

The Daily Star

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## How can a road crumble in just three years?

Khulna-Satkhira highway fiasco serves as a wake-up call for development authorities

The state of Bangladesh's construction projects is once again under the spotlight after news has emerged of the deplorable condition of the Khulna-Satkhira regional highway. According to a report by this daily, this 64km road, after being renovated in 2020, has all but crumbled within a mere three years, leaving us with yet another example of poor planning and lax quality control in the government's infrastructure endeavours.

Reportedly, the renovation project – taken up by the Roads and Highways Department (RHD) in 2018 – involved a budget of Tk 160 crore as well as a plan to widen the road from 18 to 36 feet, with the inclusion of culverts, drainage systems, and strategically placed bus stops. All this was meant to boost connectivity and economic progress in the region. The project, completed in June 2020, was among the 100 roads and highways inaugurated by the prime minister the following year. However, three years on, it now lies dilapidated, riddled with potholes, and with patches of rutted bitumen strewn particularly in the 33km stretch of the road in Khulna. This, according to local residents and drivers, has led to a surge in accidents, putting innocent lives at risk.

The question is: how can a road, reopened with so much fanfare and promise, fall into disrepair within just three years? The obvious suspect – as locals were quick to point out – is the use of substandard materials during its construction. We have seen this happen in case of so many other projects – roads, bridges, culverts – as well. In fact, it was only yesterday that we commented on the woeful state of two newly constructed bridges in Lalmonirhat that had also suffered from poor planning and workmanship. In case of the Khulna-Satkhira highway, the RHD tried to shift the blame to heavy vehicles, especially overloaded stone-laden trucks coming from the Bhomra Land Port. This is nothing but an attempt to deflect responsibility. While excessive traffic and overloading can undoubtedly contribute to road wear and tear, it cannot be the sole reason for its rapid deterioration. The construction of any road should be robust enough to withstand expected traffic for a considerable time.

This points to a serious lack of oversight and quality control measures, which is why we are not much convinced by the Khulna RHD executive engineer's assurance about the planned upgradation of the regional highway into a national one. We cannot be trapped into an endless cycle of costly upgradation/renovation projects that promise so much but deliver so little. Evidently, what we are dealing with is a systemic problem. And it needs to be dealt with systemically. We urge the government to conduct a thorough review of all ongoing and completed construction projects to ensure that they meet the highest quality standards, and to protect them from premature damage. There must be accountability in all such projects.

## Gender-biased sex selection must end

A national guideline is a good first step

It is truly distressing that despite the grandiloquent promises of women's empowerment in Bangladesh, we are still a long way from ensuring their safety, much less their full potential. A woman's fight for survival in this patriarchal world is so ruthless that it starts from the womb, with an overwhelming majority of families still preferring sons over daughters – and some going to extreme lengths to terminate the pregnancy when they find out they are going to have a girl child. As new technologies that can identify the sex of a foetus at early stages of pregnancy become more easily available, the risk of gender-biased sex selection also increases, according to experts.

Given the depressing reality, we welcome the formulation of a national guideline for the prevention of gender-biased sex selection, which aims to create awareness about preventing the misuse of prenatal diagnosis procedures and tests for determining the sex of the foetus at any time of the pregnancy, as well as the abuse of infertility treatment for sex selection. The guideline was adopted as per a High Court directive in 2020, which also prohibited medical professionals from divulging the sex of a foetus during prenatal procedures.

Unfortunately, despite the court order, families can still easily access the information in many medical establishments across the country. Thus, it is imperative that key stakeholders, such as medical staff, are engaged and sensitised about the ethical, social and demographic implications of sex selection, which the guideline proposes to do.

