

A cursed harvest

Health risks of tobacco cultivation, particularly among children, are deeply concerning

Imagine children, their hands raw and lungs burning, tending to fields of a product linked to countless illnesses. This isn't a dystopian future, but the harsh reality in the Lalmonirhat district of Bangladesh, where children are forced into hazardous labour in tobacco cultivation, causing irreparable damage to their health and future well-being. According to a recent report by this daily, as many as 30,000 low-income families in Rangpur are cultivating tobacco on 13,349 hectares of land, employing children and elderly members of their families to make ends meet and/or maximise profit.

Those involved in tobacco cultivation suffer from a range of health issues, including nausea, vomiting, dizziness, headaches and weakness, caused by green tobacco sickness (GTS), while pesticides used in tobacco cultivation can cause skin and eye irritation, nerve damage, and respiratory illness. Children report being chronically sick from the work—and missing school as a result—but having no choice but to continue the work as their families are in dire financial need. The silence of tobacco companies in the face of these documented health risks is deeply disturbing as well. Their focus on profit incentivises farmers, often trapped in poverty, to prioritise short-term gains over the health of their families and the environment.

The pesticides and other toxic chemicals used in tobacco farming aren't just harmful to human health; they also contaminate the soil and water sources. This creates a vicious cycle, as the very land that sustains these communities becomes poisoned. Deforestation to make way for tobacco plantations further disrupts the delicate ecological balance, jeopardising biodiversity and long-term food security. Lured by tobacco companies, farmers in these impoverished regions engage in tobacco cultivation in hopes of profit, without fully comprehending the opportunity cost of such practices. Research published in 2021 found that farmers lose more than Tk 45,000 per acre by tobacco cultivation, with the loss amounting to Tk 77,411 if net environmental costs are included.

Efforts to mitigate the impact of tobacco cultivation must encompass both regulatory measures and grassroots initiatives. Raising awareness among farmers about the health hazards and providing alternative livelihood options are crucial steps towards breaking the cycle of dependency on tobacco farming. Government agencies, NGOs, and civil society must collaborate to enforce child labour laws and hold accountable those who exploit vulnerable populations for economic gain. Breaking the dependency on tobacco cultivation requires not just individual awareness, but a collective effort to prioritise human health and environmental sustainability over corporate profit. We must ensure that the fields that once yielded a product of disease no longer become breeding grounds for a silent epidemic threatening the well-being of our future generations.

The constant terror of road crashes

Will we ever see an end to this menace?

Road crashes are so frequent in Bangladesh throughout the year that they have become the norm, causing a perpetual state of anxiety among people on the road. Two major back-to-back crashes this week took the lives of 28 people. It begs the question: will the authorities ever roll up their sleeves to stop these atrocities?

In the most recent incident, a cement-laden truck crashed into four vehicles after losing control, reducing them into scrap metal. This so-called accident is particularly noteworthy since it points the finger at two major reasons why crashes occur. First, a large number of vehicles in the country lack mandatory fitness certificates; even if they do have the clearance, their authenticity remains questionable. Second, drivers of commercial vehicles don't just lack formal training, but they are extremely overworked too, despite the prime minister's directive to the authorities to ban driving for more than five consecutive hours on highways. It's even more concerning when we find that in many of these roads where fast-moving vehicles ply, the authorities are yet to conduct any safety audits to identify roads with poor conditions, or note down the number of illegal structures on the side of the roads to be removed via drives.

While these problems have plagued the transport sector for long, the authorities responsible have only responded with apathy, treating these crashes with the attitude that "these things just happen." A recent investigation by this daily found that the country has three high-powered committees to deal with road safety, but they rarely meet, and even when they do, their recommendations go unheeded.

Accidents are no longer simply accidents; they are now outcomes of our authorities' consistent neglect. The World Bank's appraisal report in June 2023 highlights the lack of accountability and coordination among relevant government bodies to be a major reason behind the devastating situation regarding road safety in Bangladesh. To address these concerns, the government needs to first acknowledge the sheer severity of the problem and hold those responsible for ensuring road safety accountable, including the Roads and Highways Department, Bangladesh Road Transport Authority, and law enforcement agencies. Until it does so, the government remains directly answerable for the preventable deaths on our roads and highways.

