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FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

## Digital Bangladesh’s governance failures

### White paper unmasks corruption and patronage in ICT projects

The government-commissioned white paper on Bangladesh’s much-publicised journey towards “Digital Bangladesh” has delivered a sobering verdict. What was once marketed as a transformative national project has now been revealed—through the task force led by Professor M Niaz Asadullah—to be mired in systemic governance failures, entrenched corruption, and pervasive political capture. The conclusion drawn by the task force, after reviewing 52 ICT Division projects, should worry anyone concerned with the country’s development trajectory.

The white paper documents how political influence seeped into the very architecture of the previous Awami League government’s digital modernisation drive: at least 12 major projects and 65 components were named after political personalities or directly leveraged for partisan visibility. Flagship connectivity initiatives such as Info Sarker II and III devolved, in the report’s words, into “a textbook case of triple rent seeking.” The Bangladesh Hi-Tech Park Authority—tasked with fostering innovation and industrial diversification—fared no better. Instead of nurturing a technology ecosystem guided by demand and feasibility, the authority found itself redirected towards political pagantry and patronage. IT parks and training centres were launched not on the basis of market need, infrastructure readiness or the capacity to attract tenants, but on where they could deliver the most partisan mileage.

Irregularities revealed, includes: equipment priced at up to four times the global rate, cartel-like vendor networks, manipulated tenders, weakened state control over critical infrastructure, and an unhealthy reliance on private monopolies in connectivity projects. To shield themselves from scrutiny, some project authorities allegedly adopted “dual governance” models that enabled donor-affiliated consultants to influence procurement and programme design. Even education-focused initiatives such as the Sheikh Russel Digital Lab (SRDL) and School of Future were found to be non-functional. Meanwhile, the Digital Sylhet City Project has been one of the starkest examples of politicised failure. Conceived as an urban connectivity solution, it collapsed under the weight of patronage politics. Wi-Fi coverage reached less than five percent of targeted beneficiaries, and no agency accepted responsibility for its operations. These failures represent more than just wasted public funds—they constitute a profound lost opportunity for young Bangladeshis as the world accelerates into an era defined by digital capability.

Reviewing one of the most celebrated projects of the previous regime is a necessary step towards understanding how the absence of democratic accountability erodes public institutions and drains scarce national resources. It shows that patron-client politics does not simply distort priorities; it often cripples entire governance mechanisms. The interim government must take the task force’s recommendations seriously. And political leaders—whether in office or aspiring to be—would do well to absorb the lesson at the heart of this white paper: without transparency, oversight, and genuine accountability, no grand vision, however dazzling in rhetoric, can deliver the transformation it promises.

## Stop industrial waste from ruining our farmlands

### Unregulated wastes are contaminating crops in Savar and Dhamrai

A recent Prothom Alo report on farmlands in Savar and Dhamrai upazillas offers a stark picture of how unplanned industrial expansion is erasing agricultural land and the livelihoods built on it. Farmers who once harvested enough paddy to sustain their families now stand in fields submerged in foul-smelling industrial wastewater. Fertile land has turned into black, stagnant marshes where paddy cannot take root, and where even standing barefoot brings skin infections. Test results, jointly analysed by Prothom Alo and Jahangirnagar University laboratories, reveal excessive phosphate, nitrate, ammonia and dangerous levels of heavy metals in water and soil. This contamination is near-lethal for aquatic life and deeply harmful for crops.

Industrial pollution has spread across Dautia and Jaipura mouzas of Dhamrai and areas of Koltashuti mouza in Savar. Drainage canals have been filled or encroached upon, factory effluents are channelled into low-lying plots, and persistent waterlogging has rendered hundreds of acres uncultivable. Farmland in Dhamrai has shrunk by more than a thousand hectares in less than a decade, while Savar has lost more than double that. During the same period, the number of factories in these two upazilas increased from 1,094 to 1,832. Heavy metals from tanneries, dyeing units, pharmaceutical factories and ceramic industries—chromium, cadmium, nickel and lead—have seeped into soil, rivers and crops. Studies on the Turag and Bangshi rivers confirm concentrations beyond World Health Organization (WHO) limits. The results are visible in declining yields, empty rice grains, altered crop quality and a growing fear among farmers that their land is being poisoned into permanent uselessness.

