

Halt construction on Pragati Sarani

DNCC move to occupy road, footpath revives a troubling precedent

It is surprising to learn that the Dhaka North City Corporation (DNCC) has begun constructing a ward office occupying the footpath and a part of the Pragati Sarani near Baridhara point. According to a report, the DNCC initially planned to set up a garbage depot at the site but changed the plan after protests from residents. Later, it decided to turn the spot into an office for the corporation’s employees at ward 18, ignoring complaints about the footpath’s occupation and its impact on traffic and pedestrian movement.

While we grew accustomed to seeing such protector-turned-violator conduct by public institutions during the Awami League rule, its recurrence now shows that authoritarian tendencies still persist. The site in question is one of the busiest stretches of road in the Baridhara diplomatic zone. Building on a public right of way by cutting down trees, pouring concrete, and installing pillars—without any impact assessment on traffic or pedestrian safety—is not just a case of bad judgement; it is a violation of the very idea of public space. We must also ask, if the corporation itself starts grabbing roads and footpaths, what moral authority does it retain to act against the many encroachments that choke Dhaka every day?

While talking to this daily, an urban planner has rightly termed the DNCC move as “equivalent to committing a crime.” He pointed out that DNCC could have rented a space temporarily while exploring more viable long-term options. But instead of choosing a rational path, it is opting to occupy a public road. When asked, the DNCC administrator has said that he does not support any establishment there, and that DNCC is searching for an alternative location for both the garbage depot and the office. But he has not clarified whether the current project has been shelved. Clearly, this is not just an encroachment problem; it is also a governance problem. A government agency cannot simply break the law it is mandated to enforce.

We, therefore, call upon the DNCC to immediately suspend the construction, reopen the footpath, and restore the road to public use. If there has been abuse of power by any official or contractor, it must also be investigated. The corporation must decide where the office will go through a transparent process, based on urban planning norms and community consultation. As things stand, Dhaka’s road space is already among the most scarce in the world. The DNCC or any other state agency must not exacerbate the problem, and must demonstrate, through action, that the era of arbitrary abuse of public space is over.

Grave failures in migration oversight

Stop Bangladeshi migrants’ forced-hiring in Ukraine war

It is deeply troubling that Bangladeshi migrant workers are being exploited abroad in one of the most dangerous ways imaginable. A recent Brac report reveals that many of our workers, who travelled legally to Russia with valid work visas, have been coerced into joining the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war. Promised jobs in construction, oil, or logistics, these men were stripped of their passports and forced into military service near the front lines. According to testimonies gathered from survivors and families, some workers were injured or killed, while some families lost contact with their sons, and returnees still live with traumatic memories.

Brac’s findings suggest that both licensed and unlicensed recruiting agents in Bangladesh are involved in this grim trade. Under the guise of high-paying job offers, they send unsuspecting workers to Russia, only for intermediaries there to hand them over to the military. Such cases reveal not just criminal exploitation but deep flaws in Bangladesh’s migration oversight. These workers were victimised despite following all legal procedures, including obtaining work visas, and signing verified contracts.

One of these men, Afzal Hossain Meraj, went to Russia in August 2023 for a welding job with a promised monthly salary of Tk 70,000, after paying Tk 6.5 lakh to a recruiting agency in Utara. Four months later, a broker in Russia offered him what seemed like a better job, with larger bonuses, higher pay, and even the promise of citizenship. But after he agreed, his passport was seized, and he was sent to the battlefield instead of a job site. He secretly called his father and told him that he feared for his life after seeing two other Bangladeshis killed in combat. Such a situation must be stopped urgently.

While the exact number of Bangladeshis caught up in Russia’s war remains unknown, the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) estimates that around 2,000 people have travelled to Russia with work visas in recent years, with at least a few dozen Bangladeshis feared dead or missing. Brac suspects that several hundred may currently be stranded in active combat areas.

Clearly, the failure to monitor recruitment, verify foreign job offers, or track Bangladeshi workers abroad has turned our migration system into an exploitative one. Without stronger oversight, even “legal” migration routes can be abused by traffickers. Authorities, therefore, must treat this issue as a national emergency. Stronger collaboration between the foreign ministry, CID, and migration agencies is urgently needed to locate those missing, rescue those trapped in war zones, and hold those involved accountable. Public awareness campaigns, especially in rural areas, should warn potential migrants about fraudulent offers. Finally, Bangladesh must use all diplomatic channels to press Russia for the safe return of all coerced nationals and prevent further recruitment of our citizens into the war.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Super Typhoon Haiyan strikes the Philippines

On this day in 2013, the Philippines endured what many consider to be its worst natural disaster, when Super Typhoon Haiyan, one of the most powerful cyclones ever recorded to strike land, hit the country.

