

The road to development is ‘always’ under construction



WHAT is the first image that comes to your mind when you think of the word “development”? I see an image of a signboard, and it’s about the Metro Rail (MRT Line-6) being constructed in Mirpur, connecting different parts of the metropolis. The signboard has been put up on the fences surrounding the pillars of the overhead rail line and assorted building materials near Agargaon, telling commuters and pedestrians: “We sincerely apologise for the temporary inconvenience.” As road construction signs go, this seems pro forma, except for the fact that it’s accompanied by other promotional signboards that basically offer a reward for the trouble taken: a green, smart, gridlock-free city once the metro rail gets operational. Who wouldn’t want that?

But this “temporary” inconvenience happens to be the longest that Mirpur residents have faced, for five years and counting. And the road that is about to host this miracle of a rail line now lies in tatters, causing endless sufferings, and making the promised future seem more distant every day. For me, the image of that inanimate signage offering empty apologies has come to be a metaphor for the anaemic state of our development policy. It asks you to wait and suffer silently, for the sake of a future that will be transformative, although there is no way of knowing if that indeed will be the case or if that future will be imminent.

In recent decades, the drive for economic growth in Bangladesh has spawned a vast number of development projects, big or small. A lot can be said about how effective those have been or will likely be. But what strikes me more, after having lived through the protracted birth pang of Metro Rail, is that we clearly have a finish problem when it comes to development. Any analysis of the history of these projects will demonstrate that they suffered one

of the following unfortunate outcomes: Most completed projects were handed over well after their initial deadlines; many had to revise deadlines for several times, prompting significant cost escalations; many saw artificially inflated prices drive up their budgets; many of the projects were never finished; some never started at all, even after a budget had been allocated; some got pulled down by bureaucratic deadweight; some exist in name only, while the enthusiasm for others petered out mysteriously. Worst of all, many projects, far from addressing the problem they were meant to, ended up being counterproductive. The capital’s flyovers are not the only examples.

How these projects end up, both midway through their construction and post-completion, is a far cry from the rosy pictures drawn of them in the initial phrases. It reminds me of the editor of Clark Gable’s journalist character in the classic Hollywood film *It Happened One Night*. After the latter’s failed attempt to produce a scoop, the editor memorably comments: “You think you’ve got a great yarn and then something comes along and messes up the finish.” Similarly, something always seems to come along and mess up the finish of our development projects.

Three cases recently reported by *The Daily Star* show how some of the smaller projects end up post-completion. In one, you have a public library in the Nottun Bazar area of Tahirpur Upazila, Sunamganj. Since its construction thirty-three years ago, it has been used for everything except what it was intended for: a place to read. Because there are no books to read. Instead, the two-storey building is now used variously as a de facto community centre, an indoor sports club, an officers’ club, and an auditorium for meetings and seminars used by local officials and public representatives. The “library” was originally built to encourage reading habits among the residents of this backwater town surrounded by wetlands.

In the second case, you have a nursing institute in Pabna which, even after two years of its construction, is yet to become operational, thanks to the negligence of the



‘We seem to be running around in circles, with an endless stream of old and new projects jostling for public money and space simultaneously.’

PHOTO: SK ENAMUL HUQ

authorities concerned. The health ministry and Diabetic Association of Bangladesh started the project through a public-private partnership in 2013. Construction of the three-storey building ended within the scheduled time in 2018, a feat achieved by few projects in Bangladesh. But then “something came along” and the Public Works Department (PWD) stopped short of handing it over as, we are told, it has yet to put the finishing touches to the building, while the electric and power supply lines remain uninstalled. As we wait for the mercy of the PWD to move the needle on this important public health institute, the building risks being damaged due to lack of maintenance.

A similar fate also awaits a trauma centre in Habiganj’s Bahubal upazila. It was constructed in 2013 but has yet to launch operations, due to lack of electricity

and gas connections. The facility is part of a government project aimed to build 10 trauma centres on six national highways to provide emergency treatments to the victims of highway accidents. Like many “ghost” medical centres spread across the countryside, it now exists in name only.

What’s common to these projects is that they have been hamstrung by lack of support upon completion which proves that a project, regardless of how slow or fast it is completed, means nothing if it is not put to its intended use. Those that are ongoing also suffer from myriad problems during their execution period. We have seen how the twin challenges of cost escalations and deadline extensions have bedevilled multiple projects in recent years including billion-dollar megaprojects like Dhaka Metro Rail, Padma Multipurpose Bridge, or Dhaka Elevated Expressway. We’ve seen how corruption,

inefficiency, lack of foresight, and the red tape culture—four frequent collaborators in almost all our public works and services—have combined to jeopardise their execution. It, then, must be one of these influences that led several ministries and divisions to declare as “complete” 157 unfinished development projects marked for the 2018-19 fiscal year, as a report launched by the Implementation Monitoring and Evaluation Division (IMED) of the planning ministry in March this year shows.

