

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

Khulna must resist unplanned growth

Illegal housing projects could jeopardise the future of the region

For a region prone to natural disasters because of its low elevation, Khulna really cannot afford unplanned development any more than a highly congested and polluted Dhaka, or Chattogram, can. The region is yet to recover from the devastations of Cyclone Remal that struck a month ago. Extreme events like this serve as a wake-up call for what must be done or changed. But the region seems to have been set in the opposite direction as, far from reducing its vulnerabilities, ongoing developments in Khulna city and adjoining areas could set them up for more challenges in the future.

According to a recent report by this daily, as many as 153 housing projects are operating illegally without necessary approvals from the Khulna Development Authority (KDA) and Department of Environment (DOE)—encroaching upon government khas lands, waterbodies, arable lands, tidal floodplains, etc. Clearly, the negligence of the authorities, both in enforcing regulations and in overseeing the approval process, has allowed these projects to proliferate unchecked. Partly responsible for this situation is the proposed expansion of the Khulna City Corporation's boundaries in 2007, which ignited a frantic wave of housing initiatives. These areas fall under the jurisdiction of the KDA, so it must take responsibility for this situation.

Of particular concern here is the encroachment of waterbodies and tidal floodplains. These serve as crucial natural buffers against floods, and their transformation will only increase the risk of flooding in the future, which is really disturbing. Reportedly, thousands of plots have been developed and sold by filling up such low-lying areas. As well as the natural risks that it poses, this unplanned sprawl also threatens to overwhelm Khulna's urban infrastructure, making it increasingly difficult for the city corporation to manage waste, develop necessary roads, and provide other essential services. Experts have, therefore, alluded to the grim prospect of these unauthorised and unplanned areas devolving into concrete slums eventually. Already, in a sign of the crisis that is about to unfold, the lack of land approvals has left over 30,000 plot owners facing legal issues with building construction.

The situation demands a critical intervention from the authorities. Going forward, they must ensure that no more arable lands and tidal floodplains are encroached. We cannot continue to allow the destruction of such crucial lands and waterbodies and hope to get away without any consequences. Moreover, the authorities should enforce stringent compliance with the Real Estate Development and Management Act, 2010 and other regulations in all housing projects. That means each project must adhere to the stipulated requirements including adequate acreage, specified road widths, and essential civic facilities.

Online gambling is spreading unchecked

Multi-faceted actions necessary to prevent this crime

The recent disclosure that about 50 lakh people in Bangladesh are engaged in online gambling has come as a shock to many people. Its proliferation is concerning for several reasons. Besides this activity being illegal, its addictive nature, inherent monetary risks, and potential connection to criminal activities and platforms also make this a social threat, especially for the young people who are most vulnerable to it.

One may even argue that the prevalence of online gambling is more disturbing than casino based or other traditional gambling activities because anyone with a smartphone or digital device can access betting and gaming websites, take part in this illegal activity, and complete monetary transactions using mobile financial services (MFS)—without the knowledge of their family members and well-wishers. In fact, the daily Manojamin quoted the ICT state minister on the popularity of online gambling among young people as well as retired persons.

Although the minister told the media that gambling websites are being shut down regularly, the circulation of surrogate advertisements by betting companies on social media platforms, YouTube, and even television channels during sports events remains a concern. According to a *Prothom Alo* report, several Bangladesh government websites too are riddled with betting pages/advertisements. There have been reports of the involvement of celebrities in the promotion of these illegal activities. Fake videos of celebrities were also used to lure the audience towards online gambling.

