

An urban asset going to waste

Spaces under Dhaka flyovers can be utilised so much better

In a city perennially struggling for space, it is totally unacceptable that huge chunks of area lie unutilised or wasted underneath its flyovers. According to a new study conducted by Brac University's Centre for Inclusive Architecture and Urbanism, the spaces beneath Dhaka's flyovers have been used improperly since they were opened to traffic due to a lack of planning, resulting in public health, environmental and socio-economic losses. The study examined 10 flyovers which have a total length of 105.22 kilometres and a total area of 207 acres beneath them. And a large portion of that area has been either grabbed or misused or simply discarded, despite its potential to be an urban asset with proper policy.

For example, underneath the Hanif and Moghbazar flyovers, you can see parking space, mosque, police box, temporary kitchen market, waste dumping area, and small shops. In some places, street children and homeless people are seen to be taking refuge, while some places are also used for the sale and consumption of illegal narcotics. Taking various factors into consideration, Brac researchers estimate the public health, environmental and socio-economic losses from such usage of space at Tk 21,000 crore annually. This is too big a number to be taken lightly. Other countries around the world – countries that don't even have the kind of land shortage issues that we do – are making much better use of such spaces. For example, in developed countries, these have been converted for community-oriented usage such as through playgrounds, urban agriculture, forestation, cycle lanes, swimming pools, gymnasiums, walkways, etc.

Flyovers are perceived as symbols of modernity that are aimed at easing traffic congestion and endorsing development. But it seems that our city planners are failing to take into consideration the contextual needs of the city's inhabitants, all the while claiming to promote a futuristic vision. With the population of Dhaka growing and the space shortage problem worsening, these areas could be used, among other civic purposes, for the upliftment of the weaker sections of society. Like France, we could be using them to properly house the homeless.

Dhaka's planners need to realise the huge opportunity they are wasting through their lack of vision and poor planning. They need to urgently draw up a plan that can best utilise these areas, particularly in a way that benefits local communities and the environment.

What's happening at Holy Family Hospital?

Ensure good governance to improve the services of this once-famous hospital

We are shocked to learn of the recent findings of the Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) about the Holy Family Red Crescent Medical College Hospital in Dhaka. According to the corruption watchdog, the hospital has been plagued by corruption, irregularities and autocratic practices, due to which the quality of its services has significantly deteriorated. The TIB has particularly mentioned the name of the chairman of the Bangladesh Red Crescent Society (BDRCS) for such degradation, which is alarming.

Reportedly, this non-profit healthcare institution under BDRCS has been unable to admit patients as per its beds. Out of its 528 beds, only 300 on average remain occupied by patients. This means that the hospital's income has also declined significantly. What is most surprising is that it has employed three times more staffers than necessary, which has resulted in about 208 of them having no work to do. The TIB has found that these appointments were made based on political considerations. Irregularities have also been found in procurement and promotional practices. Overall, a serious lack of good governance in all aspects of its operations has brought the hospital to its current state.

Over the past few years, we have come to know of many public and private hospitals that have been operating without any kind of accountability and transparency. The most recent example of this is Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University (BSMMU), which reportedly recruited doctors and staff by bending the rules of the institution, while encouraging corruption. The services of many of these hospitals have also been questionable – the recent deaths of a mother and her newborn in a city hospital is a case in point. Unfortunately, although such anomalies are often reported in the media, we hardly see any action from the authorities.

To improve the quality of services at the Holy Family Hospital, the authorities concerned must check the corruption and irregularities plaguing it. They must ensure it has a structured workforce, is transparent in its operations, and runs without political interference. The interests of patients must be prioritised.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Our healthcare system needs an overhaul

Some recent incidents in private hospitals in Bangladesh have raised questions about our doctors' competency. Are our doctors playing the role that they are supposed to? The tragic deaths of Mahbuba Akter Akhi and her newborn at the Central Hospital in Dhaka has shaken the nation to the core. If a healthy pregnant woman has to die at a renowned city hospital during childbirth, what can we expect from other hospitals at the district and upazila levels? These deaths are a reminder that our health sector needs a complete overhaul.

A reader
Dhaka

Attaining zero target on border killing



ON THE SHORES OF (IN)JUSTICE

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Killing of civilians along the Bangladesh-India border by India's Border Security Force (BSF) has plagued the bilateral relations between the two countries for decades. Thus far, the occasional reiteration of the Indian commitment to bring the casualty figure to zero has yielded a marginal result. Needless to say, periodic media reports on border killings and the Indian authorities' reticence about instituting credible investigation into the incidents and actions against the perpetrators have caused frustration among a large section of Bangladeshis.

