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Carbon footprint will increase exponentially

Policymakers should revisit the coal policy

ACCORDING to a recent report, the country is likely to be hit by a “carbon bomb” once the projected 30-coal based power plants go into operation by 2031. The report titled “Choked by Coal: The Carbon Catastrophe in Bangladesh” was jointly released by Australia-based Market Force and US-based 350.org and shared by co-publishers, Bangladesh Poribesh Andolon (BAPA), Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) and Waterkeepers Bangladesh. It tells us that these projects could also land the country in a “trade deficit”, because they will cost Bangladesh an estimated USD 2 billion or Tk 170 billion annually for the import of coal.

While the data is not off the mark, Bangladesh, as an energy-starved country, finds itself in a catch-22 situation. Development activities must go on and policymakers are eyeing annual GDP growth rates beyond the seven-percent mark. This will require massive electricity generation, which inevitably will come from coal, as it remains the cheapest fossil fuel widely available both domestically and internationally. Yet, at what cost? The carbon bomb being talked about can be summed up easily from the adverse environmental effects of a single 525-megawatt coal-fired plant in Dinajpur.

Although the USA, a major user of coal to produce energy, has pulled out of the Paris Agreement, we have other global economies like India and China that have and are continuing to pour in hundreds of billions of dollars annually to fuel research on renewable, clean energy. Because, the harmful effects of a coal-driven economy and the associated ill-effects on public health due to air pollution, contamination of the soil and water resources are all documented facts. There is still time for our policymakers to rethink the energy mix of the country that would spare the future generations from a degraded environment. Putting our efforts to devise alternative renewable sources of energy that would ensure a healthy growth without degrading the environment is an urgent imperative for us.

Justice for Santals still elusive after three years

They should be given back their ancestral land

IT has been three years since Santals living on a sugarcane farm in Gaibandha were brutally evicted by police backed by influentials in an operation that left three Santals dead and many injured with many more missing. Since then, around 1,200 Santal families are living in tents amidst uncertainty and fear. Some of them continue to suffer from the injuries due to gunshots or splinters that are still in their bodies. To add to these woes, more than 100 of the members of the community have had cases filed against them. The plight of the Santals indicates a total apathy towards their rights by the authorities and an attempt to deprive this indigenous community of what they call their ancestral land.

The land had been acquired in 1962 by the then government for sugarcane cultivation and the condition was that if the mill went under, the land would be given back to the Santals. The mill did fail and the Santals returned but they were driven out violently with their homes being looted and torched. Clearly, such acts are a violation of their human rights yet very little has been done to get justice for the Santals.

It is quite baffling why, although a case was filed against 33 people who took part in this eviction drive three weeks after the incident the charge sheet given by the police did not include 11 prime accused that included a former lawmaker, a UP chairman, former UNO and officials of the sugar mill. Also why did the charge sheet not have the names of the police officials directly involved in the attack despite a well-circulated video footage of law enforcers setting fire to the Santal homes?

The attempt to rehabilitate the Santals in other villages, moreover, have not worked even after three years, thus leaving the Santals in total despair. Some of them have returned to their ancestral lands and live in makeshift homes or tents despite the threat of eviction by the administration and mill authorities.

At this point, rehabilitating the Santals to their ancestral land would be the most humane and rational solution. It is the state's responsibility to ensure that the rights of indigenous communities are protected. We hope that those accused of instigating and carrying out the attack will be brought to book and these helpless Santals will not have to face intimidation by the administration or the mill authorities.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Demon in digital disguise

Parents handing over digital devices like cell phones, tablets, laptops, etc. to their little ones has become a common sight. Children these days are so occupied with such devices watching videos or playing games that they have distanced themselves from physical activities like outdoor games or even reading books. Their tendency to use digital devices so extensively is essentially a sign of addiction.

According to research, heavy usage of such dangerous devices stimulates cognitive or behavioural disorders including obesity, obsession and depression, among others. Parents must restrict their own digital addiction first and then control their children's. Since technology is a part of our daily lives as we are totally dependent on it, we must focus on safer ways to use it without crossing our limits and ensuring safety for all. We need to address the acute “digital addiction” that is sweeping across the nation regardless of age, gender or status. The severity of the problem, if allowed to persist, will have serious consequences, especially on the younger generation.

Siddhartha Shankar Bhattacharyya, Bangladesh Agricultural University

Are we fine with the fine?



