



FOUNDER EDITOR  
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# How can a woman just die in police custody?

*The police must answer for her death*

WE demand immediate and impartial investigation into the death of a woman in police custody, only a few hours after she was picked up by the Detective Branch of police in Gazipur on February 18. Her family claims she was being beaten up even before she was taken into custody, when the DB came looking for her husband. Her 17-year-old son told reporters that he saw injury marks on her legs, arms and some other parts of the body. In characteristic style, however, the police has denied any responsibility, claiming she “fell sick” and was later taken to the hospital. The hospital’s Residential Medical Officer apparently told reporters that there were no injury marks on her body and that she had probably died from a cardiac arrest.

Even if we are to take the medical officer’s claim at face value, the fact remains that a woman in good health died from inexplicable reasons within a few hours of being picked up by the DB. What happened in those hours? If she did indeed have a cardiac arrest, what could have led to such an event? We must not forget that she was in police “custody” and as such the responsibility to prove that she did not die from unnatural causes lies with the police.

We must also ask whether the DB had enough grounds to take her into custody in the first place. The Supreme Court issued guidelines on May 24, 2016 following the death of Shamim Reza Rubel in police custody to stop law enforcement agencies from making arbitrary arrests on suspicion and torturing arrestees on remand. Were all the guidelines followed? These are questions that must be asked and answered, through an impartial investigation.

A three-member committee has already been formed to investigate the incident. While we hope that the committee will do its due diligence and submit an impartial report about the incident, past allegations of custodial deaths do not give us much hope. Last year alone, according to rights body Ain O Salish Kendra, a total of 14 people died in custody after arrest; six people died due to torture before arrest; 12 died from bullet injuries; and at least 58 inmates in different jails died of diseases and other reasons. How many such incidents have been investigated and law enforcers held accountable? The answer, unfortunately, is none. Instead, the police has repeatedly asked the government to amend the Torture and Custodial Death (Protection) Act-2013 to make it less restrictive.

The United Nations Committee Against Torture (CAT) has asked the government to ensure that its authorities, preferably independent bodies, carry out prompt, impartial and effective criminal investigations into all complaints of torture, ill-treatment, unacknowledged detention, and death in custody. We must ask the government to do the same. The widespread impunity enjoyed by law enforcers must end if we are to profess to be a country that still believes in and upholds the rule of law.

# The power of the mother tongue

*Ekushey must go beyond symbols and rituals*

AS we commemorate Ekushey with honour, respect and genuine love for our mother tongue, this is also the perfect time to reflect on our responsibility to promote and preserve the Bangla language. True, we have the unique privilege of having Amar Ekushey being declared by Unesco as the International Mother Language Day, and yes, we now enjoy the freedom to express ourselves in our mother tongue in informal and formal settings and we owe all this to the sacrifices made by our Language Movement heroes. But have we been able to give the respect that such sacrifices deserve? It is a question that warrants deep introspection.

The primary focus has to be in improving the quality of education by making curriculums more modern, updated and accessible, and ensuring effective, creative teaching methods and proper training of teachers.

The tendency of a large section of the elite class to give less importance to the Bangla language, giving the impression that it does not serve any real purpose in nurturing it, has resulted in an apathy among young people towards it. This has been accentuated by the inordinate proclivity towards Bollywood culture which again seems to dominate in most celebratory occasions marginalising Bengali culture in the process. This must be countered by encouraging reading in Bangla by producing better books in Bangla, promoting existing Bangla literature and making concerted efforts to propagate good Bangla translations of foreign literature of all genres. There is also a glaring paucity of quality Bangla movies, TV serials and children’s programmes in Bangla, which adds to the apathy towards the language.

