

Tanneries killing the Dhaleshwari River

Should it take five years to get CETP operational?

FIFTEEN hundred fisher folks living in the vicinity of the Dhaleshwari River have had to change their profession. Some have become day labourers, others rickshaw pullers. Because, the river is no longer capable of sustaining marine life. Authorities forced the tannery industry to move from Hazaribagh to the Savar tannery estate in 2016 but have so far failed to get the central effluent treatment plant (CETP) up and running. The CETP would have mitigated much of the pollution of the Dhaleshwari and experts fear it will end up like the Buriganga because of the untreated discharge of chemical effluents into the river from the tanneries.

Authorities are quick to lay the blame on tanneries stating that the factories at the tannery estate do not follow regulations. It was gross negligence on the part of the authorities to force the move from Hazaribagh to Savar knowing full well that the CETP was not operational, although it was claimed at the time that it would be in a few months. A few months has turned into a few years and the water of the Dhaleshwari now has a terrible odour. It's not drinkable and causes skin rashes for anyone bathing in it. It is so polluted that the water cannot be used for agricultural purposes either. Construction that started back in 2014 has not finished in 2019 and the construction company has failed to meet its ninth deadline. We would like to know why the contract was not cancelled years ago and a new one given to a company with a better track record. Why are we repeating the Hazaribagh scenario all over again, causing the death of a river, putting people's health at stake and destroying livelihoods of the fishing community? Have we learnt nothing? Eid-ul-Adha is around the corner and an estimated 7 million hides will be processed and the untreated chemicals will be unceremoniously dumped into an already polluted Dhaleshwari!

Roads remain dangerous

Mounting body count is a clarion call to action

YET again, blood was spilled on the roads. And yet again, there were unfortunate deaths and injuries thanks to unruly driving. According to a report by *The Daily Star* on Saturday, eleven people died in road accidents in different parts of the country within the space of a day. In some cases, the victims were run over by speeding vehicles. In other cases, they died in head-on collisions between oncoming buses and other motorised vehicles. These deaths add to a mounting body count from crashes on Bangladesh's notorious roads and highways that have persistently defied attempts to make them safe. Clearly, the ministry of road transport and bridges has a lot to answer for, and a lot of soul-searching to do given the huge responsibility it has been entrusted with. All its pledges and policy-making—and frantic wrangling with the transport associations to make them accountable—have basically brought us nowhere.

So, the question that needs to be asked is, is the ministry doing enough? Put another way, is it really sincere about bringing discipline in the chaotic road transport sector? And why is the ministry silent on these deaths? In the past year, since last year's road safety movement, there has been no significant development indicative of a genuine shift in how the ministry and its divisions in charge of road safety operate. It's still business-as-usual for them: unfit vehicles continue to be in operation; unlicensed and even underage drivers continue to drive public transports; transport workers and owners continue to enjoy immunity; the body count continues to mount up. Whatever change has been there didn't result in a satisfying outcome. This cannot go on, however. With another Eid festival approaching, which is usually when the highest number of road casualties occur, the government must do all that is necessary to ensure safety for the commuters and pedestrians.

Foreign assistance boosts infrastructure development



NO FRILLS
SYED MANSUR HASHIM

DURING the five-day state visit by PM Sheikh Hasina to China on July 2-6, Bangladesh and China inked some important deals—five agreements including three memorandums of understanding (MoUs) and other agreements that included investment in the power sector (USD 1.7 billion). The visit was important for Dhaka as it paved the way for Beijing to pay more attention to projects that are important to Bangladesh's development.

This comes in the backdrop of the USD 24 billion worth of loans and investments signed between the two countries over the past few years, ever since Bangladesh joined the BRI initiative in 2016. When we take into account the USD 13.6 billion invested in joint ventures earlier, it puts Bangladesh (after Pakistan) as the largest recipient of Chinese loans under BRI. Yes, Chinese investments have been growing at an exponential rate over recent years. As pointed out in a recent article in *The Diplomat*, "between 1977 and 2010, Beijing's investment in Bangladesh totaled just \$250 million. This rose to roughly \$200 billion in 2011 alone. In the wake of the BRI, China has emerged as Bangladesh's largest investor."

