

Don't let Shastho Batayan wither away

Govt must clear dues, grant a realistic extension to ensure service continuity

Governments in developing economies routinely contract private vendors to deliver public services—a pragmatic response to capacity gaps in the state apparatus. As the unravelling of Bangladesh's national teleconsultation service, Shastho Batayan, demonstrates, these arrangements are only as robust as the state's willingness to manage them: to pay on time, renew contracts before they lapse, and treat a private operator running an essential service as a partner with obligations on both sides.

Since its launch in 2015, the 16263 health hotline has been a triumph of public policy. By providing free, round-the-clock medical advice, the service has handled 2.72 crore calls until June 24 this year, emerging as a lifeline for rural and underserved populations. During the Covid pandemic alone, it fielded about 1.1 crore calls, keeping minor cases out of overwhelmed hospitals. It represents precisely the kind of scalable, low-cost digital intervention that resource-constrained nations desperately need. Today, however, this vital service is facing sheer bureaucratic inertia. The service's private operator, SynesisIT, has not been paid by the state for 22 months, resulting in arrears of roughly Tk 14 crore. Forced to rely on bank loans to meet payroll, the provider has predictably slashed its workforce by half. A hotline that managed up to 6,000 inquiries a day is now leaving many vulnerable citizens unanswered.

The roots of this crisis lie in a funding structure that was always fragile. Shastho Batayan operated under a sector-wide health programme whose tenure expired in June 2024. The interim government's decision to scrap the proposed successor programme in March 2025 created a funding vacuum—one that nobody moved quickly enough to fill. Meanwhile, the operator's contract expired in April, and a proposed short-term extension has since been languishing on the health minister's desk. Compounding the problem, the Directorate General of Health Services has proposed a mere six-month extension, completely ignoring the reality that public tendering for a replacement contract routinely takes up to 10 months. Then again, approving the extension today would not solve the problem; it would merely defer it. Two months have already been lost, leaving barely four months of operation before the same crisis resurfaces.

This is nothing more than a governance failure with direct costs: patients going unadvised, a private operator pushed to the edge of insolvency, and a proven public health service operating at half its capacity only because papers were left unsigned. Forcing a private contractor to absorb the state's financial obligations undermines collaborative services. The government should not shun private partners who are working on vital health projects. The cost of running a telehealth call centre is a fraction of the financial burden incurred when citizens, denied timely medical advice, eventually arrive at overcrowded and heavily subsidised state hospitals. The authorities must act with the urgency this crisis warrants. The health ministry must clear the outstanding arrears and grant a realistic extension to the current operator to ensure continuity of care while a new tender is processed. A service reaching millions of users should not be allowed to drift into contractual limbo.

Digital protection of data must improve

EC's broad dissemination of voter details was callous

Increasingly, it seems that citizens' personal data is the least safe with our own government. As per a recent investigation by fact-checking initiative Dismislab, the final voter list of the 13th parliamentary election is being sold on Facebook and Telegram for prices ranging between Tk 30 and Tk 250. This database reportedly contains voters' names, voter numbers, parents' names, dates of birth, occupations, and permanent addresses. Ahead of the February election, the Election Commission (EC) had published a final voter list, which was distributed among nominated candidates "for electoral purposes." Now, these lists of voters' personal information are being sold online, disaggregated by constituencies—although one may also purchase the national voter list at once. What is baffling is that, beyond Facebook groups and pages, the lists are also being promoted for sale via paid advertisements on the platform.

Unfortunately, personal data breaches have now become a regular occurrence in Bangladesh. Late last year, personal data—including NID cards, passports, marriage certificates, educational records, trade licences, and business contracts—of at least 1,100 citizens was reportedly leaked on a fake e-Apostille platform posing as a government service website. Only a few months ago, a technical flaw in an EC portal temporarily exposed the personal information of at least 14,000 journalists who had applied for accreditation cards ahead of the election. This raises several questions. What measures, if any, do authorities take to protect citizens' data that they are entrusted with; and do they realise the scale of the impact of such leaks?

Time and again, our cybersecurity laws have been amended and replaced, mostly with a political motive and often lacking stakeholders' consultation. Given the prevalence of data leaks and the sensitivity of the information exposed, such consultations should be made mandatory. The government must also be cognisant of the seriousness of this issue.

