

Enforce National Building Code

Implement HC ruling of 2010

As we stand at the close of 2019, the High Court order issued back in October, 2010 asking the government to establish a national building code enforcement authority within a year has not been complied with as yet.

The national building code was prepared back in 1993 and it took the government 13 long years to approve it. It then lay unused for another four years till 2010 when the government began revising it again. In the long 26 years that has elapsed since it was first prepared, we have been witness to many tragic events that cost thousands of lives. From the Rana Plaza disaster to the FR Tower incident—ensuring safety has not been a priority area for the policymakers.

Experts tell us that the global practice for building code revision is three to five years. And here we have a situation where the Bangladesh National Building Code (BNBC) has remained in limbo for nearly 30 years. More than a decade elapsed before the first revision was initiated, which has, in effect, rendered the existing building code all but obsolete. The Code, which has not been issued as gazette yet (as per the amendment of 2006), provides for seven years' punishment or Tk 50,000 in fines or both, in case of violation of the BNBC and Building Construction Rules of 2006. But as the BNBC has not been fully enforced, it has not been possible to hold anyone responsible for faulty construction design. One cannot overemphasise the importance of an enforcement authority, for the simple reason that the code applies to the entire country and not only to the five or six major cities. The government should shake off pressure from interest groups and enforce the code with the help of a powerful enforcement authority to avoid future casualties or injury.

Stop illegal sand extraction

Unscrupulous traders should be brought to book

We are alarmed at the news of sand extraction that has been going on for the last eight months in four villages of Habiganj's Bahubal upazila, jeopardising the lives and properties of local people. Sadly, not only in Habiganj, illegal sand extraction from rivers, canals and hills have been going on all across the country despite there being specific laws and High Court orders prohibiting such activities. It is now clear that no amount of law can stop these greedy businessmen and local political leaders from carrying out these unlawful activities unless there is strict enforcement of the laws and political commitment from the government to save our environment.

In Habiganj's Bahubal upazila, sand is being extracted from Kalichhara canal which flows through these four villages. Already many farmers of the villages have lost their land due to land subsidence, and the fertility of the agricultural land has also been affected.

What is most unfortunate is that despite written complaints by the villagers to the authorities, nothing substantial has been done to stop the mindless practice. Although the authorities have said that they conducted raids through mobile courts, burned the dredger machines and even fined some of the sand traders, our reporter has found no visible improvement of the situation in the area. It is also difficult to believe the local Jubo League leaders' claim that the canal was leased out to them by the government for sand extraction. We urge the government to immediately cancel the lease in order to save the four villages of Habiganj from an environmental disaster. We also hope that the authorities will enforce the relevant laws to stop illegal sand extraction once and for all.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Overusing smartphones and social media

In this era of digital revolution, smartphones are available to everyone. Though most schools prohibit the use of phone during classes, we see students using them all the time. When students are so addicted to their smartphones, the future looks scary.

As internet access increases, young people in particular are misusing it more and more by spending incredible amounts of time on social media. A 2018 survey by the National Academy for Educational Management revealed how social media use has rapidly grown. According to the survey, 29.5 percent of students are addicted to using social media during their school hours.

Some are becoming addicted to watching pornography, which changes their habits and how their minds function.

Another survey by a leading NGO last year showed that around 75 percent of school going children were addicted to pornography. It is high time for people to realise the problems that arise from the overuse of smartphones and social media.

Amdadul H Sarker, Cumilla



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on an overdrive. Waking up at 4:00 am has been routine; worrying about the industry that has been fuelling employment and economy of the country has been key. Luckily, my children are my guardians checking up on my sleeping habits, my health, my compulsions, my diary and our business. I am a lucky mother of 4.

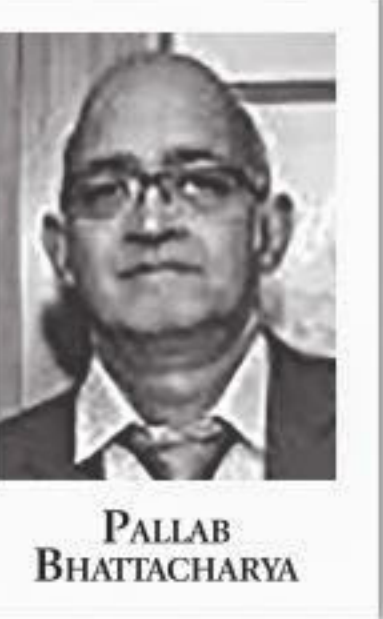
So far I have been on four official trips. Japan was the beginning, followed by China, Brazil and New York. The Japan trip with our current ambassador was a breeze. With 22 CEOs of companies that invest in Bangladesh and continue being a friend of our nation, the conversation revolved around infrastructure and ultimately ended up being the biggest pledge for FDI in Bangladesh.

Next came Dalian in China, where the conversation was more on Asean. With Asean turning out to be the world's 4th largest economy by 2030, sky is the limit for us and hence, my proposal at Asean was positioning ourselves as Asean+1.

