.

The knocking down of Jahaj Bari received some news media coverage. Yet, the overall feeling was that this was merely a minor headache of the preservation specialists! There was no statement about it on the website of the Department of Archaeology, the government agency in charge of the country's cultural patrimony. This agency recognises only 32 buildings in Old Dhaka as archaeologically significant. Jahaj Bari is not one of them. According to the Urban Study Group, a team of activists committed to the conservation of historic buildings, there are 2,200 "heritage" buildings in Old Dhaka.

The absence of a comprehensive national preservation plan in Bangladesh to safeguard cultural patrimony has long been identified as the main cause for the fast disappearance of heritage sites. But part of the problem also has emerged from the ways in which preservation activists frame the issue. Their suggestions have mostly oscillated between a lament for lost glory and the elitist foibles of a fairy-tale preservation strategy, as if nobody lives in historic buildings and the buildings exist outside of any kind of economic and political conditions.

Furthermore, there has been very little attempt to see historic preservation as a complex restorative process that has no universal formula. For instance, what stage in the life of the building would you restore? The original state when the building was built, or the "decayed" state in which the building was given to the curatorial agency? Should there be any

modern technological adaptation so that the restored building would be sustainable for the modern age? But would this technological retrofitting compromise the heritage building's originality? These are some of the questions that complicate the forthcoming restoration of Paris's Notre-Dame Cathedral, recently damaged due to fire.

In Bangladesh, neither the government agencies see any real political leverage in heritage preservation (which requires long-time commitments) nor do the owners of historic buildings understand the economic possibilities in saving their buildings from the crushing modernity of high-rise apartment blocks or shopping centres.

A dynamic and practicable action plan for heritage preservation warrants the real engagement of specialists, architects, historians, urban planners, engineers,

demolisher of history is to misunderstand the inevitable conflict between tradition and modernity.

The question of heritage preservation has long been a serious debate at the very heart of modernity: how does a civilised nation retain the vestiges of its history while incorporating the infrastructures of modern life so that preservation and economic growth can move forward in concert?

From the United States to Italy to England, from France to Turkey to Vietnam, many countries around the world have been debating this issue as a national priority and have come up with various ingenious solutions. There is a lot to learn from the experiences of these countries. A balanced mix of government regulations (without being overly authoritarian) and market-based incentives provides a defensible reason for the public to



Ruins of Jahaj Bari, which was torn down violating a High Court order and without permission from the Waqf Estate that the land belongs to. PHOTO: COLLECTED

the community, the municipality, the government, private-sector investors, and the owners. Legislative measures alone would not be enough to stop demolitions because economic incentives to tear down a building often outweigh the "manageable" penalty for breaking the law.

The idea that a historic building could be preserved to tell the story of a city's cultural evolution or that preservation could actually be profitable business simply does not resonate with a lot of people, as they are not guided to see the project of preservation within a larger economic and political context. The romantic plea for preservation has often remained entrenched in elitism and the technicality of physical restoration itself. Where is the owner in the equation? Demonising the owner as an uncultured

preserve, care for, and invest in historic buildings. Economic incentives for historic preservation may include: income tax deductions and low-interest loans for historic property owners, tax exemptions for heritage organisations and investors, government grants for heritage protection projects, property tax abatements, sales tax rebates for historic property maintenance, and free consultation for developing business models for historic properties.

Another approach toward preservation would be to convert historic buildings to economically viable "adaptive reuse"—the process of commissioning old structures for new beneficial and compatible functions (one of Jahaj Bari's tenants was Hanif Biryani; a restaurant with its fire hazard can't be adaptive reuse!). Instead of falsely mummifying a historic building

India-US tariff tiff goes beyond trade



PALLAB BHATTACHARYA

IT has finally happened. The trade conflict between India and the United States has broken out as New Delhi ended its almost year-long wait for a negotiated settlement and came up with a retaliatory step imposing higher tariffs on import of

28 high-value agricultural items from the US with effect from June 16. It was in June last year that the US set off the conflict by hiking the duties on import of goods from India including steel and aluminium. The delay in India's reciprocal measure is not difficult to understand. India wanted to give trade negotiations with the US a chance. But not only did that not happen, but what killed the prospects of a breakthrough was the announcement by President Donald Trump in March this year about the withdrawal of the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP), a special trade facility the US has given to nearly 120 developing countries, including India, permitting them to sell a portion of their goods in the US market free of import duty. India was the biggest beneficiary of the GSP which Trump terminated for India's refusal to lower tariff barrier to import of American medical devices, particularly stents, dairy products and Harley Davidson motorcycles. Under the GSP, India exported goods worth USD 6 billion to the US last year. Trump had often termed India the "tariff king."

