

Opinion

The road to development begins with education



Golam Mortoza

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What good does a first class degree do if it is achieved through memorisation? Photo: Collected

We are the biggest applauders of our own successes. Sometimes, regional and international arenas, too, portray our positive growth through development indicators. When many countries found themselves in dire straits because of Covid-19, Bangladesh's economic indicators remained somewhat consistent. Bangladesh is a "role model" for development—this is a common phrase now.

On some indexes, Bangladesh is ahead of even India—and this is often highlighted in many discussions nowadays. There is no doubt that Bangladesh has some big, notable achievements under its belt. For instance, no matter how debatable the per capita income index may be, there is no denying the fact that Bangladesh is in a better position than India. India is a huge country, where certain areas are home to extreme poverty. So the question remains whether it is justified to draw comparisons between the two neighbouring countries. But that is not what I want to discuss here—I firmly believe what the indexes indicate.

Bangladesh's success in exporting RMG products and human resources, its contribution to peacekeeping in several countries, and success in food production are, indeed, a matter of pride. So it is expected that those in power would claim credit for these feats. And they deserve it.

Keeping all this in mind, I would like to share my two cents on the "role model of development."

There are many examples in world history where a poor nation has changed its fate through development. We don't have to look very far: some of these examples exist nearby.

The development process through which Lee Kuan Yew turned the fishermen's village of Singapore of 1965 to the highly-developed country it is today, or how Mahathir Mohamad changed the Malaysia of 1980s to what it is now, hardly needs any elaboration. Japan's development after World War II, since 1945, and South Korea's rise after the Korean War of 1950 are success stories that have taken the world by surprise. Thailand is no different either.

In order to rebuild and develop, all these countries focused on one thing: developing their human resources. They established strong state institutions, using which they reached the height of success they enjoy today. And to achieve all of this, the first initiative that

they took was educating all their citizens. At first, they brought in foreign experts with high salaries for a certain period of time to help with nation-building. In the meantime, they sent their young students to Europe and North America for higher education. Once those students returned home, equipped with modern knowledge, these countries no longer needed to hire foreign experts.

After World War II, Europe and the US put more focus on air links. Japan, one of the Axis powers, was barred from making aircraft. But Japan did not sit idle, and instead focused their research on making fast trains. Only 10 years after the great war, Japan managed to invent high-speed trains in 1955, solely through their home-grown experts. They took USD 80 million as a loan from the World Bank to facilitate this project.

During the Summer Olympics in 1964, which was held in Tokyo, Japan stunned the entire world by inaugurating their bullet train service.

For Japan, as well as all developed countries, education was the prerequisite to development. They put the highest possible priority to education and research in their development policies.

Now the most critical question arises: How much importance has Bangladesh, which is hailed as the role model for development, put in its education sector? Let's not look into what Europe and North America, or Asian nations like Japan and Korea do. Compared to its South Asian neighbours, Bangladesh has the lowest allocation for its education sector. It is generally said that countries with less than four percent of budget allocation for education cannot succeed. Bangladesh's budgetary allocation for education is about two percent.

We don't follow the policy of sending our brilliant students abroad and have them gain expertise through higher education. Those who do that using their own means, seldom think of coming back.

But then, the government has no attention to spare to create an environment where those who want to return home are given the due respect, good work environment, and the opportunities to implement their knowledge and expertise. Nepal is ahead of Bangladesh in terms of the number of students going to the US for higher education. No Bangladeshi university has managed to take a respectable spot in any of the international rankings, but we can find the names of Indian, Pakistani, Sri Lankan and Nepali universities on those lists.

The CEOWORLD magazine published a list of best educational systems in 2020, where India was ranked 33rd, Sri Lanka 77th, and Pakistan 83rd. Even Myanmar ranked in the 92nd place. Bangladesh was not even on the list.

A recently published news story, published by The Daily Star, revealed that graduates of Dhaka University, who achieved first class in Sanskrit, could not speak or read Sanskrit. And they had applied to teach at the Department of Sanskrit in their alma mater. Speaking to this daily, Dr Madhabi Rani Chanda, a professor at the Department of Sanskrit, said: "There is no scope for denying the fact that the educational standards in this university are declining day by day. Most of the students score good marks by memorising the answers."

It's not just the Department of Sanskrit; this situation is alarmingly prevalent everywhere in Bangladesh.

The pathetic condition of Bangladesh's education sector has been repeatedly exposed in many relevant international researches over the last few years.

Bangladesh is ranked 116th among 132 countries in the Global Innovation Index. The Global Talent Competitiveness Index sees Bangladesh in 123rd position among 134 countries. In the Global Knowledge Index, Bangladesh is ranked 112th among 138 countries.

