MY DHAKA

Facebook's theatre of sophistication

RBR

It was one of those easy evenings: my friend and I sprawled on the bed, gossiping in that unhurried way only comfort allows. A plate of forbidden carbs -- puffy hot daalpuri -- sat between us, her frothy instant coffee churned by a battery whisk, my plain tea steaming quietly.

Between laughter and crumbs, the talk turned to Facebook. We agreed it has become a stage for sophistication, a theatre of fictional reality where rain-soaked coffee cups, designer outfits, choreographed selfies, and borrowed lines from Márquez or Arundhuti Roy serve as props. Likes and comments are applause. I've seen poor boyfriends toil through a hundred takes to capture the perfect pout, never quite satisfying their girlfriends.

We, with our strong personalities and playful streak of meanness, concluded that sophistication online is performance, not reality. So I decided to play along with Dhaka's Facebook crowd, staging a shoot with my friend -- no connoisseur of high fashion, trust me, she wears her trademark Bata flip-flops on the Alps. She has opinions on everything, from basil in salads to

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seating arrangements at decorated tables, and she is a Facebook fighter, a genre of activism that deserves its own story.

I, meanwhile, am an avid follower of fashion journalism, needing the latest Vogue edition with Anna Wintour and Meryl Streep. As our conversation reached a crescendo, bemused by the superficiality of it all, I insisted she sit for a spur-of-the-moment shoot. It became a layered vignette: her cynical take on Facebook's show-off culture against my framing of it as her "Frida Kahlo, Márquez, or Arundhuti Roy moment," rain tapping the window, frothy coffee in hand, ghosts of icons hovering in the margins.

For a fleeting second, she belonged to that glossy world she neither knew nor cared for. Yet reality tugged at the edges -- she is, after all, a flip-flop devotee of action-romance thrillers, more at home in car chases and cinematic embraces than couture salons. The irony amused me: in my world, Anna Wintour and she make perfect sense as symbols of the superficiality we promote online, while in reality our bare feet tucked under pillows and daalpuri grease on our fingers told the truer story.

Outside the feed, life is lived with ease and humour, not hashtags or filters. But on Facebook, sophistication has become the perfectly staged selfie, the curated projection of intellect and taste. Visibility and validation -- likes, comments, shares -- become social currency. The more glamorous the post, the more admiration it attracts, and this cycle of exaggeration slips into narcissism.

Narcissism here is not just vanity -- it is structural. Seeing others perform sophistication pushes us to elevate our own image, creating a loop of competition and performance. Facebook has become less a space for connection and more a mirror that magnifies narcissism. Offline, culture is comfort and humour; online, it is spectacle stitched together for validation. The contrast is stark: one is a show designed for admiration, the other the rhythm of survival and authenticity.

HARASSMENT OF ZAHED

India comments but gives no explanation

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

Days after the harassment of PM's Adviser Zahed Ur Rahman at New Delhi airport, India has finally spoken about the incident, in which he had to wait for two hours, but it did not elaborate on the matter.

Randhir Jaiswal, spokesperson for India's external affairs ministry, said Zahed reached the airport on a private passport with a Saarc visa to attend the senior officials meeting of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA).

"He was queried by immigration officials at the airport and subsequently permitted entry after reconfirming that the purpose of the visit was to attend the multilateral meeting.

"He, however, chose to return to Dhaka on his own volition," Jaiswal told journalists at a media briefing at the ministry in New Delhi yesterday.

He did not elaborate on why Zahed was made to wait there for two hours though Bangladesh's foreign ministry had sent a diplomatic note on Zahed's visit to India.

After the incident at a press conference in Dhaka on June 16, Zahed, policy and strategy affairs adviser of Prime Minister Tarique Rahman, said that he had travelled to India to attend the IORA's senior officials meeting scheduled for June 15-16 in New Delhi. India's external affairs ministry organised the event.

The adviser said he decided to return from the Delhi airport as an immediate protest against the treatment he received at the hands of Indian immigration authorities.

He said he was made to sit there for around two hours and then he was permitted entry.

"I did not go there as an individual but as a representative of the government. Therefore, what happened to me required an instant protest. That is why I decided to return."

He then took a flight from Delhi to Colombo and returned home the next day.

Zahed stressed that his decision was not intended to create a retaliatory or hostile situation.

Asked why he did not use a diplomatic passport, the adviser said he was carrying a Saarc visa, which also has diplomatic significance. "I don't think this is a passport issue. A diplomatic passport is a privilege, not a requirement."

