



A village road in Barkal in Chandanaish Upazila in Chattogram.

PHOTO: HASAN Z RAHM

Rural Bangladesh needs next-generation village roads



THE GRUDGING URBANIST
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THE road network of rural Bangladesh offers fascinating insights into the state of rural economy and social life. I recently had a very helpful experience of visiting several villages in the Jashore-Kushtia region and seeing the roads that connect them to what have been dubbed “growth centres,” zila, upazila, and union headquarters, as well as national and regional highways.

Bangladesh’s total road network covers nearly 3,80,000 km, of which a whopping 94 percent are rural roads. Out of the country’s 87,223 villages, more than 70,000 villages are considered well connected through a web of rural roads. According to a 2018 survey, the Rural Access Indicator (RAI)—the percentage of the rural populace living within 2 km of all-weather roads—was estimated at 83.5 percent. Nobody would dispute that rural connectivity is central to not only rural advancement but also the nation’s progressive agenda. The quality and improvement of rural roads determine the quality of economic and social life of over 60 percent of the country’s total population that reside in rural areas.

My observation during the recent trip was that the first-generation of rural roads played a crucial role in what I would like to call Rural Transformation 1.0 in Bangladesh during the decades of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. But those roads have become inadequate during what could be called Rural Transformation 2.0, taking place between 2000 and 2020, during which economic, social, and cultural lives in rural Bangladesh changed dramatically due to a diverse range of catalysts.

I would like to argue that, for the next generation of rural transformation, we need the next generation of “smart” rural roads to be in sync with the imagination of and strategy for an equitable Bangladesh built on the twin foundations of social justice and environmental adaptability. Social justice in road construction includes road safety for all users, including rural pedestrians, bicyclists, and livestock. Environmental adaptability in this case implies that rural roads should be able to withstand the vagaries of climate change, flooding, disasters, and seasonal impacts.

But, first, let us explore a brief history of rural roads in Bangladesh. The early 1960s rural development programmes – broadly known as the “Comilla Model” – emphasised the construction of rural roads as part of a modernisation philosophy. The Comilla Model

was conceived by the Government during the Pakistan-era “decade of development” (1958-1968) as a policy tool for providing support for increased agricultural productivity. Then, in 1984, the Government of Bangladesh initiated a strategy for Rural Development Projects seeking to improve the quality of life in rural areas.

The first of these projects was building physical infrastructures including roads, storage, and markets. Established in 1992, the Local Government Engineering Department (LGED), under the Local Government Division of the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Co-operatives, was responsible for the construction and maintenance of the upazila roads, union roads, and village roads. The legendary role of Engineer Quamrul Islam Siddique (a BUET alumnus) in establishing LGED and spearheading the construction of rural roads during the 1990s has become an essential narrative of Bangladesh’s development trajectory.

Later, in 1996, the Government of Bangladesh and the World Bank developed the Bangladesh Rural Infrastructure Strategy Study, reemphasising the integration of zila, upazila, and union headquarters and growth centres into a comprehensive rural communication network. Well-connected villages began to yield an expanding rural economy, comprising both farm and non-farm activities.

Yet, the prevailing idea of rural roads fell short of a sustainable (and socially just) notion of infrastructure that would both be sympathetic to the traditional ways of rural life and meet the needs of rural modernisation. For example, LGED’s overarching consideration for rural roads has been motorised mobility, while the traditional practice of the walking peasant, fisherman, and other village entrepreneurs has been ignored. Even today, inter-village and intra-village movements in Bangladesh occur predominantly by walking and, more recently, biking. When a leguna or a truck passes by on the village road, the pedestrian villager must stop and step aside precariously since there is almost no space between the road and the adjacent agricultural fields three or four feet below.

During Rural Transformation 2.0, the rural pedestrian and other non-motorised locomotion continued to be ignored in road

construction and improvement. The 2004 Gazette of the Government did not determine the width of village roads. The 2010 Gazette set it at 10 feet at a 5 percent increased cost. Under the Seventh Five Year Plan (7FYP, 2016-2020), LGED’s exclusive focus on motorised mobility, road width, and improvement failed to acknowledge how pedestrian villagers traditionally move around in their daily lives and their road safety.