BLOWN' IN THE WIND

SHAMSAD MORTUZA

DESPERATE times require desperate measures. The Road Transport Act 2018 was endorsed by the Cabinet Division on August 6, 2018 on the heels of the nationwide student protest

that sparked off when two college students were killed by a speeding bus last year on July 29. The law was passed in parliament on September 19 and approved by the President on October 9, 2018. The government, however, deferred the implementation schedule, and only on October 23, 2019—almost a year after the passing of the law—Bangladesh Road Transport and Highways Division issued a gazette notification announcing that the law would go into effect on November 1.

As Dhakaite road-crawlers, we are suddenly waking up to the exuberant fine fear aired by the megaphones of our traffic officials. A new law is in town to discipline the unruly traffic system. And the figures are staggering. Already, the overwhelming suspicion is, the steep penalties will lead to corruption and overburden the citizens. In many cases, the punishment is not in proportion to the severity of the crime and defies the principle of proportional justice. For instance, the “voluntary” murder clause in case of accident-related death gives a faulty driver the benefit of the doubt; whereas, for jaywalking the maximum fine for a pedestrian has been set at Tk. 10,000. So a reckless driver can get away with a murderous act, while a day labourer can be charged his entire month's salary for crossing the road outside the designated zone.

The 1983 Act, which has been replaced by the new one, had minor offences set at Tk 200-300 range. Now the same actions would demand hefty fines amounting to Tk 10, 000 to 25,000 range. Driving without fitness or registration would incur a fine of Tk 25,000, and fake license would cost the perpetrator Tk 1-5 lakh or 6 months to 2 years in jail. The hike in many instances is more than 100 times. Does the growth in our national income correspond with the steep rise? Or does the state intelligence consider us all to be casino owners?

Of course, the fines are meant to act as deterrents. But as citizens, we are getting the short end of the bargain. If you ask me, there is too much stick, and not enough carrots! Someone posted on Facebook: “Roads of Africa. Fines of America.” Without implicating the

friendly continents, we can find some truth in the statement. Is the service worth the tax that we pay? What are the faults in the infrastructure that encourage violation of laws? Have we created a system, a transport network that allows efficient movement of traffic? What about the culture of impunity in which everyone thinks law can be hoodwinked? Do we have the ethical values to respect the boundary of others while driving or travelling? Do we have the minimum courtesy for our fellow travellers? Then there are the men of law who champion unlawfulness.

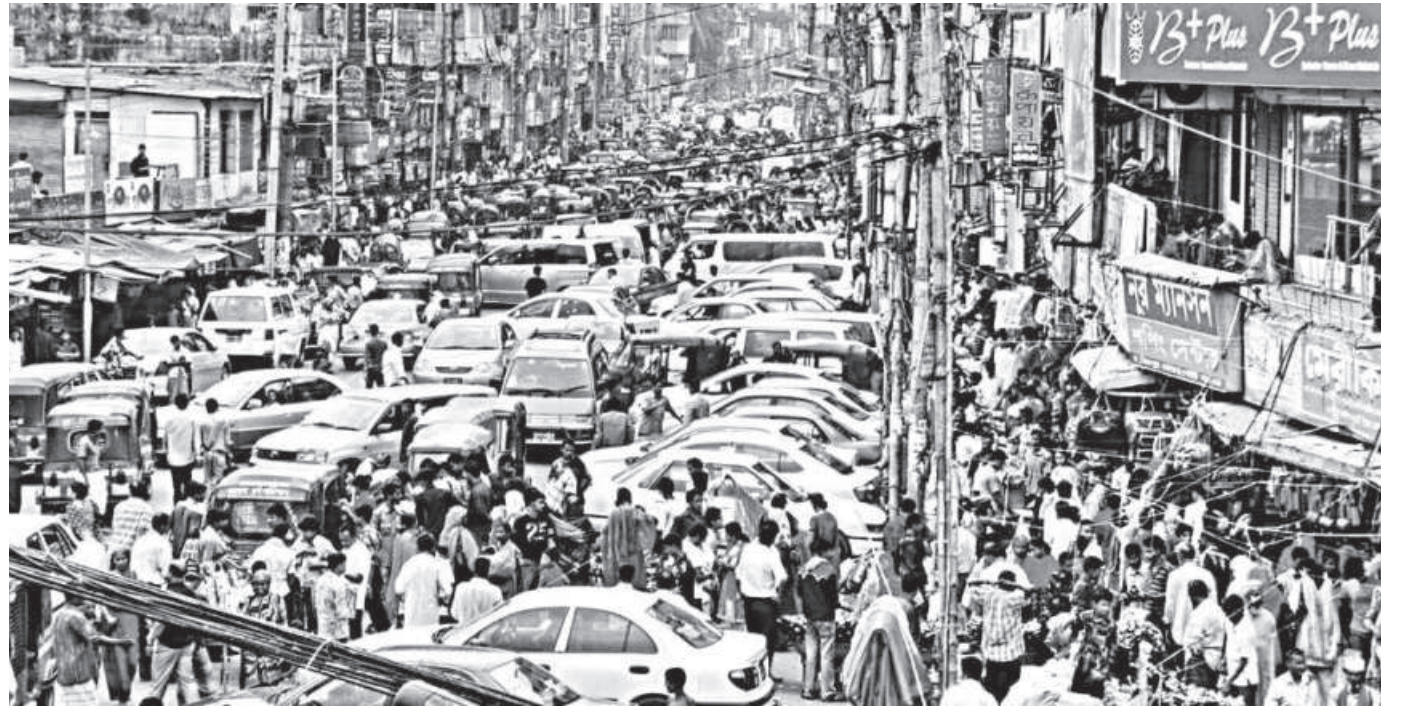
In every junction, you will notice a tag team performance by our traffic constables and traffic sergeants. The constable would randomly stop a car or pickup and bring

