

No good news for the unemployed youth

Proposed budget offers no hope or way out for them

Historically, the promise of job creation has been a cornerstone of political pledges. When Awami League came to power in 2009, it vowed to provide employment to every household. But we all know how that turned out. Such lofty promises are difficult to fulfil when contrasting priorities emerge and bureaucrats take over, but there is no denying the importance of sustained efforts—“sustained” being the keyword—to ensure proper utilisation of the youth. Unfortunately, the recently proposed budget has been frustrating in that regard. Not only does it offer no way out of the present job crisis, but it also betrays no intention of eradicating well-known barriers to employment such as corruption; if anything, it seems to have encouraged it. Case in point: allowing whitening of black money.

Corruption, it bears repeating, stifles economic growth and deters investment, thus limiting job opportunities. It is because of the widespread corruption and lack of targeted measures in Bangladesh that the number of the unemployed, especially among educated youths, has reached alarming levels. Many are forced to settle for low-paying jobs despite being overqualified. Many are seeking employment abroad through illegal and often precarious channels due to lack of opportunities. Businesses and entrepreneurs are facing various systemic hurdles. Even a large number of vacant positions in the public sector remain unfilled. The budget, as the nation's roadmap to secure its financial future, has missed the chance to address all such issues affecting the job market. Its poor allocations for education and health sectors, vital for the development of human resources, also do not help.

This reality—a stagnant job market and the uncertainties surrounding it—has been weighing heavily on young undergraduates. A recent survey by the Aachol Foundation, as reported by *Prothom Alo*, highlights the mental health struggles of university students with 55 percent of the surveyed expressing anxiety about their future careers. The intense pressure to succeed, coupled with an environment rife with bullying, harassment, and dissatisfaction with educational standards, has led to significant mental health issues among them, including depression and suicidal thoughts. This, among other things, indicates the growing disconnect between the education and employment sectors, with many students being forced to consider a career overseas.

This is bad news for the country. Clearly, what we are missing is an enabling environment for the nurturing and utilisation of young talents. We, therefore, urge the authorities to treat unemployment as a national emergency, with comprehensive strategies to stimulate job creation, curb corruption, and support both undergraduates and graduates as well as other job seekers. Our future and well-being depend on it.

Stop the decline of Chalan beel

Protecting the beel and its network of waterbodies is vital

It is appalling how we have allowed unplanned development, encroachment, waste dumping and over-extraction of groundwater strangle life out of the largest wetland of the country: the Chalan beel. The beel once provided subsistence to thousands of farmers and fishers in North Bengal. But in just over a century, according to a report, its size has reduced from 1,085 square kilometres to a mere 168 sq km, with its biodiversity largely destroyed and groundwater sources almost depleted.

The gradual decline of many of the rivers and canals that feed water into the beel caused its alarming decline. Those rivers too have been subjected to encroachment, construction of unplanned sluice gates, and mindless waste dumping. Lack of dredging is another issue. Despite repeated media reports in this regard, no effective measures have been taken by the government. Instead, the government itself built structures and set up projects, especially on Boral river's land, the main water source of Chalan beel. Although some ad hoc steps were taken to remove some of the structures on the Boral, based on a 2018 study by the water resources ministry, no long-term coordinated action has been taken to restore the navigability of the river, and consequently, the beel continued to dry up.

Several government agencies are responsible for the protection of our rivers and wetlands. It is, however, clear that no one is doing their job right. While the ill-equipped Department of Environment has done nothing to protect the biodiversity of Chalan beel, the fisheries and livestock ministry did not think twice before giving permission for pond excavation and fish farming. No action was taken to penalise illegal enclosures harming the beel's natural environment. The local administration and other responsible agencies too kept on turning a blind eye to the unplanned roads, bridges, culverts, regulators and sluice gates constructed through the beel and its network. Unfortunately, it is not the only victim of the government's sheer apathy in protecting our wetlands. We have seen several other beels being subjected to the same fate.

This needs to stop. Government agencies must work together, and develop and implement long-term projects to save this precious wetland and others. They must also preserve the networks of rivers and wetlands breathing life into our delta.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY



Donald Trump indicted

On June 9, 2023, the former president of the US was indicted with a felony over storing sensitive documents about nuclear capabilities in his Florida estate. It was alleged that he repeatedly attempted to hide records that were requested by investigators, and showed off a classified map and military plan from the Pentagon.

LABOUR RECRUITMENT TO MALAYSIA

Syndicate wins, migrants suffer, country loses

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SHARIFUL HASAN

“Is the syndicate more powerful than the state?”

