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Finance minister's reckless comments on the new poor

How can our fiscal policy be effective if a top policymaker refuses to face facts?

THE finance minister's recent comments on the state of the "new poor"—the proportion of the population that has been pushed into poverty due to the economic fallout of the pandemic—has left us stunned, not least because of his suggestion that the poverty data published by numerous organisations is "imaginary". In an interview earlier this week, he told *The Daily Star* that "everything is operating as normal... so why would there be new poor?"

The fact that he did not put forward any evidence to support his claims is a worrying indication of the current state of policy-making. According to the World Bank, the pandemic has pushed the poverty rate from 20.5 percent to 30 percent in Bangladesh, whereas the Centre for Policy Dialogue estimated in April that some 1.6 crore people have become newly poor. Estimates from the Power and Participation Research Centre and the Brac Institute of Governance and Development put that number at a whopping 2.45 crore. However, the finance minister dismissed these estimates and asserted that the government will only accept poverty data from the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS). We are keen to know when this data will actually surface, especially since the Bangladesh Poverty Database has not been completed in more than seven years—the data collected for it has already been rendered useless and the disastrous project has cost taxpayers and donors Tk 727 crore. In the absence of any credible data from the government, if the minister is also not willing to accept the data put forward by experts, then what exactly is our fiscal policy based on and guided by?

Even if we ignore the gaping lack of contextual evidence to back up the minister's claims, we cannot overlook just how callous and devoid of empathy these comments are towards the citizens of this country, who are struggling to make ends meet during the pandemic. Yes, even emergency situations can be temporary—but what exactly is his implication here? Should those who have been hit hard by the pandemic continue to struggle through hardships, waiting for the "business-friendly budget" to have positive impacts on the economy and create new jobs, without expecting any additional support from their government? Until the economy recovers, how will they make ends meet—are their children meant to go without education? Should they reduce crucial spending on health? Should they downgrade to poorer housing?

The minister's comments are all the more shocking given that the current Covid-19 positivity rate is hovering at almost 15 percent. If we enter into stricter lockdown (which is already in effect in certain border districts), those who will be affected would not be amiss in expecting some empathy and assurance of support from the authorities. In this scenario, an outright denial of their existence from a top policymaker is only likely to add to their distress.

Tangail Sal forest dying a slow, preventable death

Govt must prioritise saving it, despite conflicts among different parties

THE Sal forest in Tangail has been shrinking at a speedy rate over the years, and there seems to be no way to prevent this tragedy under the present circumstances. While locals and Forest Department officials exchange the blame for the senseless tree-felling and land grabbing, almost two-thirds of this major forest has already been wiped out. Only 40,000 acres of the original 1,22,876 acres of forest land (as of 1925) remain as a natural forest now.

Officials claim that both locals and influential outsiders are to blame for deforestation on such a massive scale. Starting from farming on forest land using harmful pesticides (which interfere with its natural biodiversity and ecological balance) to constructing concrete structures on indiscriminately grabbed land, the destruction of this forest seems to be a free-for-all. Foresters say that they also get phone calls from powerful people, such as top government officials, warning them against reclaiming grabbed land.

Locals of the area, many belonging to ethnic minority communities, are worried about the way the forest land, which their families have been living on and using for many decades, is being denuded. They also feel that foresters are to blame for the mass deforestation, as the president of the United Council of Indigenous Organisations of Greater Mymensingh claims that the destruction started in the 80s "when the Forest Department initiated rubber plantations there". On the other hand, officials of the department face opposition from locals and political heavyweights whenever they try to retrieve grabbed land. The divisional forest officer in Tangail thinks that only support from all quarters concerned can save the forest.

However, environmentalist Gautam Chandra Chanda has blamed the government's social afforestation programme as the catalyst for mass deforestation of the Sal forest. The programme was meant to lease out plots on the forest land to local landless and poor people. However, due to the greed of a section of dishonest foresters, most of the land went to outsiders and influentials in exchange for hefty bribes. So, the programme under which beneficiaries would have helped in afforestation, planting trees, maintaining the forest, etc. remained unimplemented.

We would urge the government and concerned authorities to prioritise the recovery and strategic afforestation of as much of the forest's land as possible, while also ensuring that what is left untouched (by grabbers and tree fellers) stays untouched. This means that along with ensuring that locals and officials cooperate with each other in saving the forest, the government must also hold to account all who have contributed to the Sal forest's destruction so far. Most importantly, environmentalists and other experts need to be involved in any decision-making exercise regarding this forest to avoid further damage. Otherwise, we may eventually witness the preventable death of this vital natural resource while parties involved keep going in circles, desperately looking for someone to blame it on.

