

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

## What does govt really prioritise?

Low allocations for sectors that ensure people's well-being is unacceptable

Over the years, we have noticed an alarming pattern of inadequate budgetary allocation for crucial sectors that prioritise people's well-being, despite repeated warnings from concerned stakeholders about the devastating impact it would have on the nation in the long run. According to a document placed in the planning commission meeting recently, the government allocated even less than what was planned in the 8th five-year plan for several sectors including health, education, agriculture and social protection. For instance, the health sector got 6.16 percent ADP allocation this fiscal year against the projection of 11.1 percent, while education got 13.38 percent against the projection of 16.5 percent.

While upper middle income countries spend around 5.6 percent of their GDP on education, the Bangladesh government spent only 1.64 percent in 2023. The meagre allocations, coupled with inefficient implementation, have resulted in a plethora of challenges, such as outdated infrastructure, insufficient teacher training, and a lack of necessary educational resources. When the government should be providing quality education for free to all, we are witnessing widespread inequality in accessing education, with families having to bear as much as 71 percent of the expenses out of their own pockets, as per the latest Unesco Global Education Monitoring Report. The consequences are dire: a poorly educated workforce, limited opportunities for social mobility, and a compromised national intellectual capital.

The situation is much the same, if not worse, in the health sector. The midterm review report of the 8th five-year plan that was also placed at the above-mentioned meeting highlighted how the low budget for the health sector has been a "historical concern" in Bangladesh, with allocation remaining less than 1 percent of the GDP when it should have been around 3 percent. Our public healthcare system is one of the worst in the subcontinent, with scarcity of medical facilities, understaffed hospitals and insufficient medical supplies, as a result of which people spend a whopping 72 percent out of their own pockets to access proper healthcare. At a time when people are struggling to simply meet their daily needs in the midst of an unending cost-of-living crisis, how are they supposed to afford such high costs for education and healthcare? Meanwhile, instead of increasing budgetary allocation for social protection for the most vulnerable, we are appalled to see that the government has slashed it further over the years.

It is imperative for Bangladesh to reevaluate its budgetary priorities and allocate resources judiciously to sectors that underpin the well-being and progress of the nation. It must also assess why relevant ministries are consistently failing to utilise whatever little is being allocated to them. It shouldn't be lost on the government that a nation cannot simply prosper with lavish infrastructure if it has a poorly educated workforce, an unhealthy population, a struggling agricultural sector, and deep pockets of poverty.

## Is this how we welcome visitors?

Authorities must act against poachers of migratory birds

As much as the government talks about protecting the environment and wildlife, actions do not often follow. Let's take the cruel fate of the migratory birds when they visit our haor areas, for instance. As per a report of daily *Samakal*, local poachers are poisoning or trapping our avian guests in Hakaluki and Hail haors and Baikka beel to sell their meat. This long-standing practice has led to declining rates of these birds coming to our regions. But the question is, why is it long-standing to begin with? Despite government prohibition, poachers are proliferating while the birds are disappearing.

According to the report, poachers have a slew of tactics to sell the bird meat, often in secret, and many restaurants and locals are their customers. These poachers, along with diminishing sources of food, are behind the declining arrival of migratory birds during winters, say experts. Meanwhile, the thousands of tourists who flock to see these birds are also to blame for this decline. The birdwatchers regularly throw leftover food, along with plastic packages, for the animals, which harms the birds' health. Moreover, many villagers don't even know that hunting these birds is a punishable offence.

In 1999, the government announced 75 hectares of Hakaluki as an ecologically critical area. In 2003, the Department of Environment started implementing a project to manage ecological diversity in the wetlands. However, all progress, including that of raising awareness, halted after the project period ended in 2010, and has remained incomplete for the past 14 years, in the absence of a new project.