Dhaka University’s clean-up paradox



BLOWIN’ IN THE WIND

Dr Shamsad Mortuza is professor of English at Dhaka University.

SHAMSAD MORTUZA

At the heart of the capital stands the University of Dhaka, a place that often evokes the nation’s consciousness and shapes its identity. From the 1952 Language Movement to the 1971 Liberation War, from the anti-autocratic movement in the 1990s to the July uprising in 2024, DU has been at the thick of things, ushering in changes that at times seemed unattainable. The revival of its student body, Dhaka University Central Students’ Union (DUCSU), after six years promised changes to the overall health of the university, which was diagnosed with many ills. But as soon as the DUCSU members picked up broomsticks to “set things right” at the “rotten” campus (to borrow Shakespearean lingo), the paradoxes of the city that never sleeps began to unfold.

The “clean campus” aimed at reclaiming public space, restoring order, and instilling discipline exposed an ironic and tragic fact: these young leaders are simply repeating the mistakes of the state, adding to the problem instead of solving it. While I fully support their cause and enthusiasm, I feel that their execution has blurred the fragile line between activism and authority. In a city where the municipal reflex is to “beautify” through occasional bulldozing of illegal structures and the eviction of homeless through periodic nightly actions, students have mimicked the same logic of erasure. Both student leaders and university spokespersons have publicly announced that marginalised people are a problem of the state. They have little or no sympathy for the people they deem “parasites” in our ecosystem. As stakeholders of a public university funded by taxpayers, with public roads running through its campus and vital public institutions (e.g., hospitals, metro stations, transport hubs, museums, academics, parks and fairgrounds) within its campus, the university simply

cannot isolate itself from the people who form the invisible nervous system of campus life.

Instead of leading the “imagination,” it is unfortunate that our student leaders with megaphones and sticks in their hands have joined the bulldozer brigade. And the targets of their cleansing campaign are the invisible people who keep both the city and university operational. No matter how empowered we feel to treat the tea sellers, snack vendors, cobblers, rag-pickers, and street dwellers as pollutants to be washed away, we need them. Conversely, they need us. If there is one value that we want to add to



FILE PHOTO: MAHATHIR MOHAMMED

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our education, it is empathy for both humans and non-humans. It is easy to profile the homeless people as needle pushers or drug peddlers. However, their existence within the system serves as a symptom of broader issues that require careful treatment. Surprisingly, there is not enough reaction to the drastic “clean-up campaign” led by our students.

However, I must give them credit for identifying one important pattern that plagues the public system. Many

staff and student leaders patronise the informal sector as a side hustle. They run a syndicate and extort money from the informal sector. With proper planning, this can be channelled into campus revenues and on-campus student jobs. The cleaning drive with a little bit of planning, time and care could have easily garnered public support. Instead, it has been treated merely as a photo op, accompanied by follow-up social media campaigns, making it seem as if DU has transformed into a place like Singapore.

We can easily dismiss the theatrics as youthful exuberance, but the episode has unbottled our repressed unconscious. The schizophrenia of Dhaka is in full display. We are a city that depends heavily on our informal sector and yet, pretends to be allergic to it. What employers of various sectors, who get different incentives for creating jobs, will never tell us is that an estimated 80 percent of workers operate outside any formal contract. We take care of those who take care of us without the need for any incentives. We are a terrarium in a self-supporting ecosystem where our

dynamic transaction and interaction as a necessity for our sustainable existence. Besides, any call for “order” often starts with the marginalisation of “the other.” City corporations call it “beautification;” varsity students call it “cleanliness.” The drive has reinforced an old elitism, the colonial reflex that associates cleanliness with class and order with exclusion. The “educated” once again stand clean by pushing the “uneducated” into the shadows. The logic is simple: any unsightly entity is dispensable. The drama occurring in the gated communities of elite housing societies, or the leafy areas of the tri-state region is repeated in the DU scenic-plex.

However, we expect more from our young leaders. We want them to come up with a creative and sustainable solution to the problem. How about an ideation competition? We can involve the alumni in initiating and funding a competition that aims to find clean and inclusive solutions. The challenge lies in managing vending zones and waste collection points sustainably. DU can pilot a model of co-existence between livelihood and hygiene that city corporations can replicate in the future. These are the academia-industry linkages that ranking agencies promote. We do not achieve any perceptual change when we insist on beauty through brutality. We can enhance our reputation by not reproducing the world as it is but by crafting a prototype of the world as it could be.

DUCSU can think of a “Clean Campus, Kind Campus” project that highlights DU as the country’s urban conscience. In its current project, the legacy will not be the litter it removed but the humanity it overlooked. The campaign can still change its lens by making it not about eviction but inclusion. Let our students work in collaboration with the university and city authorities to map vending spaces that don’t block walkways. Let business students come up with start-ups and microcredit models for campus vendors and on-campus jobs for students living under the poverty line. Let voluntary clubs monitor waste management, and research clubs with real-time data for the policy interventions. Let DU’s next “clean-up” be intellectual, clearing away prejudices, not people.

