The Daily Star
FOUNDER EDITOR: **LATE S. M. ALI**

Time to re-green our country

Policies, projects that threaten green space must be discarded

The impact of rising temperatures on people's health has been in discussion for quite some time, yet policymakers and businesses have largely remained unresponsive to this threat. In this context, we hope that the World Bank's recent study, which highlights both the health and economic consequences of increasing temperatures in Bangladesh, will finally prompt some meaningful action.

The study estimates that Bangladesh lost 250 million workdays and up to $1.78 billion in 2024 due to heat-related illnesses. Between 1980 and 2023, the country's maximum temperature rose by 1.1 degrees Celsius, with Dhaka experiencing a 1.4-degree increase, making it a hotspot for urban heat. During the same period, the "feels like" temperature has jumped by 4.5 degrees Celsius. Consequently, during summer, more people suffer from persistent coughs, diarrhoea, depression, and anxiety compared to the winter months. The elderly and women are most affected, but people aged 50-65 within the working age group also report these health problems in significant numbers. The study also found that work absenteeism increases with rising temperatures: at 35-37 degrees Celsius, absenteeism averages 0.8 days, but at temperatures above 37 degrees Celsius, it jumps to 1.4 days. Heat disproportionately impacts informal and unskilled workers and the poor, compared to formal, skilled workers and the wealthy.

These findings should serve as a wake-up call for policymakers and businesses alike. Economic growth cannot be sustained if workers' health continues to decline due to increases in heat and absenteeism. Dhaka's heat report also deserves scrutiny. Between 1989 and 2020, the city lost 47 percent of its dense green cover, while its temperature continued to rise. Dhaka has also frequently topped global lists for the worst air quality. Development—not just in Dhaka but across the country—has often come at the expense of parks, trees, and water bodies. Yet both private commercial bodies and public institutions continued building at the cost of the environment, violating laws under the guise of progress.

The World Bank report presents glaring evidence that such progress will not be sustainable in the long run. Northern Bangladesh is already paying the price of global warming, with ground and surface water declining at an alarming rate. In the south, global warming is increasing salinity. Both phenomena are likely to increase the number of climate migrants to cities. There is no time for the government to wait for donor funds to address these issues. Whatever can be done at the national level must be done first, including increasing green spaces in cities and preserving forest cover across the country. Political parties must also prioritise environmental issues that impact health and wellbeing over populist policies. Finally, we urge the interim government and those about to follow to strictly enforce environmental laws, stop unplanned urbanisation, and treat rising temperatures and heatwaves as climate emergencies within a comprehensive, multi-sectoral strategy.

Woeful state of a national highway

Weak construction, poor planning turned it into a nightmare

We are concerned about the pathetic state of the Khulna-Satkhira highway. Rebuilt at a cost of Tk 160 crore just five years ago, this 64-kilometre road, according to a report, now mostly resembles a broken patchwork of bricks and craters in many places. The misery for travellers begins right at Khulna's Zero Point. From there to Dumuria's Chuknagar, the road is riddled with potholes and treacherous surfaces that become clouded with dust when dry and waterlogged when it rains, causing accidents, vehicle damage, and frequent traffic delays. Around 16,000 vehicles are said to use the highway daily, with many operators claiming that travel time has doubled and repair costs continue to rise.

Reportedly, this once-regional highway was reconstructed by Messrs Mozahar Enterprise in 2020 and later, in January 2023, upgraded to national highway status. But the fate of the road, and indeed its users, hasn't changed. In their defence, officials say that traffic volume has since increased significantly, particularly with goods transported from Bhomra land port to Dhaka, and that this heavy load has worsened the damage. But this should have been anticipated. Predicting expected traffic volume after the inauguration of a new project is a normal part of planning. Unfortunately, we tend to focus too much on politically enabled firms and their greed, overlooking that public officials responsible for construction are equally to blame. Unfortunately, negligent, inefficient, or corrupt officials behind many such poorly executed projects have rarely been held to account, even after the July uprising. This raises concerns about whether the culture of impunity is still being allowed to persist.

