

## Bangladesh must heed AI warning

Govt should promote workforce training to advance AI skills

Artificial intelligence (AI) is set to fundamentally reshape Bangladesh's economy but the country's lack of preparedness leaves its vast, young workforce vulnerable to risks. Bangladesh currently sits at the lower end of AI readiness in South Asia, primarily because its economic engine, comprising the garment sector and agriculture, has so far been least affected by automation. Yet, the experience of regional peers, particularly India—which now commands a nearly 30 percent wage premium for AI skills—demonstrates the rapid pace of this technology. As AI diffuses through global value chains, the temporary low exposure in Bangladesh today "could quickly become a disadvantage tomorrow," according to a report published by the World Bank.

The immediate threat is concentrated not in the factory floor, but in the white-collar engine of modern economy. Moderately educated young workers in roles like customer service and data entry are the most vulnerable to displacement. Indeed, generative AI has already been shown to reduce monthly job listings by around 20 percent for the most exposed white-collar occupations across South Asia. This directly challenges Bangladesh's aspirations to move up the value chain. At the same time, job postings requiring AI skills in 2025 also demonstrate a regional divide: at just 1.4 percent, Bangladesh lagged considerably behind Sri Lanka (7.3 percent), India (5.8 percent) and Nepal (3.3 percent), according to the World Bank.

Moreover, gaps in digital infrastructure and human capital define the chasm between opportunity and outcome in Bangladesh. Only about 62 percent of its population has internet access, and the rural-urban gap—a staggering 32 percentage points—is the largest among all emerging market regions. This disparity directly deprives rural areas of the connectivity and reliable electricity vital for AI-driven growth.

The choice before Bangladesh is clear: seize a strategic "window of opportunity," or risk being left behind in the global technological race. Its relatively young labour force could be an advantage, potentially making AI adoption easier than in ageing economies, provided that workers gain access to the right skills. The government, therefore, must immediately prioritise affordable internet access and consistent electricity supply as a core economic necessity, closing the rural-urban divide. This fundamental infrastructure is essential for scaling AI adoption. Simultaneously, an urgent recalibration of human skills is required across the labour force. The government must expand educational and national programmes to instil foundational digital literacy for the wider populace while cultivating advanced AI skills for professionals. The government should itself lead by adopting AI to streamline bureaucratic processes, reduce corruption, and deliver services efficiently.

AI offers Bangladesh a chance to leapfrog into higher productivity. But it is not possible without supportive reforms and initiatives by both government and private actors.

## Address the plight of hilsa fishermen

Delayed, insufficient support during fishing ban causing hardship

We are concerned about the fishermen struggling to cope with an ongoing 22-day ban on hilsa fishing enforced on October 4. While the ban is necessary to protect brood hilsa during the peak breeding season, the lack of work and insufficient support from the government mean that these individuals are going through a tough time with little means of subsistence. While talking to this daily, one fisherman complained that he had already been facing difficulties due to poor hauls before the ban, and that the promised aid had yet to arrive. Another lamented that the government's rice support for the ban period—about 25 kilogrammes—was not enough to sustain a family without cash assistance.

Many fishermen across the coastal belt are similarly enduring hardship because of delayed and inadequate support. Bangladesh has about 17 lakh registered fishermen working across rivers, haors, baors, canals, and other water bodies; of them, about 7.42 lakh are involved in hilsa fishing, although due to budget constraints, only 6.2 lakh are expected to get rice support. The problem, however, is not limited to exclusion risks for a portion of registered fishermen as well as those unregistered. Insufficient allocations and delayed delivery are also major concerns. In many areas, the rice has yet to come. While officials have blamed it on the Durga Puja holidays, such explanations hardly matter to the families going hungry.

Every year, during the seasonal fishing bans, we hear the same stories of delayed or inadequate relief. Although this year's allocation of 15,503 tonnes of rice marks a slight increase from last year, it is still not sufficient or inclusive enough. A proposal to increase the rice allocation from 25 kg to 30 kg was reportedly turned down because of budgetary constraints. Another persistent problem has been the lack of cash support, for rice alone cannot fully cover their needs for other essentials and necessary services, particularly at a time when prices in general remain high. Experts have therefore highlighted the importance of providing a mix of rice and cash support so that fishing families can manage their expenses. In fact, many studies suggest that cash transfers are more effective than in-kind support as cash provides flexibility.

Given these realities, the government must ensure timely, adequate, and well-targeted support going forward. Beyond immediate aid, long-term measures—such as ensuring alternative livelihoods and a greater share of profits from hilsa business for the fishermen—are essential to safeguard their well-being, and prevent this seasonal conservation effort from turning into a seasonal nightmare.

