

“BANGLADESH’S GREATEST ASSET IS ITS PEOPLE; its greatest failure is not investing in them”

In conversation with Dr Hossain Zillur Rahman—eminent social thinker, researcher, and Executive Chairman of the Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC), as well as a former Adviser to the Caretaker Government of Bangladesh—who shares his insights on the colonial legacies of governance, the dynamics of Bangladesh’s economic transformation, and the challenges of building human resources. The discussion draws on themes from his recently published book, *Orthoniti, Shason O Khamota* (Economy, Governance and Power).

The Daily Star (TDS): You argue that Bangladesh’s governance still carries the colonial legacy of ‘executive despotism’, where real power lies in the authority to punish. Could you elaborate on this?

Hossain Zillur Rahman (HZR): What I often stress is that despite reforms, the core issue lies in the sociology of administration. Our default tendency is executive despotism, centralising power in the executive. The authority to punish outweighs policy making, as police and magistracy embody state power. Colonial rule entrenched this pattern, and it persists despite constitutional or institutional changes. Before British rule, the Mughal Empire expanded by granting local rulers a degree of autonomy. Rather than displacing existing power structures, the Mughals positioned themselves as overlords while allowing local governance to continue largely unchanged. They delegated responsibilities—such as tax collection, policing and administration of justice—to zamindars. Only in cases of serious injustice could subjects appeal



Hossain Zillur Rahman

directly to the emperor. This approach ensured that local governance structures remained intact under Mughal rule. But the British, while initially considering a Mughal-style overlordship, particularly under Warren Hastings, changed course. They did not want local rulers to retain all three pillars of authority: tax collection, judicial power, and policing. So, they let the zamindars collect taxes but stripped them of judicial and police powers. They introduced separate judicial systems. Even before that, they restricted zamindars from having their own law enforcement agents. Instead, in 1792, they established the *daroga* system—the first institutional pillar of British imperial power. The daroga (police officer) became a tool of the colonial state. The British took a sociological approach to staffing the police. They appointed police officers from lower social classes—not the elite or zamindar class—to avoid creating rivals for zamindars within their own social strata. This had two effects: first, these lower-class officers had an inferiority complex in front of the zamindars, and second, they were given a sense of state-backed authority. They were told: “Even if you are from a lower class, you are now part of state power.” Gradually, this led to a shift: the police no longer acted as subordinates to the zamindars. Over time, the daroga stopped being obedient to the local elite and aligned instead with the colonial state. This is how a colonial state systematically built its loyal institutions and left behind a structure that, even today, remains largely unchanged. Similarly, they reduced the *Kazi*, who used to be a judge, to just a marriage registrar. In other words, the British separated economic, judicial, and policing powers, but for their own benefit, they kept judicial and police powers combined under the office of the magistrate. From then on, the judicial structure was such that the district judge and magistrate had combined authority, but especially the criminal part remained very tightly under



PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

Employment-friendly strategies must take centre stage. Expanding opportunities requires strong human resources, a supportive business environment, and coherent policy frameworks—not vague rhetoric. Investing in people today ensures a future where the country’s youth can contribute productively to society and the economy.

administrative control. Civil matters, however, were treated differently. Over time, the sessions judge position was created. In 1860, further structuring occurred. But what is most interesting is that the criminal powers remained consolidated and close to administration. On the other hand, civil matters were arranged in such a way that justice became a drawn-out, unpredictable process, riddled with corruption. These outcomes were deliberately built into the system. Essentially, the colonial system did two things. Firstly, it granted judges broad discretionary powers in criminal cases, enabling the police and criminal justice system to align with the interests of the colonial state. Secondly, in civil cases, it allowed similar discretionary authority, giving judges the freedom to interpret rules as they saw fit—sometimes ruling that “this is missing,” and at other times concluding that “this is acceptable.” There was an attempt in the 1850s to formalise judicial knowledge as a guiding factor. But through the CrPC (Criminal Procedure Code), all space for judicial innovation was closed off. In the colonial system, only what was written was allowed.

In summary, criminal powers were kept tightly controlled by the administration, while civil powers were made ineffective, lengthy, and costly, with corruption often as an inevitable by-product—where grand words about justice were abundant but true justice was hard to achieve. And the costs? Always guaranteed. The results? Uncertain. I describe it like this—certainty of expense, uncertainty of results. Unfortunately, despite the ending of colonial rule, this particular legacy continues with a vengeance even in post-July Bangladesh. The hard truth is that we still cannot break that basic model, even after the so-called separation of the judiciary following the much-referenced Masdar Hossain case. Even now, look at this whole magistracy structure. Why are positions like the chief metropolitan magistrate still so powerful? It is the same old model.

TDS: How do you see Bangladesh’s economic journey, and what future do you foresee amid the uncertainty?

HZR: There were many aspects to the transformation of the economy. Previously, it consisted of poorly linked series of local economies, but now the Bangladesh economy has become an integrated national economy, with the process particularly accelerating from the late 1980s. That is one major shift. We are also now increasingly connected to the global economy.

After this transition to an integrated national economy, new enablers emerged. For example, the feeder roads from villages to cities played a huge role.

Microcredit reached places it had never reached before, and people started using it to build livelihoods on different bases. The rise of remittances also depended on feeder roads—without those roads, remittances would not have been possible, because people could not easily get to those places. Their connections abroad helped this process. Primary education also played a role. At least a minimum level of literacy was achieved. And health improvements, such as the reduction in child mortality thanks to oral saline solutions, reduced women’s reproductive burden. Earlier a woman might have had seven children, now it is around three or four, sometimes two or three. This freed up time for women, allowing them to engage in economic activities supported by microloans.



