

City Elections

Do we understand the meaning of low voter turnout?

LOW voter turnout happens in many places of the world. But never so in Bangladesh, till lately. Ours always used to be one of high to very high voter turnout. Simply because, as Bengalis, we took our political participation seriously and voted with earnestness. But not so now; because we have lost faith in what goes on in the name of elections. We no longer believe that what we vote and what comes out as the result of that voting are the same. To put it bluntly, we have lost faith in the system.

We are not sure our people in power truly understand what that losing of "faith in the system" really means. When voters turn away from the most effective means of participation in the governance process, when they are reluctant to proudly show the world the single most important "symbol" of being a citizen in a democracy, when they prefer to spend time with their family rather than take the trouble to vote because they believe that such an effort will make no difference in the outcome and finally when they believe that election is a mere show without substance; then we are in serious trouble with our democracy.

It is quite inconceivable that Dhakaites—the residents of one of the most challenged cities of the world, a city that needs literally everything to be fixed (roads, garbage collection, transportation, water supply and quality, health facilities, noise pollution, air quality, education, not to mention safety of women and traffic, to name only a few)—will desist from voting because they no longer believe that they have the capacity to bring about any change.

Nothing speaks louder about the state of our democracy than the voters refusing to vote. Obviously, the real culprit is our overall political atmosphere, which is fundamentally stifling and intolerant of dissent. But the culprit nearer to home is the Election Commission. Earning public trust never seemed to be the priority of this body and the gradual but definite decline of trust never seemed to have bothered it either.

If there be any lesson from this election, let it be about low voter turnout and what it means for our democracy. Let our efforts be directed to reversing this process.

Flagrant disregard for public interest

Hotel owners' indifference culpable

SHOULD people suffer because of someone's unlawful act, which has gone unnoticed by the authorities? The case in point is the high-handed attitude of a person who deems it perfectly permissible to withdraw and separate water from a common source, a flowing canal meant for the daily use of ordinary people living along the canal. The culprit in question happens to be a hotel owner; what gives him this I-couldn't-care-less-about-others attitude is the fact that he also happens to be an advisor to the district unit of Awami League in Bandarban.

It is outrageous that the hotel owner would dig a 100-feet deep tube well to extract 12,000 litres of potable water from the canal for his hotel, depriving the nearly seven hundred people in the area. Even the protests of the locals could not make him desist from this illegal act. The local councillor, we understand, is afraid to warn him or report the matter to the police for redress, because this person is very close to the political class of the area and therefore deems himself above the law. This has been going on for a year.

Depriving the people of common resources is illegal, but when the resource involved is water, it is a criminal act. In the Chittagong Hill Tracts, water happens to be a rare commodity. Development work and the tourism boom in the region have wrought irreparable damage to its ecology. In particular, many of the life-sustaining streams have dried up because of such activities.

So not only is this hotel owner depriving the people of water, withdrawing water in this manner is also contributing to depleting water sources, risking the prospect of the canal drying up altogether. Is this what politicians, who claim to represent the people, do to the people? We demand that the local administration takes cognizance of the matter seriously. The hotel owner should be held accountable and the law must be applied regardless of his political clout.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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I was deprived of my right to vote

I went to Habibullah Bahar School Election Centre in Uttara to cast my vote, but the person in charge showed me a hard copy of the voter list and said I was listed as a migrant who had moved somewhere else. I have been living in this area for the last nine years and have voted in all previous elections, including the municipal and national elections, so how can I be a migrant? I complained to the presiding officer and returning officer, but no one helped me and ultimately I could not cast my vote. I am an old man of 79 years, and despite my best efforts, I was deprived of my voting rights. I am a regular tax payer and a bona fide citizen of this country, so why was I not allowed to vote?

Md. Belayet Hossain, Uttara, Dhaka



PHOTO: STAR

Ending Ignorance in Bangladesh

IMPLEMENTING SDG 4



SYED YUSUF SAADAT

IN Satyajit Ray's 1980 dystopian film Hirok Rajar Deshe (Kingdom of Diamonds), the king used several measures, such as high taxes, forced labour and brain-washing, to maintain

a stranglehold on his people. In addition to these steps, when the king was apprehensive of a threat to his sovereignty, he instructed his education minister to close all the schools in the kingdom. When the education minister was initially taken aback by this decision, the king explained "era joto beshi pore, toto beshi jaane, toto kom maane" (the more they study, the more they learn and the less they obey). Subsequently, the education minister was obliged to order all schools to shut down immediately and permanently.