the buses to bully? I suspect not. Because individual greed cannot be satiated as long as the fine amounts fatten the State purse. Sharing the booty in the commission will enhance the evil practice further.

The second reason why this hefty tax is unjust involves the traffic flow of the city. Dhaka has the most sophisticated signal system, which I heard was brought from Australia. Yet the traffic is managed manually. According to traffic flow theory, having 185-250 vehicles per mile per lane causes complete stops of traffic as we reach “Jam density.” Having 67 vehicles per mile per lane is known for causing “breakdown” condition. Once the mass flow rate (or flux) exceeds the optimum density (above 30 vehicles per mile), traffic flow becomes unstable, and even

frenzy is very unlikely to help the cause. Those who levy the fines must earn the respect of the city dwellers. If our officers behave like uniformed goons, then the tendency would be to compromise. Unfortunately, we have grown accustomed to a system in which we see flag-bearing cars coming from the wrong sides; ambulances screaming at the top of their horns while traffic law enforcers pick their noses; signal lights changing while some officers are negotiating the deals. Implementing the fine structure will require a change in our mind-set.

It's good to hear that all police officers will have cameras installed in their uniforms. Maybe as citizens we need to carry cameras too so that we can present our side of the stories. The hand of law



Traffic mayhem in Dhaka's New Market area.

PHOTO: JOISEY SHOWAA/FLICKR

it to the sergeant for processing the fine and go back to his post. Any streetwise person will tell you that most public transport outfits keep many of these men on the payroll. Any avid spectator will notice the exchange of slips. Bribery, albeit extortions, are rampant among our traffic system. Hence a public bus company that has the police in its good book will dare to stop in the middle of the road, waylaid all other vehicles and pick up passengers while blocking its rival bus from overtaking it. Yet the person in charge will turn away and catch a small fry and go after a helmetless biker, ignoring the bizarre bus blockade. Will it be possible for the police force to come out of the alleged unholy alliances that allow

a minor incident can result in persistent stop-and-go driving conditions. Our GPS red grids are constant reminders of such conditions in Dhaka. So we have a system where signals don't work. Cars are stuck on zebra crossings. We don't have enough bus bays. We don't have sidewalks for pedestrians to walk. There is hardly enough parking for all the cars that ply on the streets. The public transport system is pitiable to say the least. Taxis do not run on meters. Buses do not run on time. And slow moving rickshaws paddle in the fast lane. BRTA cannot monitor license giving system and train the drivers. The long and short of it: there is no traffic management system.

Creating a system that will excite a fine

is certainly long, and if it decides on looking for loopholes it sure is supposed to get one. Conversely, if we want to find faults in the system that is implicating us, we too can notice many anomalies. One difference between those who punish us and those of us who will be punished involves the fault in the stars. The stars they wear in their dresses wreak power, and our stars are as paradoxical as eating *halwa-rooti* hoping for a changed plight.

