

Rising inequality bane to our progress

The problem is political, experts say

EXPERTS at a development conference on December 1, 2021 lamented that Bangladesh's remarkable economic growth since independence had also led to an inequitable society, and we cannot help but share in their disappointment. For a country that was founded on the basis of equality, it is hugely disappointing that as Bangladesh celebrates its 50th anniversary of independence, the country has experienced rapid increase in inequality, especially in recent times.

According to a report published by this daily in May 2019, the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) found in its Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) that the country's Gini coefficient, which is the economic measure of equality, stood at 0.482 in 2016, up from 0.458 in 2010. That, reportedly, meant inequality in the country was at an all-time high. At the latest development conference, experts, while lauding the entrepreneurial spirit of Bangladeshis that propelled the country's outstanding economic growth, also criticised the large-scale corruption that has been taking place, leading to growing inequality.

While the country has made huge progress on social indicators, the benefits of health measures and education have not been equally distributed between the rich and the poor—as well as across gender and other social divides. And this, experts opined, is mostly a political problem. The lack of accountability of various government organisations has not only become a major barrier to our progress and to social and economic equality, but is also challenging the very credibility of the state. That is extremely concerning.

Apart from economic inequality, we have seen in recent times that various types of social inequalities are also on the rise. The space to criticise those close to power has shrunk. Questioning the decisions of policymakers is now often seen through an adversarial lens. But without such open discussions, addressing the issues that are leading to greater economic inequality will become increasingly more difficult. The recent tendency of government officials to refuse to look at data provided by independent non-government agencies is another cause for worry. Without taking such data into consideration—and in the absence of unbiased data collected by the government—how can the authorities address these difficult challenges?

Bangladesh's overall human development score, evaluated by the Human Development Index (HDI), was 0.632 in 2019, but declined to 0.478 when discounted for inequality, implying a loss of 24.4 percent in human development due to inequality. This is just one example of how rising inequality is holding back our development. Therefore, while policymakers congratulate themselves for the country's development, the reality is that most of it is down to the hard work and ingenuity of its citizens—while some of the policies that are being pursued are actually negatively impacting this development. If we are to reach our development dreams, then it is the policies that must change.

Hence, the authorities must work towards bringing greater accountability and transparency in governance. And, most importantly, take every necessary step to reduce corruption, as well as make policies that aim to address inequality.

Joyous centenary celebration of DU

It's time to look to the future now

THE edifice called the University of Dhaka is one of the iconic symbols of the independence of Bangladesh. It remained at the forefront of the major sociopolitical and cultural movements of the Bengalis that ultimately spearheaded the final thrust for total independence in 1971.

We pay homage to Dhaka University on its completion of a 100-year run, leaving behind many glorious milestones for all Bangladeshis to be proud of. The auspicious journey had begun on July 1, 1921 to fulfil the dreams of the people of East Bengal. Today, Dhaka University celebrates the university's 100 years and also the golden jubilee of the country's independence.

While addressing the teachers and students of DU, President Abdul Hamid said that an academic degree is not enough—students have to achieve international standards of education. He further suggested that the university authorities keep in their mind the standards maintained at the top universities around the world while approving curricula and teaching faculty.

We believe the president hit the right button when he talked about the standard of education at Dhaka University. It is not unknown to anyone that the standard of teaching and learning and the overall academic environment in this institute have deteriorated considerably in the past decades because of various reasons.

When we talk about its glorious past, we must recall the qualifications and quality of the first few generations of teachers. It is because of them that DU had reached the high level of excellence since its inception. It has produced world-class economists, engineers, sociopolitical researchers, scientists, medical and social scientists and so on, but, unfortunately, though the number of enrolled students has gone up phenomenally, we see less presence of our students on the world stage.

Today, Dhaka University is not among the top universities in the world for many reasons; lack of research is one of them. No international standard research work has been undertaken by the faculties of this university in the past decades. The fund received by the institute is primarily spent on teachers' salaries and construction of various infrastructures on campus. As a result, it cannot fund big research undertakings. On the other hand, students living in dormitories complain of substandard food, lack of study materials, laboratories, etc.

It needs no emphasising that a university can reach the desired level of excellence when it has highly qualified and competent faculties, sound academic environment, scientific and general research activities, and the required number of departments and institutes. The quality of education and research should remain as the key indicators.

The glorious past in the early decades of DU was determined through reaching academic excellence. In the 60s and 70s, its involvement and role in the glorious liberation movement of Bangladesh became a model before nations struggling for liberation.

Today, we have to look to the future and prepare ourselves to face the challenges of the technology-driven world. Therefore, Dhaka University should invest more on science and technology, so that the present generation can be sufficiently equipped to take up the challenges.

Our killer roads: Students have once again raised a vital issue

THE THIRD VIEW



MAHFUZ ANAM

JUST as we are making news as a role model of development, we are also attracting global attention as perhaps the only country in the world where school students need to demonstrate on the streets for days on end to demand road safety measures. Things that others take for granted—things that governments should take as a matter of law—are things school students in Bangladesh have to demonstrate on the streets for, occasionally facing attacks by criminal elements who profit from the lawlessness on our roads.

