

Make protecting rivers top priority

Govt must make the best use of new classification initiative

We welcome the initiative taken by Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA) to bring 10,187 kilometres of non-classified river under classification to protect them from unplanned structures, such as bridges and culverts. The BIWTA is also reviewing the already classified routes for reclassification. This initiative is supposed to ensure better navigability of our rivers and save many of them from extinction.

According to a report in this daily, the BIWTA is implementing a Tk 18.3-crore project, with assistance from the Institute of Water Modelling (IWM), to determine or review the standard high-water level (SHWL) and standard low-water level (SLWL) of 16,155 kilometres of river in total (Currently, 5,968 kilometres of river or 95 river routes are classified). Data from 442 water-level stations from four different agencies, including the BIWTA, accumulated over the last 25 years, has been analysed to figure out the SHWL and SLWL of these river routes. Based on the findings from this project, the BIWTA has prepared a list of 367 river routes that need to be classified or re-classified. The classification system will consider the least available depth, the importance of the waterway, the traffic intensity, and the level of dependency on the route.

On paper, this initiative seems rather promising. But given the rampant irregularities in river management that we have witnessed for years, we cannot help but feel sceptical about its success. Is the BIWTA properly equipped to withstand the exertion of power by the local political influentials—some of whom are closely connected with the government—from building structures over the rivers as they please? Then there are some government agencies who have also defied the BIWTA's authority in the past to build small bridges. And what about indiscriminate encroachment, which also disrupts natural water flow and kills navigability?

Only a couple of days ago, our state minister for shipping said almost one-third of our rivers had lost navigability. In order to bring them back to their former glory, this initiative could prove to be effective—if properly implemented and strictly adhered to. Saving our rivers must be a top priority for the government right now. This will need coordinated efforts from all agencies, and there can be no scope for anyone—even someone with political influence—to put their toe out of line. The government must also equip the BIWTA with the authority to hold anyone who defies its rules to account. We have no time to waste when it comes to our rivers.

Why has family planning stagnated?

Govt must give due priority to this essential public health service

It is quite concerning that a country as densely populated as Bangladesh has not updated its family planning structures for almost two decades. The significant gap in the need for and availability of family planning services, particularly in rural areas, raises serious questions about the health authorities' commitment to public health and women's empowerment. According to a recent report by *Prothom Alo*, there are 11,145 vacant positions at different levels of the Directorate General of Family Planning—almost 23 percent of all its jobs—among which over 9,000 are field-level jobs. Meanwhile, the government's stock of various reproductive health products is dwindling, and some districts are completely out of contraceptive and/or menstrual hygiene products. This acute shortage of reproductive health supplies and absence of field officers—who provide door-to-door services—are not just logistical issues; they reflect a deeper neglect of reproductive health priorities of the government.

Per a report published in this daily, contraceptive use has seen only a six percent increase over 19 years, from 48 percent to 54 percent. This slow growth, coupled with the consistent 12 percent unmet need for contraception, underscores the failure of responsible authorities to adapt to the evolving needs of the population. In rural areas, the challenges intensify due to poor transportation, widespread illiteracy, and social stigma against family planning. The situation in Moulvibazar is illustrative, where a 2019 study by the Society for Environment and Human Development, the Centre for Injury Prevention and Research Bangladesh (CIPRB), and the United Nations Population Fund found high rates of early marriage and low contraceptive use.

We cannot help but ask: how can such an essential component of the healthcare system be overlooked? And what does this imply about the priority given to women's health and rights in Bangladesh?

To effectively address these issues, a multifaceted approach is required. The government must launch a comprehensive campaign to promote shared contraceptive responsibility and address social stigmas and gender biases in family planning. Educating about male contraceptive methods and raising awareness about the adverse side effects women face due to contraception are essential. Additionally, the government must prioritise filling the vacant positions and ensuring adequate contraceptive supplies. These actions are not just measures to improve family planning services but are pivotal for ensuring public health, gender equality, and the overall well-being of the population.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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The menace of littering

After witnessing the aftermath of this year's February 14 celebrations, I was disheartened to see a veritable graveyard of plastic waste strewn across beloved locales like Jagannath Hall Field, Suhrawardy Udyan, and TSC in Dhaka. It's clear to me that many of my fellow Dhaka residents haven't yet grasped the grave environmental impact that careless littering holds. I strongly urge our city authorities to step up and create a robust disposal system, and if necessary, impose fines to discourage reckless littering, especially of plastics.