A study conducted by the University of Dhaka with support from UNFPA found that both men and women preferred sons over daughters, but that women were more likely to want sons than men. This may be because in many families, particularly in rural areas, women are still blamed when they give birth to daughters and are valued less for their failure to provide a male heir. Experts suggest that even the knowledge that they are carrying girls can at times lead mothers to suffer from depression and fail to provide adequate care and nutrition to their foetuses during pregnancy. All these suggest that a lot more needs to be done to establish gender equality in the country. There must be renewed focus on challenging entrenched patriarchal norms that still undervalue women to such an enormous extent that their very birth is considered a curse.

# Serving a party is against the oath of BPSC



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KAMAL AHMED

Finding a member of a constitutional body in a sub-committee of the ruling party may not seem something innocuous. But naming Prof Delwar Hossain, who is a member of the Bangladesh Public Service Commission (BPSC), as a member of Bangladesh Awami League's international affairs sub-committee has stoked quite a controversy. According to the media, AL General Secretary Obaidul Quader approved the 56-member sub-committee for 2022-25 on July 24.

It is the second instance in less than two and a half years in which a constitutional office holder has been included in the ruling party's organisational structure. Previously, the Awami League included Attorney General AM Amin Uddin in its sub-committee on information and research affairs on February 18, 2021. But the party dropped the attorney general from the sub-committee merely a few days later amid criticism, which is why Prof Delwar Hossain's appointment as a party functionary is quite puzzling. Does it mean that the ruling party no longer thinks that keeping constitutional offices free from its clutches is necessary?

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In a way, Delwar Hossain's constitutional position is more restrictive than that of the attorney general, though the latter's office appears higher in order in the constitution. The constitution doesn't impose any bar on the person holding the office of the attorney general from being eligible for future

appointments in services of the republic.

But as far as the office of the members of the BPSC is concerned, the constitution unambiguously debar the person from any such service. Article 139(4) stipulates: On ceasing to hold office, a member of a public service commission shall not be eligible for further employment in the service of the Republic, but, subject to the provisions of Clause (1), (a) a chairman so ceasing shall be eligible for re-appointment for one further term; and (b) a member (other than the chairman) so ceasing shall be eligible for re-appointment for one further term as chairman of a public service commission.

This specific and stricter disqualification for any future service of the republic can have only one purpose, which is to ensure one's neutrality and restraint from responding to any kind of enticement. In this case, at least, the framers of our constitution did realise the gravity of the question of conflict of interest. It has also been reflected in the prescribed oath of office for

the members of BPSC in the third schedule of the constitution. The last line in the sacred oath says, "And that I will not allow my personal interest to influence my official conduct or my official decisions." Arguably, belonging to a party forum brings in some degree of political commitment to the party, which is bound to influence someone's judgement.

appointing him to a very important constitutional position. This practice of political appointments has been going on for successive governments, but has now reached an unprecedented level, which has led to a widely held perception that all state institutions have been fully captured by the party in power. Delwar's failure to recuse himself from the activities of



Prof Delwar Hossain, second from left, gets sworn in as a member of Bangladesh Public Service Commission on February 7, 2022.

FILE PHOTO: BSS

Delwar, a former chairman of the Department of International Relations at Dhaka University, told the media that he did not apply for the party position, but was made one of the expert members of the committee anyway. However, AL International Affairs Secretary Shammi Ahmed told a local daily that Delwar had been informed of his inclusion and gave his consent. If the professor is to be believed, then the Awami League stands accused of forming an expert committee by not only ignoring the constitution, but also imposing a responsibility upon someone without even checking whether he is willing or not. No one is doubting Delwar's scholarly abilities and contribution to the country's foreign policy area, but it is hard to believe that the ruling party, which could find 55 other willing experts, would have been crippled without him.

Prof Delwar Ahmed has been well-known in the academic circle and beyond as an ardent supporter of the Awami League, and understandably it was one of the prerequisites of a political government to consider

Awami League gives further credence to such a perception.

People with multiple commitments and working for the better future of the country and society do need appreciation and encouragement. But there are quite a few offices in which the holder has to confine themselves within their remit and sacrifice many other things, including not-for-profit work. That's why we see Supreme Court judges or election commissioners disassociate themselves from non government organisations, be it research-oriented or charity.

