

Safe roads before smart cities

Time to put people’s safety at the heart of policymaking

The manner in which the human toll of road crashes has been rising in Bangladesh is anything but normal. We end each year with the ignominy of having surpassed last year’s records in road crashes and casualties, only to begin another year with fresh horrors. This time, too, has been no exception. As an estimate released by the Road Safety Foundation shows, 2022 was one of the deadliest years on record for the transport sector, with its numbers of crashes and deaths registering an increase of 27.14 percent and 22.74 percent over corresponding figures in the previous year.

The organisation has also released a number of figures that can help us understand the extent of the danger that passengers, and the nation as a whole, face. It said that 81.36 percent of the 7,713 road crash victims counted last year were aged between 18 and 65 years – the most productive segment of the population – while students accounted for 16 percent of those who died. In the end, the loss to the workforce suffered through these tragedies has amounted to a staggering Tk 23,460 crore. The figure, we are told, would be more than 1.5 percent of the country’s GDP if property damages are also taken into consideration.

Another important revelation has been about how Dhaka division – which hosts the capital of the country – emerged as the most unsafe among all divisions. Dhaka has seen the highest number of both accidents and fatalities, with 2,044 individuals dying in 1,841 crashes. The second highest death toll was recorded in Chattogram.

All these figures have significant socioeconomic implications for the country. It goes without saying that the road and transport authorities have totally failed to perform their responsibilities, despite frequent appeals from citizens to ensure the safety of our roads and highways. The situation makes a mockery of the promises made by the government in 2018 before enacting the Road Transport Act – which, by the way, still remains largely unimplemented – as well as the vision of a Smart Bangladesh that the ruling party has recently set for us. Clearly, at the moment, citizens need safe roads more than a smart country or smart cities, whatever that means.

The spectacular lack of progress in the transport sector betrays a spectacular lack of concern at the policymaking level, which is really disturbing. Recently, the government, over four years after passing the act, has finally formulated its rules which, among other provisions, have detailed the compensation that victims of road crashes can expect to receive. This was an important move, if long overdue. But significant uncertainties still remain about the act itself. For this act and its rules to ever serve the public and reduce their sufferings on the roads, the authorities must ensure they are properly, regularly and evenly enforced.

We urge the higher authorities to take meaningful action to fix the transport sector, but also hold to account those who have consistently failed to deliver results. Given how bad the situation has been of late, they must put people’s safety at the heart of policymaking.

Don’t clip the wings of investigators

ACC empowering secretaries to transfer and promote investigation officers is illogical

We are shocked to learn that the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) has decided to hand absolute power to its secretaries to deal with the investigation officers. The ACC published an order in this regard on December 18, according to which the secretaries have been given the authority to transfer and promote its deputy directors and assistant directors, who are mainly involved in enquiry and investigation related tasks. Previously, such decisions were taken by the commission’s permanent members, but now it will be done by bureaucrats who remain attached to it for only a fixed period.

The decision has naturally raised questions about the anti-graft body’s independence and autonomy. The Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB), for example, has said that the move will make the ACC a “toothless tiger” and transform it into a government organisation. TIB, therefore, asked the commission to withdraw the decision. We also think withdrawing the decision is the right thing to do as it will make the institution more ineffective in curbing corruption and irregularities, which have been plaguing our public institutions.

If we look into the records of the ACC over the past one decade, it will become clear that it has largely failed to live up to its mandate. The organisation has often failed to complete the corruption investigations that it has initiated. A TIB report in 2016 found that only 37 percent of those charged by the ACC were convicted. In 2017, a TIB report again revealed that it had failed to dispose of about three-quarters of the complaints filed against 12 public service-oriented institutions. There is also the example of ACC’s incompetence in its investigations into the Basic Bank loan scam. Even after over seven years, it has failed to complete the investigations or even submit charge sheets in any of the 56 cases filed in this connection.

Needless to say, public confidence in the ACC was again dented when, last year, it sacked Sharif Uddin, one of its assistant directors who reportedly investigated graft allegations against some land acquisition syndicates. Reportedly, the decision to sack him was not taken following proper procedures. It is also evident from the way the ACC has acted over the past decade that it is not free of political influence. It often failed to act neutrally when it came to dealing with corruption and money laundering.

