

The Daily Star

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DHAKA MONDAY NOVEMBER 1, 2021, KARTIK 16, 1428 BS

Press freedom is under serious threat

And because of that, our democracy is at risk too

IN a discussion organised by the Editors’ Council on Saturday, newspaper editors and academics expressed concern saying that the freedoms of the press and speech in Bangladesh were under serious threat. Despite Article 39 of our constitution guaranteeing the right of every citizen to freedom of speech and expression, as well as freedom of the press, these rights are being attacked from all directions, according to the speakers. We can’t agree more.

On the one hand, the adversarial stance of government authorities and various state machineries on the publication of any information revealing their incapacity or incompetence, or criticising them, has often led to the full might of the state being used to crack down upon independent journalists and journalism. On the other hand, the attempted corporate control of the media by different business houses that own media outlets is leading to the stifling of independent journalism from within the industry itself.

The primary asset of any newspaper is its credibility. With the attempted use of different newspapers by corporate owners for their own benefits, that credibility is at risk of fast deterioration. This does not bode well for journalism in the long run. On the flip side, while the government has been attempting to use various tools such as sedition laws, the draconian Digital Security Act (DSA), and the Official Secrets Act of 1923 to crack down on press freedom, the various institutions and mechanisms that are supposed to be in place to safeguard the fundamental rights to free expression and free press have been failing badly. The end result is that the independent press—an essential pillar of any democracy—is under tremendous pressure, which is endangering our democracy, as an informed public is a prerequisite to any functioning democracy.

Whether the government realises it or not, it is losing out, too—as without an independent press, how can it sense the pulse of the citizens? What channels can it rely on for an accurate picture of its performance?

The government needs to seriously reassess many of the laws and mechanisms it has put in place that are stifling freedom of speech and freedom of the press. Instead of seeing every criticism as something of a hostile or conspiratorial nature, the authorities need to understand that the primary function of independent journalism is to shed light on uncomfortable truths which, oftentimes, is the best antidote to many of society’s ills. In line with that, it should consult with the Editors’ Council to formulate strategies that can help the independent media flourish. Meanwhile, we also hope that corporate owners will refrain from using their positions to force their media houses to become propaganda tools, as that would seriously tarnish the reputation of not only their own outlets, but that of the industry as a whole.

Mere arrests in trafficking busts won’t work

Authorities must be more vigilant in dismantling such criminal networks

OVER the past few days, 23 women have been rescued from the hands of traffickers, of whom 22 were in three “safe houses” in Dhaka’s Mirpur, Uttara and Tejgaon areas. Rab has also arrested 11 members of two human trafficking gangs that allegedly trafficked women to India and Middle Eastern countries, promising them a better life abroad. While we are relieved to hear that these women have been rescued, it is extremely concerning to find that these gangs are continuing to prey upon young women in the country.

According to a report in this daily, of the recently arrested traffickers, one group used to pose as a dance club and another group as agents for jobs in the Middle East. In the last one year, the latter trafficked around 30-35 women to Saudi Arabia, UAE, Jordan, Oman, Qatar, Kuwait and Egypt, whereas the dance club racket has trafficked nearly 100 women since 2019 by promising their victims dance lessons that would get them jobs in India.

Could these women have been saved from their ordeal if the law enforcement agencies had been more vigilant? It appears so. In April 2019, the ringleader of the dance group, DJ Kamrul, was arrested by Badda police for trafficking a woman to India. According to the Human Trafficking Deterrence and Suppression Act, 2012, human trafficking comes with a penalty of five years to life imprisonment. Yet, Kamrul was in jail for only three months, after which he apparently went back to his criminal activities. How is it possible that even after being arrested and imprisoned, he was able to act with such impunity?

At a press briefing, Rab also revealed that they had identified eight different border routes that were being used by the dance club gang. These same routes, along with the safe houses, have been identified before, especially after the discovery of the TikTok trafficking ring. The authorities, on both sides of the border, must do more to dismantle these networks. It is unacceptable that traffickers are being identified, imprisoned and then allowed to return to their lives of crime.

According to anti-human trafficking NGOs, around 500,000 Bangladeshi women and children aged between 12 and 30 years have been illegally sent to India over the last decade. This is no small number. We urge the authorities to strictly implement the human trafficking prevention act and mete out exemplary punishment to traffickers, as well as provide rehabilitation support for trafficking victims so they are able to return to their families and communities.

