

An economic lifeline hostage to govt indecision

What’s the logic behind scrapping the Dhk-Ctg expressway?

WE are at a loss to understand why the government has been so myopic in its plans to upgrade the Dhaka-Chattogram corridor, which is considered to be the economic lifeline of the country. Reportedly, the government decided to build an expressway in 2013, but after spending Tk 100 crore on a feasibility study, detailed design and preparatory work, it decided to scrap the project altogether seven years later. When the feasibility study was conducted in 2009, the daily average number of vehicles on the highway was between 20,000 to 25,000, and it was estimated that the number would reach 66,000 by 2030. Now, the government is taking piecemeal measures to keep the highway functioning, which is a tall order given the huge traffic it has to accommodate on a daily basis.

Meanwhile, in 2017, Bangladesh Railway conducted a feasibility study and detailed design of a high-speed train, spending Tk 110 crores. It is undertaking another feasibility study currently to build a chord line between Dhaka and Cumilla via Narayanganj to reduce the distance between Dhaka and Chattogram by almost 100 km. If and when built, the route promises to reduce travel time drastically. However, it’s still a long way from being constructed—apparently BR has only just begun the process of hiring consultants for the study. Moreover, experts have pointed out that even if the rail expressway is built, it cannot make up for an express highway, as the latter would still be needed to transport 80-90 percent of the country’s trade.

Given the importance of the Dhaka-Chittagong route in ensuring the smooth functioning of the economy, it is inconceivable that the government would scrap it altogether, that too, after already spending Tk 100 crores. What was the logic behind such a decision? Did the government not realise that a rail expressway and adding lanes to the existing highway would not be an efficient alternative to constructing the expressway? Was the decision an arbitrary one or was it informed by the expensive feasibility studies that have been conducted over the years? We believe the public, with whose money these studies and projects are carried out, deserves an answer.

The projects that the Road and Highways Department (RHD) is currently undertaking to make up for the lack of an expressway is not enough by their own admission. Many of them are still stuck in their initial stages with no guarantee of if and when they will be completed; or worse, whether there would be any visible improvement of the scenario even after spending hundreds of crores of public funds. Given how much money has already been wasted due to the government’s indecision—and how much more would be spent in temporary fixes in the near and far future—we urge it to reconsider its stance and come up with a more feasible and long-term solution.

A whole generation at risk

Primary schools need to make up for lost time

IT is disheartening to read the latest Unicef report that says that only 34 percent of third graders in primary schools can read texts from their books properly and that only 18 percent of them have foundational numerical competency. This is the general picture of primary education in the country and it is even worse for children coming from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

A third grader is, on average, almost 10-years-old, by which time s/he should be able to acquire reading, writing and numerical skills. It is alarming that 66 percent of them lack these basic skills which, in large part, is due to disruption in their education for a long period of time because of the Covid-19 pandemic. The forced internment had an adverse effect on them and, as a result, most of them remained detached from their textbooks. The health concerns and economic uncertainties of the parents somehow filtered down to the growing children, and so education was rarely given priority during the crisis period for an overwhelming majority of families, especially in the rural areas.

It is worrisome that globally more than 635 million students have been affected by full or partial school closures because of Covid-19 pandemic in the last two years. When we look at the situation at home, we see that school closures—one of the lengthiest in the world—in Bangladesh, from March 2020 to September 2021, and again in February 2022, disrupted education of around 37 million children.

Unicef highlights that even before the pandemic, children in Bangladesh faced various types of hurdles in attaining foundational skills. The pandemic has worsened the situation beyond the worst expectations. Children in the country need full access to flexible and remedial learning to help make up for the time lost. It has been rightly said by experts that just reopening schools is not enough. Students need intensive support to recover lost time and education. Schools must also endeavor to focus on children’s mental and physical health, social development and nutrition.

There is no denying that children must enjoy learning and the school authorities will have to ensure creating a congenial environment in school. At the same time, greater attention should be given to those falling behind—otherwise it would spell disaster for a whole generation of the country. If only 34 percent of third graders can read today, schools must make sure 100 percent of them can tomorrow.