Over the last decade and more, there has been a push to digitise every government service, perhaps in an effort to appear advanced. But the issue was and still is the lack of adequate digital protection frameworks and infrastructure to complement these advances. We would urge the government to acknowledge that Bangladesh's digital security mechanisms are dangerously flawed and to work with experts in law, technology, and human rights to ensure that citizens' safety and dignity are not allowed to be handled so callously by authorities themselves.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

United Nations Charter signed

On this day in 1945, the United Nations Charter was signed by 50 nations in San Francisco.

What lies behind the Jamaat chief's 'civil war' remark?



WINKERS AWEIGH!

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It is customary for politicians to campaign against the other side: the opposition speaks against the government and the government against the opposition. It is not unusual for the opposition to wage strong campaigns against the government either. After all, the ultimate goal of any party is to highlight the shortcomings of the ruling party and win the next election. So, it is quite understandable that the incumbent leader of the opposition rails against the government in his public speeches. But when he says, as he did early this week, that they had accepted the February 12 election results just to keep a civil war from breaking out, it sits uncomfortably beyond the normal line of political rhetoric.

It means that Shafiqur Rahman, the chief of Jamaat-e-Islami, is hinting at something far more dangerous than just a political campaign. But before even getting there, one should perhaps first examine what is manifestly implied by the statement, "We don't want disorder in the country. We love the country. With immense pain in our hearts, we accepted the election results. But let no one think that we accepted them out of fear; we did so to prevent the country from descending into a civil war."

Here, the Jamaat leader is all but alleging that the election was rigged or, at least, that there were widespread irregularities. That is a rather curious suggestion to make more than four months after the national polls that were, by and large, acknowledged as peaceful, fair and participatory. Granted, Jamaat had sought a recount in 32 constituencies where they believed narrow defeats were the result of counting errors. However, that only came after the gazette was published and, notably, the party had not registered their complaint at the polling centres where they were supposed to. The results were not reversed. But Jamaat's actions surrounding these seats, the timing of their protest, and the manner in which they did it have always belied that it was merely political theatre. Had they been sincere about the recounts, the party's representatives would have



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protested at the polling centres and demanded recounts where they had the prerogative. Instead, they waited until the gazette notification to file their complaint. Further, such an issue could have been raised at the election tribunal, where it could have been duly resolved, or at the dozens of public rallies since the election in such a forceful manner.

But now the Jamaat chief raises this issue again, indicating that the 32 seats were indeed significant. So significant that the party, in an alternate scenario, would put up a strong fight to secure what they deemed due—strong enough that it might lead the country down the path of a civil war.

That remark, besides revealing a disturbing proclivity for violence, also indicates something deeper. It shows that Jamaat is not quite the vocal opposition that we need in the interest of a vibrant parliament. It is conflating its own interests with those of the entire nation; why else would a civil war even be contemplated? The remark also betrays a confidence the Jamaat chief had that he could

dismiss his public speeches as mere theatre? In that case, even floating the idea of such violence, especially so soon after the bloody political changeover of 2024, sounds irresponsible at best, and sinister at worst.

Shafiqur Rahman continued his speech to invoke his predecessors who, as he put it, had walked the gallows and smirked at the noose. These leaders, he said, had taught how to lay down one's life for one's country. These predecessors that the Jamaat leader invoked were hanged for war crimes during Bangladesh's 1971 Liberation War. They had collaborated with the Pakistan Army and were punished for heinous crimes such as murder, arson and rape. Jamaat had actively opposed the liberation forces of Bangladesh in 1971 and the party's leaders were hanged for their misdeeds. The party may well contest those war crimes trials and they may well question the entire legal process, but these verdicts have not been challenged at any competent court, let alone reversed. But when the current Jamaat leader threatens a civil war while invoking

exhibitions and propose condolence motions in parliament. Hence, when Shafiqur Rahman says he seeks forgiveness for the "mistakes" that his party members have made since 1947 (when Jamaat was founded), without clearly acknowledging their roles in 1971, it becomes difficult to accept that apology in good faith. Instead, those "semi-apologies" feel rather like attempts to placate public emotions. Jamaat has spent decades trying to shed their 1971 legacy but never turned around to face it head-on. Until they do, the albatross may continue to hang from their neck.