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# EDITORIAL

## The politics of narrative: How stories shape reality in Bangladesh



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Politics everywhere runs on stories, but in Bangladesh, the "politics of narrative" has been especially powerful. Competing tales of identity, progress, and legitimacy form the invisible architecture of political life, shaping not only how events are remembered but also how they are lived.

Walter Fisher's narrative paradigm captures this dynamic well: humans are storytellers who make sense of the world through coherent narratives rather than abstract arguments. Narratives are symbolic actions—words and deeds with sequence and meaning—that persuade, unite, or divide. Benedict Anderson likewise argued that nations are "imagined communities," built from shared stories that bind strangers into a common identity. Wars, revolutions, and political struggles become meaningful only when translated into narratives that enter collective memory.

The defining story for Bangladesh is, of course, the 1971 Liberation War. Like a literary classic that spawns endless reinterpretations, this momentous episode provides a key foundation for political narratives. Every party and leader must position themselves in relation to it, either as its "legitimate heirs" or as "challengers" to its meaning.

The Awami League, under Sheikh Hasina, cast itself as the guardian of the "true" liberation narrative. This framing turned rivals into something more sinister than competitors: Pakistani "collaborators" betraying the national cause. Legitimacy, too, was genealogical—Awami League presented itself as the nation's founding force, with its politics rooted in a legacy of the resistance movement passed down through generations.

The Bangladesh Nationalist Party and other opposition groups have tried to revise this story. They emphasise contributions beyond party politics and highlight neglected voices in the independence struggle. In doing so, they frame themselves as revisionist historians, expanding the narrative beyond the Awami League's

version and insisting that the nation's birth was a collective achievement.

Once, state media and newspapers largely controlled these stories. Today, social media has turned every citizen into a potential storyteller. Twitter (now X), Facebook, and YouTube have become democratic spaces with competing voices jostling for attention.

This digital turn has fragmented the national narrative. A handful of outlets



VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

once shaped public opinion; now millions of micro-narratives coexist in cacophony. On the one hand, this allows ordinary citizens to challenge official accounts. On the other hand, it opens the floodgates to conspiracy theories and misinformation.

Recent protests illustrate this shift. The 2018 student road safety movement, sparked by fatal traffic accidents, quickly became a broader story about governance failure and generational frustration. Protesters framed their activism as a cry for accountability in a system that disregards young lives. Social media amplified their message, turning a local tragedy into a national reckoning. Similarly, the 2024 anti-discrimination demonstrations revealed deep anger against authoritarian practices, with digital

narrative revealed limits. Storytelling alone could not substitute for concrete solutions, and when global sympathy failed to translate into sufficient support, Bangladesh was left caught between its humanitarian commitments and its internal political constraints.

Economic growth has provided another fertile ground for narrative politics. Successive governments

have told a triumphant story of transformation—from the infamous "basket case" to an overstated "development miracle."

Statistical achievements such as poverty reduction, infrastructure expansion,

and GDP growth became cinematic highlights in a carefully edited national film.

This was a case of "selective visibility." Success stories were

estimated at Tk 30,560 crore in the same year.

In the absence of updated data and given the limited public data available, proxy indicators can be used to show whether the situation is improving or worsening. Taxes to the exchequer have risen over the past decade, and tobacco companies' revenues and profits have climbed steadily. Taken

**Taxes to the exchequer have risen over the past decade, and tobacco companies' revenues and profits have climbed steadily. Taken together with the persistence of affordability and continued down-trading into lower tiers, this indicates that the current tax design is not working as intended.**

together with the persistence of affordability and continued down-trading into lower tiers, this indicates that the current tax design is not working as intended. If taxation were effective, retail prices would increase and consumption would decline, so overall revenue would likely decline. Instead, revenues are soaring.

Evidence consistently shows that the economic costs of tobacco use far exceed the revenue governments collect from tobacco taxes. In 2017–18, Bangladesh collected Tk 22,810 crore in tobacco tax (SD + VAT). Yet the economic cost of tobacco use from lost productivity and direct healthcare costs of smoking related illnesses was

magnified, while structural issues—corruption, inequality, environmental degradation—remained in the shadows. Opposition groups present alternative narratives: that growth disproportionately benefits the powerful and wealthy, that the poor face rising costs and stagnant opportunities, and that economic miracles often mask fragile foundations. The same numbers, framed differently, convey clashing stories of national progress.

Bangladesh's experience reveals a paradox at the heart of narrative politics. The more tightly governments try to regulate national stories, the more they expose their fragility. Laws restricting press freedom, regulations on social media, and penalties for "false" information signal not narrative strength but weakness. Official stories require constant policing because they rest on contested ground.

