

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR  
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# Professional bodies limit general public’s access to healthcare

## Partiality in treatment unacceptable

IT is most unfortunate that at a time when our already fragile healthcare system is taking a blow from the surging number of coronavirus cases, a report published in this paper reveals the shocking practice of “booking” of private hospitals by the upper echelons of society. Flexing their muscles, a number of influential and professional bodies like Bangladesh Judicial Service Association, Bangladesh Police, Supreme Court Bar Association, Broadcast Journalist Centre and Bangladesh Medical Association (BMA), among others, have already reserved beds or entire hospitals for their members or are pushing to do so. What is more bewildering is that the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) recently asked three private hospitals in the capital to provide treatment to the members of the Supreme Court Bar Association and their families who are infected with Covid-19.

We cannot help but ask, with such “special arrangements” underway, what will happen to ordinary people, many of whom have already been denied treatment? This daily has reported time and again about the sorry state of our hospitals due to the alarming lack of preparedness. It has become difficult for Covid-19 patients to get beds, especially in ICUs, at private hospitals, as only a handful of those provide treatment to such patients.

Denying healthcare is a violation of human rights and under no circumstances can we, as a society, condone a practice of arranging preferential treatment to the influential while depriving access to ordinary people. The situation has exposed the acute shortage of critical healthcare and the inequities that prevail in accessing it. Healthcare is a right for all and not the privilege of a few.

During such crucial times, we need all hands on deck. The government must form quick response teams to provide assistance to every patient, regardless of their social status or profession. It is imperative that the authorities mandate equal treatment for all during this pandemic to ensure that no more suffering and unnecessary loss of life is allowed due to negligence and discriminatory practices.

# Returnee migrant workers should be quarantined

## Authorities must provide these facilities

SPECIAL flights of Biman have been bringing back migrant workers to Bangladesh, mainly from the Middle East. Recently, 388 expatriate workers returned from Saudi Arabia; most of them had been in jail or detention camps in the Gulf country. These men only add to the over 14,000 migrant workers who have returned from ten countries since April. Many more will come back, as they have lost their jobs due to the pandemic. We are concerned about what kind of precautions the authorities have taken to prevent further spread of the virus, which has already gotten out of control in the country. Are these migrants being tested, quarantined and if infected, treated?

Returnees are supposed to produce medical reports certifying that they are Covid-19 negative, following which they are allowed to leave. But this does not take into account the 14 day incubation period, nor the possibility of getting infected after the test had been taken, for example, during the flight. We understand the logistical challenge of testing such a huge number of people and then making sure they quarantine. As far as we know, there are some institutional quarantine measures but they are far from being enough. The result is that most of these returnees are being asked to self quarantine when they reach their home towns or villages. Is this at all practical, especially in a scenario where these migrant workers will be self-isolating in homes where a separate sleeping area and bathroom facilities are likely to be non-existent?

We have seen what happened previously, with migrant workers from Italy and other countries going to their villages without being tested or quarantined. A mismanaged attempt to keep foreign returnees at the Hajj camp backfired, as there were no adequate facilities. This led to a fast spread of the virus in the areas they returned to.

We are worried that a similar situation is unfolding as thousands of migrant workers are coming back. There is an urgent need for institutional quarantine for the incubation period. We have seen that most of the migrants coming in previously have violated the 14 day (some experts say it should be longer) quarantine period when they were asked to self-isolate in their homes. Unless the authorities can enforce the self quarantine, such instructions are pointless.

The authorities were well aware that thousands of migrant workers will be coming in; they should have been prepared to test them and put them into institutional quarantine. Experts have already warned of the possibility of a fresh wave of infections due to the huge influx of migrant workers, many of whom could be carriers of the virus. We urge the authorities to take these warnings seriously and take immediate steps to arrange institutional quarantine with proper facilities where returnee migrant workers will be treated with compassion and respect.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

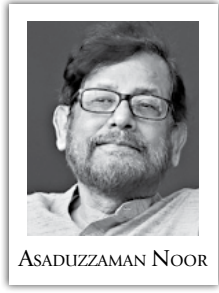
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Opinions must be heard

There used to be a polls section on the website of this daily where we could vote on whether we agreed with government policies or not. This was our “only” democratic right, which was taken away too. Given the times we live in, this needs a comeback. I would highly appreciate the return of Star Weekend magazine too. It pains me to see how journalists in the West hold their politicians accountable, whereas in our country, our journalists are more worried about their careers. I believe we can all stand up and not give in, whoever may be in power.

Rifat Nawaz,by email

# Remembering the rebel voice of Kamal Lohani



ASADUZZAMAN NOOR

IN the early sixties, cultural activists and student bodies with different political affiliations, led by their university faculty, played a crucial role in demanding democracy and holding the Pakistani authoritarian regime to account. In 1966, I moved to Dhaka as a student. It was during this time I first met Kamal Lohani. The veteran journalist is known widely for his role in 1971 as the news editor of Shadhin Bangla Betar Kendra, which earned him the title of “Shobdo Shoinik”, and his varied contributions to different news outlets, including as the director of Bangladesh Betar after independence. But at the time, our acquaintance was formed as cultural activists and through our left-leaning politics.

