

## Make tourism safe and sustainable

### Incidents of obstruction in Sylhet tourist spots concerning

It is troubling to learn of some recent incidents of harassment and obstruction faced by tourists in Sylhet. While such incidents in tourist spots are nothing new, the latest development brought two issues to the fore: growing tension surrounding unregulated mass tourism, and the disturbing role played by religious actors in it. According to our report, people visiting the Utmachhara tourist spot in Companiganj on Sunday (the first day of Eid) were asked to leave by members of the Companiganj unit of Jubo Jamiat, the youth wing of Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam Bangladesh. In a video that has since gone viral, the group members are heard telling visitors of a local decision to bar tourism due to alleged “immoral activities” like drinking and indecent behaviour. The following day, a scuffle broke out between some locals and tourists near the Jallong BGB camp, although no injuries were reported.

These incidents illustrate how mass tourism can sometimes strain local communities. Complaints about environmental degradation, littering, and disruptive behaviour by visitors are natural in areas where tourist footfall has surged without adequate infrastructure or enforcement of behavioural norms. This creates resentment among locals, who may feel their culture and environment are being disrespected or exploited. But imposing restrictions on tourism—instead of seeking constructive solutions through regulation, education, or improved civic oversight—sets a dangerous precedent. What makes this especially alarming is the involvement of religious groups. While their concerns are shared by many in local communities, their actions—policing public behaviour and dictating who can access shared natural resources—undermine both the rule of law and the inclusive spirit of tourism.

These issues demand critical reflection as mass tourism continues to boom in Bangladesh. There is clearly a fine line to walk here. First of all, tourism is vital for the local economy as it creates employment and supports small businesses. But with too many people rushing to the beauty spots accessible in a small country like Bangladesh, unregulated tourism can be hugely disruptive. We, therefore, must find a way to make this sustainable. Part of the reason for the unregulated mass tourism in Bangladesh is its unregulated development—we cannot address one without addressing the other. Other issues underscored by recent trends involve safety both on the roads and while at the tourist spots. There have been reports of road crashes, criminal activities, and drowning as holidaymakers move to different locations, including Cox’s Bazar, which has seen a huge footfall this holiday.

Clearly, to make tourism safe and sustainable, we need to address the persistent lack of safety infrastructure, enforcement of rules, and coordination among all stakeholders. Ensuring community voices are heard while also defending the right to safe and responsible tourism must be the priority. This calls for a comprehensive tourism policy that not only fosters economic opportunities but also protects local culture, the environment, and the safety of tourists. The government may also consider decentralising tourism by investing in new destinations to reduce pressure on existing hotspots. The rise in tourist numbers during holidays is welcome, but without proactive planning and inclusive governance, such growth will only bring more chaos. On their part, Sylhet local administrations must also prevent a repeat of what happened recently and hold to account anyone obstructing tourists.

## Why can’t we ensure safe Eid journeys?

### Take steps to prevent further road crashes

Every Eid holiday, home-bound people risk their lives while travelling long distances, and this time has been no exception. Between June 5 and 10, at least 29 people died and 153 were injured in road crashes across 16 districts. Casualties will rise in all likelihood as people start to return to their places of residence after the end of the extended 10-day holiday. A similar trend was observed during Eid-ul-Fitr, when 132 people lost their lives in just eight days. Unfortunately, despite such high numbers of casualties and crashes during Eid holidays, the authorities seem largely indifferent to road safety.

This also reflects the anarchy in the transport sector that continues to persist even after the fall of the Awami League regime in August. Unfit vehicles and unlicensed drivers still dominate our roads, while the Road Transport Act 2018 remains largely unenforced to this day. According to the BRTA, over 75,000 vehicles, including buses, minibuses, trucks, covered vans, and tankers, have surpassed their operational lifespan. In Dhaka, one in five privately operated buses lacks a valid fitness certificate. These outdated and unfit vehicles contribute significantly to accidents, yet there has been little effort to remove them. The interim government’s decision to eliminate expired vehicles from roads after May this year has not yet been implemented, with buses emitting black smoke still a common sight. Moreover, extortion and disorder continue to plague the transport sector, with transport associations now predominantly run by BNP leaders instead of their Awami League predecessors.