Debt servicing burden to nearly double

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interest payments are projected at Tk 40,300 crore, equivalent to around $3.3 billion at the prevailing exchange rate.

For the current fiscal year, the revised debt servicing estimate stands at $4.94 billion. It is projected to rise to $5.62 billion in the upcoming fiscal year.

Of the $4.11 billion actual debt servicing costs in FY2024-25, $2.61 billion was principal repayments.

Zahid Hussain, former lead economist at the World Bank's Dhaka office, said the rise is inevitable as debt stocks expand.

"The arithmetic is simple: if the debt stock rises, its servicing cost will also rise," he said.

According to finance ministry data, Bangladesh's foreign debt stock is projected to increase to $123 billion by FY2028-29 from $87 billion at the end of the last fiscal year and $51 billion in FY2020-21.

Zahid identified three major reasons behind the higher servicing burden: rapid debt accumulation following the Covid-19 pandemic, shorter repayment periods than in the past, and rising interest rates.

He also pointed to the repayment structure of World Bank loans, under which borrowers repay 1 percent interest annually during the first 10 years, 2 percent in the next decade, and progressively higher amounts thereafter. As older loans enter later repayment phases, annual obligations rise.

A stronger US dollar is adding further pressure, he said.

Repayment schedules for large bilateral loans are also becoming due.

Annual repayments for the Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant loan are expected to require around $600 million, while repayment of Russia's $12 billion loan for the project will begin in September 2028.

Chinese loans also require faster repayments due to shorter grace periods and maturities.

According to an Economic Relations Division (ERD) report, Bangladesh borrowed about $9 billion from China under a package until June, of which around $500 million has already been repaid, excluding interest. The interest rate is 2 percent, the grace period is only five years, and the repayment period is 15 years.

Since Covid, Bangladesh has increasingly relied on budget support loans, which begin accruing interest immediately after disbursement. The IMF loans carry comparatively lower interest rates but shorter repayment periods of 10 to 12 years.

Zahid warned that rising repayments pose two broader challenges. Firstly, debt obligations must be met in foreign currency, making repayments costlier as the taka weakens, and they place additional pressure on the budget and balance of payments.

Secondly, although foreign borrowing remains cheaper than domestic borrowing, financing higher foreign currency demand could strain other sectors if fresh external financing on favourable terms becomes harder to secure.

The Finance Division echoed these concerns in its policy statement.

It noted that taka depreciation significantly raises the local currency cost of external debt servicing, as more taka is required to repay the same amount of foreign currency.

Still, the government expects repayments to remain within manageable limits through diversified financing sources and stronger foreign exchange reserves.

The statement noted that Bangladesh's external debt portfolio remains concentrated in three major currencies -- US dollar, Special Drawing Rights (SDR) and Japanese yen -- which together accounted for about 91 percent of total external debt as of June 30, 2025.

SDRs are IMF-created reserve asset, valued against a basket of major currencies, that countries can exchange for usable foreign currency to boost their reserves.

USD and SDR-denominated debt represented 71 percent of Bangladesh's debt portfolio. SDR exposure also indicates continued access to concessional financing from institutions such as the IMF and World Bank.

Japanese yen accounted for 20 percent of the portfolio, largely linked to long-term concessional project financing, while euro and Chinese yuan represented 5 percent and 3 percent respectively.

The ministry warned that heavy exposure to dollar-denominated debt leaves Bangladesh vulnerable to exchange rate fluctuations and global financial conditions.

To reduce such risks, Bangladesh plans to explore financial instruments to hedge against adverse currency movements.

The policy statement projected that public debt would remain broadly stable over the medium term, reaching 38.9 percent of GDP by end-FY29.

However, the financing landscape is expected to become more challenging.

As Bangladesh graduates from least developed country (LDC) status, access to grants and highly concessional financing, characterised by low interest rates, long maturities, and extended grace periods, is expected to decline.

That transition will likely increase reliance on costlier commercial and non-concessional borrowing, raising debt servicing obligations.

Bangladesh missing out on China

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According to Bangladesh Bank data, Bangladesh imported goods worth $18.19 billion from China in FY2024–25, accounting for around 27 percent of the country's total import bill, up from $16.63 billion in FY2023–24.

Quarterly imports reached $4.64 billion in July–September 2025 and $4.58 billion in October–December.

