

Rocky road ahead for economy

Continued misgovernance will push it into deeper trouble

According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), the country's quarterly GDP growth has halved to 3.78 percent in the second quarter of FY2023-24, the slowest pace in three quarters. This, along with a number of other factors, should make it abundantly clear that the economy is not heading in the right direction. As growth slows, inflation has edged close to double digits, rising to 9.81 percent in March. With prices rising and wages failing to maintain parity with it, consumers are feeling increased pressure as their buying capacity continues to erode over time. This is leading to decreasing domestic demand, which is also affecting businesses and investment.

The World Bank and the Asian Development Bank had earlier projected that Bangladesh's GDP growth will be comparatively lower than in previous years. However, it is not just growth that is weakening. According to the BBS, the expansion of industrial production worsened to 3.24 percent in the October-December period of 2023 from 10 percent in the same period a year before. The services sector, which accounts for half of the GDP, increased 3.06 percent in the second quarter of FY2023-24 against a growth of 6.62 percent in the same period of the last fiscal year. And growth in manufacturing actually saw a 0.45 percent decline in the second quarter of the current fiscal year.

Economists have identified three main factors for the overall decline in growth: macroeconomic mismanagement, import restrictions, and a distressed financial sector. Due to previous policy mistakes leading to the foreign currency reserves crisis, it can be argued that the government had no choice but to implement import restrictions. However, the government can have no excuse for its macroeconomic mismanagement and the distressed financial sector, given that its own policies have fed these. For years, we have stressed in this column the urgent need for financial sector reforms. But far from it, the government has continually allowed defaulted loans to grow, weakening the financial sector, by protecting vested quarters responsible for the looting of the sector.

Unabated corruption, extortion and other abuses by powerful interest groups have caused unimaginable harm to the economy. And it is an undeniable historical fact that when corruption thrives, the economy ultimately suffers—as ours is currently doing. Therefore, unless the government acknowledges this reality and conjures up the political will to change things around, it is safe to say that the economy is heading into darker clouds.

Save our migrants in Malaysia

Govt must act for Bangladeshi workers trapped there

Over the past month, The Daily Star has published multiple reports and editorials about Bangladeshi migrants who face unmet promises and exploitative employers in Malaysia. However, we are dismayed to learn that authorities in the destination country are actually taking action against workers and on behalf of corrupt employers. In a recent letter to the Malaysian attorney general, the Malaysian Socialist Party (PSM) alleged that despite complaints to the police and the human resources department, filed by migrants and the PSM, no action has been taken against employers who confiscated workers' passports and failed to provide them with jobs and salaries. Instead, Malaysian police are now investigating employers' claims that the complaints filed by Bangladeshi workers are fake. There are also claims of employers having taken workers' signatures on blank papers, which the latter fear could be used against them. In such circumstances, the support extended to our migrants by the PSM is admirable.

Unfortunately, such blatant use of intimidation by Malaysian employers against Bangladeshi migrants has been a continuous thing, largely unopposed by authorities in both countries. Then there's the dominance of corrupt syndicates in the recruiting process and the sky-high amounts workers must borrow to pay off recruiters. As we know from previous reports, researchers estimate that out of around 800,000 Bangladeshi migrant workers, between 100,000 and 200,000 remain jobless, unpaid, and in debt.

Bangladesh's connection with Malaysia, in terms of exporting its human resources there, has been a murky one for decades. But the trial-and-error process of making recruitment corruption-free has resulted in too many lives (of Bangladeshi workers) ruined and even lost altogether. We know a government-to-government process, bypassing private agencies, was adopted in 2012 to solve the crisis. But since that failed, why have we not seen our government hardening its approach of sending our workers to Malaysia? What of those workers who are now trapped in that country, their passports seized, and justice eluding them? This cannot be.

We urge the government to wake up and pay attention to the harrowing reality of the hundreds of migrants in Malaysia. Our authorities must compel their counterpart in the destination country to put an end to the exploitation and discrimination committed by the Malaysian employers. The dream of a stable livelihood in a foreign country cannot keep turning into a nightmare for the thousands of Bangladeshis in Malaysia.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Heat island of Dhaka

Visiting our rural hometowns over the Eid holidays, many of us have come back with the realisation of how much hotter the weather is in our capital city. Unabated and unplanned urbanisation has turned Dhaka into a jungle of heat-absorbent structures. And we know that our world will only get hotter. Are Dhaka dwellers doomed to suffer the worst of the heat each year? Our city authorities must adopt strategies such as installing green roofs, preserving greenery, replace normal pavements with cool pavements, etc. Dhaka must not become more of an urban heat island over time.