A CLOSER LOOK



TASNEEM TAYEB

THE Purbachal Residential Model Town, spanning around 6,227 acres of land, was supposed to have been an extension of Dhaka city—to support its growth momentum and accommodate its ever-growing population. Unfortunately, 26 years after the project was initiated, it has turned into a quagmire of corruption, nepotism, and mismanagement—a black hole sucking in enormous economic and natural resources, giving nothing back in return.

The plan for the Model Town has been revised a total of five times since Rajdhani Unnayan Kartripakkha (Rajuk) launched the scheme in 1995. And from the get-go, there had been reports of corruption and nepotism in handing out plots to selected individuals. Even as recently as May 2, 2021, the High Court questioned the legality of plot allocation to 912 individuals in Purbachal. *The Daily Star* report on this also stated that the applications of 200 people were found to be "fake and faulty", while 15-16 of the plot allocatees were government officials.

And not just the government officials—MPs, ministers and high-ranking politicians have also been allocated plots in Purbachal from time to time, often in violation of the rule that says people who own land and house in Dhaka are not eligible to get a plot allocation. "At least 285 people have been allotted various types of plots in the reserved quota by Rajuk in the last three years. Of them, 149 are current and former MPs, while others are top bureaucrats, office assistants, and former Chhatra League and Mohila

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Awami League leaders. Lawmakers who own houses, plots and flats in Dhaka also received the Rajuk plots in special quota. Rajuk officials said they have just followed the instructions of the (housing) ministry," according to a *Prothom Alo* report published on February 15, 2021.

Kamal Ahmed Majumder, the state minister for industries, who already has an inherited home in Dhaka, is one of the plot allocatees. So is Kazi Firoz Rashid, a prominent leader of the Jatiya Party, who along with his wife own 20 flats, as per his affidavits submitted to the Election Commission. *Prothom Alo* quoted him as claiming, "The rule, which states that any person owning land and house in Dhaka is ineligible for a plot, is not applicable to

the lawmakers."

While influential politicians, lawmakers and bureaucrats, among other beneficiaries, are being allocated plots in Purbachal, it is the local inhabitants who are allegedly being deprived of their due rights. A report by the *Sangbad* newspaper suggested that around 3,500 inhabitants of the area, who had been affected during the land acquisition process for the Purbachal project, are yet to receive their plots. The *Prothom Alo* report echoed the

Despite this, it has been alleged that in September 2018, Rajuk, in violation of the 2014 High Court order, "secretly allotted 84 institutional plots taking land from areas earmarked for schools and their playgrounds," as reported by *The Daily Star* in 2019.

All these unplanned or ill-planned initiatives by Rajuk are costing the nature as well. Even the fourth revision to the plan, if fully implemented, would entail the felling of 11 lakh trees, according to

corruption that has enabled Rajuk to carry on its illegal and questionable activities with impunity. Either there is a clear lack of monitoring on this from the concerned authorities, or they have been, and still are, equally involved in the corruption that has led to the current state of Purbachal. Whichever it is, we do not know. But given the potential of Purbachal—or whatever is left of that potential—the government and relevant authorities must take immediate measures to address this crisis in the



A massive development work at the 300-foot Purbachal Road is underway. The government is constructing an eight-lane expressway to connect Kuril with Kanchan Bridge via Purbachal. Besides, 100-foot canals are being built on both sides of the road from Kuril to the Balu River.

PHOTO: SK ENAMUL HAQ

same: "Many people affected during land acquisition haven't received the plots yet... According to Rajuk sources, a total of 3,554 applications for plots were submitted in the affected or indigenous category (those who are yet to get plots). After scrutinising those, some 1,453 applications were considered eligible. But the reality is that Purbachal doesn't have so many plots."

So, how are so many people going to be compensated? Rajuk seems to have a solution to this problem as well: revision of the design. The same report quoted a Rajuk official as saying that they are planning to "create" 1,197 three-katha plots on 89 acres of land by altering the design.

There have been multiple allegations against Rajuk of taking away from free, community spaces—or lands allocated for educational institutions or healthcare facilities—to create more land plots for their vested beneficiaries.

The misadventures of Rajuk over the years have reached a point where the High Court, in response to a public interest litigation, had to direct the body to not "efface, subtract, vary or modify the forest, lakes, canals, urban green, parks, playgrounds"—as presented in the fourth revision—without the court's permission. This happened in March 2014.

the Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association (Bela). Evidently, the new urban sprawl being developed in the model town is costing the ecosystem and biodiversity of that area dearly.

While Dhaka is crumbling under the load of its burgeoning population—according to World Bank, "between 1995 and 2005, road surface in Dhaka increased by only 5 percent, while [the] population increased by 50 percent and traffic by 134 percent"—its hope for emancipation through Purbachal seems like a far-fetched dream.

The project cost of Purbachal has trebled to Tk 10,329 crore from the initial cost of Tk 3,312 crore—as has the pressure to accommodate more people than what had initially been anticipated. The initial plan was to accommodate 10 lakh people, which has now reached to a staggering estimation of 27 lakh.