In many ways, the Hirok Raja (Diamond King) was right. When people are educated, they learn about the world around them, and begin to think independently. Such free thinking may pose a serious threat to the absolute power of any totalitarian regime—as George Orwell aptly pointed out, "ignorance is strength". Since ignorance is the strength of authoritarian governments, empowering people with education and ending their ignorance is the pathway towards a democratic society and a developed country.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) acknowledge the vital role of education in fostering democracy and facilitating development. SDG 4 calls upon countries to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. Bangladesh has made good progress, at least quantitatively, on indicators under SDG 4. Lower secondary completion

has followed a weakly cyclical upward trend since 1998. According to data from UNESCO, the lower secondary completion rate for both sexes increased from 48.8 per cent in 1998 to 58.9 per cent in 2003. However, there was a reversal of this progress in the subsequent years as lower secondary completion rate fell to 52.4 per cent in 2006. Thereafter, there were a few years of gradual improvements in the lower secondary completion rate, followed by jumps in 2013 and 2016. In 2017, the

female youth compared to male youth. The gender parity index of youth literacy rate has been very close to, or within, the upper and lower bounds of parity since 2012. Literacy rate of the adult population, aged 15 and above, increased from 35.32 per cent in 1991 to 47.49 per cent in 2001. The youth literacy rates are higher than adult literacy rates during the period 1991-2017, which implies that there has been a steady improvement in literacy in Bangladesh over time. Youth literacy rates are higher for females,

has been provided as a fundamental right, but quality education has been reserved as an elitist privilege. Such inequities in education tend to perpetuate inequalities in income and wealth as well.

In the upcoming book titled, "Four Years of SDGs in Bangladesh: Measuring Progress and Charting the Path Forward", the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) outlines a number of recommendations for the implementation of SDG 4 in Bangladesh. These include: i) instilling good governance in



The number of girls in education is steadily rising in Bangladesh.

PHOTO: STAR

In developing countries like Bangladesh, enforcing mandatory secondary schooling may often be difficult to implement in practice. However, research has shown that both conditional and unconditional cash transfers are conducive towards increasing enrolment rates.

lower secondary completion rate for both sexes stood at 77.6 per cent. Interestingly, during the period of 1998 to 2017, the lower secondary completion rate has been higher for females compared to males. For example, in 1998 the lower secondary completion rate was 2.10 per cent higher for females compared to males. This difference later increased significantly, and in 2002 the lower secondary completion rate was 16.55 per cent higher for females compared to males. Apart from lower secondary completion rates, primary education completion rates also showed signs of improvement. Primary completion rate increased from 64.26 per cent in 2005 to 118.55 per cent in 2017. However, completion rates above 100 per cent are problematic since they indicate that some students may be failing their classes and repeating the same grade.

In 2001, literacy rates were lower among female youth aged 15-24, compared to male youth. However, in 2011, literacy rates were higher among

starting from the year 2007, which shows that Bangladesh has managed to improve access to education for females during the period 2007-2017.

Despite the progress made by Bangladesh in achieving SDG 4, a number of key issues remain. In developing countries like Bangladesh, enforcing mandatory secondary schooling may often be difficult to implement in practice. However, research has shown that both conditional and unconditional cash transfers are conducive towards increasing enrolment rates. Nevertheless, whilst school enrolment in Bangladesh has increased over the years, ensuring quality education and preventing dropouts are challenges that need to be addressed urgently. On average, educational outcomes in Bangladesh are substantially better in private and urban schools, compared to public and rural schools. This means that the students from poor families are being deprived of high quality education. Basic education

educational institutions by increasing the participation of students and parents in their functioning and operation; ii) increasing funding for educational institutions in remote rural areas and educational institutions that serve left-behind communities; iii) improving means of assessment of learning so that both cognitive and non-cognitive skills are adequately tested; iv) encouraging international cooperation to strengthen university education and research; and v) improving the quality of teacher training and implementing continuous monitoring and evaluation systems to check the effectiveness of training. Bangladesh has already made great progress in ensuring access to education, and if these recommendations can be followed through properly, we will be able to move even closer towards achieving SDG 4 and ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education for all.

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PROJECT SYNDICATE

Has Davos Man Changed?



