

Who is to blame for unsafe roads?

Our policymakers' apathy is the real problem

There are few places as unsafe for a Bangladeshi as the roads and highways of the country, with at least 9,951 people dying in road crashes last year alone. Despite the ever-increasing procession of deaths on our roads, however, our policymakers seem to think that all is well with the sector, indicating the root of the problem – their apathy. In a statement following the horrific crash which killed 19 people on the Dhaka-Bhanga expressway on March 19, Obaidul Quader said that the road was not to blame for the accident and that enough initiatives were being undertaken to ensure road safety in the country. Instead, he pointed fingers at the BNP for using road accidents to further its political agendas after its movement failed, suggesting that the issue of road safety was in, effect, a non-issue.

We cannot say we are surprised by such a statement from our minister absolving his ministry and the government of any responsibility for the increasing number of deaths on our roads. We have noted with increasing alarm the lacklustre – and at times callous – attitude of our government in fixing the glaring issues ailing the sector, from crushing down the student-led road safety movement in 2018 to taking four years, to simply formulate the “rules” of the Road Transport Act (RTA), to the repeated failures of the authorities to rid the roads of unfit and unregistered vehicles and drivers.

If we simply refer to the incident on Sunday, we can see that the registration and route permit of the bus had been suspended by the authorities following another accident only four months ago. Its fitness permit had also expired on January 18. The minister may be right in pointing out that the government is investing in building and upgrading national highways and expressways, and that the road on which the accident took place in itself is not to blame for the crash. However, the truth remains that no number of fancy roads can make up for the egregious lack of enforcement of rules by relevant government agencies.

An analysis of eight major crashes in the past few years by *The Daily Star* reveals that in each case, either the vehicles did not have valid documents or their drivers did not have licences. The report also highlights that thousands of unfit vehicles are paying bribes to corrupt highway police members, BRTA officials, and politically connected people on a regular basis. Will our government take any steps to identify these officials and ensure that those found guilty are given exemplary punishment for their roles in the countless deaths of innocent citizens? We urge our minister to give us a concrete response.

There are a host of issues that plague the road and transport sector, but for any meaningful change to take place, what must change first is the mindset of our policymakers. Ad hoc solutions and reactive measures that are not followed up on will not result in safer roads. First, they must acknowledge the full depth of the crisis, including their own complicity in the matter, before they can take comprehensive measures to overhaul the corrupt and dysfunctional system. Anarchy can no longer be allowed to be the law of our roads.

Stop killing our ‘sign of life’

Better water management can improve people’s lives

As we observe World Water Day, it is disappointing that people's access to clean water, sanitation, and hygiene in Bangladesh is in such a poor state. Despite making some progress towards improving its water and sanitation infrastructure and services, Bangladesh is still miles away from achieving the targets of ensuring universal access to the availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all, which is a part of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals – (SDG 6). According to 2022 data from water.org, 41 percent of the population in Bangladesh – around 68 million people – lacked access to a reliable, safely managed source of water. Around 61 percent of the population – a staggering 100 million people – lacked access to safely managed household sanitation facilities. According to a World Health Organization (WHO) study from 2021, 107 million people in Bangladesh did not have basic handwashing facilities with soap and water at home.

The data clearly illustrate that the state of our water management is in dire straits. With so much hype around Bangladesh's graduation from the Least Developed Country category (LDC), the real scenario of millions of people not having access to basic water-related services is extremely concerning. What is the point of development that cannot even ensure people's access to safe drinking water and proper sanitation facilities?

As this newspaper reported exactly a year ago, Bangladesh ranks seventh out of 10 countries in the Asia-Pacific region that extract the most groundwater, according to UN findings. Such quick depletion of groundwater not only puts at risk our access to safe drinking water, but could also lead to major problems for our agriculture and industries. Moreover, approximately 5-24 percent of the land area in Bangladesh is exposed to extremely high to high risks of elevated arsenic, salinity and groundwater depletion hazards. And this means that somewhere between 4.5 percent to 17 percent of our population are still being exposed to these health hazards, leading to enormous health problems for people. Yet, the emphasis put by the authorities on improving this situation over the years has been greatly inadequate.