Uday Sikder Paltan, Dhaka

The dairyman that won our hearts



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

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SHAMSAD MORTUZA

It doesn't get sweeter than this. A 90-year-old curd seller has been awarded the second highest civilian award in Bangladesh, Ekushey Padak, introduced in memory of the martyrs of the Bangla Language Movement of 1952. In a world where praise and prizes often grace the heads of the sweet-talking and the well-connected, the story of Ziaul Haque's story is both heartwarming and humbling.

A selfless man from Chapainawabganj, Ziaul dedicated his entire life to creating a public library with the little bit of profit he made from selling curd. His father forced him to drop out of school in 1957 after he passed the Class 5 exams with credible success. His father told him that he could not spare three taka and two annas on his books when a taka would fetch five kilos of rice. Ziaul then joined his father's curdling profession.

The business gradually improved because there was not enough competition. "I go to bed with a filled stomach under a safe roof, but my heart remains restless. I had the hunger to get books, especially for those who could not afford them." He wanted to give the children in his village the chance to get an education, which he was denied. He started a textbook lending service in his own home for those who couldn't buy books. He realised that for a complete intellectual makeup, you need books of all sorts. Every year, he spends Tk 20,000-50,000 to buy books. His library now has over 14,000 titles, and about 450 of its users are employed in various government and private agencies. After receiving Ekushey Padak, the dairyman talked to this newspaper. I realised both his conviction and the size of his library have simply strengthened over the years.

Earlier in 2007, a Unilever campaign for unsung heroes with beautiful minds, "Shada Moner Manush," identified the bibliophile Ziaul. He was interviewed by a TV channel at that time. He began by saying, "Doi ar boi, ei niye amar jibon" (Curd and books, that's my life). The rhymed statement led me to the memory lane to meet a

fictional dairyman, whose story was a staple in our children's literature and part of our growing up: the curd seller in Tagore's play *The Post Office*.

Ziaul's story felt like a sequel featuring Amal, the dying child in Tagore's play who's confined to a room due to his illness, and the gallery of people from the outside world who come to his window. There's one dairyman with whom Amal strikes up a casual conversation. The sound of a dairyman hawking "Curds, curds, good nice curds," later mimicked by Amal in the play, rings in my ears.

Amal tells the hawker that he has visited the dairyman's village in his imagination and seen the River Shamli at the foot of the Panchmura hills. The dairyman is so impressed by Amal's vivid description of his village that he promises the child that he will take him to the village once the doctor allows him to do so. Amal then requests that he be shown how to hawk curds. The dairyman reacts by saying, "Why should you sell curds? No, you'll read big books and learn."

Amal then says, "No, I never want to be taught—I'll be like you and take my curds from the village by the red road near the old banyan tree, and I will hawk them from cottage to cottage. Oh, how do you cry? 'Curd, curd, good, nice curd!' Will you teach me the tune, will you?"

The dairyman replies, "Dear, dear, teach you the tune; what an idea!" The conversation ends with Amal

of Ziaul hearkens us back to a time beyond neoliberalism that has incentivised greed. The juxtaposition of curds and books makes me think about Amal and the dairyman's afterlife. *The Post Office* portrays Amal as a boy by the window, always waiting for a conversation with others. During the World Wars, this play assumed a different connotation. The play was broadcast on French radio when the



VISUAL: REHNUMA PROSHOON

asking whether he has kept the hawker waiting too long. The dairyman answers, "Not a bit; it has been no loss to me at all; you have taught me how to be happy selling curds." (Translation by Dababrat Mukherjee, 1914).

Just like Amal inspired the curd seller to find his inner child and the joy of doing what he does, the story of Ziaul inspires us too. At a time when a book is considered an antiquated object, when publication of books is greeted with reels and memes, when writers make a buzz not for the merit of their writings but for their quirky lifestyles, when the only big news coming out of the fair is a list of aesthetically pleasing stalls, when the traditional book fair learns to replicate some of the corporate events that take place in the Bangla Academy premises, or when crowds go to the fair not to buy books but to mark their social calendar due to a fear of missing out (fomo), the story of the dairyman sweetens our memory.