JOSEPH E. STIGLITZ

my first Davos in 1995. Back then, there was euphoria over globalisation, hope for ex-communist countries' transition to the market, and confidence that new technologies would open up new vistas from which all would benefit. Businesses, working with government, would lead the way.

Today, with the world facing climate, environmental, and inequality crises, the mood is very different. Facebook, willing to provide a platform for mis-/disinformation and political manipulation, regardless of the consequences for democracy, has shown the dangers of a privately controlled monopolistic surveillance economy. Corporate leaders, and not just in the financial sector, have displayed remarkable moral turpitude.

Moreover, multilateralism is under attack. Its strongest defender historically, the United States, now has an administration committed to "America First," and to undermining global cooperation, even as the need for cooperation in a host of areas—including peace, health, and the environment—becomes increasingly apparent.

This year's meeting highlighted disenchantment with the increasingly dominant American model of shareholder-first, profit-maximising firms. More than 50 years ago, WEF founder and head Klaus Schwab argued for stakeholder capitalism: enterprises should be accountable for the interests of their customers, workers, communities, and the environment, as well as their shareholders. Some 45 years ago, with Sandy Grossman, I showed in a standard

economic framework that maximising shareholder value would not maximise societal welfare. In speech after speech this year, business leaders and academics explained how Milton Friedman's successful advocacy of shareholder capitalism led directly to the crises we face today—including, in the US, opioid addiction, childhood diabetes, declining life expectancy amid soaring "deaths of despair"—and the political divisions they have fuelled.

To be sure, recognition that there is a problem is necessary if we are to change course. But we also have to understand that the causes of societal maladies go beyond maximising shareholder value. At the root of the problem is neoliberalism's

everyone else (indeed, tax rates in the US will rise for some 70 percent of those in the middle).

Cognitive dissonance—or dishonesty—was on full display. Attendees could highlight the importance of climate change and tout their corporations' response to it, and yet welcome Trump's deregulation, which will allow the US, already the leader in per capita greenhouse-gas emissions, to pollute even more.

Moreover, despite much talk about stakeholder capitalism, there was no discussion of reducing CEO and managerial pay to ameliorate growing pay disparities, or of the first element of corporate social responsibility: paying

Commission's agenda. To their credit, a few US firms, such as PayPal, explained their commitment to paying *liveable wages*, going well beyond the minimum wage mandated by law.

And yet *some* of the business leaders at Davos this year, especially those from Europe, seemed to have grasped the urgency of responding to climate change and the scope of what is needed. And some have actually taken giant strides. There might still be some "greenwashing"—banks that talk about energy-efficient light bulbs as they lend money to coal-fired power plants—but the tide has turned.

A few business leaders also recognised that our economic and social maladies will not cure themselves—that even if most businesses were socially motivated, a single-minded focus on profits entails a race to the bottom. A soft-drink company that doesn't want to produce addictive sugar-rich drinks that can contribute to childhood diabetes risks losing out to a less scrupulous enterprise.

In short, unfettered capitalism has played a central role in creating the multiple crises confronting our societies today. If capitalism is to work—if it is to address these crises and serve society—it can't do so in its current form. There must be a new kind of capitalism—what I have elsewhere called progressive capitalism, entailing a better balance of government, markets, and civil society.

The discussion at Davos this year may be part of a move in the right direction, but if leaders truly mean what they say, we need to see some proof: corporations paying taxes and liveable wages, for a start, and respecting—and even advocating—government regulations to protect our health, safety, workers, and the environment.

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excessive faith in markets and scepticism of government, which underpins a policy agenda focused on deregulation and tax cuts. After a 40-year experiment, we can declare it a failure. Growth has been lower, and most of the gains went to the top. While this should be obvious, there is no consensus among our business leaders.

Even though the applause for US President Donald Trump, who delivered one of the opening addresses, was the most anemic I have seen for a global leader, almost no one openly criticised him. Perhaps audience members feared a critical tweet or felt gratitude for a tax cut that benefited billionaires and large corporations at the expense of nearly

your fair share of taxes by curbing multinational tax avoidance, and ensuring that developing countries get a fair share of tax revenues. This led Rob Cox, global editor of Reuters Breakingviews, to suggest that stakeholder capitalism might be a strategy to unfetter CEOs even more: If they fail to meet profit goals, they could waffle and say they were meeting broader environmental, social, and governance objectives.

Nor were reforms that might increase workers' bargaining power, through the strengthening of unions and collective bargaining, at the centre of the discussion, even though in Europe such reforms are at the top of the new European