

The Daily Star

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Ensure fair contest for govt contracts

We must break monopolistic stranglehold on public procurement

The monopolistic control over government procurement is something that we often talk about. A recent study by Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) now reveals that over the past 12 years, 17 percent of all government tenders had only one bidder. This means public contracts were awarded without competitive price bidding among multiple participants, violating the government's own policies. While public procurement is among the most corruption-prone sectors globally, in Bangladesh, according to TIB, corruption in this sector has spiralled out of control.

For example, between 2012 and 2025, 27 percent of all bids had only two or three bidders. Additionally, more than 44 percent of tenders were issued under the "limited tendering method," which is intended for cases where goods, services, or works are available from only a small number of suppliers. Since the launch of the e-GP system in 2011, the top 10 contracting ministries have accounted for about 92 percent of the total expenditure of Tk 596,921 crore. However, larger contracts have remained outside the e-GP framework, making them even more susceptible to corruption.

At the Road Transport and Highways Division, just 11 percent of all contractors were awarded 93.55 percent of the Tk 82,506 crore spent by the department between 2015 and 2025. The concentration is even more extreme among the top 1 percent of contractors, who control 72.9 percent of the market. Similarly, at the Ministry of Water Resources, around 9 percent of contractors hold 91.5 percent of the total project value, with 38 contractors controlling a 30.9 percent market share. At the Ministry of Housing and Public Works, only 7.45 percent of contractors dominate 71 percent of the market.

A similar pattern is seen across other ministries, highlighting the extent of monopolisation that has taken root under past regimes. This, in turn, has fuelled inequality, as a select group of favoured companies have repeatedly secured projects without competitive bidding or proper oversight. It is one of the reasons why government projects in Bangladesh tend to be so costly, despite often being of subpar quality.

TIB has found that the companies dominating government procurement often change with shifts in leadership at local governments or ministries. This suggests that the procurement system does not function based on the competitiveness of bids, the quality of a company's work, or its market reputation, but rather according to the whims of those in power. This raises serious concerns about conflicts of interest and corruption.

Given the circumstances, the interim government must undertake a comprehensive overhaul of the procurement system to ensure independent oversight, greater transparency, and mechanisms for external scrutiny. The government should also introduce market share caps for individual contractors and joint ventures. Breaking the monopolistic cycle will encourage not only the establishment of more firms but also greater competition, thereby improving the quality of public projects.

Sajek fire a wake-up call for tourism sector

There must be proper safety measures in all tourist destinations

Our hearts go out to the victims of the devastating fire that ravaged Rangamati's Sajek Valley, one of the most popular tourist destinations in the country. According to estimates given by the district administration, the fire—which broke out around 1:00pm on Monday—gutted about 98 establishments, including 36 resorts and cottages, 35 houses, 20 stationary shops, and seven restaurants. Business owners estimate the total damage to be around Tk 100 crore, including Tk 30 crore lost in tourism-related destruction alone. While the scale of the fire has caught many by surprise, preliminary investigations reveal glaring lapses that make such a tragedy seem all but inevitable.

According to a report by Prothom Alo, the fire, which burned uncontrollably for hours, was exacerbated by the lack of a fire station nearby. By the time fire service units from Dighinala, Khagrachhari, Rangamati, and other far-flung areas arrived, the damage was already extensive. The water crisis in Sajek also hampered firefighting efforts by locals. There were other factors responsible for the devastation. For example, most structures in Sajek are built of wood and bamboo, making them highly flammable. The uncontrolled expansion of resorts and cottages without proper regulations also created a densely packed environment where fire could spread rapidly. Moreover, none of Sajek's estimated 126 resorts and cottages had fire extinguishers, nor had there ever been a fire drill in the area.

The question is, how could such a popular spot develop without having any fire safety measure in place? Why didn't the local administration and fire service department enforce necessary measures, even after similar fires broke out in Sajek in 2017, 2021, and 2023? While the lack of fire and building safety is a threat that extends to all of Bangladesh—especially urban and industrial settings where fire incidents are a common occurrence—the Sajek episode should serve as a wake-up call for the tourism authorities and entrepreneurs. We need sustainable tourism that prioritises safety, not unplanned expansion that compromises it.

The immediate priority, however, is to ensure the victims are properly compensated and helped in rebuilding efforts. At the same time, steps must be taken to prevent fires in the future. The establishment of a fire station in Sajek or nearby areas has become crucial. Also, given the water shortage in hilly regions, every resort and cottage there should be mandated to have fire extinguishers and other essential firefighting equipment. All this must be done as part of a strict regulatory framework for tourism infrastructure development.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Chile struck by earthquake and tsunami

On this day in 2010, a magnitude-8.8 earthquake struck Chile, causing widespread damage and triggering a tsunami that devastated coastal areas. It was the most powerful earthquake to strike the western South American region since 1960.