While it cannot be denied that the unanticipated and poorly regulated passage of heavy goods trucks did, and continues to, damage the road, the use of substandard construction materials, so often the hallmark of AL-era projects, seems equally responsible. Funding such shoddy work is the most immediate price we pay as taxpayers, with the subsequent sufferings from hastened road deterioration—caused by the accumulation of dust, mud, accidents, and traffic gridlock—making up the longer-term toll on commuters, businesses, and the broader economy.

We, therefore, urge the government, particularly the departments involved with road construction, to take strict measures in this respect. They must ensure that substandard construction practices are rooted out and that those responsible for poor planning and construction are held accountable. It is also vital that future projects are planned and executed properly. The Khulna-Satkhira highway is one of the most important trade routes in the country's southwest, so pending repair works must be conducted urgently.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Legendary guitarist Jimi Hendrix dies

On this day in 1970, American rock guitarist and singer Jimi Hendrix, who fused American traditions of blues, jazz, rock, and soul with techniques of British avant-garde rock to redefine the electric guitar in his own image, died of an overdose of barbiturates in London.

Literacy in Bangladesh is still a distant dream

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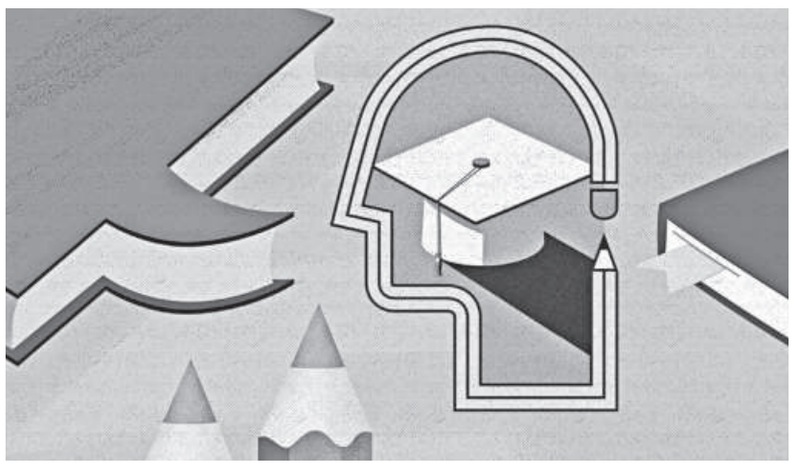
On the occasion of the International Literacy Day on September 8, Primary and Mass Education Adviser Dr Bidhan Ranjan Roy Podder announced that the literacy rate among people above seven years of age, per the Bangladesh Economic Survey 2024, was 77.9 percent—an advance over 76.8 percent in 2022. Interestingly, the adviser was sceptical about the quality of the skills the declared literates actually possessed, and if they could use the skills in their lives. The "functional literacy level" might be much lower, the adviser observed.

Several pertinent questions, then, arise: what really is literacy that is functionally useful in a person's life? How is it measured? And, most importantly, how can it be ensured that citizens, particularly young people, achieve the basic skills that are regarded as the foundation for further learning and success in life?

The conundrum is that, even after completing five years of primary schooling, most children in Bangladesh are not able to read a simple text, write a message, or use the four basic arithmetic rules for calculation, as indicated by the National Student Assessment 2022 data for primary schools. By a World Bank estimate, 51.2 percent of adolescents in the country were in the "learning poor" category in 2024. The lack of ability of 10-14-year-olds to read a short, age-appropriate text is defined as learning poverty.

The Awami League government, during its first tenure (1996-2001), carried out a literacy campaign called the Total Literacy Movement (TLM). People aged 15 years and above were enrolled in courses set up by the politicians' favourite NGOs, and the enrollees were declared to be literate after six months. Quality control and assessment of the skills acquired were ignored. Thus, many upazilas were proclaimed to be free of illiteracy and the official literacy rate increased every year. The TLM project became popularly known as "Total Loss of Money."

The BNP-Jamaat regime of 2001-2006, focused on allegations of corruption and mismanagement of the previous regime, shut down the Directorate of Non-Formal Education, then replaced it with the Bureau of Non-Formal Education (BNFE). The bureau reduced authority, staff and budget. New initiatives were lacking. Whatever momentum in non-formal and adult education existed was lost. Some activities continued mainly through the work of various NGOs, which provided literacy and vocational skill training to vulnerable populations.