The negligence becomes even clearer if we look at the broader picture. A study done by a Cambridge University team mentions 13 districts where illegal trade of animals is thriving. This activity is booming largely due to a lack of awareness about the ecosystem, and so, large-scale campaigns to educate people and change behavioural norms, such as eating meat of rare animals, are a must. Most importantly, leaders of poaching rings must be brought to book through robust monitoring and swift action.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Spaces for shared experiences

Among other things, rapid urbanisation has snatched away one important aspect of our culture: *addas*. True, pockets of *addas* still exist, but there is now a severe decline, and spaces for such interactions, where different people from the neighbourhood would gather, either in some *uthan* or tea stall, are dwindling too. We cannot stop infrastructural changes or urbanisation, but I believe we must preserve these cultural characteristics in our march towards development.

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# Our energy plan is full of pitfalls



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MAHA MIRZA

In 2016, the government prepared a master plan for the energy sector of the country (Power System Master Plan). It was positioned as a comprehensive guide for the country's power and energy sector. However, as time unfolded, the master plan appeared to be a path to financial disaster, due to a number of key issues.

### Heavy reliance on external entities

The Power System Master Plan heavily prioritised foreign investment, foreign companies and imported energy sources when perfectly viable domestic alternatives are available. The administration contracted a bunch of foreign companies to build mega coal power plants and terminals, while it heavily relied on foreign banks to fund such projects. What is more problematic is that the master plan, devised by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (Jica), bypassed the recommendations of local energy experts, which raised questions about whether the plan truly aligns with the domestic needs and capabilities of the country.

Ultimately, such reliance on external entities has led to a scenario where vital energy decisions of the country are now being heavily influenced by foreign interests.

