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Dhaka metro rail to usher in a new era of commuting

Speedy launch and proper service delivery are key to its success

BAKGLADESH is set to embark on a new era of commuting with a new mode of transport hitherto unseen on our land—the elevated metro rail of Dhaka. The first step in that direction was taken on Sunday, when the road transport and bridges minister inaugurated a series of test runs of the metro train, which will continue until its planned commercial launch in December next year. Sunday saw the beginning of what is being called the “performance tests”, which will continue for about six months, followed by three months of “integrity tests” and then another five months of “trial runs” (without passengers). These test runs are to ensure the elevated train service is ready for use while works on the overhead railway viaducts, tracks, wiring, and other preparations are in various stages of completion.

This is a big moment in the country’s transport sector. Although the train service will be launched initially from Uttara to Agargaon—and later to Motijheel, covering a distance of 20.10 km—one can imagine a successful period of run may eventually lead to its replication across other busy parts of Dhaka and also in other metropolitan areas of Bangladesh. The benefits of an elevated metro rail in an overpopulated, rapidly urbanising country like ours—forever jostling for space—are many. It will not only significantly reduce travel time in daily commute but will also carry a large number of passengers, easing the pressure on other transport services. The flexibility, ease and speed of communications, and consequent economic potential that this service promises to bring, may have profound impacts on the quality of life.

Reaching that potential, however, will depend to a large extent on how fast the impending work and purchases (of trains, coaches, etc.) are completed and how satisfactorily the service is delivered, once it is available for commercial use. As of July this year, the Dhaka metro rail project, which has seen several deadline extensions since its initiation in 2012, made only 68.49 percent of progress, its execution delayed, most recently, by pandemic-induced disruptions. Going forward, we hope the project work will be expedited and no more disruptions will be allowed to get in the way to ensure the December 2022 deadline is met.

There seems to be no dearth of goodwill on the part of the authorities. However, care should be taken so that it is properly reflected in the execution of the project and the quality of services to be rendered—and so that, to take a cue from past experiences, it doesn’t meet the same fate of other ambitious communication projects that have failed to deliver as promised.

Who will account for the days lost in enforced disappearance?

Govt can’t shirk its responsibility to protect citizens

ON June 30, 2015, a fish trader named Mosharraf was allegedly beaten up by members of the police, placed inside an empty septic tank, and left there for nearly 36 hours. Later, he was shown arrested for carrying 200 pieces of yaba. Today, Mosharraf isn’t fighting in court to get justice for his ill-treatment but to prove his innocence in regards to the drug case. There are many types of enforced disappearance cases that we hear about in Bangladesh. And being picked up by law enforcers and not being produced in court within the legal timeframe of 24 hours—and instead being detained at a clandestine place before that, leaving hours, days, or weeks in custody unaccounted for—is just one of them.

Despite widespread allegations of law enforcers using enforced disappearance as a tactic against victims who remain untraceable, collecting data on such cases has proven to be difficult. The issue only came under substantial media scrutiny after cartoonist Ahmed Kishore filed a case alleging that he was kept in an unknown location for several days and tortured. Typically, despite the number of individuals who have gone missing racking up in the hundreds, once any of these people returns, they all seem to go into a cocoon, distancing themselves from the glare of the media and staying silent on their whole experience of being disappeared—that is, if they are “lucky” enough to return alive.

Detaining someone and not presenting them in court within 24 hours is a clear violation of the law. It is also a violation of human rights. It contradicts a number of different international treaties that Bangladesh is a signatory to. Still, according to rights organisations, there are hundreds of alleged cases of enforced disappearances that the authorities continue to pay very little heed to. And then there are many more cases where, despite the victims disappearing for a few days, they are only shown arrested and produced in court much later, without any explanation as to their whereabouts during the time that they had remained traceless—or any explanation whatsoever as to what had happened to them.

The tendency on the part of the higher authorities—when their political adversaries, or people they view as their opposition, disappear and remain traceless for days on end—is bound to eventually trickle down onto others. And we have now reached a point where enforced disappearance has become normalised for most members of the law enforcing agencies, as well as other state machineries. It means that some law enforcers might resort to such tactics even for their own parochial reasons, knowing that such cases have become so common and are so readily overlooked that chances of them getting caught or punished is highly unlikely.

The truth is, even if it isn’t any of the state organs that are responsible for these individuals disappearing—which is what the victims’ families almost always claim—it is incumbent upon the state to investigate what happened to them, and bring them safely back to their families. Any failure to do so is a failure on the part of the state to fulfil its mandate of protecting the constitutional rights of citizens. And that is a most egregious failure—one that should entail accountability and serious penalties.

Gender stereotypes continue to silence male victims of sexual abuse

We must break the social stigma and amend our laws to protect boys and men



LAILA KHONDKAR

SALIM (not his real name) is 42 years old and works in a private company in Dhaka. Recently, he needed to go to an office to have a meeting, and felt intense anxiety. This happens to him whenever he has to meet any man alone. This fear is deep-rooted in his childhood experience of being sexually abused by his uncle repeatedly. He has never been able to disclose this to any family member, and worries that his cousins too have had similar experiences of abuse by the same perpetrator. Recently, he disclosed the incident to a colleague who advised him to seek counselling to heal from the trauma.

