

MY DHAKA

Embracing the AI revolution, human style

RBR

Artificial Intelligence (AI) and its phenomenal popularity with us, the users, remind me of Seven of Nine, the Borg character from the Star Trek: Voyager TV series.
Seven was originally human, before her Borg assimilation, and later, when liberated by the crew of Star Trek, she was working on reclaiming her lost humanity, while retaining some of her Borg knowledge. She is half-human, half AI, or something like that.
Technological innovations like AI can analyse data by using algorithms and improve our performance, our ability to perform simple tasks, such as learning, reasoning, and problem-solving, that, in any circumstances, would require human intelligence. With this AI breakthrough, we have now become half-human and full lazy.
Bringing AI into the lives of ordinary people is a stroke of genius, but for older people of Generation X, who are still in the workforce, this knowledge and know-how gave rise to complexes. Terms like algorithms, data, and performance remind me of my math teacher in detention class, and are downright too much of a stress for me, a happy human of Generation X.
In such a technologically awkward moment, I was introduced to ChatGPT, a conversational AI chatbot, by a junior colleague when he saw me struggling to translate a big Bangla script.
And in the blink of an eye, the 1,000-word document got translated

As soon as I pressed the button. I was astounded. I felt like the country mouse visiting the town mouse.
Anyway, leaving aside the corny jokes, I dread handing an assignment to my sub-editors because of my poor grammar, writing errors, and their sneer. So, I have decided to cheat, be corrupted, and ruin my human intelligence to score brownie points with them by chatting with ChatGPT. I now know the shortcut to successful writing.

write. Don't bother too much with the grammar or spelling. Just make sure to write and tell your story, however you want. Once done, give it to the AI and simply ask it to format and edit it for clarity and fix any spelling and sentence structure mistakes. The final output will be infinitely better than whatever slop the AI would have come up with if left on its own," says a disciplinarian sub-editor, who works with young writers in an English magazine.
"It's inevitable. It's the future. Students and young office executives will opt for AI assistance for any assignments. However, to know how to properly use AI to your advantage is the point of concern now. Students should be discouraged from uncontrolled, mindless AI usage rather than being deprived of modernisation and technological advancements," says a part-time professor in a reputed university.
"The first indication that anything is written by AI is that it has absolutely no character and no 'signature.' Like a fingerprint, everyone's write-ups are unique from each other. You can claim to tailor your prompts to create a unique write-up, but there is no escaping their bland writing style and even worse humour," the sub-editor vents his frustration with detecting AI presence in write-ups he edits.
So, to sum up, AI is here to stay, reshaping how we think, write, and create. The key lies in balance -- using it wisely to enhance, not replace, our human touch.

ILLUSTRATION: ASHIF AHMED RUDRO

China vows massive high-tech sector development in next decade

AFP, Beijing

China will develop its high-tech sector on a massive scale in the next decade, top officials vowed yesterday, a day after meetings on the country's future policy priorities concluded in Beijing.

The four days of closed-door discussions began on Monday and involved high-ranking officials outlining long-term strategies for the 15th Five-Year Plan, which starts next year.

The country has poured support and investment into developing its science and technology sectors, part of ongoing efforts to present itself as a world leader in those areas ahead of Washington.

Yesterday, officials in Beijing promised that industries such as "quantum technology... hydrogen and nuclear fusion energy, (and) brain-computer interfaces... are poised to gain momentum".

"The new scale added in the next 10 years is expected to reshape China's high-tech sector," development official Zheng Shanjie told reporters at a news conference.

Trade talks with Canada off

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"When someone says, 'Let's impose tariffs on foreign imports,' it looks like they're doing the patriotic thing by protecting American products and jobs," Reagan says. "And sometimes for a short while it works - but only for a short time."

He also says: "...over the long run such trade barriers hurt every American worker and consumer", and that the result of trade wars is that "Markets shrink and collapse; businesses and industries shut down; and millions of people lose their jobs."

The ad does not, however, mention that Reagan was using the address to explain that tariffs imposed on Japan by his administration should be seen as a sadly unavoidable exception to his basic belief in free trade as the key to prosperity.

The Canadian government had no immediate comment.