This was the closing line of my article about labour recruitment to Malaysia, published in *The Daily Star* on July 25, 2022. After two years, particularly in the last few days, many now understand the syndicates' complexities and influential role in the recruitment process of Bangladeshi migrants for Malaysia.

Such incidents are common in the context of migration to Malaysia. Over the past 15 years, Malaysia's labour market has been shut down three times due to the same syndicate's involvement, irregularities, corruption, and bribery allegations.

When Malaysia resumed hiring Bangladeshi workers in August 2022, following a four-year hiatus, the governments of both countries agreed that a worker would spend no more than Tk 78,990 during the whole process. However, migrants each had to pay Tk 5.44 lakh or \$5,000, according to a survey by the US-based non-profit Verité.

On March 28, four UN experts wrote to the governments of Bangladesh and Malaysia, highlighting the plight of Bangladeshi migrants. They reported that each migrant spent between \$4,500 and \$6,000 to secure a job in Malaysia. Several migrant workers told the media they spent over Tk 5 lakh to get there.

Despite paying such excessive amounts, at least 16,970 migrant workers failed to reach Malaysia before the May 31 deadline due to mismanagement by the government authorities and local recruiting agents.

Deceived by the recruiting agencies, some failed to obtain airline tickets, while others bought tickets at triple the usual price, but still couldn't travel due to a lack of clearance from the concerned company in Malaysia. Many mortgaged their lands or sold livestock and borrowed from banks, friends, and relatives, only to see their dreams shattered as they missed the opportunity to travel within the stipulated time.

The government could have avoided this by proper planning, as the deadline was set three months ago. But we saw repetition of the cycle of halting the intake of Bangladeshi workers, then re-opening the market, workers paying five to seven times the official cost and struggling to find work and eventually, the market shutting down again.



Many mortgaged their lands or sold livestock and borrowed from banks, friends, and relatives to arrange the money to travel to Malaysia, only to see their dreams shattered.

PHOTO: RASHED SUMON

Meanwhile, a group of people profited immensely.

State Minister Shofiqur Rahman Choudhury announced that the ministry had formed a six-member probe committee to investigate this mismanagement. “Those responsible will be brought to book,” he assured, adding that the committee would submit its report within seven days and action would follow. However, will this committee uncover the truth? What solutions will they propose, as this is not an isolated incident?

Migration to Malaysia has been fraught with issues since the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET) recorded the first 23 Bangladeshi workers migrating in 1978. Over the last 46 years, the recruitment process has seen different names, but it has experienced persistent mismanagement, high migration costs, corruption and repeated closure.

After the market was almost frozen between 1997 and 2005, Malaysia introduced the calling visa system at the end of 2006. Then, in 2007 and 2008, 400,000 Bangladeshi workers went to Malaysia. Although the migration cost was fixed at Tk 84,000, individuals had to pay Tk 2-3 lakh. Despite that, many Bangladeshis did not get jobs and started to suffer in KL.

businessmen and private agencies put a stop to G2G and in 2016, Malaysia declared that it would hire workers through private agencies again. This time, they adopted a syndicate of 10 agencies. There was corruption and massive ambiguity about the process in both countries, and migrants had to pay high costs, at least 10 times more than the government-fixed cost. In September 2018, the market closed again due to corruption and irregularities, re-opening in 2022, only for the same syndicate to emerge.

Most people were delighted about the Malaysian market re-opening, but optimism was replaced by anxiety and scepticism when the syndicate issues re-emerged again in 2022. Dhaka wanted to allow all 1,520 licensed recruiting agencies to send manpower to Malaysia, but in a letter sent to Bangladesh's Expatriate Welfare Minister Imran Ahmed on January 14, 2022, Malaysian former Human Resources Minister M Saravanan said that Malaysia wanted to recruit workers from Bangladesh through 25 agencies.

According to media reports, Aminul Islam Bin Abdul Nor, a Malaysian national of Bangladeshi origin, controls the entire business of sending workers to Malaysia. Ruhul Amin, alias Shawpon, the former

Secretary-General of Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies (Baira), represents Aminul in Bangladesh. Together, they decide who joins the syndicate.

Aminul also owns the Foreign Workers Central Management System (FWCMS) software MiGRAMS, used for recruiting workers in Malaysia. If the demand papers for any workers

are finalised in Malaysia, they are distributed among the approved agencies through the FWCMS software.

Initially, the syndicate had 25 agencies sending workers to Malaysia. This number increased to 100 private agencies, including several owned by parliament members, their relatives, and political leaders, controlled by the syndicate.

From August 2022 to May this year, around 4,76,672 Bangladeshi workers migrated to Malaysia for jobs. This means the syndicate syphoned over \$1 billion out of Bangladesh.