Motorcycles account for a significant number of road crashes in the country, causing nearly 38 percent of all accident-related deaths. Reportedly, many of the crashes during this Eid holiday also involved motorcycles. We wonder whether the government has at all taken any measure to regulate the operation of such risky vehicles. Furthermore, the accident-prone zones on highways are quite well-known by now, but has the government taken any steps to reduce accident risks in those areas?

Unless all these issues are addressed, road crashes will continue to claim lives. The need for meaningful reforms in the transport sector, therefore, cannot be stressed enough. With the Eid holiday still ongoing, the authorities must take proactive measures to prevent further casualties during people’s return journeys. The tragic loss of lives must not continue unchecked.

# Beyond muscle and money

## The leadership Bangladesh now deserves



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Antonio Gramsci once wrote, “The old world is dying, and the new world struggles to be born: now is the time of monsters.” His words ring true today, perhaps more than ever. Our old political order has finally crumbled, but the new one has not quite taken shape. After a bloody uprising in July last year, we have emerged from the grip of a 15-year autocratic regime. Thousands lost their lives. Many others spent years resisting, fighting for the dream of a different future. Now that the regime has fallen, we find ourselves asking: whom do we trust to lead us next?

If we are truly interested in honouring the blood, courage, and voices of the youth who sacrificed their lives on the streets in July, and of all those who spent more than 15 years fighting for freedom and human rights, we must rethink the kind of leadership we accept, promote, and empower in Bangladesh. We must ask not only who is in power and how they use their power, but also how they have come to power.

For decades, Bangladesh’s political arena has been dominated by leaders



FILE ILLUSTRATION: REHNUMA PROSHOON

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who thrive not through vision or service, but through intimidation, wealth, family, and connections. Political parties and corrupt businessmen have backed local strongmen, helping them to violate the law. These leaders are not accountable to the common people, but to the networks that helped them climb the ladder. These networks, built on patronage, violence, and loyalty, have created a system where merit is overlooked and corruption is encouraged. These “leaders” often

lack the education, global exposure, or policy understanding necessary to run a modern state. Instead, they survive by creating chaos, spreading lies, and keeping people divided and confused. The result? Mismanagement, corruption, and a deep mistrust of politics among the common people.

Bangladesh is now at a turning point. With our youth more connected and aware than ever, and with a new generation of professionals willing to return and rebuild, we have an opportunity to shift the power dynamics permanently. But first, we need to define what real leadership should look like for us.

We need leaders who think beyond the next election and plan for the young generation. They should understand economic strategy, climate policy, education reform, and technological advancement—not just slogans, showdowns, and populism. They must be capable of representing Bangladesh with dignity at international forums. They must speak for our country proudly on the global stage and understand the world beyond our borders.

We need leaders with a clean image, who don’t enrich themselves through corruption. Corruption must no longer be excused as a political necessity. True leaders serve their people. They listen, adapt, and build systems that uplift everyone, not just their party, their family, or their business associates.

Our political institutions must represent the full diversity of the country, including women, minorities,

should initiate leadership training academies open to qualified young professionals across sectors. These should focus on public administration, ethics, communication, and grassroots problem-solving.

Right now, political parties reward loyalty over merit. We need internal reforms in party structures that prioritise capable candidates with a clean track record and a service-driven intent. Civil society must pressure parties to publish candidate credentials and open nominations to non-dynastic, qualified individuals.

Additionally, money is a major barrier to entry for new leaders. If elections continue to be won by the highest bidder, we will always return to the same corrupt elite. Elections should not be decided by whoever spends the most. We need fair, capped campaign funding, and the media must also ensure equal coverage for all candidates, not just those with the deepest pockets.

Grassroots committees of political parties should be empowered to evaluate and audit their local representatives. Participatory meetings and citizens’ complaint reports can bring transparency and pressure at the local level.

In the long run, a crucial solution is to reform our education system to produce citizens who understand civic duties, democratic values, and ethical leadership. We must teach our students to question authority, demand accountability, and dream bigger for their communities.

collaboration, emotional intelligence, and humility. We must actively challenge this narrative. We must stop idolising “strongmen” and start uplifting “wise men.” It is not about power and domination. It is about the values we associate with leadership. Do we want someone who can dominate others, or someone who can unite and inspire them?

