

The Daily Star

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Battery-run rickshaw ban can be reviewed

But we must bring them under a strong regulatory framework

Rushed decisions and lax enforcement have been the bane of policy efforts surrounding battery-run rickshaws in Bangladesh. Over the years, we have seen how the use of these vehicles—with their fragile structures and unsustainably high speeds often posing safety risks—has prompted either blanket bans or partial restrictions, only for such regulations to prove futile as drivers invariably return to the streets. The High Court’s directive on Tuesday—banning battery-run rickshaws on Dhaka’s streets—and the inevitable pushback by drivers seem to perpetuate this cycle. A real solution that takes into account both the safety of passengers and the livelihoods of drivers, as well as the needs of this evolving city, remains elusive.

According to media reports, agitated drivers on Thursday again held demonstrations protesting the High Court directive. Following protests at Doyaganj in Jatrabari the previous day, they staged blockades at various intersections in Agargaon, Kallyanpur, Gabtoli, Mirpur, Mohammadpur, and Rampura, causing huge traffic disruptions. They also blocked railway tracks at Mohakhali for hours. If past trends hold, the authorities may again acquiesce to their demand, allowing them to operate as before.

But this will neither solve the problem nor address the deeper issues that perpetuate it. Weak enforcement is not the only issue here; the sector also suffers from lack of proper regulations. Currently, there is no official data on the number of mechanised and battery-run rickshaws and other illegal three-wheelers. However, unofficial estimates suggest there may be over six million such vehicles, with about one million within Dhaka city. The shortage of affordable public transportation relative to demand has led to their proliferation. The High Court first banned such rickshaws nationwide in July 2014, but successive attempts to implement the directive or restrict their use have failed. Massive investments have already been made, so an outright ban, without alternative employment for those involved, is clearly not a wise solution.

That doesn’t mean we should continue to ignore the safety concerns. According to the Road Safety Foundation, motorcycle accidents cause the highest number of road fatalities in the country, followed by accidents involving three-wheelers, including battery-run rickshaws. In Dhaka, the recent deaths of a student at Jahangirnagar University on Tuesday, and another woman at Shahbag earlier, again brought the issue to the fore. Clearly, things cannot go on as before. While many have recommended a gradual phasing out of these rickshaws, we believe this would only address the safety concerns without addressing what the city actually needs.

It needs something that’s faster than traditional rickshaws but safer than the inherently venerable battery-run rickshaws. So, we propose a three-pronged policy directive involving technical upgradation of their structures, retrofitting them with necessary suspension and braking features; detailed guidelines on where and to what extent they can operate; and proper regulations, including registration, driver training, and formalisation of other operational aspects. And, of course, we must ensure strict enforcement of these regulations. Done right, this kind of vehicle could be the future of city transportation. We urge the government to approach this issue with the thoroughness it demands.

People need urgent relief from inflation

Their exhausting wait for essentials is quite telling

The continued inflationary pressure on ordinary citizens, evident in the large crowds desperately lining up at TCB truck sales points and Open Market Sale (OMS) shops, is alarming. As reported by this daily, men, women, and even children are waiting for hours at various locations in Dhaka, anticipating the arrival of TCB trucks. In the busy Mirpur-10 area, for instance, around 300 people gathered early Monday morning, hoping to buy subsidised essentials that serve as a lifeline for low-income families. Elderly women, some as old as 70, were seen standing in line for hours and then running after a TCB truck to purchase necessities. Pregnant women also endured hours in line under the scorching sun to access low-cost essentials. With inflation remaining above 9 percent for 20 consecutive months, even middle-class individuals have joined these long queues.

Reportedly, a large number of people from low-income households are scrambling for essentials at the TCB truck sales points and OMS shops, which has become a defining picture of the city of late. Despite the government’s efforts to increase the supply of low-cost essentials, it remains insufficient to meet the overwhelming demand. For example, according to one TCB goods seller, while they can serve about 350 people a day, around 700 people gather daily at their spot, indicating that TCB trucks are able to meet the needs of only half those seeking daily essentials.

