

Can we finally expect some results?

Launch of largest-ever road safety project brings hope but also familiar concerns

We are delighted to see the launch of Bangladesh's largest-ever road safety project financed jointly by the World Bank and the government. Totalling Tk 4,988.14 crore, the five-year project marks a milestone in the country's ongoing battle against deadly road crashes. According to a report by this daily, the project will focus on comprehensive road safety measures, including improved engineering designs, road signs and markings, pedestrian facilities, speed enforcement, and emergency care. These measures, to be implemented along two specific highways, are expected to reduce road traffic deaths by over 30 percent. There will also be measures targeting selected urban areas and district roads.

Crucially, the World Bank's appraisal report highlights the lack of accountability and coordination among relevant government bodies, the importance of which cannot be overstated. It is thus heartening to see the involvement of vital institutions like the Roads and Highways Department, Bangladesh Road Transport Authority, Bangladesh Police, and the Directorate General of Health Services in the project. Their collaboration – which not only signals a shared commitment but also a recognition of the multi-faceted approach required to ensure road safety – is vital for the effective implementation of this undertaking.

However, to expect one project to bring dramatic changes would be expecting too much. It is also crucial to reflect on the longstanding systemic challenges that have derailed past endeavours. While improving infrastructure and post-crash care is certainly necessary to bring down casualty numbers, what is most problematic about our transport sector is the laissez-faire approach of those in charge, with the traffic and road safety rules barely enforced. Accountability should extend to not just officials at the government bodies but also transport professionals and their associations.

So as we embark on this project, we must remember that it is not just about financial investment or infrastructure improvements. Ensuring road safety in Bangladesh will require a fundamental shift in our attitudes, a culture of accountability and law enforcement, and continuous efforts to raise awareness among all road users. The success of this project will be measured not only in terms of reduced fatalities and injuries but also in changes brought to the mindset of all concerned, without which no initiative will be sustainable. It is also essential to ensure that such initiatives are extended to all regions of the country for a greater impact.

Tree for tree, but at what cost?

HC's call for planting new trees shouldn't be taken as a licence to cut trees at will

We welcome the High Court's directive for the authorities to plant 10 trees for every one tree cut for the sake of development work. The order came after an incident involving felling 30 palm trees for the construction of a road in Patuakhali. It hits especially close to home given how widespread the culture of cutting trees has become in Bangladesh. Time and again, we have warned about the environmental cost of destroying trees and forests under various pretexts, but there has been little effect so far.

Just days before the HC's rule, a vested quarter reportedly razed down hills in Chattogram's Fatikchhari upazila to construct a chicken shed. Around the same time, it was reported that the Chattogram district administration decided to clear out a mangrove forest to build a sanctuary for birds and wildlife. How ludicrous is the idea of destroying a natural forest to create an artificial one? Meanwhile, in Dhaka, we witnessed how the two city corporations disregarded all logics to fell trees in the name of beautifying roads. It appears that those in charge of development work are somehow unaware that development at the cost of the environment is a lost game in the end.

As for the HC's comment, we must recognise that simply planting new trees after cutting down older, mature ones will not provide the same environmental benefits. Older trees absorb and store more carbon dioxide, and replacing them with younger ones not only degrades soil quality, but also impacts the new plant's quality and growth. What complicates it further is that often new trees are selected and planted arbitrarily, with very little aftercare.

Therefore, the court's directive should not be taken as a licence to cut trees indiscriminately, and those in charge need to ensure that new trees are planted carefully and judiciously. We also would like to urge all project authorities to ensure that their project designs are made by keeping the importance of nature in mind.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Improve passport office service

Recently, my wife and I went to the regional passport office in Dhaka's Agargaon to collect our passports. We went there at 9:30am and waited until 12:30pm, when the office authorities announced that their servers were down. Hundreds of people waited for hours and returned empty-handed. My question is, why can't they work manually when their servers don't work? They can take a signature from each passport seeker and deliver his/her passport. And when the servers start working, they can mark "delivered" on each one's page. Is it so difficult? Or they must come up with an alternative system for when their servers are down, so people don't have to suffer.

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ECONOMIC CRISIS IN BANGLADESH

It all comes down to accountability



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KALLOL MUSTAFA

Ministers and MPs of the ruling party often claim that Bangladesh has surpassed Singapore and Malaysia in terms of economic development. But in reality, depreciation of the taka against the US dollar, high inflation, energy crisis, and frequent load-shedding have all disrupted the country's economy and people's lives. In a sense, this crisis has been caused by the dwindling foreign exchange reserves, because Bangladesh's forex expenditure is higher than its forex income at present. As a higher demand for the dollar outweighs forex inflow, the value of taka against the dollar keeps falling, causing a crisis in the import of necessary fuel or raw materials too. But the events, decisions and processes behind this economic phenomenon are entirely political.

