

Debunking the Starlink paradox in Bangladesh

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In May 2025, Starlink deployed its satellite internet services in Bangladesh. This moment was hailed by the interim government, led by Prof Muhammed Yunus, as a major step towards the realisation and promotion of its economic development vision for the country by bridging the digital divide.

An equally important part of the narrative was the promise of an uninterrupted internet connection, given that Bangladesh experienced at least 17 instances of internet shutdowns under the past regime as part of its attempts to silence dissent and provide a cover for violence. The narratives were straightforward and politically convenient for a government seeking legitimacy and under pressure to demonstrate progress.

As the celebratory narrative for Starlink fades, the underlying reality comes into sharper focus, one that raises more questions than it answers. Who will actually benefit from this service? How does the introduction of Starlink sit with concerns about digital sovereignty? To begin answering these questions, we must first challenge some of the prevailing assumptions.

The promise of a digital leapfrog

Starlink's launch is marked by the vision for "digital leapfrogging" that has gained particular traction with the public under the interim government. However, at the heart of the issue is a simple but unavoidable fact: Starlink is prohibitively expensive for those whom the leapfrogging rhetoric claims to serve, particularly rural and low-income urban communities in Bangladesh.

And the financial cost is only a part of the whole story. Equitable access is further undermined by barriers in payment infrastructure. Starlink requires users to

access international financial systems when just over 43 percent of Bangladeshis are currently banked. Strict capital controls and limited cross-border transaction mechanisms form yet another exclusionary layer.

This accessibility and affordability gap raises serious questions about whom the satellite internet is really for. While the narrative of "connecting the unconnected" is frequently invoked, the economic barriers suggest that high-speed satellite access can become yet another luxury good in an already unequal digital landscape.

Anti-competition concerns

An important but overlooked consequence of Starlink's deployment and its technological advantage is the impact its entry may have on the market. Local internet service providers (ISPs) may struggle to compete with a well-resourced global provider that may not be subject to strict domestic regulatory frameworks that telecommunication providers are obligated to follow. This development could potentially lead to a concentration of bigger industry actors. For example, Starlink equipment has been set up in 96 percent of municipalities in the Amazon in Brazil, giving it monopoly over the region's internet and information access. Ultimately, such a market shift undermines users' right to access information through affordable and reliable internet services, and highlights the need for regulation to balance innovation with fair competition.

The interim government not only fast-tracked Starlink's licensing application but also actively supported its launch campaign. This blurs the line between public and private interests, raising concerns about the government's ability to hold Starlink accountable. It also sets a troubling precedent: other providers may not receive equal treatment, and the state risks becoming a public relations arm for private technology firms.

Meaningful connectivity is dependent on maintaining a plural and interoperable ecosystem where users have choices in the types of services available to them. It's not just about having internet access, it also means not being reliant on any single company's business model. Instead, adopting and promoting a range of internet services with government investment in the development

of local infrastructure can build a more competitive and resilient market and digital ecosystem.

Can Starlink solve internet shutdowns?

Another key narrative is the positioning of Starlink as a form of "resilience," a critical safeguard against potential future internet shutdowns. This framing is of particular importance given the context and history of internet shutdowns in Bangladesh—most recently, the nationwide blackout during the 2024 student-led mass uprising. However, it is important to state that Starlink's ability to provide internet services in the country is still fundamentally tied to government regulations and licensing. Starlink was able