JAISHANKAR'S REMARKS ON BANGLADESH

A deeper understanding is necessary

THE OVERTON WINDOW



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ERESH OMAR JAMAL

India's External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar recently made some strong remarks about Bangladesh at the Delhi University Literature Festival. Here are some key excerpts from his speech. "Things happened there last year, all of you are aware of it... for us what is very troubling, there are two aspects of it... the spate of attacks on the minorities... it is something which impacts our thinking and... we have to speak up about... they have to make up their mind what kind of relationship they want with us. Because every day, somebody in Bangladesh, who is in the interim government... if they stand up and blame India for everything, and some of the things in the reports are ridiculous... I think this is a decision also that they have to make. About what kind of relationship they want.

"We have sent a very clear signal, okay we are a neighbour, we would like for things to calm down... But we would obviously not like to see the messaging and... signalling which is continuously hostile in a way to India."

Let's start from the very beginning—about what happened in Bangladesh last year. In July-August, a mass uprising erupted against Sheikh Hasina's Awami League government. During the protests, approximately 1,500 students, workers, and citizens lost their lives, while around 20,000 others were injured. A United Nations Fact-Finding Mission reported, "The prime minister herself told security force officials to kill protesters to quell the protests and specifically demanded 'arrest the ringleaders of the protests, the troublemakers, kill them and hide their bodies.'"

Despite these serious allegations, Indian officials and some segments of its media have barely mentioned these facts. They have hardly acknowledged that Sheikh Hasina and numerous other Awami League leaders—whom India has sheltered—stand accused of mass murder. If Mr Jaishankar and other Indian officials are truly aware of what happened in Bangladesh, why this omission?

On the issue of minority attacks, this newspaper, along with other media outlets as well as the interim government itself, have acknowledged

and reported on incidents of attacks on minorities after the Awami League's unceremonious ouster. Many of these attacks occurred on August 5-8, when the country totally lacked law enforcement services. A number of minority community members—including Hindu Bangladeshis—were attacked, but some of them were attacked because of their political affiliation with the Awami League and the resentment among people towards the former ruling party.

While this context helps explain the attacks, it does not excuse them. The interim government has repeatedly stated that even a single attack on a member of a minority community is unacceptable.

However, segments of the Indian media have been caught exaggerating reports. And the extent of falsification even extended to presenting events in India as occurring in Bangladesh.

In fact, if we consider how some segments of the Indian media, social media, and commentators on other platforms have covered Bangladesh over the past six months, it has been nothing short of an information war against Bangladesh.

Indian government officials, too, have harped on this matter, with West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banarjee even suggesting that India should seek the deployment of UN peacekeeping forces in Bangladesh—raising concerns about Bangladesh's sovereignty.

What about the rights of minorities in India, though? Since 2014, leaders of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) have made many openly hostile remarks against Muslims. Some examples include:

- On May 14, 2014, BJP leader Giriraj Singh said, "Is it not true that people involved in terror activities belong to a particular religion?"
- On September 14, 2014, MP Sakshi Maharaj claimed, "Terrorism is being taught in madrassas."
- In March 2016, BJP leader and Union Minister Anant Kumar Hegde stated, "As long as Islam exists, there will be terrorism. Until we uproot Islam, we cannot eliminate terrorism."
- On February 6, 2018, MP Vinay

Katiyar declared, "Muslims should not stay in this country. They have partitioned the country based on population. So why are they still here? They should go to Bangladesh or Pakistan... They have no business being in India."

And these are only a few examples.

On August 14, 2024, Human Rights Watch reported that since March 2024, of the 173 speeches delivered by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, 110 contained Islamophobic remarks.

Yet, Bangladesh has rarely issued statements of concern about minorities in India, treating these issues as the latter country's internal affairs. Notably, India rarely expressed similar concerns about minority rights during Hasina's tenure, despite similar incidents occurring, leading to some deaths and many injuries. Since Hasina's fall, however, India appears to have taken a different approach

these remarks not come off as hostile?

And what about BJP leader Dilip Ghosh's comment in December 2024—months after the interim government took office—that Bangladesh's forces are no match for India and that Bangladesh's political leaders should "think carefully" about the ongoing turmoil? Was that a friendly message?

Moreover, the continued killings of Bangladeshis by Indian border forces, despite repeated promises of zero border killings, sends more contradictory signals. So does India's failure to share the water of Teesta River with Bangladesh, despite previous assurances.

India should understand that Bangladesh has a legitimate right to feel aggrieved by these and other unresolved matters. And the Indian government should be willing to listen to these grievances instead of ignoring them.

The Bangladesh government, similarly, should listen carefully to the legitimate concerns raised by India. In this case, for example, Mr Jaishankar's point of not sending hostile signals should be taken seriously by the Bangladesh government.

There are two other important lessons that Bangladesh should draw from this situation. First, for years, India engaged only with one political party in Bangladesh—Sheikh Hasina's Awami League—and treated it as the sole representative of the country. Bangladesh must not make the same mistake. India is a vast, diverse nation. The majority of its people, if they truly understood the oppressive nature of Hasina's regime, would likely sympathise with the Bangladeshi people.