That the retaliatory tariff move by India was on the cards had been indicated by Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal the week before last when he hinted that New Delhi is not going to pursue a solution to the GSP withdrawal problem and is ready to move on without the trade concession from the US. Goyal said the discontinuation of the GSP was not a matter of life and death for Indian exporters. "India is now evolving and moving out of the crutches that we thought we needed to export. India is no more an underdeveloped or Least Developed Country that we will look at that kind of support. We believe we can be competitive in exports on our own strength," he said.

This is reflective of a bold new approach by India and Goyal's words are part of a new diplomatic lexicon in New Delhi in its dealing with the US for two main reasons: 1) India's economic heft makes it ready to stand up to the US without any rancour, and 2) India is prepared to be transactional in handling bilateral relations. Such a stance was

waiting to be adopted by India for quite some time now, discarding the traditional rhetoric about shared values of democracy and freedom in conducting international relations. The US never carried any ideological baggage in its foreign policy and its only guiding principle was national interests. Why should India be bogged down by any ideology in pursuing its own interests? As the Indian commerce ministry had asserted in its reaction to the US decision to scrap the GSP for India: "We have significant development imperatives and concerns and our people also aspire for better standards of living."

India's initial refusal to hit back at the US with tariff hikes was apparently

on the sidelines of the G20 Summit in Osaka, Japan, on June 28-29, and prior to that on the bilateral talks between Indian External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar and American Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, when the latter visits New Delhi on June 25-26. This would be the first meeting between Modi and Trump after the former assumed power as prime minister for a second consecutive term on May 30, following the Indian parliamentary elections, and the Jaishankar-Pompeo talks would be doing the spade work for the summit-level interaction.

The trade issue is likely to figure prominently in Modi-Trump talks in Osaka. Ahead of his travel to Osaka, the

flourishing medical tourism in India. Secondly, India's recent changes in e-commerce rules have raised the hackles of US giants Walmart and Amazon, which run India's top two online market places. The rule changes prevent the two behemoths from forcing sellers to bring products exclusively on their platforms. Thirdly, India's insistence on digital payment service providers storing data on Indian consumers on servers located in India, as protection against data breach, has become another bone of contention. The US considers the data localisation as discriminatory and trade-distorting. Analysts feel the US unhappiness about online trade rules change and data localisation has prompted the Trump administration to withdraw the GSP benefit to India.

However, to put the India-US tariff tiff in a proper perspective, one needs to take a much larger picture of the sticking points in bilateral relations beyond trade. True, India and the US have convergence of views about a rising China. The Trump administration's putting more and more heat on Pakistan on the issue of cross-border terrorism and prompting China to give up its veto on the designation of Jaish-e-Mohammed terror group founder Masud Azhar in the UN list of terrorists were welcomed in New Delhi. But there is a divergence of opinion between India and the US in some other areas. The US has indicated at a threat of sanctions on India if New Delhi goes ahead with the purchase of S-400 missile defence system from Russia and buys crude oil from American sanctions-hit Iran.

On the other hand, the US hopes to secure big defence deals with India estimated at USD 10 billion. These, according to Indian media reports, include 24 multi-role helicopters, 30 weaponised Sea Guardian drones and National Advanced Surface-to-Air Missiles to protect the national capital city of Delhi. On June 13, US Senators John Cornyn and Mark Warner moved an amendment to the American National Defence Authorization Act (NDAA) to include India along with NATO allies for sale of sensitive defence hardware. Obviously, Washington sees India as a lucrative market.

It remains to be seen how the India-US trade friction plays out and if it impacts other areas of cooperation in the coming months. It looks unlikely that Trump will go back on restoring the GSP status to India or roll back import duty hikes on Indian steel and aluminium ahead of the US presidential elections next year. India, for its part, must brace for switching over to transactional diplomacy with the US.

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The India-US trade tensions come despite Washington's effort to boost ties with India as a counterweight to China and President Donald Trump's stated good relations with Prime Minister Narendra Modi. PHOTO: AFP/SAUL LOEB

viewed by the US as a sign of itching for a compromise. India's retaliatory tariff measure can now alter the terms of trade engagement between India and the US. The two countries can now go to the negotiating table as equal partners, according to Biswajit Dhar, a professor of economics at Jawaharlal Nehru University. He said it was untenable that Washington would want greater market access in India on the one hand, and end the GSP facility on the other. While India's exports to the US amounted to USD 52.4 billion in the fiscal year 2019, imports stood at USD 35.5 billion.

India's clamping higher tariffs on American imports is expected to cast a shadow on the proposed meeting between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Trump

Indian prime minister articulated what Trump can expect to hear from him. In his speech at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Summit in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, on June 13, Modi attacked unilateral trade protectionism saying it did not benefit anyone and highlighted the need for a rule-based global trading arrangement.

In trade, the US is miffed about India imposing price caps on certain medical devices from the US for the benefit of poor patients in India. This has hit American multinationals like Abbot and Boston Scientific. The US companies consider India a lucrative market, estimated at around USD 5 billion, for their medical devices. Analysts say the costly medical devices, particularly stents, may affect