

## Enforced disappearances remain unresolved

*The statistics are too horrendous to gloss over*

OF all the fundamental rights guaranteed by the Constitution, the right to life is the most central to the functioning of a state. It is (or should be) inviolable, but if one's right to life is abridged, without the proper application of the law, and if the state takes no action to address the situation and arrest the phenomenon, then not only does the rule of law become the law of the jungle—the Constitution stands defiled, the credentials of the state is slighted and the dignity of society sullied.

This is unacceptable in a society that takes pride as a votary of rule of law. According to a local human rights watchdog, between 2009 and September 2021, as many as 605 persons have disappeared, of whom 154 remain untraced. Among the disappeared, 370 have returned, and a gruesome 81 persons have been found dead during the mentioned period. Predictably, the state agencies have denied any involvement in the matter, but accounts of the victims' families in most cases talk about the victims being picked up by people in plainclothes, sometimes claiming to be members of state agencies.

We do not want to point fingers at anyone, but in this regard, one must acknowledge some incontrovertible facts. First, people have gone missing and a good number still remain unaccounted for. Two, a good number of them have ended up dead. Three, most of those who have returned, suffer inexplicably from a bout of amnesia; they are unable to recall anything of the period after they were captured, kidnapped or apprehended, till they returned home.

Does it not then become the responsibility of the state to go into the depth of the matter? If the state agencies are not involved in enforced disappearances, as they claim, then does it not devolve on them to find out who is? Are we to believe that there is a supra-entity that has managed to cause the enforced disappearance of more than 600 people? Is it not the enough to raise the hackles of the security and intelligence agencies and get them moving to apprehend whoever these people are—who are working clandestinely and doing so since the last decade, and so efficiently too that they are able to evade being identified, leave alone captured, by the state agencies?

These are questions that cannot be brushed aside with puerile answers from the authorities. There are only so many possibilities and reasons behind a person going missing. And that is all the more reason that every missing persons case should be thoroughly investigated. Thus, we wonder, why is there reluctance on the part of the police, reportedly, to register "missing persons" cases? And in some cases, there are pressures on the victim's families to withdraw the case. It demands demonstrated actions by the agencies to address the issue, but there are none at the moment. The authorities should not be oblivious to the possibility that lack of palpable action on their part may be taken as indicative of complicity.

## Evaluating 50 years of Bangladesh

*Exemplary progress and unmet goals*

BANGLADESH has come a long way since independence in 1971, crossing many milestones to reach where it has today. The chronicle of the 50-years-long journey is dotted with achievements—as well as numerous catastrophes, thrown its way by both nature and humans, which the country managed to overcome while upholding the tenets of independence. In his evaluation at a recent webinar marking the country's golden jubilee, Prof Rehman Sobhan said, "Bangladesh became a success case from the basket case in 50 years."

It is true that Bangladesh has an impressive track record of growth and poverty reduction that has made us all proud. From being one of the poorest nations at birth in 1971, with the 10th lowest per capita GDP in the world, Bangladesh reached lower-middle-income status in 2015, and is now on track to graduate from the UN's Least Developed Countries (LDC) list in 2026. Labelled as one of the fastest growing economies in the world over the past decades, the credit for its success goes to demographic dividend, RMG exports, and favourable macroeconomic conditions, according to the World Bank.

While eminent economists, scholars, social researchers and think-tanks at home and abroad endorse this view, they however have offered a few words of caution as well. While praising our achievements, they also pause to point out where things could have been much better.

Despite remarkable progress in economic and social development, the country is lagging behind in institutionalising democracy, strengthening important institutions, improving governance and protecting the environment. Widening inequalities in income, fading social parity and declining education standards need to be addressed urgently. Scholars believe ensuring accountability, good governance and public trust are pertinent issues for a democracy.