Even if there are groups in India we disagree with, we must continue to engage with the broader Indian population. This will benefit both nations.

Second, we must realise that there is no place for ego in foreign policy. Some Bangladeshi commentators have suggested that India's reaction to Hasina's ouster is driven by bruised egos—because India lost a pliant ally and failed to predict the changing political landscape. But foreign policy must not be driven by ego or emotion—and this also applies to us. It should be rooted in pragmatism, common sense, and mutual benefit.

And so, if Bangladesh and India truly want a stable relationship, and we believe they do, both sides must acknowledge their shortcomings and address each other's concerns with sincerity.



India's External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

towards Bangladesh. This raises questions about the sincerity of these recent concerns from India.

Mr Jaishankar has said India has sent a very clear signal that it wants things to "calm down," but it does not want to see hostile messaging from members of the Bangladesh government. Such restraints, however, should be mutual.

In light of that, it is important to mention that BJP leaders have repeatedly accused Bangladeshis of trying to take over the "rightful land" of Indians, referring to them as "Jihadis," "infiltrators," and "termites," who should be identified and drowned in the Bay of Bengal. Do

Why children's voices matter



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UPASHANA SALAM

As part of a study on play, two groups of children were asked to practise solving jigsaw puzzles. One group was given a choice of additional puzzles on the floor besides those on the table, with no adult intervention. The other group was informed that there were puzzles they needed to solve, with an adult present, but no interaction occurred. Both groups were given 10 minutes to complete the puzzles and then asked to solve them again. Which group do you think performed better?

The study's first group was free to choose their puzzles, had no adult presence, and could decide where to solve them. Thus, they identified the setting as a playful environment, which gave them the freedom to try new ways to address a problem. The second group, on the other hand, perceived the setting as non-playful due to the adult presence and the site that was dictated to them (the table, in this case). Regarding performance, all children improved after practice, but the playful group went beyond the immediate results. Children practising in the playful environment showed enhanced purposeful creativity, problem-solving skills, persistence, focus, engagement, well-being, and metacognition, i.e.

the ability to monitor, control, and reflect on learning and processing information.

But how does one define play? Justine Howard, associate professor in child research at Swansea University and a developmental and educational psychologist specialising in play, describes play as a "process or cycle characterised by children adopting a playful psychological state or approach to a task." Put simply, play is defined by the players themselves. Therefore, the question is: what puts them in a playful psychological state?

Howard illustrates this with a teacher playing with preschool students pretending to drive a bus. When the teacher joined in, asking about the destination, fare, and change for 50 pence, the children gradually lost interest. Although the teacher intended to integrate learning, the children felt she had taken over their activity. Children view activities as playful when they feel they have choice and control (over when, where, with whom, what, and for how long they play), regardless of age and context.

In a study, Howard and her colleagues asked children aged three to six to pose for pictures while

engaging in activities like reading, solving puzzles, or group work. In different classrooms, children played a game where they sorted pictures into "play" and "not play" categories by posting them in labelled letterboxes. After sorting, the children explained their choices. They generally did not consider an activity playful if it was done at a table or if an adult was present. Smiling faces in the pictures were more likely to be seen as play. Activities with books and numbers were less likely to be considered play, while outdoor activities were perceived as more playful than indoor ones.

An interesting observation from the study was how children used cues to determine how they would approach an activity. For example, placing a box of Legos on the table or a floor is essentially the same, but children view the activity as play when it's on the floor. Choice also plays a significant role; activities are labelled as play when perceived as voluntary.

Howard compares a child learning in a playful environment to an archer with a quiver full of arrows. When children feel confident and secure, they have many opportunities to hit the target. If they miss, they might even adjust the target, demonstrating innovative problem-solving in a relaxed, choice-driven environment. In a playful state, children are more willing to experiment and take risks. Howard explains, "A small change in their environment and the cues that they are exposed to can have such an impact on children's psychological state that they do much better on the task as opposed to when they are not

given that agency."

Conversely, when that agency is taken away, children have fewer arrows in the quiver and they feel like their opportunities are limited. They are more afraid to take risks and think of innovative ways to address a challenge. Thus, they are more likely to continue with an incorrect action rather than think about it creatively and are less likely to be deliberative or purposeful with their problem-solving. Their behavioural thresholds are heightened and they become more aware of what they "cannot" do, leading to more rigidity in their actions.

In playful environments, children can retry activities without judgement, building identity and self-confidence. This low threat environment is why play—a low-cost, sustainable to support children's mental health and well-being—is so important for every child's development. It reduces their fear, protects their self-esteem, helping them with increased emotional and physical perseverance.

Perceptions of play are embedded in cultural practices. Parents in Bangladesh generally struggle to acknowledge even teacher-led play as an acceptable teaching tool. The more knowledge we have about play and the more evidence there is on its importance, the more convinced parents are likely to be about its impact on children's development. Children obviously have to learn to do certain things at certain ages when it comes to mainstream education but through play, we can help that learning be more effective by helping them feel safe, make mistakes, and grow within their learning environment.