

People shouldn't pay for govt ineptitude

Project delays a direct result of irresponsible governance

We are exhausted from seeing one government project after another get delayed and their costs increase astronomically, draining more and more of the taxpayers' resources in the process. This time, it is the Dhaka-Tongi-Joydebpur railway expansion project, which is set to take 15 years to complete instead of the original three, with its cost now expected to rise fourfold from what was originally promised. It won't be easy to find another country in the world where the government is *this* inefficient!

The Dhaka-Tongi-Joydebpur railway expansion project is a glaring example of how poor planning, bad decisions, lack of coordination, and an astounding extent of moral bankruptcy – which allows government workers to fail so miserably in their duty without a shed of remorse – among different government agencies result in a huge waste of public money. We are stunned at how this government has regularised the lack of accountability when it comes to project completion, which has normalised such delays and wastage.

As has become the norm, different government agencies and project managers involved with the project have come out with a list of excuses for their failures. Among them is the fact that the Bangladesh Railway (BR) apparently took up the project without conducting any feasibility study. Why would the BR take up the project in the first place if they didn't conduct such a study, and why would it be passed? Is it because those who green-light such projects and hand over their contracts have become so corrupt that they have no regard for how the taxpayers' hard-earned money is utilised? What other explanation could there be?

Another reason given for the cost escalation is the strong dollar. But the dollar has only risen in value against the taka in the past year. The project was supposed to be completed in 2015 – seven years earlier. Why should the taxpayers have to pay for the government's failure to complete it on time? Why is it that it is always the public who have to pay for the government's mistakes, incompetence or corruptness? Why aren't the authorities responsible for such mistakes, incompetence, and corruption ever held to account? Why aren't they ever made to pay?

If those responsible for implementing the projects on time and within the original cost estimates are never held to account, things will never change. And if those at the top of the government are incapable of determining which projects to green-light or how to hold project managers to account, why do they still cling so hard onto their posts? We demand a change in this utterly reckless behaviour and irresponsible governance.

Don't forget about the terminally ill

Korail PCAs give us a crucial lesson in compassion

It is heartwarming to learn how, as this daily has recently reported, a group of palliative care assistants (PCA) has been working to care for at least 304 patients (including 23 children) in Dhaka's Korail slum since 2019. The group currently consists of eight PCAs, three nurses, and a single doctor, and they work for Momotamoy Korail (or Compassionate Korail), a community palliative care centre which is run by the Palliative Care Society of Bangladesh (PCSB). What is most heartening is the fact that the PCAs themselves are residents of Korail, who took up this gutsy profession after training at the BSMMU for six months post their SSC completion.

The patients that these PCAs care for are suffering from debilitating diseases. In most cases, not only are they themselves unable to take care of themselves, as they are bedridden with terminal illnesses, but their families also struggle to care for them properly – either due to financial incapacities or a lack of willingness. In one case cited in our report, family members of a cancer patient would provide food to him from the door of his room, with the help of a stick, as they could not bear the odour emanating from his infections. But it was the PCAs of Momotamoy Korail who stepped forward to assist him and give him his required medicines. Besides providing 24/7 tele-consultation to their palliative patients, the PCAs also provide outpatient services to the slum's residents once a week. The name for the group is backed by the extent of their services, as they even provide bereavement support to the families of deceased patients.

In our fast-paced world, where even hospitals lack the required tools, professionals, and passion to properly care for terminally ill patients, such a community-oriented public health approach to palliative care is refreshing, to say the least. But it is equally saddening how the work of Momotamoy Korail is an outlier, despite there being an abundance of patients across the country who require such services. Dr Nezamuddin Ahmed, former chairperson of the Palliative Medicine Department at BSMMU and adviser to the PCSB, told this newspaper how they had been struggling to fund the initiative and how it would be best to hand its responsibility over to the government. We strongly endorse this suggestion.

While we commend such citizen initiatives as Momotamoy Korail, we urge the government to use them as opportunities to learn from and build on, to create a system that is more caring towards the terminally ill patients of all ages. The government must also work to remedy the poor state of elderly care in the country, including a lack of allowances, care homes, and a comprehensive pension scheme that could cover the high expenses of elderly care. The PCAs working in Korail slum have shown us how far compassion goes in improving the last stage of life for citizens who once thrived. Let us implement their example on a national level.