The answer to solving the problem can be found in reducing our dependence on groundwater. As per the SDGs, 70 percent of our water consumption must come from surface water sources. But, as we know, our surface water is horribly polluted and its use will only be possible once the government ensures enough water recycling and purifying plants.

At the same time, the government also needs to protect whatever surface water is available from further contamination. In that regard, the government has to make the use of effluent treatment plants mandatory for *all* factories. The lax enforcement of laws is the biggest problem we have when it comes to water management in the country – leading to the widespread pollution of our rivers, for example. And the onus is on the authorities to change that.

The joke is really on us



THE OVERTON WINDOW

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A former journalist colleague of mine once shared a joke with me. It goes like this: after attending a conference in India, a Bangladeshi minister visits an Indian minister's house. It looks more like a mansion. Impressed, he asks his Indian counterpart, “How can you afford this? Do ministers here get paid so much more than us?” The Indian minister takes his guest to his backyard. He then points toward a river beyond his property. His guest is further astonished that he could afford a riverside house, with a backyard. But the Indian minister quickly tells him to focus, and asks, “What do you see on top of the river?” His guest replies, “A half-constructed bridge.” The Indian minister then responds enthusiastically, “Fifty percent,” meaning he pocketed 50 percent of the bridge's budget.

A year later, the Indian minister comes to Bangladesh and visits the Bangladeshi minister. Arriving at his house, the Indian minister is shocked and insulted. After lunch, he tells his host, “When you were my guest, why did you pretend like you lived in a small house when your house is actually a palace? And how could you afford it?” His guest takes him to his huge backyard, akin to a football field. He then points beyond it, towards a river, and asks, “What do you see on top of it?” The Indian minister replies, “Nothing.” The Bangladeshi minister, beaming with pride, says, “One hundred percent.”

When I first heard this joke about nine years ago, I thought to myself that it portrayed Bangladesh as if it were a banana republic. Little did I know then that, less than a decade later, it would align so much with our reality.

Take the case of the debacle surrounding the National Household Database (NHD). The initiative to set it up was undertaken by the government in July 2013. The initial project deadline was set for December 2017, with an estimated cost of Tk 328 crore. But, as has become the norm, it went through numerous revisions. The project was finally expected to finish by the end of 2022, with its cost rising by whopping 112.75 percent to Tk 727 crore.

In January 2018, while admitting that misuse occurs at the time of spending money set aside for safety net programmes, Finance Minister Mustafa Kamal said, “The national database will stop the misuse.” In a letter he wrote to the World Bank – perhaps to impress it – in March 2022, he said the government was committed to using the long-overdue NHD to