What Bangladesh can learn from China’s influencer regulation



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APARAJITA DEBNATH

China has recently introduced a sweeping new regulation requiring social media influencers to hold formal qualifications—such as a university degree, professional licence, or recognised certification—before they offer advice on sensitive topics like health, finance, education, law, or medicine. The directive, issued by the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC), aims to protect users from harmful or misleading guidance, such as unverified health tips, unsafe skincare practices, financial “get-rich-quick” schemes, or legal advice from unqualified individuals.

Far from being viewed as an attack on free expression, the law is justified as a safeguard for public welfare in an era when online information spreads far faster than traditional guidance. The logic is that, without minimum standards, society risks exposure to “opinion bombs” from laypersons posing as professionals.

In countries like Bangladesh, where social media reach is vast and consumer awareness often limited, many unqualified individuals are offering advice on health, skincare, investment, legal rights, and mental wellness. This trend warrants serious scrutiny due to its potential impact on users. Common examples of influencer promotions include skin-whitening products, slimming teas or juices, and libido-enhancing oils or tablets. Without oversight or credentials, such advice can lead to harmful side effects, wasted money, and emotional distress. By distinguishing between mere opinion and expert advice, regulation

can protect the public while preserving freedom of expression.

China’s approach demonstrates that it is possible to impose restrictions for the greater good rather than resorting to blanket censorship. The intent is not to suppress free speech but to ensure accountability for those perceived as authorities in specialised domains.

Recent studies reveal that misinformation from unqualified Bangladeshi content creators poses a growing public health concern. Research on health misinformation in Bangladesh notes that most health-related posts originate from individuals with no medical background, yet 60.7 percent of surveyed users reported following online health tips. One alarming case involved a local vlogger promoting the use of Savlon disinfectant spray and a fogging machine on the body as a Covid precaution—an unsafe and scientifically baseless act. Such examples illustrate how unqualified advice can cause physical harm and delay access to proper medical care.

Beauty and skincare content is another domain rife with misinformation. Influencers frequently promote cosmetic products without understanding their safety or ingredients. A recent study by the Environment and Social Development Organisation (ESDO) found that 22 out of 26 skin-lightening creams available in Bangladesh contained mercury levels up to 24,800 times the legal limit. Marketed as “herbal” or “safe,” these products are often endorsed by influencers who lack

any dermatological expertise. Other investigations have revealed that many influencers unknowingly promote counterfeit cosmetics, exposing users to chemical burns, long-term skin damage, and toxic exposure. Brands typically hire influencers for their reach rather than credibility, replacing expert advice with popularity-driven marketing.

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Studies indicate that around 50 percent of Gen Z and millennial followers trust influencers to provide reliable advice about the products or services they promote. This places a moral responsibility on influencers to share honest opinions rather than sponsored endorsements. Yet, social media feeds are filled with personalities praising products as “the best in the market” without credible proof, perpetuating what scholars call a “trust economy.”

In 2023, a popular online shop owner known as Sabu was arrested following a complaint from a customer who developed a skin condition after using her “miracle soap.” Sabu frequently appeared on live streams, claiming her product would lighten skin tone and asserting it had been

tested and approved by the Bangladesh Standards and Testing Institution (BSTI)—claims that were later proven false. This case highlights how the absence of credential requirements enables influencers to masquerade as experts, sometimes with dangerous outcomes.

With millions of Bangladeshis relying on social media for health, beauty, financial, and lifestyle guidance, the stakes are high. Influencers today are not merely entertainers; they often shape decisions that affect physical health, mental well-being, and financial security. While China’s model may not be flawless, its underlying rationale remains sound.

Bangladesh already has a legal framework recognising expert opinion—Section 45 of The Evidence Act, 1872, which accepts expertise only from individuals with demonstrable training, experience, or specialised knowledge in a relevant field such as law, science, or art. Courts are empowered to reject opinions from unqualified individuals because ordinary people are unlikely to make accurate judgments in such matters. Extending this principle to the digital sphere would be both logical and beneficial.

If influencers wish to provide medical advice, promote chemical skincare products, or offer guidance on legal or financial matters, they should be held to similar evidentiary standards. Social media platforms could verify credentials, label expert content, and require disclaimers from non-experts. This would not curtail free expression, as individuals could still share personal experiences or opinions. The only change would be that claims presented as expert advice must meet the same legitimacy threshold already recognised by our justice system.

In an age when misinformation can be deadly, such a move would not constitute censorship; it would represent responsible governance in the public interest.