

River excavation must be done right

The plight of Mayur River shows where the problem lies

The deterioration of Mayur River, once a lifeline for Khulna residents, has happened right in front of our eyes, as has the repeated failure to revive it. Over the years, we have published a number of reports on how it is being choked by structures and encroachments of all sorts, unregulated fish farming, and unchecked pollution, with about 26 drains pouring most of Khulna city's waste into it. Against this backdrop, the excavation projects undertaken over the decade were meant to breathe new life into the river. But instead, they have further contributed to its decline.

According to a recent report by this daily, two excavation projects taken up by the city corporation—one in 2014 and another in 2023—have failed to deliver any meaningful improvement. During a recent visit by our Khulna correspondent, the river was seen occupied by a makeshift bamboo dam, with sand being dumped at several points. Meanwhile, old problems persist as the river remains choked with silt, hyacinths, and waste, with no visible improvement in its water flow or quality. This raises serious questions about the planning and execution of such projects.

Over the years, failed or harmful excavation efforts have been reported across the country. Unfortunately, despite river dredging being routine work, the relevant authorities often do it wrong, and in isolation, without linking it up with other interventions—such as eviction, de-cluttering, and stopping other harmful and invasive activities on rivers—necessary to make its impact lasting. In Khulna alone, such cases abound. For example, in 2022, we reported an initiative by the Mongla port authorities to dump the debris excavated from Pashur River on vast swathes of farmland, threatening soil fertility and the livelihoods of thousands. That same year, we also wrote about the Bhadra River, which, despite being excavated only two years ago, silted up again as dug up earth fell back into it. This has been more or less the running theme of our dredging or de-siltation initiatives, with excavated debris invariably making it back to the river.

The irony here is inescapable. River excavation is supposed to solve problems like navigability, pollution, and waterlogging. Instead, it is causing them anew. If we truly want to revive our dying rivers, dredging must be treated as a means, not the goal. Excavation should be preceded by proper ecological assessments, involve local communities, and include clear plans for water sourcing, encroachment removal, pollution control, and maintenance. And the relevant authorities must coordinate better and be held accountable. Otherwise, we risk repeating the same failure until our rivers are beyond saving. The Mayur River stands as a grim reminder of what such failure looks like.

Neonatal deaths must be prevented

Focus on equipping existing infrastructure properly

Despite Bangladesh's significant progress in reducing the under-five child mortality rate over the years, our success in saving the lives of newborns is dismal. Neonatal deaths—or deaths within 28 days of birth—stand at 20 per 1,000 live births, which is far higher than the Sustainable Development Goal's 2030 target of 12 per 1,000 live births. A recent UN report on Bangladesh estimated that nearly two-thirds of over 100,000 children who died before their fifth birthday in 2023 passed away within 28 days of delivery.

One reason we fail to save our newborns is the lack of well-equipped Special Care Newborn Units (SCANUs) and Newborn Stabilisation Units (NSUs). These units have played a crucial role in saving many infants born with complications. However, a lack of maintenance and delays in replacing old and outdated machinery are limiting their effectiveness. Although the government is planning expansion by establishing more SCANUs and NSUs, the focus should be more on upgrading the existing ones and ensuring proper maintenance. Unfortunately, because of corruption in our healthcare system, obvious problems are often overlooked while resources get invested in less important areas. We can only hope that such practices will be avoided in the future.

Also, we should aspire to reduce the number of premature births, or births that lead to complications, in line with the adage "Prevention is better than cure." Among the leading causes of neonatal deaths are birth asphyxia and prematurity/low birthweight. These can be prevented if mothers can deliver in well-equipped primary healthcare centres that have on-duty, experienced birth attendants, or if the delivery is conducted by trained, certified, and skilled midwives. Unfortunately, we have not been able to ensure these services evenly across the country. Home deliveries still account for 30 percent of all births in Bangladesh. Additionally, malnutrition among mothers and shorter intervals between pregnancies—often the consequences of child marriage—can, and does, lead to neonatal deaths.

Therefore, the government must invest more in these areas to make primary healthcare more accessible, ensure proper nourishment of adolescent girls, prevent early marriages, and raise awareness about the importance of properly spaced pregnancies. Preventing neonatal deaths is crucial for the country's future, as every child saved today may be an asset for tomorrow.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Chernobyl explosion

On this day in 1986, a devastating environmental catastrophe occurred early in the morning when an explosion and fire at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in Ukraine released large amounts of radioactive material into the atmosphere.