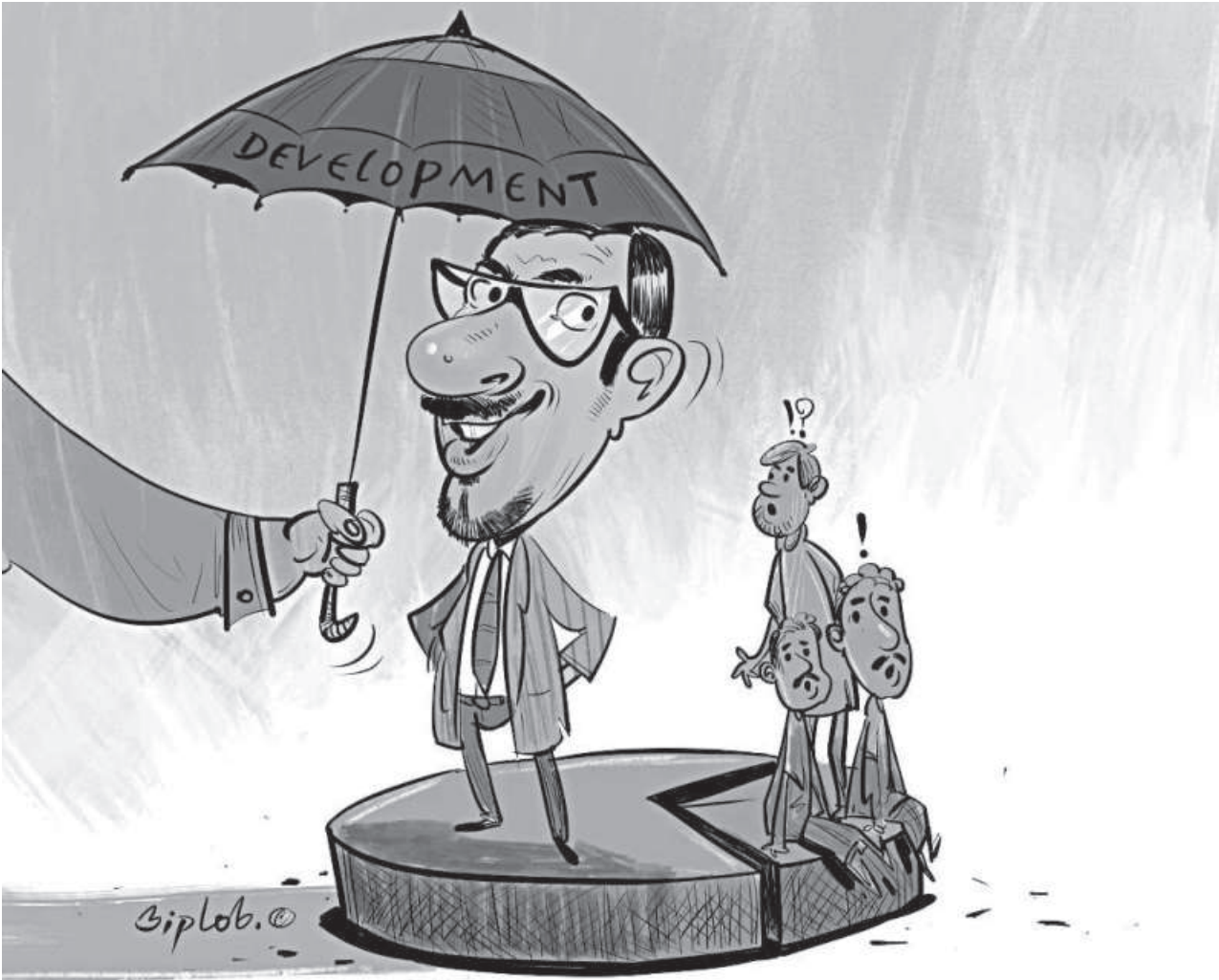


ILLUSTRATION: BIPLOB CHAKROBORTY

disburse the social safety net allocation of Tk 113,576 crore. A few months – and thousands of crores – later, a government report found that the project, in the state that it was in, was “unusable” – meaning corruption ate away a project that promised to lower government corruption.

But maybe I am being a bit too critical. After all, the Awami League government does deserve a lot of credit for developing quite a bit of our infrastructure. But at what cost?

When the AL came to power, the two things Bangladesh lacked badly – and still does to an extent – were enough roads and highways. This government has built quite a bit of both. However, according to a 2017 World Bank report, Bangladesh spends a lot more than India and China on road construction because of time overruns and lack of competitive bidding. A four-lane highway costs \$1.1-1.3 million to build in India, and \$1.3-1.6 million in China. In Bangladesh, the estimated

corruption. According to Prof Shamsul Haque of Buet's Department of Civil Engineering, most construction firms that are awarded public works contracts are politically connected. Having political clout, they rarely ensure quality road construction due to a lack of proper monitoring by the relevant authorities. As a result, these expensively built roads need regular repairs, which puts further burden on the public exchequer.

Despite corruption seeping into every sector, the one that has perhaps been the worst affected is banking. For years, independent experts and the media have been highlighting it, while most government officials unashamedly deny it. But earlier this month, Moody's, one of the big three global rating agencies, downgraded its outlook for Bangladesh's banking sector from “stable” to “negative.” This will make financial transactions more difficult and costly for Bangladesh.

According to Syed Mahbubur

Reportedly, according to sources, some overseas institutions have already curtailed credit limits for Bangladeshi banks. *Nikkei Asia* reported that a few weeks ago, the Dubai-based Mashreq Bank and Standard Chartered Bank's Hong Kong office declined letter of credit (LC) openings for at least two Bangladeshi banks, according to high-ranking executives.