However, despite these positive changes, we remain stuck in a particular phase—we are still operating within a low-wage economic model. Key growth sectors like the ready-made garments industry continue to rely on cheap labour as their primary competitive advantage. The same applies to remittance earnings, which are also driven by low-skilled, low-paid migrant work. As a result, our overall competitiveness is tied to inexpensive labour, preventing us from transitioning to the next phases of development.

TDS: What role have people’s resilience and initiative played in Bangladesh’s progress, and how far can this take the country?

HZR: Up to this point, much of the progress has come from the initiative and entrepreneurship of ordinary people. When we talk about change in a country, it often involves grassroots efforts.

Two major events profoundly shaped the collective mindset of the people, but in different directions. The

1971 War of Independence, though rooted in struggle, instilled a deep sense of hope and possibility. In contrast, the 1974 famine exposed the state’s incapacity to protect its citizens, triggering a significant shift in public consciousness. People began to realise that they had to take charge of their own futures and rely on themselves. Where once it was common to believe that fate was pre-written, that belief gradually faded. The new understanding was clear: only through their own effort and hard work could they shape their destinies.

That was a big shift. But this only takes you so far. For further progress, a proper state mechanism and environment are needed. For example, we need quality education, and the current environment of deteriorating law and order cannot take us forward. For these, an effective and enabling state is necessary.

TDS: How do you assess the impact of the shift from an overwhelmingly rural society to rapid urban expansion on the pace and nature of social change in Bangladesh?

HZR: There are a few points here. Transformation has happened, and I believe the time has come for new research—what I call the “new rural.” Earlier, we just had villages; now we have this new rural. This new rural is very important. The villages have partly taken on the characteristics of towns. The people living there have demands similar to urban residents. The types of entertainment are also like those in towns. Community centres have spread widely even in villages.

What does this new rural mean? What is its strength? We need to study its needs. At the same time, when we talk about cities, cities themselves have become multi-layered. Dhaka has a central urban core, but its outskirts and suburbs have taken on different characters. The idea of district towns (mofussil) has also changed; the old notion of mofussil is no longer the same.

Plus, our transportation system has undergone massive changes. Even remote villages now have bus services. Especially in transport, huge changes have created a new reality where village and town have merged in a different way.

Because of this, we need to rethink ideas of economic development. Earlier, we often equated villages with agriculture and towns with industry—backward village, forward town. But now bigger changes are visible, especially in the service sector. The service sector is actually bringing new agricultural possibilities, which need to be explored.

Overall, we must understand Bangladesh as a single country with both new Rural and new urban realities. We must also reconsider agriculture, because agriculture is now a potential driver of future growth. Yet, we still view agriculture as a backward sector

without a future. But there are many ways to build futures here.

The service sector is also vast and multi-layered, ranging from low-level services to very high-quality services. While we do some exports, our domestic market is also huge. Supporting this market properly is essential and necessary.

At the same time, our main resource is human resources. Countries like South Korea have invested heavily in human resources and have become high-income nations. Unfortunately, we do not invest adequately in human resources.

Regrettably, our discussions go around projects endlessly. Any ministry you visit, they have skill development projects. NGOs have them too. But ultimately, we have not been able to establish human resource development as a transformational agenda.

TDS: The Covid-19 pandemic reversed many hard-won gains—pushing millions back into poverty, increasing child marriage, and raising dropout rates. Why did these achievements prove so fragile?

HZR: We have not undertaken genuine institutional reform. What we have achieved are sectoral changes, but these have been superficial and fragile, failing to deliver lasting transformation. Crucially, deeper reforms—such as investing in human resources and restructuring the institutional environment—remain unaddressed. We have also failed to rebuild the vital relationship between the bureaucracy and public service.

As a result, even during this post-July interim government, bureaucratic rule has intensified. Instead of declining as expected after the mass uprising, bureaucratic dominance has doubled within a year. This is a paradox. We have discussed the idea of change politically, but have failed to place institutional reform at the core of that discussion.

TDS: Why do you consider the growth-centric development model to be too narrow to bring meaningful change for the masses?

HZR: Growth-centred thinking will always persist, as it resonates with people’s aspirations for progress and prosperity. Yet, over the past fifteen years of Hasina’s rule, two fatal flaws have marked the growth narrative: it has not been employment-friendly, and it has not been equity-friendly—it has failed to advance poverty alleviation.

What we need is growth, certainly, but we must move beyond debates over whether it is 6% or 10%. The real challenge lies in identifying new drivers of growth. Agriculture, IT, services, and the pharmaceutical industry all hold significant potential, and these opportunities deserve urgent focus. However, bureaucratic mechanisms alone will not deliver this shift; it requires broad dialogue and partnership with the private sector, with particular attention given to agriculture and other emerging sectors.

We have to prioritise employment-friendly strategies and expand opportunities. The foundations for this must be strong human resources, a supportive business environment, and coherent policy frameworks—not vague rhetoric. Such policies need to be crafted with efficiency and purpose. Crucially, we continue to neglect decentralisation, focusing narrowly on large groups while sidelining the SME sector.

Ultimately, the question is one of power. Under autocratic rule, the so-called ‘iron triangle’ of development emerged, where economic opportunities were politically cornered to serve a narrow, loyal elite. Breaking this iron triangle is essential. Democratisation is the only way forward: competition must be opened, merit must be evaluated fairly, and institutional capacities must be strengthened. Only then can we dismantle the unethical patronage networks that suffocate progress. The iron triangle must be uprooted—and I believe the time has come to say so unequivocally.

The interview was taken by Priyam Paul.

Democratisation is the way forward: open competition, fair merit, and stronger institutions are essential to dismantle patronage networks that suffocate progress.

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