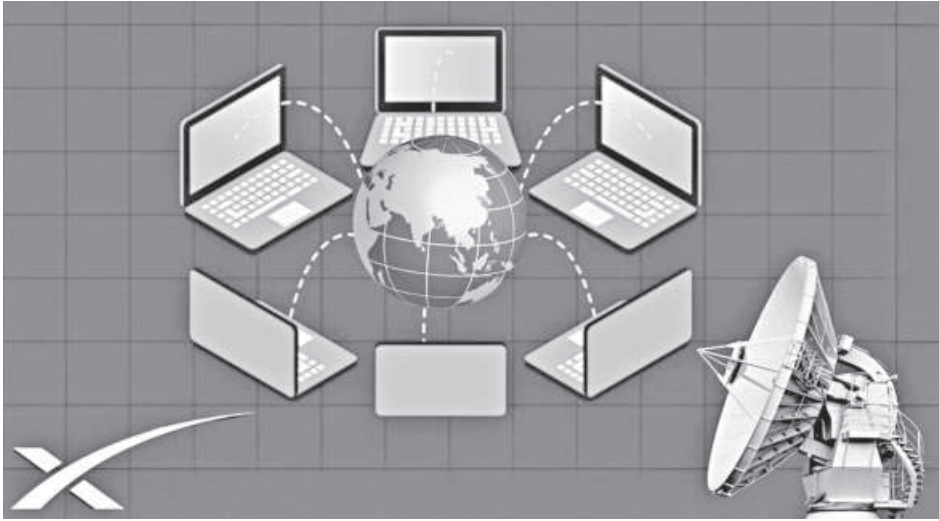
known as the spectrum. Since governments regulate spectrum, they ultimately retain control over these frequencies and, in turn, the deployment of satellite internet services such as Starlink. In other words, despite the promise of technical resilience, Starlink's deployment remains subject to government intervention, which can restrict or block the permission to use the necessary spectrum.

Additionally, despite being satellite-based, Starlink still depends on physical infrastructure. Currently, Bangladesh is working with several companies on establishing ground stations across the country to support Starlink's deployment. And while progress is underway, developing

ability to control its own digital faith; it chips away at its very core, offering only the illusion of autonomy while deepening external dependency.

Relying on a foreign-operated satellite service for critical internet connectivity effectively transfers a portion of Bangladesh's digital backbone to an external private actor, whose commercial and geopolitical interests may at some point diverge from the country's priorities. The 2022 Ukraine example, in which Elon Musk unilaterally decided to restrict Starlink's satellite coverage over Occupied Crimea, highlights the risks of technological dependency that Bangladesh may have to confront in the future, especially amid rising geopolitical tensions and the market concentration of technology companies. If critical decisions about access to internet connectivity—and in this case, about satellites—can be influenced by the personal decisions of an individual, then the myth of sovereignty quickly turns into a liability. Without robust legal safeguards, public oversight, and investment in local infrastructure, Bangladesh may simply be exchanging one form of dependency for another.

What we see is the contradiction between the promises Starlink offers and the reality it delivers—a paradox. The deployment of Starlink in Bangladesh promises universal access to bridge the digital divide, but the reality is that its high costs and reliance on international payment systems make it largely inaccessible and unaffordable to the people it should serve the most. It promises resilience against shutdowns, but the reality is that through licensing, regulation on spectrum, and mandatory routing through local gateways, it remains subject to the type of centralised government control we have witnessed in the past. Finally, with the deployment of Starlink comes the promise of digital sovereignty, but when the reality comes into sharper focus, we see that we risk outsourcing critical infrastructure to a foreign private company and creating dependencies. If the interim government wants to leverage Starlink, it must develop specific economic, legal and regulatory solutions that actively navigate the complex trade-offs this technology entails in the context of Bangladesh.



VISUAL: MAHIYA TABASSUM

to launch its services after receiving a 10-year operating licence from the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC). Although the contents of the licence are not public, it reportedly includes strict requirements such as routing internet traffic through local gateways and connecting to government-approved international internet gateways (IIGs). What this means is that by making Starlink route its traffic through local gateways, control remains centralised with the government.

Importantly, in order to operate in Bangladesh, Starlink must also obtain permission to use specific radio frequencies,

the necessary supporting infrastructure remains a significant challenge.

What we see is that satellite internet offers the illusion of resilience without any guarantees. It becomes a narrative of progress that lacks the institutional and technical foundations necessary to sustain access and accountability during moments of crisis.

The myth of digital sovereignty

Starlink's arrival in Bangladesh is often hailed as a leap towards "digital sovereignty," but the reality is that it demands a costly trade, exchanging national agency for access. This trade-off doesn't strengthen the country's

Reimagining education for gender equity

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In developing countries of the Global South like Bangladesh, education is a multiplier that can change the trajectory of individual lives and entire communities. For girls and young women, especially in under-resourced areas, it is the most powerful tool to break the intergenerational cycles of poverty and social exclusion. Education that is values-driven, holistic, and grounded in local realities can radically shift what girls believe is possible for themselves. It must go beyond test scores to nurture leadership, confidence, and empathy. This is the kind of education that leads to genuine empowerment, and it must begin early and extend far.

