

## Girls continue to top public exam scoreboard

*Why can't this success be replicated later on?*

IT is truly inspiring that our girls continued to perform extraordinarily in the two biggest public examinations in the country—Primary Education Completion Examination (PECE) and Junior School Certificate (JSC) Examinations—last year, outdoing their male counterparts in terms of participation rate, success rate and grades achieved. They also outperformed boys in the pass rate for Secondary School Certificate (SSC) and Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) and equivalent exams earlier in 2019, with an outstanding number of girls securing GPA 5. These results are a testament to what our girls can achieve if and when given the right opportunities. They also speak of the tremendous success of coordinated efforts of the government and NGOs in reducing the gender parity in education.

However, we are still struggling to replicate this success story as girls move up the ladder—dropout rates for girls are at a high 42 percent at the secondary school level and secondary level completion rates are at a mere 59 percent. Child marriage, entrenched patriarchal norms, sexual harassment to and from schools, lack of access to appropriate information about sexual and reproductive health and high cost of education continue to deter girls from realising their full potential. Unfortunately, these trends carry through tertiary education, explaining why the female participation rate in the labour market is still much lower than that of their male counterparts, despite the promise that girls show early on in their educational trajectory. Women are still predominantly employed in low-paid, low-productive activities, which further increase their vulnerability in the labour market and society at large.

Girls have consistently proved that they can deliver results—often better than boys. But we, too, must prove our commitment to our girls, by continuing to invest in their education, retain them in schools and create an enabling environment in which they can pursue their own dreams.

## BSCIC must live up to its expectations

*Improving the condition of its estates should be a priority*

IT is unfortunate that among the 74 industrial estates of Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries Corporation (BSCIC), only a handful are running with some form of efficiency. Most of the estates are in a very bad shape with plots lying idle due to a lack of basic amenities. On a recent visit to some of the estates, our correspondents have found that the road networks leading to the estates are very poor and many of the estates do not have proper drainage systems. Moreover, many of them even lack gas, water and power supply. Quite a few industrial units that are currently running in the estates have to suspend their operation during the rainy season because of waterlogging. Security issues, too, have not been addressed by the authorities.

The poor condition of the estates was reported by this daily several times in the past. It was reported that among the 74 industrial estates in 59 districts, at least 20 were established without any feasibility study. There were also allegations that many of the estates were established solely for political reasons. The result is that the BSCIC has failed to attract new entrepreneurs and generate employment among rural people.

Under the circumstances, to make all the industrial estates fully functional, the authorities must improve the condition of its estates through ensuring sufficient gas and electricity supply as well as improving the road networks. The 496 plots that are currently lying idle should be allotted to entrepreneurs through a fair selection process. Moreover, the weaknesses in rules and regulations should be urgently addressed.

Of all the BSCIC estates, since the one in Dinajpur industrial area has been the most successful, it should serve as an example for the rest of the estates. Needless to say, if all the 74 industrial units can be properly utilised, the economic impact would be phenomenal.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### New Year resolutions

As 2020 has begun, I, like many others, have made my list of commitments for a fresh start in order to be a better person. I have decided to eat healthy, exercise regularly, be kind to people, help my mom in the kitchen, assist the needy, be optimistic and so on and so forth. I had done so last year as well, and tried to stick to my decisions to the best of my ability, which, in my opinion, was beneficial in more ways than one.

But somewhere down the line it seems that the pace with which we so eagerly begin tends to ease down and the resolutions seem to make less sense; and that is when I believe one should stand one's ground ever so firmly. Yes, life is about maintaining that healthy balance between the positive and the negative. As every beginning provides us an opportunity to better ourselves, I pray this year will be no different. Happy New Year, everyone.

Ishrat Jahan, Dhaka



MOHAMMED NORUL ALAM RAJU and FAIMA RAHMAN

THE severe cyclonic storm Bulbul originated from the Bay of Bengal advancing with a speed of 140 kph and started dwindling when the mouth of the storm crossed the Sundarbans and hit the mangrove forest at a speed of 70-80 km per hour. It's been over 10 years since cyclone Aila ravaged the Sundarbans in 2009, and the devastating cyclone Sidr in 2007 with a wind speed of 250km an hour hit the forest. The Sundarbans resisted the latter before it began to fade.