In a world dominated by images



BLOWIN’ IN THE WIND

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THE “Oscar Slap” has created a virtual cottage industry that profits from processing a particular on-stage action that took place during the 94th Academy Awards-giving gala on March 27. The internet is divided in its reactions to the incident, which is being interpreted as either male chivalry or masculine toxicity. But is it a coincidence that Will, who lobbied hard to smith an Oscar following his first nomination for the award some twenty years back, self-sabotaged his moment of fame by “smacking the s***” out of a fellow comedian (who stood like a rock) to protect the hurt feelings of his wife from a rather docile (albeit, insensitive) joke, and jeopardised his glory of being finally trophied for playing the lead role in a film on (surprise, surprise) protecting the family involving the tennis sensation Williams sisters to prove how the Fresh-Prince-of-Bel-Air has come a long way to become the patriarch King Richard who knows (as a dialogue in the film posits), “If you fail to plan, you plan to fail”? Curse me for the long sentence, but I wanted to create a spectacle to disrupt the spectacle that has been offered to us. We are dealing with spectacular Hollywood, at its best! And I want you to think beyond that provided image.

Otherwise, how do you explain the stage intrusion of a member of the audience during a high-profile award ceremony? How do you explain the presence of the perpetrator after the violence is committed? Why wasn’t he immediately escorted out of the venue? How do you explain the narration of the action by the anchor (“Will Smith just smacked the s*** out of me”) and the consequent business-as-usual attitude after being hit by a man who is trained like a Mohammad-Ali-like boxer? How do you explain the standing ovation offered to the violator within 15 minutes after the violence took place? What is the link between the core message of the speech of “protect your family” and the interlude that preceded it?

Whoever has stage-managed this deserves an Oscar. After all, the image of the Oscar Slap has momentarily drifted our attention from the bombing of Ukraine, the dropping of a financial nuclear bomb on the petrodollar scheme, the dark side of the mega projects in Sri Lanka that have brought the country to a halt, the no-confidence vote on Imran Khan’s premiership who reportedly irked



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PHOTO:
COLLECTED

the secret society for being on the wrong side of history, the death of a young girl shot by a stray bullet of a professional killer and whose father refused to seek justice from the authority concerned, or the long lines of diarrhoea patients at ICDDR,B. Oh, did I miss out on price hikes and traffic jams (maybe I will mention them during my Jumma prayers)? The list goes on as we remain awestruck by the glitzy slap of a man protecting the honour

incoming flow of vehicles to the city from the airport area. The bottleneck from the Mohakhali flyover has a domino effect on one of the two main roads running through the city. The Minister responsible for the two buildings has been musing over finding an underground solution to the traffic problem. Of course, millions of taka need to be spent on the feasibility studies before anything concrete can be said on this topic. Maybe such studies

of his wife, who has lost her hair due to a medical condition. The image affects our social relations. We try to make sense of our world by taking a bite of knowledge, the forbidden fruit that has been dished out to us with the fallacy of control over our own thoughts and actions. Even though the secret insignia is hidden out in the open as a logo on my phone, I allow its AI to regulate my behaviour.

The Will-power has pulled me away from the city I wanted to write about. The Will Smith action has made me reflect on the power of the image. I am looking at an image of one of our city’s mayors. He is standing on a boat flowing along a freshly excavated canal in Mohammadpur that opens up to a river mouth of Buriganga. Mayor Atiqul Islam deserves our thanks for the angioplasty with which he removed the blocks and ensured flow in long-lost drains and canals, needed to keep the city alive. The media entourage with which he customarily travels quotes him to shed light on another block plaguing the flow of the city’s traffic.

I thank him for his honesty and courage in identifying two government structures responsible for blocking the

can also explore how certain portions of Dhaka can be demilitarised to create more civil thoroughfares. Those in service may not feel the urgency now—but once they retire, they too will realise how their game of golf is blocking the two main roads of Dhaka city from meeting just like the two tall buildings near the flyover are.

The image of a mayor standing on a boat in freshly furrowed water makes me think of the illegal buildings and constructions he had to demolish to unblock the canal. Can we think of similar unblocking for our roads? Sometimes you need to self-sabotage to draw attention to something that you aspire to. Sometimes you need to resort to or orchestrate violence to garner support for your cause. Will Smith, if you ask me, used theatricality to pitch his film on “protecting one’s family.” Our mayor’s boat trip, for me, has the potential to pitch the idea of “unblocking.”