Uni ranking announcement and the morning after



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

Dr Shamsad Mortuza is a professor of English at Dhaka University.

SHAMSAD MORTUZA

The oldest private university in Bangladesh is giving its oldest public university a run for its money. They are the only two educational institutions to be featured in the top 800 of a world ranking estimated by Times Higher Education (THE). To see these local universities in the same global category provokes more questions than answers.

These two universities – one in Dhaka North, the other in Dhaka South – are separated by thick traffic worth two-three hours on the road and a culture of mutual dismissiveness. Whether the ranking agency will thaw the frozen relationship is a matter to be seen. The achievement of North South University (NSU) cannot be brushed aside as it devised and pursued a strategic plan to achieve its status in the elite club of universities. Three other Bangladeshi universities, all technical in orientation – Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (Buet), Bangladesh Agricultural University (BAU), and Khulna University of Engineering and Technology (Kuet) – have been featured in the 1200-1500 range. The overall performance is dismal. It begs the question: why are the other leading public universities and notable private universities not there?

Established in 1921, Dhaka University (DU) has a clear advantage in the five areas in which THE measures the performance of a university: teaching, research, citations, international outlook, and industry income. With its government funding, DU caters to 38,172 students and has a fleet of 2,200 teachers. Conversely, NSU, established in 1992, has 20,596 students with a teaching team of 386 full-time and 362 part-time teachers. As per the UGC's 2019 record, DU spent Tk 52.02 crore in research and had 472 publications, while NSU spent Tk 65.32 crore in research and claimed 1,135 publications.

It needs to be mentioned that a university needs to have 300 indexed publications a year for five consecutive years to be considered for THE ranking. NSU has persistently nurtured a research culture to be at par with a university that is 70 years older than it. The presence of three technical universities in the ranking suggests that they have the required



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VISUAL: STAR

number of publications, which many other universities lack.

It is refreshing to see that DU is feeling the pressure to excel. Recently, it initiated an annual performance goal for each academic department and liberalised its international outlook. According to THE, 7.5 percent marks are given for international outlook based on the proportion of international students, international staff and international collaboration. This is an area in which private universities have greater flexibility. In terms of teaching, which makes up for 30 percent of the ranking scale, the subcategories are reputation survey, staff-to-student ratio, doctorate to bachelors ratio, doctorate awarded to academic staff, and institutional income.

Given the government's policy of not allowing private universities to award doctorate degrees, private universities are missing out on the learning environment category. The same goes for industry income, amounting to 2.5 percent of THE ranking metrics, in which private universities are handicapped as they are not allowed to run for-profit institutes. But a lot depends on the reputation survey (15 percent in

University, is almost equal. However, there persist some misconceptions about private universities as they are subjected to some additional regulatory monitoring that handicaps their growth.

The introduction of private universities has stopped many students from going abroad as they could get quality education within the country and save money because of the credit-transfer scheme. In many cases, the curricula of public universities are not updated. Most of our programmes are not accredited. The government has initiated the Bangladesh Accreditation Council, which is likely to address the issue and bring the public and private universities under the same measurement scale.

For the tertiary sector to grow, there has to be a common and consistent policy. Some older universities behave as if they are above any scrutiny. Their claim to vaunted prestige is now being rightfully challenged and claimed by newer universities. It is about time these divisions were eschewed as the teachers who teach and the students who learn are all citizens of this country. They all deserve fair and equal treatment. For instance, UGC

system, they can easily attract both local and international students in PhD programmes. Of course, UGC can apply strict regulatory criteria for awarding the degree.

In absence of such open-mindedness, we are seeing many of our local students going abroad. Malaysia has become the second largest student destination for Bangladeshi students, which used to be a source country in the 1980s. According to the Bangladesh Bank, in the first four months of this year, USD 343.9 million were sent abroad to Bangladeshi students. Through the official channel, USD 1.32 billion (Tk 12,144 crore) was sent abroad for outbound student mobility. The actual figures would be higher as there is no record of the illegal channels. The number of outbound students has increased by 129 percent in the last six years.

