

Govt must do more to ensure free press

Robust protections for journalists and media houses essential

In our pursuit of a fair, anti-discriminatory Bangladesh, few values are as vital as press freedom. We are therefore concerned by the persistent intimidation, harassment, and censorship faced by journalists in the country, which shows how the media landscape remains fraught with obstacles. The alarm raised by Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) and the Editors' Council in this regard recently underscores the urgency of addressing these challenges, and the responsibility for this falls primarily on the interim government. This is not to detract from journalists' duty to uphold ethical standards, but a free press, by definition, comes without any restriction or condition, regardless of its outcomes.

Unfortunately, journalists today still face physical attacks, threats, slander, intimidation, and frivolous lawsuits. In their statements, both TIB and the Editors' Council also criticised the escalating rhetoric and even threats of siege by certain quarters targeting certain media houses, including this daily. Such attempts to suppress or manipulate coverage whenever it challenges powerful interests hark back to the abuses witnessed under the previous regime, whose actions over 14 years led to Bangladesh's ranking on the World Press Freedom Index plummeting by 42 positions.

For its part, the government did take some positive steps aligned with its commitment to ensure media freedom. It has moved to repeal the much-criticised Cyber Security Act (formerly Digital Security Act), with plans to withdraw all cases filed under this law. It has undertaken measures to revitalise state media organisations and established a media commission to drive reforms in the sector. However, it is its failure—or lack of action—to safeguard journalists from ongoing attacks and harassment that has raised concerns. Recent statements from top government officials, including the information adviser, warning media outlets about coverage of banned or “fascist” organisations such as the Awami League's student wing, Chhatra League, only deepen these worries. The abrupt revocation of accreditation cards for many journalists, reportedly for similar reasons, further contrasts with the commitment to press freedom.

This approach, we must say, not only dismisses journalistic independence but also weaponises the media's duty to cover all sides of the political spectrum. It also risks robbing any media reform agenda of its credibility. The government, thus, can be held accountable for both its actions and inactions. Against this backdrop, the priority is to end ongoing assaults on journalism and restore confidence in media independence. A “new” Bangladesh cannot thrive if its media remains shackled by fear and intimidation. The government must ensure robust protections for journalists and unequivocally condemn any attempts to silence or manipulate the press through coercive tactics.

Ensure transparency in law enforcement

Hold to account all accused of tampering or planting evidence

It is alarming to learn from a recent report that some members of a law enforcement agency, allegedly connected to a local Awami League leader in Dhaka, may have planted evidence to implicate an individual in a firearms possession case. The plight of such victims, and the apparent ease with which evidence can be manipulated, underscore the urgent need for accountability within our law enforcement agencies.

The case details show that on the night of March 30, a Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) team arrested two men in the capital's Madhya Pinerbagh area, accusing them of fleeing on a motorbike while in possession of a firearm. However, security camera footage from that night, a written statement from a Rab member present at the scene, a witness account, and allegations from one of the arrestee's family members present a different story. These sources indicate that the men were allegedly picked up in a microbus by several Rab officers from another location, and were not attempting to flee on a motorbike. In fact, footage shows two Rab members (later identified by their team) riding a motorbike that belonged to one of the arrestees.

One of the arrested men alleges that he was detained, handcuffed, and transported to another location in a microbus. He claims that Rab officers later instructed him to lift the seat of his motorbike, which they had brought there, where he then found a revolver and bullets allegedly placed there by the officers. His mother also accused Rab officers of framing her son at the request of a local Awami League leader, his business rival. In April, she filed a case against several Rab members and the leader in question. In response to her complaint, Rab also formed a three-member committee to investigate the incident.

This disturbing case of “arms recovery” echoes numerous reports from the previous regime where evidence was tampered with or planted to falsely implicate innocent individuals. Given the interim government's commitment to enhancing law and order, it is imperative that all such cases are thoroughly investigated or re-investigated, with strict disciplinary action taken against guilty officials. Besides, the authorities must ensure that instances of arbitrary arrests and frivolous cases do not recur. They should also thoroughly reform the accountability mechanisms within all law enforcement agencies, not just the police. Allegations of this gravity should be handled by independent investigators rather than internal committees, as the latter often failed to meet public expectations for impartiality in the past.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Super Typhoon Haiyan strikes Philippines



On this day in 2013, the Philippines endured what many consider its worst natural disaster when the country was struck by Super Typhoon Haiyan, one of the most powerful cyclones ever recorded to strike land.

‘Karnaphuli tunnel is a white elephant for Bangladesh’

Dr Md Shamsul Hoque, professor of civil engineering at the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET), talks about the practicality of undertaking megaprojects like the Karnaphuli tunnel in an exclusive interview with Monorom Polok of The Daily Star.

What prompted the Bangladesh Bridge Authority (BBA) to undertake the Karnaphuli tunnel project?

