

A dangerous precedent

Dissolution of textbook committee shows fault lines in reform drive

The row over the composition of a textbook revision coordination committee over the last few days has exposed a fault line in the government's ongoing reform drive, underscoring the challenges it faces as it prepares for more critical reforms, especially surrounding the question of religion in the constitution. On Saturday, the government dissolved the committee after facing backlash from certain groups for the lack of Islamic scholars in the 10-member committee and alleged "anti-religious" views held by its two members. The development, and the manner in which the authorities have acquiesced, underline a dilemma that has long plagued the state: how to balance progressive reforms with the expectations of religious constituencies that still hold significant sway.

The education adviser has denied the decision had anything to do with the pressure, stressing that there was no need for such a committee as specialists from both Islamic and general streams of education are "at the final stage of revising textbooks." But why form a committee then and disband it only after 13 days? The episode suggests that the government may be susceptible to yielding to conservative pressure in its reform initiatives. It also brought into focus the broader question about the role of religion in state affairs, with the fallen Awami League regime setting a trend of exploiting and appeasing fundamentalist elements for political gains. One may recall how pressure from religious groups led to the removal of certain stories and topics from school textbooks.

If we analyse the criticisms directed at the two Dhaka University teachers, it is clear that those had nothing to do with education or their qualifications, but only their perceived beliefs. Many have even indulged in a hate campaign online to the point that it sparked concerns about the safety of the teachers. Dissolving the committee, without critically evaluating the criticisms or doing nothing about those indulging in hate speech, also cast doubt about the government's commitment to such reforms. Are we to accept that any group can influence or reverse much-needed reforms through public agitation?

We must acknowledge the importance of ensuring a balanced and inclusive curriculum, one that reflects the cultural and religious diversity of the nation. But decisions on curriculum revisions must be based on academic merit and pedagogical principles, not political pressures. The government must realise that yielding to such pressures risks creating an atmosphere where education is increasingly getting detached from the objective of nurturing critical thinking which it is supposed to do. We must not allow our education system to regress under the weight of such undue pressures any longer.

Govt must do more to reduce prices

Efforts to ease inflationary pressure proving ineffective

According to the World Food Programme (WFP), around 38 percent of low-income households in Bangladesh were food insecure in August, as essential commodity prices only slightly decreased after the interim government took office. We must say the continuation of this situation to this date is deeply distressing. The government should have placed greater emphasis on reducing prices considering the suffering of the people, especially those in the low-income bracket.

In July, food inflation reached an all-time high of 14.1 percent due to disruptions in the supply chains during the mass uprising. Food security further deteriorated in August due to floods across 11 or more districts, leading to over a million people being affected, 74 being killed, and an estimated loss of over Tk 14,269 crore. The country also incurred huge losses during Cyclone Remal, which had a devastating impact on 20 districts, affecting almost four lakh people and causing an estimated loss of over Tk 7,000 crore. As a result of these external shocks and various other factors inflating prices, about three in every 10 households could not afford an adequate diet in August. The number rises to six in every 10 households when considering only the low-income segment.

The country has been experiencing continuous inflationary pressure for around two years now. With people's real income and purchasing power deteriorating or stagnating, households are being forced to either rely on credit purchases or spend from their savings. In fact, the situation has become so severe that the most vulnerable households have had to resort to various coping strategies to deal with food insecurity, with about seven in every 10 selling assets to make do.

Under these circumstances, it is hard to accept the interim government's failure to remotely address the inflationary crisis. In an effort to contain prices, it recently set prices of some goods, but in a manner reminiscent of the previous government, it has failed to enforce them. Experts say that simply setting prices—without understanding the ground realities of why prices are remaining high or addressing the underlying reasons—is the wrong approach. Unfortunately, we haven't seen much else being done by the government to address food inflation.

We urge the authorities to learn from their failed interventions, take strict measures against any syndicates profiting off increased prices by creating an artificial crisis, and improve supply chain conditions. Additionally, they should increase allocations for subsidised food programmes, such as the Open Market Sales, and other initiatives of the Trading Corporation of Bangladesh to ease some of the pressures on low-income groups.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Munich Agreement signed

On this day in 1938, the notorious Munich Agreement, in which then British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain encouraged Britain and France to appease Adolf Hitler's demands in the hope of preventing World War II, was reached.