When we look at the government's vision for the country, it is obvious that Dhaka wishes to make substantial improvements in its infrastructure. However, given the government's less-than-successful bid to secure funding from traditional sources, it has had to turn to China to fill the void. The unfortunate incident of the World Bank and subsequently the Asian Development Bank pulling out their combined funding (of USD 1.2 billion) for the Padma Multipurpose Bridge Project over alleged graft, left the ruling party with a bitter taste in the mouth. Then there was the Bank BNP Paribas and Norwegian

government's sovereign wealth fund, both of which refused to finance the Rampal coal-fired power plant in Khulna on environmental grounds. These disappointments eventually paved the way for Bangladesh's move to join the BRI initiative, which also opened up the opportunity to take loans from China's AIIB, the newly emerging global lender, and of course, direct Chinese investments from the People's Republic of China (PRC).

China has been an active development partner for Bangladesh. A number of important projects have been awarded to Chinese companies in rail and road. Indeed, an industrial park is being built next to an upgraded Chattogram port

For instance, Bangladesh opted to go with Japan's proposal to build a deep sea port at Matarbari and effectively shelved the Chinese proposal for one in Sonadia because there is no need for two deep sea ports. Now that shows the country's financial planners are well aware of what will work and what won't when it comes to taking out multi-billion-dollar loans. Just because the money is on offer and on the table doesn't mean we will take it. China for its part has shown remarkable restraint in not pushing the deep sea port too much.

When we take into account the fact that Bangladesh's economy has actually pushed beyond the 6 percent annual growth rate and ventured into the 7-plus

Of course, not everything is as rosy. True, MoUs have been signed worth billions and billions of dollars. The Achilles heel has been slow disbursement. Going by media reports, we are informed that China has actually disbursed less than a billion dollars on agreements signed back in 2016. The reasons for such a snail's pace in disbursements vary but what has been shared unofficially by the Chinese is that red tape is largely to blame. There have also been cost overruns on many of the projects that have been financed by China and one of the biggest allegations levelled against Chinese firms is that they always bid a sum that is lowest to clinch the project—and once the project is awarded, they go for time



Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and China's Premier Li Keqiang attend a signing ceremony at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, China.

PHOTO: REUTERS

that was done with Chinese assistance. Besides being a partner in the Padma bridge construction, China has built some eight friendship bridges in Bangladesh. Apart from these, Bangladesh is receiving a lot of support in the power sector, particularly in coal-fired power plants some of which are being built in Chattogram and Payra.

So, why are relations so warm between these two countries? As stated before, China is accommodative with Bangladesh's demands for financing/investing in projects that are important to Bangladesh. As for the question put forward by pundits in Washington and Delhi about Chinese loans fuelling a possible debt-trap, Dhaka has been cautious about the projects it undertakes.

percent benchmark, the continued growth in inward remittance from expatriate workers and robust export of readymade apparels, and coupling all those indicators with soft loans available from countries other than China, particularly India and Japan, it gives us hope that no, we are not headed in the same direction as, say, Sri Lanka, or Pakistan for that matter, and setting ourselves up for an eventual debt-trap. India, which has been a time-tested friend of Bangladesh, has extended soft loans worth around USD 7 billion and the Japanese are helping develop multi-billion-dollar projects, including the Matarbari complex, multiple power plants and a deep sea port. Hence, our externally-assisted development portfolio is not entirely China-centric.

extensions, which inevitably lead to revising project costs that do not benefit the country.

The last visit by PM Sheikh Hasina has paved the way for a joint working committee that will identify and eliminate issues that are holding up disbursement and this, it is hoped, will help keep project completion times in check. At the end of the day, the BRI is happening. As is Bangladesh's road map for infrastructure development. The country will move ahead with all its development partners playing a role in infrastructure development including India, Japan and yes, China.

Syed Mansur Hashim is Assistant Editor, *The Daily Star*.

When we look at the government's vision for the country, it is obvious that Dhaka wishes to make substantial improvements in its infrastructure.

PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

Technology on the frontline for girls



JESSICA POSNER ODELE

ways to empower girls and women—safe and reliable access to mobile phones and the Internet—is in danger of being ignored.

Today, the GSMA—the global trade body for mobile operators—estimates that more than five billion people have mobile devices, over half of which are smartphones. But the rapid diffusion of mobile technology has not been equal. Though the number of women from low- and middle-income countries who own mobile phones has risen by some 250 million in just the last five years, there are still 184 million fewer women than men with mobile phones, and women are 26 percent less likely than men to use mobile Internet.

