

Time to review social protection schemes

Raising allocations is vital, but not enough to address poverty

It is disconcerting to see how our social safety net is failing to provide timely and meaningful relief to the disadvantaged groups at a time when the prices of essential goods have skyrocketed, making them more vulnerable. As several recent reports show, the safety net continues to overpromise and underdeliver, as the current model spreads insufficient funds across too many small, often overlapping programmes (140 in total), with nearly half of the budget directed to pensions for government employees and interest payments on savings certificates. That leaves actual beneficiaries with little support.

A look at the social welfare ministry data reveals how inadequate it is. For example, the monthly allowances for widows, the elderly and persons with disabilities—who rank among the most vulnerable in our society—are Tk 550, Tk 600 and Tk 850, respectively. There has been only a negligible increase in the amounts over the decades despite a steep rise in inflation during this period, with a Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) analysis of the prices of 34 essential food items showing a hike by up to 310 percent between January 1, 2019 and May 19, 2024. Given this reality, the paltry sum given to the beneficiaries amounts to little more than symbolic support.

According to official data, 18.7 percent of the country's population, or 3.17 crore people, are poor, while 5.6 percent, or 95 lakh people, are extremely poor. The social safety net is supposed to provide a cushion to these groups, but it can't, primarily because of the insufficient allocations. The system is also plagued by selection errors, with many ineligible individuals benefiting at the expense of the poor. Last year, a CPD study found that an estimated 33 lakh elderly people and 25 lakh widows eligible for assistance were not covered by the social safety net programmes. Even though the interim government sought to update the beneficiary lists to address these issues, the drive has reportedly hit a snag because of the absence of many local public representatives.

As a result, over 1.21 crore beneficiaries have yet to receive cash allowances for the first quarter (July-September) of the ongoing fiscal year. Moreover, according to another report in this daily, food distribution under various schemes also fell by 14 percent year-on-year, mainly due to reduced grain transfers under the Food for Work (FFW) and Food Friendly Programme (FFP).

Clearly, the social safety net is not working as expected. Under the current circumstances, there is no alternative to expanding its coverage through sufficient allocations and ensuring the inclusion of all eligible beneficiaries. But as experts say, this alone is not enough since providing cash or food support, while vital for the time being, perpetuates dependence without offering a sustainable solution to poverty. For that, the government must overhaul the entire system of social support. Rather than fixating on scattered allowances, it should implement comprehensive rehabilitation programmes aimed at lifting the poor out of poverty.

Stern action vital to protect environment

Ineffectiveness of govt measures raises concerns

It is frustrating to see the relentless onslaught on our nature even now. Indiscriminate hill-cutting, deforestation, encroachment of water bodies including riverside areas, illegal sand-lifting, and rampant tree-felling—all are happening as before with the relevant authorities failing to prevent them. Almost every day, we see news of some environmental degradation somewhere in the country. The continuation of this situation even after the fall of the Awami League government and the installation of a pro-environment leadership is alarming.

For example, a photo published on the front page of this daily on October 17 revealed one such incident, which showed a hill being cut to make way for housing at Tukerbajar union in Sylhet Sadar. Reportedly, at least six hills have been cut in the area recently. What's more alarming is that, despite locals' complaints, neither the Department of Environment nor the district administration took any action to halt this destruction. The front page of our October 18 issue also published a photo showing how illegally sourced logs were being burnt inside makeshift furnaces in Khulna's Rupsha upazila, leading to environmental pollution. Another report reveals illegal sand extraction at the Raghunandan Hill Reserve Forest in Habiganj. While hill-cutting is directly linked with landslides, sand extraction exacerbates soil erosion and increases landslide risks.

The question is, how can individuals destroy hills, illegally extract sand or fell trees right under the administration's nose? Over the years, this daily has published numerous reports exposing such illegal practices and written countless editorials urging the authorities to take action against those involved. Yet, nothing seems to stir their conscience. Earlier this year, we witnessed local influentials ravaging a hill in Chinipara of Bandarban's Chimbuk area to build a road to transport illegally felled trees. More recently, local influentials cut off the top of Nagin Pahar, a hill in Chattogram, for residential construction. And just the other day, reports emerged about the Water Development Board felling 50,000 trees to collect soil for an embankment in Khulna's Koyra upazila.