It is, therefore, pertinent that the government takes a stricter stance against online gambling. Existing legal provisions must be updated to better address this threat, and relevant authorities must coordinate with social media platforms to regulate access to online betting pages. Those promoting gambling must also be monitored and regulated. Awareness campaigns targeting different age groups are also required to educate people about this social ill. Recently, the state minister for finance remarked about the involvement of personal MFS accounts in money laundering through online gambling and betting, further highlighting the danger. Clearly, strict interventions are required from the authorities. In the long run, the government should also focus on improving people's financial security so that economic desperation does not push anyone towards risky activities like gambling.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY



Opening of CN Tower

CN Tower in Toronto, Canada, which opened to the public on this day in 1976, was—at 1,815 feet (553 metres)—the world's tallest freestanding structure until being surpassed in 2007 by the Burj Khalifa in Dubai, UAE.

Why we must rethink university faculty recruitment



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The Global Innovation Index (GII) ranks world economies based on their innovation capabilities, using approximately 80 indicators to capture the complex nature of innovation. In the 2023 GI, Bangladesh ranked 105th out of 132 economies. A crucial component of GI, as well as other science, technology, and innovation (STI) indicators, is the performance of tertiary educational institutions.

Unfortunately, Bangladeshi universities are underperforming compared to other countries at similar development levels. Patent statistics from the Department of Patents, Designs, and Trademarks (DPDT) further highlight this issue. Over the past three decades, Bangladesh has seen approximately 100-400 patent applications annually, with 320 applications in 2023. In stark contrast, India filed over 77,000 patent applications, while emerging Asian countries such as Thailand, Vietnam and the Philippines filed over 8,600, 8,700, and 4,700, respectively, in 2023. South American countries also file thousands of patents each year. Thus, when adjusted for population, our patent per capita ratio is dismal.

Bangladesh's research article production also remains modest compared to other Asian countries. In 2023, as many as 12,879 citable research documents were published from Bangladesh. This number is significantly lower than in several neighbouring countries. For instance, India produced 269,183 documents, while 37,937 documents were published from Pakistan in the same year. Countries like Thailand and Vietnam also outperform Bangladesh, with Thailand contributing approximately 25,430 citable documents and Vietnam producing around 18,290 documents annually. China leads Asia as well as the whole world with an astounding 1,018,423 citable research papers, showcasing its robust investment in research and development. Meanwhile, Japan has about 124,330 publications, and South Korea and Taiwan contribute approximately 97,487 and 41,654 citable documents, respectively.



VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

Several factors contribute to this difference. One major issue is the limited focus on research at universities in Bangladesh. Additionally, there is a lack of adequate funding and infrastructure to support extensive research programmes. Other Asian countries have invested heavily in research and development, fostering a robust research culture within their academic institutions.

The Triple Helix model, which describes the interaction between universities, industries, and government, is essential for fostering a robust STI ecosystem. However, this collaborative framework is still largely absent in Bangladesh. To address this, we must focus on introducing reforms that can catalyse broader collaboration. Universities in Bangladesh primarily function as teaching institutions, particularly at the undergraduate level, where teachers act as facilitators between textbooks and students. Here, a good teacher is often defined as someone who delivers lectures well and explains concepts clearly, typically

directly impact the STI ecosystem. In contrast, the current faculty recruitment process in Bangladesh rewards academic diligence during undergraduate and graduate studies, sometimes resulting in faculty members who do minimal research beyond the required publications for promotion.

To transform universities into hubs of knowledge creation, we must overhaul the faculty recruitment process at universities in the country. Universities are meant to generate new knowledge, not merely disseminate existing information. The University Grants Commission's decision to allow private universities to offer PhD degrees is a right step to this end. A robust PhD programme is crucial for fostering a research culture and improving faculty quality. Pursuing PhD transforms individuals from knowledge users to knowledge creators, enabling them to think independently and contribute to knowledge production. Further, understanding a subject deeply enough to challenge existing ideas

compared to other jobs that only require a bachelor's or master's degree. Departments at universities should start PhD programmes funded by the government or private sector, allowing universities to produce knowledge and establish strong industry ties. If PhD researchers receive substantial scholarships, it will attract strong candidates to pursue PhDs and eventually transition into teaching roles. Additionally, these researchers can take on roles as teaching and research assistants, further enhancing the academic environment.