In all three of these indexes, Bangladesh trails behind India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Nepal.

We claim to have become "Digital Bangladesh," but our internet and mobile data speed is the slowest among all South Asian nations.

Using this ultra-slow internet, I tried to find if there are other countries where two rival student organisations, or two factions of a single organisation, frequently engage in violent clashes using an arsenal of weapons, often leading to bloody and sometimes fatal outcomes. From Uganda to Nepal, I couldn't find a single example of such a phenomenon. Uganda has a history of student uprisings against dictatorship. Similar accounts of movements can be found in the histories of Nepal and India as well. But I have yet to find an example that even vaguely resembles the incident of two rival wings of the same organisation beating each other up, which resulted in one student ending up on life support, his doctors forced to remove a part of his skull to help his healing process. On the bandage around his head, these words were written: Haar nei, chap diben na (No bone here, do not apply pressure).

In our "role model" development philosophy, education and research have zero importance. What is important is building roads, bridges, flyovers, and buildings. There is no denying the fact that infrastructural development is a staple for overall progress. But we have forgotten that infrastructure provides support for achieving development goals—they are not the markers of development themselves. For sustainable development, we need skilled, tech-savvy human resources, and to achieve that, there is no alternative to proper education and research. Importing expertise from abroad can be a temporary measure, but it can't be a permanent solution. We have built bridges and satellites using foreign expertise. The technology remains unknown to us. The knowledge that we need to train skilled manpower is still beyond our grasp.

Golam Mortoza is a journalist at The Daily Star. The article has been translated from Bangla by Mohammed Ishtiaque Khan.

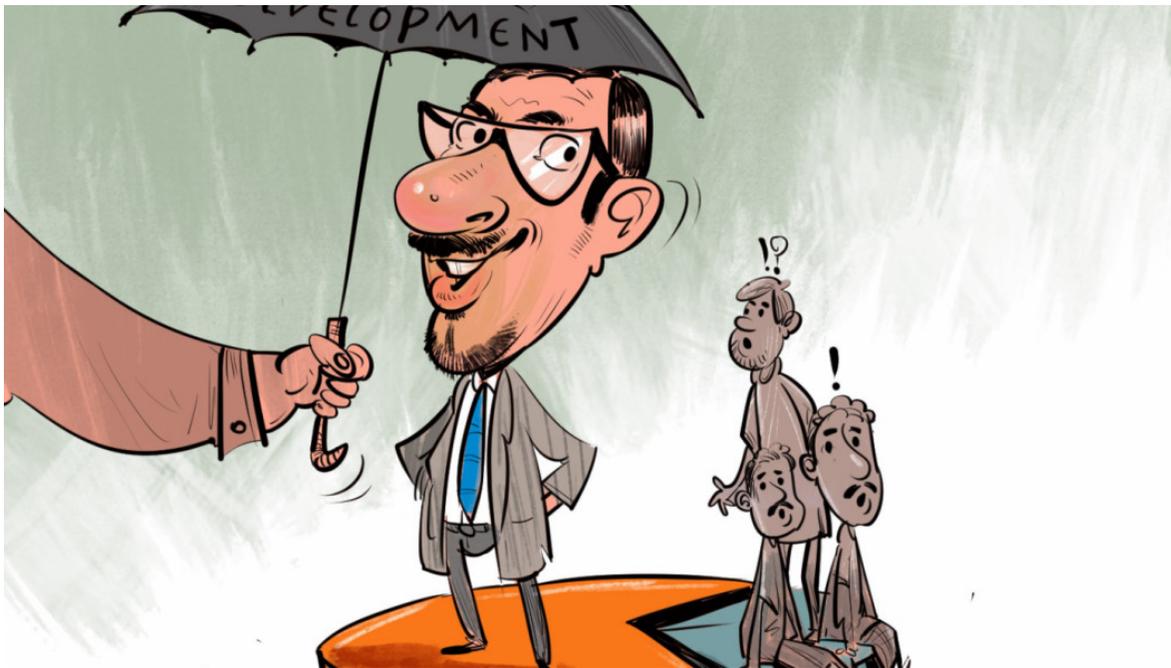
Views

'Louha tribhuj' and the political economy of development



Hossain Zillur Rahman

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The micro realities of poor and middle-class households struggling against a relentless cost-of-living crisis signal the entrenched presence of 'bad days' for a majority of the population. VISUAL: BIPOLOB CHAKROBORTY



Un many development metrics, Bangladesh's performance and achievements have been justly recognised and feted at home and around the world. However, while the 50-year transformation scenario has indeed been robust, near-term trends have exposed systemic weaknesses, making the medium-term outlook decidedly shaky. While the immediate sense of macroeconomic breakdown has been tempered, the micro realities of poor and middle-class households struggling against a relentless cost-of-living crisis, and the meso realities of enterprise-level heightened uncertainty in growth outlook in critical subsectors, signal the entrenched presence of "bad days" for a majority of the population.