At the same time, while we must make sincere efforts to preserve and promote Bangla, let us not forget that there are other mother tongues in our country, spoken by other ethnic communities. Many of these languages have gone extinct while some are on the verge of disappearance. The state of a mother tongue is closely related to the social reality of those who speak it. We must always remember why our heroes willingly risked their lives to make sure that their mother tongue was not marginalised or made irrelevant. On this day which has become a global celebration of the mother tongue, we must recognise the importance of all mother tongues in our country and the right of all ethnic minorities to assert their cultural identity. Our diverse cultural heritage, which includes the different languages spoken by minority communities, is something that we should protect and preserve.

# A breath of not so fresh air

*A data-driven exploration of Dhaka’s air quality*



TIMOTHY S. GREEN

reappear by the time you return from work, or spend a little time outdoors and just feel the air in your throat to know there is a real problem. But how bad is it truly? And are there insights that the data can reveal to us?

The US consulate in Baridhara has been collecting air quality readings since March 2016 and, in the spirit of open data, publishes an hourly update online (it even has its own Twitter handle @ Dhaka\_Air). Their air quality monitor measures the average concentration of fine particle pollutants (PM2.5) in the air over an hour and converts this into an Air Quality Index (AQI) value. AQI is a numerical scale, between 0 and 500, informing how potentially dangerous the air is to health, where small numbers are good and large numbers are bad.

The recognised acceptable standard for AQI is up to 100; once the quality of air degrades to an AQI above 100, sensitive groups of people may experience adverse health effects. AQI values above 150 are considered “unhealthy”, meaning everyone begins to be at risk of adverse health issues, the severity of which increases as the AQI gets larger—with air deemed “very unhealthy” at AQI in excess of 200, and “extremely unhealthy” above 300.

From analysing and displaying the data from the last four years, two things are immediately obvious from the graph: (1) Dhaka’s air is rarely below the safe AQI standard of less than 100, and (2) there is clearly seasonal variation, with air quality being much worse during the winter months and at its best during the monsoon season.

Over the last four years, only 25 percent of days had an average AQI in the desirable safe range of less than 100, and 45 percent of days had an average AQI in the “unhealthy” range of more than 150.

*By exploring how the data changes with respect to time of day, it turns out that the air quality is at its worst during the night and early morning. Despite the increased number of cars on the road at this time, the hours with the best air quality are generally 10 AM to 6 PM.*

In the dry winter months from November to March, the air quality is especially bad and is commonly in the “very unhealthy” or even “extremely unhealthy” range. In fact, with the exception of December 2017 (which was borderline at 195), the monthly average AQI for December, January and February has been “very unhealthy” (i.e. AQI>200) consistently for the last four years.

Intuitively, anyone living in the city already knows this. Just recall how pleasant it is to take a deep breath after a monsoon rain and compare it to last weekend (which saw an “extremely unhealthy” average AQI of 307 on the day of Pabela Falgun). But why is this the case?

During winter in Bangladesh, an unfortunate combination of meteorological, geographical and human factors works in tandem to create and keep high levels of pollutants in the air. Firstly, highly polluting industries like brick manufacturing (a Department of Environment study in 2014 attributed 58 percent of Dhaka’s air pollution to

from the air *and* many pollutants-creating industries and construction work scale back.

Given that we are breathing in “unhealthy” air during nearly half (45 percent) of the year in Dhaka, what exactly are the health risks? The data analysed here is based on readings of PM2.5, which are measurements of fine particulate matter, arguably the most dangerous commonly measured pollutant. The size of these pollutants (less than 2.5 microns) means they can be suspended in the air for long periods of time and can infiltrate deeply into the lungs, bypassing the body’s natural filtration systems, and even enter the bloodstream, increasing the risk of cardiovascular and respiratory disease, and cancers. A 2016 World Health Organisation (WHO) estimate says that air pollution causes 4.2 million premature deaths worldwide per year.