Regardless, Jamaat is currently the main opposition in parliament, which is a grave responsibility. As such, even the party's staunchest detractors would like them to succeed in their role as a watchful and worthy opposition. This is also a unique opportunity for the party to serve the country. But vitriolic pronouncements like the above may fail them even as they have just embarked on this new journey. It does not suit the main opposition, nor does it bode well for the future of our democracy.

The real test of the education budget will be in the classroom



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When I look at the proposed education budget for FY-2026-27, I don't first think about allocations or percentages of GDP. I think about a teacher and their students in a rural village: whether that teacher will have the tools and training to help those children learn, thrive and contribute to Bangladesh's future. Ultimately, every allocation must answer a simple question: will it improve learning for the child sitting in the classroom?

The country's education sector, with nearly four crore learners and 10 lakh teachers, is set to receive its largest-ever budget allocation of Tk 136,606 crore, 14.56 percent of total spending and around 1.79 percent of GDP. More than a fiscal commitment, it reflects our aspirations for the next generation and the kind of workforce Bangladesh hopes to build. The government has also pledged to raise education spending to five percent of GDP within five years.

The budget includes several welcome initiatives: the "One Teacher, One Tab" programme, AI-enabled learning tools, expanded connectivity, technical and vocational education, and the introduction of a third global language in secondary schools. Together, they acknowledge a simple reality: tomorrow's workforce will

need skills many current jobs don't yet require. Artificial intelligence, automation and digital technologies are already reshaping economies worldwide.

Yet, Bangladesh's greatest education challenge is not technology; it is scale. With a population of around 17.5 crore, the country operates one of the world's largest education systems. It educates more students than the populations of many countries often cited as education success stories. While Singapore, Estonia and South Korea offer valuable lessons, their reforms were implemented in much smaller systems. However, the experience of high-performing systems offers an important lesson. Vietnam's experience is particularly relevant. Despite having a GDP per capita far below many OECD countries, Vietnamese students have consistently performed strongly in international assessments such as Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), reflecting decades of investment in teacher quality and classroom instruction.

For Bangladesh, the highest-return education investment may not be in devices, buildings or connectivity, but in the capability of the teacher standing at the front of the classroom.

Even small improvements in teacher effectiveness can influence millions of students. Few investments offer a greater multiplier effect. The "One Teacher, One Tab" initiative is a useful start, but its success will depend on how effectively teachers use these tools in the classroom.

Recent research by Telenor Asia found that a majority of Bangladeshis already use some form of AI in their daily lives. As AI becomes embedded in how people learn, work and access information, teachers must be equipped to guide students in using it effectively and responsibly. A national initiative for teachers' AI literacy could help educators use AI for lesson planning, assessment and personalised learning, evaluate AI-generated content, teach critical thinking, and guide students in the ethical use of emerging technologies. High mobile phone penetration gives the country a unique opportunity to deliver continuous professional development to teachers nationwide.

Another priority is ensuring that girls remain in school and successfully transition into higher education, skills development, and employment. Bangladesh has made remarkable progress in girls' enrolment through decades of policy commitment and targeted interventions. However, child marriage still remains a major barrier to girls' continued education. More than half of Bangladeshi women aged 20-24 were married before turning 18, giving the country the highest rate of child marriage in Asia and one of the highest rates globally. Just 59 percent of adolescent girls complete secondary education. At the same time, the country is among a small group of countries where two percent or fewer

adolescent girls and young women possess basic digital skills.

As the economy becomes more technology-driven, these statistics should concern us. Keeping girls in school and equipping them with digital, technical and AI-related skills will be critical not only for gender equality but also for economic growth. Gender-responsive budgeting must increasingly focus on not just access but outcomes as well. Every girl who stays in school, completes her education and transitions into employment strengthens the country's economic competitiveness.

Countries that have achieved sustained educational improvement have paired investment with strong assessment systems that help policymakers understand what works. Bangladesh should begin preparing a roadmap towards international benchmarking through assessments such as PISA. Stronger national assessments and gradual benchmarking against international standards would help ensure that investments in technology, teacher development, and curriculum reform translate into measurable gains in learning.

The budget represents a significant investment in Bangladesh's future. Its success will not be measured by the number of tablets distributed or buildings constructed. It will be measured by whether teachers are better equipped to help their students learn, whether more girls stay in school and enter the workforce, and whether those young people leave the classroom ready to contribute to the country's economy and society, and thrive in a future increasingly shaped by technology.