

Don't let Kuhelia River die

Is a two-lane road more important than a life-giving river?

IT is hard to believe that a river would be pushed to slow but certain death for the sake of a so-called development project undertaken by a government agency. A report by this daily on Saturday reveals how the Roads and Highways Department (RHD) has filled up around 26 acres of the Kuhelia river in Cox's Bazar's Moheshkhali upazila to build a two-lane road. The river has now turned into a narrow stream due to this massive encroachment. Reportedly, when the RHD gave the proposal to the land ministry to acquire land for the project, the latter had turned it down. Even then, the RHD moved ahead with the project ignoring the ministry's prohibition.

When a government agency does something like that, and so blatantly, it shows where our priorities lie as a nation. Is it any wonder then that local land grabbers feel emboldened to do the same ignoring river protection laws and Supreme Court directives in that regard? According to law, no one can hinder the natural flow of a river or fill up the flood plains of any river for any purpose. The High Court also gave some very important directives in 2019 declaring rivers as "living entities", while condoning strict punishment for polluters and grabbers.

However, very little has changed after those directives were given. News of our rivers being encroached or polluted by those in power or enjoying their patronage is getting quite frequent. Sadly, the perpetrators are hardly ever brought under the law. This daily has reported the sad condition of a few of our rivers in the last month alone—the Sonai River and the Old Khowai River in Habiganj district, for example, which are just two cases that recently exposed our failure to protect the rivers.

In case of the Kuhelia River, the RHD and the district administration had given the project proposal to the ministry by hiding some basic facts: while the RHD did not mention in its Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) report that construction work would require earth filling, the Cox's Bazar district administration mentioned the river area as "ponds" and "ditches" in the proposal sent to the land ministry. What is more, the RHD is continuing with the construction work ignoring the PMO's recommendation to build the road away from the river.

We, therefore, urge the government to take immediate steps against the RHD officials and those in the Cox's Bazar administration involved in the Kuhelia River grabbing, which is a punishable offence according to our law. Unless we can implement the law against powerful offenders, including those holding public offices, more of our rivers will face the same fate. Also, this will send a strong message to anyone who thinks they can get away with putting rivers in harm's way for their own petty interests.

Saving the country's first art school

Govt should preserve all buildings and sites of historical significance

IT is saddening that the building that once housed East Bengal's first art and craft school, Maheshwarpasha Art School, is set to be demolished and replaced by a new structure. While the identity and location of the school itself changed a few times since its establishment in 1904, the building where it was first located is recognised by art historians for its cultural significance. In a statement dated March 14, 1975, poet Jasimuddin and artists Quamrul Hasan and Nilima Ibrahim had also stressed the need to preserve the school for posterity. So, despite this, why is it that the Khulna City Corporation (KCC) is considering demolishing it?

It should be noted that the building currently houses a school named Shashibhushan Shishu Vidya Niketan. Even if a similar building is erected in its place for the students, it is not going to be the same, and over a century of history will have been lost simply because we didn't appreciate the importance of preserving buildings and sites of historical significance. The move to construct a new building after the demolition drive also reeks of poor planning at best and historical amnesia at worst, as the present school could easily be moved elsewhere. The bottom line is, nothing justifies the demolition or alteration of such a significant structure.

We would like to urge local authorities to investigate how this outcome can be avoided, and to find out the best possible way to preserve its rich cultural history. As experts have said, turning the building into an art gallery could be one way of engaging tourists with local heritage, as well as the school's own history. At the same time, we also need to see the bigger picture here: this is not an isolated incident. Such buildings and sites are, after all, being sacrificed at the altar of development on a regular basis. Therefore, we would urge the government to stop this onslaught and identify more such vulnerable buildings and take immediate steps to preserve them. With a proper plan, these can then be transformed into tourist destinations giving local tourism a much-needed boost. We need to understand that buildings such as these are more than brick and mortar. It's time we accepted this with the sobriety it deserves.

Time to adapt to AI



Dr Moinul Zaber is senior academic fellow at the Operating Unit on Policy-Driven Electronic Governance (UNU-EGOV) in United Nations University (UNU), Guimarães, Portugal. His Twitter handle is @zabermi. The views expressed in this article are those of the author.