Last week, the director-general (DG)-level border coordination conference between the BSF and Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) was concluded in New Delhi. The principal thrust of this conference was to expedite and give more momentum to developmental and infrastructure activities to boost trade and bilateral relations between the two countries. The two forces agreed to curb border crimes effectively through more simultaneous coordinated night patrols in vulnerable regions and real-time sharing of information.

On the issue of "violent incidents" (euphemism for killing) along the border and to ensure that the number of such incidents was curbed, both sides agreed "to work jointly and engage professionally, enhance joint patrolling, and vigilance, especially during late hours of the night to early morning, intensify public awareness programmes, share real-time information and (make) all-out efforts to bring these criminals to justice."

Speaking on the killing incidents at the border, the BSF DG said his force "does not discriminate amongst criminals. So, when these kinds of incidents happen, usually it is taken as a last resort when the life of a BSF personnel on duty is threatened." He asserted that BSF assiduously followed the mandatory policy of resorting to non-lethal weapons. He, however, acknowledged that "in a couple of incidents, the use of force by the BSF personnel was probably more than it was necessary. So, these individuals were identified and the proceedings as per (the) BSF Act are going on." In his statement, the BSF commander stated that the DGs agreed that sometimes there are misunderstandings or misinformation among ground level forces. He hoped by working together the "killing incidents in the bordering area will be reduced."

At the outset of the conference, the BGB DG made it clear that the issue of border killing would be his top priority.



The BSF chief's claim that shoot-outs at the Bangladesh-India border take place for self-defence is simply self-serving.

FILE PHOTO: ARUPPARIA/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

However, from the above narrative on the outcome of the conference, it is clear that his Indian counterpart essentially hung on to the business-as-usual approach pursued by his predecessors. No one can underestimate the value of cooperation and collaboration between the border forces of neighbouring countries, and the need for simultaneous coordinated night patrols in vulnerable regions and real-time sharing of information, intensified public awareness programmes and sharing of real-time information. However a close reading of the BSF statement brings to fore several important elements of the Indian approach.

Firstly, the formulation presents the victims of BSF shoot-outs as "criminals." It begs the question whether the BSF as an institution can be the plaintiff, judge, jury and executioner of those deemed by the agency as criminals. Should the determination of criminals not be left to the judicial authorities of the country concerned, following due procedure?

Secondly, BSF's claim that it does not discriminate (on grounds of nationality) in shooting down criminals at the border triggers the need for securing the number of Indian nationals who fell victims to such killings over the past 12 years against more than 1,200 Bangladeshis who lost their lives.

Thirdly, the BSF justifies the killing of suspected smugglers by claiming that they try to evade arrest. Suspicion of a crime or evasion of arrest cannot alone justify the use of lethal force.

resort when the life of a BSF personnel on duty is threatened." The hollowness of this argument is well-established. In all 100 cases covered by the HRW and Odhikar study, "the alleged criminals were either unarmed or armed with only sickles, sticks, and knives, which suggest that in shooting victims, the border guards are likely to have used excessive force... In others, injuries indicate the person was shot at close range, with witnesses often alleging that the person was tortured and killed in BSF custody." The report further adds that in none of the cases "did the BSF show it had recovered lethal weapons or explosives that could pose an imminent threat of death or serious injury that might justify killings (in self-defence)." Therefore, the claim that shoot-outs take place for self-defence is simply self-serving.

Fourthly, the BSF DG's statement that "on a couple of incidents, the use of force by the BSF personnel was probably more than it was necessary" is a welcome acknowledgement of the reality. However, in contrast to the "couple of incidents" he cited, Odhikar documentation reveals that as many as 1,276 Bangladeshi lives were lost and 1,183 more were injured by BSF firing along the Bangladesh-India border between 2010 and March 2023.

Fifthly, while the onus of border killing squarely rests on the BSF for its failure to attain zero target set more than a decade ago, the narrative churned out by the agency appears to hold both Bangladesh and India

responsible for "misunderstandings and misinformation" that cause "such violence." In the future rounds of the border conference, there is a strong case for Bangladesh to remind the Indian authorities of the zero target that the country has committed to achieve. Also, there is little scope for complacency at the mere "reduction" in the number of killings.

Finally, the DG's assurance that procedures are in place in India for errant BSF personnel to be held to account for their misdeeds fails to gain traction among border scholars and rights activists. The charade conducted in the name of administrative proceedings by the force and the blatant impunity that was accorded to the killers of Bangladeshi teenager Felani leaves little room to trust such a process.