Many years later, Lohani Bhai told me that his “rebellious character” was first shaped during 1952. As a child, after losing his mother at six years of age, he was sent to live with his aunt in Kolkata. In his childhood, he said he had been “lucky enough to see the end of World War II and unlucky enough to see communal riots, but I lived through the greatest misfortune of all—seeing the nation fall apart in its bid to get rid of the colonisers.” He returned to his hometown Pabna after Partition, and was preparing to sit for his matriculation exams when the February 21 massacre happened. The next day, there were protests across the country, and his spontaneous involvement in those protests shaped the beliefs that guided him throughout his life. As a student in Pabna, he was a member of the Student Union, and once in Dhaka, he became immersed in journalism and cultural activities as well.

When we met in the sixties, Kamal Lohani had formed a group called Kranti (this was after he left his position as general secretary at Chhayanaout from 1962 to 1966), through which he became one of the leaders of the cultural movement. I saw one of their performances at the Paltan Maidan, and I remember feeling inspired. By then, a few of us had established the University of Dhaka Shongskriti Shongshod and we wanted to organise events of the same calibre. It was through this cultural exchange that Lohani Bhai and I were introduced and came to know each other well.

I was surprised when I later found out that this sombre gentleman was not only a political and cultural activist, but a dance artist as well. His relationship with dance was another spontaneous turn in his life. In 1959, the Bulbul Academy

of Fine Arts decided to create a dance drama based on the folk narrative of Bangladesh. Kamal Lohani was involved in organising the performance of Jasimuddin’s *Nakshikanthar Maath*, which required the participation of around eight male dancers. When they were struggling to find enough men for the cast, he took it up as a challenge. He recounted later that the performance attracted such a huge crowd that poet Jasimuddin himself struggled to find a seat—no small feat at a time when there was a greater focus on classical drama over folk performances.

Although we were connected in our cultural activities, our political ideologies—like all of the left—were split along the Moscow and Peking schools of thought. Some of the Peking proponents had a “don’t disturb Ayub” policy due to the close ties between Pakistan and China, and the Moscow supporters used it as ammunition against them. But it is important to mention that despite his support for Peking, Kamal Lohani was staunchly against autocratic rule. At the time, I was immersed in the student movement of the Sarbadaliya Chhatra Sangram Parishad under the leadership of DUCSU, which was part of a wider movement that demanded the autonomy of East Pakistan and the removal of Ayub Khan from power. And Kamal Lohani was at the frontlines of this anti-autocratic movement.

*Kamal Lohani was in one way, an uncompromising man. There was no compromising his beliefs. There was no compromise in his stance against autocracy, which was made clear once again through his involvement in the movement against Ershad. There was no compromise when it came to his support for Bengali nationalism, or his belief in a secular Bangladesh.*



Kamal Lohani in 1960.

PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA

Another thing I remember from those days is the respect that Lohani Bhai showed for Bangabandhu. In fact, when Kamal Lohani was arrested in 1962, less than a month after his son was born, due to his involvement in the anti-autocratic student movement, he was jailed for three and a half months with some of the leaders at its forefront. He mentioned this in an interview with me, many years later, saying—“I consider it to be my greatest privilege that during those months, I was in the company of the heroes of Bangladesh, people whose names now make us bow our heads in respect. The first was of course our leader Bangabandhu, but I also had the privilege of knowing Abul Mansur Ahmad, Rafiuddin Ahmed Chowdhury and others. Bangabandhu used to fondly call me Captain, because I captained the volleyball team we had in prison.”

We all know how he, like the rest of the nation, heeded Bangabandhu’s call for freedom and contributed to the war effort in their own ways. He reached Kolkata in early May of 1971, and after Shadhin Bangla Betar Kendra officially launched at the end of that month, a dedicated team of journalists and artists worked everyday to bring the voice of the liberation struggle to the Bengali

people. In December 1971, it was Kamal Lohani who read the daily bulletin from Shadhin Bangla Betar that announced the independence of Bangladesh—a memory that he fondly looked back on.

At one point, he became increasingly frustrated with the Bangladeshi left and moved away from active politics. He dedicated his life to journalism and culture instead, holding senior positions in different news outlets and cultural organisations. He contributed to Bangla literature and culture through his various writings and through his work as an editor. But in whatever he did, his rebel voice was heard.

Kamal Lohani was in one way, an uncompromising man. There was no compromising his beliefs. There was no compromise in his stance against autocracy, which was made clear once again through his involvement in the movement against Ershad. There was no compromise when it came to his support for Bengali nationalism, or his belief in a secular Bangladesh. And there was no compromising his conviction that without socialism, secularism and nationalism, there would be no free Bangladesh.

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Asaduzzaman Noor is a Member of Parliament and cultural activist.