In May 2022, the fifth round of the PPRC-BIGD panel survey estimated the proportion of new poor to be 18.5 percent. Last week, the government's statistical agency at last acknowledged that the poverty rate had indeed gone up and now stood at 29.5 percent, compared to the pre-Covid level of 20 percent. But this rise in poverty numbers and the economic despair of an escalating number of the middle classes is only the visible tip of the crisis iceberg. The real worry is in the political economy of the policy landscape impacting both crisis management in the short term and growth management in the medium term.

Bangladesh has a vibrant public discourse on the state of the economy. However, what is frequently missing is a political economy lens and connecting the necessary dots.

Is corruption only a moral failure or does it flourish due to how rule-making, incentives, and sanctions are being politically constructed? Is the reluctance towards reforms only a question of inefficiency or is it dictated by the compulsion of protecting vested interests? Are implementation weaknesses a lack of capacity or are they due to how merit is systematically sidelined to the benefit of sycophancy? What indeed is the reality of economic governance?

We have always had deficits in our economic governance. But over the last decade, the political economy of the policy landscape has morphed into something more structural. A louha tribhuj, or an iron triangle, of three tendencies has come to define and limit the policy landscape.

The unjust and discriminatory face of corruption

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The first part of the louha tribhuj is a one-sided vision of development. Infrastructure has become the "be all and end all" of development, with social development pushed to the sidelines. This is not to say that "social" is out of budgetary attention. But even in "social," all the attention is on the hardware, with software out of sight. School-building has become more important than the quality of education. Hospital-building has become more important than the quality of healthcare. Standalone infrastructures without attention to integration with other parts of the infrastructure network is leading to plummeting liveability and productivity of urban centres. Focus is on the concrete only, without commensurate attention to user protocols, maintenance and infrastructure governance.

The consequences of this one-sided focus are all too familiar: shocking lack of road safety and unpredictability of travel; drop in the quality of educational experience; healthcare becoming a reality of galloping costs without results.

The second part of the iron triangle is the rampant spread of conflict-of-interest-driven policy-making. Boundaries of public and private interests are constantly transgressed in the policy landscape in favour of private interests closely aligned with ruling groups. Flouting of rules and, in some cases, rules specifically designed for narrow private interests have shockingly become the norm in critical and remunerative sectors such as finance, banking, energy, transportation, ICT, and infrastructure. Such collusive "contact and contracts" have become brazen and become a structural property of today's economic governance.

Some sectoral examples make the above abundantly clear. Quick rental electricity plants were adopted as a short-run option to address load-shedding. But why has it continued far beyond the initial timeline, with a relentless expansion of installed capacity without required investment in distribution infrastructure and primary energy supplies? Why was gas exploration deliberately sidelined for a disastrous overdependence on expensive LNG import? Why has the state agency Bapex been systematically sidelined in favour of a foreign firm in Bhola gas fields, as a glaring example? No wonder capacity charges have emerged as the brazen face of planned inefficiency and corrupt collusion, dictated not by economics but by political economy.

A similar story holds sway in the most catalytic of economic sectors – namely transportation. Primacy of narrow politically-connected private interests have become a structural barrier not only to road governance, but also to the economics of transportation impacting travel time, onerous formal and informal

costs of travel, and rampant failures in road safety. The BRTC has been rendered a perennially sick state-owned enterprise, route permit allocation is dominated by a transport owners' oligopoly standing in the way of both road safety and sector efficiency, and the BRTA is nowhere near rising up to its stewardship role. Rule-flouting private interests are effectively being given the immunity to continue the misgovernance stalemate.

Turning a blind eye to glaring conflicts of interest – nay, positively supporting corrupt and collusive rule-making – has also come to cast the darkest shadow over the banking and financial institutions sector. The pillars of finance sector governance are either over-eager to pander to selected private interests, or conspicuously inactive in their regulatory and supervisory responsibilities that has led to astounding levels of fraud and corruption. The case of PK Halder has perhaps become emblematic of such entrenched institutional culpable misgovernance.

