

# Government must save Panthakunja from the pillars of development



**Kallol Mustafa**  
is an engineer and writer who focuses on power, energy, environment and development economics. He can be reached at kallol.mustafa@yahoo.com.

**KALLOL MUSTAFA**

The previous government spent thousands of crores of taka on various mega infrastructure projects to decongest Dhaka. But instead of solving Dhaka's traffic congestion problem, these projects led to a decrease in the average speed of vehicles, encouraging private car movement. One such project is the Dhaka Elevated Expressway project which is under construction in the Public Private Partnership (PPP) model.

The main purpose of constructing an expressway is usually to bypass the congested city. For this reason, the number of ramps inside the city is kept to a minimum. Initially, similar plans were made for the Dhaka Elevated Expressway. It was said that vehicles coming from the northern region would bypass Dhaka city and travel to the southern and southwestern regions by using this elevated expressway, thereby reducing the traffic pressure on the internal roads of Dhaka.

But in reality, the opposite has been done. As the road is being constructed by foreign private companies in the PPP model, a large number of ramps have been constructed at various places within Dhaka city to collect more tolls for the companies' commercial interests. As a result, more and more cars are coming down the ramps at faster speeds increasing the traffic congestion.

This became clear soon after the Kawla to Tejgaon section of the expressway was opened for vehicle movement in September 2023. It has been observed that the expressway is being used almost exclusively by private cars and since these vehicles are coming down from the northern part of Dhaka at Farmgate at great speed, Farmgate has become the new centre of Dhaka's traffic jam. But even then,

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FILE PHOTO: PLABON AMIN

The construction of the link road of the Dhaka Elevated Expressway is still going on, destroying the Panthakunja Park.

the construction of more ramps from the expressway did not stop. Under "Support to Dhaka Elevated Expressway PPP Project," an initiative was taken to construct a connecting road from Moghbazar Rail Crossing to Sonargaon Hotel, Panthakunja, Hatirpool, Kantabon, Dhaka University to Palashi Mor. As part of this, a part of Hatirjheel has already been filled and many trees of Panthakunja Park have been cut down to build expressway ramps.

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even during this government's tenure, the work of elevated expressway is going on and parks and waterbodies are being destroyed as before. Not only that, even after more than a month of joint movement by various individuals, organisations and experts including the Bangladesh Tree Protection Movement, the government is doing nothing to cancel the works.

It is noteworthy that several advisers

In February 2023, she demanded the removal of commercial establishments built or under construction in Dhaka's Dhupkhola Ground, Bahadur Shah Park and Gulshan Shahabuddin Park and other parks and grounds. In a joint statement, she reminded the government about the Preservation of Playgrounds, Open Spaces, Parks and Natural Water Bodies Act, 2000. According to this Act, the use of playgrounds, open

to have the honour of perhaps setting up the world's first coffee shop in a public park!"

He used two arguments against setting up coffee shops in public parks: i) establishing a coffee shop inside the park will limit public access to certain parts of the park; ii) the coffee shop is not compatible with the purpose of the park. We need not remind him that both these arguments can also be applied against the construction of Dhaka Elevated Expressway ramp at Panthakunja Park.

Despite having such pro-environment advisers in the cabinet of the current government, the construction of this link road, which is destroying the Hatirjheel and Panthakunja Park, is continuing. Adviser Muhammad Fouzul Kabir Khan said on the 11th day of the continuous sit-in programme of the Tree Protection Movement to protect Panthakunja Park: "A decision has already been made. It is not possible to stop the construction of the Karwan Bazar to Palashi section of the expressway. Now we will think about how development work can be done by

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keeping trees. You try to understand. What has happened here has to be accepted. Listen to what I have to say. If you don't listen, I will leave."

What might be the reason for this attitude? Would stopping the construction of the link road at this stage hurt the interests of foreign companies by undermining their investment in the expressway? Perhaps if the pillars and ramps are not allowed to be built by destroying the park and Hatirjheel, the elevated expressway will have less traffic, resulting in less revenue for investor companies. So, is the construction of the ramp being allowed at the cost of the Panthakunja Park and Hatirjheel to keep the interest of the investing company intact? However, to protect public interest and the environment, the elevated expressway agreement, like many other anti-people agreements signed by the previous government, should be re-evaluated and revised.

The interim government must prove that they are not a follower of the destructive development model of the past autocratic regime. But it is difficult to be optimistic about the government's behaviour so far. It is very sad that the government has not changed its stance even after the activists of the Tree Protection Movement have been staging sit-in protests at the Panthakunja Park for more than 40 days demanding a stop to the environmental destruction, an initiative the government should have itself taken.

spaces, parks and natural water bodies in any other way is prohibited. She also raised the question, is earning money or profit the main goal of the city's institutions and authorities? Is creating an ideal environment for people to live, absolutely secondary to them?

Muhammad Fouzul Kabir Khan, adviser to the Ministry of Road Transport and Bridges under whose supervision the expressway is currently being built, has also written in favour of environment and sustainable development. Just two years ago, in January 2023, he took up the pen opposing the establishment of a coffee shop in Gulshan's Shahabuddin Park. Protesting against setting up coffee shops in parks, he wrote in a satiric tone: "Gulshan's Shahabuddin Park is going

of this government were vocal during the previous regime in protecting the environment including trees, playgrounds, waterbodies, and parks. They have opposed the construction of any kind of structure in public parks and playgrounds across the country including Dhaka through their speeches, statements, and writings.

