The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR
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DHAKA TUESDAY JUNE 2, 2020, *JAISHTHA 19, 1427 BS*

Minority and ethnic communities attacked during lockdown

Their security is the state and society's responsibility

IT is shocking that while the whole nation is grappling with a pandemic, there has been a consistent trend of human rights abuses. Sixteen noted citizens have demanded justice for the incidents of attacks on minority communities, violence against women, land grabbing, harassment of common people and torture of journalists, which happened during the coronavirus pandemic in the country. In particular, they have highlighted the incidents of violence, harassment and human rights deprivation of minority communities.

Referring to media reports and different social organisations, the group found at least 30 incidents of violence against members of minority communities, which took place in April and May amid the shutdown. Homes of minority and ethnic communities have been attacked leaving persons injured; in some cases, land has been grabbed or there have been attempts to do so. Temples have also been vandalised after false rumours of demeaning religion.

On May 15, houses of 10 Hindu families were vandalised and a Hindu youth was arrested on allegations of demeaning religion in Bhola's Monpura. Two days later, miscreants torched the homestead of Baul Ronesh Thakur, a prominent disciple of Baul Shah Abdul Karim, in Sunamganj's Derai.

These acts cannot go unpunished and legal action must be taken against the perpetrators. These incidents highlight the audacity of individuals in carrying out such crimes even during a nationwide lockdown that had significantly curtailed the movement of most people. It seems these groups of perpetrators enjoy a certain immunity and were not at all concerned about breaking the law. We have seen how these incidents have played out in previous occasions, with law enforcement and local administration being ineffectual, and at times indifferent, about preventing such attacks. As a rule, minority communities and ethnic groups have been targeted, taking advantage of their vulnerable status. During the lockdown, this vulnerability was intensified. It is therefore up to the respective thanas where these incidents have occurred to carry out thorough investigations, file cases against the perpetrators and make sure they are punished under law. So far, even in normal circumstances, we have seen very few of these attackers being identified, arrested and punished. This lack of due diligence cannot go on.

Communal harmony is one of our most valued assets as a nation. The government must send a strong message to the public in general that such attacks on these communities will not be tolerated and will not go unpunished. All citizens of this country must be protected by the state and its law enforcement machinery. Police, local administrators as well as the community at large must all work hand in hand to make sure that minority and ethnic communities are protected and feel safe. The message must come from the top leadership.

Children of the char are left out of alternative learning

Find innovative ways for them to gain access to education

IN the wake of the ongoing pandemic, education institutions will remain closed nationwide. A report published recently in this daily depicts how the lockdown has affected students living near the char areas of the northern districts. With the gates of the schools shut, the students are deprived of daily lessons. Most parents in the char region don't have the necessary education and expertise to teach their children as a temporary measure.

Before the lockdown, many people on the char benefitted from agricultural development but this is not the case anymore. Amidst the pandemic, the children are either playing in the fields or loitering around their neighbourhoods while their parents are busy trying to source food and make ends meet. We are concerned that this lack of schooling will result in higher dropout rates in the near future. Earlier, the government introduced education through TV for students to help them complete lesson plans, while many schools made similar arrangements online to continue the flow of learning. However, as internet and television networks are poor or nonexistent in island and coastal areas, the children there are miserably deprived of such alternative facilities. To make matters worse, the recent cyclone Amphan damaged many schools in the coastal belt. With schools remaining closed, experts estimate nearly three million children living in the country's char, coastal and low-lying areas might suffer and will not be able to finish their yearly academic syllabus.

Last month, the European Union (EU) transferred EUR 46.125 million to the Bangladesh government to support key national reforms in primary, vocational and technical education sectors. We believe that the government should allocate the fund strategically, especially towards the children in such char areas, where alternative means of education cannot be accessed. The authorities can identify the underprivileged students and find ways to improve their internet access in collaboration with telecom companies. They can further coordinate with experts and implement wide-ranging plans on addressing the long-term impacts of the ongoing crisis. It is important to develop innovative ways to engage these children in learning and make sure they are not falling behind in their studies.

The Covid-19 vaccine: panacea or enigma?

SYED SAAD ANDALEEB

AS the deadly Covid-19 virus continues to climb the grisly charts, an intense race is already on, globally, to discover the next vaccine, the next panacea. For many, perplexing questions arise: "What's in it for us?" and "Is this frenzy really about saving lives or is it about the age-old calculus of greed, money, and power?" What does the vaccine really mean for the developing world? Let's try and break it down.