EDITORIAL

The slow death of our universities



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

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A university is more than an academic institution; it is a site where young adults experience their transformative rites of passage into adulthood, their next phase of life. As educators, we want students to have a deep sense of curiosity that makes them question everything, including the power structure. We want them to be creative in their expressions while mindful of the boundaries of others. The youthful idealism of our students' dissent is not only tolerated but nurtured within the norms of academia. Questioning authority while maintaining order is a lifelong learning tool. The sanctity of any academic institution lies in the social contract between youthful idealism and vigilant guardianship of academic integrity.

In July, our students made us proud through their fight to reclaim democratic space from the clutches of an authoritarian regime. The activism of our students ignited hope in this generation's ability to ensure justice and accountability. We were optimistic when they proclaimed to reset systems. Seldom, however, did we realise that we were up for perpetual rebellion. Every grievance, be it personal or collective, now triggers agitation. Every administrative intervention is suspected and overruled. Protests are not the final option—they are pitched as first responses. The system has started corroding from within. Our universities and colleges are slowly dying.

There is an emerging trend in which the administration is consistently being forced to yield to student demands. None of the institutions can stick to their disciplinary actions, whether for misconduct, academic dishonesty, or breaches of code. The aggrieved party does not resort to legal or systemic recourse. They initiate a protest and subsequently support it with a social media campaign. Hashtags and emotional appeals amplify the outrage without a proper analysis of the context. The focus soon shifts from the ground zero of the cause to a media trial of the consequence.

I wish the situation were hypothetical. It is not. It has become the lived reality of our universities. The



Students of the Khulna University of Engineering and Technology (KUET) protest against all political student organisations and the university administration on February 20, 2025.

FILE PHOTO: HABIBUR RAHMAN

students locked down all academic and administrative buildings. The KUET syndicate suspended political activities on campus and initiated a formal investigation while filing a police case against 400-500 unidentified individuals. The decision irked the activists, as they felt that the vice chancellor (VC) was acting at the behest of the parent organisation of JCD. They symbolically "red-carded" political organisations and demanded the VC's resignation. They also sent a memorandum to the chief adviser to draw attention to their cause. To calm the situation, the university authority ordered the students to vacate the halls on February 25. The containment measure, however, was perceived as punitive. For nearly two months,

to target institutional leadership with political ties or blessings. Where did the KUET administration go wrong? Their response was largely reactive. They were unable to comprehend the intricacy of the circumstances surrounding the student politics ban. The SAD leaders have already formed a national-level political party. Activities of Islami Chhatra Shibir are also visible on campuses. Yet, these two groups don't want any student politics tied to national politics to enter the campus.

Banning campus politics is a policy issue, and the decision should come from the government. The politically appointed interim VCs do not have the moral high ground to deal with such a loaded issue. The KUET authorities closed the residential halls as a quick

fix. They should have sought help from the authority under which they operate. The decision to suspend students before rebuilding trust smells of authoritarianism. It is not clear whether the suspended students were called to defend themselves in the presence of a professional counsellor.

KUET is not alone in making these misjudgements. These misjudgements are a common flaw in our university governance. We need to give credit to the students for conjuring their symbolic and performative protests. They employed symbolic red cards, burnt the effigy of the VC's chair, and launched hunger strikes to open the eyes of the interim administration to both galvanise social media support and control the narrative. Student activism today is indeed different from that of the previous generation. I don't think our university administration is well equipped to deal with this kind of performative resistance amplified by social media and public sentiment.

Consequently, procedural resolution mechanisms of the universities are threatened. What is required right now is a credible, neutral mediation framework to stop conflict from spiralling. The KUET teachers' association have already expressed their dissatisfaction over the removal of their senior colleagues. Teachers realise that they are becoming hostages to students. Both faculty bodies and external stakeholders, such as the alumni, have failed to intervene to stem the protest.

KUET has thus exposed a systemic weakness in conflict resolution within academic institutions. One solution can be to engage institutional ombudsmen or third-party mediators to de-escalate tensions without compromising authority. The time has come for universities to sit together to create a system that fosters continuous dialogue with students and understands their needs before they morph into crises. Before banning student politics, universities must redesign their student unions as an alternative site for student representation and leadership. The public relations offices of the universities need to reorient themselves to learn how to proactively pitch the position of the administration. We need to realise that in this image-driven post-truth world, optics can outweigh facts. Controlling narrative needs to be part of a university's overall objective. For the greater sake of the nation, we must uphold the autonomy of the universities. Siding with the loudest voices can be popular, but may not always be beneficial. It will kill the universities slowly—and painfully.