Next came Brazil. Brazil and Bangladesh have a bilateral trade of 1.5 billion dollars, out of which Brazil exports USD 800 million worth of sugar and we export only USD 163 million of readymade garments to them, taxed at 35 percent in Brazil. The idea was to attempt to ease into a somewhat trade preference mode leading to an FTA, at some point of time in the future. These things take time involving detailed study into the potential and the problems, with an effective follow up for both sides to stay engaged in.

Not giving up.

The fourth trip was, of course, to the UNGA, where during the side events, meetings with US policymakers, think tanks, trade union representatives, one thing became clear: the labour narrative is yet to be addressed. In spite of our export to the US growing, after new tariff lines being imposed by the US on China with effect from September 1, the discourse around trade still continues to be steeped into past references of



Hasina had flagged the issue during her previous meeting with Modi in New York on September 27 on the margin of the UN General Assembly session where the Indian PM, according to Bangladesh Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen, assured his Bangladeshi counterpart that Dhaka has nothing to be worried about in case of the NRC. Curiously, the read-out issued by the Indian External Affairs Ministry on September 27 does not mention the NRC nor Modi's assurance. Going by Momen's briefing to the media, the assurance from Modi should assuage concerns in Bangladesh over the NRC because it has come from the highest quarter of India.

The epicentre of the National Register of Citizens may have been Assam, but its after-shocks are being felt in West Bengal. The slugfest between the Bharatiya Janata Party and the state's ruling Trinamool Congress has given rise to anxiety and apprehensions in West Bengal and a scramble among the people to acquire documents that would help prove their Indian citizenship. Hundreds of people are queuing up before government and municipal offices across West Bengal, including Kolkata, to collect their birth certificates and property documents to be in readiness if National Register of Citizens is implemented in the state despite assurances by Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee that it would not be allowed as long as she is in power.

The omission of a large number of Bangla-speaking Hindus and Muslims from the final NRC list in BJP-ruled Assam seems to have set off panic among the people in West Bengal. According to Mamata Banerjee, six people have died in the state so far due to tension over procuring necessary documents to prove their citizenship. Indian media reports have it that people committed suicide after allegedly failing to procure old documents or after falling ill while standing in queues at different government offices to get their documents. Mamata has repeatedly appealed to the people not to panic at all

Not Giving Up

abuse, termination, etc. Backing it up with promises and sound argument and yet doing the best will continue to be a challenge.

But, not giving up.

What else am I not giving up on? Let me candidly share the challenges that we have in the sector.

In the last 5 months, more than 40 factories have closed down and over 25,000 workers have lost their jobs. Yet, the growth figure seems to continue to impress all. A four-year CAGR indicates a dip in prices, lack of product diversification or up-gradation, and uncertain global sourcing trends. Big orders are ceasing; smaller runs are on the rise. The appeal of the bulk is being



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PHOTO: ILO

quickly replaced by more conscious and custom-made choices. Meantime, over capacity is also an issue to be examined deeply with a more focused study on developing a base national capacity, which will disallow us from undercutting each other and allowing our customers to pick the lowest bidder. The race to the bottom has to end.

Not giving up.

However, what bothers me about our growth narrative is that the big are growing bigger and the small are perishing. This puts a dent in my faith in the possibility of having new, young entrepreneurs popping up the manufacturing landscape. This means the economics of the developed world

has won and that we have succumbed to the usual. Well, we have not. Today is a time for the unicorns, the new gazelles, the start up's that will further the pace of our land. This is a place where small firms with limited production capacity can actually promise a new growth in the changed pattern of consumers where big factories fail to comply with customisation and where small factories could actually cater to such demands.

How do we turn them around and make them compliant? We could. In this journey, national monitoring already is the first critical step for Bangladesh having our own codes, own practices, own standard of sustainability, which would take us to the new level of

authority and credibility. Thus, in September, with fall at its peak, we pledged to peak our commitment to sustainable and collaborative national monitoring with the formation of Readymade Garment Sustainability Council. The timing has never been better.

What else could improve though? Perhaps a generous dose of policy support? A quick look at our competitors should be enough for any policymaker to rethink and reset the thought button. Recently, the Indian government has announced a 4 percent incentive under the Merchandise Exports from India Scheme; For Vietnam, corporate tax is at 0 percent for first 4 years, 50 percent for

the next 9 years and 10 percent for the following 15 years. Pakistan's central bank now offers 7.5 percent interest against Export Refinancing Scheme.

At our end, with prices plunging, with the country concept being a provider of basics, with growing and enviable advantages being offered in neighbouring countries, with patterns of sourcing changing, we need to immediately consider strengthening our bargaining power by being together as manufacturers and offering an acceptable price to our buyers and understanding that being cheap is not sustainable, but being competitive is. We need to also flaunt our capabilities to the brands and tell them firmly that there's nothing we can't produce in this country of ours. To our policymakers, we must ensure that our data is not misunderstood or misinterpreted and that only one month of September peaking in 2018 impacted the entire year's increase and that...alas, it is not what they think it is.