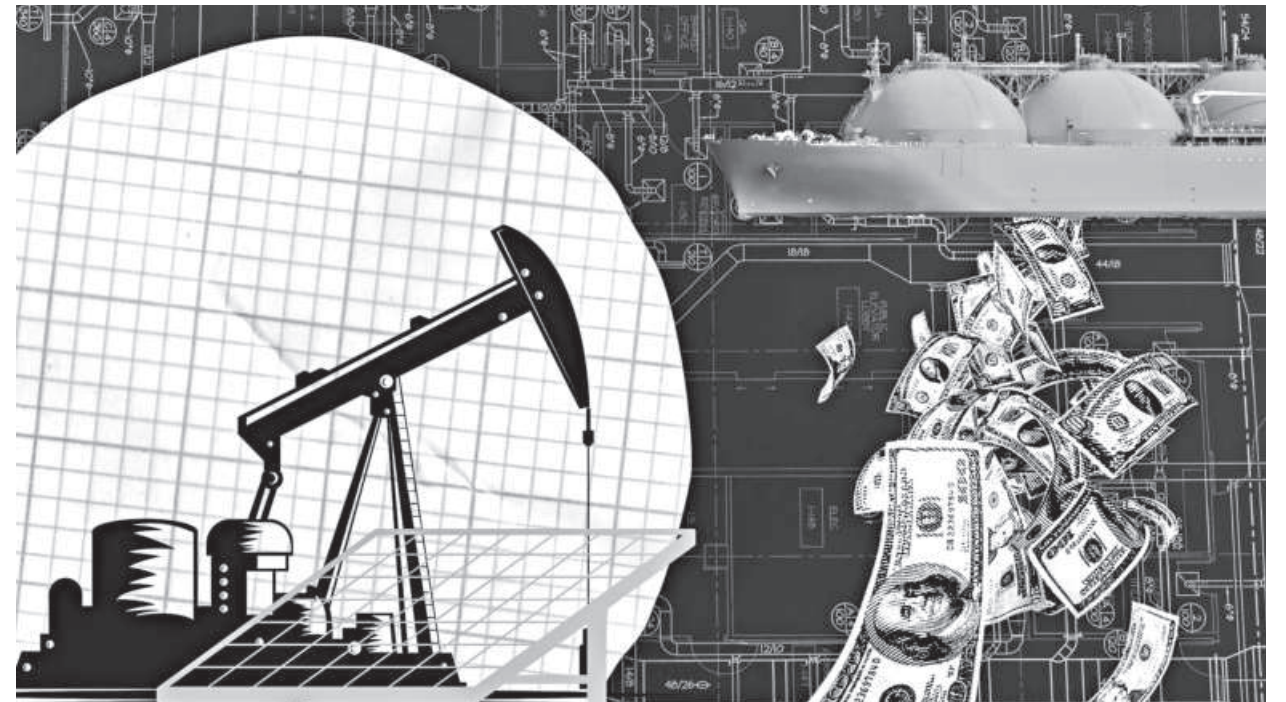
### The perils of imported coal and LNG

The master plan heavily leaned towards imported fuels, such as oil, liquefied natural gas (LNG), and coal. It outlined extensive plans for increasing coal usage, building coal plants, and importing a massive amount of LNG, despite its higher cost and environmentally destructive nature. The experts have long cautioned that such huge plans for coal import (as much as 80 percent of Bangladesh's energy needs by 2041) will have dangerous consequences both for the country's foreign exchange reserves and environment.

Relying heavily on coal also raises ethical questions about the government's commitment to sustainable development. The plan outlined significant coal projects, intending to achieve 35 percent of the energy mix from coal by 2030. Environmental concerns, along with concerns regarding the potentially

catastrophic financial impact of a high level of import, have been raised by organisations such as Market Forces. The long-term consequences of such a trajectory could transform Bangladesh into a carbon-intensive nation.

Experts have long warned that this overreliance on imported fuels would put the economy at severe financial risk. The extremely volatile nature of the global market and geopolitical



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events can drastically impact the availability and pricing of these resources.

In an era where sustainable alternatives are gaining prominence globally, the master plan's focus on traditional and environmentally taxing fuels raises serious concerns about the long-term viability of the energy security of the country.

### Neglected domestic gas

What really never made sense was the plan's prioritisation of imported LNG over domestic gas. Experts have consistently warned against neglecting domestic gas exploration and extraction in favour of LNG imports.

The cost difference is stark, with imported LNG being highly expensive compared to domestic gas.

Geologists have constantly reminded us about the high potential of unexplored gas reserves in Bangladesh. Investing in domestic gas exploration and extraction could easily reduce dependency on costly imported fuels. However, the government chose to ignore it.

Meanwhile, the failure to secure long-term contracts for LNG at favourable rates in the international market also raises questions about the capability of the administration.

Revisiting the domestic gas potential of Bangladesh is imperative. The master plan's disregard for domestic gas resources has not only inflated energy costs but also left Bangladesh vulnerable to international market fluctuations.

be underestimated. A thorough investigation into media coverage, affiliations, and lobbying efforts is essential for ensuring a transparent and unbiased energy policy-making process. This is important to ensure that the information disseminated is unbiased and reflects the best interests of the public.

### Renewables neglected

While global trends show an increasing reliance on renewable energy, surprisingly, the government's master plan neglects this sector. What's most alarming is that the new master plan for the Energy and Power Sector, titled Integrated Energy and Power Master Plan (IEPMP), which sets out the country's energy plans up to 2050, also developed with the technical expertise of Jica, is more or less a continuation of

### Media and lobbying

There has been some speculation regarding a coordinated effort behind promoting LNG imports, with suspicions of a local and foreign lobby pushing for these changes. Media campaigns highlighting "diminishing gas reserves" and the "dire need for LNG imports" have created a narrative that certainly serves the interests of vested groups. Notable examples include journalists regularly associating with officials of LNG and LPG companies, raising questions about the authenticity of media reporting on vital energy issues.

The media's role in shaping public opinion on energy policies cannot

the 2016 masterplan. The lack of emphasis on solar and wind power development is glaring, particularly, when considering the plummeting costs of these sources. A comparison with India, a country with similar land constraints, highlights the missed opportunities in harnessing renewable energy.

In conclusion, the Power System Master Plan requires a holistic reassessment to address the myriad challenges it poses to Bangladesh's energy sector. The prioritisation of foreign dependency, neglect of domestic resources, and insufficient focus on renewable energy alternatives demand urgent attention.

# What does science tell us about social media addiction?

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Our society is entrapped in an infinite maze of unavoidable notifications and unproductive videos from social media. Everyone talks of crossing this maze of addiction with numerous conjectural techniques. However, understanding the science behind social media obsession can help people know the logic behind their addictive practices and help them overcome such issues.

