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Another deadly capsizes, another avoidable tragedy

Govt must answer for failure to prevent recurrence of such accidents

WE are shocked by the news of yet another launch capsized that took place in the Shitalakkhya river in Narayanganj late Sunday. At least 27 people reportedly drowned after a cargo ship rammed through the Munshiganj-bound passenger boat, leading it to capsize. The launch, named Sabit Al Hasan, was reportedly carrying nearly 50 passengers when it was hit near an under-construction bridge. The remaining passengers managed to swim to shore. The ship responsible for the collision, we are told, still remains untraced, as the authorities scramble to present an accurate account of what happened, and why.

This is the latest disaster for a country haunted by regular maritime accidents. One may still recall the horrors of the launch capsized in Buriganga River on June 29 last year, which occurred after a collision with a ferry, leading to the deaths of 34 passengers. Those who thought the sheer number of casualties would be enough to bring discipline to this unruly sector were in for a rude awakening when another boat, carrying 30-35 passengers, sank following a collision with a stone-laden barge in Karnaphuli River in mid-February, killing at least three. The manner in which such accidents keep happening—with heavy casualties inflicted almost every time—is deeply disconcerting. Every time, we see a routine reaction from the authorities: probe committees are formed (as they were this time, too), “carelessness” of the vessel operators is blamed, and compensation for the victims is promised. But no substantive reforms are undertaken to check such accidents.

Experts have often cited a number of reasons for the launch disasters in Bangladesh, including faulty designs, structural weaknesses, lack of adequate safety measures, weaknesses in inspection procedures, obtaining of fitness certificates through unfair means, overcrowding, disregard for weather forecasts, and of course, negligence and carelessness of the ship’s crew. No doubt the latest probe committees will also highlight one or two of these reasons—and those responsible should be detained and punished according to law—but whether or not this will lead to a significant reform necessary for safe maritime transport is uncertain. Unless the authorities overseeing maritime transport, especially Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA), overhaul the sector and address the bigger issues of corruption and accountability to check their own inefficiencies and failures, such accidents will recur.

Our hearts go out to the families of the victims of the Shitalakkhya launch capsized. No words of consolation or monetary compensation can make up for the wanton loss of lives and the agony of those who have lost their loved ones. The government must answer for these deaths, and for why it has been consistently failing to provide safety to the maritime passengers. Without significant reforms in how this sector is run, we may never be rid of the scourge of preventable maritime accidents.

Do we have the scientific data to fight the pandemic?

Govt must focus on generating local research

WE know how deadly Covid-19 infections can be, especially now with the second wave of the pandemic and a record number of daily death counts and infection rates. This is why it is so important to have accurate data that can give the kind of information required for policy-making and treatment. This has been reiterated by Dr Nazrul Islam in a report published in *The Daily Star* yesterday. In another report published by the same daily just four days ago, the chief of the National Technical Advisory Committee on Covid-19 (NTAC) echoed this view, highlighting the importance of vigorous scientific research to find out the reasons behind the second-wave of the Covid-19 epidemic. Both suggestions point to the dearth of scientific data having adverse impacts in tackling the ongoing coronavirus crisis.

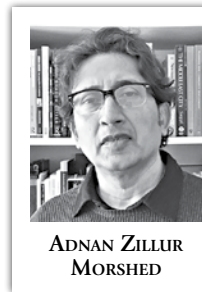
According to the WHO, public health surveillance is needed as an early warning system to identify public health emergencies, guide public health policies, and monitor the epidemiology of a condition to set priorities. An effective surveillance system is comprised of detection of health events, collection of pertinent data, investigation of cases or outbreaks, preparing routine reports and forwarding them to respective administrative levels for further actions. The entry also mentions that some systems called “AFP Surveillance” have been set up in many countries which work as the backbone in curing vaccine-preventable diseases. Also, a global laboratory network has been established to find out the underlying reasons that cause vaccine-preventable diseases.

The joint advisory group that Dr Nazrul is part of was formed as a collaboration between the WHO and the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs with a view to help the member states of these organisations to collect estimates of the number of deaths due to the direct and indirect impacts of the pandemic. Since 2016, the group has been analysing death reports from 29 countries around the world. Unfortunately, Bangladesh is not in this list as the country lacks in accurate and robust data collection on vital statistics, which help to analyse the trends and patterns of usual deaths and compare them with the deaths caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

The government must take urgent steps to include Bangladesh in the aforementioned surveillance systems and global laboratory networks. Also, creation of a research culture in our local educational institutions is also crucial to lessen our dependence on foreign research activities in managing our domestic challenges. The government has to increase its spending, both to enable the academic community to carry out impactful scientific research projects, and also to set up new research organisations. Hiring the best academic staff, ensuring necessary infrastructure for high-quality research and foreign and domestic scholarship opportunities for bright but needy students can also be some of the measures that the respective authorities can initiate to reduce the dearth of scientific research work in our country.