Trump has called tariffs "the most beautiful word in the dictionary" and used them to apply pressure to countries around the world.

His trade war has increased US tariffs to their highest levels since the 1930s and he has regularly threatened more duties, sparking concerns among businesses and economists.

Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney told reporters yesterday that Canada will not allow unfair US access to its markets if talks on various trade deals with Washington fail.

Safety standards flouted at import section

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He attributed much of the responsibility to these three parties, particularly Biman, which handles ground operations, but said it would be "premature" to assign direct blame before the investigation concludes. He also noted that firefighting trucks could not reach the fire source because large quantities of goods were piled in front of the import cargo warehouse.

Aviation experts, however, held CAAB responsible alongside Biman, C&F agents, and customs authorities for failing to discharge their duties. Biman handles ground operations, C&F agents manage cargo clearance, and customs authorities oversee cargo management. Although goods are supposed to be cleared within 21 days, insiders said items often remain for years.

The CAAB chief claimed that

operations at the airport follow ICAO protocols, a set of practices ensuring the safety, security, and efficiency of international civil aviation.

Aviation expert ATM Nazrul said the import cargo section lacks standard practices, with goods stored haphazardly inside and outside the building, which made it difficult for firefighters to reach the blaze. He urged CAAB to adopt international standards in the import section.

In April 2016, the UK and EU banned direct flights from Dhaka due to safety concerns at HSIA. Bangladesh later regained approval after committing to improved scanning, screening, explosive detection, fire control, and overall incident management at the airport and cargo complex.

Boshra Islam, general manager of public relations at Biman, said almost all sections of HSIA follow ACC3 and RA3 standards, except the import

section. The last ACC3 validation by the EU was conducted on March 3-5, 2024, and the last RA3 validation on May 15-17, 2023, both covering only the export cargo section. The ACC3 is valid until March 4, 2029, and RA3 until October 4, 2026. She confirmed that import cargo facilities are not included in these validation programmes.

Aviation expert Kazi Wahidul Alam said even if ACC3 and RA3 standards are not mandatory for the import section, the same level of compliance should be maintained because it is an equally important part of the airport. Since import cargo is often not released immediately - sometimes taking up to two weeks - strict safety and compliance measures are essential.

Referring to delays in cargo release, Alam said this makes the strict implementation of safety and compliance standards in the import section even more crucial.

Govt project to save 4 rivers

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In its verdict, the HC directed the then deputy commissioners of Dhaka, Narayanganj, Gazipur and Munshiganj to conduct and complete a river survey based on both Cadastral Survey (CS) and Revisional Survey (RS) records by the end of 2009.

The CS, conducted between 1888 and 1940, defined and recorded the legal boundaries of properties for managing land ownership, while the RS was carried out later to update the land records based on the CS.

The HC also ordered that all river lands - except those legally leased out - must be identified and demarcated with boundary pillars by November 2010 to keep those under full control of the government.

Initially, the Public Works Department (PWD) was assigned to put up demarcation pillars. It proceeded with the installation of 9,577 boundary pillars without adhering to CS records.

Following protests from environmentalists, the government decided to discard those and install pillars afresh.

Under the second phase of the project, BIWTA is supposed to install 10,820 demarcation pillars along the four rivers; construct riverbank protection walls stretching up to 44.8 kilometres; and build three eco-parks and several jetties.

Contacted, Abu Zafar Mohammad Shahnawaz Kabir, the project director, said, "Work remained suspended for one and a half years due to legal complications. Land grabbers obtained court orders to halt work in many areas, prompting us to seek intervention from the High Court," he said.

Of the 220 kilometres of planned walkways along both banks of the four rivers, the government has so far undertaken projects covering 72



The walkway along the Turag river in Diabari.

PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

kilometres. Once the second phase is completed, the BIWTA will launch the third phase to build the remaining stretches within the city's inner circle, the project director said.

"So far, 87 percent of the project [second phase] has been completed. At least 6,200 demarcation pillars have been installed, and walkway construction [72 km] is at the final stage," he said.

When the second phase of the project was taken up in 2018, the cost was estimated at Tk 845.55 crore. In July 2022, the deadline for its completion was extended to June last year, raising the cost to Tk 1,181.10 crore.