Although the government continues to blame the Russia-Ukraine war for the crisis, the issues of growing budget and trade deficit, money laundering, expensive development projects, using the forex reserves for infrastructure projects, and increasing import dependency in the energy sector were all already there long before the war broke out. If there was minimum accountability and an effective democratic process in the country's governance system, these issues would not exist year after year.

Due to a lack of accountability, the more development projects are taken up, the more corruption takes place and the more the development cost rises. Moreover, thousands of crores of taka have been embezzled in the name of loans from public and private banks under political institutional patronage. Money earned through corruption has regularly been laundered abroad. According to Global Financial Integrity (GFI), a Washington-based research institute, Bangladesh lost approximately USD 8.27 billion annually on an average between 2009 and 2018 because of traders misinvoicing the values of import-export goods to avoid taxes and/or to move money out of the country. If the government were accountable to the people, these incidents of corruption

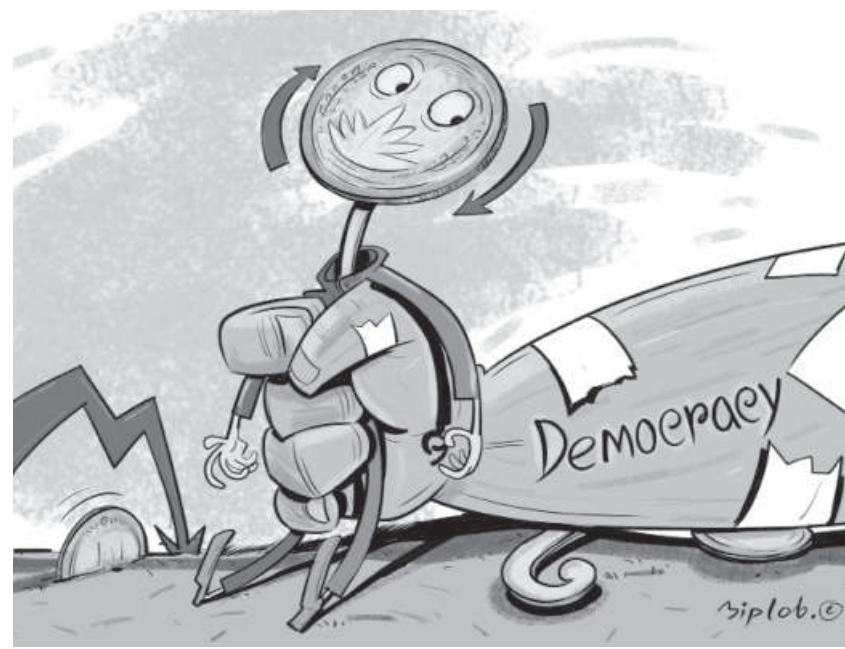


ILLUSTRATION: **BIPLOB CHAKROBORTY**

and money laundering would have been minimised.

The government also fails to tax the rich adequately, and instead helps them grow through different incentives. Thus, tax collection in Bangladesh as a percentage of GDP has been stuck at around 7.6 percent (as of May 2022) – the lowest in South Asia and one of the lowest in the world. As a result, the government's budget deficit has increased, but that does not stop it from taking up costly development projects one after another. To fund these projects, it takes loans from various domestic and foreign sources, which in turn puts more pressure on the economy. Bangladesh's foreign debt more than tripled in just 10 years, rising to \$91.43 billion in 2021 from \$27.05 billion in 2011, according to a World Bank report.

One of the reasons behind the forex reserve crisis is that foreign loans have been used to fund costly and wasteful projects that do not generate enough forex earnings to cover the reserve deficit. A common trend in megaprojects here is the abnormal time and cost overruns.

Due to planning errors, irregularities and corruption, the costs escalate time and again. This trend has made Bangladesh home to some of the world's most expensive roads and highways, BRTs, metro rails, power plants, etc.

In the name of solving the power crisis, one after another rental and quick rental power plants and IPPs have

community in general have to suffer. In Bangladesh, all the people, including the businessmen, are suffering from the extreme power and energy crises created by policies that were designed to benefit a few local and foreign businesses, without considering the long-term consequences on the economy. Due to frequent load-shedding, industrial production has been reduced significantly. Production costs are rising for factories that are running on diesel generators during power outages. Most factories are unable to utilise their workers and machinery for a large part of the day. Factory machineries are being damaged and raw materials are being wasted due to frequent power outages. As the production of export-oriented industries are being hampered, industry owners fear the loss of foreign buyers, which would further jeopardise our export earnings.

The biggest problem of an authoritarian regime is that the decision-making power becomes centralised, with no check and balance in place, which creates great risks for a country. Moreover, arbitrariness and vested groups' interests trump public interests in major decisions. The grassroots reality does not reach the centre of power, or even if it does, there is a tendency to hide it with fabricated statistics, which after a certain point leads to an even greater danger.