How about experiential indicators of wellbeing?

We must measure the state of our development on the ground rather than blindly trusting trickle-down economics



ADNAN ZILLUR MORSHED

THAT gross domestic product (GDP) is not a fully satisfying measure of a country’s progress is no longer news. The awareness of GDP’s inadequacies in revealing a nation’s

state of development is now almost mainstream. The driving mantra that “anything that can be measured can be improved” has been faulted for excessive linearity and misleading objectivity. A year after winning the Nobel Prize in Economics in 1998, Amartya Sen published *Development as Freedom*. The book starts with this straight-shooting statement: “Development can be seen... as a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy. Focusing on human freedoms contrasts with narrower views of development, such as identifying development with the growth of gross national product, or with the rise in personal incomes, or with industrialisation, or with technological advance, or with social modernisation.”

A decade later, in 2009, three economists—Sen, Joseph Stiglitz, and Jean-Paul Fitoussi—led a groundbreaking study on alternatives to GDP, commissioned by the then French president Nicolas Sarkozy.

Then, after more than a decade of contestations and, now, in the wake of a global pandemic that has both revealed and magnified the systemic social inequities across the world, measuring a nation’s progress in a holistic and meaningful way seems more urgent than ever before.

Meanwhile, since 1972, Bhutan has been promoting a “gross national happiness (GNH)” index as a way to balance the influence of modernity and the preservation of tradition with a Buddhist ethos of compassion, contentment, and calmness. After the 2008 financial crisis, the world took a serious look at GNH as a viable alternative to growth-centric development models.

Ironically, when in 2017, the United Nations released a report ranking countries by happiness, Bhutan came 97th, while Norway claimed the title of the happiest country. Lately, the people of Bhutan have not been unified in their country’s self-branding as a “happy country.” A Bhutanese radio host summarised the rising cynicism within the country this way: “The idea of GNH may have put Bhutan on the map, but the concept has been hijacked by the West—and quantified to a degree that makes it unrecognisable to ordinary Bhutanese.”

Measuring happiness remains elusive due to its disconcerting range of subjectivities—from happiness as personal emotion at a particular time (I am feeling happy because I had an ice cream today) to happiness as a cognitive evaluation of something (I love riding the commuter train because it brings me to my destination safely and punctually every day).

Many experts have been talking about “wellbeing” as a more inclusive and sustainable metric than the ones that predominantly focus on measurable indicators such as per capita income. Consider this: Bangladesh’s per capita GDP is nearing USD 2000. Bangladesh is now the third fastest growing economy in the world. A paltry USD 8.75 billion at the time of its independence, its economy is expected to reach nearly USD 500

anxious about being sexually harassed on public transportation.

If seven out of 10 random respondents on the street express more or less the same feeling, then there is a serious policy need to come up with new indicators of the quality of everyday life. This, of course, does not mean that GDP is obsolete. The argument here is that the conventional indicators should be complemented with other types to understand the effects of

address. Walk Score is based on how long a person needs to reach a nearby urban amenity (such as a park or a hospital or a metro station). The highest score is awarded to an address where an amenity is reached in five minutes by walking, while zero point is given to those that have facilities requiring more than a 30-minute walk. A “walker’s paradise” has a Walk Score of 90-100. Walkability makes a city humane, democratic, and

start using the Urban Neighbourhood Green Index (UNGI) to assess the quantity and quality of green spaces at the neighbourhood level. Neighbourhood competitions to improve UNGI should have an impact at a city scale. The fruits of economic growth must be experienced in our daily lives.

Quality of public space: A city without accessible, pedestrian-friendly, and democratic public spaces is like a



The experience of daily life can be measured with a combination of quantitative and qualitative metrics, such as the use of zebra crossing as a street safety tool. PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

Not an end in itself, development must be assessed (both quantitatively and qualitatively) for the quality of its effect on people’s lives, while the very notion of development must be open to public reasoning. On the flip side, blanket criticism of “development” has lately become a popular middleclass pastime and a biased prop for government-bashing. What we need is objective assessments of, among others, the effects of a flyover in mitigating traffic congestion in the metropolis or quality of community-building through the restoration of urban parks or economic dividends of the Padma bridge.

national development on daily lives.

How should policymakers recalibrate prevailing metrics to assess conditions on the ground? The experience of daily life can be measured with a combination of quantitative (air quality) and qualitative metrics (use of zebra crossing as a street safety tool). Could supra-indicators like GDP or other health measures be complemented by what could be called

healthy. It represents an urban area’s state of wellbeing and the best weapon against oligarchic segregation of the city.