Playing the role of a shield against the ferocity of Bulbul, the dense forest full of various trees and bushes saved the coastal community from destruction. The storm entered Bangladesh through the Sundarbans and then hit Khulna, Satkhira, Bagerhat, Barguna and other districts. However, it claimed 12 lives in seven coastal districts as it uprooted trees, caused the collapse of houses, damaged crops and prevented people from taking their ailing ones to hospitals from cyclone shelters. Hundreds of people died in two similar storms in 2007 and 2009; but thousands of others survived as the Sundarbans stood as a safeguard between the habitants of the coastal districts and fierce winds during this volatile situation. The Sundarbans has always been like a mother to Bangladesh, protecting this country from the onslaught of cyclones and tidal surges. The recent cyclone, once again, reminded us of its importance.

It is proven that the mangrove forest has contributed largely to reducing the loss of life and damage to property from storms and cyclones as it reduces the impact of waves, storm surges and high winds during hazardous times. At least 4,589 trees were damaged under the pressure of Cyclone Bulbul in the Sundarbans, according to a report prepared by Bangladesh Forest Department (BFD); the report didn't consist of information regarding any wildlife being affected by the cyclone. However, infrastructure worth Tk 62.58 lakh was damaged in the Sundarbans due to the cyclone (*The Daily Star*, November 16, 2019).

Though the Sundarbans is a guardian

*If building the Rampal Power Plant proves to be one of the most damaging human interventions, then no matter what, the government should assert its intentions to save the Sundarbans. In this case, authority should be vested in the experts.*

POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE



SALEEMUL HUQ

As we enter the new year of 2020, we are in fact making a very significant transition when it comes to the issue of climate change. The first transition is a semantic one, but nevertheless a very significant one, namely that in 2019 we acknowledged that the climate change problem has become the climate change "emergency". This means that we need to prioritise it like we have never done before.

In scientific terms it means that the adverse impacts, and associated loss and damage, from climatic events such as floods, droughts, cyclones and wildfires can now be clearly attributed to the fact that human induced climate change has raised global temperature by over one degree centigrade from pre-industrial times and that abnormally severe events have now become the "new normal".

At the same time a new constituency of activists have arrived on the global scene with the potential to make a significant difference, namely the school strikers led by Swedish teenager Greta Thunberg. The scientific community had been warning global policymakers for several decades about the potential dangers of human induced climate change and the need to take action. And then the adversely affected vulnerable developing countries like Bangladesh and Tuvalu had added their voices in the last decade and the global leaders were able to agree on the Paris Agreement on Climate Change at the 21st Conference of Parties (COP21) in December 2015. However, since the withdrawal from the Paris Agreement by Trump and the election of leaders like Bolsonaro in Brazil and Scott Morrison in Australia, these leaders have decided to block any further action to tackle the climate change emergency.

This fact became abundantly clear at

## EDITORIAL

# Why saving the Sundarbans is so urgent

angel for us, our actions and interventions are risking its biodiversity and also causing extinction of many wildlife species.

The way the ecological quality of the forest is declining is very upsetting. Notwithstanding preservation commitments from governments, the Sundarbans is under threat from both natural and man-made causes. The fact that the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the official advisor on natural World Heritage, has recommended that the Sundarbans be classified as a 'World Heritage in Danger' should worry us all. The forest is also suffering from increased salinity due to rising sea levels and reduced freshwater supply.

The proposed coal-fired Rampal power station situated 14 km north of the Sundarbans at Rampal upazila of Bagerhat district in Khulna, is anticipated to further damage this unique mangrove forest according to a 2016 report by UNESCO.



PHOTO: STAR

The ecosystem of the Sundarbans has become very vulnerable to pollution.

Climate change, too, poses a threat to this great forest due to a rise in sea level, along with the establishment of industrial projects around the Sundarbans. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's 2007 report and a report by UNESCO, an anthropogenic 45 cm rise in sea level likely by the end of the 21st century, combined with other forms of anthropogenic stress on the forest, could lead to the destruction of 75 percent of the Sundarbans mangroves. Already, Lohachara Island and South Talpatti Island have disappeared under the sea, and Ghoramara Island is half submerged.

Agricultural activities had destroyed around 17,179 hectares of mangroves within three decades (1975-2010). Shrimp cultivation has destroyed another 7,554

and the livelihood of people. That's why Bangladesh has to take the highest measures possible to protect this unique forest.