In this month where we celebrate sacrifices for languages, the sacrifice

country was under Nazi occupation. "The play is more than a text; it is a mood; it conveys more than emotions; it is an experience; and the actors are more than actors; they are children," explained Janusz Korczak, the director of the play who staged it featuring children of a ghetto in Warsaw. Asked why he had selected this particular play, Korczak replied, "We must all learn to face the angel of death." Three weeks after the performance on July 18, 1942, all of the child performers and the director were taken to death camps.

Like Amal, we are all stranded behind our screen windows, witnessing yet another mass killing and defeat of humanity. Often, we are reminded of the power of books that encapsulate and transport life. As we all wait for death, human spirits such as Amal's—read: Ziaul's—offer a last flicker at the wick of life to spread light against an all-pervading darkness. Let's try to learn the tune of the dairyman's cry and walk the roads of life with a heart full of joy.

PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

No one wins in a lose-lose world

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If the international community was ever on track towards a more peaceful and just global order, it was during the early post-Cold War years. While global governance was not free of flaws, the risk of a great-power war seemed low, and poverty was declining. Moreover, the initial results of summits dedicated to promoting development and safeguarding the environment raised hopes for breakthrough solutions to humanity's most pressing problems.

But geopolitical tensions and economic uncertainty have long since crowded out the optimism and ambition of that era. Rather than working together to address urgent challenges, the international community is now "gridlocked in colossal global dysfunction," as UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres put it.

Worse, many states no longer seem to care about the wider benefits of the liberal world order; they are more worried about their own slice of the pie. Key actors in the transatlantic community, powerful autocracies, and the so-called Global South have all become dissatisfied with what they perceive as an unequal distribution of the gains from global cooperation.

In many Western countries, large parts of the population believe that their piece of the pie is shrinking, owing to what they see as a general trend of domestic stagnation and decline. New data from the Munich Security Index

shows that few people in the G7 today believe that their countries will be more secure and wealthier a decade from now. Moreover, many expect China, as well as Brazil, India, and South Africa, to become much more powerful over that period.

Populist politicians in the West are adept at exploiting the fear of decline, but the nationalist policies they propose could accelerate the process. Even non-populist leaders have grown wary of globalisation, as the downsides of increasing interdependence become apparent.

China arguably has been the main beneficiary of the liberal economic order. Having helped grow the global pie, Chinese leaders now believe their country deserves a bigger slice, and that the United States is in fact the revisionist power attempting to halt China's rise and prevent it from assuming its proper role on the global stage.

Faced with several domestic challenges, including a shrinking population, a property crisis, and high levels of government debt, China will likely focus even more on relative gains in the coming years. While Chinese leaders continue to speak of "win-win" cooperation, others joke that now it means China wins twice. Clearly, Chinese policies in recent years have led some to grow more sceptical of its long-term goals and even prompted a few to "de-risk" their

relations with the country.

Others are not worried about their share of the pie getting smaller, because they believe it was paltry in the first place. To people living in poverty or suffering from protracted conflicts, calls to defend the abstract rules-based order and shoulder the accompanying costs sound tone-deaf and intended to

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reinforce Western dominance.

Many Global South countries know well that they will suffer the most from increasing geopolitical fragmentation. That is why they try to avoid taking sides and instead call for multi-alignment, which would allow them to pursue their own interests. But the transactional diplomacy that some of these countries endorse, with its focus on bilateral deals and short-term

wins, could undermine the long-term prospects only a rules-based system can provide.

As more states define their success relative to others, a vicious cycle of zero-sum thinking could begin, undermining shared prosperity and exacerbating geopolitical tensions. This lose-lose scenario is already unfolding in many policy fields and engulfing various regions. Even climate policy, perhaps the best example of how global cooperation can benefit all, risks falling prey to concerns about which country might gain at another's expense.

There are valid reasons for some of these policy choices: "de-risking" economic relations is a rational response to a more competitive environment and can help reduce vulnerabilities. But the increasing fragmentation of the world economy into competing geopolitical blocs could derail growth, especially in low-income countries. Reduced economic growth, in turn, nurtures a zero-sum mindset—creating a self-fulfilling prophecy.

In the face of geopolitical uncertainty, it is understandable that a country would want to protect its piece of the pie. But the international community must prevent fears of unequal outcomes from prevailing in policy debates. Above all, efforts to protect individual shares must be balanced with attempts to enlarge the pie. This will require building new partnerships, based on mutually beneficial cooperation, and reforming the rules-based international order to ensure that the gains are shared broadly. If these efforts fail, every slice is destined to shrink—and countries will end up competing over who loses less.