# Nobody’s children

Studies have shown that this benefits both groups. Getting the ten highest-performing students from classes eight to 12 in every school to be a “big buddy” to a homeless child is a fantastic way to teach the students empathy, humanity and responsibility. Just imagine the number of street children who may benefit from such pairings as well. The foster home would take care of food, shelter and safety, and there are ways to solve the problem of space regarding shelter. Can’t schools,

girl from the slums dreams of becoming a scientist. And why shouldn’t she? The aspirations of any child need not be limited and we should not fit them into a box with a set list of destinations. A street child can be part of our demographic dividend too.

In terms of financing, we may need to accept that laws banning child labour are useless unless we facilitate its enforcement. For sustainability, we may need to consider a fee to be a part



RUBAIYA MURSHED

JUNE 12—World Day against Child Labour—wasn’t supposed to be just another Friday. It would have been the launch day of my first book, containing stories about street children. Some of these children are school dropouts. Some have never gone to school. Some have lost their families and their homes; going to school is the last thing on their mind. This last group are the most vulnerable—the “hard to reach” children. I call them “nobody’s children”, because sadly, that is just what they’ve become to us.

The 2025 Sustainable Development Goal of eradicating all child labour seems a far cry now, but wasn’t it already? We have social safety net programmes such as the Street Children Rehabilitation Programme. There was an initiative by Bangladesh Bank in 2014 to provide street children with bank accounts to save the income they earn. Are these initiatives working? Can we do better? I believe we can, especially if we focus on three specific interventions.

The first is to develop a database of street children to keep track of them. This would mean figuring out a way to give the children shelter so that they do not have to move around to survive. It will be tricky. Some street children have families but cannot shelter with them, and others have no family at all. We need to incorporate all the different categories and provide each child with the support they need.

The second immediate need is a specialised education programme. We will have to design a sustainable model of how to protect, provide for and educate street children. One size will not fit all. Our best option is to design a programme that would be a cross between a foster care system and a specialised school where education is tailored to each child’s level and capacity.

Here is where we have the scope to be innovative. For example, we can adopt a “big buddy” programme that has proved successful in many countries. The main idea is for privileged children to tutor and mentor underprivileged children.



Bangladeshi child labourers wash their hands before lunch at an aluminium pot factory in Dhaka in 2014.

PHOTO: AFP/MUNIR UZ ZAMAN

especially the larger ones, donate two of their classrooms for 15 street children to sleep in? We could even have “child-mobiles”—caravan style homes—with beds and hygiene facilities.

Two important pieces of the puzzle are—how to empower these children and make sure they can support themselves when they become adults, and how to fund all this. For the former, vocational skills training may need to become a part of the education programme, but not as a substitute to education itself. Why? A scene from the movie *Super 30*, based on the life of Indian mathematics teacher Anand Kumar, comes to mind—where a

of the specialised education programme. Charitable sponsors would help, or it may also be the case that a street child would have to work part-time in a safe and secure job. There is scope for local entrepreneurship to bloom here, and there should be strict rules to ascertain safe labour for the children.

My final proposal is to allocate a separate portion of the next national budget for the education of homeless children. Create a separate allocation for them not only as a social safety net programme, but in the budget allocated for education as well.

I often have dreams about the street

children I knew. In one dream, there’s a two-decker red bus, the top deck with warm beds and the bottom with tables with food, shelves of books, a filter for drinking water. Some forgotten children live in the bus; they go to their special schools in the morning and sell books from the bus by day. Can we make something like this a reality? There are many NGOs who have been working for years to help street children. It cannot remain as philanthropy anymore. We will only be able to make a real sustainable difference if we can institutionalise our ideas. It has to be a system, not a charity.

There are more pros than cons. Such a programme for street children has the potential to create thousands of new jobs. It would require a large pool of teachers, caregivers and mental health experts. The first challenge is to change our mindsets. We have to make the job of teaching a street child attractive, and give it the high remuneration and elevated social status it deserves. Teaching a street child or being a primary school teacher should not be a transition before switching to a better job. It is the better job. That’s how we should set the stage.

I’ve learnt that ideas, no matter how important, are easier, while implementation in a country like ours requires the attention of the big fish. We tried, through our organisation Blue Roses Foundation, but couldn’t persist due to lack of capital. I then began to write down the stories of the children I’d known. I asked them whether they would give me the honour of being their voice and they poured their hearts out to me. Many years later, the stories are about to become the book *Nobody’s Children*. This book is for the world to hear the unheard children. With the blessings of my publisher UPL, I am pledging my writer’s cut from the book sales to sustainable efforts for the betterment of street children. As Valerie Taylor, founder of Centre for the Rehabilitation of the Paralysed (CRP), who very kindly wrote the foreword to the book, says, “May we care enough so that ‘nobody’s children’ someday become ‘everybody’s children’”.

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If you want to become a part of the fight to ensure better lives for street children, please email nobodyschildren2020@gmail.com.

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