Factory owners have long been allowed to flout environmental regulations, often without installing effluent treatment plants. Local administrations act only after complaints, rarely through preventive monitoring. Farmers say that when canals are filled illegally or wastewater is diverted into fields, those responsible face no meaningful consequences. Smallholders are now being forced to sell ancestral land at throwaway prices to the very industries causing the damage.

The crisis demands decisive political will. Factories discharging untreated waste must face immediate punitive action, including shutdowns for non-compliance and the cancellation of licences. Drainage canals must be restored and protected from future encroachment. Coordinated monitoring of water and soil—across both dry and monsoon seasons—should be mandatory, along with public reporting to ensure transparency. Finally, the government must enforce land-use laws and expedite agricultural land protection legislation. Unless action is taken now, more farmers will be pushed out of agriculture, and the country risks losing vital food-producing land to reckless industrialisation.

# The primary teachers’ strike is a mirror held up to Bangladesh



BLOWIN’ IN THE WIND

Dr Shamsad Mortuza  
is professor of English at Dhaka University.

SHAMSAD MORTUZA

A primary school teacher on strike was seen bleeding profusely from the wounds inflicted by the agitated guardians who blamed him and his colleagues for turning their wards into hostages to push for better pay and benefit. There was a lot to unpack from the image. As I scrolled down to the comment section, there was no sympathy for the striking teacher or protest against the violence. “Good, he deserves it!” reads one comment. What does such a reaction say about where our sympathies lie as well as how our institutions fail? This crisis over primary school exams operates across four interlocking axes: ethical, financial, moral, and political. And none, it seems, can be solved in isolation.

The teachers have the legal right to indulge in civic protest. But is it ethical to do so by compromising their primary duty towards their students? Additionally, what about the children’s rights to education enshrined in the Unesco mandate? Adults’ financial concerns should not infringe on the basic rights of children, who are right-bearing entities. The cry for a raise is not unique to the teachers: inflation and household costs have hit every sector. Then again, is it moral to use exams as bargaining chips with children as the currency? Is it ethical to betray the guardians who have entrusted their children, hoping the teachers will ensure their education? The guardians feel the added pressure that the disruption caused by the teachers will create a session lag costing more both in terms of time and money. Conversely, the striking teachers can well argue that their demands are far from sudden. They have voiced their resentment over pay grade anomalies, promotion bottlenecks, and perceived humiliation relative to other cadres in different forums and formats. Regular political dialogues have failed, and the failure of preventive governance has now pushed the teachers towards last-minute brinkmanship around exams. So, it is necessary to reflect on the issues that gave rise to the current situation.

The assistant teachers of 65,000-plus government primary schools

have been pressing for a three-point demand. They want to upgrade their pay scale (from grade 13 to grade 10/11), resolve higher-grade benefits after 10 and 16 years of service, and ensure 100 percent departmental promotion from assistant to head teacher. The protest intensified in November with a call for the complete shutdown and boycott of the annual exams starting December 1. As a result, many schools failed to hold exams. In some cases, the headmaster, with assistance from guardians, held or invigilated the



FILE PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

In the long run, we must develop a contingency plan for dispute resolution so that classrooms aren’t used as bargaining arenas.

exams. The authorities served legal notices to absent teachers, issued transfer orders, and even threatened to take actions under criminal law. Social media is rife with images of heated arguments, scuffles, or symbolic acts (tearing up question papers, locking school gates, shouting matches with head teachers or local officials).

I wish the conflict was a mere sectoral wage dispute. It is a confrontation staged on the bodies and futures of children. The guardians and teachers are only addressing a small portion of the problem, while the teachers’ councils continue to battle the financial issue with the overburdened interim government.

have come to the scene, the patience of the government has withered away. And they responded, not with carrots, but with sticks. And some teachers lost their last vestige of prestige by grasping the feet of marauding police constables. The irony lies in the expectation of low-paid teachers to uphold the moral standards of those unaffected by pay rigidity.