Of course there are genuine offenders who deserve genuine punishments, if not more. For the rest, are we fine with the fines?

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PROJECT SYNDICATE

The end of neoliberalism and the rebirth of history



JOSEPH E. STIGLITZ

the entire world from its destiny of liberal democracy and market economies. Many people agreed.

Today, as we face a retreat from the rules-based, liberal global order, with

AT the end of the Cold War, political scientist Francis Fukuyama wrote a celebrated essay called “The End of History?” Communism's collapse, he argued, would clear the last obstacle separating

simultaneous waning of confidence in neoliberalism and in democracy is no coincidence or mere correlation. Neoliberalism has undermined democracy for 40 years.

The form of globalisation prescribed by neoliberalism left individuals and entire societies unable to control an important part of their own destiny, as Dani Rodrik of Harvard University has explained so clearly, and as I argue in my recent books “Globalisation and Its Discontents Revisited” and “People, Power, and Profits”. The effects of capital-market liberalisation were particularly odious: If a leading presidential candidate in an emerging market lost favour with Wall Street, the

taxation, or a well-regulated financial system—“because the country will lose competitiveness, jobs will disappear, and you will suffer.”

In rich and poor countries alike, elites promised that neoliberal policies would lead to faster economic growth, and that the benefits would trickle down so that everyone, including the poorest, would be better off. To get there, though, workers would have to accept lower wages, and all citizens would have to accept cutbacks in important government programmes.

The elites claimed that their promises were based on scientific economic models and “evidence-based research”. Well, after 40 years, the numbers are in: growth has

of goods. They were right to feel conned.

We are now experiencing the political consequences of this grand deception: distrust of the elites, of the economic “science” on which neoliberalism was based, and of the money-corrupted political system that made it all possible.

The reality is that, despite its name, the era of neoliberalism was far from liberal. It imposed an intellectual orthodoxy whose guardians were utterly intolerant of dissent. Economists with heterodox views were treated as heretics to be shunned, or at best shunted off to a few isolated institutions. Neoliberalism bore little resemblance to the “open society” that Karl Popper had advocated. As George Soros has emphasised, Popper recognised that our society is a complex, ever-evolving system in which the more we learn, the more our knowledge changes the behaviour of the system.

Nowhere was this intolerance greater than in macroeconomics, where the prevailing models ruled out the possibility of a crisis like the one we experienced in 2008. When the impossible happened, it was treated as if it were a 500-year flood—a freak occurrence that no model could have predicted. Even today, advocates of these theories refuse to accept that their belief in self-regulating markets and their dismissal of externalities as either non-existent or unimportant led to the deregulation that was pivotal in fuelling the crisis. The theory continues to survive, with Ptolemaic attempts to make it fit the facts, which attests to the reality that bad ideas, once established, often have a slow death.

If the 2008 financial crisis failed to make us realise that unfettered markets don't work, the climate crisis certainly should: neoliberalism will literally bring an end to our civilisation. But it is also clear that demagogues who would have us turn our back on science and tolerance will only make matters worse.

The only way forward, the only way to save our planet and our civilisation, is a rebirth of history. We must revitalise the Enlightenment and recommit to honouring its values of freedom, respect for knowledge, and democracy.

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East German citizens climb the Berlin wall at the Brandenburg gate after the opening of the East German border was announced, November 10, 1989.

PHOTO: REUTERS/FILE

autocratic rulers and demagogues leading countries that contain well over half the world's population, Fukuyama's idea seems quaint and naive. But it reinforced the neoliberal economic doctrine that has prevailed for the last 40 years.

The credibility of neoliberalism's faith in unfettered markets as the surest road to shared prosperity is on life-support these days. And well it should be. The

banks would pull their money out of the country. Voters then faced a stark choice: Give in to Wall Street or face a severe financial crisis. It was as if Wall Street had more political power than the country's citizens.

Even in rich countries, ordinary citizens were told, “You can't pursue the policies you want”—whether adequate social protection, decent wages, progressive

slowed, and the fruits of that growth went overwhelmingly to a very few at the top. As wages stagnated and the stock market soared, income and wealth flowed up, rather than trickling down.

How can wage restraint—to attain or maintain competitiveness—and reduced government programmes possibly add up to higher standards of living? Ordinary citizens felt like they had been sold a bill