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Are we ready for a third spike of the pandemic?

Govt must campaign for compliance with health guidelines

NO sooner had the virus reached a trough than we see a spike in the number of infected cases in the country. Some countries have been so badly infected, like Italy, that they have gone into another countrywide lock down. To make matters worse, different variants have emerged that might be resistant to the vaccines developed so far, certainly they are considerably more resistant to treatment than the original Covid-19 virus, and more infectious.

Statistics show that in the last four weeks the number of infected persons has shot up in the country and hospital admission has spiked tremendously, particularly in the last one week, by almost 100 percent. According to virologists, there may be several reasons for this. The fall of infection rate to below two percentage in the previous 2-3 months gave us the feeling that the pandemic was all but gone, and the minimum precautionary measures of masking and social distancing were no longer required. Added to that was the false notion that with taking of the first dose of the vaccine we could go back to business as usual. And of course, there is the new UK variant which is, reportedly, much more infectious than the old variety. Virologists also fear that due to repeated mutations, one cannot dismiss the possibility of the growth of a new local variety of the virus.

The newly infected patients in the majority of cases not only need oxygen but intensive critical care also. Unfortunately, we have been again caught off guard. The available ICUs are full to capacity, and if the current trend continues, will fall short of the requirement. As it has been reported, many patients are being turned away from some hospitals. While we take comfort from the assurance of the DGHS, that our facilities can treat the rising number of patients on the existing ICU beds and that our oxygen supply is enough and that central oxygen supply systems have been set up in many medical college hospitals and the hospitals with 250 beds, we must cater for the new wave.

The virus is so highly infectious that no facility can ever be enough. Therefore, apart from enhancing the hospital facilities, we believe that the best way to combat the virus is to prevent its transmission and growth by adopting all the protective measures as individuals. That means masking up mandatorily, washing our hands at regular intervals, and maintaining social distance. We believe that the government must start another campaign to reinforce the observance of these health guidelines. We can go back to business as usual, but only at our own peril.

Unplanned industrialisation killing the Sutang river

When will the authorities act to save our rivers?

THE rivers of Bangladesh are so crucial to its existence that they have been recognised as "living entities" or "legal persons" with their own set of rights by the High Court, and the National River Conservation Commission (NRCC) has been appointed as the legal guardian of all rivers in the country. Despite this, despite the 17-point High Court judgment from July 2019 which clearly stated that "killing a river is virtually a collective suicide for all", and despite the prime minister herself giving several directives to the involved actors to protect rivers—the destruction of our rivers and other waterbodies continues unabated.

And the latest victim is the Sutang river. According to a report in this daily, the Shoijura canal in Habiganj was re-excavated seven years ago for the crucial task of bringing fresh water from the Sutang to irrigate surrounding villages; but now, it has become a hazard affecting at least 30 villages, as well as the river itself. As is often the case, the culprits are a number of factories established on its banks that are dumping industrial waste into the canal and contaminating the water, to the extent that the Sutang river is now too toxic for aquatic life and for irrigation purposes. On top of that, locals have reported that the polluted water is causing skin diseases and damaging crops, but demands raised by environmentalists and local representatives have, so far, fallen on deaf ears. As the Sutang is connected with the Meghna, this wanton destruction is ultimately affecting one of the major rivers of Bangladesh.

March 14 was the International Day of Action for Rivers, and environmentalists and activists came together to give the government a number of recommendations on saving our rivers, which included dealing with the dumping of waste and making it mandatory for all factories to install waste treatment plants. Will the authorities take these recommendations on board, when they are failing to take even the simplest steps to stop river pollution due to unplanned and unregulated industrialisation?

In almost every report this daily has printed on the destruction of rivers, whether through industrial pollution, land-grabbing or faulty river management, there have been accusations of influential persons escaping any sort of accountability for the actions that are negatively impacting rivers. In this case too, local environmentalists allege that large companies have bought up cheap land and are now occupying and polluting the Sutang river with impunity. Even DoE officials have admitted that despite running effluent treatment plants, it is possible that untreated industrial waste is being discharged into the canal through less visible streams.

Our question is, what are the authorities going to do about it? Are they going to finally step into their role as the protector of our rivers, and take action? Or are they going to allow the unregulated industrialisation around the Sutang to destroy not just the river, but the wetlands and agriculture in surrounding areas, causing untold damage to the environment, as well as to the health and livelihoods of the local population?