For example, Syeda Rizwana Hasan, adviser to the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, expressed solidarity with the movement against the construction of a police station in the Tentultala field of Kalabagan in the capital in 2022. On April 26, 2022, she pointed out how dysfunctional the urban planning of a country can be, that people have to stage protests to save playgrounds!

## Dr Manmohan Singh: A brilliant political leader and visionary thinker



**Amartya Sen**, Nobel laureate, is Thomas W Lamont University professor and professor of economics and philosophy at Harvard University.

**AMARTYA SEN**

To say Manmohan Singh was a great man would be to state the obvious. He was a brilliant political leader, a visionary thinker, an outstanding economist, a superb academic, a fabulous leader of administration, a splendid husband, father and grandfather, and an immeasurably sympathetic human being.

For me personally, he was also the warmest of friends for nearly 70 years. From the time, 69 years ago, I went to see him in his undergraduate rooms at St John's College in Cambridge, I have remained immensely impressed by his wisdom, modesty and kindness.

We were extraordinarily happy at the Delhi School of Economics when we successfully persuaded Manmohan to join us. He was a terrific teacher and a darling of the students, but he also had time to talk with his colleagues.

I have been immensely privileged in having the opportunity of interacting with Manmohan in his many different roles: First as a fellow student, then as an international civil servant, then as a wonderful colleague at Delhi School of Economics, then as a senior civil servant, followed by the time when he was running the international South Commission based in Geneva, then as a statesman, including his time as the most innovative finance minister in the history of modern India, and finally as the prime minister of the world's largest democracy.

We talked on thousands of subjects on what seem like millions of occasions. I always learnt hugely from our conversations.

I am glad, however, that Manmohan was less than successful in teaching me to be as modest as he himself was. I have many memories of the prime minister of India patiently waiting for others around the table to finish before speaking himself. Waiting for others to finish can take a long time in India.

Other than feeling good about Manmohan's failure to educate me to his level of courtesy, I wish he had been less educated in modesty himself and spoke more often. He had hugely important things to say to India and to the world. It would have been wonderful if some of the things that figured, with inescapable hesitation, in his private conversations had figured more—and in greater length—in his public statements.

Manmohan had the same well-mannered reticence everywhere, but he could be amazingly eloquent and profound when pushed. The only occasion I have had the privilege of dining next to Michelle Obama was when the Obamas gave their first ever gala dinner at the White House in honour of Manmohan—I had a wonderful placing as Manmohan's guest. Michelle asked Manmohan repeatedly to say what he thought on various subjects and got extraordinarily illuminating answers. I wish someone as

brilliant as Michelle Obama had done a "one-on-one conversation" with Manmohan for sharing with the world.

Manmohan's understanding of the great need for unity and for social justice in India comes back to me whenever I think about these persistent problems. I know that Manmohan is mainly thought of as the architect of economic liberalisation of India (which he certainly was), but we must



FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

**Manmohan Singh had hugely important things to say to India and to the world.**

also note that he never lost sight of the need for equity in economic progress, and in particular of increasing employment and income of the poor. Cultivating rich—and super rich—plutocrats was never his priority.

I wish Manmohan could have done more on elementary health care for all and in expanding general education, and also more in removing the inequities of caste divisions. It is particularly unfortunate that he achieved

considerably less than he wanted in these areas and could not get the practical politics of India more excited about these objectives. These are areas in which Manmohan could have fruitfully been less reticent, especially in making his private concerns more public. We often had discussions on Ambedkar's vision of India, but that vision did not receive as much attention in Manmohan's speeches, though his frustration did get airing.

To move to another area, Manmohan's focus on secularism was extraordinarily firm. Both his private conversations and his public priorities reflected that strongly. As the commitment to secularism has weakened in India, and religion has entered into Indian politics in a big way, Manmohan's secular priorities are especially important to recall.

His clear understanding of the necessity of unity in India remains strikingly important today. The distinction between religion and religious politics was important for Manmohan. In addition to keeping religion out of politics, there was another aspect to Manmohan's religious neutrality.

Religion was important for Manmohan, including religious customs. When I went to his room in St John's College in 1956, I remember stumbling against his freshly washed turbans which he had hung across his room in an attempt to dry them. But his Sikh identity was never in tension with his supportive acceptance of other people's religion and religiosity.

When, a long time ago, I talked with Manmohan on this, I remember thinking that this is quite a different aspect of religion-neutrality from the standard secularism of keeping religion out of politics. This different form of religion-neutrality reminded me, rather, of a remark of Gautama Buddha in one of my favourite Sanskrit books, *Vajracchedika Prajnaparamita Sutra*, which in its Chinese

translation by Kumarajiva, done in 401 AD, had the distinction of becoming the first printed book in the world (printed in 868 AD). In the book, often known as the Diamond Sutra, Buddha told his disciple Subhuti: "Those who set forth on the path of bodhisattva know, see, and believe all dharmas but know, see, and believe them without being attached to the perception of one singular dharma."

Since Buddha included atheism and

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agnosticism among possible dharmas, I could inform Manmohan that I, too, could count on his support if he were to go along the path of bodhisattva, which his good behaviour indicated he had been doing.

The importance of Manmohan's recognition of the plurality that surrounds us remains as strong today as it has always been. I so much wish that his vision will remain an indispensable part of the understanding of what we are. We will not take Manmohan's modest hesitation as an answer.

*This article was originally published in the Indian Express on January 15, 2025.*