

The fault in our idea of progress

A voyeuristic appetite for growth and graduation



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PUZZLING positive developments in our economic indicators, which hardly delineate the real socioeconomic conditions of the people in Bangladesh, are not new phenomena. For instance, our GDP growth hitting the mark of 7.25 percent for the outgoing 2021-22 fiscal year has yet again managed to leave the nation with raised eyebrows. In the face of a global economic crisis and a deep-seated hangover from the pandemic, Bangladesh eagerly awaits its LDC graduation with a roaring economic growth – despite rising inequality, record inflation, and high social and environmental degradation sitting remarkably at the heart of it. As these contradicting statistics are tried to be made sense of through debates and deliberations, it is the ordinary people who take a hit.

Despite being in a storm of mutually reinforcing economic crises right now, our policymakers – emboldened by such misleading measures of progress – are quick to respond sanguinely, adding further insult to the injury. With the LDC graduation on the horizon, it would be fitting to remind ourselves that material-centric indicators rarely constitute a healthy public. And that with our pushy agenda for higher and even higher growth, it would be very easy, and perhaps convenient, to forget the ones who are yet to get on board while Bangladesh prepares to take off. It does not take an expert to realise that all these optimistic statistics are hardly being translated into inclusive development. Development that would enable people to collectively benefit from factors such as equal distribution of national wealth, wide social safety net coverage, clean air and water, quality education, basic healthcare, a strong legal and judiciary system or free speech – none of which are factored in the GDP, a globally controversial metric and the “crowned prince” of our development journey so far.

The lion's share of this GDP growth comes from our overdependence on the ready-made garment (RMG) industry, a sector burgeoning painfully on the backs of exploited workers, whose minimum wages have remained stagnant since 2018. This only goes to show that, as we glorify

this growth, the cost of living a dignified life spirals out of control at the hands of those who are directly responsible for it, signifying a degree of manic and unashamed oppressiveness that persists for a totalitarian kind of growth. Ironically, the overwhelming reliance on this single industry for export just might cost us a high price, since a whopping 70

percent of Bangladesh generates such worryingly low yields of revenue as a percentage of its GDP – with a tax-GDP ratio of 7.6 percent, the lowest in South Asia – that resource mobilisation in itself becomes a Herculean task. What does this signify, then? A governance system of tax revenue collection mired in corruption

upcoming graduation. It is already in shambles, ensuring the majority are just one medical disaster away from being relegated to a lower socioeconomic class. Now, add to that the looming cessation of the pharmaceutical waiver under the TRIPS agreement, which has allowed the pharmaceutical industry to flourish substantially due to its waivers and flexibilities – be it through meeting the local demand for medicines without having to import, or through local drug manufacturers being able to export drugs, even with expired patents, or through affordable access to essential medicines for families in low-income brackets. Now, with the LDC graduation – without an extension of the agreement for graduated LDCs like Bangladesh till the end of the transition period – the industry is bound to face huge setbacks with patent and licensing issues, while vulnerable families are doomed to an irrecoverable welfare loss due to the consequential price hike of medicines.

And this is just one glaring example among many others. Almost all sectors have gone mouldy due to inefficiency, corruption, or the culture of impunity. This serpentine web of issues needs to be addressed urgently, with a concerted effort through strong structural reforms and proactive policy instruments; and yet, all we seem to care about is this totalitarian growth. The growth is contested by eminent economists, not just as a concept, but also based on how it is measured and does not align with “correlates and other proxy indicators.” Such gross discrepancies have created the need for an autonomous independent body that would collect and comprise national data, free from any manipulation, but let us not get carried away.

In 1968, US Senator Robert F Kennedy famously remarked that we consider “everything, in short, except that which makes life worthwhile,” while sharing his opinion on how we measure economic performance and how we mismeasure the quality of our lives. Moreover, in its essence, GDP does not take into account the prices we are having to pay for our strange fixation with growth; they are just externalities. The metric pretentiously makes a cosy place for itself in the list of sustainable development goals and joins the cause of “leaving no one behind.” Sadly, under the aegis of this very instrument, we are proceeding towards our graduation and designing the path beyond it, “leaving behind” countless vulnerable lives to grapple with a new set of reality, thanks to our higher economic status.