VISUAL: **ANWAR SOHEL**

Assuming power again in 2009, the Hasina government, despite its manifesto pledge of ending illiteracy by 2014, managed to start the Basic Literacy Project by 2018 to teach literacy and life skills to 450,000 people aged 15-45 years in 64 districts. The life skills component was dropped "due to fund crisis." The results remained unclear due to lack of assessment.

The history of literacy education for children and adults in Bangladesh suggests a confusion among some policy and decision-makers about what literacy skills mean and how these are taught, as well as wilful denial of the problems. Add to that the absence of political commitment and a culture of impunity to corruption, incompetence and mismanagement.

UNESCO's updated statement (September 2025) about the concept of literacy says, "Literacy is now understood as a means of identification, understanding, interpretation, creation and communication in an increasingly digital, text-mediated, information-rich and fast-changing world." It is a continuum with varying levels of skills ranging from those who can barely recognise letters of the alphabet to those who can use the skills in varying contexts in their life and for further learning.

It is difficult to precisely measure literacy competencies as a multifaceted set of skills. It also may be questionable whether a single statistic can represent the literacy status meaningfully. If a core definition of literacy is taken, the logical approach would be to administer a simple test of one's reading, writing and counting abilities. In practice, a "self-reporting" method is applied in surveys—a person declaring oneself as literate or a household head doing so for the family rather than applying a test. Then, all children completing five years of schooling are also automatically categorised as literate, ignoring the problems about school performance. The literacy statistics reported every year is based on these faulty premises and methods.

To be fair, measurement methods in Bangladesh are those commonly used in most countries and are accepted by UNESCO for compiling global data. This explanation does not solve the problem of poor skills of our youth and adults. In fact, an OECD-sponsored measurement called the Programme for International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) applying a "tested literacy" method has been in use in more than 30 rich countries. UNESCO itself has been working on a Literacy Assessment and Monitoring Programme (LAMP) using tests, though it has yet to gain currency among developing countries. Why UNESCO continues to endorse and rely on patently inadequate literacy assessment is another story.

It is obvious that realising the goal of functionally useful literacy skills for youth and adults call for a two-front approach: i) primary schools have to do a good job and not add new generations of youth into the pool of illiterates; and ii) adult education programmes that succeed in attracting youth and adults and enable them to acquire functional literacy in combination with skills for life and livelihood.

The consultation committee for primary education reform, appointed by the interim government, has made elaborate recommendations on improving students' learning outcome. It has emphasised the importance of language and mathematics as foundational skills, which deserve special attention at the primary stage. The recommendations can be the basis for designing the next phase of primary education development (PEDP5).

Regarding literacy for youth and adults, the BNFE, taking a cautious approach, proposed a second expanded phase of the project called the Skill-Based Literacy for Out-of-School Adolescents (SKILFO), which was recently implemented in Cox's Bazar. It also proposed a three-year project called Alternative Learning Opportunity in one upazila with low literacy rates in each of the 64 districts. The success of these projects will depend on learning and applying the lessons from the long history of past projects that have not produced the intended results.

Recently, a non-formal education development programme was formulated by the BNFE, in collaboration with NGOs and academic stakeholders. It anticipated a workable multi-tier partnership model at national, district, upazila and union levels to set up a network of community learning centres and to expand the opportunity for literacy as a first step for lifelong learning. It is premised on a concept of strong partnerships of state and non-state actors; substantial roles for NGOs, community organisations, local government; and supportive and facilitative regulatory processes and mechanisms, along with adequate funding. Ambivalence at the policy-making level about the anticipated strong role of non-state actors appears to have stalled the consideration of the proposal. The political dynamic of policy and decision-making keeps success unattainable in respect of meaningful literacy.

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A case for adopting a climate passport

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Every year, families in Bhola, Khulna, and Shatkhira lose their homes to floods and erosion. Most move to city slums, where life is extremely precarious. Internal migration is already straining our cities. By 2050, the number of people forced to move due to climate change could reach as high as 20 million. The pressing question is: when lands become uninhabitable and sometimes disappear under water, where do vulnerable people go, and under what law? With rising seas displacing millions, Bangladesh must push for a climate passport to secure dignity and justice for its people.