The July mass movement was not simply a protest against an authoritarian regime or corrupt administrations. It was a fight for dignity, justice, equality, and a different kind of future. However, we cannot build our future by relying on the same old foundation of muscle, money, and family politics that has controlled Bangladesh for so long. If we return to the same structure, parties, families, and tactics, we will destroy whatever progress we have made. We now have a choice: either go back to the familiar darkness or step boldly into a future defined by competence, integrity, and care.

Ultimately, the kind of leaders we empower will reflect the values and culture we have. If we stay silent, vote out of fear, or make excuses for corruption, nothing will change, and the country will fall directly into the hands of monsters. But if we demand better, support clean candidates, and raise our collective voice, we can break the old cycle.

Bangladesh deserves better leaders who build, not break; who serve, not steal; who unite, not divide. Let’s not waste this rare opportunity to reshape our nation.

# The power of goodness



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“The social situation is deteriorating day by day.” “Nothing ever gets better here.” “People are so selfish now.” People seem to love making negative remarks about societal breakdown and people’s lack of concern for others. Virtually all older people will tell you how different things were before; their parents and grandparents no doubt made similar observations. Such remarks are dispiriting. They also serve to excuse one’s own selfishness—if everyone else is acting only in their self-interest, why should I worry about others?

Perhaps my endless optimism is its own illusion, but I can’t help but notice goodness all around me. Let me offer three quick examples from the other day. As I was walking in the morning, a woman ahead of me, busy chatting with a friend, dropped her phone unawares. I picked it up and handed it to her—as, I hope, anyone would have.

A bit later, I was trying to cross a street but was deterred by a giant

puddle, too big for an old lady like myself to leap over. “If only someone would offer me a hand,” I thought. Almost immediately a man walking by on the footpath turned to me. “Do you need a hand?” With his help I was able to clear the puddle and continue on my way.

Mind you, only a few minutes before being deterred by the puddle, I had glanced at an article in *The Guardian* about how political divisiveness risks destroying the sense of neighbourliness that causes people to help each other in times of need. Social fragmentation is real and dangerous. Lack of concern for others is a contagious disease that can seriously harm the body politic. The warning is important. It is also important to fight it actively, and to pay attention to all the kindness that still surrounds us.

Shortly after the man helped me clear the puddle, a different man told me that I had dropped something. I looked down, sure enough, a small,

insignificant, but to me precious, object had slipped out of my bag. I thanked him, recovered Snowball the finger puppet (a character in my book *Life Lessons with Bianca*), and went on my way. When I later mentioned the incidents to a couple of men, they suggested it was my lucky day and I should buy a lottery ticket. We laughed together, enjoying a brief moment of connection.

**When my young friends complain that nobody ever does anything for others, I have two requests for them: try to pay more attention to the kindness you are ignoring (I’ll see it when I believe it), and make sure that you engage in small acts of kindness yourself.**

Why do small acts like these matter? As I said, it’s too easy to believe in the selfishness and hard-heartedness of others. The media magnifies malignant acts, making cruelty seem the norm. In Bangladesh and around the world, people face enormous crises that cannot be

resolved without cooperation. Cooperation requires trust. Acts of kindness towards strangers, however small and seemingly insignificant, help build that trust and remind us that, however it may seem from reading the paper or watching the news, cruelty is almost always the exception, not the norm.

When my young friends complain that nobody ever does anything for others, I have two requests for them: try to pay more attention to the kindness you are ignoring (I’ll see it when I believe it), and make sure that you engage in small acts of kindness yourself. We won’t always be rewarded as immediately as I was that day, but if we pay attention, we will notice that there is a lot of goodness out there, that most people are not cruel, that especially in the majority world there is still a thriving community that we can continue to build on.

So yes, before criticising others, let’s make sure that we are the kinds of people we want others to be. Let’s also pay more attention to the positive signs; once we do, I’m sure we will notice how ubiquitous they are. Let’s remind others when they make the inevitable negative remarks about societal breakdown that, in fact, community and kindness continue to flourish. And then, together, we can rebuild the society we wish to live in.