MACRO MIRROR



FAHMIDA KHATUN

WHILE more than seven billion doses of Covid-19 vaccines have been administered around the world—albeit almost 70 percent in developed countries and only two percent in low-income countries—the global economy is expected to see a strong recovery in 2021. The growth projections by international organisations indicate a ray of hope with some of the major economic parameters showing positive signs. For example, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), in October 2021, projected that the global economy would grow by 5.9 percent in 2021 and 4.9 percent in 2022, compared to a negative (-) 3.1 percent growth in 2020. The World Bank in June 2021 estimated that the global economy would increase by 5.6 percent in 2021. The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), in October 2021, saw the world output growing by 5.3 percent in 2021, as opposed to a negative (-) 3.5 percent growth in 2020. Of course, the uncertainty cannot be overruled since we are still dealing with the pandemic, and its forms and spread are beyond human control. Therefore, such prospects are subject to the level of risks of the pandemic and the management of financial situations in the developing countries, which are struggling more than the developed countries. It is also projected that going back to the pre-pandemic economic situation will take several years.

Moreover, this growth is going to be uneven across regions and countries, and among sectors of the economy. There will be unbalanced growth within the countries themselves as well. This is already happening as large businesses have managed to recover to some extent and are showing promising signs of growth, while the smaller ones are struggling. Therefore, it was indicated by some international organisations and experts that the recovery from the pandemic would be K-shaped. In fact, the unbalanced growth pattern already existed during the pre-Covid period. While developed countries progressed smoothly and significantly, developing and least developed countries continued to fall behind with limited finance, low technological absorption and weak capacity. In the same tune, as the rich accumulated income and wealth, the gap between the rich and the poor grew further at the country level too. Therefore, as the attempt towards economic recovery is now ongoing, the expectation is that the world will see a better outcome of

economic growth, which will be inclusive and equitable. There has been a lot of rhetoric on building forward a resilient global economy. But what would it really take to recover from the economic shrinkage due to the pandemic? We want to recover the losses and restore growth momentum. But the pattern, type and nature of that growth should be different from the pre-pandemic period, and be new and progressive. I would like to focus on four areas for such a recovery. These should in fact be the preconditions for the post-Covid growth narratives in all countries, particularly those with limited resources capacity.

First, the healthcare system should be made robust by large investments in both physical and soft health infrastructures. We must remember that we are not yet

able to handle critical health crises, such as the pandemic. Such a health system must also be affordable by all citizens, so that they can pay for doctors, nurses and medicines. Higher investment is required, not only for more hospitals, intensive care units, doctors, nurses and health service providers, but also for universal health insurance, so that healthcare services are affordable to the common citizens. This is not only applicable for Bangladesh, but also for many developing countries.

Second, many governments will have to maintain an accommodative monetary policy to support the businesses for some time. During the pandemic, there was a need for expansionary monetary policies as governments across the world announced stimulus packages at various scales to support businesses

Besides, there is also a need for direct cash support to the poor who could not receive money during the first phase of cash support. Though the economy has started to gear up, high inflationary pressure of commodities has become a concern for the common people, including the poor who are the hardest hit.

Third, higher investment on green projects should be made for future growth to be environmentally sustainable. Investments are essential for job creation. But it is critical to monitor how those investments are made. Infrastructural investments by destroying forests, biodiversity and ecosystem, and burning fossil fuels may add to the gross domestic product (GDP) of the country and create jobs, but the growth is of low quality and not sustainable. To fulfil Bangladesh’s commitment for reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emission and to adapt to the climate-induced risks and disasters, technology is crucial. The private sector, which plays a key role in the economy through investment and employment generation, should take the lead to bring in clean technologies for green growth. Technology should also be coupled with capacity development of the people. For adaptation, public investment plays a vital role. However, developing countries do not have adequate resources for undertaking adaptation measures, which is expensive. This has to come from developed countries as well as the Global Climate Fund. Indeed, developed countries also have the responsibility for technology transfer to poor countries.

Fourth, the post-Covid growth should aim for increased participation of women in the labour force. As of 2020, labour force participation by women is 36.3 percent, according to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (2018). However, 91.8 percent of the female workforce are in the informal sector and earn low income with high job insecurity. During any economic shock, the informal sector workers are the first ones to lose their jobs. Reports have also found that women have been more vulnerable to domestic violence during the pandemic. While designing measures for “building forward better” during the post-pandemic period, the focus should be to have women-friendly policies, so that they can take part in the labour market in larger numbers. Implementations of policies will require higher investment into girls’ education and training, and creating a safe environment for them.

Overall, the future growth has to focus on quality, rather than quantity. Inclusivity and sustainability aspects have to be brought to the forefront. Therefore, policies for and perspectives on economic growth have to be changed.

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Although Covid-19 is still very much prevalent around the world, countries are expected to see strong economic recovery soon. ILLUSTRATION: BIPOB CHAKROBORTY

in the post-Covid phase. The pandemic is very much prevalent; there is a huge uncertainty as to when it will leave us, or if it will go away at all. Of course, the majority of the population in developed countries are vaccinated and are probably in less risky situations. But the people in developing and poor countries are still in danger of the pandemic. So, the immediate requirement is ensuring vaccination for all in those countries that are left behind. All eligible citizens of all countries should be fully vaccinated and defeat the virus. This requires commitments and policy actions at the global level, so that vaccines are accessible to the people of the poor countries.