MOINUL ZABER

DO you know that Bangladeshi girls and boys won four gold medals at the International Robot Olympiad (IRO) last month? Since 1999, girls and boys from around the world have been competing here every year with their amazing ideas and the robots they build. In 2021, Team Bangladesh won four gold, two silver, five bronze, and four technical medals at the IRO. This is an achievement that should encourage many more youngsters to enter the amazing world of robotics. As a nation, we should be proud and assured that amid myriad problems, we are producing intelligent youngsters—our first robot builders. I humbly acknowledge the tremendous work done by the organisers and promoters behind this success. But how do we make this success permanent? We have the human capital, our leadership has embraced the vision too, but are the institutions ready to lead?

AI (artificial intelligence) is a buzzword that engenders both fear and hope. This is because AI can automate many tasks resulting in cheaper, faster, and better performance than humans. So, economies that are embracing AI-based automation have greater leverage than others. This means that a novel digital divide among the "haves" and the "have nots" is lurking in the corner. Many international institutions like PricewaterhouseCoopers (PWC) and McKinsey have forecasts on how many tasks of almost all economic sectors will be replaced by AI-backed automation. There will be new jobs and roles added to the economies, while many traditional jobs will become obsolete.

However, AI is in its nascent state. Even the developed nations have only started harnessing AI. Also, unlike previous technologies, AI is less about infrastructure and more about knowledge and education. Hence, any nation with a planned educational scheme can reap its full benefits. However, the first step is to have a practical and context-aware strategy.

The Bangladesh government's ICT Division portal hosts a draft AI strategy. According to that draft, a task force was supposed to be established by 2019, prototype development and piloting was due to be done by 2021, and data-driven directive generation and a fully trained workforce are supposed to be in place by 2024. However, a prolonged web search failed to provide any information regarding the progress of this strategy. Meanwhile, Oxford Insights' Government AI Readiness Index 2020 tells us that Bangladesh ranks 123rd among 172 countries, and in the regional ranking, we are 14th among 16. One of the parameters of this index is "vision," where Bangladesh scores zero.



▲ In 2021, Team Bangladesh won 15 medals at the International Robot Olympiad (IRO), including four gold medals—an achievement that should encourage many more youngsters to enter the amazing world of robotics.

PHOTO: BANGLADESH ROBOT OLYMPIAD (BDRO)

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A day in infamy in US history



Ashfaque Swapan is a writer and editor based in Atlanta, US.

ASHFAQUE SWAPAN

A year ago, on January 6, armed, violent supporters of President Donald Trump attacked the US Capitol. Lawmakers hid in fear of their lives. Trump's Vice-President Mike Pence faced a real threat of being hanged for performing his ceremonial duty and declaring Joe Biden the winner of the 2020 elections.

It was, to echo the words of President Franklin Roosevelt, "a day that will live in infamy." The events of that day were an ominous warning. Democracy faces an existential threat in the US—an unprecedented development in any Western democracy since World War II.

The crisis may have been triggered by Trump, but that is not where the real danger lies, a vital point to which I shall return.

To be sure, the origin of this existential threat to democracy is Trump's refusal to concede after losing the 2020 presidential election. Trump's political career is littered with many dubious firsts: He is the first US president to refuse to concede after losing an election; he is the first US president to be threatened that his mike would be switched off in a presidential debate if he didn't follow rules; and he is the first US president to lie so blatantly and often that the US media, normally deferential to the president, was forced to bring itself to call Trump a liar so often that the fact itself became passe.

Trump's lies have ranged from the frivolous (he said it didn't rain during

There are a couple of other indices that are also relevant to understanding our technology readiness. One of them is a Portulans Institute's Network Readiness Index, based on parameters like technology competitiveness, governance, individuals' readiness, and social and economic conditions. According to the 2021 index, Bangladesh ranks 95th among 130 countries, despite having

and mobile financial services than the developed world, where there are robust landlines and banking services. This is proof that leapfrogging is possible. The key is to start with one sector and not to worry about all others. Maybe we could emphasise agriculture or textile and put all our research and planning efforts on building AI-driven appropriate technologies and engaging people.

a score higher than expected given its income level. In the individuals' readiness sub-index, Bangladesh ranks 104 with points lower than the lower middle-income average. The United Nations' e-government development index (EGDI) indicates the state of digital inclusion, in 2020 EGDI, Bangladesh ranked 119th out of 193. Among its South Asian peers, Bangladesh is lagging behind India (100), Bhutan (103), and Sri Lanka (85). To sum up, these indices point out that the culture of digital inclusion in the country is not satisfactory.

To bring about a cultural shift, vision is necessary, but not sufficient. First, we need to focus on making the government truly digital. Bangladesh has some piecemeal solutions, but with no electronic ID or holistic data management system, and without a user-friendly interface, these interventions are fractured. The country can move forward only if the transactions between the government and the residents become secured and easy.