It is worthwhile to juxtapose the experiences of the Indian authorities' border policy along the Bangladesh-India border with those along the India-Pakistan and India-Nepal borders. Unlike the experiences of the other two borders where BSF shoot-outs are rare, if not non-existent, Bangladeshis succumbing to BSF bullets is almost a regular phenomenon. In March 2017, the killing of a Nepalese citizen over a local dispute in a rare shooting at the border prompted a series of anti-India protests in Nepal. The scale of the protest led to India's national security adviser calling up the Nepal prime minister to condole the victim's death and extend assurance that the Indian authorities had initiated a probe into the killing. This leads to the questions why, as a neighbour, we have been taken for granted and being subjected to such brutality and ignominy for decades by India, and why as a nation we have failed to raise our collective voice when our fellow citizens are extrajudicially killed and the perpetrators are not held to account.

Is the age limit of 30 years a rational policy?



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Young people in Bangladesh have been demanding the revision of a few public recruitment policies for some time now. Their demand for revising the quota policy was met, and they are currently striving to raise the eligibility age ceiling from 30 to 35 years. But, it is unfortunate that revising a policy requires chaos rather than research.

About 90 percent of Bangladesh's employment is in the informal sector, which provides almost no stable earnings and economic security. In the remaining 10 percent, which consists of the formal private and public sectors, a large segment of private sector jobs does not provide decent working conditions, earnings, and social security. Public sector jobs ensure basic benefits, which makes individuals want them more. Preferences for public sector jobs intensified in recent times, particularly after the pay scale was doubled in 2015.

The public sector covers less than five percent of total employment in Bangladesh and is unable to absorb a large pool of interested candidates.

Instead, it may affect human capital development by diverting investment, prolonging unemployment by keeping candidates engaged in the preparation process, and crowd out private sectors in getting efficient human resources. To minimise these harmful effects, the government applies an age ceiling for recruitment, which was revised from 27 to 30 years in 1991.

Beyond the eligible age, obtaining jobs in other sectors would not be easy if the public sector job preparation could not be utilised for other sectors. Human capital or brain gain may result from the preparation for public service exams if said preparation is useful in obtaining a non-government job as well. This is supported by some literature on international migration that indicates that migrant-sending countries enjoy brain gain rather than brain drain, because investment takes place on human resources in the hope of migration, but not all of those who prepare can emigrate, and some are left in their home countries with higher

capabilities.

A survey indicates some gains from public sector preparation: about 32 percent of 105 respondents who were preparing or had prepared for government jobs at the time of the survey found the preparation "very" or "extremely" useful for other jobs, while the rest of the respondents found it somewhat useful (40 percent) or not useful at all (28 percent).

My review of the preparation materials for public service in Bangladesh does not indicate much value addition. Candidates generally study Bangla and English language and literature, general knowledge of Bangladesh and global affairs, and general science for government job preparation. Even if studying these materials generates some human capital gain, the gain appears to be trivial compared to the high cost of preparation.

With the goal of getting attractive government jobs, jobseekers are likely to delay searching for and taking up other opportunities, repeatedly try for public sector jobs until they become indelible, and incur substantial direct and indirect costs related to the preparation. In the survey, the median number of exam attempts was 13 for a candidate, and the median number of hours spent was 1,116. The time spent on preparation is equivalent to 28 work weeks if we consider full-time work as 40 hours in a week. The median of total monetary costs is close to that of the monthly income for those who had studied for

government jobs in the past and about four times the median monthly income for those who were currently preparing.

The survey findings reinforce the notion that the lure of government employment leads people to prepare for jobs they may not get. The demand side of the labour market gets affected by this since job preparation keeps people from proactively taking on entrepreneurial roles and generating employment.

When I spoke to people at different professional forums, some of them were surprised to learn that such an age restriction policy exists. Some of them asked me about what happens when a woman's eligibility expires due to giving birth or when someone is sick. These serious issues are not considered in our public sector recruitment process.

To avoid the negative consequences of seeking government jobs, in the short run, a restriction on the number of times a candidate can apply would be preferable to the age ceiling, considering other factors such as the variation of the number of years for university graduation, discrimination against older candidates, and special conditions such as sickness and pregnancy. In the long run, achieving optimum wages and other benefits for the entire labour market, keeping no public vs private segmentation, would be a more sustainable and efficient approach to create a vibrant economy and ensure the quality of work and life for all.