Bangladesh's achievements in 50 years and making it meaningful



FAHMIDA KHATUN

MARCH is a month that carries special significance for Bangladesh. In March 1971, the country got involved in the Liberation War, which continued for nine long months. This war was the culmination of a prolonged movement for emancipation from economic, political and cultural suppression by the then West Pakistan. Thus, the Liberation War was influenced by the ethos to establish a country where the underlying philosophy of development policies were equity and justice. Independence was about achieving democratic rights, economic rights, social rights and cultural rights. The aspirations of the people of Bangladesh have been articulated eloquently in the constitution of the country.

However, Bangladesh's journey in the post-independence period has not been smooth. It has experienced turmoil in the form of assassinations, coups, counter-coups and military rule. These were coupled with corruption and bad governance. Within three years of Bangladesh's independence, the Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was assassinated in August 1975, by a group of junior army officers, in an attempt to overthrow the incumbent government. Following this brutal killing, a sharp division in political ideology began to take root in the country. After a long period of instability and misrule, Bangladesh moved towards a democratic transition through parliamentary elections in 1991.

This transition, however, could not continue uninterrupted as politics could not take a developed and institutional shape and instead became highly confrontational. So, after a few elections, the democratic process faced another blow in the midst of bitter hostility among the dominant political parties in 2006, when transition of power through an election became uncertain. This resulted in the assumption of power by a military-backed non-partisan caretaker government, which took over in January 2007 with the promise to hold a free and fair election. An election was held in December 2008 and Bangladesh Awami League came into power, winning an overwhelming majority. However, the parliament became dysfunctional after the election and political opposition has become weaker over time. Hence, 50 years on, Bangladesh's political journey is still a "work in progress".

In terms of the economic situation, in 1971, Bangladesh inherited a poor and undiversified economy. It was predominantly an agricultural economy with low productivity. It had underdeveloped industrial and services sectors, a rapidly growing population and an overall poor infrastructure. Due to

decades of British and Pakistani colonial exploitation, the economy was stuck in the vicious cycle of poverty. Low levels of income, savings and investment were resulting in a low growth. On top of this, the war had caused serious damage to the economy.

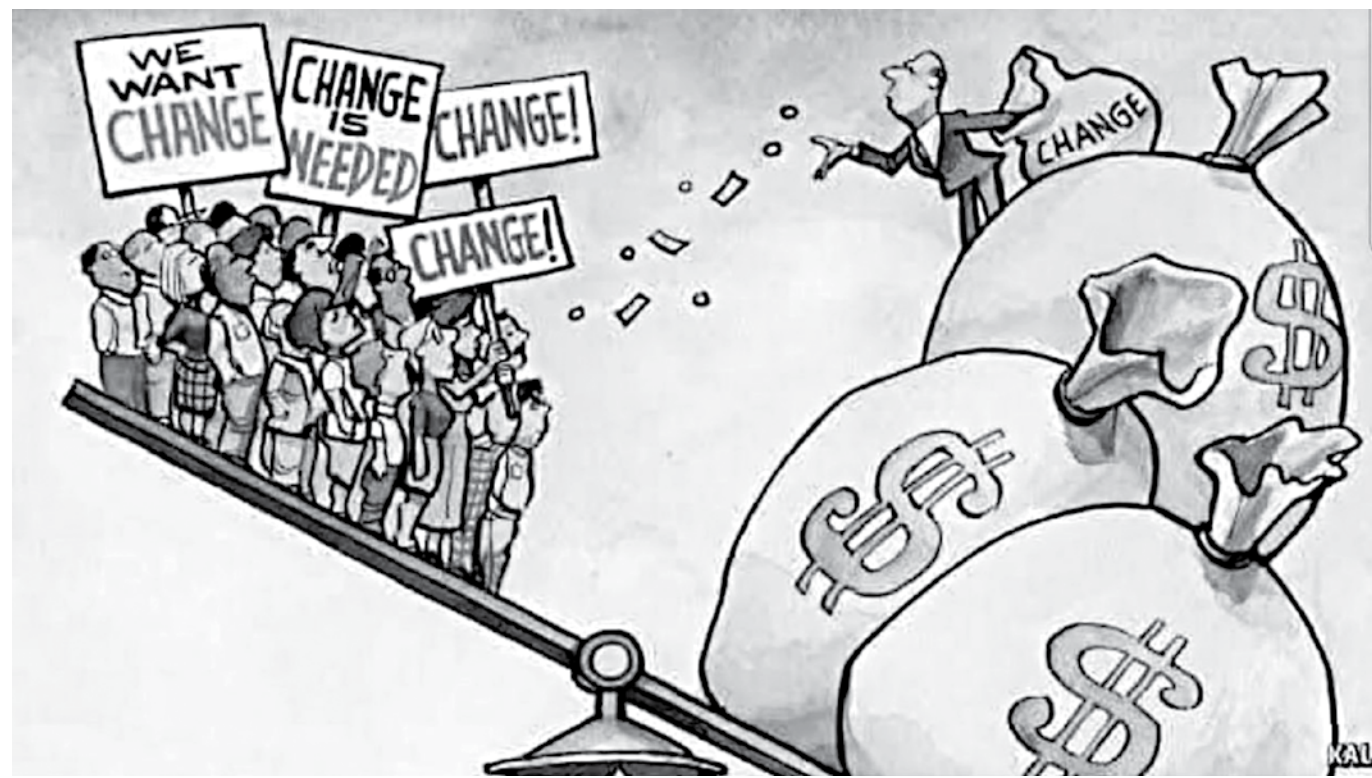
Despite such unfavourable circumstances and constraints on resources, Bangladesh has made spectacular economic and social progress over the last five decades. For one, the growth rate of its Gross Domestic Production (GDP) has been impressive. On average, the GDP of Bangladesh has risen from about 3 percent in the 1970s to 7 percent in the 2010s, and had crossed 8 percent just before the Covid-19 pandemic set in. Though the pandemic has slowed Bangladesh's growth, its GDP growth is projected to rise faster than