It has been around two weeks now that our school students have been demonstrating on the streets. For what? Except the demand for half fare on the buses for themselves, all the other demands have to do with road safety issues that concern all citizens of the

our roads, both in terms of planning and maintaining them; and finally, the state of our traffic system that is supposed to ensure safety for all who use them.

The situation of the drivers is clearly a recipe for disaster. To start with, there is no formal channel for their training. They learn to drive on the sly—from other drivers. Even if they get some rudimentary ideas about driving, they get absolutely no training on traffic laws, differences in driving on the city roads and the highways, when or when not to overtake, how to navigate turns, especially narrow ones, and about driving within one's lane.

A large number of drivers have no licence—one of the grievances expressed by the agitating students was the high number of drivers without any licence, including those found driving several police cars. Those who do mostly have fake ones. They are procured through bribery, without any test or any sort of screening.

Just imagine: drivers with some rudimentary exposure to driving and with no practical exposure to traffic rules, no idea of the differences between light

glasses, which they don't know about, and some may even suffer from occasional night blindness.

If you put all of the above together, is it any wonder that our roads are as dangerous as we are now seeing them to be?

Then comes the issue of how scientifically our roads are constructed, and how regularly they are maintained to ensure safety. We have reported several instances where accidents were

caused solely due to badly planned roads, non-existent stop signs, confusing intersections, no indication for blind turns, and insufficient signals for oncoming traffic.

Often, roads are not maintained, which poses a serious threat to vehicles and to the passengers. On occasions that a section of a road is closed for maintenance, the diversion is so inadequately spaced and marked that those accidents become inevitable. It is not known how much the unscientifically placed speed breakers have helped to ensure safety, but they definitely have contributed to the rising back problems of the passengers.

Is there anything called a traffic system prevalent here? Well, if Dhaka city traffic is anything to go by, then there isn't. If there is a practical illustration of the phrase "anything goes," then our streets exemplify it. Anything that moves is on our streets—from the fast moving to the very slow, from the fully mechanical to the completely human-powered, from very small, compact ones to the highly oversized ones. There are no clear directives as to the type of vehicles allowed on the streets and ones which are not, with the result that our traffic is among the slowest in the world. The World Bank reported some years back that in the very near future, the speed of motorised vehicles on our streets would be the same as that of pedestrians.

There is practically nothing called parking restrictions on our highly over-subscribed streets. Literally, anyone can park anywhere—sometimes blocking a whole lane. If you are linked with the

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Students demanding safer roads stop a vehicle of the Armed Police Battalion in Dhanmondi, Dhaka on November 28, 2021, as the vehicle had no number plates.

PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

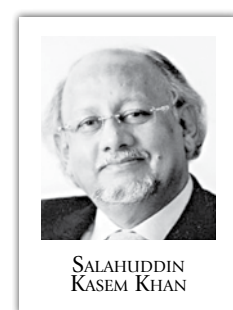
country, not just students.

The number of deaths on the streets, especially of students, are just the tip of the iceberg of an all-encompassing malaise that has turned our roads into the deadliest in the world.

There are three main elements of the whole road safety question: The level of training of the drivers who run the buses, trucks and other vehicles—like the DNCC garbage truck being driven by the unlicensed assistant of its driver; the level of fitness of the vehicles and the quality of

vehicles, like private cars, and heavy ones, like buses and trucks, are allowed total freedom on our streets to drive any vehicles that their owners assign. Add to that the fact that most drivers never face any medical examination—many drivers have never had an eye examination—or psychological counselling on how to manage pressure and tension on the road. Add further to the above fact that many drive for hours, sometimes all through the night, without adequate rest. It's quite possible that many drivers may need

Make the post-Covid world more inclusive for people with disabilities



SALAHUDDIN KASEM KHAN

accessible and sustainable post-Covid-19 world." The inclusion of individuals with disabilities in all spheres of society and development is mandated by law. When we successfully do so, we recognise and respect the rights of people with disabilities as equal citizens. Similarly, when we fail to do so, we deny those very same rights. These rights are enshrined in the Rights and Protection of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2013, which is aligned with the UN Convention on Rights of the Persons with Disabilities, which Bangladesh has ratified. This is a shift from an antiquated welfare, charity or purely medical approach to a progressive social and rights-based model. As we await the end of Covid-19, it is worth reflecting on what we expect from the post-pandemic world in terms of work.

The recent global shift to remote work due to the pandemic presents a big opportunity for people with certain types of disabilities—it can be an enabler for people with mobility impairment or those who face inaccessible transportation and infrastructure. This type of flexibility with work can significantly support employees with disabilities—and ideally it makes employers open to offering other enabling flexibilities. However, at the same time, it must be ensured that the progress in establishing greater accessibility to transportation, infrastructure and other facilities for people with disabilities remains on track.

