

Some thoughts on universal basic income



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The issue of social protection may be viewed from three perspectives: as a concept linked to the notion of a welfare state; as a support to those who cannot fend for themselves and are outside the growth loop; and also as a tool to reduce poverty and inequality in a society. Social protection has various programmes and instruments, ranging from disability assistance to unemployment insurance to childcare allowances to conditional cash transfers. Over the years, one of the social protection instruments that has been piloted in many countries is the universal basic income (UBI).

Some of the issues concerning UBI need to be clarified. First, the word "universal" in UBI is sometimes misunderstood. Universal here does not mean everyone in the society, but it refers to everyone who qualifies for it, irrespective of all other social assistance they receive. Second, even though UBI has been discussed for decades, no country in the world currently has a national UBI. Over the years, many countries have tried UBI as pilot programmes on a local scale. Thus, in 1974, Canada ran its basic income pilot programme in Mincome, in the province of Manitoba. In 2008-09, Namibia provided every resident of Otjivero-Omitara with 100 Namibian dollars per month. In 2017-18, Finland paid 2,000 unemployed people a monthly income of 560 euros. Third, even now, experiments with UBI are still going on.

For example, in England, a pilot programme is planned to trial a UBI of 1,600 pounds per month. The programme will pay 30 people a lump sum each month for two years.

Three issues are pertinent to the UBI pilot programmes in different countries. One, they were to test whether this basic income transfer could reduce poverty and social exclusion, and also to assess the modus operandi of such programmes. Two, it was to identify whether a basic income to people would act as a disincentive for them to work. Three, the pilot programmes were a test case to determine whether the cost implications for an UBI programme would be high. These concerns are of importance for scaling up the current UBI programmes as well as for their replication in other countries.

All these issues are relevant to contextualise the present discussions that have been taking place in Bangladesh on introducing a UBI programme, in line with the aspiration of the people to create a society without disparities. The idea is that such an initiative in Bangladesh will improve the living conditions of its poor, will protect those who are outside the market structures and are unable to fend for themselves, and will pave the way for a welfare state. A UBI programme for Bangladesh has recently been proposed as a promising tool to reduce poverty, empower citizens, and streamline social protection even within the constraints

of the current fiscal framework.

Some of the characteristics of the proposed programme are: first, it would include a periodic, unconditional, and uniform cash payment system, offering financial security to all members of the society. Second, it has been maintained that at this point, a partial UBI would be perfect for Bangladesh. Third, a poverty scorecard has been recommended as a reliable and cost-effective tool to assess

referred to as an initiative that could be more effective than the current social safety net programmes in alleviating poverty in the country. Does it mean that other social safety net programmes will be scrapped? Or would it lead to a combined integrated social protection package for the country? Similarly, if there is duplication of benefits (for example, if someone gets some other social safety benefits in addition to UBI), will

of UBI should be thought through. The bureaucracy around UBI can be stifling.

Two other major issues need to be tackled in the context of UBI for Bangladesh. First is the question of targeting. The proposed UBI has indicated that the threshold of the poverty scorecard would be determined by analysing values in urban and rural areas, aligning them to represent households that fall below the upper poverty line, as defined by the 2022 Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) of the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS). According to the proposal, urban households with a score below 48, and rural areas below 52, would be eligible to receive allowances. In this context, two questions need to be answered: one, how the scoring was done—if there was any subjectivity behind those scoring; and two, if, in future, the upper poverty line was adjusted up or down, how the scoring would change.

Second, the resource implications of UBI everywhere in the world is huge, and Bangladesh is no exception. If each eligible person here is handed over, as proposed, Tk 4,540 per month, a national UBI programme would cost the treasury about Tk 75,000 crore. With the country's tax-GDP ratio at eight percent, the scale of the challenge to implement a national UBI programme will be daunting. There is also a related question: even if it is possible to sustain this cost of UBI, would the resources for other social safety net programmes dry up?

Finally, it is good to know that like other relevant countries, the UBI proposal is focusing on it first as a programme on a limited scale and coverage. A proposal has been made to roll it out in 11 most poverty vulnerable districts in the country. This is a prudent and a pragmatic approach. If, on monitoring and evaluation, it seems promising, the UBI programme can then be scaled up nationally and sustained.



VISUAL: SHAHKH SULTANA JAHAN BADHON

poverty levels and identify target groups. The threshold of the proposed poverty scorecard is supposed to indicate the households' susceptibility to poverty with the implication that those scoring below the threshold are more vulnerable to poverty, while those above are not. This will ensure an effective implementation of the programme.