True, there have been projects that finished admirably on time, and within budget. But those are so far and few between—and the number of ill-conceived and ill-executed projects is so great—that it created a profound distrust in the ability of the current development policy to deliver the future it promises. Something must be wrong with how we’re approaching the concept of development. Today, we seem to be running around in circles, with an endless stream of old and new projects jostling for public money and space simultaneously. The road to development is “always” under construction, their scars equally visible in cities and across neighbourhoods, leaving in their wake a long trail of sufferings. Ask anyone what image they have of “development” and you’ll be surprised to know how many have come to despise it, despite acknowledging its importance for the goals we’ve set as a nation.

Many of the infrastructure and power projects that are now underway may be profoundly impactful, transforming the lives of millions of people in ways we may not yet imagine. But that future must not be at the expense of our present—our happiness, safety and wellbeing. We must make a balance between our needs in the present and our ambitions for the future, and find a way to ensure we don’t pit one against the other. And we must fix our finish problem so that projects end up right where, and when, they were meant to be, shutting the door on all avenues of exploitation.

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16 DAYS OF ACTIVISM AGAINST GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Gendered violence: The paradox of the routine and the spectacular



NOVEMBER 25, 2020 marked the beginning of the UN Women’s worldwide annual 16 days of activism against gender violence. My social media stream is filled with images of rallies, announcements for seminars and candle-light vigils organised across the world by feminist and social justice groups. I am particularly drawn to the livestreams, and vociferous chants of activists—mixed by gender, age, class, occupation against the cityscape of Dhaka. “We want freedom, not protection” is the rallying cry. A rising trend in sexual violence in recent months has instigated intensified attention, outrage and mobilisation across diverse constituents locally and in the diaspora.

UN Women informs us that sexual violence is a global phenomenon, indeed a “global epidemic” with 35 percent of women and girls facing it in some form in their lifetime. Only 40 percent of victims of rape report it to authorities, while numbers of actual cases going to trial and being fully adjudicated remain appallingly low. In Bangladesh, over a nine-month period in 2020, Ain O Salish Kendra (ASK) reports a total of 975 rapes of women and girls, 208 gang-rapes, 191 attempted rapes, 41 cases of suicide following a rape, 216 child victims of rape and 44 child victims of gang rape. ASK also notes that the numbers in each category have risen steadily over the last several years. Stunning as the statistics of violence against women are—and reporting of it in the media has certainly strengthened recently—honing in on specific cases reveals not only the ingrained cultures of violence, stigma and shame but also, paradoxically, cultures of impunity and silence.

Focusing on the paradox here, I find that the more things seem to shift and progress in the realm of gender violence in some instances, the more they also appear to remain the same. An epidemic perhaps is a misleading concept with regard to gender violence which, unlike epidemic-prone diseases, neither erupts suddenly nor ends with a cure-all vaccine. Rather, taking a long view of gendered oppression brings the focus back to society and, more importantly, actors and institutions that allow the problem to continue.

In the United States where I reside, this paradox colours a generalised perception that certain populations, namely those in the Global South and especially in Muslim societies, are prone to extreme

violence and subjected to an excessive form of patriarchy. This kind of colonial thinking sees women’s status as the measure of civilisation and progress, and attributes certain cultures, men and governments as the perpetrators of forms of violence that are sanctioned by religion and culture. Ahistorical and racist, this kind of colonial thinking maps onto narratives and policies of development and modernisation initiatives often championed by the governments and humanitarian institutions of the North. Ironically, absent here is the long oppression of women upon which the very foundation of our history rests: that of colonial domination and enslavement of indigenous peoples and Blacks.

Sociologist Patricia Hill Collins argues that rape of Black women and lynching of Black men in the Antebellum South are two sides of the same coin: that of subjugation of the Black population. Rape of indigenous women was, and



continues, as a tool of subduing the Native population, dehumanising them and breaking their spirit. The legacies continue, of course, when we look at the alarming statistics of 1 in 3 Native women likely to be raped in their lifetime. And whereas most rapes are intra-racial, in the United States, in the case of Native women, non-Native men are the majority of assailants; and non-Native men also are not legally bound by tribal criminal sanctions. The point here is that even as the United States touts itself as a beacon of democracy and humanitarianism, it obscures its own violent and racist history of misogyny and policies that have made and continue to make certain populations more vulnerable to extreme violence. And that structural violence against vulnerable populations—including rape of women of colour—has been foundational to nation-building and the imagination of Self and

that of the Other in this country. Further, patriarchy—although central—alone is an insufficient category to comprehend and illuminate the sanctioned and political underpinnings of rape.