VISUAL: TEENI AND TUNI

percent of Bangladesh's share of exports utilise LDC-specific benefits, which will be gradually removed after graduation. We are also set to have our exports – both in dollars and in percentage – decline by 14 percent, with our garment exports levied with the highest increase in tariffs. So, instead of cashing in on cheap labour for maximising this disproportionate growth, the focus could have been shifted to mobilising our domestic resources for creating a more conducive environment for higher private and foreign investments, for capacity enhancement of our labour, and for exportable product diversification. That would have not only improved the livelihoods of our labour force, but also allowed us to find our footing in the competitive global market.

and complacency? A growing informal economy? Rigid policies that allow tax evasion? We cannot – or dare not – say for sure. What we can understand, however, is that such staggering levels of tax revenue directly translate to extremely poor levels of public expenditure meant for improving social welfare. It translates to the low preparedness of our education system that fails to equip young people with the skills necessary for today, let alone for after the graduation, or a social safety net that amounts to peanuts against the peaking inflation, or the negligence towards the destruction of our forests and rivers, or the absence of universal healthcare.

The health sector, especially, is looking at an imminent crisis with the

Disney is destroying independent cinema



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RACIST crows, cotton plantations, non-consensual kissing, whitewashed main characters. These are all things that Disney has featured in some of their movies and theme parks in the past, and I am certain there are many more problematic characters, themes or elements in Disney's catalogue that we haven't noticed just yet.

Disney has revamped their image since, and is now obsessed with maintaining a squeaky clean, family-friendly image to appeal to as many people as possible. However, much like any other corporate entity, Disney is focused solely on one thing, and that is profits.

One of the avenues they have been using to generate these profits is Disney+, their own streaming platform. Now, Disney has a pretty rich catalogue of content spanning over almost a century. Unfortunately, it has decided that no amount of content can be enough, and that the only way to be the undisputed king of streaming platforms is by having a catalogue that is as close to endless as possible.

As a result, Disney is producing shows and films left and right. It almost feels like every other week another new Disney spin-off show or side character movie is making its way to our screens.

This plan, however, seems to have been in the works for a long time, even before streaming platforms had even become a thing. Disney spent a large part of the last 20 years acquiring other companies, whose intellectual property (IP) they could use to bring an even larger audience into Disney's core consumer base. In 2006, Disney acquired Pixar – one of their biggest rivals in the animation industry – and followed it up by acquiring Marvel Entertainment, Lucasfilm and 21st Century Fox in 2009, 2012 and 2019,

respectively.

Disney's end goal is to mass-produce content that will appeal to as many people as possible. To do that, they have created a formula for their films and TV shows, which primarily focuses on giving viewers a form of instant gratification. When you watch a Marvel movie, or one of the new *Star Wars*, you notice how the movies are scripted from start to finish similar to how a rollercoaster ride is. It puts you through stages of anticipation and relief over and over, while building to the finale which – spoiler alert! – is usually meant to make you leave the theatres ecstatic or excited.

When Martin Scorsese said that Marvel movies aren't cinema, and that they better represent theme parks, he wasn't wrong. Disney's movies are built to be light-hearted and enjoyable, with the occasional deviation to serious and dramatic when they need to remind audiences that they aren't just silly movies.

However, the consequence of watching films that constantly let us experience instant gratification is that we no longer want to wait for things. I've heard many people complain about the length of independent movies, or that they aren't as fun of a theatre experience as something Marvel has to offer. After all, you really don't need to be heavily invested in a Disney, Marvel or *Star Wars* movie.

While I'm not saying that Scorsese's view on cinema is the only way to think about films, I do think he is making an important point. Possibly the biggest problem with Disney's approach is the lack of risks involved. Disney loves to play it safe, and their focus is always on making a movie that's mass appealing. The type of movies Scorsese would classify as “cinema” – like the works of Alfred Hitchcock, Christopher Nolan, Stanley Kubrick, Steven Spielberg, etc – were ones that took risks on the quest to tell unique and interesting stories.

However, Disney does not really need to do that when their movies can fill up theatres every other day. And this is yet another problem that Disney is causing.