Economic progress has impacted the social lives of the population positively on many counts. By 2016, the share of population below the poverty line had declined from more than 80 percent in the early 1970s to 24.2 percent. Life expectancy has also increased by more than one and a half times since 1973. In a similar vein, maternal mortality has declined by almost four times and child mortality by about five times from what they were in the eighties. And there are many more visible progresses of which we are proud of.

The recognition of such progress has come from several organisations. In February 2021, Bangladesh fulfilled all three criteria to graduate from a least developed country (LDC) to a developing country, for the second time since 2018. The United Nations has recommended

increasing. With the pandemic hitting the economy hard, inequality may have widened in Bangladesh, as is apprehended in many other countries too.

Therefore, the macroeconomic numbers are only a part of the full story. GDP may continue to grow, and per capita income may also rise—but they mean nothing in the end, particularly for those who live on the edge of vulnerability. This is not only because the process of estimating GDP and per capita income are faulty and provides an incomplete picture, but also because, in the absence of major enablers of economic progress (such as participatory development process), growth will continue to suffer from disillusionment. Studies indicate that if political and economic institutions are inclusive and pluralistic, everyone will have incentives to invest and success will



that of other countries. High growth has pushed per capita income upwards by 23 times in 2020, from where it was in 1973.

The characteristics of a modern economy—that is, a graduation from being agriculturally-dependent to growing through the industry and services sector—is also being observed gradually. Currently, the share of agriculture in Bangladesh's GDP is about 13 percent, while that of industry and services sectors are about 35 percent and 52 percent, respectively. The economy has also been integrated with the global economy. Shares of exports, imports and remittances in GDP have increased over time. Moreover, high imports are possible with the help of impressive remittance flow. On the other hand, dependency on foreign aid to undertake development work has declined by almost half in terms of its share in GDP in 2020 (from that of 1973), indicating a more self-reliant growth effort.

Bangladesh's graduation by 2026. Besides, in 2015, Bangladesh became a lower-middle income country from being a low-income country, according to the World Bank's classification of countries.

It should be noted, though, that the fruits of all this progress are yet to be distributed equally to each and every member of Bangladeshi society. So, while we rejoice at the achievements we have made since our independence, it is important to remember that we have also let many opportunities pass us by. Despite steady progress in several areas, the promise of an equitable and just society has remained unfulfilled. Income inequality persists as resources and wealth are concentrated amongst a few people in society, many of whom are politically connected. The nexus between politics and business is also strong. As the number of the ultra-rich people is increasing fast, the Gini coefficient that measures the country's income inequality is also

follow. However, nations find it difficult to succeed if institutions protect the political and economic interests of only a small group of powerful people.

On the occasion of Bangladesh's golden jubilee, we celebrate the achievements made by the country with pride. A lot of blood, sweat and tears have gone into Bangladesh's independence and victory. The sacrifice of our freedom fighters can only be meaningful if tangible change in the lives, particularly of the poorest of common citizens, happens. This requires an inclusive democratic and development process. Participation of the broader section of the population in the economic and political process can make the 50 years of economic progress even more meaningful.

