

# The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

## Free press must have editorial autonomy

### State, media owners must help protect independent journalism

Journalism cannot act as a watchdog if a country's news media houses fail to establish strong editorial institutions that can resist financial and political pressure. This truth was again reiterated by speakers at a journalism conference in the capital on Friday. Unfortunately, for decades, Bangladesh's media houses have struggled with this core responsibility, often giving in to political, financial, and even societal pressure. A more recent threat, which throttles investigative reporting and even fact-based opinion, is mob violence—a phenomenon that this daily experienced first-hand last December.

Fear, partisanship, and subservience to the ruling party have long characterised Bangladesh's media landscape, particularly during Sheikh Hasina's regime. Any exposé of party leaders, security agencies, or private-sector actors that bolstered the regime's grip on power was met with measures ranging from legal harassment to enforced disappearance. Media houses either resorted to self-censorship or became the government's mouthpiece, not only exaggerating news but at times disseminating misinformation. This led to an erosion of trust in mainstream media, and many turned to social media newsfeeds that often spread misinformation and disinformation. Speaking at the conference, Zaffar Abbas, editor of Pakistan's *Dawn* newspaper, aptly summarised the danger of self-censorship: it is often more damaging than direct censorship because media outlets cannot publicly admit to it.

Sadly, the situation of self-censorship has not improved significantly after the fall of Sheikh Hasina's authoritarian regime. What is more, the recommendations of the Media Reform Commission formed by the interim government have remained unimplemented for more than a year. These recommendations not only aimed to secure the financial stability of the media but also proposed measures to ensure journalists' protection, accountability, and ethical practices within the industry. Financial stability is essential for journalism, as emphasised by Tauhidul Islam of Transparency International Bangladesh at the conference.

However, in this era of clickbait and constant news bombardment, the space for investigative journalism is also shrinking. Zaffar Abbas observed that the prioritisation of profit over investment in investigative journalism by media owners—not only in Bangladesh but also in India and Pakistan—would endanger the very existence of journalism. He described how such important stories are being washed away by a "flood of information and misinformation"—a new form of censorship that does not threaten or abduct journalists but kills the stories that can hold power to account.

A society that relies on unverified social media noise can expect nothing but chaos—benefiting only a small circle close to power. The rest of the population bears the cost in rising poverty, lawlessness, and violations of rights. Therefore, we urge the government to take note of the wisdom shared at the conference and help build a free press in Bangladesh by implementing the recommendations of the Media Reform Commission seriously. Media house owners must also recognise the true purpose of this industry and act accordingly to ensure its proper functioning. Without commitment from both actors, the Fourth Estate will exist in name only, rather than in practice.

## Khulna city needs its bus service back

### Residents shouldn't be left dependent on three-wheelers

We're concerned about the collapse of bus services in Khulna city that has been depriving its 18 lakh residents as well as visitors of an affordable public transport option. As per a report by this daily, the once-vibrant bus services that connected the divisional city with its outskirts and key neighbourhoods have disappeared over the years, leaving commuters dependent on the costlier and often unsafe three-wheelers, including CNG-run and battery-powered auto-rickshaws and easy bikes. This, understandably, has affected commuting, especially for students and low- and middle-income groups who must spend more on transport while remaining vulnerable to periodic fare hikes. In recent weeks, for example, fares have reportedly risen by up to 20 percent due to increases in fuel prices.

Our report cites residents and activists who lamented what the gradual disappearance of bus services has meant for the city. They recalled the time when Khulna had a widely used bus network that enabled people from different neighbourhoods and surrounding upazilas to travel affordably and efficiently. In the 1990s, more than 60 buses reportedly operated on various routes. As recently as 2005, around 50 buses were still running within the city. Things started to change rapidly after 2010, when CNG- and diesel-run three-wheelers hit the roads, and by 2017, the number of buses had dropped to just five before completely going off the roads in 2018.

Their total absence today has to do with the unchecked expansion and dominance of three-wheelers, combined with the failure of the relevant authorities to preserve or revive bus operations. There are allegations that bus operators often faced obstruction from transport groups at key city points, discouraging them from continuing services. Even an initiative by the BRTC that launched five double-deckers ended in failure; it had to take them off allegedly in the face of opposition from three-wheeler drivers' unions. Some local political leaders with close ties to these unions are reportedly resisting moves to relaunch bus services. Although, when contacted, the Khulna City Corporation administrator referred to plans to relaunch services, possibly through electric buses, it may be a while before residents can access such a service again.