The Karnaphuli tunnel project was, frankly, a decision taken on a whim. The bridge authority moved forward without a proper feasibility study. We already had a bridge over the Karnaphuli River—the Shah Amanat Bridge—so the argument was that a second bridge would create congestion and disrupt the river flow due to the gathering of silt around bridge pillars. Thus, the decision to build a tunnel was made to avoid these issues, with much hype about it being South Asia's first underwater tunnel. But the decision wasn't well-thought-out or technically sound. The ambition of being the first at something outshined the need for the conversation about feasibility.

Why do you think there are challenges in bridge construction in Bangladesh?

Bangladesh has yet to master modern bridge construction. Most of our bridges are built with short spans and many pillars, which isn't ideal. This results in structures that interfere with river navigation, especially as vessel sizes and river traffic increase. In countries like Vietnam, bridges are constructed with spans exceeding a kilometre. Here, however, even major bridges like the Padma and Jamuna bridges have spans of only 150 to 200 metres. This limits clearance, hinders river traffic, and reflects the outdated design. It's almost impossible to call these structures “modern bridges” in the 21st century.

What are the specific advantages of bridges over tunnels in a river environment like the Karnaphuli?

Bridges are advantageous because they use natural elements, making them more sustainable and easier to maintain. For example, a bridge benefits from natural ventilation, sunlight, and rain drainage, reducing the need for energy-intensive maintenance. If a bridge gets wet, rainwater drains off naturally, while exhaust disperses into the open air. Tunnels, however, require constant maintenance for ventilation systems, lighting, drainage, and emergency firefighting equipment, among other things, which is also costly. Essentially, a tunnel is on life support from day one. The need for artificial lighting,

ventilation, and drainage makes it far more resource-intensive than a bridge.

When tunnels were built in the past, there was less emphasis on sustainable development, but that has changed. Now, everyone is focused on green development with minimal carbon footprints. The Karnaphuli tunnel, however, runs contrary to this goal, which is why it's so costly and difficult to maintain. In fact, its operation is causing us a daily loss of Tk 27 lakh. It is akin to being a “white elephant” for the country.



Dr Md Shamsul Hoque

Was there sufficient planning for the tunnel's long-term maintenance and revenue generation?

No. A tunnel requires continuous ventilation, lighting, and firefighting measures. Moreover, the revenue potential is limited due to certain vehicle restrictions. For example, vehicles carrying hazardous materials or those powered by CNG are not allowed to enter, which narrows its use. This decision makes the tunnel less accessible, which impacts revenue.

On top of this, toll rates for the tunnel are much higher than those for the Shah Amanat Bridge, which deters many vehicles, particularly commercial ones, from using it. Private cars, which don't generate substantial revenue, may still use it, but commercial vehicles will seek cheaper alternatives. This combination of high maintenance and limited revenue doesn't bode well for the tunnel's future.

Why are bridges considered more

efficient for revenue collection, and how does the Karnaphuli tunnel fare in comparison?

Typically, tolls from commercial vehicles like buses and trucks drive revenue for infrastructure projects like this. These vehicles prefer routes that are both affordable and accessible. Here, the high toll and restrictions on certain vehicle types reduce the tunnel's attractiveness and revenue potential. Since it was costly to construct and is expensive to maintain, the toll rate is considerably

better practices in the future.

Was the idea of building a “twin city” around the tunnel realistically considered?

The notion that this tunnel would enable a “twin city” across the river is overly simplistic. We have seen no such development even with long-established bridges, such as the Jamuna Bridge. In other countries, twin cities are built around integrated road networks and thoughtfully planned infrastructure on both riverbanks. Creating a twin city requires much more than just building a tunnel or bridge; it demands accessible transport systems for all types of vehicles, including pedestrians, cyclists, and local modes of transport.

However, such plans need close collaboration between the BBA and the Chattogram Development Authority to create cohesive urban development. This coordination is absent, and without it, the idea of a twin city remains just a vision.

What further planning and coordination issues have you observed in the tunnel project, and what could be improved in future projects?

There were various critical oversights in planning this project. For one, the bridge authority doesn't have a dedicated planning or research department, so they have always relied on external consultants rather than building internal expertise. It also treats these infrastructure projects as isolated tasks rather than as part of a larger transportation network. For instance, even when a bridge or tunnel is completed, the approach roads are often still under construction, which makes them inefficient. Ideally, approach and exit roads should be part of the planning from the beginning, with consideration given to traffic flow, multiple access points, and connections with other transport systems. For future projects, Bangladesh needs to consider sustainable, long-term solutions that integrate bridges or tunnels with other infrastructure. This may mean consulting international experts in infrastructure planning or sustainable development. As a small, densely populated country, Bangladesh has limited resources and land, so every development must be three times more efficient and carefully planned. Sustainable development should be the guiding principle.

How can we realise our innovation potential?



Afia Mubasshira Tiasha is senior research associate at the South Asian Network on Economic Modeling (SANEM). She can be reached at tiashaafia@gmail.com.