According to a recent report by the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, released by international agencies including the UN, nearly 23.3 million people—or 26 percent of Bangladesh’s population—are experiencing high levels of acute food insecurity. This situation is not only driving increasing desperation among the populace, resulting in thousands of hours wasted standing in TCB lines, but also causing immeasurable suffering. Additionally, the long-term health impacts of people cutting back on healthy diets will hinder progress for years if not urgently addressed.

Under these circumstances, the government must further prioritise efforts to address runaway inflation. If necessary, a high-level committee should be formed specifically to tackle inflationary pressures on low-income families. The government must further increase the quantity of essentials available at low cost through TCB and OMS sales. It should also work to improve the efficiency of their distribution, preventing people from enduring long lines and unnecessary hardships to access these resources.

The Indian media and Bangladesh-India relations

There cannot be a stable relationship without deeper understanding



THE THIRD VIEW

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As Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus stated, “The Bangladesh-India relationship is deep and multifaceted. We can have our differences but that cannot define it.” We have said this many times before and reiterate now that our bilateral relationship must be based on a “win-win” policy, rooted in mutual respect, non-hegemony, and the pursuit of shared prosperity and deeper understanding. In my early days as the editor of *The Daily Star*, I wrote, “For India, there are only two neighbours—China and Pakistan. The rest of us are geographic entities to be praised, cajoled, reprimanded and even punished as the situation would call for.”

Sheikh Hasina’s last tenure in power (2009-mid 2024) appears to have been a period of “praise.” However, after the student-led people’s uprising toppled her regime, a powerful section of the Indian media has shifted into the “reprimand” mode, with some even suggesting “punishment.” Much of the social media discourse seems to support this.

Let me start with my unequivocal position that oppression of minorities anywhere in the world, including in my own country, must be condemned and speedily resolved. It should never recur. Communal conflict has been an age-old phenomenon in South Asia following the British colonial policy of “Divide and Rule.” It is a regrettable fact that, after 77 years of the departure of the British, we have still not been able to solve it.

After the regime change in Bangladesh, the Indian media’s coverage of events can, in my view, be categorised as follows: 1) the events that toppled Sheikh Hasina was the work of Pakistan’s ISI, the Islamists in Bangladesh, or pro-Chinese elements all aimed to replace the “India-friendly” government with an “India-unfriendly” government. There is no mention of the role of common people or of the students—of the killing of ordinary people, etc. Where is the evidence of foreign hand? What is the source of all these assertions? And yet, the vilification goes on unabated; 2) the new government is bent on persecuting Hindus and even committing “genocide,” according to some. Many of these stories were debunked by fact-checkers, including the BBC. But that did not stop or even slow down the tirade of stories demonising us; and 3) the US’s involvement was also referred to and was linked with the events in

Pakistan—as in after toppling Imran Khan, the US toppled Sheikh Hasina.

In terms of covering the events of the July-August uprising by the Indian media, the following observations are striking:

1) The Indian media largely ignored the massive student-led people’s movement, which saw millions take to the streets in Dhaka, Chattogram, Rajshahi, Sylhet, Bogura and Khulna. Their focus remained almost exclusively on the sporadic violence against Hindus during the power vacuum in the first week of the transition.

2) The brutal firing on unarmed



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demonstrators, resulting in at least 700 deaths by August 5, was barely covered. This represents one of the most barbaric crackdowns in the recent history of South Asia, yet the Indian media gave it little attention. In the six interviews I gave to mainstream Indian outlets, there was almost no mention of the scale of the uprising or the civilian deaths, only the vandalism of symbols like Bangabandhu’s statue or the burning of government properties.