The strategic priorities for the rural road network in the Eighth Five Year Plan (8FYP, 2020-2025) state: “LGED will upgrade and maintain the rural road network in the master plan. The road network will be developed in a way to withstand floods and disasters, which will connect the growth centre/markets, villages and upazila roads. The upazila road network will connect with the economic zones, special economic zones, export processing zones, industries, land ports, river ports, seaports, and railway stations.” Here, motorised mobility and economic connectivity take precedence over rural liveability. Pedestrian road safety is overlooked, giving rise to a policy question on social inclusivity. While inter-village and intra-village connectivity has been emphasised, the quality of movement on village roads remains uncertain.

What I noticed during my visit to villages in the Jashore-Kushtia region, Narsingdi district, and Anwara Upazila in southern Chattogram, was a wide range of motorised vehicles plying on village roads. From bhothoti and nosimon to private cars and construction trucks whiz by at an ever-increasing frequency, a stark contrast to our entrenched mental image of the tranquil Bengal village.

I saw school children walking inches away from speeding poultry-feed trucks. The sight of school children walking to their schools in groups is one of the most uplifting scenes in rural areas. But how concerned are we about their safety on village roads? Understanding the new reality of rural Bangladesh must be freed from a singular focus on economic progress. The humanistic rurality of *Pather Panchali* does not exist anymore. There is a New Rural, inspiring, complex, and contradictory all at the same time. Researching the New Rural would require a multidisciplinary approach.

While vehicular movement at a higher frequency certainly means a burgeoning rural economy, village roads also reveal that our rural road master planning, unfortunately, replicates the same lack of concern for pedestrian safety that plagues our city streets. The magnitude of fatal and non-fatal road traffic injuries (RTI) among the country’s rural communities has been on a sharp rise. Rural Bangladesh needs the next generation of streets that value the safety and wellbeing of all those who use rural roads, while facilitating efficient connectivity between different administrative headquarters and growth centres.

Ailing Democracy: Rx Intensive Care



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MANZOOR AHMED

IN about two months, on the second Tuesday of November, as is the tradition, mid-term national elections in the United States will be held – mid-term because the current Presidential term will run up to January 20, 2025. The November poll will be observed intently across the globe because it will determine if the two houses of the US Congress – as well as all 50 state legislatures, at least 36 state governorships, and other important state level offices – will be controlled by President Joe Biden’s Democratic Party or the Republican Party, in which former President Donald Trump wields great influence. The contrasting stance and posture of two dominant parties in the US have global consequences for international economy, trade, security, super-power relationships, climate change issues and the future of democracy.

The conventional wisdom is that, in the mid-term polls, the incumbent president’s party is at a disadvantage. The expectation is that the current razor-thin margin for the Democrats in the Senate and a stronger majority in the House would be lost to the Republicans. But a recent Supreme Court Ruling issued by Trump-appointed conservative Justices that seriously limits abortion rights established half-century ago in 1973 has energised opposition to the

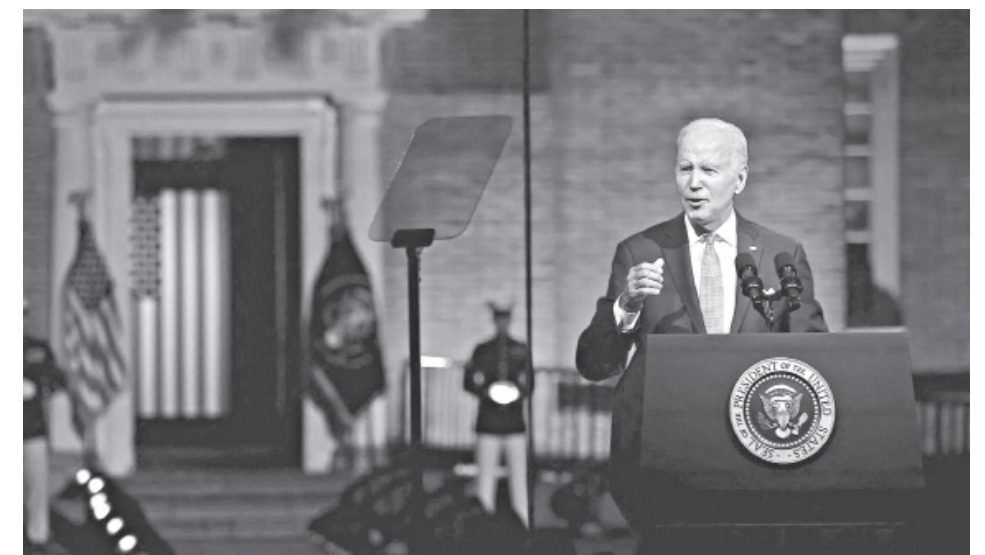
threat to democracy in the US. MAGA stands for Make America Great Again, the jingoist rallying cry of Trump and his followers.