But the project could not be completed within the revised timeframe, resulting in further cost escalation.

The project director said the new deadline is June next year, and the project cost has been revised up to Tk 1,275 crore due to a rise in overhead or indirect costs as well as other factors.

Meanwhile, parts of the 22km-walkway that was built along the riverbanks in Kanchpur, Shyampur, Dharmaganj, Ramchandrapur and

Tongi have fallen into disrepair.

During a recent visit to Shyampur, it was found that the boundary wall along the walkway collapsed. Pedestrians must exercise caution while crossing the stretch as they risk falling into the river if inattentive.

Asked, the project director said the walkways in Shyampur and Kadamtali areas are in poor shape due to a lack of maintenance.

Referring to the project, environmental activist Sharif Jamil said, "In the name of complying with the 2009 court order, government agencies under the previous administration went for faulty demarcation of rivers, and conducted some sporadic eviction drives, leaving foreshore and riverbanks in the hands of grabbers."

The walkway project is nothing but a tool for corruption to make money from both the project and river grabbers, alleged Sharif, member secretary of Dhora, an NGO working on environment and climate change.

Unabated encroachment and pollution are gradually turning the rivers into narrow canals that carry pollutants downstream, he added.

Dhaka on a perilous path

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minimal oversight by Rajdhani Unnayan Kartripakkha (Rajuk), entrusted with enforcing building regulations in the capital.

Recently, a three-member government body revised the Detailed Area Plan (DAP) 2022 and proposed raising FAR further in most core city areas - a move that, according to urban planners, would allow developers to build even taller structures in the already overcrowded capital.

The proposal was approved in principle at a meeting of the advisory committee on DAP review, chaired by Land Adviser Ali Imam Majumdar on October 19.

Welcoming the development, Liakat Ali Bhuiyan, senior vice-president of Real Estate and Housing Association of Bangladesh (REHAB), said the move would help the sector come out of stagnation.

"Industries linked to the real estate sector will also benefit from this," he added.

PERILOUS PATH

Urban planner Adil Mohammed Khan, president of the Bangladesh Institute of Planners, said global planning norms are not followed in the case of Dhaka city.

Traditionally, plot-based development (small plots with strict height limits) coexisted with block-based colonies in Dhaka city, which included houses, schools, and open space. Dhaka initially followed the plot-based model, capping the height at two- and a-half storeys that ensured airflow and sunlight.

But all this changed with the formulation of the 2006 Building Construction Rules after developers promoted FAR as a way to meet the housing demand.

They promised to leave more open space while constructing structures. But in practice, neighbourhoods have become mismatched: four storey houses are seen beside 10-storey high-rises, he said.

"Even in developed countries, height limits preserve neighbourhood character... High-rises belong in business districts, not alleys in residential areas," Adil pointed out.

In most countries, FAR rarely exceeds 2 in residential areas, meaning that the total floor area is twice the size of the land, he said.

But the 2008 rules allowed FAR between 3.5 and 6.5, depending on road width. This enabled 10-storey buildings beside narrow roads and 20-storey high-rises beside main roads. Now, 14-storey towers rise from alleys barely wide enough for rickshaws.

Adil said the authorities are approving the construction of high-rises in congested neighbourhoods with lanes too narrow for fire trucks. "Some roads are too narrow for two cars to pass, yet developers want towers there. It's chaos."

Many high-rises are unreachable by fire trucks or ladders. Developers who pledged open spaces in return for higher FAR often build structures without leaving adequate open space, he said.

Mohammad Fazle Reza Sumon, former president of Bangladesh Institute of Planners, said that with higher FAR, the population of urban areas could go beyond the designed capacity, putting unbearable strain on utilities and infrastructure.

For example, Purbachal was originally designed for 10 lakh residents, but was later revised to accommodate 15 lakh.

With higher FAR, its population could soar to 60 lakh, putting utilities and infrastructure under severe strain. This is precisely why areas like Mohammadpur and Dhanmondi are already struggling.

An increase in the number of residents beyond capacity will lead to a surge in vehicles, worsening traffic congestion in the city, he noted.