Yet the current reality tells a sobering story.

According to a recent report by the Centre for Policy Dialogue, 61.7 percent of the youth of Bangladesh who are Not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEET) are women. It reflects the systemic barriers that continue to limit women's full participation in society. We have the tools to turn this situation around. For that, education, particularly English education that opens up global access, is key. Communication in English is a skill that unlocks confidence, employability, and international opportunity. When a girl in Kurigram learns to communicate in English, she isn't just memorising the rules of a language; rather, she is beginning to see herself as a participant in a wider world, a world where she can lead.

We often see how women's leadership is underestimated, boxed in by expectations, or treated as an exception. In boardrooms and classrooms alike, women are still required to prove themselves repeatedly. But the truth is, when we give women the tools to lead, they do it often with greater resilience, collaboration, and vision.

This shift in mindset must start with how and where we educate. In many rural areas, formal education remains inaccessible or insufficient for girls. This is where non-

traditional, peer-led learning models can make a powerful difference. Initiatives like the British Council's English and Digital for Girls' Education (EDGE) clubs are helping to bridge the gaps, especially in places where dropout rates are high and role models

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are few. In these safe, girls-focused spaces, learning takes on new meaning—girls practise English, grow in confidence, and learn to advocate for themselves and their communities.

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and economic empowerment cannot be overstated. Educated women can more easily contribute to the economy, support their families, and drive innovation in their communities. They are also better equipped to navigate and lead in times of crisis. Working with thousands of female garment workers, we've seen how even basic education can open doors to new roles, responsibilities, and respect—both at work and at home.

By investing in girls' education now, we lay the foundation for an inclusive, equitable economy in the future. English language skills, digital literacy, and soft skills like critical thinking and collaboration must be integral to this journey.

The challenges faced by rural girls are often different from those in urban areas—less access to resources, fewer role models, and more deeply entrenched gender norms. Programmes like EDGE demonstrate how localised, stakeholder-driven approaches can create real impact. Rather than imposing solutions from the top down, we must listen, adapt, and co-create with local communities.

What's needed now is stronger collaboration across sectors. Government, NGOs, private institutions, and academia must come together to scale what works and close

the gaps in access, quality, and opportunity. This is not a task for any one group—it is a collective national responsibility.

Finally, we must reimagine the role of the educator not as someone who provides answers, but as someone who sparks curiosity, critical thinking, and empathy. Teachers are change makers, especially when they come from the communities they serve. Investing in women educators from marginalised backgrounds can multiply the impact of our efforts, providing both instruction and inspiration.

Quality education that nurtures leadership, critical thinking, and confidence is not just a human right; it's a foundational step towards gender equity. We should help create and scale educational environments where girls can realise their potential, especially in communities where opportunity remains out of reach.

The stories of the girls we work with are powerful reminders of what is possible when we reimagine education as a tool not just for learning, but for liberation. They show us that with the right skills, the right support, and the right spaces, girls can and will lead. All they need is a chance. And it is our shared responsibility to make sure they get it.

CROSSWORD
BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS
1 Easy wins
6 Musical speeds
11 Find charming
12 Poor sport's cry
13 TV, radio, etc.
14 Clinic worker
15 Poet Pound
17 First person
18 Course cry
20 Past due
22 Hold title to
23 Largest of the Balearics
26 Coarse fellow
28 Knight wear
29 Multi-screen theater
31 Laugh sound
32 Flower feature
33 Recipe amts.
34 Calendar reading
36 Blinds piece
38 Dwelling
40 Bumbling
43 Deserve
44 Be of one mind
45 "Bye Bye Bye" band
46 Fit for a king

DOWN
1 Flock father
2 Praiseful poem
3 Study of the past few centuries
4 Trophy, e.g.
5 Blacken
6 Light metal
7 Earth circler
8 Agatha Christie specialty
9 Tuscany city
10 Article
16 According to
18 Indy 500 winner A.J.
19 Man - (famed racehorse)
21 Trojan War hero
23 Lawn burrower
24 Brilliant act
25 Sacred chests
27 Joined a mailing list
30 Print units
33 Lively dance
34 Consign to failure
35 Fivers
37 Tale teller
39 List abbr.
41 Pod unit
42 - Aviv

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