Suraiya Jebin
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How much you can pay decides what education your child gets



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The compulsory education law adopted in 1990 requires that the state provides primary education up to Class 5 of acceptable quality, free of cost, to all children in Bangladesh. But the government has not accepted such an obligation for secondary education. After three decades since the primary education pledge was made, the cost of a child's education remains a heavy burden for some 80 lakh households below or close to the poverty line in the country.

A Brac Institute of Educational Development (Brac IED) study titled "Non-state actors in education" (2022), prepared for the Global Education Monitoring Report, estimated that of around 44 million students in Bangladesh (excluding those in Qawmi madrasa), 42 percent attend institutions fully supported by the state (the majority being primary schools), 38 percent go to non-government institutions assisted by the state, and 20 percent go to private institutions without support from the state. But even in state institutions, the study noted, there is substantial non-government contribution, mainly in the form of household expenditure for children's education.

The Education Watch 2023 report found that, between 2022 and 2023, a family's out-of-pocket costs per school-going child increased by 25 percent and 51 percent at the primary and secondary levels, respectively. The average annual family cost per child in 2023 was Tk 17,294 and Tk 41,424 for primary and secondary levels, respectively—about a quarter less for rural areas. Private tutoring and commercial guidebooks were major contributors to these costs.

According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), the average monthly family income was Tk 32,422 in 2022. Schooling cost is a big burden, especially for about two crore households in the country earning below average income, especially if they have more than one school-going child.

In this context of systemic disparity, the initiative to roll out a new curriculum in 2022 proposing major changes in classroom practices and in assessing students' learning is seen by many as a partial and fragmented response, attempting to address symptoms rather than the root of the problem. The critics are concerned about the readiness of schools, teachers, students, and parents for the radical changes being attempted. In fact, the changes were justified by the authorities as a way of weaning students off private tutoring and commercial guidebooks, thus



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reducing household costs. However, anecdotal evidence indicates that the materials needed for the project work and the ICT access now required for students have added to family expenses, while students and teachers are still reluctant to give up private tutoring and guidebooks.

Systematic discrimination and the denial of equal opportunities characterise the education system in Bangladesh. A comprehensive national plan for quality schooling, looking at it from a rights perspective, does not exist. The target set in Education Policy 2010 to obtain education up to Class 8 by 2014 is yet to be reached. Now, in 2024, in light of the SDG 4 target, it is necessary to consider compulsory and free education of acceptable quality up to Class 10 and eventually Class 12. Yet, no such national plan exists, nor does it seem to be under consideration.

A major fault line in school provisions is between rural areas (where 70 percent of the children live) and urban localities. City slums are an exception to the pattern, where education facilities are often worse than those in rural areas. Rural schools are at a disadvantage in respect of capable and motivated teachers, adequacy of infrastructure, and availability of effective and operational digital technology. Sociocultural norms discourage girls to realise their potential, even though more of them are enrolled in school than boys.

Various Education Watch reports and other studies have documented the educational disparities affecting populations in geographically remote and ecologically disadvantaged areas (such as haors, chars, hills, and coastal areas), cultural and ethnic minorities, and children with disabilities and in especially difficult circumstances (such as street children, working children,

large number of students at primary and secondary levels, and distributed free textbooks to all students of mainstream schools. These measures expanded access to education in a major way, but only partially mitigated the disparities in the system noted above. The scale of effort and effectiveness of implementation remained deficient. More significantly, expansion did not

match learning outcomes, thus limiting the impact of the initiatives.

It is a no-brainer that to offer equal and inclusive opportunity for education, a state-run or state-assisted primary and a secondary school of acceptable quality must exist in every locality across the country. To attain this goal, planning and management of school education should be decentralised to each upazila, union, and city ward. The declining trend of public investment in education (in real terms), which has persisted for a decade, has to end. More importantly, use of resources has to be guided by comprehensive planning and strategies to address the various disparities and reduce the burden of costs on families.