Another negative impact of unplanned urban expansion is the loss of daylight.

In small plots of 4-5 kathas, residents of two or three-storey buildings have access to at least two hours of natural light daily. But if high-rises are built on adjacent plots, they block all sunlight to neighbouring homes, Sumon said.

This is why buildings are limited to 3-4 storeys in most residential neighbourhoods in India, Pakistan, South Korea, the US or Australia, he said.

DETAILED AREA PLAN

The 2022 DAP sought to introduce area-based FAR, depending on road width and civic facilities. Later, FAR was raised for almost all areas in the capital following demands from developers.

Though the approved plan capped FAR between 2 and 4.5, the limits were raised in many areas in September 2023. FAR is now between 5 and 5.5 for residential areas in Gulshan, Banani, and Dhanmondi.

"When it comes to planning, FAR 5 or 5.5 is unthinkable for residential plots... On narrow roads, it should not exceed 2.5 - at most 3. Raising it to 5.5 means disaster for neighbourhoods," said Adil.

Mohammad Ashrafur Islam, project director of DAP and Rajuk's chief town planner, said a three-member subcommittee, led by Housing and Public Works Adviser Adilur Rahman Khan, revised DAP 2022 and prepared a proposal after discussions with all stakeholders.

He said the proposal, approved in principle by the advisory committee recently, will be sent to the law ministry soon for vetting.

According to the proposal, FAR has been raised in most core city areas, including Kazipara, Shewrapara, Jatrabari and Badda, while it has been slightly reduced in a few areas, including Dhanmondi and Gulshan.

Ashrafur said flood flow zones will be unified under a single category to protect them from encroachment. Development or construction on agricultural land will be prohibited, with the exception of projects of national interest.

It will be mandatory for a developer to install a Sewage Treatment Plant (STP) if the plot size is five katha (3,600sq ft) or larger, he added.

Stronger military ties key to offsetting Chinese influence in Bangladesh

Says US envoy nominee

UNB, Dhaka

Brent Christensen, nominee for US Ambassador to Bangladesh, on Thursday described Bangladesh's upcoming polls as "the most consequential election in decades."

"The United States supports Bangladesh in its journey toward a bright and democratic future," he told the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations during his nomination hearing.

Christensen, who has "over twenty years of experience working on US policy towards Bangladesh," including a prior tour in Dhaka, made the remarks in his opening statement.

Senator Pete Ricketts of Nebraska asked about Bangladesh's growing military cooperation with "Communist China," referring to a Chinese-built submarine base in Pekua and Dhaka's plan to buy Chinese J-10 fighter jets.

"If they finalise the sale, it would lock Dhaka into a decades-long financial and strategic relationship with the Chinese defence industry," Ricketts said, asking how Christensen would engage with Bangladesh's leadership to discourage dependence on Chinese platforms.

Christensen replied that he shared the senator's concern over Chinese influence in South Asia and, if confirmed, would "clearly articulate the risks from Chinese activity... as well as highlight the opportunities and benefits that come with a closer partnership with the United States, especially military to military."

Ricketts also referred to the "Think Twice Act," a bill meant to dissuade countries like Bangladesh from buying Chinese weapons. Asked what alternatives the US could offer, Christensen said, "One of the things we can do through our US military groups is highlight some of the allied systems that might be more affordable for a country like Bangladesh... and encourage their interoperability with other platforms as we conduct additional military exercises with them."

Christensen noted that Bangladesh, the world's eighth most populous country, often does not receive the attention it deserves due to its larger neighbours. He said its strategic location makes it vital to an open, secure, and prosperous Indo-Pacific region.

"Bangladesh is also at a pivotal point. Student-led protests in August 2024 brought down a government that had been in power for 15 years," he said.

Christensen said Bangladesh hosts nearly 1.3 million Rohingyas in Cox's Bazar. "The disproportionate effort by the United States to fund the response is not sustainable," he said, urging other nations to step up.

He said he would work with Bangladesh, the international community, and US partners to find a viable and lasting solution. The US Embassy in Dhaka has been without an ambassador since Peter Haas completed his tenure in mid-2024, with chargés d'affaires filling the role since then.



Brent Christensen