How remittances shape labour market dynamics



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There have been many studies that show how remittances affect labour supply decisions and other labour market outcomes. By supporting consumption-led growth, remittances impact macroeconomic stability as well, but if productive investments don't keep pace with the rising demand, they may potentially exacerbate inflationary pressures. Therefore, it can be said that remittances might have a mixed effect on the labour force.

In recent years, remittances have also contributed to substantial capital transfers in various developing countries. According to the recent estimates of the World Bank, with around \$23 billion of inflow, Bangladesh is among the world's top recipients of remittances. Moreover, in 2023, personal remittances received in Bangladesh were estimated to be five percent of the GDP. These inflows help to lower poverty, boost household spending, and fund healthcare and education.

Empirical research illustrates that remittances reduce the likelihood of domestic labour market participation, indicating a disincentive impact (engaging in non-market activities) among those who don't participate. Therefore, although remittances can raise living standards, they can also discourage domestic labour supply and

lead to reliance on external income. Because the recipient households view the inflows as non-work money, it is anticipated that remittance payments will have a detrimental impact on labour force participation, highlighting the issue of moral hazard. In addition, remittances can lower labour supply and foster a culture of dependency, which limits economic expansion and increases inequality.

However, another study found that remittances do not significantly influence the labour force participation of men. Yet another study found that self-employment is increased by remittances. The increase in self-employment can be attributed to remittances directed towards entrepreneurial investment activity. Thus, it can be said that there might be a mixed effect of remittances.

Even though a lot of research has been done on the macroeconomic implications of remittances, few studies have used advanced econometric techniques like Vector Error Correction Models (VECM) to examine their direct effects on labour force participation in Bangladesh. Previous studies primarily focused on micro-level household survey data or cross-country analyses, which might overlook the short-term and long-term linkages between remittance

inflows, labour force participation, and exchange rates. In the study titled "Analysing the Impact of Remittance on the Labour Force Participation Rate: Evidence from Bangladesh," we identified this gap and looked into the short- and long-term relationships. Data for Bangladesh was taken from the World Development Indicators (WDI) database, which spans from 1991 to 2022.

The study revealed various key insights. Remittances had no substantial short-run impact on the labour force participation rate (LFPR). However, there was a positive and statistically significant effect of remittances on the LFPR in the long run. Specifically, every one-unit increase in remittances is associated with an increase of 0.00267 units in LFPR, implying that increased remittance inflows promote labour market participation over time. A possible explanation for this long-term positive effect is that remittances are channelled into productive investments that enhance employability and entrepreneurship. Households receiving remittances may use them to finance education, vocational training, and skill development, which in turn improves their ability to participate in the labour market. Additionally, remittances may serve as startup capital for small businesses, generating employment opportunities and encouraging labour force engagement.

Moreover, in the short run, the exchange rate has a significant impact on LFPR, meaning the fluctuations influence labour force participation. It also has a substantial effect over the long term. Labour force participation rises when the exchange rate

depreciates, which occurs when the value of the domestic currency declines relative to other currencies. The result showed that a one-unit depreciation is specifically linked to an LFPR increase of roughly 0.06890 units. The findings demonstrated the presence of a long-run relationship between the LFPR and its determinants, indicating that currency depreciation significantly boosts labour force participation, possibly due to enhanced export competitiveness, increased employment opportunities, or pressures on households to maintain real income levels amid rising prices.

Policymakers should take initiatives to establish supportive environments to facilitate the transformation of remittance inflows towards productive investments and human capital development to maximise the positive impact on labour market participation. These inflows may contribute to the creation of additional jobs through financial literacy initiatives, focused incentives for entrepreneurship supported by remittances, and easy access to financial services for households who receive remittances. Moreover, considering the vulnerability of the LFPR to changes in currencies, especially in the short run, the macroeconomic focus should be on guaranteeing exchange rate stability. Maintaining currency stabilisation could help to alleviate volatility-induced labour market distortions, especially in sectors that are highly responsive to trade and migration-related financial flows. Incorporating remittance and exchange rate management into wider labour market and development activities may result in more resilient and inclusive labour market outcomes in Bangladesh.