We feel these well-intentioned suggestions should be considered seriously as part of the 50-year celebration of our independence. There is no denying that the country's progress, and its recognition by the international community, has helped us overcome the negative stereotypes that had previously been attached to Bangladesh. Now we, as a nation, have a healthy positive perception about our abilities and our goals. One of the wisest ways for us to celebrate our success now is to study our strengths and weaknesses at present, so that we can chart our future course to reach the next 50-year milestone.



**AN OPEN DIALOGUE**  
ABDULLAH SHIBLI

*Star, in an editorial, hailed the news as a milestone. It rightly pointed out, "As Bangladesh celebrates its Golden Jubilee of independence, this achievement establishes us on the global map as a country with great potential."*



**It will be very challenging for Bangladesh to attain its development goals if institutional weakness continues.**

ILLUSTRATION: BIPOB CHAKROBORTY

The PM of Bangladesh called on business leaders to step up to the plate for the journey forward. "Get ready for LDC graduation challenges," she said at a gathering arranged by the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI) to celebrate the Golden Jubilee of the country's independence on December 1 in Dhaka.

The good news came on November 24 in the form of a statement from the UN headquarters in New York City. "The U.N. General Assembly has adopted resolution A/76/L.6/Rev.1, Graduation

of Bangladesh, the Lao People's Democratic Republic and Nepal from the least developed country category," the declaration said.

Incidentally, all three countries, Bangladesh, Laos and Nepal, will cross the threshold and graduate from the LDC category after a preparatory period of five years. Even though the standard period is of three years, these three nations have been granted an "exceptionally extended" timeline, in light of the economic and social damage caused by Covid-19.

Earlier this year, in response to a recent intervention by the government of Bangladesh, the Committee for Development Policy of the United Nations (UN CDP) agreed to extend the transition period by two more

it embarks on this historic journey? A cursory look at the recent studies done by national think-tanks and international agencies reveals that the major hurdles that lie on the path to middle-income status are low investment, unequal distribution of income and wealth, a private sector stunted by lack of diversification, and weak institutions.

Participants at two recent conferences emphasised the role of institutions and highlighted the critical impact of the lack of a robust regulatory framework, effective and supportive bureaucracy, and the slow development of a supportive ecosystem. "It will be very challenging for Bangladesh to attain its development goals if institutional weakness continues," said Prof Selim Raihan of Dhaka University at the CPD-Cornell University virtual conference.

At a BIDS conference, Prof Rehman Sobhan recently gave a clarion call for strengthening our institutions to support economic development.

A stunning rebuke of our development strategy came earlier this year from the World Bank's Systematic Country Diagnostic 2021 Update (SCD) report. It identified four major challenges, and the first one was the narrow-based private sector which was characterised as "not competitive to drive growth and job creation."

It is well-known that only a few large firms, including conglomerates, drive the formal sector markets. "Such firms remain mostly inward looking and benefit from rents from protected domestic markets and RMG exports under special incentive programmes and from being supported by close links with the banking sector," the SCD added.

Prof Wahiduddin Mahmud, an eminent economist, in his new book and in a recent op-ed in this newspaper, also flagged rampant capital flight, which leads many well-run private businesses to fall into a debt repayment crisis.

"The governments are forced to bail out these companies by various financial assistance, like allowing additional loans and rescheduling existing loans at concessional interest. The interest rates on these loans in real terms—that is, taking inflation into account—often turns out to be negative, thus putting a heavy burden on the financial institutions and harming the economy at large," he added.

The private sector, one must concede, faces one of the world's most burdensome business environments, underpinned by a regulatory governance regime that is unpredictable, non-transparent, and discretionary.

Many of the challenges confronting

Bangladesh as it re-embarks on the trajectory towards sustainable graduation originate from exogenous factors. With the new Omicron variant raising its head and adding to the uncertainty surrounding Covid-19 recovery, one has to be cognisant of the latter's endurance across the world, especially in Europe and North America, and the potential threats on export earnings and remittance inflows.

As the firms at the top flourish, small and medium enterprises (SME) face major roadblocks. These include lack of access to finance and excessive regulation.