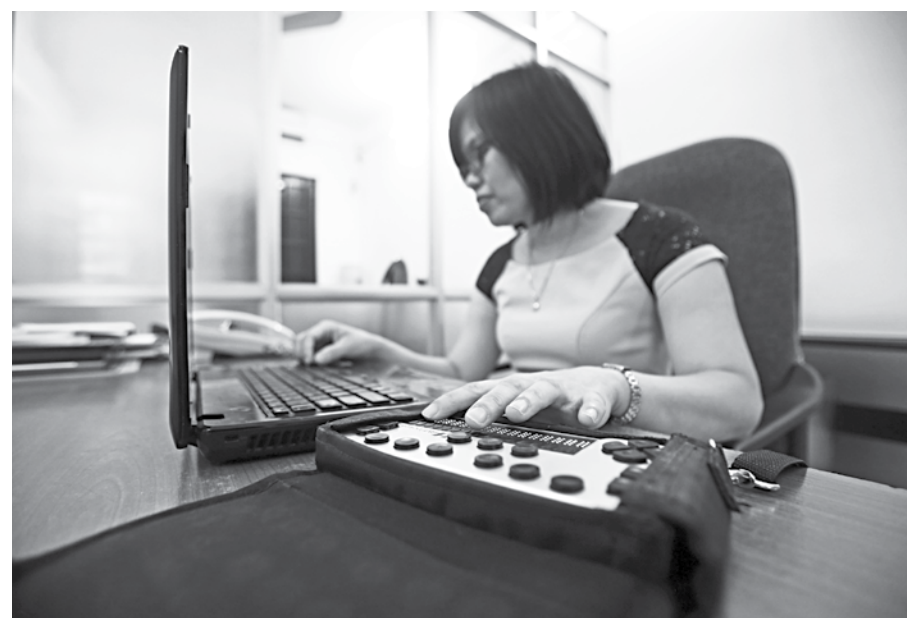
The dependence on technology for remote work has further made clear the great digital divide. Those with devices, reliable internet connections and

adequate digital literacy have been able to continue working during lockdowns, but those who did not have access to those tools were left behind. In the face of the 4th Industrial Revolution, the need for digital solutions for our day-to-day life will grow more prominent. Technology can become a great equaliser if accessibility and inclusion can be ensured—otherwise it can further widen the existing divide.

So how do we build a world that

disabilities and ensure their active participation.

The other key word in this year's theme is leadership. There is a saying in the community of people with disabilities that there should be "nothing about us, without us." It indicates the need to ensure that people with disabilities are central in the process of designing solutions or programmes that are for them. We must ensure that there is a pathway for people with disabilities



The global shift to remote work, caused by the pandemic, has opened up new opportunities for people with certain types of disabilities.

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

is more inclusive, accessible and sustainable? From the perspective of employment, it begins with a shift in mindset. We must recognise that to become inclusive as employers, merely hiring a few people with disabilities is not enough. Rather, it is about building a holistic, enabling environment and ensuring that in an organisation, team members are onboard with disability inclusion and equipped with the necessary tools and capacity to meaningfully include people with

to take up leadership roles—not only on issues that affect them, but on mainstream issues as well.

To build an accessible world, we need the Bangladesh National Building Code, which has provisions for accessibility, to be strictly enforced. In developed countries, one often sees that people with disabilities are prioritised in public transport and infrastructure, whereas in Bangladesh, they are often unnecessarily harassed and discriminated against (e.g. being charged extra for

having a wheelchair). In addition to the government's efforts, the private sector must also ensure that all the infrastructures they are building or using are accessible to people with disabilities. Development partners can also consider mandating this in all new infrastructure projects that they are financing. Soft infrastructure such as information, training modules, websites, public announcements, etc also need to be made accessible. Support from specialist organisations may be availed to facilitate this.

Then comes the issue of sustainability of these initiatives. This is where policy needs to be put into practice. Many skills development programmes funded by development partners have targets for including people with disabilities as trainees. These targets need to be met, not only by ensuring that enough people with disabilities get access to these programmes, but also by focusing on the necessary provisions to ensure that an enabling and accommodative environment is created, and that there is sufficient budget allocation to see these programmes through in the long term. Simultaneously, as the supply side grows, so must the demand side. A greater number of employers need to come forward to offer opportunities to skilled, qualified and experienced people with disabilities. Gender-sensitive approaches must also be considered as women with disabilities face a number of additional barriers.

As we continue to build capacity and our labour market matures, more types of disabilities must also be progressively addressed. All this and much more can only be achieved through collective multi-sectoral effort. We invite all interested organisations to join and engage with the Bangladesh Business and Disability Network, a non-profit trust established by Bangladesh Employers' Federation, to realise this vision of establishing a disability-inclusive workforce in Bangladesh.

Salahuddin Kasem Khan is chairman of AK Khan and Company Ltd., and former president of Bangladesh Employers' Federation.