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It's time to incentivise sustainability



MOSTAFIZ UDDIN

RECENTLY it was announced that one of the world's leading online fashion companies, Boohoo, is looking at financially incentivising its leadership team for achieving sustainability targets. The business discussed this issue in a meeting with the UK government late last year and the government has now written to the company's chairman, urging him to link executive bonuses to progress on workers' rights and environmental sustainability.

We have seen talk of this kind of thing in the past but not so much in the textile and apparel industry. I believe this picture may change soon, not just because it is the only sure-fire way to ensure companies will do what they say they are going to on sustainability issues, but also because of compliance reasons.

The regulatory authorities in one of our key target markets—the EU—are more and more looking at supply chain due diligence. In other words, they are considering laws which would make companies within the EU accountable for transgressions in supply chains in Asia. So, for instance, if it was found that a brand was importing clothing that had been made using forced labour or in a factory that was polluting the environment, the brand would be held accountable and may face fines or other penalties.

I am digressing slightly, although these issues are interlinked. Let's go back to the issue of incentives. It's my belief that all actors in the apparel industry—brands, their suppliers, even workers—need to be incentivised to behave responsibly, ethically and with the environment in mind. The challenge is that this is rarely the case right now. In fact, in many instances there is absolutely no incentive to operate responsibly.

Let me use the example of my own factory. Like many other RMG operators in Bangladesh, I set out to meet the ultimate environmental and ethical standards. I have all the water and energy saving technology, I have the accreditations, I look after my staff well and strive to meet the highest sustainability standards. My factory is far from alone in that; my story is mirrored across many other, progressive factories

What is going to compel us all as an industry to do the right thing? How can we be incentivised as individuals and businesses to invest in sustainable practices?

Surely linking sustainable achievements with bonuses is a great start. There has been talk of this for years in supply chains, talk of purchasing managers being incentivised to purchase along green lines. The talk has never



in Bangladesh and, indeed, in other parts of Asia.

As factory owners we have invested in some cases because we want to do the right thing but, in many cases, because we believe there will be a financial pay-off. In other words, many owners believe brands will be more likely to use our factories—and pay a premium where appropriate—if we do things the right way.

The problem comes when this does not work out; when factories which have done none of these things and basically done the bare minimum also continue to get business and thrive. Where is the incentive to invest in green business then?

All of this was brought to mind when I related the Boohoo story earlier around linking executive pay to sustainability progress. We are talking about a universal issue here and it is one of incentives.

materialised into action. When I deal with buyers it is almost always price, price, price. Sustainability teams and purchasing teams still appear to operate separately after all these years. They should be one and the same thing or, if not, at least singing off the same hymn sheet.

The ability to purchase sustainably, to identify the best factories in terms of green practices, to understand different materials and production methods, to reward good suppliers should be the number one attribute of a good purchasing manager. It should supersede all else if we genuinely want to turn the needle on sustainability.

I talked about the shifting legislative environment earlier and the growing importance of due diligence. Here, again, incentives are a crucial factor. Governments have a critical role to play

in ensuring that businesses which operate sustainably gain a clear commercial advantage. This can be a two-pronged approach: on the one hand, heavy fines or punishments for bad practice or serious transgressions; and rewards/incentive schemes for industry leaders. These rewards could include tax-breaks and other fiscal incentives. There must be a benefit to behaving responsibly, otherwise you create an unfair playing field whereby laggards get to cut corners and save costs with no punishment. In effect, they actually gain a commercial advantage here if all are treated the same.

I see examples of all these things playing out in the broader fashion industry. For years, we as manufacturers, have known who the best buyers are—the ones who treat suppliers the fairest, the ones who do not cut corners, who pay their bills and who can generally be trusted.

Likewise, we all know the brands which are always looking to make a saving, which drive unnecessarily hard on price and do not appear to understand sustainability issues (and that the sustainable way can sometimes be more expensive).

And yet, guess what? The public often do not know the difference. They are none-the-wiser and when I see things written about our industry, it often appears that all brands are tarred with the same brush. I come back to that word again: incentives. Where is the incentive to do right if all are treated the same?

This is the issue our industry must grapple with. There has to be a clear pathway for sustainability and a suitable reward structure for those doing good, whether that be individuals or businesses.

At the moment, there are far too many cases where people and businesses are rewarded very handsomely for practices which exploit people and the planet. As long as that remains the case, where is the real incentive to change?

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