Sadly, in all these instances, local administrations either remained silent or were themselves complicit. We know how individuals connected with the previous regime directly engaged in anti-environment acts, but to see this practice persist after regime change questions the sincerity of the present administration. Reportedly, in many cases, AL-affiliated individuals have been replaced by BNP-affiliated ones. We urge our environment adviser to investigate these matters and take stern action against anyone involved in activities detrimental to the environment. We have ample laws for environmental protection; it is time to put them to proper use.

Is stability possible without embracing pluralism?



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A key dividing factor in South Asian politics lies in the tension between secularism and religion-driven ideologies. This is not an isolated phenomenon as the global rise of far-right politics continues to patronise sociopolitical and cultural divides. Theoretically, any sovereign South Asian nation, including Bangladesh, can choose to separate state from religion or place religion at the centre of governance. However, from a pragmatic perspective, prioritising religious sentiments to (re)define culture or politics or claiming that a particular religious belief is fundamental to state (re)formation is a high-risk strategy. Such approaches, which seek to shape a state based on religious sentiment, can create and perpetuate tensions and conflicts within society, especially in the context of today's increasingly diverse, plural and multicultural South Asian societies impacted by globalisation.

Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum have made insightful observations in their respective books *Identity & Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (2006) and *The Clash Within: Democracy, Religious Violence, and India's Future* (2007) on how democracy and religious beliefs can be in a conflictual relationship with each other if not carefully discussed or nurtured by the state and the polity. They discuss the risks that nations like India face when they fail either to embrace sociocultural plurality or resist communal violence, thus impeding national progress. The hope that both Sen and Nussbaum have for South Asia in general, and specifically for India, is that public discourse and cultural and historical tolerance for secular ideals, despite various religious sentiments that are dominant in the country, can allow for the emergence and sustenance of a robust democratic culture that embraces pluralism in every possible way.

This is crucial because if we look at two major countries in the Middle East—Israel and Iran—it appears that both often impose their religious narratives on the public to sustain internal populist support. This has not brought peace or stability to either country. On the one hand, Israel, despite thriving militarily with the unconditional support of the US and its allies, is in endless conflict with its neighbours. On the other hand, Iran, under heavy Western sanctions, has a crippled economy. It also has an aggrieved population that does not necessarily support the current regime. Its citizens do not actually like the way they live their lives and would like to exercise their democratic rights instead.

rhetoric. One group is jubilant, believing that it has the authority to spread hate and incite violence, while the other is in deep shock, fearful that their freedoms are being curtailed by political threats, mob violence and acts of revenge. Even teachers, academics and artists have not been spared, facing hostility and abuse on multiple fronts. The rise in the number of dubious court cases against some journalists, intellectuals and others is also alarming, alongside the clashes between law enforcement agencies and garment workers.

We cannot assume that things will improve on their own, or that it is acceptable to turn a blind eye to issues that could affect the country's long-

term stability. My study on insensitive violence has made it clear that once a cycle of violence begins, it perpetuates in different forms and does not stop unless major interventions in the spheres of state and politics are made.

Following this, I argue that to ensure its long-term stability, what Bangladesh currently needs is pluralism as opposed to any one particular ideology or belief system. This is because only pluralism allows societies like ours to accommodate multiple ideas, religions, ideologies, and identities. In a society that celebrates pluralism, different actors and ideas can intersect to find common grounds to develop a just state. It might not be perfect, but it can serve all types of people with different beliefs in an adequate manner.

However, such a state cannot be built on the doctrines of countries like Israel or Iran, nor can it dismiss the importance of diverse worldviews. It also cannot be achieved through ambiguities in political and statist views, such as claiming that we want religious dominance while operating under Western-style democracy. Mixing such competing ideologies would create instability and chaos.

will impede the real progress of Bangladesh. We must also recognise the need to reduce Western geopolitical dominance, which can only be done through collective political consensus. Again, such consensus can only be achieved when we adopt pluralistic values as our common political language and attendant activities.

As the world contends with competing national interests, hyperconnectivity and the rise of artificial intelligence, it is shortsighted to remain stuck in debates about whether a country should be run by narrow identity politics or by triggering political ambiguity or impractical ideas so as to seize power. We can take pride in the fact that, historically, Bangladesh has been built on pluralistic ideals born out of the Language Movement of 1952 and the Liberation War of 1971. We cannot afford to be hesitant to honour the pluralistic spirit and the dignity of the lives either lost or shattered during 1952 and 1971, which paved the way for our hard-earned freedom on December 16, 1971.