Head teachers and local government officials intervened to provide a lifeline. Caught between ministry orders and teacher resentment, they allowed exams to continue, creating friction with both groups. The crisis also showed the urban/rural rift where the city-based guardians tend to react more assertively than the rural ones.

# Let’s uplift the women who build our city



Major Shajeda Akter Moni  
is deputy director at Research Centre of Bangladesh University of Professionals (BUP).

SHAJEDA AKTER MONI

Each morning, long before the city awakens, I envision the women who bear its bones—the bricks, the sand, the mortar—in their hands and upon their heads, walking into the dawn of Dhaka. They are the unseen architects of our skyline, yet so frequently overlooked in every discussion of the city’s future. Their faces are weary, their backs bear the load of society’s disregard. Yet they rise—sisters, mothers, daughters—constructing not merely buildings, but hope. How may Dhaka truly flourish without nurturing those who hold it up?

The difficulties these women endure are daunting. A whopping 78 percent toil under verbal agreements without contracts or protection, and nearly none enjoy proper sanitation, safety equipment, or maternity leave—according to researchers at South Asian Network on Economic Modelling (Sanem). Almost none of these workplaces have toilets, which forces women to endure unimaginable discomfort, jeopardising their physical well-being, and stripping them of dignity. Added to this, the sun burns them mercilessly, with no respite given even in the most sweltering heat.

Sorrow calls for action, not sympathy. It is within our power

to change their lives with tangible measures that are equal parts straightforward and humane.

Let us first formalise their work. Start by registering all women on construction sites, even under a rudimentary ID system. This acknowledgement is not symbolic: it opens doors to healthcare, accident compensation, decent wages, and access to labour protections. Bangladesh’s Industrial Policy promotes formalising the informal sector; this is the time to apply it to them.

Second, render worksites gender-responsive. Each site must have a hygienic toilet, shaded resting area, drinkable water, and private corners where women may take a breather. These are not indulgences; they are rights.

Third, offer heat relief and mobile health care. When the heat rises, cooling centres or shaded rest areas with first aid close to work sites can be lifesavers. Even simple water stations would be the difference between falling apart and continuing to construct our city.

Fourth, create childcare options. These women often juggle bricks and babies. Trusted, community-run

daycare centres near construction hubs can give them the peace of mind to work without guilt or distraction—and their children the security they deserve.

Fifth, we need to provide training and upward mobility skills. Most come into the industry as unskilled workers and thereby decreasing their bargaining potential and options.

**Dhaka cannot be built on bones that break. Let us not only recognise these women’s labour, but uplift it through dignity, safety, and opportunity. Encourage collaboration between city planners, health departments, labour ministries, and women’s wings to ensure their inclusion in every relief plan, design proposal, and training initiative.**

Classes could be conducted in evenings or on weekends by women trainers so that the women can earn while they learn.

Sixth, provide social protection and representation. Workers are threatened with eviction, irregular payment, and harassment. Their representation in labour unions must be strengthened and their voices heard in policymaking.

Seventh, change public perceptions through storytelling. Social stigma still surrounds women in male-

dominated spaces. Let’s make their presence normal through stories and media—a mother working for her child’s education, a daughter saving for tuition fees, a neighbour providing shade and water. These stories can create empathy and respect, not sympathy.

Eighth, utilise NGOs and microfinance networks. Institutions such as the Bangladesh Homeworkers Women Association (BHWa) have a long history of organising informal sector women workers. Collaboration with them can promote micro-credit schemes, health funds, and community savings groups—all based on trust and local accountability.

Ninth, it is necessary to integrate them into gender policy structures. Informal women construction workers must be included in all reports, strategies, and budgeting decisions.

Dhaka cannot be built on bones that break. Let us not only recognise these women’s labour, but uplift it through dignity, safety, and opportunity. Encourage collaboration between city planners, health departments, labour ministries, and women’s wings to ensure their inclusion in every relief plan, design proposal, and training initiative.

Such actions should not be categorised as acts of charity; rather, they represent investments. These investments result in more robust, healthier, and inclusive growth. When women construct Dhaka under equitable circumstances, they create not merely housing but also resilience. When they are recognised, safeguarded, and empowered, they serve as the cornerstone of our collective future.