The success of DU and NSU shows that with the right attitude, we can create world-class universities to cater to our local needs and retain foreign currencies from being siphoned out. But to benefit from the system, we need a radical change in the mindset of the policymakers and the government.

Ask your party to commit to RTI

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SHAMSUL BARI and RUHI NAZ

Bangladesh is in the throes of election fever, even though the next general elections are more than a year away. There is fear that the situation may become more tense and heated than the previous two elections. One way to cool down and professionalise the atmosphere would be to make the elections more issue-based. They should be contests in which political parties explain their respective positions on critical national issues to the voting public. One such issue is governance and the commitment of those seeking to govern the country.

Two laws form the basis for citizens to affect governance. First, the election laws which allow citizens once every five years to elect people to power, whom they trust to ensure better governance. Secondly, the Right to Information (RTI) Act, which empowers citizens to monitor the work of all public offices entrusted with day-to-day governance and ensure that they do so lawfully. We believe both are equally important. The RTI law complements election laws by providing a more permanent basis for citizens to intervene with the government on matters of governance. The forthcoming elections provide an opportunity to emphasise this aspect of RTI.

To begin with, RTI enthusiasts and citizen groups should demand that political parties declare their position

on the subject.

The goal should be to engage the political parties in discussions regarding the revolutionary objectives of the law and the role they must play – should they form the next government. Are they committed to help the law reach its full potential without any hindrance? Will they ensure that public officials will respect the law and not restrict its application or abuse its provisions to frustrate its objectives?

The elections provide us an opportunity to look back over the years since the RTI Act was enacted in 2009, identify issues that slow progress and the measures required to correct them. This is a young law: 13 years is not a very long time for a law of such a nature to strike deep roots anywhere in the world. This law's objectives go against the grain of traditional governance practices employed globally. But societies must move towards openness; unless we pay attention to the challenges and learn to overcome them, progress will prove elusive.

Among all laws of the land, RTI is uniquely a people's law and only people can make it work. Governments have little or no incentive to do so since the ideal of the law is to bring them under people's control. There is a need to continually educate the public about the objectives of the law and help them articulate their demands to the political parties to commit themselves to its implementation.

The prevailing culture of governance in most countries is to foster secrecy as opposed to transparency. The general assumption is that ordinary citizens not only have no business in the affairs of the state, but those wanting to enquire into

them must have illegitimate motives. In fact, this has been the experience of many in Bangladesh, leading them to abandon their RTI pursuits. Political parties must be asked to clearly state their positions to the public in this regard.

When Bangladesh adopted the law, the topic was not fully debated. The elections offer an opportunity to air out these concerns and objectives in public discourse.

The goal should be to engage the political parties in discussions regarding the revolutionary objectives of the law and the role they must play – should they form the next government. Are they committed to help the law reach its full potential without any hindrance?

As in many other countries, the RTI experience in Bangladesh has revealed many procedural difficulties citizens face to obtain information from public authorities. Many public officials use the law and its procedures to avoid responsibilities and to discourage and deny information requests from citizens. They fail to recognise that the law encourages citizens to seek information from public offices not for personal needs only, but also to advance public good.

Let's ask those seeking to form

the next government to do their best to remove all impediments to the application of the RTI law and encourage public officials to respect its objectives. This should include keeping to the timelines foreseen in the law and not denying information requests without explanation.

Those standing for elections should also tell us whether they would be ready to provide the necessary support to the Information Commission, which is entrusted with the job of steering the law and resolving disputes between seekers and providers of information. Of particular importance would be to increase their capacity not only to take proper decisions, but also to articulate them judiciously to help the development of proper jurisprudence on the subject. Let's ask those we are voting for if they will commit to following the selection process for commissioners, and ensure that they have legal expertise and act with objectivity and neutrality.

Let's also remind election candidates that successfully implementing RTI is an essential element of Goal 16 of the SDGs, to which Bangladesh has committed itself fully. So far, there is little to show that we are doing well in that regard.

Finally, political parties must bear in mind that their commitment to better governance and a more effective RTI regime in the country would depend a great deal upon their ability to ensure rule of law, accountability, civil liberties, and political rights for the citizens. Let the next general elections focus more on these issues and help the nation tread the democratic path more confidently.