Public transportation: It is now common wisdom that the backbone of sustainable urbanism is mass transit because it is the most cost-effective and environment-friendly way to facilitate urban mobility. Cities use Transit Score to measure how well a location is served by mass transit. It is calculated by the usefulness of public transport in terms of the routes used, frequency of service, and accessibility to the nearest station on the route. The forthcoming elevated metro in Dhaka should be an opportune moment to institute Transit Score as a measure of urban wellbeing in Dhaka.

Waste management: Going around in the streets of Dhaka or any other big city in Bangladesh, one would face the inevitable environmental calamity: the rotting solid waste on the street. We have a precariously low public hygiene threshold for reasons that require national debates and robust anthropological studies. With Bangladesh’s rapid urbanisation, the total solid waste generation in cities is expected to reach up to 47,000 tons per day by 2025. If 50 percent of Dhaka’s daily solid waste remain uncollected on the streets, how would GDP reduce the stench? We need Solid Waste Management Score (SWMS) to measure the state of public health in a location. If I go to Lalmeta to rent a house, I should be able find out the area’s SWMS and then decide whether I should rent there or not.

Access to green and natural environment: Nature is therapeutic. Urban greenery are our best and cheapest public-health infrastructures that rejuvenate us and keep us healthy. Livable cities create miniature forests as urban oases, building an ecosystem of trees, birds, wind, air, smell, and quiet. A green park can create Zen moments, lowering the mental stress of hectic city life. City corporations and municipalities should



The backbone of sustainable urbanism is mass transit. PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

billion by 2025. The world appears to consider Bangladesh a success story. This is great news.

However, the experience of impressive national development in the country’s everyday life is considerably uneven. If you ask a woman on the way to work near a bus stop in Dhaka about how her life is these days, she may answer you like this: life is much better than before since I can make ends meet, but my house rent is too high and finding an affordable, quality primary school for my children is a constant struggle. Besides, I am always

“experiential indicators?” (I focus here only on cities; there should be indicators for rural wellbeing too).

The following experiential indicators could be considered.

Footpath and Walk Score: People of all economic classes and gender should be able to use footpaths comfortably, safely, and pleasurably. Footpaths must have adequate width to facilitate a two-way pedestrian traffic and be free of obstructions. Many cities now use Walk Score to measure the walkability of an

room without a window, suffocating, claustrophobic, and unhealthy. Public spaces nurture community spirit among urban inhabitants. If you are in Barcelona for the first time as a tourist, you are most likely to visit Las Ramblas before finding out Spain’s GDP. Most “public spaces” in Dhaka are street nodes like Shabbagh Mor, TSC intersection, or Manik Mia Avenue. None of these nodal places are designed as safe and healthy public spaces. What would be Dhaka’s Public Space Index?

Internet accessibility: The global competitiveness and digital democracy of cities will increasingly be determined by their access to broadband. Almost a quarter of urban Americans—23 percent or 62 million people—do not have broadband access. In Brazil it is 38 percent, India 31 percent, and Germany 11 percent. According to a survey conducted by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics in 2019, in Bangladesh, 62 percent of households do not have internet access at home. The reasons for this disparity are quality of the internet, affordability, IT literacy, and socioeconomic conditions of a country. In a post-pandemic world, the measure of a city’s digital democracy will be one of the ways to determine its livability and wellbeing. The quality of the virtual space will be as important as the physical space. However, measuring the adverse effects of excessive online usage, particularly social media, on people is equally important.

As we celebrate the 50th anniversary of Bangladesh’s independence and introspect on its progress, it would be prudent to be creative about experiential indicators to measure the state of our development on the ground rather than blindly trusting trickle-down economics. It is also important to measure the environmental and social costs of development. Not an end in itself, development must be assessed (both quantitatively and qualitatively) for the quality of its effect on people’s lives, while the very notion of development must be open to public reasoning. On the flip side, blanket criticism of “development” has lately become a popular middleclass pastime and a biased prop for government-bashing. What we need is objective assessments of, among others, the effects of a flyover in mitigating traffic congestion in the metropolis or quality of community-building through the restoration of urban parks or economic dividends of the Padma bridge.

Nicholas Kristof’s recent op-ed in *The New York Times* on Bangladesh’s hard-earned ability to teach the world “how to engineer progress” through investment in “education and girls” was a great birthday gift. It is beneficial to get good press. But the gushing reaction of Bangladeshis around the world almost suggested that unless we receive the validation of western media and pundits, we cannot be so sure of ourselves. The most important sign of a nation’s self-confidence is its ability to self-assess, while aspiring to loftier goals.

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