The ACC already lacks the power to initiate investigating corruption charges against public servants. And now this fresh move – giving executive power to the secretaries to transfer and promote investigators – will only curtail its power further, and definitely discourage officials to investigate allegations against the powerful people. Overall, the decision will be a barrier to ACC’s independence and impartiality. We, therefore, urge it to reconsider the decision for its own sake and that of the public.

Attacks on the Mro damage the dignity of Bangladesh



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SANJEEB DRONG

One of the reasons that make Bangladesh such a beautiful and diverse nation is the people from all different ethnicities who live here. In a cultural affairs ministry gazette published on March 23, 2019, the government said that there are people from 50 different ethnicities living in Bangladesh.

The culture, development, democracy and humanity of a country are measured by how its religious, ethnic and other minorities fare. However, in the beginning of the new year, on January 2, we sadly witnessed an attack on the Mro community in Bandarban’s Lama. Their houses were burned and vandalised, and its inhabitants were assaulted. This happened last year too, but there was no redress.

A repeated complaint is that the land that the Mro people live on is apparently not theirs. We know that if one owns the land, they have to have the title to it. However, Indigenous people around the world do not have such titles because they have been living in these lands, forests and hills for generations. They have what is called customary rights. These customary or ancestral rights to land are recognised by international law. The Bangladesh government, too, ratified the ILO Convention on Indigenous and Tribal Populations in 1972. This means that the Indigenous people living on our lands, hills and forests have ancestral rights to the land they live on too, and their rights are recognised.

The Mro people were attacked in April last year, and their crops on the 400-acre land were burnt down. Their main water source was also poisoned, and their banana orchard was cut down. Despite meetings with the administration about this, the Indigenous people’s rights were disregarded, and the land was given out on lease to some influential quarters. If the land rights of the Indigenous community were properly recognised, then this lease would be illegal.

The UN adopted the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) in 2007. Before that, in 1992, it adopted the Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic



Indigenous communities have continued to carry out protests for their land rights, such as the one pictured here, organised on March 2, 2021.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

Minorities. Just like any minority in any other country of the world, the Mro people and other Indigenous groups of Bangladesh are minorities who these declarations apply to. And securing their rights and upholding their dignity is the responsibility of the state.

The state must prove that it supports its oppressed people and will act against the people who attack minorities. That is the hallmark of a developed and civilised nation. However, we are sadly continuing to witness human rights violations of Indigenous peoples around the world, and in Bangladesh too.

Dr Abul Barkat has a book titled “Political Economy of Unpeopling of Indigenous Peoples”, in which he shows that Bangladesh is gradually losing its minority population. Some are going abroad, and some are getting displaced, including Indigenous

and ensure their rights to their land. There must be a functional land commission that will effectively work to resolve these land issues. And the promise of establishing a minority commission must be fulfilled very soon.

In any case, a piece of good news for the Mros is that representatives of the National Human Rights Commission have gone to Lama and listened to the community’s grievances. This gives us hope that a crucial dialogue could take place at the higher echelons of the government, and concrete policies and steps will then be taken to solve the land crisis of the Mro people. The state must also ensure exemplary punishment for those who have repeatedly attacked the Mro people. That is the only way the cultural and ethnic diversity of our nation can be protected.

We should always consider our

other countries. And there should be a government order saying that until the land crisis has been solved, nobody can disturb Indigenous people on their ancestral land. No for-profit company or individual, or even the government, should be able to undertake projects on their land without discussions with them first.

When incidents like the most recent attack take place, and the stories and pictures of the attack come out in the media, the dignity of our state is damaged. It brings us shame as a nation. The government must be proactive in standing beside Indigenous communities in these cases, even if they do not come forward to file a case for whatever reason. My hope for the new year is that this culture will be nourished in the country.

Transcribed and translated by Anupam Debashis Roy.

Should we be banning textile waste export?



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Bangladesh, the second world’s largest exporter of garments, needs to have a long conversation about recycling. Just recently, the Bangladesh Textile Millers Association (BTMA) requested that authorities ban the export of garment waste in order to preserve raw materials for native recyclers. It was claimed that capacity building efforts across Bangladesh are supporting companies as they look to accommodate greater streams of textile waste.