But how will all this happen? This author and others have been advocating education leadership initiatives for transformative change in the sector. Two helpful steps would be: a) to bring school education management under the leadership of one ministry to allow coordinated and holistic development; and b) to establish a high-power statutory permanent education commission as recommended in the Education Policy 2010. These measures can work only with high-level political commitment to enable the system to work by protecting educational institutions and decision-making from partisan and short-sighted political calculations.

It has been argued that three major schooling streams reflected the social class division in the country (madrasas largely serving the poor, middle and lower-middle class enrolling their children in Bangla schools, and the powerful elites patronising the English medium institutions). The diverse streams reinforced the existing class division in society.

The state did assume responsibility for most primary schools, adopted the compulsory primary education law in 1990, offered a monthly stipend to a

The philosophical undertones of writings on public transport

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Writings on public transport are loaded with moral teachings. The origin of this practice cannot be ascertained, but public vehicles during the 1980s and 1990s were without such long writings, as far as I can recall. Other than *Bhepu bajan* (Honk please) or *Thamun* (Stop), these writings were rarely seen. But do many commuters pay attention to these writings? I myself have done so for quite a long time. Nowadays, the most common message on public vehicles is *Prithibir shobcheye boro adalat manusher bibek* (The world's biggest courtroom is one's conscience). Of course, we all know that the one thing in short supply is our conscience; even if it is inside us, it is in eternal hibernation.

Consider another one: *Ghum bhangle shokal, na bhangle porokal* (If you wake up, it's the morning; if you don't, it's the afterlife). It aims to teach commuters the importance of religion in our lives. Then, there are messages like *Mohajon shahab kinlen gari, driver shaheb charlen bari* (Mr Merchant buys a car, and Mr Driver leaves home). This line is

obvious. Because of urbanisation and globalisation, both people and goods are moving frequently from one place to another. More and more automobiles are needed to meet this growing need. That's why the merchant bought a vehicle, and the driver left his home to come to the city and earn a living.

The thoughtful and philosophical themes of these writings surely make us ponder the ubiquity of human intellect. These writings on public transport are the reflection of social rules and norms and the harsh reality we try to escape sometimes.

I once saw this one written on the back of a CNG-run auto-rickshaw: *Jokhon shomoy kharap jay tokhon ghorio jiggesh kore koyta baje* (When

the times are tough, even the clock asks if everything is okay). When someone is in distress, are we always too busy to listen to their stories?

Another common writing is *Ekti durghotona, shara jiboner kanna* (One accident can cause lifelong sorrow). We all know the importance of safe driving. But blaming the



drivers only for accidents will not solve the problem. It is not that some drivers are always looking for the adrenaline rush. One driver once told me that he could not sleep the night before because of a long-haul drive, and he was feeling sleepy. But he was forced to drive on another trip, and I happened to be one of his passengers. I could do nothing but sympathise with him, while hoping to reach my destination in one piece.

Messages like *Apnar shontan ke school e pathan* (Send your child to school) underscores the importance of formal education in our lives. It is also time to think about the quality of education not in terms of grades, rather in terms of attaining human qualities. Another message that caught my attention was written

on an auto-rickshaw: *Ami chhoto, amake marben na* (I am small, do not hit me). Out of all the different forms of public transportation, CNG-run auto-rickshaws belong to the category of small vehicles. That's why it fears the big vehicles on the road. It reflects society in general where the powerless people feel intimidated by the powerful elites.

Some lines are funny. Some oil tankers are found to have this Hindi sentence written at the back: *Mujhe pyar se dekho* (Look at me with love). Some say: *Chhi chhi tumi eto kache!* (Fie! You are so close to me!). Some vehicles don this message, *100 haat dure thakun* (Stay 100 arms' length away). Sentences like *Mamu, diesel khamu* (Uncle, feed me diesel), *Jodi thake pet bhora, bhoy kori na desh ghura* (If my stomach is full, I am not scared of roaming the country) or *Jonmo theke jolchhi, ami diesel bolchhi* (Burning from birth, it is me, diesel) written on the fuel tank of some of the big covered vans highlight the importance of fuel for proper functioning of our fast-paced civilisation. No matter what happens, fuel and energy cannot run out.

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