There are 14 countries, including Bangladesh, that send workers to Malaysia. However, other than Bangladesh, none of the countries have such a syndicate. So, the government needs to start analysing the amount of remittance and the amount of cost for migration to Malaysia. Nothing will happen if Bangladesh denies sending people through the syndicate.

However, for the sake of the people and for the country, Bangladesh and Malaysia should investigate such irregularities and punish the guilty. But the crucial question remains the same: Is the syndicate more powerful than the state? If not, why do they go unpunished? Are they above the law?

The Indian election's winners and losers

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SHASHI THAROOR

When the results of India's general election were announced on June 4, the biggest losers were the pundits and pollsters, who had almost unanimously predicted an overwhelming victory for Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Their exit-poll projections were so far off the mark in several states that one prominent pollster, appearing on India's most popular English-language television channel, burst into tears on camera when the actual results were revealed.

To be sure, Modi's BJP has been returned to power. But its victory looks more like a defeat. Far from expanding its formidable majority from 303 to 370 seats in the Lok Sabha, the lower house of Parliament—as Modi and his principal lieutenant, Home Minister Amit Shah, had predicted—the BJP lost 63 seats.

Indeed, the BJP now holds only 240 seats—well short of the 272 needed for a majority. With the allied regional parties in the National Democratic Alliance similarly falling short of Modi and Shah's predictions, the BJP now must depend on a motley array of NDA allies to get any legislation passed.

The second-biggest loser was Modi

himself. He made the election all about himself, seeking to capitalise on the personality cult that he has spent years promoting. His approach was shameful: Covid-19 vaccination certificates bore his photo, rather than that of the vaccinated person; bags of grain distributed to 800 million people were emblazoned with his image; railway stations across the country featured “selfie points,” where travellers could pose with life-size cutouts of Modi.

So inflated were Modi's delusions of grandeur that they apparently morphed into illusions of divinity. During the election campaign, he told one interviewer that he used to believe that he was biologically born, but had become convinced that he was sent directly by the Almighty to serve India. Some might find this cringeworthy, but the public seemed to lap it up: in one recent survey, Modi obtained a 75 percent approval rating.

Now, however, Modi is confronting the downside of his strategy: the BJP's failure to secure even a simple majority has damaged Modi's reputation not only in the eyes of Indian voters, but also within his own party, over which he has long enjoyed unchallenged dominance.

In fact, Modi has taken highly consequential decisions—such as the disastrous demonetisation of 2016 and the stringent pandemic lockdown in 2020—without so much as a discussion with his cabinet. But this is likely to change, because prominent BJP figures and the leaders of the party's now-indispensable allies can now be more assertive, thereby reining in Modi's increasingly autocratic tendencies.

Just as the BJP's victory represents a kind of defeat, the resurgent opposition's defeat looks a lot like victory. The opposition Indian National Congress (of which I am a member) and its partners in the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) have much to celebrate.

The Congress party nearly doubled its seat total, from 52 to 99. And several of its INDIA allies performed better than ever before. With control of 232 seats, INDIA is now a formidable force. One can be certain that the Lok Sabha will no longer serve as a mere rubber stamp for Modi's agenda.

A striking feature of the vote is the widespread rejection of the BJP's Hindu chauvinist *Hindutva* doctrine. The BJP lost several formerly “safe” seats in constituencies where Modi's campaign rhetoric had been the most Hindu-centric and inflammatory, including Ayodhya, where he inaugurated a magnificent new temple in January.

In fact, opposition parties made significant gains in the “Hindutva heartland” of northern India, including states where the BJP juggernaut crushed the opposition alliance in 2019.

The biggest winner of the recent election is undoubtedly Indian

democracy, which has come under increasing strain during Modi's decade in power. This is reflected in the beating India has taken on global indices. Freedom House has now downgraded India from “free” to “partly free,” while the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute has reclassified it as an “electoral autocracy.” With the BJP in charge, India has become a prime example of “democratic deconsolidation” around the world.

Likewise, India now ranks 113th out of 125 countries in the Global Hunger Index, and 159th out of 180 in the World Press Freedom Index. The German foreign ministry has expressed concerns about declining press freedom, while the British government questioned the banning in India of a BBC documentary on Modi's role in the 2002 anti-Muslim pogrom in Gujarat, where he was chief minister.

Others have raised related concerns. The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom is worried about the treatment of minorities, and the US State Department has sounded the alarm over human-rights abuses more broadly. The World Health Organization took issue with the BJP government's unconvincing Covid-19 mortality figures, and the World Bank pushed back against India's rejection of its human capital index.

Fortunately, these trends are now set to be reversed. India's opposition is determined to continue fighting to restore an older vision of India, in which, to quote the immortal words of the Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore, “the mind is without fear and the head is held high.”