India's hydropower projects, power corridor, and our concerns



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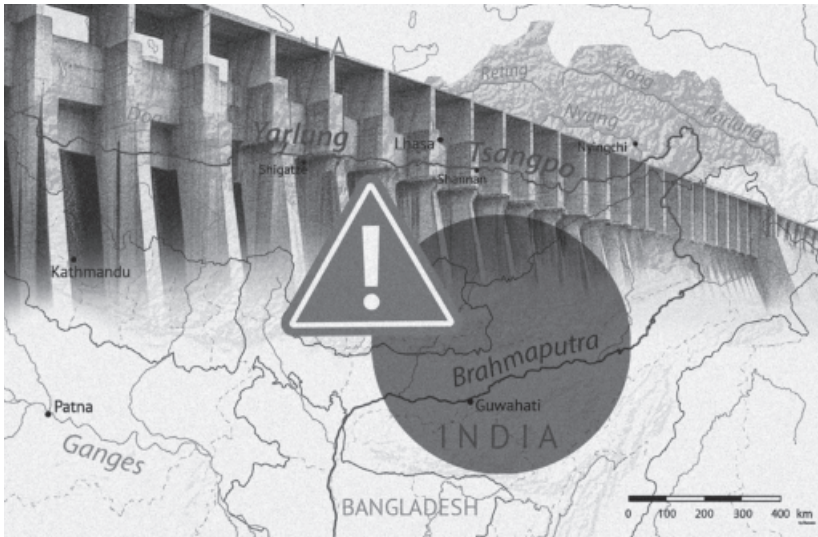
India has recently decided to invest \$1 billion to expedite the construction of 12 hydropower projects upstream of the Brahmaputra River in the northeastern state of Arunachal Pradesh. A couple of months ago, the federal finance ministry approved up to 750 crore rupees (\$89.85 million) as financial assistance to each hydropower project in the state. Earlier in August 2023, the state government of Arunachal Pradesh signed a memorandum of agreement (MoA) with three central state-owned power companies to generate a total of 11,517 megawatts (MW) of electricity through these projects. Of these 12 projects, five projects of 2,620MW capacity were allocated to the North Eastern Electric Power Corporation Limited (NEEPCO), five projects of 5,097MW capacity to Satluj Jal Vidyut Nigam Ltd (SJVN), and two projects of 3,800MW capacity to the National Hydroelectric Power Corporation Ltd (NHPC).

These hydroelectric projects with reservoirs of varying capacities will be built on different tributaries of Siang, Dibang and Subansiri rivers, which themselves are major tributaries of the Brahmaputra. For example, the 1,000MW Naying hydroelectric power project with a reservoir capacity of 82 million cubic metres is planned on the Siyom River, which is a major tributary of the Siang. The 680MW Attunli hydroelectric power project with a reservoir capacity of 13.96 million cubic metres will be built on the Tangon River which is a tributary of the Dibang. And the 1,800MW Kamala hydroelectric power project with a reservoir capacity of 623.58 million cubic metres is planned on the Kamala River, a tributary of the Subansiri.

Not only these 12 projects, the total hydropower potential of Arunachal Pradesh is estimated to be over 57,000MW, as per the central electricity authority of the state. To tap into this hydropower potential, India's plan is to construct at least 135 hydroelectric power projects on different tributaries of Brahmaputra River.

If so many hydropower projects are constructed by building dams

upstream of the Brahmaputra, it will intensify water shortage in Bangladesh during the dry season, while during monsoon, opening the dams will increase the risk of flash floods. According to a study by the US-based Center for Naval Analyses (CNA), the Brahmaputra provides 75 percent of river water in Bangladesh during the dry season. Bangladesh is already



VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

getting 25 percent less than the required water from the Brahmaputra and facing human security pressure, which will be magnified by building dams upstream and water diversion activities.

Regrettably, there is a serious lack of information in Bangladesh regarding the danger of these hydroelectric projects. Moreover, arrangements are being made to facilitate transmission of the electricity generated from these power plant projects from the northeastern part to the northern, western and southern regions of India through Bangladesh. This huge amount of electricity cannot be used in the northeastern region of India due to a lack of demand, and it is also inconvenient for strategic and technical reasons to transmit this electricity through the narrow Siliguri Corridor in West Bengal. As the parliamentary standing committee on energy of 15th Lok Sabha explained,

availability of power transmission corridors through the Chicken's Neck area is limited due to the requirement of space for habitation, railways, roads, oil and gas pipelines, communication links, etc and is gradually getting constricted.

For this reason, the Indian government has been pressuring Bangladesh for a long time to approve the construction of a power transmission corridor from northeast India through Bangladesh to other parts of the country. To this end, discussions have been going on for a long time in the meetings of Bangladesh-India Joint Working Group (JWG) and Joint Steering Committee (JSC). At last, at the 22nd meeting of the JWG on July 19—less than three weeks before the Hasina

March 7, 2020, Bangladesh mentioned that the country did not have any additional power import requirement at that time and in the future till 2030 that could justify the construction of the interconnection line. In the 19th JWG meeting on January 21, 2021, Bangladesh expressed concern that this transmission system might be used to evacuate hydropower from northeast India in the future, and Bangladesh being a lower riparian country, the issue also needs to be discussed by the Joint River Commission (JRC) Bangladesh and India. The Bangladesh side also raised the issue of security and the operation and maintenance of the line. Bangladesh proposed to sign a data-sharing agreement in order to get different kinds of information to conduct comprehensive feasibility study, hydrological and water modelling studies, and environmental and social impact assessments.