Bangladesh and China are also discussing a possible free trade agreement (FTA) to deepen trade and investment ties. A joint feasibility study has already been completed, although formal negotiations remain at an early stage.

However, Dhaka may move cautiously, as import duties on Chinese goods generate significant government revenue.

China also remains strategically important as Bangladesh explores pathways to join the China-led Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).

Chinese investment has already gained a substantial foothold in Bangladesh.

According to the Chinese Enterprises Association in Bangladesh, nearly 2,000 Chinese companies are operating in the country with investment totalling around $3 billion, particularly in the garment sector.

'IMPOSSIBLE TO OVERTAKE'

Mohammed Amirul Haque, chairman of Seacom Group and president of the Chittagong Chamber of Commerce and Industry (CCCI), said replacing China as Bangladesh's main source of industrial inputs is virtually impossible.

"China remains Bangladesh's preferred sourcing destination because of competitiveness, pricing, supply chains, logistics and shorter lead times," he said. Most industrial machinery used in Bangladesh is imported from China for those reasons.

Amirul added that maintenance costs are also significantly lower. Chinese technicians can be hired for machinery repairs at around $60 to $100 per day, while technicians from Europe and the US may cost $600 to $800 per day, excluding accommodation expenses.

Mohd Khorshed Alam, president of the Bangladesh-China Chamber of Commerce and Industry (BCCCI), said reducing dependence on China would also be difficult because of pricing advantages.

Importers can source Chinese goods at prices around 28 percent lower than alternative suppliers, he said.

CHINESE PARTICIPATION VITAL

Mohammad Abdur Razzaque, chairman of Research and Policy Integration for Development (RAPID), said Bangladesh's weak export performance in China shows that duty-free access alone cannot create demand.

"We simply do not yet produce enough of the goods that Chinese consumers and firms want to buy," he said.

Given China's dominance in apparel manufacturing, Bangladesh has limited room to expand exports through its traditional basket, he added.

Razzaque argued that the bigger challenge is commercial.

Without integration into Chinese retail networks, distribution channels and sourcing systems, Bangladeshi products will struggle to gain meaningful access to the Chinese market.

"What we need is a new model based on Chinese joint ventures with Bangladeshi entrepreneurs producing specifically for the Chinese market," he said.

Such partnerships could bring market knowledge, product design, technology, branding and direct links to retailers.

"The tariff door is open, but we still need the products and commercial connections to walk through it."

Razzaque said an FTA with China could still be useful, especially after Bangladesh graduates from least-developed-country status.

Since China already grants duty-free access, the value of an agreement would lie more in securing long-term preferential treatment, attracting Chinese investment and reducing regulatory and non-tariff barriers.

But Bangladesh must proceed carefully.

"China is the world's most efficient manufacturing powerhouse with enormous supply-side capacity. A poorly designed FTA could place significant pressure on domestic industries and reduce government revenue," he said.

He urged Bangladesh to adopt a China-specific export strategy by identifying 20–30 promising products and supporting firms through certification, packaging, product adaptation and stronger commercial representation in major Chinese cities.

Bangladeshi exporters also need direct connections with Chinese importers, retailers, supermarkets and digital platforms.

"Chinese participation will be critical because without their investment, market knowledge and distribution networks, it will be difficult to generate a meaningful export response from Bangladesh."

Razzaque said Bangladesh should move beyond seeking isolated Chinese projects and instead focus on investment-led production clusters.

Special economic zones could play a central role, particularly if investment brings technology, managerial expertise and access to international markets rather than serving only domestic demand.

Promising sectors include export-oriented electronics and components, renewable-energy equipment, technical textiles including man-made fibres, agro-processing and light engineering.

He added that Bangladesh must improve its investment climate through reliable energy supply, serviced industrial land, faster customs clearance, predictable taxation, transparent profit repatriation procedures, effective one-stop services and digitised regulatory approvals.

Question over Neymar playing remains

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In recent times, Neymar's case has been driven less by logic and more by emotion and nostalgia for what the playmaker once produced at his peak. He remains arguably the only player left in the Brazil squad who still carries the kind of Samba flair and improvisational brilliance associated with the sides that lifted a record five World Cups.

The 34-year-old's possible return in the famous yellow and blue jersey has naturally sparked huge interest, becoming one of the main talking points ahead of the Scotland clash. Still, there are several factors that Ancelotti must weigh carefully, all of which could shape his approach.