At the national levels, respective governments should also take appropriate policy measures for developing robust and efficient healthcare systems which are

and individuals. In Bangladesh, such support has helped many businesses and poor people to stay afloat. With economic activities being resumed and consumer demand going up, businesses—particularly the larger ones—have managed to make a comeback. However, the cottage, micro, small and medium enterprises (CMSMEs) have faced the toughest challenge, as they have had little access to finance despite the stimulus packages in place. Due to the informal nature of the CMSMEs, the complicated formalities for bank loans, and lack of information on the stimulus packages, many suffered serious losses and closed down. These small businesses are sources of employment for many. As the economy aims for higher growth, these businesses will require liquidity support in the form of soft loans from commercial banks.

Dhaka, Density and Liveability



DEBRA EFROYMSON

GROWING up in a small city in the southwest United States, I thought I didn’t like cities. I loved hiking in the nearby mountains, from the top of which a grey haze hung over the city, which itself offered a few charms. Since we had no industry or brick kilns, I can only assume that the pollution was caused by the car traffic. The city planners seemed to have invested more energy in ensuring that people could move around easily, than to ensure that there were destinations worth reaching. Despite having beautiful weather most of the year—my family ate outside on our veranda about half of the year—there weren’t outdoor places where people gathered. Our local parks were sad, bedraggled affairs. Bored youth drove to restaurants or shopping malls to hang out.

Then I had the good fortune of travelling across the country to attend university near Boston. Now, Boston isn’t one of our greater cities. It is racist, segregating the dark-skinned in dirty and dangerous neighbourhoods. Winters are miserable. But it is a city. I could walk for hours, exploring different neighbourhoods. There was—is—a lengthy bike and walking path along the Charles River, where people can stroll and cycle, safe from traffic. For free evening entertainment, there were plazas where I could watch street performers and passers-by. There was also functional public transit—it was slow and noisy, but it came regularly and it was easy to understand how to use it. As a result, when I didn’t feel like walking for hours, I could still explore the city.

In later years, I started informally studying urban planning and came to realise that the beauty of cities is that they bring many opportunities for exchange into a small area. The higher density of urban areas means that one can meet and mingle with a greater variety of people, exposed to different ideas, cultures, and ways of being than one can find in the countryside. Cities can be polluted, but

they don’t need to be—at least not to the level that many are. This is a discovery that many have made only because of Covid-19 shutdowns.

When I first moved to Dhaka, the sheer size of the city was overwhelming, but I came to realise that you don’t live in a megacity—you live in a neighbourhood. And I find mine enchanting, with so many people walking about, people selling goods from bicycle carts, children moving about on their own, people

In the past, during hartals, I marvelled at the sight of four or five children riding bicycles side by side, teens playing cricket on quiet streets, and the ability to travel faster by rickshaw than most days when I could travel by car.

During Covid shutdowns, we once again saw a different, quieter, friendlier, less polluted version of Dhaka.

Sure, Dhaka is overcrowded, but how much space does a migrant take, versus a private car?

their neighbourhoods and discouraged car trips, we could make the city much more liveable immediately in terms of congestion, pollution, noise, and safety. If we stopped supplying so much space to cars, we would have a lot more space available to people—more space for parks and playgrounds, to plant trees and restore canals, all of which would also reduce the heat island effect and help offset the worsening flooding due to the climate crisis. What is true for Dhaka is



Dhaka can be more than its endless traffic and concrete structures. PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

interacting freely. Entertainment is freely available, watching the people. It is the opposite of the lonely and isolating cities that are all too common in my home country.

Having just observed World Cities Day on October 31, it is worth reflecting on what aspects of our city we enjoy and what aspects we would like to change. Rather than reflexively blaming migrants for Dhaka’s overcrowded state, or rickshaws for its traffic jams, or whatever the culprit of the day is for its pollution, it is worth reflecting on what the city is and what it could be.

Yes, rickshaws can be annoying—especially when I’m on a bicycle—but what VIP road is free of congestion?

Winter dust and fires, and brick kilns, do contribute to pollution, but so does the overwhelming presence of motorised vehicles.

Dhaka turns out to be not that big, as you can discover if you try cycling it early in the morning or on a holiday. Many destinations would be easily reachable by bicycle if we built the proper infrastructure to make cycling safe and convenient. If we focused on enabling people to move easily within

also true for our divisional cities, which otherwise risk becoming the same noisy polluted congested mess.

As a wise man once said, “Liveability is density done right.” With so many fascinating people within such easy reach, our city could become a great place to wander and inhabit. Then, instead of consistently ranking as one of the world’s least liveable cities, Dhaka could prove far more rewarding to its many inhabitants.

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