New Message

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Subject

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Kafkaesque realities of traffic rule enforcement



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

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One of the Facebook groups that provides real-time traffic information is currently debating the functionality of speed cameras installed on the Dhaka Elevated Expressway. A faction within the group suggests that the project has become a significant loss for private investors, thus dissuading further investment in enforcing speeding fines. These "camera deniers" tend to speed past cameras at over 100 kilometres per hour. Conversely, there are cautious drivers who strictly adhere to speed limits, often staying in the slow lane. Then there are those who attempt to outsmart the system by slowing down near the cameras and accelerating afterwards.

However, the problem lies in the lack of clarity regarding the type of speed cameras installed and their operational status. Despite the use of handheld loudspeakers by announcers to warn of camera operations and the digital scrolls, the public still lacks knowledge about the exact date these cameras became operational, the extent of fines, and the possibility of multiple fines in a single journey. The absence of transparent information creates an atmosphere of hearsay and uncertainty.

A source at a kiosk confirms that the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) is indeed fining vehicles for speeding, collecting the fines upon the renewal of the fitness tax token. Consequently, individuals may be penalised for alleged offences nearly a year later, depending on their current token's expiration date. One member of the social media traffic information hub mentioned that someone had to pay Tk 21,000 for seven acts of violation over the course of two months. If this is true, then the authorities have adopted clandestine means to generate revenue. Such delayed repercussions leave little room for protest or redemption, trapping individuals in a Kafkaesque scenario where justice feels unattainable and arbitrary.

Recently, while taking a U-turn on Tejgaon Link Road, I encountered an unsettling situation. The road was practically empty on a Friday afternoon. There was a uniformed officer who did not mention that the turn was illegal, and I did not see any sign that said it was a wrong turn. But lo, as soon as I turned, a traffic constable appeared from the shade



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FILE PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

of a tree and waylaid me, asking for my papers. The rearview mirror told me that he took the papers to his superior, a traffic sergeant, who was waiting in an adjacent alley. The sergeant came back with the papers, which were in order, and said, "Sir wants to talk to you." "What for?" I asked. "You took a wrong turn." Refusing to exit my vehicle, I challenged the accusation. The officers' faces were clearly confused—they weren't prepared for resistance from someone who had fallen into their trap. They let me go, fearing the sting from their unlikely victim.

If the objective of a traffic system is to encourage rule-following, why resort to predatory tactics that treat commuters as prey? What does it say about institutions that endorse such dubious practices? While my encounter was personal, the issues surrounding the elevated expressway are institutional. Reports indicate exorbitant fines for multiple violations, suggesting a covert revenue-generating scheme. Similar accusations are heard about the metro rail. Apparently, the wait time at the metro station is

transparency and accountability. Instead of prioritising crime, prevention and community welfare, the authorities resort to entrapment tactics, fostering resentment and alienation among citizens. As the government asserts its authority, individuals feel increasingly powerless and disenfranchised.

The use of deception and confusion as governance tools speaks volumes about the government's attitude towards its citizens. The authorities can always claim to be clean, saying that the devil is in the details. We should have heard the loudspeakers or read the digital signs. However, the signs do not provide any clear indication of the fines we will have to pay down the road. By the same token, we are now told that AI is being used in Dhaka's Gulshan area to identify traffic rule violators. If deception is the rule of the game, how do I know that a traffic constable who beckons me to come forward in alignment with the thoroughfare at a traffic crossing is not setting me up for an artificially orchestrated intelligent fine? The system is fast becoming unfriendly,

government to build the roads. One can only assume why such a system is in place: the abuse of exemption clauses by public service officials. The news of the toll for the fire truck caused resentment among the citizens, who are tired of seeing special provisions made for the super-privileged group, but not for an emergency intervention. Fortunately, the Karnaphuli tunnel authorities have just announced no charge for emergency vehicles. This is a welcome move.

A democratic government pays close attention to the murmurs made by its citizens. The best way to judge the pulse of the populace is not the mainstream news, but the flurry of comments of ordinary citizens. Indeed, there is a lot of nonsense. But some of the nonsense is due to the absence of clear communication. Deception and confusion undermine the principles of true democracy, which demands transparency, accountability, and justice. If we continue to ignore these issues, we risk perpetuating an unfriendly and unsupportive system that prioritises profit over people's well-being.

PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

Will Boeing crash shareholder value?



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KATHARINA PISTOR

For half a century, maximising shareholder value has been the overriding objective of corporate governance, especially in the US and the UK. But Boeing's disastrous performance on product and customer safety may mean that change is in the air.

The crashes in 2018 and 2019 of Boeing's 737 MAX model, in which 350 people were killed, should have served as a wake-up call. But it was not until the blowout of a side door on a recent US flight that it became obvious to everyone that there is a fundamental problem with how Boeing is being run. Since then, AerCap—the world's largest aircraft leasing company and a major customer of Boeing—has demanded that financial targets "take a back seat," so that the company can focus 100 percent "on quality and safety metrics." Another customer, Emirates, has demanded that the company's next CEO be an engineer. And Boeing's largest union, the International Association of Machinists District 751, has demanded a board seat to "save this company from itself."

How did it come to this? For years, courts and academics have embraced

shareholder value as the path to efficient management, as if focusing on this single goal and subjecting a company to the discipline of the market would reliably ensure top performance. Yet, corporate management is far too complicated a task to be guided by the stock ticker. Every day, executives must make difficult decisions about how best to balance financial goals with product quality and safety, labour conditions, environmental impact, and so forth.

What shareholder value has done is turn corporations into ATM machines. Corporate bosses embraced the concept because they could partake in lucrative shareholder bonanzas through stock-option plans and extra bonuses. Perhaps not surprisingly, these cash channels are often misaligned with actual company performance. How else could Boeing's CEO walk away with a 45 percent pay raise after causing even more damage to the company when he failed to fix its problems after the MAX crashes?

Pleasing shareholders with hefty dividends and share buybacks can all too easily undermine large business operations. But it wasn't always

this way. In the early 17th century, a legal innovation, the "capital lock-in," created a basis for corporations to mobilise capital for large-scale investments by depriving investors of the opportunity to withdraw their money. With a more stable capital base, companies could borrow on a larger scale, and the market for shares became more liquid, because new investors did not have to fear that old ones would pull out.

The primacy of shareholder value turned shareholders into the pilots who steer companies. But portfolio investors have little interest in concerning themselves with the details of management. Their only concern is the bottom line. They lack a "firm commitment," as economist Colin Mayer of the University of Oxford puts it. And when these pilots' planes start to fall apart in midair, many will simply bail out and try their luck elsewhere.

But firms are more than just ATM machines. They pool resources, they innovate, and—perhaps most importantly—they solve problems. Contrary to the leading theory of the firm, which views the institution as a second best to markets (as merely a "nexus of contracts"), firms can do things that markets cannot do. As economists Albert Hirschman and Kenneth Arrow demonstrated, firms have the capacity to repair—to mend flaws when things go wrong, to improve their operations, and to find solutions to new complications.

Prices may signal the need for repair, but actually doing the repair work requires much more. One must

find the root cause of the problem and devise an effective and lasting fix. Stakeholders that can parachute away when things go wrong will not invest in repairs. They will choose "exit" over "loyalty" (in Hirschman's terms); and when they use "voice," they usually do so only to vote for directors who will advance their own interests.

For portfolio investors, the exit door is always kept open—if only by the company stepping in and buying back their shares. That means they are the most disloyal stakeholders of any business corporation. From their perspective, it does not even matter what goods the firm produces, except as a factor to be considered in building a well-diversified portfolio. Once they have pocketed their gains, they will get out, leaving behind an organisation that has sought to please investors by cutting costs, even when that has meant losing customers and valuable employees. As with planes, it is easy to crash a firm, but it takes much more time and resources to rebuild it.

Boeing's self-inflicted woes hold broader lessons. Once again, we see how the misguided idea of shareholder value can serve powerful financial interests while destroying what business organisations are best at. Firms excel not at blindly pursuing a single goal, but at pooling resources to solve complex problems, produce things of value, and reduce costs for society. This can be profitable, but making profit an end in itself is ultimately counterproductive. The "Boeing Effect" ought to remind us of that.