Universities should also emphasise research at the master's level. Elite and established universities can pilot this model. Finally, undergraduate education needs to be redefined with a focus on research.

Implementing these changes can position Bangladeshi universities as key players in the global innovation landscape, fostering a vibrant ecosystem of knowledge creation and application.

Bigger isn't always better

Our appetite for more is killing the planet



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Big banks, big stores, big corporations. Some politicians and economists would have us believe that bigger is always better, and that modernisation means replacement of local vendors, small shops, and other small independent businesses with giant global chains. We, the consumers, are meant to go along passively with the trend, even to celebrate the availability of a range of global, heavily advertised—and thus seemingly glamorous—products and services.

But despite what we are told, there are options. It is possible to resist the trend towards ever bigger corporations, ever more billionaires, and the ongoing entrenched poverty. It is possible to create a movement that is powerful enough to shift the economy away from the big and powerful and back to the local, in a way that supports our livelihoods and our well-being—both individual and planetary.

There are two clear and divergent paths into the future. One involves constant hurry, ever-more movement at ever-greater speeds and sizes, including financial transactions which can collapse an entire economy. It involves becoming ever more wrapped up in our technologies, even more dependent on AI to guide us. The other involves slowing down, going local, and reconnecting to our communities,

our values, and to the environment that sustains us.

The belief shared by corporate and government leaders that bigger is always better is founded on the false assumption that humanity is somehow divorced from nature, that technology can replace finite resources, and that we can live

even more resources and create more pollution, thereby contributing to the climate emergency. Not only our air, water, soil, and finite resources are sacrificed, but also vulnerable populations, such as the Indigenous and poor, and recently, the middle classes in industrialised countries.

The results of our pursuit of speed, growth, and wealth include a degraded environment, unbearable heat, ever more intense storms, and the concentration of wealth and power into the hands of the few. Rather than celebrating local cultures and economies, we see an effort to homogenise people's desires, so that they can be met with mass-produced (and often harmful and unnecessary) items.

The belief shared by corporate and government leaders that bigger is always better is founded on the false assumption that humanity is somehow divorced from nature, that technology can replace finite resources, and that we can live without a healthy environment. This belief also promotes competition at the expense of cooperation, of living in harmony with our neighbours and our ecosystems.

without a healthy environment. This belief also promotes competition at the expense of cooperation, of living in harmony with our neighbours and our ecosystems.

In order to pursue our false dream of "sustainable development," where development means ever-increasing mobility and consumption rather than guaranteeing that the basic needs of all are met, we must extract

But the local, though stifled, has not disappeared. In country after country, people are looking to ancient ways of life to proffer wisdom in these troubled and destructive times. People are seeing and sharing the benefits of strong communities and a close connection to earth. People are allowing "common" sense, intuition, and holistic awareness to guide them towards ways to protect diverse

cultures and species, to revitalise healthy food and fibre systems, and to forge or restore human-scale political and economic institutions.

Yes, we are bombarded with messages about the alluring and inevitable march towards the huge and monolithic, even when it means making our air unbreathable and our temperatures unbearable. But people remain roughly the same size, with the same core values, despite the changes around us. People still care deeply about a good education for their children, about living a healthy life, about having access to nature, about having strong social connections, and, vitally, about maintaining a liveable planet. We need voices that highlight the better, brighter path that takes us away from pollution, from AI, from ever-increasing concentration of wealth and power into the hands of the few.

Those of us concerned about terrifying global trends can and must make clear what will, and what won't, bring us closer to those deeper relationships with real people and living places for which we all long. We must continue to speak up, to educate those around us, and to make decisions in our daily lives that support the local. We must also push for local, regional, and national policies that shift subsidies from global corporations to local businesses, that shift wealth from the billionaires to the impoverished, and that seek to restore, rather than continue to destroy, the environment that enables our healthy existence on this cherished but abused planet.

The author has a tiny role in the new film Closer to Home (available for free at LocalFutures.org).