Here, I would like to spotlight three recently reported cases of sexual assault in Bangladesh, which have captured the attention of media, legal and cultural advocates. One case involved a gang rape of a woman on the premises of a college campus in Sylhet. Six members of Chhatra League, the student front of the ruling Awami League, assaulted the young woman who was on a holiday with her husband. The men were known to be associates of influential local political elites, and despite various prior reported crimes against them involving illegally acquired weapons, extortion and harassment of women, they had been empowered to wield power and roam the streets with impunity.

The second case occurred in Khagrachhari, Chittagong Hill Tracts, and involved nine Bengali men breaking into the house of a Chakma family, gang raping a disabled girl in the presence of her parents. This recent case brings back memories of another case in July 2018 in the same area, involving an 11-year-old child who was raped and murdered allegedly by members of the Bengali community. The third case, and possibly one that incited the most broad-based outrage across the nation, involved the gang rape of a woman in Begumganj, Noakhali, whose assailants subsequently released a video clip of the assault. The main perpetrator in this case also had multiple prior charges against him, one even of murder. He had repeatedly raped the woman at gun point over the last year. He asked for money from the victim, and threatened her with continued sexual assault by his associates if she did not comply.

I emphasise these three cases to draw attention to the paradox of attention and impunity, to the routine and spectacular ways gender violence manifests and operates. The rising trend in numbers is not a new phenomenon. But firstly, I would like to suggest that the continuing and brash impunity that empowers certain individuals and groups to enact violence is a simultaneous and intensifying trend. Secondly, the rape of ethnic minorities in the Hill Tracts is sanctioned by a double impunity of militarised and gendered oppression where sexual violence against indigenous women has long been a tool to subdue, threaten and terrorise the Jumma communities. Indigenous women’s bodies here stand outside the attention and protection of social and legal systems—their bodies deemed “rapable”

as a metaphor of colonial violence, conquest and occupation. Thirdly, even while subjected to rape repeatedly, the victim in the third case did not report to the police because she feared that a woman in her position—socially and economically vulnerable—would not be taken seriously, let alone meriting justice.

Most egregiously, of course, rape—a routine violation of the vulnerable—was made spectacular by the circulation of the video clip, gathering attention and calls for mobilisation. Rising trends, increased reporting, new laws, and social advocacy have not protected the vulnerable, ethnic minorities or economically marginalised. On the other hand, the rising mobilisations by advocacy groups—certainly something to be commended—have done little to diminish the culture of impunity which empowers certain individuals and groups to act without consequences. In a recently broadcasted webinar hosted by Sarbojonkotha, scholar-activist Rahnuma Ahmed noted that men accused of sexual violence and men standing trial in such cases repeatedly state that they would not have committed such crimes if they thought they would be prosecuted. Dr Ahmed’s findings are corroborated by legal experts on the webinar who noted that the conviction rate for rape in Bangladesh is below 1 percent. Moreover, a multi-country study conducted by the UN found that among men in Bangladesh who admitted to committing rape, 88 percent of rural respondents and 95 percent of urban respondents said that they had faced no legal consequences. Every-day violence enacted on the structurally vulnerable does not incite or instigate mass movement, let alone justice. Spectacularising the event—as we saw in the Begumganj case—made it worthy of attention and reaction.

The victimised in the Begumganj case has been entitled *Shahoshika* by activists in solidarity to continue the work of justice and awareness. In the words of Shahoshika, all women are threaded together in the violation and harm done to her. So what then enables some of us to look away and perhaps focus on certain enactments of violence over others? Shahoshika reminds us that women across strata of class, status, ethnicity, sexuality, and nationality have been stripped naked by the naked power of impunity. The question remains whether the present structures of power can enable a recognition of that hierarchical yet mutual vulnerability and urgently insist on a freedom based on reciprocity and justice across lines of power.

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CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS	reading	7 Online icon
1 One of a bear trio	30 Clip	8 Upscale homes
5 Mass units	32 Swiss peak	9 Goopy stuff
10 Heartburn	33 Singer Torme	11 Creamy sauce
12 Traditional foe	34 Draw	17 Make better
13 Of the kidneys	35 Pizzeria buy	20 Gladdin
14 Muscat native	37 “Don’t Cry for Me” singer	21 Words to the maestro
15 Soccer’s Hamm	39 Asian peninsula	23 Shoulder ornament
16 Handful of	40 Phone sounds	25 Bed item
18 Huck’s pal	41 Big wave	26 Strike caller
19 Toward the wake	42 Prudent	27 Corkscrew pasta
21 Fast runner	DOWN	28 Orchestra pieces
22 Princes, e.g.	1 City of northern Italy	29 Gofer’s work
24 Modify	2 Unfair hiring	31 Make fun of
25 Act hoity-toity	3 Fiesta prop	33 Diner buy
29 Watch	4 One-time link	36 Animator’s frame
	5 Get bigger	38 Oath
	6 Brink	

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YESTERDAY’S ANSWERS

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