We don't need to reiterate the importance of a structured public transport system in a city of this importance. It is vital that the authorities help revive the bus services without delay, regardless of any opposition from vested interest groups. Dedicated bus routes, strict regulation of all modes of transport and related groups, and protection against any unlawful obstruction are also essential. All this will also help improve traffic, which the city needs.

# Freight belongs on rail, but how to make it work in practice?



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In a previous article, I argued that Bangladesh must rethink its reliance on a road-based transport system along the Dhaka-Chattogram corridor and move towards a more energy-efficient model. This article builds on that discussion by focusing on how such a transition can be implemented in practice. The railway offers a promising solution, but for it to play a meaningful role, Bangladesh Railway must overcome various long-standing structural and institutional challenges. Without reform, even the best ideas will not deliver results. The answer, therefore, lies not in choosing rail in principle, but in making it work in practice. This requires a clear and practical roadmap.

Firstly, structural inefficiencies must be addressed. Bangladesh's railway system still uses a mix of metre gauge, broad gauge, and dual gauge lines. This creates delays and makes operations more complex. In many cases, cargo must be shifted from one system to another. For a busy corridor like Dhaka-Chattogram, this increases time and cost. A gradual plan to standardise the gauge—especially on major freight routes—can make train movement faster, smoother, and more reliable. This is a basic but foundational step.

Secondly, freight must be given priority. At present, the railway mainly focuses on passenger services. As a result, the railway has not been able to meet the growing demand for goods movement. There are not enough locomotives, wagons, or trained drivers to transport freight. Indeed, many freight trains depend on spare capacity from passenger services. This makes scheduling uncertain. If businesses cannot depend on rail, they will continue to use trucks. This is why investment in freight capacity is essential, so that the railway can become a reliable option for industries.

Thirdly, institutional reform is needed. Bangladesh Railway is run



FILE PHOTO: STAR

With a mix of private and state funding, Bangladesh could commit to a future of more efficient and cost-effective goods transport.

almost entirely by the government. While this ensures control, it also limits flexibility and investment opportunities. There is a strong case for allowing private participation in freight services under clear rules. This does not mean full privatisation, but private operators could run freight trains on selected routes while the government keeps oversight. This will invite investment, improve service quality, and increase efficiency.

Fourthly, infrastructure must be linked to logistical planning. Building railway lines alone is not enough; the system must include proper logistical facilities, especially inland container depots (ICD). ICDS near industrial areas—such as Narayanganj, Narsingdi,

Pubail, Gazipur, and northern regions like Nilphamari and Rangpur—can reduce long distance trucking. Today, many goods travel long distances by road before reaching the port. With ICDS, cargo can be collected near factories and then moved in bulk by rail.

Private investors have already expressed an interest in developing

Narayanganj-Chattogram chord line. This will reduce travel distance and time, while also bolstering capacity. At the same time, new economic hubs like Matarbari port and Mirsarai industrial zone should be connected by rail. Expanding rail links towards the northwest, including areas like Nilphamari, could also enhance regional development.

Transport is not just about moving goods. It is also about energy and cost. Every additional truck increases diesel use and import costs. Rail, by contrast, uses much less fuel and can reduce overall transport expenses. Financing this transition will require a practical approach. Large railway infrastructure will still have to rely on public funding and investment from development partners. But ICDS, rolling stock, and freight services can be definite opportunities for private investment.

A structured financing model will help reduce pressure on government resources. Public-private partnerships (PPP) can play a key role, especially in locations where demand is emerging for alternative modes of transport for goods. In areas such as Nilphamari and Rangpur, private investors could bear the initial risk in developing rail-based logistics facilities. At the same time, the PPP Authority can support these projects through viability gap funding, making them financially viable while attracting investors. This approach will allow the government to support development without carrying the full financial burden.

Around the world, countries are linking transport planning with their energy and economic strategies. India is investing in dedicated freight corridors. China is strengthening rail links between ports and industries. Europe continues to rely on rail for efficient and low-emission logistics. Bangladesh can and should move in the same direction. The country has already shown that it can execute large infrastructure projects. The next step is to make those investments smarter. The choice is not between road and rail. Both are needed. Roads will remain important for short distances. But without a strong rail system, the overall network will remain costly and fuel-intensive.

Building a modern railway system will take time, of course. But with the right planning, investment, and reform, it can form a key part of Bangladesh's economic future.

# Credit isn't enough – farmers need assets to build income



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Bangladesh has built a considerable rural credit system. Each year, tens of thousands of crores are supplied to the countryside. But too little of this money becomes machinery, storage, irrigation, livestock, processing capacity, or producer-owned assets. The result is a rural economy that borrows repeatedly without accumulating enough to grow. On paper, the stagnation makes little sense. Disbursement targets are routinely met and national financial inclusion metrics appear strong. Agricultural credit targets continue to expand. New policy instruments are being introduced to deepen farmers' access to finance and machinery. The system moves more capital into the rural economy than it has at any point before. But the question remains as to whether this credit builds anything that lasts.