Is there any way for us to avoid this bad air quality? Well, if you are health-conscious and going for an early morning jog or walk thinking “less cars are out

effects to your personal health. Avoid vigorous exercise outdoors during the night and morning hours when air quality is worse. If you are fortunate enough to be able to afford one, a good-quality face mask can protect you while outside (unfortunately, a scarf or a cheap surgical mask does little to filter out these harmful fine PM2.5 pollutants). When indoors, close the windows and use an air purifier, especially during winter nights when the air quality is at its worst.

But of course, like in all environmental issues, it is the more vulnerable members of society that are most at risk—those without the luxury of homes with windows, and access to expensive masks and electrical appliances. This situation is exacerbated by the common practice of cooking on open fires in and around the home in these communities—another significant source of air pollutants. With this in mind, the only thing we can do is to try and exert whatever pressures we can on getting increased regulation for high pollutant emitting industries, such as brick kilns. A Department of Environment



STAR FILE PHOTO

brick kilns) and construction work see a substantial increase in activity in winter to offset lost productivity during the wet season. This then combines with a meteorological phenomenon called “temperature inversion”, in which colder winter air, which you may recall from physics classes is more dense (since hot air expands), gets trapped under a layer of warmer air in the atmosphere. This blanket of warmer air prevents polluted air at ground level from mixing with clean air at higher altitudes and dispersing pollutants away. So, we have a situation where there is a higher production of pollutants and a weakened mechanism to carry them away.

Relief eventually comes as temperatures rise for summer, since the warmer air mixes with the higher atmosphere and is more effective in dispersing pollutants. Additionally, as the monsoon rains begin in earnest, the rains wash out pollutants

so the air must be cleaner”, I have some bad news for you. By exploring how the data changes with respect to time of day, it turns out that the air quality is at its worst during the night and early morning. Despite the increased number of cars on the road at this time, the hours with the best air quality are generally 10 AM to 6 PM. What is going on? Well, remember the temperature inversion, where cooler air doesn’t mix as well with the upper atmosphere? The same thing happens during the night. So counterintuitively, despite more pollutants being produced during the day, there is less pollution because the hotter daytime air rises and mixes with cleaner air at higher altitudes, dispersing these pollutants more effectively.

So unfortunately, we have little individual control over the air around us. However, there are certain small measures you can employ to mitigate the adverse

(DoE) report suggests that over 2,400 brick kilns were operating illegally as of August 2019. Positive initiatives seem to be underway in this area, with DoE Director Ziaul Haque announcing in July 2019 that the government plans to convert all brick kilns from fire to non-fire ones, and in November 2019, the High Court ordered the closure of illegal kilns in order to curb air pollution. However, reports have since emerged that some of the kilns closed in this drive are already resuming operations, so clearly there is a lot more that needs to be done.

In the meantime, the data brings some hope. March is coming and the air should improve over the months ahead—the silver lining to the sweaty Bangladeshi summer.

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## PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

# Who Can Beat Trump?



ELIZABETH DREW

another four years in power could define the US for a long time to come.

This year’s election will be no typical struggle between two parties that differ more in degree than in kind. But first, the Democrats must select their candidate, and this time that contest is exceptionally fluid.

Former Vice President Joe Biden’s third attempt to win the country’s top job isn’t going much better than the first two. Biden is a well-liked figure—a decent, empathetic man who lacks a mean streak. But Biden’s very likability might well be his electoral undoing. He lacks what I call presidentialness—a certain dignity and remoteness that conveys the sense that crossing him or her would be unwise. He also lacks a message: reminding Democrats that he was Barack Obama’s vice president tells voters little about how he would govern.

Nor is it surprising that the air has gone out of Elizabeth Warren’s campaign. At the outset, she responded to questions by saying, “I have a plan for that.” She’s knowledgeable about domestic government and has attracted a passionate following. But she seemed not to grasp that enacting so many new programmes would be impossible. Several of her Senate colleagues—including allies—told me early on that she wouldn’t “wear well”. They dislike her “holier-than-thou” attitude. There’s a coldness to her that all the selfies with fans don’t quite overcome.