The BTMA is even calling for the withdrawal of VAT which, in some cases, makes importing recycled fibres cheaper than trade on the domestic market.

In theory, this sounds like a good idea, but it is not so straightforward. It would appear to make perfect sense for Bangladeshi garment-makers to better utilise waste rather than send it abroad. However, recyclers primarily use pure cotton waste and simply lack the capacity or technical know-how to process tricky fibre blends, non-woven items and other complex waste types.

Common Objective (CO), a UK-based global tech solution for sustainable fashion business, estimated that 62 percent of all fibres used in the fashion industry are made from a synthetic material – mainly polyester, but also nylon, acrylic, polypropylene and elastane. While cotton use stands at 24 percent, this will be blended and not 100 percent cotton. At the same time,

synthetic fibre consumption is said to be growing globally, at around 7.39 percent.

If we were to ban textile waste exports now, we would potentially see huge quantities of waste going to landfill, a situation that nobody wants. Better, for now, to send waste to countries that are better placed to process it.

This issue is not unique to Bangladesh. In fact, if one looks around the world at textile recycling, the most common textile waste being recycled are pure cotton items. White sheets from hospitals and hotels, for instance, are an excellent feedstock for recyclers.

It is something of a myth and slightly misleading that clothing is becoming part of the “circular economy” – at present anyway. At best, the vast majority of excess clothing heads to second hand markets, often in countries in Africa. Countries such as India and Pakistan are also way more advanced than Bangladesh in the mechanical recycling of textile fibres.

Nevertheless, we do need conversations around this. A few things need to be brought out into the open. Our ready garment industry generates huge quantities of pre-consumer textile waste each year. The sheer scale of this issue alone should give us pause for thought. How much of this precious resource is being reused or recycled? How much is being exported to other countries? How much of it is being

incinerated or landfilled? We need better data on these issues.

In fact, there is an opaqueness generally when it comes to textile waste. The informal sector of textile waste globally is a bit of a mystery, and Bangladesh is no exception. This is the issue which people do not like to talk about publicly.

There are several reasons why this needs to change. The first is regulation. It was recently reported that one of our major European markets was planning to map all of its used clothing and textile waste streams. Regulators there want to know precisely how much clothing is sold in the domestic market, and how much clothing sent to that country cannot be sold in shops.

All around the world, regulators are looking closely at these issues and this has implications for fashion brands, our customers. They are under pressure to lift the lid on their production levels and, who knows, that may soon include supply chains. How much waste is in their supply chain? How much excess inventory is there?

For regulatory reasons such as this, Bangladesh needs to get better at accounting for garment production. How many garment makers are there, how much waste are they producing, and what is happening with it all? There are valid reasons for having complete transparency on these issues.

The second reason we need to tackle this issue is, obviously, environmental. It pains me to learn that Bangladesh produces large quantities of pre-consumer textile waste. This suggests our industry is not as efficient as it could be, and surely leaves room for improvement. Moreover, it cannot be of benefit to the environment to have a sector that is producing so much excess, especially at a time of dwindling global resources (and not to mention

rising raw materials prices).

For instance, the fact there is ever growing strain on the production of cotton globally – drought wiped out more than a fifth of Pakistan’s cotton crop in 2022 – offers further evidence that we should be better managing and making use of raw materials inputs. Cotton, remember, is the main feedstock into Bangladesh’s garment industry.

The final point I want to raise is about skills, learning and technology. It is widely accepted within our industry that textile recycling is one of the foremost opportunities of our time. Every single major fashion brand has its own strategy on textile circularity, and there are numerous industry initiatives on this.

With this in mind, surely Bangladesh should put huge resources into supporting these efforts. By this I mean investment in technology and people. Are our universities and colleges training future industry entrants in textile recycling? If not, why not? What efforts are we making to capacity build in the area of chemical textile-textile recycling? This is where textiles are broken down into their original building block monomers for the production of new clothing. There are huge opportunities in this area.

Playing a leadership role in this area could also bring financial benefits. There is plenty of grant funding available within major global bodies at the moment, all with a focus on sustainability. As a developing country, Bangladesh would surely be a worthy recipient of such funding, especially if this were to support work to future-proof our main export market by making it a global leader in recycling.

We must grasp this nettle in 2023 before a competitor does.