Stories like the above remind me of the book *Why I Didn’t Say Anything*, written by former ice hockey player Sheldon Kennedy. In 1996, Kennedy shocked the Canadian hockey world by announcing that his former minor-league coach, Graham James, had sexually abused him more than 300 times. The media portrayed Kennedy as a hero for breaking the code of silence. James eventually pled guilty to the charge that he abused Kennedy, and was convicted of sexually abusing several of the players he coached in the 1990s. Kennedy’s revelations contributed to increasing abuse awareness in sports, and in society. His story has resonated around the world. He gave many others the courage to come forward, and he has supported numerous programmes of awareness and recovery from abuse in the 25 years since he told the truth about his days in junior hockey.

Many people believe that children are usually abused by strangers, and only girls are abused. However, experience from different parts of the world suggests that the abuser is usually a relative or someone known to the child, and that both men and women can be perpetrators. Sometimes, older children (boys and girls) may also abuse younger children. Boys or girls of any age, from any socioeconomic background, in urban and rural areas, are at risk. Child sexual abuse happens in many different ways, which can range from inappropriate touching to rape. Children are abused in all settings—homes, schools, playgrounds, workplaces, institutions, etc. Most of the cases of child sexual abuse

remain unreported, and the likelihood of the abuse being unreported is higher in the case of boys. Researchers have found that at least one in six men have experienced sexual abuse or assault, whether in childhood or as adults. This is supported by scientific research, including a study conducted by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. This is likely an underestimate of the actual prevalence, as it does not include non-contact

many boys/men are engaged in unhealthy and risky behaviours (e.g. smoking, drinking alcohol, crossing speed limit while driving) that are harmful for their lives. This is rooted in masculine gender socialisation, which depicts men as strong—physically and emotionally. Boys receive these messages from family, society, media, etc. repeatedly. The myth on masculinity implies that a boy or man who has been sexually abused will never

reasons and must not force the child to interact with him/her. Children should be informed that it is the perpetrator who has done something totally unacceptable; the child is never to be blamed for any incident of abuse.

Parents should not show that they are alarmed, overreact, ask too many questions or punish the child if they suspect an incident of abuse. Underestimating the incident or taking the

Child sexual abuse happens in many different ways, which can range from inappropriate touching to rape. Children are abused in all settings—homes, schools, playgrounds, workplaces, institutions, etc.



PHOTO: COLLECTED

experiences, which can also have lasting negative effects.

Perpetrators use their greater size, strength and knowledge to manipulate or coerce boys into unwanted sexual experiences. This is usually done from a position of authority or status (e.g. coach, teacher, older cousin, admired athlete, community or religious leader). They gain children’s trust by showing attention and giving special privileges (e.g. money, gifts), and then become close enough to abuse them. Sometimes, children get confused and do not even understand what is happening to them. Many fear that they will be blamed for this and remain silent.

Men who have experienced sexual abuse as children are at a much greater risk of serious mental health problems, including symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder and depression, alcoholism and drug abuse, suicidal thoughts and suicide attempts, problems in intimate relationships, and underachievement at school and at work.

Gender stereotyping affects both men and women negatively. For example,

be a “real man.” Society expects men to be able to protect themselves. Successful men are depicted as never being vulnerable. As a result of all these, boys find it very challenging to speak out when they are sexually abused.

There are also legal ambiguities regarding the sexual abuse of boys and men in Bangladesh, which should be addressed immediately. As of now, the country’s laws define rape as a gender-specific crime—committed by a man against a woman who is not his wife. This archaic definition allows perpetrators of male sexual abuse to evade justice. Alongside a long-term campaign to make the law more inclusive, the following could also be done to protect children (both boys and girls) from sexual abuse.

Parents should explain that if somebody does or wants to do something with the children or their bodies that s/he does not want, they can say “no” (starting from the slightest touch to tickling, hugging, etc.). Parents should notice if the child wants to avoid a particular person. If yes, they should try to understand the

side of the perpetrator must be avoided. If needed, medical, counselling and legal services should be offered to the child.

The parent-child relationship is very important when it comes to responding to and preventing child sexual abuse. Children will only feel comfortable in expressing themselves if they feel confident in communicating with their parents without fear.

Parents should raise children in a way that they do not feel confined by gender stereotypes, which will free boys from the burden of being “strong”, and will also contribute to protecting them from abuse. The media can play an important role in promoting positive images regarding gender roles. The social stigma and silence around the sexual abuse of boys/men result in a lack of awareness and understanding about the long-term negative impacts of these experiences, and what men need to move forward. It is time to break the silence and take actions.

Laila Khondkar is an international development worker.

What are India’s plans regarding Afghanistan?



PALLAB BHATTACHARYA

WHEN Indian External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar briefed floor leaders of 31 parties in Parliament on August 26 on the developments in Afghanistan, he faced some searching questions about New Delhi’s policy, actions and future strategy towards Afghanistan, post-Taliban takeover.