The consequence of such corrupt and collusive rule-making is neither vague nor inconsequential with the most serious impact on competitiveness of the economy. Our exports-to-GDP ratio – one measure of competitiveness – has halved over 2012-22, from 20 percent to 10.6 percent. The continued stagnation in the private investment-to-GDP ratio is another cause for worry. Most recently, collusive regulatory moves appear to have unnerved external investors in the stock market. In such an amoral world, the "good entrepreneur" is effectively left adrift with a herculean uphill task.

energy sector

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The grip of the "iron triangle" works differently, but no less negatively in the case of development projects, particularly infrastructure projects. E-tender was supposed to have brought in transparency and efficiency to the whole process of awarding contracts, but reality speaks otherwise. Corrupt, inefficient and collusive practices work here through informal barriers to competitive bids, inflated costs, post-approval cost escalations, and project delays.

The third part of the *louha tribhuj* is the *obicharer orthoniti* – the economics of injustice rooted in policy marginalisation of all those lacking political voice, including workers, farmers, small entrepreneurs, and now even the middle classes. Not one member of the common masses sits idle, relentless in their effort and labour for whatever opportunities come their way, but the benefits of policy attention is disproportionately faced away from them towards a small number of favoured groups. Public transport, prices of essentials, utility costs, affordable housing, access to quality healthcare and education, access to green spaces – each of these pillars of quality living, central to the welfare of the common people, lacks the level of policy attention that would make a difference. It is as if the common masses have to shoulder the burden of resilience while fruits of growth flow disproportionately to favoured groups.

The second face of the economics of injustice is equally concerning. All our discussions are around macroeconomic imbalances and the ensuing crisis. Yet, we also need to keep in focus our medium-term

goal of achieving the SDGs. In at least three areas, there is a real danger of reversal with Bangladesh becoming off track in SDGs: nutritional deficits (with nutritious items disappearing from the household diet due to lack of affordability), rise in secondary dropout level, and rise of youth unemployment (particularly, educated youth unemployment).

Bangladesh may be at an inflexion point in its development journey. Plenty of other initially successful countries fell into the "middle-income trap" because warning signals were not heeded and reform needs were pushed under the carpet. Will Bangladesh be able to recognise the *louha tribhuj* for what it is – a vicious triangle of mutually reinforcing policy tendencies that has morphed into a structural barrier straddling Bangladesh's inclusive and sustainable development aspirations? This cannot be overcome or dislodged merely by technical recommendations and feel-good talk. The need of the hour is a dismantling of the *louha tribhuj* through a qualitative change in political realisation, political approach and political will, and an urgent big push on reforms.

Hossain Zillur Rahman, an economist and political sociologist, is the executive chairman of Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC).

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Views

‘Decision to use EVMs defies all logic’

Mohiuddin Alamgir

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Badiul Alam Majumdar FILE PHOTO: STAR

Badiul Alam Majumdar, *secretary of Shushashoner Jonno Nagorik (Shujan)*, talks about the controversy surrounding the Election Commission's decision to use EVMs, despite widespread opposition to the idea, in an interview with Mohiuddin Alamgir of The Daily Star.

The Election Commission (EC) has decided to use electronic voting machines (EVMs) at 150 constituencies out of the 300 in the next general election, ignoring the BNP and several other political parties' objection to EVM use. The EC has also decided to purchase 200,000 new EVMs. What are your thoughts on this?

This decision defies all logic. Spending about Tk 9,000 crore is illogical when the country is going through an economic crisis, and when we are trying to get a loan of around USD 7 billion. Many people and political parties are protesting the decision as well. What is particularly concerning is that they are going to spend

money on technologically flawed machines. It is possible to manipulate the election results through the EVMs. The machine has no Voter-Verified Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT), a system that dispenses a slip with the symbol of the party for which an individual has voted. Late Dr Jamilur Reza Choudhury, who was appointed as the chief of the technical advisory committee on EVMs, protested the move of buying them as they don't have VVPAT. In India, VVPAT has been added to EVMs following a court order.

There is no scope for a vote recount if an election is held using these EVMs. The people will have to accept whatever the EC announces as the final result. Biometric-based EVMs, in many cases, cannot identify fingerprints of elderly voters, or if one's fingers get damaged because of their work patterns. The presiding officer and assistant presiding officer have overriding power in case a voter's fingerprint does not match with the data stored in the server.

According to a BBC report, in the last election, in as many as 25 percent of the cases, presiding officers and assistant presiding officers employed their overriding power. It was reported that these election officials were partisan, and were appointed only after being verified by police. As they have the power to open a machine, they can even cast votes when voters are absent. How much of this overriding power was used? Who will oversee that, and where is the transparency? Even 5-10 percent cases of officials employing this overriding capacity can be a determining factor in the election results.