Who will come up with the vaccine?

There are many players in the game, mostly from the financially well-endowed nations with top-class biotech scientists, state-of-the-art research establishments, and reliable institutional oversight. Some players, conducting clinical trials, are poised to announce the news of a discovery.

How does this matter to us? With China and India in the game, developing countries may be rooting for them for two simple reasons: accessibility and price. The key question will be, "Can we trust their products?" If the vaccine is produced by the developed world, their products may be trusted, but are the people behind them trustworthy?

How soon will the vaccine be available?

Early 2021 is a much bandied around date. A recent BBC news item suggests earlier availability: "Drugs giant AstraZeneca has announced it is ready to provide a potential new coronavirus vaccine from September" to the tune of 400 million doses.

Sceptics charge that companies will be unable to deliver so soon but manipulate information to make gains elsewhere—for example, the stock market! Scientists have also cast doubts about early trials, suggesting that scant data can be unreliable.

If history is any guide, time to market a new drug spans years. Why then should anyone believe the animated claims of an early breakthrough? Perhaps such claims may be intended to divert attention from the daily pall of death and to keep an irate world calm where agitations born of fear and uncertainty are beginning to intensify. If this wrath erupts, another mammoth epidemic of social disorder may be at hand to contain.

Who will benefit from the vaccine?

Ideally, the human race should benefit.

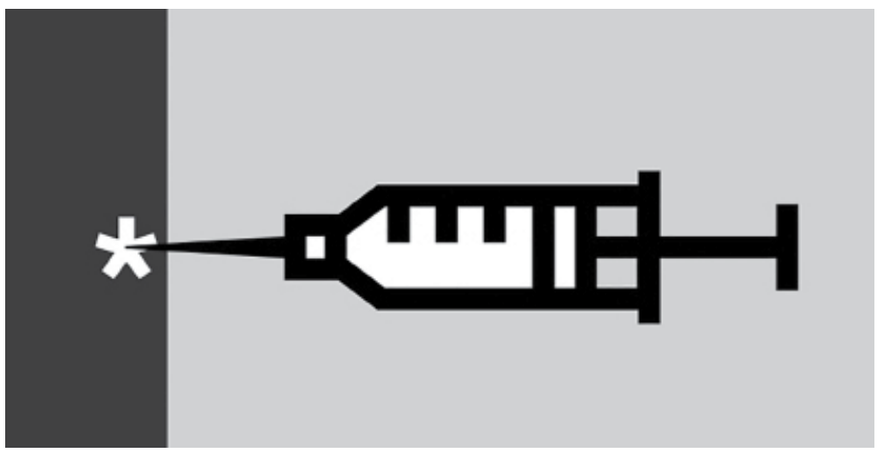

PHOTO: COLLECTED

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But let's face it: in the global (and local) order of how lives are valued, some more than others will have priority. To many, some human lives may matter less than other life-forms (does George Floyd ring any bells?). Such audacity is in plain view; but a countervailing resistance to this deplorable attitude can be ominous.

The R&D is also conducted in a limited number of advanced nations; surely they will have first dibs. And while the scientific community invokes the term "global vaccine," national leaders are not likely to be global: their own populations will have to be immunised first. President Trump makes no bones about it: America first.

Moreover, R&D capabilities may be advanced in China and India, but are they likely to be altruistic? China has a population of around 1.3 billion; their focus will undoubtedly be local. India, if it is able to produce the vaccine, also plans to make it available for its own countrymen first.

Where does that leave the multitude from the developing countries who do not have the expertise, R&D budgets or advanced facilities? With access in serious question, what are their self-preservation options? Masks and social distancing seem to be the only reasonable answers.

What of quality?

Interestingly, there is a growing global reservation about vaccine safety, fuelling the anti-vaxxer movement. In the developing nations, whose people have served as guinea pigs in the past, their concerns are: i) Will the vaccine actually work, given the perceived rush to market? ii) With limited number of trials, in multiple populations, across the world, will the vaccine be effective for all? iii) Will nanochips really be inserted with the vaccine: the global population control conspiracy theory?

The fast-track approach in some countries has also garnered suspicions that regulatory bodies will be lax in ensuring quality. Thus, trust is of essence, especially if the early batch, couched in altruism, is shipped out to the developing world for testing. One can imagine the virulent backlash if there is a breach of trust.