“I believe America is at an inflection point,” Biden said, “One of those moments that determine the shape of everything that’s to come after. And now America must choose to move forward or to move backwards.” If the President’s message reaches a large enough number of citizens and they turn up at the November polls, there may be a push back on the assault on democracy and democratic institutions in the country.

I wrote earlier on July 4, on the independence anniversary of the US, about democracy being on life support around the world – in the US, South Asia, and Bangladesh. To stick to the metaphor, we may say that intensive care for democracy has to continue.

Biden’s “inflection point” applies to Bangladesh, too, as the preparation and strategising by the ruling party and the opposition begin for the 12th parliamentary election in about 16 months.

I had written that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, thinking about her legacy for the next generation, can consider four steps, including nominating candidates for their honesty, competence, popularity and record of public service, rather than the money and muscle power; shunning the use of *mastaans*, muscle power, intimidation and violence by the ruling party and its candidates; supporting the Election Commission to conduct a free and fair election; and strongly discouraging factional, communal, sectarian, and religious divisions for political gains and reclaiming the liberation ideals of justice, inclusion and human dignity for all. These steps would lead to Bangladesh being a model of liberal democracy in the region and also secure election victory for the



US President Biden delivers remarks at Independence National Historical Park, Philadelphia, US, September 1, 2022.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Republican Party.

The revelations of the Congressional enquiry of January 6, 2020 invasion of the Capitol building by protestors and Trump’s role in it as the sitting president brought home again to many non-partisan citizens the threat to democracy that Trump supporters posed. They persist in justifying the insurrectionists’ cause of over-turning the 2020 presidential election. The FBI raid in August on Trump’s Mar-a-Lago ocean-front resort in Palm Beach, Florida to retrieve hundreds of secret and sensitive state documents that Trump squirreled away in the basement added to the sordid drama.

Democrats, therefore, have picked up some momentum this election cycle. Opinion polls suggest that the possibility of Democrats holding on to their narrow majority in the two houses of Congress and improving their position in the states cannot be ruled out.

President Biden, on September 1, delivered an unusual prime-time nationally televised speech from the steps of the Independence Hall in Philadelphia (where the debate on framing the American Constitution was held two and a half centuries ago). He declared that MAGA Republican extremism and its influence throughout the country were a

ruling party. But it has to prove its bona fides through action, not just words.

The signs do not look promising. PM Hasina at the BCL event on August 31 complained about the media blowing out of proportion any infraction of the student wing of the ruling party. It is reported that BCL is set to establish its presence in private universities, so far protected from partisan politics. This would be a recipe for disaster, further aggravating the already looming crisis in higher education in the country.

The Election Commission has not shown any indication so far of taking a firm stance against potential transgressions of fair election practices. One example is its equivocal position on the use of electronic voting machines (EVMs) without a paper trail, thus subjecting it to undetected manipulation.

Police and law-enforcing agencies have continued suppressing opposition gatherings and protests, leading to injuries and fatalities, despite government undertaking to the contrary.

We must not miss the opportunity to halt the slide down the slippery slope of oligopoly and authoritarianism before it is too late. Nurturing democracy in good faith is the only way to secure a future for the nation to be marked by genuine progress and peace.

/Opinion
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12 Ship of 1492
13 Due to
15 Tear
16 Common conjunction
17 Metal source
18 Arid expanse
20 Addition column
21 Arm's length
22 Nuisance
23 Message from the boss
25 Orpheus played one
28 Of the kidneys
31 Track shape

32 Without a contract
34 Procured
35 Write hastily
36 “— pig’s eye!”
37 Superficially to
40 Dark
41 Moolah
42 Abounds
43 Hive group

DOWN
1 Fencing need
2 More minuscule
3 Go by
4 Chest muscle, for short
5 Tater
6 Take the title

7 Chant
8 Boutiques
9 Most secure
11 Uncommon
14 Spot for shingles
19 Canvas holder
20 Some tourneys
24 Brain-based
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