Bangladesh is still overly dependent on a few export items, and this has generated its own weakness as well. Although the export sector of Bangladesh has made remarkable progress in the last few decades, exports remained heavily concentrated in few products and limited markets. The vulnerability of export concentration is well recognised in the Bangladesh planning landscape, according to the SCD. The Eighth Five Year Plan and other perspective plans have given due attention and many measures and policy options have been devised to diversify both products and markets. "A blend of skills, finance, improved technology, entrepreneurship, and adequate quality infrastructure is key to the success of the export diversification programme," the World Bank document recognises.

Between 2003 and 2016, the Bangladesh economy generated more than 1.15 million net jobs per year, on average. The strong job creation was accompanied by a continuous labour shift from agriculture to industry and services and from rural to urban areas. Female employment, which rose 4.4 percent annually, increased at a faster pace than male employment.

Since 2015, however, the manufacturing sector became less effective in generating jobs, while female labour force participation declined in urban areas; and there was uneven progress in poverty reduction across the country. The slowdown in growth in recent years has affected Bangladesh's poverty reduction and jobs creation targets.

Another issue in the post-graduation phase is the loss of trade-related ISMs (International Support Measures). Unless timely and appropriate policy measures are taken with the support of our development and trading partners, we might run into some real challenges later this decade.

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## Keeping up with the Fourth Industrial Revolution a crucial factor in economic growth



MM SHAHIDUL HASSAN

OVER the past decade, there has been tremendous interest in understanding how technology is shaping the nature of work and education around the world. The advance of technology has shattered traditional business models and demands the modernisation of industries and new skills from workers. In this context, the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) has seen unprecedented advances in technology that did not occur in previous industrial revolutions. Artificial intelligence, cyber security, cloud computing and robotics are changing our way of life and work. Also, the rapid pace of change is disrupting almost every industry in every country. The Internet of Things enables large-scale production, end-to-end data collection, and advanced decision-making for real-time reporting. Therefore, the 4IR poses a challenge for low-skilled and unskilled workers. While advances in technology create new jobs, many other jobs are also lost.

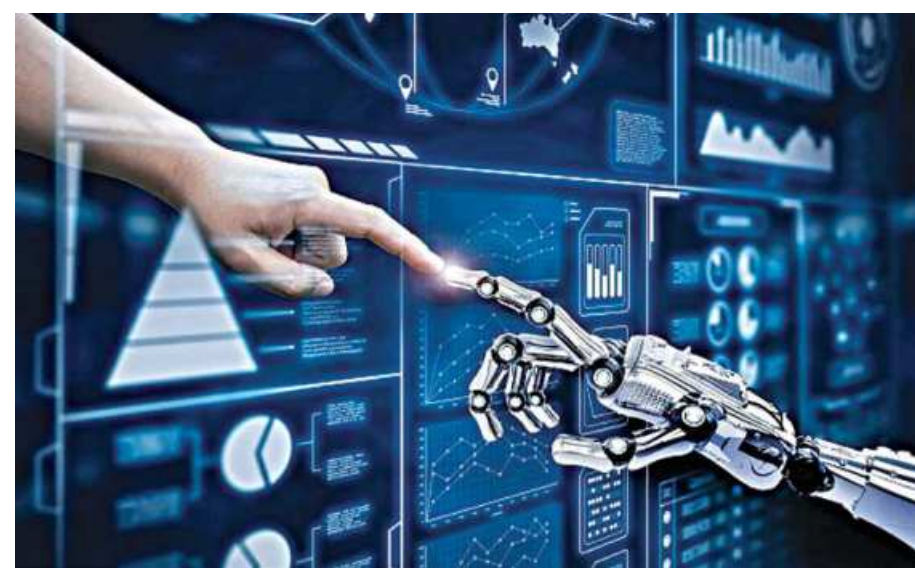
In countries that hold much higher numbers of low-skilled and unskilled workers over high-skilled workers, 4IR is particularly worrying and creates discussions on how technology will affect their socioeconomic development. The role of routine vs non-routine and cognitive vs manual tasks has become a hot topic of debate. In 2016, the World Development Report predicted that over 40 percent of today's jobs in many developing countries may be at risk of being significantly transformed or altogether replaced by digital technologies over the next decades.