3) Even three months later, there has been no substantial coverage of the atrocities inflicted on students and civilians. The Sheikh Hasina government even resorted to firing on demonstrators using helicopters—an act of shocking cruelty. In a prompt action, the interim government fast-tracked the issuance of visas for journalists. However, the Indian journalists who visited Bangladesh focused solely on the attacks on Hindus, ignoring the broader human rights abuses by the Hasina government, thereby greatly affecting their credibility

to Bangladeshi readers.

4) The Indian media’s coverage appears to be driven by concern solely for Hindus of Bangladesh, rather than the people of Bangladesh. Will that foster a healthy relationship between our two countries? I have said previously and I repeat it now that India should not see the recent events through the lens of Sheikh Hasina but through the lens of democracy.

5) In a recent video broadcast by the well-regarded news portal ThePrint, Meenakshi Lekhi, a BJP leader and lawyer, said, “The chief adviser... is seeking to rename the nation [Bangladesh] to be [the] Islamic republic of East Pakistan.” Where did she get that from? What is the source of her claim? Her column was filled with distortions and misinformation. When recounting Sheikh Hasina’s grand success, she omitted critical facts like the rigging of the 2014, 2018 and 2024 general elections—the core reason for voters’ outrage with her regime.

Along with my team at *The Daily*

Star, I studied 56 news items appearing in the Indian media—both legacy and online—between July 9 and November 20. Except for a handful, most could be categorised as “views reports” and not “news reports,” with headings like: “To avoid election Yunus is using the excuse of reforms”; “Politics of revenge – 13 including ministers on trial”; “Will democracy at all return to Bangladesh?”; “China, ISI behind escalation of student-led protests in Bangladesh”; and “ISI conspiracy to topple Sk. Hasina and establish anti-India govt,” among others. Some TV news even called it an “Islamist takeover.” There were hardly any attempts to take a serious look at the events in Bangladesh.

If we analyse the sourcing of the news, the presentation, the headlines, and the language used in reporting, it becomes clear that it was directed at creating an impression that Hindus were not generally safe here, so that a deep hatred is generated against Bangladesh among the Indian population.

It is my conclusion that the mindset of the Indian media—and also that of a section of political leadership—is dominated by two strains of thoughts: 1) a fundamental disrespect for our intellectual ability; and 2) Islamophobia.

As for the first, Indian media coverage clearly implies that we, as a people, are incapable of determining our future. It is the Pakistanis, Chinese or the Americans—not to name the Indians, which they don’t, of course, mention—that must tell us what to do. This mindset is insulting to a nation that has fought against Pakistani cultural, economic and military oppression, and that has defeated them in an armed struggle—albeit with Indian help. It is insulting to a people who have dismantled BAKSAL imposed by the post-liberation Awami League government, defeated the autocratic rule of Gen HM Ershad, and who have now toppled what appeared to be an invincible regime of Sheikh Hasina. This mindset shows the disdain of the Indian media towards us, and that of some political leaders, one of whom compared us with termites.

The second issue is the Indian media’s Islamophobia and their total misunderstanding of the deep roots of Islam in the Muslim Bangalee psyche. People going to mosques, wearing Islamic headgear, keeping beards, using Islamic salutations, or referring to the Quran as a part of daily life are portrayed as extremists and terrorists in their eyes.

I wonder why they don’t learn from their own backyard. If the revival and strengthening of Hindu religious practices, building more temples, enshrining Hindu cultural traits, and becoming more practising Hindus are part of the present-day Indian ethos, then why should we, the Bangladeshis, becoming more Muslim make us extremists? If mass-based groups like the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, the Bajrang Dal, and the RSS can propagate the Hindu religion, and if a political party like the BJP, whose aim is to establish Hindutva in India, can get elected three times, then why does the reappearance of Islamic groups make us a fundamentalist country?

The Indian media and leadership must open their hearts and minds, dig deep into the cultural and religious heritage of Muslim Bengal, and try to embrace us as we are, rather than define us as they would like us to be. What the Indian people decide is the India we must accept, just as what the people of Bangladesh decide we are, India must accept. That is the only way a durable Bangladesh-India relationship can be built. The lesson for India is that regime-based relationships must be replaced by people-based relationships. For that to happen, we must understand each other better, with sincerity and respect.