Who pays and how much?

This question is probably unanswerable at this stage. In the West, however, people with low incomes who lack insurance can get free or low-cost drugs through assistance programmes. Such support programmes do not exist in the developing countries where only the rich can pay the high prices. How will the Covid-19 vaccine be priced: greed-based or solace-driven? Battered by daily survival challenges, the developing world is already wary about any new price burdens.

Will the knowledge be shared?

Local production will be the key to safeguarding the multitudes in the developing world. But this knowledge is unlikely to be shared—voluntarily and/or altruistically. Only some arcane Faustian bargain may work, bound by straight jacket production contracts and inscrutable deals. But, with big money at stake, and markets to skim, the legal force of patents and the politics of power will surely take precedence. The developing world can only sit and watch from the sidelines.

Some countries are accused of using cyber thieves to steal the knowledge from targeted laboratories. For the developing countries, they simply do not have the craft; even if they did, they would not dare!

Is there the capacity to deliver?

Will there be enough trained healthcare personnel to vaccinate the global population? There will be a huge need for healthcare workers, facilities and training, supplemented by a variety of equipment. How quickly can these resources be marshalled? Are governments even prepared or likely to spend on building such capacity? This, again, places the vaccine out of reach of many.

If the goal is humanitarian, vaccine development will best come about through global cooperation, information sharing and resource pooling. But there are many stakeholders—scientists, companies, investors, lobbyists, regulatory bodies, and the governments themselves. In their clash of interests, the humanitarian goal, if any, will be the first casualty. An unbridled and self-seeking tribalism also casts its dark shadow on the world today, where the prevailing spirit is winner-takes-all.

Again, the poorer nations lose. What then is their fate? I turn to our "so-called" houses of knowledge—the universities and research institutes—that could have carved out frontrunner positions in biotechnology, social sciences and a plethora of related fields. With a presence for decades, some nearing even a century, solutions should have come from them instead of waiting for handouts. But all they have done is vie for professoriates while professing nothing. And the knowledge they fare continues to do little for the people they pretend to empower and protect with illusory solutions.

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To go or not to go online?

RUBAIYA MURSHED

AS my students entered the exam hall, their faces were a tad bit more tense than usual. I was nervous myself. I would finally find out whether our efforts to make the course different had been a whopping failure. It was the midterm of our Research Methodology course and these 14 students were our acid tests. I had gone into teaching the course with much excitement and thanks to my co-teacher, we were able to make the changes we wanted. In our education system, even at the university level, memorisation and cramming are, sadly, still the most popular learning strategies. We wanted students to think and learn by thinking. We designed our course in such a way that we would be able to encourage creativity, originality and interactive classes. It was a challenge. I was uncertain how the students would respond and whether this would actually enable them to learn better. Above all, I wanted to get the students to love learning.

As Covid-19 forces us to contemplate university education in terms of online classes and session jams, this may be an eye-opening opportunity for us to strive to improve our education system. While the lack of infrastructure and resources may be an impediment to mobilising online teaching as an alternate route, what worries me more is whether we have the intellectual capacity to make the shift. I find the most pertinent question to be whether how we teach—and how our students learn—is compatible with the change.

When I'd planned that the exam question paper for my course would be case study based so that students would have to think and wouldn't be able to "vomit" their memorised answers onto the answer scripts, I knew that it was my responsibility to train the students for this approach. I couldn't impose a different style of assessment on them without preparing them for it. I had to first learn the right pedagogy and apply it in contrast to the usual pedagogy I myself had been used to as a student.

For online classes, we need to be prepared with much more than just laptops and internet access. Firstly, the online modality would have to be substantially different from the spoon-feeding pedagogy that we are accustomed to if we want students to really learn. However, this is true for offline classes as well. How well do our students really learn anyway? How can they if memorisation is their dominant study strategy? If we are to aim for better learning, I believe that the most effective strategy is to simply change the exam question formats. Teachers providing references and reading materials, and students looking up those references and reading on their own time would matter more, because students would have to rely on really learning to pass and excel.

For example, in open book exams, the exam question structures make the students think. That should be the ultimate goal—to make students think, to teach them how to think. To make online classes a success, there is really no alternative to drastically changing our assessment format. In the existing format, students could easily copy their answers onto their online answer scripts because the questions are often simply too direct. Giving students assignments as an alternative to exams also has its own problems—plagiarism to begin with.