My job as the president of BGMEA, the RMG exporters' association, so far has been to work with entrepreneurs who have been engaged in this trade for years, engaging in constant fears of falling prices and failing industrial units. There are closures and there are failures. Amidst all this, my job essentially is just not to firefight our dark nights into a more tolerable tomorrow's, but to essentially raise the bar of hope.

But, any unfavourable policy, any lack of encouragement will not only halt the industry but will also pose an immediate threat to the massive employment that this sector provides. In the last 5 months, more than 40 factories have closed down and more than 25,000 workers have lost their jobs. In brief, we are not doing well.

But we are not giving up.

At a recent conference in Harvard titled "Bangladesh Rising" organised by the Lakshmi Mittal South Asian Institute, in front of an august audience of academics, what was evident was that we are a nation with rapid transition positioned to take off with a distinctive 8.2 percent GDP model, with 165 million people living in a nation no bigger than the state of Wisconsin, and that we are secular and democratic, efficiently addressing challenges in both private and public sectors.

It was also evident that Bangladesh is just not rising anymore. Bangladesh has arrived. Thus...

Not giving up. Ever.

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NRC: The way ahead for India and Bangladesh

and said there will be no NRC in Bengal, and the West Bengal government has put out ads featuring her on TV channels with the same message. But her appeals do not seem to be having the desired effect.

What appears to have contributed to the anxiety over NRC in West Bengal are: i) the Election Commission's drive to verify voters list (fresh legislative assembly elections are due in West Bengal in 2021); and ii) the state government's issuing and updating digital ration cards to those who do not draw subsidised food grains from fair price shops to use them as identity proof. These two factors have combined to set off a perception that they are linked to the proposed NRC in West Bengal. On the other hand, the BJP Bengal leadership

trigger a bigger consolidation among 30 percent of Muslim voters in Bengal, the highest in India, for her. And second, it has the potential to cause a split among Hindu electorate in the light of the Assam experience. There seems to be recognition in the BJP that Mamata using the Assam NRC in Bengal could queer the pitch for its Hindutva plank. Trinamool Congress Secretary General Partha Chatterjee has asked the BJP to explain the exclusion of Hindus from the NRC in Assam before projecting itself as the saviour of Hindus.

Aware of this, the Sangh Parivar outfits—the BJP, the RSS and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad—have mounted a coordinated offensive to counter her. Taking a lesson from Assam, the saffron

may lose the ground gained during the Lok Sabha polls campaign, when the saffron party's charge against Mamata government of minority appeasement had gained traction, and cloud its prospects of defeating the Trinamool Congress in the next assembly polls.

Two important points that often tend to get drowned in the war of words over the NRC are: i) the agitation in Assam—and for that matter in the entire north east—against "foreigners" since 1980s till today is religion-neutral but; ii) the CAB in the context of the NRC is religion-specific. The question is: how do you reconcile the two?

Four days after the Hasina-Modi meeting in New York, the NRC issue once



Trinamool Congress supporters protest against the National Register of Citizens in Siliguri on August 4, 2018.

PHOTO: AFP

has blamed Mamata and her party Trinamool Congress of creating panic over NRC in the state to instil fear among the Hindus. At the same time, BJP national General Secretary Kailash Vijaybhargya insisted that the NRC would happen in Bengal.

The exclusion of Hindus in Assam NRC has given rise to fear among a section of Hindus in Bengal. It is this anxiety that Mamata is trying to tap into, in order to win back a sizable slice of Hindu voters who had backed the BJP in this year's national polls leading to a remarkable saffron surge in the state. There appears to be two key aspects of Mamata's strategy for pushing back hard on the issue of NRC: one, it could

outfits are now telling the people in Bengal that the NRC in the state will be preceded by parliamentary passage of the Citizen Amendment Bill (CAB) that seeks to give citizenship to Hindus, Buddhists, Parsis, Jains and Sikhs and some others who migrated to India from Bangladesh, Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Trinamool Congress's increasingly sharp attack on the BJP over the NRC issue is also forcing the saffron party to adopt a more and more stridently polarised stance by arguing that Hindus excluded from the NRC would be given the protective cover of the CAB. The BJP is conscious that if Mamata's campaign on the NRC whips up a perception and if Hindus are disenchanted with the exercise, it

again was in media spotlight when the Indian PM's close aide Amit Shah, the Home Minister, spoke on it at a seminar in Kolkata. The only new point emanating from Shah's speech at the seminar was that the CAB will precede extending NRC across the country. Modi's assurance to Hasina in New York notwithstanding, it has been suggested by some in India that Bangladesh and India can look at arriving at an agreement to tread carefully on a sensitive issue, including a joint verification procedure to identify the undocumented nationals so that the present status of bilateral ties remains insulated from possible turbulence.

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