In moving forward with the proposal, it will be of critical importance to pay attention to some crucial issues. First, the proposed UBI programme has been

the other benefits be stopped? Second, the proposed UBI will be an unconditional cash transfer. As there is an intense global debate on the efficacy of unconditional versus conditional income transfers, the issue may be revisited in the context of Bangladesh. This is because conditional cash transfers can bring in additional benefits in areas of children's education, health and nutrition. Bolsa Familia, the conditional cash transfer programme in Brazil, is a prime example. Third, the implementation mechanism

BANGLADESH-INDIA RELATIONS

Bridging borders, building futures



Bobby Hajjaj is a political activist and academic.

BOBBY HAJJAJ

By the capricious grace of geography and the unyielding heft of history, Bangladesh and India are bound together, like conjoined twins linked by the same lifeblood, the rivers that course through our lands and the shared tragedies and triumphs of our past. Yet today, this bond stands strained, frayed by the abrasions of mistrust, poisoned by the venom of misinformation and tested by the heavy tread of political opportunism.

To repair the fragile ties between our nations, the chief adviser of the interim government of Bangladesh can consider the following recommendations, which are neither lofty abstractions nor partisan posturing—they are pragmatic imperatives aimed at staving off discord and building anew the bridges of cooperation. For the truth is plain: our nations have too much to lose from estrangement and far more to gain from solidarity.

Few nations in the world are so inescapably entwined as ours, and nowhere is this more evident than along our 4,096-kilometre border—a serpentine demarcation that is both a meeting point and a wound. Here, life plays out in sharp contradictions: smuggling routes that mock official trade channels, familial ties that transcend barbed wire, and, most tragically, the bodies of Bangladeshis struck down by Border Security Force (BSF) bullets, suspended grotesquely on fences of steel and cruelty.

This border, this scar etched into our shared flesh, must transform.

The chief adviser, as the head of the government, can form a national advisory committee comprising political leaders, civil society actors and government officials to collectively address the challenges of this volatile frontier. Through this body, grassroots tours can bring policymakers into direct contact with affected communities, fostering trust and countering the malignancies of misinformation. Cross-border trade zones, rather than barriers, can offer hope—economic lifelines replacing the smuggling networks that thrive in the absence of legitimate opportunity.

Our rivers are capricious, nurturing and destructive, soothing and raging, unifiers and dividers. The Teesta, in particular, has become the site of a festering dispute—a river of life turned into a stream of acrimony. Without equitable sharing, the drought-stricken farmers of northern Bangladesh face ruin, their fields barren and cracked under the sun's merciless gaze. Time-bound negotiations grounded in science and fairness can be pursued. The lessons of the Mekong River Commission, considered a triumph of regional cooperation, should guide us.

The challenge of water-sharing is inseparable from the spectre of climate change, whose rising seas and erratic rains are rewriting the rules of survival. Only through collaboration can our nations protect the rivers that sustain us.

Trade ought to be the beating heart of our economic partnership. Instead, it has become a sore point, a battlefield of imbalance. Indian goods dominate Bangladeshi markets, while our exports are stymied by bureaucratic red tape and thinly veiled protectionism. This asymmetry is not just an economic grievance; it is a political irritant, fuelling

can—and must—be a shared triumph.

During the upheaval of the July-August mass movement, as Bangladesh's youth rose against tyranny, voices from across the border joined the chorus. Indian students and activists stood in solidarity, reminding us of 1971, when India's people helped millions of Bangladeshi refugees and lent

and seminar halls fortify the bridges of diplomacy and trade.

In this era of information warfare, narratives can shape nations. Bangladesh has been vilified and misrepresented in Indian media, and our responses have too often lacked coherence and reach. The stakes of this propaganda are high, threatening to deepen mistrust and derail dialogue.

however, is not a physical one. It is the war of words, the rhetoric of division. Indian political leaders, particularly those of the BJP, have indulged in sabre-rattling, their inflammatory statements echoed by an ever-obliging media. In West Bengal, even Mamata Banerjee's once conciliatory tones have hardened, amplifying hostility rather than harmony. But let us not answer fire with fire. Let Bangladesh take the higher road, countering rhetoric with reason and aggression with appeals to our shared humanity. We must remind the people of India that our futures are brighter together than apart.

In a world besieged by authoritarianism, Bangladesh and India must reaffirm their commitment to democracy. For us, this means holding free and fair elections, inviting international observers, including those from India, to bear witness. Transparency will not only bolster our democratic credentials but also silence the voices of scepticism and distrust.