We need stronger pledges from COP29



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Climate scientists have warned that climate change is progressing faster and affecting a wider area, with severe impacts across the globe. The devastating effects of climate change are felt from the bottom of the sea to the top of the hills, through coastal and plain lands. Antonio Guterres, the UN Secretary General, in his opening remarks at a plenary session at COP29 in Baku, stated that 2024 has seen the hottest day, the hottest month, and the hottest year on historical record. People are bracing for the next cyclone. Nonstop floods are destroying agriculture, crops, and infrastructure, affecting the food security of millions. A large number of children in African and Asian countries are going to bed hungry due to climate-induced shortages of produce.

A recent report by the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research (PIK) on “10 Insights in Climate Science” has cautioned that the world is not on the right track, as climate actions, particularly mitigation for the reduction of greenhouse gases (GHGs), are severely lacking, especially

among developed countries. The World Meteorological Organization (WMO) has reported that the average global temperature crossed 1.5 degrees Celsius in January 2024. Thus, the pace of climate change is rapid and forceful, with grave consequences for ecosystems. Scientists fear severe additional penalties, as climate change is a multiplier of risks, vulnerabilities, and socio-economic issues.

Climate change aggravates poverty, food, water and livelihood insecurity, which may lead to further social, gender inequities and conflict over limited resources, along with long-term social unrest in many parts of the world. The PIK report asserts that social systems in many countries could reach a threshold, or a social tipping point, due to the growing impacts of climate change, causing societies and economies to fall into an unrecoverable state. Early signs of this emerging situation are evident in some African countries, where thousands of poor and climate-vulnerable people are being forced to migrate to neighbouring countries due to hunger

and famine caused by extreme drought and frequent crop destruction.

In Bangladesh, people are facing alarming situations in climate hotspots, particularly in the coastal regions and north-central river basins, where they encounter multiple climate disasters year-round. They are exposed to cyclones, increased soil salinity, floods, soil erosion, drought, heat stress, and cold. These impacts affect the lives and livelihoods of millions of poor people, women, and socially excluded groups. They are unable to cope with the drastic changes in the local climate and its devastating effects. Thousands of people are displaced by climate extremes every year, and they are forced to migrate to large cities in search of livelihoods and shelter. However, these climate migrants are not welcomed by city residents or governments. They often end up in city slums and fringe areas, living in inhuman conditions without basic amenities such as food, adequate housing, water, sanitation, and healthcare. Women, children, and girls face significant insecurity and violence on their journey to the cities. Many of them never return to their villages of origin. They become homeless and are frequently evicted. As a result, their social ties, community connections, and social cohesion are broken.

Solving the climate crises requires policy responses for both adaptation and mitigation, adequate global finance, technological innovation, capacity building, institutional support

for the vulnerable communities, and local climate actions. The global strategies and responses are discussed at COP every year. Unfortunately, the developing nations and poor countries who are the innocent victims of climate change do not get much support from the developed countries, which are responsible for creating the problem.

We have observed with great concern that the major key players and climate negotiators—the presidents of the US, Russia, and China—are absent from this COP. This may negatively influence the decisions and ultimate outcomes of the COP. It is also feared that the major polluting countries are not committed to providing the necessary funds for adaptation and mitigation. However, a successful COP will require commitments to boost adaptation goals with adequate climate finance, develop strategies and actions for moving away from fossil fuels, and accelerate net-zero carbon emission strategies.

We hope that the civil society organisations, thousands of youths, environmental agencies, NGOs, human right groups, and media participating in COP29 will put pressures on the negotiators and global leaders to deliver the right strategies, targeted actions, and desired outcomes for the people. These actions are essential to reduce growing climate risks and vulnerabilities, address the emerging social tipping point, take urgent mitigation actions, and protect ecosystems and the planet.