Senator Bernie Sanders, too, is a victim of over-promising. He still does best among the youngest voters; most older voters question how he would pay for all his promises, including free tuition at public colleges and forgiveness of student debt.

Both Warren and Sanders have run into trouble with “Medicare for All,” universal health insurance. No one has shown how replacing Obamacare with a single-payer system wouldn’t raise taxes on the middle class, and some unions oppose it because it would replace the better health-care plans they negotiated, having given up other benefits. (Warren later adjusted her proposal, but not convincingly.)

Sanders, a self-proclaimed “democratic socialist,” is a worrisome figure at a time when party unity is seen as crucial to defeating Trump. Sanders’s ideological rigidity limits his following, and so he has failed to grow his constituency. Although he won New Hampshire, which borders his home state, Vermont, he won 50 percent fewer votes than in 2016. But right now, he cannot be ruled out as a strong possibility for the nomination.

Helped by a political press looking for a new story and by a good debate performance four nights before the New Hampshire primary, Senator Amy Klobuchar turned a third-place finish there (she was fifth in Iowa) into a “surge.” But debates are a poor indicator of a presidency: they test likeability, cleverness, and a vision, but they reveal little about candidates’ temperament, judgment, curiosity, wisdom, and diplomatic skill.

For now, Klobuchar’s bump has overshadowed her reputation for meanness in dealing with staff, which has caused difficulty in attracting and retaining top-tier aides. But Klobuchar also lacks a vision. She recites an apparently impressive record of winning elections in Minnesota, where she hasn’t

had strong opposition, and emphasises her modest origins (her grandfather was a coal miner). What she doesn’t point out is her corporate backing, including by the agribusiness giant Cargill, America’s largest privately held company and one of the most controversial.

Pete Buttigieg, 38, has been the most surprising phenomenon in the contest, thanks to his sharp intellect and unusual composure. His rivals deride his political experience as mayor of a small city (South

planner he once was. That, as much as controversial personnel decisions he took as mayor, may underlie his difficulty so far in attracting support from minority voters. And while one can imagine Buttigieg’s sharp intellect and quick sense of humour unnerving Trump, it’s unknown whether the electorate as a whole would be as accepting of a gay candidate as Democratic voters are.

Once Mike Bloomberg, a three-term New York City mayor, rose in opinion polls, he began to get closer scrutiny—which has landed him in choppy waters. For example, he has been accused of racism, essentially because of his “stop-and-frisk” programme as mayor, and of misogyny in his business practices; vulgar statements he made before becoming mayor are now being circulated. But Bloomberg has drawn upon his enormous wealth to self-finance his campaign and build important alliances by donating to candidates and offering training grants to mayors, most of them black, and helping women advance.

Moreover, Bloomberg’s governing experience and his calm competence make him attractive to many. But his major draw is that he’s viewed as the best equipped to defeat Trump, who seems rattled by the prospect of facing a challenger who is far wealthier than he is (and evidently privy to his unseemly New York business practices).

To be able to buy political advantage may be unfair or wrong, but Trump is such an alarming figure that many voters so far appear willing to overlook what they would never forgive otherwise. That’s because the 2020 election is being fought at a time of crisis for American democracy.

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*To be able to buy political advantage may be unfair or wrong, but Trump is such an alarming figure that many voters so far appear willing to overlook what they would never forgive otherwise.*

Bend, Indiana), but that has familiarised him with how federal programmes work. He volunteered for the military and served in Afghanistan, and he has given more thought to foreign policy than most of his rivals (except Biden). He handles being a married gay man with aplomb. He has a wry sense of humour and can subtly skewer an opponent in a way that recalls Obama.

But is that enough to win? Bill Clinton projected empathy. Americans saw Obama cry following the Sandy Hook elementary school massacre in 2012. It’s hard to imagine seeing Buttigieg cry. He can come off as the reserved McKinsey