Second, we should focus on finding a way to leapfrog. As a soon-to-be developing country, Bangladesh is slowly moving towards heavy manufacturing, but the economy is still dependent on agriculture, textile, and garments. With AI, most manual tasks in these sectors will be automated. This means that we will need fewer-in-number-but-better-in-skills labour. With proper planning, new technologies infiltrate faster in societies where people do not enjoy the luxury of traditional technologies. The developing world saw faster growth of mobile phones

Third, we need to plan on ensuring infrastructure. Emphasis should be given to wider use of mobile telephony and applications. This requires ensuring robust high-speed connectivity, and sufficient wireless bandwidth. Secured applications should be designed that are usable with little tech knowledge and no language barrier. These applications will need a vast amount of data while collecting much more. These data should be made available for greater use, and the regulatory regime should ensure that personal privacy will not be at stake in the name of public safety.

Finally, we need to plan on ensuring education for all. The critical need of a successful AI-based society is its educated residents. The focus should be on ensuring multi-disciplinary training starting from the primary level. In the AI world, emphasis should be given to STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts and mathematics), not STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), as we need more society-aware scientists, technologists, and science-aware social workers, and creative residents. We should also emphasise making our educational institutions ready for "continuous education," focusing on training and awareness for all.

Bangladesh came a long way in 50 years. However, the next phase of our growth depends on a knowledge-based society. If we want to ensure development, we will have to embrace AI. Our youngsters are ready; we need to ensure that the adults have put a proper plan in place.

his inauguration, when it did) to the silly (Trump said the Boy Scouts chief told him he had given the greatest speech to them ever. The Boy Scouts chief confirmed he said no such thing). Sometimes his lies were no laughing matter. His litany of untruthful remarks about the coronavirus (it was like the flu, the situation was "totally under control," the virus was "disappearing") had profound adverse consequences.

Trump's most consequential lie is his claim to have won the 2020 presidential election. This is a breach of one of the loftiest traditions of American politics. No matter how bitter the campaign, at the end of a presidential election, the losing candidate—whether Republican or Democratic—makes a gracious concession speech, which reaffirms the strength of American democracy. The sustenance of democracy, after all, depends on the consent of the defeated.

Trump and his supporters stubbornly claim to have won despite no evidence.

The real damage—and it is far from clear that US democracy will recover from it—is the vicious, mindless nature of the assault on the American electoral system.

Trump and his supporters filed a slew of lawsuits, all of which have been thrown out of court—frequently by judges appointed by Trump himself. Unsubstantiated claims of rigging, false voting, machine tampering have been made and debunked.

However, the reason American democracy is staring at a yawning abyss is not Trump or his cohorts so much as the complete meltdown of the Republican Party.

Awful as Trump's depredations have been, what has been stunning to behold is the complete moral bankruptcy of the Republican Party. Eight US senators and 139 House members—all Republicans—have refused to accept Biden's victory. There is a wry saying

about American politics: "If you think the politicians are bad, you should see the constituents." According to a University of Massachusetts at Amherst poll in December last year, 71 percent of Republican Party supporters don't believe Biden is the legitimately elected president.

The intraparty Republican political bloodletting is reminiscent of Soviet-era purges. Georgia presents a depressing case study. Its popular Republican Governor Brian Kemp and Republican Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger are robust Trump supporters. Both face a remarkably odd predicament. As they gear up for re-election, they face intraparty rivals—an extraordinarily rare thing for an elected official. Why? Both Kemp and Raffensperger had refused to subvert the presidential elections in Georgia in 2020, and Trump, in a fit of spite, has backed Republican rivals to unseat both of them.

In a battle for the soul of the Republican Party, Trump supporters have made blanket support for his big lie a litmus test. Equivocation is not acceptable, and the cult-like support they demand is completely untethered from consideration of facts.

The disquieting upshot of all of this is that American politics has entered a new era. Today, only partisan victory is an acceptable outcome to most Republicans. In the Republican Party, voices of reason and ethical democratic norms are marginalised to the point of extinction as Trumpier elements merrily rule the roost.

Democracy made a narrow escape in the 2020 elections. One reason was that election officials—including Republicans—refused to compromise the integrity of the electoral system.

Between threats to impartial election officials, unsubstantiated claims of malpractice whenever the results go the other way, and a vicious partisan mindset immune to facts, it is not clear at all the US will be so lucky next time.