Describing the importance of democracy, Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen in his book *Development as Freedom* highlighted its protective role, mentioning that when economic conditions are normal, the importance of this protective role of democracy is often not felt. But when the situation deteriorates, it becomes clear how important democracy is to prevent economic and social disasters.

As an example, he mentioned the 1997 Asian financial crisis, which was a result of lack of transparency, accountability and people's participation in policymaking. If democratic systems were effective in those countries, maybe investment decisions and the associated risks would have been scrutinised more deeply, which might have averted the crisis.

In Bangladesh, in the context of the ongoing economic crisis, those who have been putting emphasis on the growth-centric development model at the expense of democracy may have started to realise now the importance of democratic accountability in the governance system.

'Barn's burnt down – now I can see the moon'



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MILIA ALI

I write this column with some hesitation, since many may regard it a bit preachy or elitist. Given that the entire world is experiencing turmoil – even an existentialist threat – most readers are anxious to inform themselves about the outlook on politics, economics and sociology. People prefer to sift through op-eds that predict future trends and global developments.

I, too, often reflect on these issues – not as an analyst or futurist, but as a humanist. I look at situations through the lens of my humane experiences, trying to understand how the decline of socialism, the rise of raw capitalism and authoritarianism may have impacted people's emotions, psyche and attitudes. In recent years, the pervasive culture of intolerance, selfishness and material greed has numbed me into inaction, and I have been afflicted by the common malaise known as "indifference," allowing myself to flow with the tide and embrace the comforts that a retired life in the West offers.

Once in a while, though, I receive a sudden jolt that forces me to focus on the cost of making compromises with the values of my inner core. The most recent awakening began with a late-night phone call from a cousin in Dhaka, informing me that my music teacher/mentor had suddenly passed

away. He was much younger than me – a talented classical singer, but more of a dreamer than a pragmatist. The thread that bound us was a passion for music. We first met three decades ago, and my daughter and I started taking lessons from him. My purpose was to hone my musical skills, while she received training in Hindustani classical music. With his low-key but dexterous handling and patience, he transformed into my music mentor and her guru.

I lost touch with him after moving abroad, but revived the old connection occasionally during my visits to Dhaka. Years passed by and both of us were engulfed in the usual challenges of our respective lives. Our bond became tenuous. The young man who had brought a fresh perspective to music years ago, was now caught up in the vortex of life's practical battles. He had progressed into a full-time professional music teacher, providing security to his family and struggling with his career and public recognition. I, too, had moved away from my ideological dreams to a more mundane existence.

On my last visit to Bangladesh, my teacher/friend texted me and asked for a music session like old times. I also wanted it but, once again, several obligations – some important and some

not – kept me busy and I neglected to respond. Was it a subconscious choice? Was I afraid to turn the wheel backwards and sift through the layers to rediscover the calling of my soul? It was, after all, easier to move on with the "new" life I had created. But, alas, we are more fragile than we realise, and nothing gives us full protection from

I look at situations through the lens of my humane experiences. In recent years, the pervasive culture of intolerance, selfishness and material greed has numbed me into inaction, and I have been afflicted by the common malaise known as "indifference," allowing myself to flow with the tide and embrace the comforts that a retired life in the West offers.

the randomness of destiny's hand...

After my cousin's phone call, I lay awake waiting for dawn to creep in and the world to wake up. I checked my phone for my mentor's last message sent in November 2022, "Apa, amra gaane ki ekebarei boshbo na?" (Apa, are we not ever going to sing together?) My answer was vague, "Yes, we will, let me find the time." I guessed his message was a coded appeal for help. What I didn't know was that he was facing health and monetary challenges. I didn't bother to ask and he was too

proud to tell me.

As I sipped my cup of morning tea, there was a lingering sense of loss. I had failed myself. The graceful Saraswati statue in my living room lay inert with her Veena – the statue meant nothing without the sweet sound of the Veena's strings. In an instant, I was smitten by the fact that none of the material possessions I owned were irreplaceable. However, the void that I had created within me by an insouciant disregard for a unique friendship would be difficult to fill.

I was stricken with grief and recurring remorse. But then, if we humans don't feel such extreme grief, how would we experience the intense passion that helps us revive ourselves? Gradually, as the first rays of the sun filtered through the windows, I began to gain a sense of clarity – an inner voice was asking me to reprioritise and change course. There was still time, not only to connect with my mentor's grieving family, but also to be attentive towards those that I had drifted away from. Individuals who had helped me grow emotionally and spiritually and who needed me now!

It will be a difficult road to traverse. I would have to revamp my lifestyle, losing a few social connections and material possessions on the way. But in shedding what I need to, I could rediscover what is essential – like the Haiku composed by 17th-century poet Mizuta Masahide: "Barn's burnt down – now I can see the moon."

Am I fully ready for this metamorphosis? Maybe not. But I now know that the force is within me, ready to make the right choice. And there are many out there waiting to receive the grace!