The first decision is whether Neymar should start against Scotland or be introduced as a substitute.

In the most likely scenario, the latter appears more realistic for a player who has not featured in national colours since suffering a knee injury in a World Cup qualifier against Uruguay in October 2023.

Since then, Neymar has been sidelined for more than 650 days through a series of injuries across spells in Saudi Arabia and Brazil, where he returned to boyhood club Santos last year in an attempt to revive his career.

However, further setbacks -- including a calf injury sustained around five weeks ago -- along with ongoing debate over whether he still fits the demands of modern elite football, have disrupted the rhythm of the former Barcelona and PSG star.

There is no denying that Neymar has been out of the elite football for some time. This year, he has recorded six goals and four assists in 15 appearances for Santos, while being carefully managed and never playing more than four consecutive matches since returning from knee surgery in February.

After warming the bench in Brazil's disappointing 1-1 draw against Morocco in the opener, Neymar did not travel with the squad for their 3-0 win over Haiti in the second group match.

Even so, Neymar is expected to feature at some point in North America, whether it is against Scotland or later in the knockout stages -- which Brazil have all but secured qualification for, and can confirm top spot in the group with a win in this game.

Ancelotti now faces the delicate task of easing an injury-prone star back into international football. The Italian must carefully weigh the best way to reintegrate Neymar -- likely starting with a brief cameo against Scotland before considering him for the more demanding knockout rounds -- all while ensuring the approach aligns with Brazil's wider goal of ending a 24-year World Cup title drought.

His teammates, however, believe he is ready.

"He's performing at a very high level, and you could see the intensity in today's training session. You could see how keen he is to be with us, and his quality is unquestionable," Gabriel Martinelli said at a press conference on Monday.

"Whether he'll play or not is a question for the manager, but I think he's in great shape."

Neymar being in "great shape" will naturally lift hope and excitement among Brazil fans, but the final decision rests with Ancelotti -- who must consider the bigger picture before making his call.

While the prospect of seeing Brazil's all-time top scorer on the pitch is tempting -- especially against Scotland, a team he scored twice against on just his third international appearance when Brazil last met them in a friendly in 2011 -- it is a decision that cannot be rushed. For a team chasing glory in a long and demanding tournament, patience may prove just as valuable as inspiration.

Record-breaker CR7 helps Portugal down Uzbekistan

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disappointing 1-1 draw with the Democratic Republic of Congo to start Portugal's World Cup title bid.

But when he did have two chances he missed the target, igniting calls for coach Roberto Martinez to drop him.

His travails in front of goal were in glaring contrast to the likes of Messi, Kylian Mbappe, Erling Haaland and Harry Kane, who all made lightning starts to the World Cup.

But Martinez has stuck defiantly by his skipper, who was given a rapturous reception when he came out to warm up at Houston Stadium, and again each time he appeared on the big screens.

Ronaldo nearly pounced after just three minutes, narrowly failing to make contact at the far post after a cross by Mendes. Ronaldo slapped the turf in frustration.

He did not have to wait long for his goal, swivelling on the six-yard box to meet a cross first time from Joao Cancelo and smash the ball beyond goalkeeper Abduvohid Nematov.

The outclassed Uzbeks, coached by the Italian 2006 World Cup winner Fabio Cannavaro, were perfect opponents for Ronaldo to rediscover his scoring boots.

It was 2-0 on 17 minutes when Mendes curled in a free-kick.

The Uzbeks thought they had pulled one back, after a screamer by Azizjon Ganiev, but the goal was ruled out after a VAR intervention for a foul on Cancelo.

It was Ronaldo's day, and he rolled in a third with only the goalkeeper to beat with a smart, controlled finish.

He might have had a third following an intricate freekick routine, but Nematov denied him, clattering into the veteran attacker in the process.

From the resulting corner it was 4-0, with Ronaldo in the thick of it again before the ball went in off Nematov for an own goal.

Substitute Rafael Leao scored an emphatic fifth in the 87th minute.

Before this, the evidence against Ronaldo was beginning to stack up.

In the previous 10 games at major competitions (World Cup and Euros) before the Uzbekistan match, he had zero goals and one assist.

He did though have a successful season with Al Nassr in Saudi Arabia, scoring 28 goals in 30 league games.

Portugal's final group match is on Saturday against Colombia, who beat the Uzbeks 3-1.

Colombia meet DR Congo later Tuesday in Group K knowing a win will propel them into the last 32.