Let's do a little experiment of our own. Think about the last time the theatre in

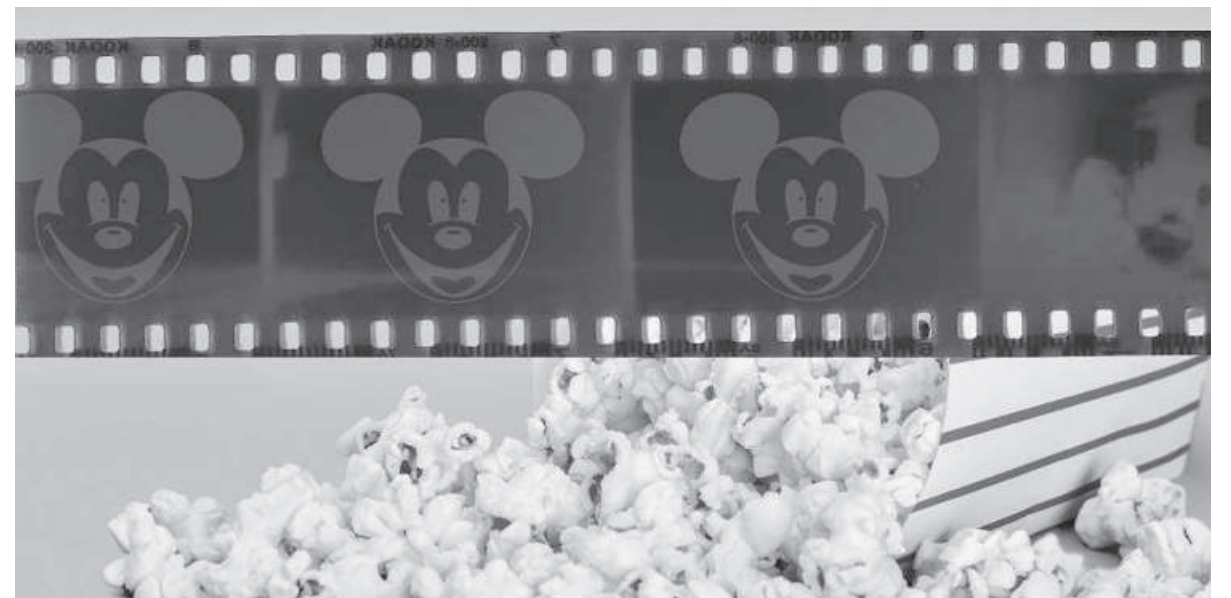
your town ran something that wasn't a superhero film. As I'm writing this, Star Cineplex's website lists *Doctor Strange: In the Multiverse of Madness* and *Jurassic World Dominion* as the movies that are currently available. The movies that are coming soon include *Thor: Love and Thunder*, *Black Adam*, *DC League of Super-Pets*, *Minions*, and *Elvis*.

All of this makes sense, of course. Why would theatres screen films that can't match the ticket sales of Disney

is all there is to it.

As Disney continues to dominate the box office, this theme of mass-produced superhero movies will continue to persist. Production companies will see this pattern for themselves, and shift funding from independent films to superhero movies. After all, why would anyone sink money into projects that cannot be box office hits or pop culture phenomena, the likes of which Disney makes?

This is where we, as consumers of



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productions? And as theatres only bring Disney films, we continue to watch them and our consumption patterns continue to adhere to the Disney model, thereby repeating the cycle over and over again.

In making these movies that have very little heart and soul, and are instead an endless sequence of prequels, sequels and spin-offs – that build to one big movie every three or four years, before starting all over again – Disney has created a financially successful model that appeals to not only production houses, but also to theatres. And for those of you who have read so far, I'm sorry to bring you to yet another problem, the summary of which is “capitalism is bad,” but sometimes that

content, have to make a tough decision. While I completely understand why so many people love what Disney has been creating, particularly with Marvel, are we really going to stand there and let independent cinema die?

I am not asking for us to become connoisseurs of movies, who are snobs to anyone who doesn't have Hitchcock's entire filmography memorised by heart. All I am saying is that we need to take a long hard look at exactly where the movie industry is going, every time we fill up a theatre or subscribe to Disney+ to watch yet another generic, four-act, two-hour film that is filled with one-liner jokes and cool visual effects.