Devising well-balanced coastal land-use plans, such as maintaining sustainable limits in logging and other harvesting activities of its resources are a must. Efforts in the direction of strengthening capacity building initiatives to reduce dependence on the land and forest, in collaboration with civil society organisations and regional stakeholders, can support internalisation of alternative livelihood opportunities. Community-based tourism can be encouraged as an alternative livelihood measure. While this may be a positive step for the community towards sustenance, it is important that the administration and community take equal responsibility in restricting the impact of

this initiative on the forest to a minimum. People of the area should be made aware about the issues faced by the Sundarbans; they should also be made aware of the consequences of manmade hazards like deforestation, etc.

Investments are required in bringing the mangroves back. Various international organisations, NGOs or other banks should come forward to grant the funds to save the Sundarbans. The local community should be provided with funds so that they can consume other sources of nourishment. We should consider this mangrove as part of the coastal zone management, coastal development strategy and coastal zone policy.

To save the Sundarbans we need to leave it alone, without any human intervention. The only thing the government can do is to minimise human intervention. This includes preventing people from polluting the nearby areas, refraining from disturbing the animals and

birds, discouraging boats to carry goods, prohibiting polluting the rivers with harmful substances or even the air, so that plants remain unharmed. If building the Rampal Power Plant proves to be one of the most damaging human interventions, then no matter what, the government should assert its intentions to save the Sundarbans. In this case, authority should be vested in the experts.

Over the years, our greed has worsened the situation and if we continue to ignore it, we will soon have to face the wrath of nature. We should play a positive role in conserving the mangrove forest, keeping in mind that if we save the Sundarbans, then it will save us too.

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# What lies ahead on climate change

the recently concluded COP25 held in Madrid, Spain (but under the presidency of Chile) where despite adding two extra days (and nights!) to the negotiations, they failed to reach an agreement on several critical issues.

Thus if the UNFCCC is to retain any sense of credibility, the United Kingdom who will be hosting COP26 in Glasgow, Scotland in November 2020 need to think out of the box to change the format of the event as business as usual has been demonstrated to be unfit for the purpose.

At the same time, the actuality of the climate change impact around the world brings a new dimension to the task of

(CVF) from President Hilda Heine of the Marshall Islands in mid-2020 and will be chair for the following two years.

At the bilateral level Bangladesh can join forces with the UK, as it has already done during the UN Secretary General's Climate Action Summit in New York last September as part of the adaptation and resilience track. The two countries can develop their cooperation further in the run up to COP26 in November.

At the national level in Bangladesh, the UK can also provide support, as it has been doing for some time to Bangladesh's Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan which will be revised and launched in



PHOTO: ANURUP KANTI DAS

tackling the climate emergency that all countries will have to deal with locally, nationally, as well as globally.

At the global level, we now need to develop coalitions of the willing amongst governments of countries, both developing as well as developed, who want to take action to tackle climate change. Here Bangladesh has an important opportunity to play a leadership role, as Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina will be taking over the chair of the Climate Vulnerable Forum

2020 taking it to 2030. One element of such a bilateral strategy between the UK and Bangladesh could be the development of an action research programme to tackle climate change and development related issues which would benefit other Least Developed Countries (LDCs), as well through South-South Cooperation.

At the same time, Bangladesh can play a leading role as the global champion of Community Based Adaptation (CBA) and supporting locally led adaptation around the world. This would build on the launch

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of the locally led adaptation Action Track of the Global Commission on Adaptation (GCA) to be launched at the Gobeshona conference on climate change research into action on January 20.

The government of the Netherlands has offered to help Bangladesh set up a South Asian Regional Centre for Adaptation in Dhaka from 2020, which could become a means of sharing our experience and knowledge with our neighbouring countries in the region as well.

Bangladesh is pioneering the application of the concepts of whole-of-government as well as whole-of-society involvement not only in tackling climate change, but also for all 17 of the global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), where we aim to achieve those goals by 2030.

Thus the year 2020 can indeed become the start of a new era for Bangladesh, as well as for the world, where we change the narrative from being one of the most vulnerable countries to climate change, to becoming one of the most resilient countries, by offering to share our knowledge and experience with other countries both through South-South as well as South-North cooperation. This could indeed become a new foreign policy strategy for Bangladesh going into the new decade.

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