Political narratives are thus both weapons and vulnerabilities. A compelling story gives leaders legitimacy, but it also creates standards they may fail to meet. The Awami League's liberation-centred narrative, for example, elevates expectations of living up to the ideals of 1971. When the party appeared authoritarian or self-serving, critics accused it of betraying the very principles it claimed to embody.

What emerges from Bangladesh's case is that narratives shape and influence political reality. Politicians do not simply describe the world; they help create it through stories that give meaning to events. Elections, therefore, are not just contests of policies or personalities but battles between rival visions of national identity. Victory often goes not to the candidate with the best plan but to the one who tells the most resonant story of where Bangladesh has been and where it should go.

As the country evolves, new narrators will rise. The younger generation, globally connected and digitally fluent, is already crafting fresh stories that depart from older party-centric frames. Their narratives are less about the bloodlines of 1971 and more about governance, opportunity, and dignity in the present. In this ongoing project of framing nationhood, Bangladeshis remain both authors and readers of the stories that define what it means to belong.

After all, a nation, in a profound sense, is a story in motion—retold, contested, and rewritten with each generation.

## Are tobacco taxes really working in Bangladesh?



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Bangladesh is among the highest tobacco-consuming countries in the world. The National NCD Risk Factors Survey 2022 by the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) reported that around 39.4 percent of adults aged 18–69 used tobacco in some form, with usage at around 54.7 percent among men and 25.4 percent among women. In comparison, global smoking prevalence in 2023 was 22.3 percent, of which men were 28.1 percent and females were 4.7 percent, according to the World Health Organization (WHO).

One of the strongest instruments for curbing tobacco use is taxation, which works in two ways. Increasing taxes reduces the prevalence of smoking and deters new smokers from ever taking up the habit. The logic is straightforward: higher taxes push prices up, discouraging new and price-sensitive smokers, and at least nudging others to cut down.

However, Bangladesh has a complex tax policy system for tobacco products. The government relies on a tiered ad valorem supplementary duty (SD) on the retail price, 15 percent VAT, and a one percent Health Development Surcharge (HDS). There are four tiers, and therein lies the problem. When taxes rise across all segments, smokers can easily switch from premium to low-tier brands, keeping consumption stable. This system benefits tobacco

companies as well, since customers do not leave the market. British American Tobacco Bangladesh's (BATB) 2024 annual report shows that low-segment brands account for the largest share of its sales volume.

Compounding this is the issue of consumers being able to buy single-stick cigarettes. Midway through FY2024–25, the government hiked VAT and SD on over 100 goods and services, including cigarettes. However, the prices of some of the popular brands selling loose are still quite affordable—between Tk 20 to Tk 10—for low-income populations and even the youth, particularly schoolchildren, who are potential new smokers.

Bangladesh is committed to becoming a smoke-free nation by 2040, which is now only 15 years away. Yet, there is no updated national-level data to show whether tobacco use is declining or rising. The last STEPS survey, based on World Health Organization's approach to noncommunicable disease (NCD) risk factors surveillance, was in 2018; the last Global Adult Tobacco Survey (GATS) was in 2017. Although the DGHS conducted a NCD Risk Factor survey in 2022, the official report has not yet been released publicly.

Without updated evidence, how can policymakers steer the country toward its stated goal and design interventions

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estimated at Tk 30,560 crore in the same year.

As public health is not in focus and with no effective national health financing strategy in place, people are left in a doubly vulnerable situation. The low-income population, in particular, often lacks full awareness of the health consequences of smoking. With out-of-pocket health expenses at around 73 percent in 2021 and showing a rising trend over the past two decades, many families slip into poverty when faced with treatment costs stemming from tobacco-related illnesses. They are forced to sell assets, take on heavy loans, and shoulder crushing financial burdens to pay for the treatment of diseases caused by smoking. In 2018 alone, nearly 126,000 people in Bangladesh died from tobacco-related diseases.

Now, tobacco companies may continue to parade their status as among the country's "highest taxpayers." The government, too, may feel pressured to tread lightly, fearing a loss of revenue if tougher policies are imposed. But the government must realise that this trade-off cannot be justified. The citizens of this country should not bear the burden of a system that values revenue over lives. The constitution obliges the state to protect the health of its people.

Cigarette sales and taxation are only instruments for revenue collection. If revenue generation is truly the concern, the government must explore other avenues. It should work with economists, health experts, researchers and all other relevant stakeholders to identify sustainable, equitable alternatives. Bangladesh has pledged to its people and to the world that it will be smoke-free by 2040. That pledge cannot remain hollow words.

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