Agriculture still contributes some 11 percent to our GDP and supports a large share of livelihoods. Its weakness affects through employment, consumption, food prices, rural demand, and banking sector exposure. Its upside will also travel through the same channels. Better rural finance can turn agriculture into a stronger source of income, demand, and resilience.

Decades ago, microloans were a necessary innovation. They proved that the rural poor were bankable. As opposed to formal banking, these loans provided liquidity. But the rural economy still hasn't moved far from that model. In 2024, Microcredit Regulatory Authority-licensed

microfinance institutions (MFIs) disbursed more than Tk 263,000 crore across all loan categories. Scheduled banks disbursed Tk 37,154 crore under targeted agricultural and rural credit. The figures are not identical categories, yet they show where rural financial delivery capacity now sits. Commercial banks often lack the infrastructure to underwrite rural risk directly. Many meet central bank-mandated agricultural targets by channelling bulk capital through MFIs.

By the time outsourced capital reaches the farmer, it carries additional intermediation costs, meaning that subsidised credit reaches the final borrower at a much higher price than the headline policy rate suggests. The subsidy is priced out before it reaches the farm. Bangladesh Bank has recognised this cost shifting and recently mandated that banks disburse at least half of their agricultural targets through their own networks, which should force the development of genuine last-mile infrastructure. But the conventional banking behemoth will likely move slowly.

The dominant microfinance model is better at stabilising consumption than financing capital formation. Small, high-frequency loans do not suit the purchase of machinery, storage, irrigation, and processing capacity. These assets still depend on subsidy, informal capital, or external ownership. Microcredit once promised a bridge to commercial banking. However, it now keeps rural borrowers inside a narrow loop of liquidity and repayment.

Formal banks also misread the rural economy when they lend directly. Finance runs on monthly calendars, while agriculture runs on cycles of planting, growth, harvest, storage, and sale. Rural lending needs to be backed by knowledge about crops, seasons, markets, and communities. It cannot rely only on conventional customer files.

In Panjor Bhangra, a flood-prone community in northern Bangladesh, a woman named Renu Bala helped build a women's milk cooperative around a simple ambition: buy better cattle, produce more milk, and earn a more stable income. But they did not have the collateral. At a training programme, she learned about a credit policy for small dairy businesses offering lower interest rates and longer repayment periods. She still had to go from bank to bank before one agreed to lend to her. With that loan, the cooperative bought Friesian cows. Production rose, the loan was repaid, and the group expanded.

The lesson is not that credit solved everything, but that the right kind of credit allowed income to form around an asset.

Nearly half of our national agricultural lending is absorbed by seasonal crop loans used for seeds, fertiliser, and diesel. These loans keep production moving but they rarely build the asset base that can help raise productivity over time. Instead, the harvest comes in, the debt is cleared, and the farmer starts again from zero. The problem does not end at credit. Farmers work through the season to keep crops alive, then often lose pricing power after harvest. Without local storage, many sell immediately when prices are at their weakest. Intermediaries capture margins that should remain with producers. After all, a farmer who cannot hold produce cannot negotiate value.

The financing inequity is also geographic. Rural Bangladesh

operates as a net exporter of capital. The banking system moves savings out of the countryside more easily than it supports local asset formation. Rural deposits move towards the city while rural proposals for harvesters, storage, irrigation, and processing face rejection. Therefore, our core metric of success must shift from credit volume to the creation of productive rural assets.

Ownership matters as much as access. Too often, financed agricultural assets belong to absentee landlords or urban investors. Meanwhile, credit follows land titles and production remains under-credited. The farmer operates the economy without owning the asset base that allows the economy to grow. To correct this, we need finance that creates assets and allows producers to own them.

The tools already exist. Digital transaction histories can support credit assessment where land records are weak. Warehouse receipts can turn stored produce into collateral and help farmers wait for better prices. Equipment leasing and shared ownership models can make machinery accessible without unsuitable debt burdens. District level lending discipline can ensure that rural deposits return as meaningful local commercial credit.

Renu Bala's case shows the difference between credit that passes through a village and credit that stays there as capital. The cooperative did not need another short loan to manage scarcity. It needed finance that was patient enough to buy an income-generating asset and wait for that asset to generate earnings.

The first phase of financial inclusion gave rural Bangladesh access to the system. The next phase must help rural producers build and own assets that generate income. Without this shift, rural growth will remain visible in credit data but absent from lived realities.