We have seen the image-saturated mass media and the message that it wants us to consume. Whether the message will be manifested or not is another debate altogether.

WORLD AUTISM AWARENESS DAY

Creating an autism-friendly society



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“DURING the lockdown, our teachers offered online classes, but it was extremely challenging for autistic children to understand the instructions through a screen. Parents also struggled a lot. We tried to support parents by providing them with guidance on activities for children while staying in homes,” remarked the executive director (ED) of an NGO in Dhaka that runs a school for children with special needs, including autism.

Since 2020, the disruption in learning due to pandemic-related school closures has reversed years of progress and exacerbated inequalities in education. Many students with autism have been disproportionately affected due to the disruption to routines and services as well as to the supports that they rely on, as explained by the ED. But the lives of people with autism are not easy even in regular times.

Autism, or autism spectrum disorder, refers to a broad range of conditions characterised by challenges with social skills, repetitive behaviours, speech and nonverbal communication. Each person with autism has a distinct set of strengths and challenges. While some autistic people can live independently, others have severe disabilities and require life-long care and support.

Like everyone else, autistic people have the right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health, education, employment, recreation, etc. But they and their families are often subjected to stigma and discrimination in

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accessing various services. “I was not even allowed to touch a newborn in the family, as my child is autistic. I was also blamed for the autism of my child,” commented a mother.

In Bangladesh, having an autistic child is considered a misfortune for the family. It should not be so. A broad range of interventions can contribute to the development, health, well-being and quality of life of autistic people. Services are still limited in our country, which must be scaled up and whose quality should be improved. The monitoring of child development as part of routine child health care is critical in early diagnosis, which can lead to early evidence-based psychosocial interventions. Presently, child development centres in government medical colleges in Bangladesh can assess children’s development. This should be expanded till primary level healthcare settings to improve diagnosis and referral.

Educating someone with autism requires an understanding of their needs, abilities and learning styles. In Bangladesh, most children with autism attend specialised schools. There are concerns about the quality of education offered in most of those schools. According to a study titled “Understanding the Education of Children with Autism in Bangladesh: Parents’ Perspective”, social and familial stigma, lack of transparency from administrators, and insufficiently qualified teachers are some of the challenges facing autistic students. The paper also recommends that technology be used more creatively in improving learning outcomes.

The objective of the disability-related Integrated Special Education Policy (2019) is to ensure that children with neurodevelopmental disabilities in Bangladesh receive appropriate education and life skills, and be prepared to integrate in mainstream schools. In addition, the policy also highlights the importance of regulating special schools. The Neuro-Developmental Disability Protection Trust (NDDP Trust) has

been working for persons with neuro-developmental disabilities including autism since its establishment in 2013 by the government. The main objective of NDDP Trust is to promote the quality of life of the persons with NDDP and protect their rights. However, we must do more and be better in implementation of existing legal and policy commitments.

There should be more initiatives for capacity building of teachers in specialised schools for autistic children, and regular monitoring is required to ensure quality. With the required support, more children with autism (whose condition is not severe) could be integrated into the mainstream education system. Training of teachers is important. Autistic students could be paired with children without autism. This type of initiative has been quite effective in various countries for promoting inclusive education. Quality education is crucial so that they can achieve success in the labour market. In addition to improving access to education, parents and caregivers should be trained to support autistic people adequately at home. Collaboration between health, education, employment and social services is important.

Sometimes, autistic children are made to sing and dance in events, and some consider that as inclusion. But we must move beyond tokenistic participation and be more sincere in ensuring meaningful engagement of autistic people in society.

Teen climate activist Greta Thunberg said, “I have Asperger’s syndrome and that means I’m sometimes a bit different from the norm. And given the right circumstances, being different is a superpower. It makes you think differently.” An inclusive society needs all types of thinking to thrive. It is our responsibility to create the “right circumstances” where autistic people can realise their potential to the fullest and make meaningful contributions to society.