The meeting was aimed at generating a national consensus on a vital foreign policy and national security issue for India. By all accounts, the government and opposition parties have been able to set aside their recent face-off over the Pegasus spyware, farm sector laws and handling of the second wave of Covid-19 when it came to dealing with the Afghan developments.

Jaishankar made it clear that India’s top priority right now is the evacuation of all Indians from Afghanistan, which is already well underway. India has been allowed to operate two flights per day from Kabul and more than 600 people, including 565 Indians, have so far been brought back. However, evacuations have been slowed by the volatile security situation in and around Kabul airport, whose control is divided between the Taliban forces and the US. In turn, the opposition lawmakers asked how many Indians are still stranded and how New Delhi planned their repatriation after the August 31 deadline.

Questions were also asked about how the Indian government views the situation in Afghanistan, what options it has with the Taliban dispensation and how New Delhi intends to pursue the visa regime for Afghans, irrespective of their religious identities, who feel unsafe or fear persecution under Taliban rule. Two key issues that came up were: did India hurriedly shut down its embassy in Kabul and consulates in Herat, Jalalabad and Mazar-e-Sharif and Kandahar by pulling out all Indian staff, and could it have waited a little longer?

Jaishankar made a robust defence of the closure of Indian diplomatic missions—his comments came just hours before powerful blasts rocked Kabul airport, resulting in scores of casualties. The minister pointed to the past when the Indian embassy in Kabul had been attacked thrice, and consulates multiple times, by terrorists. In view

of the deterioration of the situation in recent weeks, India-based personnel were withdrawn from Indian consulates in Herat and Jalalabad. In June this year, India scaled down its diplomatic presence in Kabul and issued four advisories in the last three weeks asking Indian citizens to leave Afghanistan.

Another important question was if India would recognise the new Taliban regime, and if so, when. The participants in the meeting also wanted to know—what is the future of about 500 India-funded development projects in all 34 provinces in Afghanistan?



Officials from the Indian mission in Afghanistan and evacuated Indian civilians after their flight landed in Jamnagar for refuelling on the way to Delhi, India, on August 17, 2021.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Opinion is divided on whether India should engage with the Taliban. Since the Taliban are the only *de facto* authorities in Afghanistan, should India not hold a dialogue due to its deep economic interests in that country, and for safeguarding Afghans of Indian origin? This, it is felt, becomes all the more important because India has no diplomatic presence there. India chose to close down its embassy in Kabul even when the US, European countries, China, Russia and Iran had not done so. The US and European countries have shifted their diplomatic missions to Kabul airport primarily to facilitate the evacuation.

On these questions, Jaishankar told the August 26 meeting that India was in wait-and-watch mode and would not rush to a decision. This is primarily due to acute uncertainty on the ground in

Kabul, and differences within the Taliban and within the international community over the contours of a new government in Afghanistan. Besides, he underlined, the situation in Afghanistan was critical and there was no clarity as to how long the US will stay in that country. He indicated that there was “some coordination” with the “local authorities” in Kabul for the limited purpose of evacuation of Indians, but declined to elaborate, obviously for security reasons.

Some analysts in India noted a significant development when the UN Security Council on Saturday night

whoever holds the levers of power in that country in future.

On the other hand, the Taliban too came out with its first outreach to India on Saturday. In a video message in Pashto circulated on the social media accounts of the Taliban and Afghanistan’s Milli TV, the deputy head of the Taliban office in Doha (Qatar), Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanikzai, said India is “very important for this sub-continent” and that his group wanted Afghanistan’s cultural, economic and political ties with India to continue “like in the past.” Of course, India needs to wait and see if Stanikzai’s words are in sync with the Taliban’s actions on the ground.

It is true that the turn of events in Afghanistan poses a serious national security threat for India, and has the potential to roil India’s domestic politics and polarise society. Two members of the All India Muslim Personal Law Board (AIMPLB) in Uttar Pradesh state have gone on record supporting the Taliban, a development that was condemned by leading Muslim civil society members like authors Naseeruddin Shah and Shabana Azmi, and lyricist Javed Akhtar. Of course, AIMPLB sought to distance itself from the two members. A Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader of Uttar Pradesh has also filed a sedition case against a Samajwadi Party lawmaker for allegedly terming the Taliban as “freedom fighters.”

On the other hand, the inflow of Afghan Hindus and Sikhs into India has been utilised by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, BJP President JP Nadda and senior cabinet minister Hardeep Singh Puri to justify the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), which gives Indian citizenship to six religious minorities in Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan who came to India from the three countries till 2014. The BJP’s former ally Shiromani Akal Dal leader Harsimrat Kaur Badal has demanded that the Indian government amend the CAA to extend the cut-off date of December 31, 2014 to facilitate citizenship for Sikhs taking shelter in India after the Taliban triumph in Afghanistan.

Surely, the August 26 meeting was intended to convey that India has a strong national stand on Afghanistan, and it will be unfortunate if scoring political brownie points by parties stands in the way of India’s entire political establishment speaking in one voice on the Afghan issue.

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