What it all boils down to is the fact that corruption, no matter how cleverly you pull it off, always inflicts a cost. What the government seems to have nearly perfected is delaying the people from realising that the cost is coming due, because in the end, given the true state of our government's tolerance for corruption – where the perpetrators are never held to account – it is the people who have to foot the bill.

So, we can joke away all we want to make ourselves feel better about the web of corruption that we find ourselves tangled in. But, ultimately, it seems the joke is really on us.

THE ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE PROJECT

A journey into students’ mental health

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Youth is often painted in vivid colours – different shades of orange to express its vibrant and sociable nature, or strokes of yellow with pink shades to evoke compassion and zeal. Writers see them as a fountain of confidence, a force to contend with. But do our youthful university students agree?

The answer is a resounding NO. Many are in a state of relentless self-criticism, haunted by poor grades and past failures, irrespective of coming from a public, private or international institution. Consumed by a feeling that they are not fulfilling their family's and society's expectations, they suffer anxiety and even a serious loss of self-esteem.

Driving these mental stresses are academic practices of the past: of a dominant and authoritarian teacher, reliance on rote learning, and comparative performance assessment that fails to recognise individual qualities and inclinations. These practices, of questionable validity, also compel students to conform, inflict exam after exam, and grade and categorise them into antiquated slots, while abandoning them to devise their own imperfect solutions and sink or swim. Bringing out the best in our students is of little concern to

academia. The consequent burden of mental health and its ramifications are unfortunately and routinely swept under the rug.

The subject of students' mental health is complex. To this end, our online survey attempted to provide insights into the issues that university students confront. There are many personal battles they wage daily. Some of them feel that they are not performing well enough to meet the standards set by their families, teachers, peers, and society. They also resent the treatment they receive from the university authorities who often lack compassion. Language barriers at the university level is also a major reason behind students' constant self-disparagement as English is not their forte.

The demands of the job market and Bangladesh's education system also rarely go hand-in-hand. According to the students, a number of their courses are ill-suited for today's job market. And in the Covid era, when the universities went online, students found it difficult to concentrate and absorb the knowledge availed through the new platform. The evaluations that they received were also generally subjective, with grades dispensed

recklessly. Students suffered immeasurably despite their putting in a Herculean effort.

Female students complained about facing sexist attitudes at their universities, while a few experienced racism – both situations affecting their mental well-being. Private university students fared a little better compared to their counterparts in public universities on past failures and self-criticism metrics. International students seemed less affected amid their local friends in both private and public universities.

University educators and administrators are failing badly to recognise students' mental health issues. Most universities have done almost nothing in this regard. It is generally expected that students will be self-motivated to fit in with the obscure curricula and standards the universities claim to offer. After graduation, these students are expected to adapt to a completely different set of criteria set by employers. The gap in these expectations is astounding.

And sadly, societal judgement places an additional layer of strains on the students to chase societally expected, ephemeral versions of success, rather than follow their hearts. There is no assessment yet on how this affects the students' mental health.

Let us contemplate this: nearly half of Bangladesh's large population is under the age of 24. They are not being enabled or empowered, starting from early childhood. Unleashing the huge potential in the nation's

human capital should be the focus of the country's current academic and political leaders. To this end, students need to be understood and dealt with in a much better way. For example, the authorities need to play a more proactive role in creating healthy social bonds among the students to make them feel like they are part of the community. Past failures should also be treated as learning curves, not a basis to punish and denigrate students as our culture continues to permit.

Influencing what and how students learn, helping shape their attitudes, behaviour, and understanding of the world is the primary goal of the university, making sure it is designed with the needs of students in mind and disseminated competently and compassionately will elicit the best from them. This mindset must begin to take root. When the youth of Bangladesh are supported creatively, not stifled or neglected, it will ease their suffocating conditions. They must be allowed breathing space in the confines of the university, steered away from the rat race of top grades. Let them think, let them imagine, let them create, let them thrive. The university system needs to be less of an assembly line churning out graduates in tens of thousands and more of a space that provides a creative, healthy, and compassionate learning environment.

This op-ed, the first of a four-part series, is the result of faculty-student collaboration designed to impact higher education in Bangladesh.