The rivers we share, the markets we trade, and the ideals we uphold bind Bangladesh and India in a destiny too profound to be undone by petty politics or misplaced pride. This moment of tension is also a moment of choice. Will we drift further into estrangement, or will we rise to the promise of partnership? The answer lies in dialogue, in understanding, and in the courage to build anew where old structures have crumbled.

Let us turn borders into bridges, water disputes into lifelines, and trade imbalances into engines of shared prosperity. Let us replace the ink of animosity with the spirit of unity, writing a new chapter in the history of Bangladesh-India relations—one of hope, trust and shared triumph. This is not just a diplomatic necessity; it is a moral imperative. It is a story worth telling and a future worth fighting for.



Indian Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri at a meeting with a Bangladeshi delegation in Dhaka on December 9, 2024.

resentment and weakening the ties that bind us. Both governments must seize the opportunity for economic symbiosis. Bangladesh must gain greater access to Indian markets, especially in textiles, pharmaceuticals and IT—sectors where our industries have proven their mettle.

Simultaneously, attracting Indian investment in Bangladeshi infrastructure and energy projects can create jobs and foster goodwill. Trade need not be a zero-sum game; it

their strength to our struggle for freedom. This solidarity must not be a fleeting memory; it must become the foundation of a new chapter.

There can be robust youth and cultural exchanges, creating networks of understanding that transcend political turbulence. Universities, think tanks, and student unions can collaborate on shared challenges, from climate resilience to democratic renewal. Let the bridges we build in classrooms

A comprehensive media strategy can be adopted, comprising regular rebuttals in international outlets, special press briefings in English and other global languages, and proactive engagement with the Bangladeshi diaspora to amplify our truths. Dialogues with Indian journalists and opinion leaders can help recalibrate the narrative, fostering a culture of mutual respect rather than mutual suspicion.

The most dangerous frontier,

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

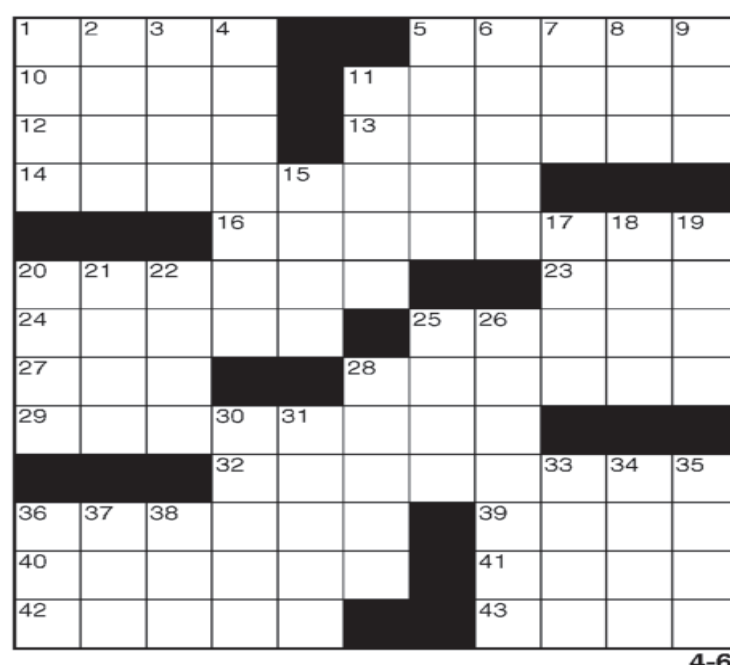
ACROSS

- 1 Bunches
- 5 Small herring
- 10 Stubbs of the Four Tops
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- 12 Perfect place
- 13 Made up
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- 16 Arctic regions
- 20 Gentle touch
- 23 Pitching stat
- 24 Follows orders
- 25 Intense beam
- 27 CEO's deg.
- 28 Like some lines
- 29 Spot for a shot
- 32 Base for shingles
- 36 Mississippi port

DOWN

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- 3 Finished
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- 11 Battle reminders
- 15 Highlands girl
- 17 Take a breather

- 18 Grove growth
- 19 Knotty pieces
- 20 Rooster topper
- 21 "Fernando" group
- 22 Bring up
- 25 Aerobatics feat
- 26 Hawks' home
- 28 Day in Hollywood
- 30 Long-legged bird
- 31 April headache
- 33 Sandbox toy
- 34 Writer Ferber
- 35 "Doggone!"
- 36 Outlaw promise
- 37 Marital
- 38 Old card game



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