But, at the higher-level 19th JSC meeting on January 23, 2021, India denied the relation of any specific hydroelectric power project with the Katihar Parbatipur-Barnagar transmission line and said no riparian issues were involved with the proposed transmission system. Thus the issue of data-sharing and hydrological and water modelling studies involving the Joint River Commission were dropped from the agenda, and it was decided that Bangladesh would carry out its due diligence about social and environmental impact inside its territory, as undertaken for other transmission lines, and evaluation of legal and technical aspects of the projects will be continued parallelly.

Although India refuted the relation of the transmission line with the hydropower projects in Arunachal, it is obvious that transmission through Bangladesh would be a practical necessity for the utilisation of the huge power generated in the Indian state. That's why it would be suicidal for Bangladesh to allow India to transmit the power generated by damming the Brahmaputra river system.

In this context, the interim government of Bangladesh currently has two major responsibilities. First, it should protest India's unilateral decisions to construct 12 hydroelectric power projects on the upstream of Brahmaputra basin and take the necessary diplomatic steps to deter India from moving forward. Secondly, it should cancel the approval of the Katihar-Parbatipur-Barnagar transmission line project immediately so it cannot be used by India to evacuate the hydropower generated by damming the Brahmaputra.

NATIONAL GIRL CHILD DAY

Let girls realise their dreams



Laila Khondkar is an international development worker.

LAILA KHONDKAR

I once had a conversation with Tajul Islam, the former principal of Thakurgaon Degree College. He established Rangatungi Pramila Football Academy in Ranisankail upazila about 10 years ago. He shared, "Five players from this academy are representing the national team in different age groups. Some have just got a chance in the Bangladesh Army as players, which has turned their lives around. As a result, interest in football has increased among the girls."

Most of the people in the area live below the poverty line. However, about 50 girls in the age group of 10 to 20 years have joined this academy, despite facing many challenges. This has increased the pressure on the organisers, as they are struggling to meet the expenses related to the training materials, sports equipment, ground preparation, medical and travel expenses.

While I feel encouraged to note the success of girls' sports and also appreciate people like Tajul Islam, thinking about the child marriage situation in Bangladesh is still very upsetting. Bangladesh has the highest prevalence of child marriage in South Asia and globally ranks among the top 10 countries with the highest rates of child marriage.

A survey by BRAC, titled "Born to be a Bride" (October 2023), shows

that child marriage is happening irrespective of the girls' socio-economic backgrounds. In addition to poverty and lack of social safety, parents referred to finding "suitable grooms" as one of the major reasons for marrying off their daughters. Limitation in law enforcement is also a significant problem, while social acceptance of the practice is another. Additionally, nearly two years of school closures and rising poverty during the Covid-19 pandemic increased child marriage rates.

Apart from child marriage, there are other challenges that are linked to discriminatory attitudes and biases against girls and women in our society. I was disturbed to see a recent advertisement by an English medium school in Dhaka where two boys are seen learning mathematics and robotics, while a girl is seen playing the violin. To me, it was a glaring example of gender stereotypes, as the media and the entertainment industry continue to portray women in trivial ways. Limiting children to the narrow confines of gender stereotyped expectations affects their ability to realise their potential to the fullest.

The lives of adolescent girls shrink due to lack of social safety. In many cases, their mobility gets restricted and they are not able to avail opportunities. It is our responsibility to make society

safe for girls by strengthening child protection system at the community and national levels.

Recently I was talking to a few adolescent girls in Dhaka. They have their own analyses and thoughts on a wide range of issues, starting from the importance of environmental protection to the impact of artificial intelligence on our lives. Some of them are writing novels online, some

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are learning foreign languages, some are interested in karate, and some are skilled in graphic design. I was hopeful to know their views on various aspects of society and culture.

Swedish author Astrid Lindgren created a character named Pippi Longstocking—the strongest girl in the world. Pippi lives with her horse and a monkey (Mr Nilsson), and has the courage to do anything. The story of this extraordinary girl, who leads life according to her own terms, not afraid of anyone and empathetic to others,

has become part of classic literature.

The girls of Bangladesh are more courageous than Pippi. I have seen such girls in different parts of the country—from the char of Lalmonirhat to the haor of Sunamganj. They are determined to build their own lives.

However, that cannot be achieved without investments in girls' education, health, protection, and sports.

Initiatives must be taken to compensate for the loss to their education due to the Covid-19 pandemic. It is important to bring back married girls and adolescent mothers to school so that they can develop skills for economic, social, and political empowerment.

Girls should be raised in such a way that they can become confident, strong, ambitious, brave, independent and humane. We should listen to them while making decisions on issues affecting their lives. Furthermore, boys must be taught to respect girls and women. Having an equal relationship between men and women in the family is critical as well because children learn by observing adults around them.

On a broader scale, writers, artists, and cultural activists can create realistic and inspiring stories of female characters. Parents have to choose books, movies, toys, etc. for children very carefully, while the media can take steps to highlight women who are positive role models.

The girls of Bangladesh are marching forward. They want to reach the sky. If we encourage girls to dream and support them in their journey, they can succeed in all kinds of professions, and contribute to society in a meaningful way. Are we ready and willing to perform our responsibilities?