Similarly, though younger people own mobile phones at a higher rate than their older counterparts, gender imbalances persist. According to a 2018 study by Girl Effect (of which I am CEO), boys are 1.5 times more likely to own a phone than girls. Even among those who do own phones, boys are more likely to have smartphones than girls.

But ownership is not the same as access, and our investigations have revealed that girls often find ingenious ways to get their hands on mobile devices. More than half of the girls we interviewed—in places like India, Malawi, and Tanzania—regularly borrow mobile phones from their parents, siblings, or friends. Some also share SIM cards and devices, finding inventive ways of access.

Given the enormous benefits of Internet access, this is good news. For example, a 14-year-old girl in rural Bangladesh, having never been taught about puberty, might be so ashamed

about changes she is undergoing that she skips school. But, during the two hours per week she is allowed to borrow her brother's phone, she can learn about menstruation and pregnancy, and connect with a local health facility to arrange in-person advice and care. In other words, mobile access gives her the knowledge and confidence she needs to protect her health—and her future.

Access to mobile phones is not an end in itself. Rather, it is a way to level the playing field not only through knowledge, but also through connection: nowadays, mobile phones are key conduits to drive demand to vital services, such as health and financial services. Ensuring broad and equitable mobile access is thus a powerful, easily scalable way to help all people make informed decisions about their own lives, in areas ranging from health to education to employment.

Getting girls and women online—whether on their own devices or on borrowed or shared ones—is only the first step. We must also ensure that they have sufficient technical literacy to take full advantage of the devices they are using.

Girl Effect's research showed that, overall, boys use far more phone features and capabilities than girls.

Moreover, we must consider what girls find when they get online. Is the information they are receiving accurate? Are they at risk of exploitation? Ignoring these questions would be a missed opportunity—and dangerous.

That is why Girl Effect has been working to create safe online spaces where girls can access reliable information tailored for them, discover valuable services in their area, and connect with others facing—and overcoming—the same challenges. The goal is to foster curiosity, boost self-confidence, and empower girls to pursue their dreams.

Of course, for such platforms to make a difference, they need to be attractive to users. When girls get online, they might be seeking not to learn, *per se*, but rather to be entertained. We must meet them where they are, offering experiences that are engaging and—critical for those who lack digital literacy—user-friendly. To this end, girls should be included in the design process.



SOURCE: PINTEREST

Getting girls and women online—whether on their own devices or on borrowed or shared ones—is only the first step. We must also ensure that they have sufficient technical literacy to take full advantage of the devices they are using.

Girls in Ethiopia, Rwanda, and Malawi are already benefiting from such platforms, and Girl Effect is launching similar initiatives in India and Tanzania. In all of these environments, approaches are tailored to local needs and perspectives, and constantly re-evaluated, in order to account for changes in access and use.

There is no shortage of research demonstrating the far-reaching—and broadly shared—benefits of gender equity. For example, raising female labour-force participation in India could add USD 56 billion to the country's economy, making the workforce as a whole 27 percent richer. That, in turn, would reduce fertility rates and enable higher investment in human capital, driving sustained rapid economic growth and development.

To secure these gains, governments and their partners must invest in technology-based initiatives that respond to the needs and preferences of girls and women. Creating safe, engaging, and informative online platforms for them is a good place to start.

Jessica Posner Odele is CEO of Girl Effect.

Copyright: Project Syndicate, 2019.
www.project-syndicate.org

(Exclusive to *The Daily Star*)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Unnatural deaths on the rise

It seems that death is lurking everywhere in Bangladesh. Every day we hear news of numerous unnatural deaths. Only July 31, for example, six people died while cleaning a septic tank in Joypurhat and three ship-breaking workers died from toxic gas in Chattogram.

On August 1, a father was killed at his daughter's wedding and the mother was seriously injured in Dhaka's Moghbazar. A schoolboy named Titash had to die on a ferry because it was kept waiting for a VIP. He was being taken to Dhaka for an emergency operation in an ICU-fitted ambulance from Khulna. The boy had to die because the government official's travel schedule was more important than his life.

We hear news about dead bodies being recovered, women and even baby girls being raped and slaughtered on a daily basis. Road accidents are claiming many lives.

The overall picture is frightening. People are at their wit's end not knowing how to survive. May the Almighty save us from our current condition.

Nur Jahan, Chattogram

CRIME SCENE DO NOT CROSS