The BPSC members, too, get and enjoy equal status, job protection and privileges for a purpose, which is to make them neutral and independent both in essence and appearance. If writing newspaper columns, appearing on talk shows and chairing a think tank remain someone's preference, then wouldn't it have been better for them to not take the responsibility of a constitutional office? How can serving a particular party's interest be termed as not against the oath of office of the BPSC?

## The five Bangalee love languages



Syeda Samara Mortada, a feminist activist, is co-founder of Bonhishikha, a feminist organisation working to unlearn gender and create a platform for the youth to share their gender-based experiences.

SYEDA SAMARA MORTADA

Most of us have probably heard of the five love languages by Gary Chapman – words of affirmation, quality time, acts of service, gifts, and touch – the different ways of expressing love and how it varies from person to person. In retrospect, it may also vary from culture to culture, and I recently came to realise what the different Bangalee love languages are, and how we Bangalees demonstrate love to our close ones in contrast to the globally affirmed love languages we have all come to learn. So, without further ado, presenting to you, the Bangalee love languages!

The first one would most definitely be "Bhaat khabi" ("Want to have rice")? Every child has heard this from their parents at some point in their lives – when their parent has yelled at them, called them names, and maybe also said, "Tor moton ekta shontan thakar cheye na thaka bhalo" ("It is better to not have a child than to have one like you"). That burst of anger, when it ultimately settles down, is usually met with a "Bhaat Khabi?" One has to understand the emotion of *bhaat* and what its essence is to a Bangalee. *Bhaat* is, for the lack of a better word, unabashed love. And while the



ILLUSTRATION: REHNUMA PROSHOON

quantity and quality of *bhaat* may differ from household to household, *bhaat* is a must-have at least once a day, if not more, in every Bangalee family's meal plan. Now, *bhaat* may be accompanied by meat, *daal*, salad, the works, but when you want to make a peace offering, you offer *bhaat*. While this love language is usually between a parent and a child, it could very well translate to romantic relationships. I am still trying to analyse what those different nuances could look like.

Now, imagine if it is June/July. Summer time, which equals mango time. The love language, as one would presume, would also differ from season to season, and so very quickly *bhaat* can be replaced by *aam* (mango), and thus become "Aam khabi?" ("Want to eat mango?"). When parents are even more deeply guilty for a specific

behaviour, they would go down the *aam* road. Let's also be clear that there is no saying sorry or thank you in Bengali culture, nor is there a tradition of saying "I love you" to express love to our close ones, although this sentiment might differ when it comes to romantic couples. One might be wondering if all Bangalee love languages are related to food. But that's not the case. While food is an epitome of expressing love, we Bangalees do have some more forms of expressions up our sleeves!

I invite you to continue reading, dear readers.

Since I have up until now only delved into romantic forms of relationships, let us get into the deep, the dark – the love language of couples. The first and foremost in this case would be "Pic pathao" ("Send me a photo"). And while the content of the photo may vary from couple to couple, or what time of the day it is, or the relationship between two individuals, saying "I love you" is best replaced by "Pic pathao." And the rarer the photo is, the deeper one's love can be felt.

Another one of my favourites would be getting the bill for something that your partner has purchased. It could be clothes, it could be groceries, it could be the bill at a restaurant. As soon as the receipt arrives, if you take out your wallet from your front pocket/bag, and take out those fresh Tk 500 notes, and say "I got this," this shows love is like love unknown. Welcome, dear readers, to the world of adult loving.

Last but not the least, the most intense and selfless act of showing love would be when you share your social media passwords with your partner. When your partner knows your Facebook and email passwords, it means that you have nothing to hide, and that you would go to the end of the world for the other person and be faithful for ever after. Now remember, these practices might not be approved by global lovers, but to us Bangalees, well, we just hit differently. So, the next time you do not want to say those three words to your partner, try one of the above and make 'em feel loved. Good luck!