 EVM fingerprint mismatch

EC doctored parties' stance on EVM

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The EC often claims that no one can prove the EVMs are not secure.

That is incorrect. If you provide us with an EVM machine and the proprietary source code, we will be able to prove how the manipulation is possible.

But will a manufacturer share the proprietary source code with others?

Indeed, a manufacturer will not share the proprietary source code with others. But how else will we prove that vote manipulation is possible through EVMs? Take Germany's case for an example. A German court in its judgment on EVMs said that the principle of the public nature of elections, as per Germany's Basic Law, requires that all essential steps in the elections be subject to public examinability, unless other constitutional interests justify an exception. The court said that the proceedings for the examination of the type sample by the Physikalisch-Technische Bundesanstalt – the national metrology institute of Germany – and approval by the Ministry of the Interior should be public as part of election preparations. Any interest of the manufacturer in protecting its business secrets should be subordinate to the principle of democracy. In order to check the devices independently, disclosure of the control documents, reports of Physikalisch-Technische

Bundesanstalt, and of the source code of the EVM software is the only way to be able to judge the integrity of the elections. Not disclosing this information is said to constitute an electoral error.

So, without the source code, we cannot prove that manipulation of the machines is possible.

If opinions can be changed, who says the poll results won't be?

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The BNP has been saying that they will not take part in the next general election. The EC is saying that they cannot and will not compel any party to join the polls. Can the commission make such a statement?

We don't want just a participatory election; we want a competitive, free, fair, and credible election. The EC is an independent constitutional body, and its responsibility is to hold free and fair elections. When a large political party or several parties refrain from participating in elections, it cannot be called a proper election. Elections mean choosing between alternatives. The EC cannot get away by saying that they wouldn't compel anyone to

join the polls. The EC has enormous power, according to Mahmudul Islam's book *Constitutional Law of Bangladesh*; they have the inherent power to ensure a free and fair election. In the face of a boycott, the EC must tell the ruling party and others that it cannot meet its constitutional obligation to hold a participatory election.

The EC cannot ensure free and fair elections by itself if the law enforcement agencies and the administration are partisan, and the ruling party acts aggressively. But they have the power to prevent rigged elections, provide remedies and cancel the elections after probes when needed.

Do you think the EC's decision to use EVMs will affect the opposition parties' as well as the people's confidence in them?

Yes, considering how the commission is adamant to use EVMs in the election despite such clear objection from several parties. They have been making contradictory statements, too. The CEC once said political parties' stance was not considered when the decision to use EVMs was made. Later, they said the majority of political parties were in favour of using EVMs. Then media reports revealed the commission had misrepresented or changed what some of the parties had said about EVM use – they had set some conditions for it, but the commission said they had agreed to the idea.

In doing so, the EC sent out the message that they would use the EVMs in the election no matter what, because the ruling party and its alliance partners were in favour of it. This proves that the commission is biased towards one party. Naturally, the opposing parties as well as the people would not trust this commission.

Even though some political parties, including the BNP, are in favour of a poll-time government for a participatory and credible election, the EC has not yet recommended this in their working

plan for the next election, saying it does not fall under their jurisdiction.

We think the issue of caretaker government does fall under the EC's jurisdiction, as their mandate is to hold free, fair, and credible elections. Again, regarding the caretaker government, the EC can tell the government that they cannot meet their constitutional obligation to hold free, fair and credible elections without it, because that would not be consistent with the constitution.

Excessive force against protesters can't be justified

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Members of the opposition parties are facing police attacks whenever they try to hold a rally or a meeting. Do you think such attacks would further widen the existing political division between the opposition and the ruling party?

It is not just about the widening of political division. This would create the scope for an election full of fraudulence as well. The current events may lead to members of the opposition parties facing police cases. And such cases will keep them on the run. They were on the run during the 2018 election and such a situation may

happen again. The opposition will be harassed using such cases, and they will not be able to stay in or visit their localities, so it will be difficult for them to participate in the election in its true sense.

There is also the Digital Security Act (DSA), and the government is trying to enact some more black laws, which may become obstacles for a conducive election atmosphere. In our country, the government is not being formed based on people's will; as a result, there are no accountability measures in place. If you go to people seeking votes, you have to be accountable to them as you will need to go to them again to seek votes in five years.

How would you evaluate the EC's performance thus far?

They have announced a roadmap for the next election, but I think it is aimed nowhere. I would say it is a roadmap for a failed election. They may end up holding an election haphazardly. If they do hold the election in such a manner and fail to meet their constitutional obligations, someday they will be held responsible and may have to answer for their failure.

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