Almost 90 percent of Bangladesh's workers are unskilled. As a result, 4IR will pose a great challenge to our government in dealing with this situation. However, more recent research suggests that the adoption of technology to transform many traditional industries immediately into smart industries is not economically feasible, thus, displacement due to automation may not occur immediately (Asian Development Bank, 2018). On

the other hand, about 60 percent of the population works in agriculture, and about 30 percent of GDP comes from agriculture. We cannot expect that the adoption of technology in these sectors will happen anytime soon. Thus, the idea that all industries will become automated and that low-skilled workers will lose their jobs is not correct. However, non-routine jobs need to be accelerated to sustain economic growth. The non-routine and cognitive categories require

steam engine, and 2IR increased mass production using electric energy. In the third IR, electronics and information technology was used to automate production. In 3IR, machines replaced a lot of the work that people used to do. All of these revolutions have substituted the human, but not their thinking.

However, 4IR has the potential to skyrocket economic growth or negatively impact the countries that will lag behind if they do not realise its potentials. It is



**Artificial intelligence, cyber security, cloud computing and robotics are changing our way of life and work.**

PHOTO: COLLECTED

higher-order cognitive and soft skills. Bangladesh will be able to continue its economic growth without high risks to today's jobs. However, traditional industries have to choose the path of automation to increase the rate of production in the future. Adding resilience to the industry through training and skills development of workers is more important than ever. Since we do not expect that the tasks in routine jobs will change much in the near future, for now, we should focus more on non-routine jobs that will keep pace with the desired rate of economic growth.

Every industrial revolution in the world has been called disruptive in its time, as machines replaced human labour. The first industrial revolution replaced manual work with the invention of the

important for developing countries to take steps to take advantage of the 4IR. The first challenge is lack of awareness and of a coherent strategy. Some of the technologies that are considered to be an integral part of 4IR have been used in manufacturing before, such as robotics and additive manufacturing. However, with the advancement of fields such as machine learning, data science and the Internet of Things, it is now possible to amalgamate these and related technologies to revolutionise manufacturing. Other challenges include lack of infrastructure and lack of specialists in required areas, lack of collaboration between industry and academia, and lack of collaboration among different countries. In 4IR, humans are needed in high-skilled

innovation and critical decision-making jobs, as well as in fields that require emotional intelligence. To coexist with machines and achieve good results in the future, humans should make certain changes in education and skills. We should also develop principles and standards in dealing with the relationship between humans and intelligent machines.

Universities need to produce graduates who are equipped with the skills of complex problem-solving, critical thinking, creativity, human resources management, networking, emotional intelligence, judgment and decision-making, and service orientation. Graduates in science or engineering, or even social sciences, should have knowledge of machine learning. Traditional education inherited from the pre-independence regime of Bangladesh is not producing employable graduates. Now, developed countries adopt a "learning paradigm" instead of an "instructional paradigm" in teaching and learning. The underlying principle behind this new paradigm is based on the concept of teaching to students' ability levels, which has been known to work in improving learning. The Ministry of Education, University Grants Commission and universities need to work together to bring this paradigm into higher education.

Bangladesh needs to take steps to keep up with 4IR. The country needs to set up Artificial Intelligence (AI) and computing research centres, which should be centers of learning and research in AI. Smart factories need to have security experts and research centres to keep pace with new security threats and their prevention. Bangladesh needs to invest in infrastructure before taking further steps to implement 4IR.

Bangladesh can attain the level of a developed country by 2041 if it can take advantage of the 4th Industrial Revolution and restructure the entire education system, like many developing countries. We need to reform not only higher education, but also primary and secondary education. Research finds that a crucial part of education happens at the age of five. This is important in helping children develop creative minds at a young age.

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