The climate passport is a proposed legal instrument to protect those displaced by climate change. It would function much like the historical Nansen passport issued to stateless people after World War I, granting them legal status and the right to cross borders. Scholars suggest embedding such a system into existing frameworks like the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the Platform on Disaster Displacement, and the Global Compact for Migration.

The strength of the idea lies in tackling a critical legal vacuum—the 1951 Refugee Convention does not cover climate displacement. Though International Human Rights Law offers some protections, it does not include the right to migrate across borders when homes are lost to the sea. Without a legal remedy, millions will be trapped in limbo—neither secure at home, nor recognised abroad.

The Constitution of Bangladesh guarantees the right to life (Article 32), protection of law (Article 31) as well as the right to a healthy environment (Article 18A). Moreover,the Supreme Court, in cases such as *Dr. Mohiuddin Farooque v. Bangladesh* (2003) and *Rabia Bhuiyan, MP v. Ministry of LGRD & others*, has interpreted that Article 32 and 31 also include the right to a healthy environment. But when entire coastal regions like Shatkhira or Khulna become uninhabitable, Dhaka and other cities cannot endlessly absorb these populations. Constitutional protections under such dire circumstances cannot remain confined within shrinking borders. Safeguarding life and dignity then requires pursuing mobility rights beyond the state's territory. Without legal recognition abroad, displaced citizens risk becoming invisible—neither refugees nor secure residents at home.

In this sense, climate displacement is not only a humanitarian crisis—it is a constitutional and legal obligation. Bangladesh, as both a frontline victim and a moral voice in climate diplomacy, has a duty to articulate this case internationally.

According to experts, with rising sea levels, Pacific small island states, like Kiribati and Tuvalu, will be the first ones to go underwater. Threatened by the same fear, in February 2025, Nauru announced a controversial "climate citizenship" or "golden passport" scheme to raise funds for adaptation and potential relocation. Critics view it as selling nationality, but its message is vividly clear: when territory is at risk, mobility and identity become questions of survival, not of choice. Similarly, climate activists and legal scholars have revived the idea of a climate passport as a structured, rights-based solution. Bangladesh's plight mirrors theirs, though ours involves millions of people under the threat of climate displacement, rather than thousands.

The answer to the question of why a climate passport matters is—(1)Justice: Bangladesh has contributed less than 0.5 percent of global emissions, yet faces devastating consequences. The environmental principle of common but differentiated responsibility (CBDR) demands that high-emitting nations take on a fair share of responsibility, including supporting climate mobility; (2) Order: A climate passport would ensure legal, predictable, and dignified movement, avoiding chaotic displacement and irregular migration; (3) Dignity: Migration should not strip people of their rights. A climate passport would ensure that losing land does not mean losing their identity, culture, or protection.

Bangladesh has long led global climate advocacy, chairing the Climate Vulnerable Forum and championing the Loss and Damage funding. The same can be done for climate mobility by pushing internationally for recognition of climate passport at the UNFCCC and within the Global Compact on Migration. Building alliances with small island states and other vulnerable countries to demand minimum standards for recognition is also important, along with preparing domestically by documenting displaced populations, investing in skills training, and negotiating bilateral labour agreements with potential host countries.

Framing the climate passport not as charity but as a legal necessity rooted in human rights and international law will strengthen Bangladesh's case.

The history of global dialogues suggests that wealthy nations are unlikely to agree, but the alternative to not trying is far worse: millions trapped in disaster zones, or uncontrolled flows into overstretched cities. However, experiments like Nauru's golden passports or scholarly proposals for a Nansen-type travel document show that law is already bending under the pressure of rising seas.

Bangladesh cannot stop the Bay of Bengal from advancing towards itself, but it can help reframe global law so that when our people move, they carry not only their belongings but also their rights and dignity. A climate passport is not a utopia. It is an essential beginning to stop the worst nightmare from coming true, and Bangladesh should be at the forefront of making it a reality.

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