Sadly, due to our school and college education system having their own flaws, there is perhaps also a lacking in students' skills—simply writing two paragraphs in English on their own may be a struggle for many. Before we enforce a new system, we need to ask ourselves whether the students—-all of them, regardless of their backgrounds—have the capacity to adapt to it. We need to teach our students in such a way that they can answer applied questions and not just memorise the definitions. We need to figure out how to keep students motivated because their enthusiasm is important in ascertaining that they absorb what they learn.

Of course, we would need preparations for such a shift. Just from my experience, I can promise that it takes a lot of effort. As the teacher, I had to read twice—maybe even thrice—as much as my students. It was worth it though, especially because the students stepped up to the challenge. They convinced me that students will respond well if we give them the right opportunity, platform and lessons to do so. A very crucial point—a confession if you may—is that class size matters. We were able to implement the changes because we had a manageable class size. For larger class sizes, the struggle is much harder; not impossible, just extremely demanding. There may also be variations to the feasibility of such a shift across different subjects—across different institutions even. Sadly, there is much variation in both infrastructural and intellectual capacity. Such variation, especially across students of different socioeconomic backgrounds, is why it is difficult to design an educational policy that will not harm a particular group. Closing the divide caused by this variation should be a topmost priority.

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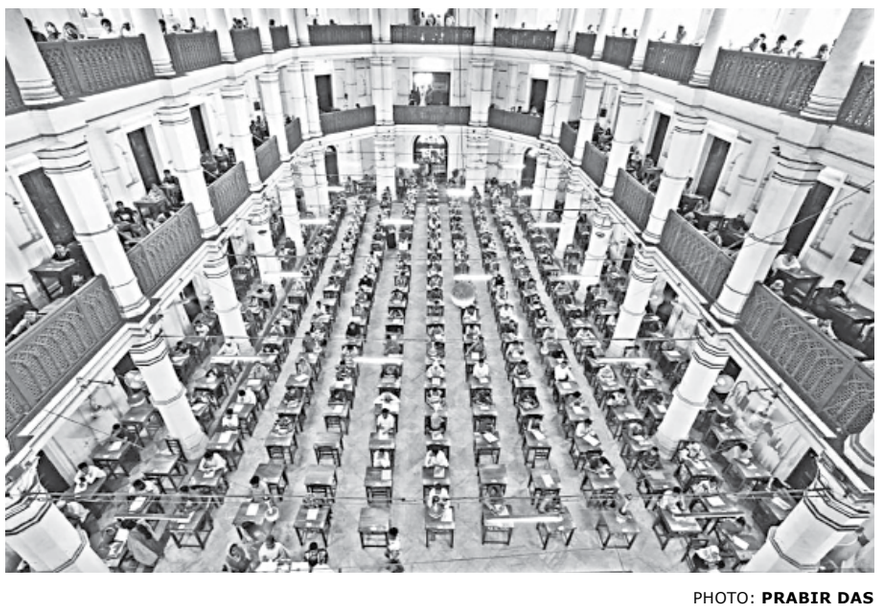

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

For students who were at the end of their programmes and about to graduate soon, there is the matter of whether a delay will cause them harm in the job market and in higher studies. In our system, their CGPAs are as important as sugar levels are to a diabetic patient. There has been much chaos over how to assign grades already. If we put the learning factor aside, the purpose of a grade is to act as a signal in the job market. What to do? The fairness of relying on past grades may be questioned.

Another option is to go for universal pass/fail grading. But how do we decide when to fail a student? Should we then, in the light of the current pandemic, just let all students pass? There is a possibility that someone undeserving may get a pass when they would have normally gotten a fail. As a result of passing everyone, the system loses its opportunity to use CGPAs and grades as filters. In such a case, the intervention would have to come from the job market. Employers would have to devise new and innovative filtering systems when they recruit from this student pool. I believe that such a change is needed anyway because relying on grades—in the current state of education in this country—to assess quality is faulty.

To identify alternatives, there is no substitute to rigorous quality research in the field of education. There is an immense lack of educational data in Bangladesh. We need research to be able to inform evidence-based policymaking. Otherwise, it will continue to be speculations, trial and errors. How long can we afford to shine the spotlight on a stage where "development" dances while the education system crumbles beneath?

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