AFIA MUBASSHIRA TIASHA

Innovation elevates productivity by introducing novel concepts, methods, and technological advancements that contribute to efficacy. This results in higher production from the same or fewer inputs, which is essential for economic growth. The World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) publishes the Global Innovation Index (GII), which ranks countries based on their innovation capabilities and outcomes, considering institutions, human resources and creative outputs. It has seven pillars that offer a comprehensive framework for evaluating global innovation performance, and two sub-indices: innovation input and innovation output.

In the GI 2024, Bangladesh's score reflects a mixed narrative—steady although constrained progress in certain innovation sectors, and systemic challenges in others. In addition, out of the 133 economies, the country stands at 106. It is also ranked 22nd out of 38 lower-middle-income economies. There is disparity between the innovative input and output which reveals a crucial component of Bangladesh's innovation ecosystem: although the country can produce innovative ideas, it finds it difficult to establish an atmosphere that encourages long-term innovation.

In addition, the country is ranked considerably low by the GI in categories like business sophistication and human capital and research. These areas are directly related to the aptitude

of businesses and sectors to conduct research and development (R&D), integrate cutting-edge technology, and create environments that are conducive to innovation. Additionally, limited participation in global value chains, the lack of R&D partnerships with universities, and an absence of knowledge network integration are the primary hurdles at the firm level. Expenditure on research, education, and skills development is still sparse in Bangladesh.

While discussing innovation in contemporary sectors, access to digital infrastructure is essential, but instead, Bangladesh performs poorly in terms of fixed broadband and 5G access. Digital transformation requires better connectivity, especially as Bangladesh aims to boost its low-level, stagnant high-tech exports. To integrate data analytics, increase operational effectiveness, and link with global value chains, firms require a strong digital infrastructure. Accelerated investment in broadband infrastructure is necessary to ensure that businesses and industries outside of urban areas are not left behind. However, furthering this involvement at the corporate level is now a challenge, particularly in sectors like manufacturing, agribusiness, and textiles.

A potential solution for tackling the disparity involves expanding funding for advanced industries such as automation, artificial intelligence, and sophisticated procedures for

manufacturing. For instance, firms in the RMG industry may leverage automation technology and more advanced digital supply chains to reduce inefficiencies and increase their competitiveness. In a similar vein, agribusiness firms may employ precision agricultural technologies to boost crop yields and resilience, potentially promoting economic growth and innovation.

Bangladesh requires immediate action to improve knowledge absorption, innovate connections, and stimulate the growth of knowledge-intensive jobs. Constraints without immediate remedies may prevent firms from engaging even in activities that have been regarded as beneficial to innovation, such as R&D collaborations with foreign or academic partners. Creativity in innovation clusters, coupled with collaboration among firms, universities and governments, are prerequisites to develop sophisticated skills. To optimise knowledge-sharing, these clusters should concentrate on sectors where Bangladesh excels, such as digital finance, clean energy, and textiles.

The expansion of Bangladesh's venture capital market is necessary to allow startups and small and medium enterprises (SMEs) to undertake risks, invest in new technology, and develop. This might create a source of funding for high-growth companies by offering incentives for private equity investment in emerging industries.

Bangladesh, which ranks 128th globally in human capital and research, is also experiencing a significant human capital crisis. Limited funding for education, particularly in STEM disciplines, and a shortage of skilled labour slow down industry innovation. Better education and vocational training are essential to produce a workforce capable of working in high-value industries, research, and entrepreneurship.

Moreover, the problem of missing or outdated data, especially in the high-tech, education, and research and development sectors, is a key revelation from the GI 2024 report. Nine of the indicators in Bangladesh have out-of-date data, while 13 indicators have missing data. This dearth of reliable data makes it more difficult to accurately evaluate Bangladesh's capacity for innovation as well as for businesses and governments to identify those areas that need adjustment. A more robust innovation ecosystem can be fostered by making well-informed policy decisions, which will require strengthening the data infrastructure.

In addition, Bangladesh's institutional quality (for which the country is ranked 108th) emphasises the necessity of changing regulatory frameworks to foster an atmosphere that is more conducive to business. Businesses frequently encounter administrative roadblocks and a lack of defined, uniform policies that foster creativity. Innovation potential in businesses could be greatly increased by streamlining the patenting and intellectual property protection processes, cutting red tape, and improving governance.

The GI 2024 provides a road map for Bangladesh's transition from small-scale innovation enhancements to becoming a regional innovation leader. Firms and industries in the country need to work more to encourage innovation, even though they are efficient at transforming innovation inputs into outputs. This will require higher R&D expenditures, more sophisticated business operations, and a workforce skilled to use new technologies. By utilising sectoral strengths and addressing structural shortcomings, Bangladesh can realise its full innovation potential. Ultimately, this would improve the country's long-term economic growth and competitiveness globally.