Given that the Model Town project is already struggling to accommodate the affluent members of society, one wonders how it plans to accommodate those less affluent ones who will have to live in and around the area in order to serve the plot holders, once they start staying there.

But Rajuk alone cannot be blamed for the mess that Purbachal has become. It is the system that protects and promotes

greater interest of the public.

Dhaka is already the fourth least liveable city in the world, as ranked recently by the Economist Intelligence Unit's Global Liveability Index. Going forward, the pressure on the city will only increase given its mushrooming population.

The government cannot afford to risk allowing Dhaka's condition to grow worse, particularly given its importance as the epicentre of the nation's economic growth. It should immediately revamp the Rajuk mechanism that is currently in place, so as to bring transparency, accountability and fairness in project planning and allocation of land.

Those individuals who have illegally been allocated the plots should return them to the government for the greater good of the city. If civil society and public representatives come forward in saving this project, Rajuk and the authorities would be forced to mend their ways. At the end of the day, saving Dhaka and bringing a healthy balance to the growing capital is everyone's responsibility. But how many can rise above personal gains and own this responsibility? Only time will tell.

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What Ails Democracy?

STRAIGHT LINE



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

THERE is a well-grounded belief that irrespective of the state of socio-economic progress, democracy as a form of government has not been able to take firm root in many societies.

Internationally reputed think tanks tell us that the number of illiberal democracies has registered an unfortunate increase in recent years. This is undoubtedly a frustrating development, as democracy worldwide continues to be the preferred mode of governance. At least that is what most liberal thinkers would have us believe.

Therefore, when people become apathetic or show signs of losing faith in the efficacy of democracy delivering the goods, it is definitely a cause for concern. Such a scenario must compel us to look into the reasons of the apparent failure of democracy, particularly in the so-called developing part of the world, especially our subcontinent.

One has to recollect the great saying of French thinker Montesquieu who, in the eighteenth century, said: "The tyranny of a prince in an oligarchy is not so dangerous to the public welfare as the apathy of a citizen in a democracy."

To begin with, it would appear that in the developing world, many politicians have a vested interest in illiteracy because their political survival depends to a large extent on the continuation of the forces of ignorance. To them, poverty is good business as they talk continually about it without having the will, expertise or imagination to eradicate it.

In the political discourses, we also often see a tendency to press home a partisan advantage to its bitter end which

neither understands and respects the other side nor supports unity among all citizens. There is very little appreciation of the habits of consent and compromise which are attributes of mature political societies. Consequently, we do not see a lawful government by the majority, run under the principle of rule of law, and with the freedom of expression and dissent guaranteed. It is thus no wonder that in the absence of the spirit of moderation, society tends to degenerate

"movers of people, mobilisers of opinion", have actually been downgraded and devalued. Many of us do not realise the contrast between what our educational institutions were like during the initial decades and what they have been reduced to in the last four decades.

It is, therefore, not surprising that the public leaders remain occupied in maintaining a system which is poisoned by collective bad faith and also by individual avarice. Values that are



ILLUSTRATION: COLLECTED

into division while hatred replaces goodwill.

There is little concern for public good and also lack of interest in public welfare. The "carefulness" about personal property is matched only by the carelessness about public property. The decay of the institutions has also taken a heavy toll. There is an unfortunate lack of appreciation of the reality that in a young republic, leaders produce institutions and later the same institutions produce leaders. Consequently, institutions, particularly the educational ones that aim at generating excellence and producing

detrimental to the flowering of democracy about in such an atmosphere.

The staying power of democracy varies from country to country. Any failure on the economic front cannot cause grave damage to a country if its political institutions acquire durability through age and tradition. There will be cause for worry if there are fragile institutions and a constitution which is looked upon by the politicians as so pliant that it can be bent to any whim or caprice of the ruling plan.

To halt the hobbling of democracy, the strength of the political institutions must be increased. The individual must

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not be completely subordinated to the state because dwarfing the individual will create a situation where nothing great can be accomplished. The tone of public life has to be high. There cannot be any democracy without meritocracy. For the good of the country, ignorance, incompetence and dishonesty must be considered as disqualifications for high public offices, and integrity and impartiality must be insisted upon in judicial appointments.

The leaders have to ensure the creation of an environment where every class of citizens puts their nation above their respective party and group—where the spirit of change from privilege to talent, and from the accident of birth to the accent on calibre, is brought about in all corporate and public affairs; where businessmen and professionals realise that money has to be earned rather than be got or won; where there is a collective effort to stop the society from disintegrating into factions and divisions; where there is a realisation that there is no substitute for knowledge and integrity in public life; where individuals are appointed to public offices because of what they are and not because they belong to a particular group or a region; and where there is a realisation that the government can achieve substantial gains by unleashing the energies of citizens.

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