It is a sharp reminder that while the West, especially the US and the



VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

Instead, a coherent vision of pluralism, rooted in tolerance and reasoned debate, is necessary to improve the quality of life for all.

If we agree on pluralistic political and social ideals, we must then reject both ambiguous and opportunistic political views and extremist positions in the name of reform. Otherwise, Bangladesh risks trapping itself in isolationist ideas. For example, populist approaches, such as opposing India based on communal sentiment rather than addressing Indian political and corporate dominance, or borrowing from the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund (IMF) without considering the long-term impact on ordinary citizens,

UK, exerts considerable influence over geopolitical issues in the Global South, these nations have managed to cultivate relatively successful pluralistic societies, build a highly skilled workforce, and lead the world in technological advancements. In the 21st century, Bangladesh should think forward, not backward, to resolve issues like gender inclusivity and the right of intellectuals to criticise authorities, while avoiding the use of narrow identity politics for political ambitions and gains. In sum, Bangladesh cannot risk becoming isolated from the global pluralistic debate. Such an isolation would only result in increased injustice and geopolitical domination, either from its neighbours or the West.

The wisdom of youth



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A friend recently came to visit me with her 14-year-old daughter. One day, we got to talking about economics.

"You probably think," I told her, "that economics is all about making money. But what if it was about managing our resources wisely? Let's say we need to house people. Different companies come forth with different proposals. One wants to clear some forest and build luxury housing; it will generate a lot of money (mostly for the company) while harming the environment and doing nothing to help the poor.

"Another company plans to build high-rise buildings for the poor, way out from the city where there are no job opportunities. A third company proposes building low-rise, affordable housing interspersed among other housing, complete with vegetable gardens, using local materials and local workers.

"The decision of who gets

permission to build wouldn't be based on how much money a company would make; it would be based on how many people we could comfortably and affordably house, and whether we could avoid damage to—or even make things better for—the environment."

She nodded. "Well, of course."
I continued, "The same with making clothing. Are we dumping chemicals into the river, or making them in a way that doesn't harm the environment? Any major project would be approved based on how good it is for the workers and the environment."

She nodded again. "How else would you do it? That makes perfect sense!"

Perhaps the biggest mistake we make in this world is not allowing ourselves, at least occasionally, to be guided by the wisdom of youth. We have created a world of such complexity that none of us can understand more than a tiny piece. We use devices with

no idea how they are built or how they function. We leave major decisions in the hands of so-called experts, who are so specialised that they are unaware of how their field of work impacts other people, issues or our planet.

Mind you, I am not arguing for oversimplification. Many issues are complex, and too often our solutions are ridiculously out of scale with the nature of the problem. We take one aspect of a complicated mess and address that, while ignoring everything else. Thus, we think that self-driving cars are the solution to the 12 lakh people dying every year in road crashes, or that electric vehicles will magically resolve pollution and the climate catastrophe.

Never mind that both those solutions still involve mining resources that are rapidly running out, using electricity (which is mostly still generated by burning fossil fuels), clogging our roads, and creating ever more isolating and hence dangerous and depressing cities.

But there are also cases in which we are overly complex. Teachers of economics like to bring out long and intricate formulas. They—like specialists in all fields—use jargon and acronyms that are meaningless to the uninitiated. They tell us that they possess arcane and necessary knowledge, and thus must be the ones

to make decisions that affect nearly every aspect of our daily lives: where we live, how we travel, what we eat and wear, and whether we can visit our friends (or have any).

Sure, one can argue that an ignorant child or teenager doesn't understand complicated concepts like economics. Certainly, so-called common sense can often lead us astray. But there are instances where the innocence of youth is combined with deep insight. We have all heard a naïve child make a remark that astounded us with their ability to unpack complexity and arrive at a simple truth.

In that vein, I suggest a simple truth: that our paradigms about economics such as intense competitiveness, the necessity of global trade for virtually every product, and the need to be ever-faster, ever-bigger, and ever-richer are wreaking utter devastation on our families, communities and planet. A profound rethinking of how we conduct the business of living is needed, and an approach that may sound childishly simplistic and utterly impractical may, in fact, be the approach that is needed to save our lives, our societies, and earth.

After all, if we have learnt nothing else in the last several months, it is not to underestimate the power of young people.