In this era of momentous modernisation, people are getting more and more addicted to social media, and most are unaware of their own dependency. Social media gives people an instant dopamine rush and makes them feel ecstatic. Dopamine is a neurotransmitter released when we feel an unprecedented rush of motivation or when we are in complete expectation of a reward. In simpler words, it is a chemical generated in our body that makes us feel ecstatic. To gain the same rush or pleasure that we felt in the initial stages of using social media, we must spend more hours each passing day, as our body gets resistant to artificial dopamine rushes quickly.

The body has a natural baseline for dopamine, and whenever people want to feel a peak of dopamine rush, in other words, "artificial happiness," they have to cross the baseline. At one

point, the body's baseline dopamine is artificially raised because of constant consumption of social media. Soon, the body becomes increasingly unresponsive to the naturally produced dopamine, which is way lower than the artificial one.

As time passes, it craves an artificial rush, and the individual spends more time on social media, leading to a further rise in the baseline and a further craving for social media to cross the baseline. So, from 10 minutes to 40 minutes to one hour, the consumption continues. This is known as the "Hedonic Treadmill Theory." This theory explains that everything that is addictive in life must be consumed in larger amounts over time to receive the same stimulation as its initial stages, because the human body easily becomes resistant to smaller doses of the same thing. Therefore, it leads to addiction. According to Forbes magazine, an average teenager spends 5.8 hours daily on social media, and this rate is increasing alarmingly.

Meanwhile, the euphoric sensation of pleasure and the undesirable feeling of pain are both controlled in the same sector of the human brain. Our body has a balancing system, scientifically called "homeostasis." This modulates both emotions simultaneously, akin to a seesaw. Instead of children, the seesaw is occupied by pleasure on

one side and pain on the other. When pleasure goes up, pain consequently goes down, and vice versa. Our body never wants an imbalance to occur. The body searches for ways to bring the seesaw to a base level. This is called the "Seesaw Theory."

When spending excessive time on social media, the metrics of pleasure go up. Nowadays, people mostly watch Reels and TikTok, where the videos end very quickly. As soon as the video finishes, our brain feels a sense of "completion." Usually, whenever our body completes any action, it releases dopamine, which makes us feel "rewarded." We chase this feeling of reward repeatedly, as we know that we can get it quickly through short videos on social media. This makes social media a uniquely attractive source of happiness and reward.

This sense of pleasure continues to rise if we continue with the consumption: the pleasure side of the seesaw goes up. Now there is more pleasure than pain. This keeps on rising, as long as we stay on social media. However, as soon as we leave our mobile screens, the body regains its control on the seesaw. Now, there is no more external force, such as social media, misleading our brains. The body immediately senses the disproportionate distribution of the two feelings. It tips the seesaw towards

the side of pain with equal force and intensity. Soon, we feel huge pain and search for ways to regain "pleasure." Therefore, we resort to watching social media again, and soon it leads to addiction.

However, there are ways to get rid of this addiction. Involving yourself in physical activities, like sports or exercise, increases dopamine naturally, leading to less usage of social media. Societal engagement also helps, as conversing about yourself with others and receiving their validation makes people feel rewarded and enhances internal peace. Thirdly, practise panoramic vision for 17 minutes each day. Focus on your breathing process and the surrounding environment in nature. This helps maintain mental agility and regain control over your own choices.

Contributing to society and helping others also make us feel happier and rewarded, while self-control is imperative. The first two weeks of leaving social media will make us feel dopamine deficient, but in the third week, our brain reinforces control over our pleasure-pain system naturally, making us feel better. Besides, we can practise NSDR (non-sleep deep rest); this increases baseline dopamine by up to 65 percent in a natural and beneficial way. Meanwhile, spending some time under morning sunlight increases cortisol, a chemical that gives us energy and enforces dopamine throughout our body, making us feel elated. Finally, learning new skills, such as coding or a new language or musical instrument, makes us feel rewarded every day.