

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR
LATE S. M. ALI

DHAKA SATURDAY JULY 18, 2020, SHRBAN 3, 1427 BS

Why is there no database of the poor and vulnerable?

Its absence is fuelling inequity in access and distribution

WE are concerned that four months since the onset of Covid-19 in the country, the government is yet to prepare a reliable database of the poor and vulnerable, which continues to pose a major challenge for the distribution of food aid to those in need. From the beginning, the government has insisted that the country has sufficient food reserves to ward off any possibility of a famine, but unfortunately it has not been able to ensure a systematic and equitable distribution of these reserves. As such, vast numbers of those worst hit by the pandemic have been left out of social safety net programmes; corruption and mismanagement in distribution of relief have been rampant. Private initiatives have also fallen short of reaching the vulnerable in a systematic manner, given the absence of a database.

Food secretary, Mosammat Nazman Khanum, in a virtual programme organised by the Right to Food Bangladesh, a platform of food security campaigners, admitted that an extensive study is needed to prepare a complete and flawless database to ensure food security. She asked the platform to carry out such a study to find out the exact number of vulnerable people. While we appreciate her candour and her willingness to give space to the development sector, we wonder why the government itself is not preparing such a list, given the complexities and difficulties involved in identifying poor households across the country in the absence of a fully-functioning elaborate identification infrastructure. There needs to be coordination between local government and NGOs in this regard to ensure speedy creation of such a database and effective distribution of food aid.

The government is still using the 2016 Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES), the last official database for assessing poverty, to roll out social safety net programmes. This needs to be updated on an urgent basis to reflect the growing and current number of poor and vulnerable households so that effective and targeted initiatives can be undertaken. Otherwise, no matter how extensive the food aid packages are, a large number of poor households will continue to go hungry.

Sixty-four-year-old takes bookselling business from the streets to social media

Serving the bibliophiles with commitment

A recent report in this paper sheds light on the sanguine story of Habibur Rahman, a book vendor who came to Dhaka from Narsingdi in 1988. Missing out on the opportunity to attain literacy himself and unable to educate his sons due to the hardships of life, Habibur Rahman resorted to find solace in his bookselling business which brought the joy of books to readers. He started selling books on the street in front of High Court and at Sadarghat but was shunned by many who showed nothing but disrespect towards him. The 64-year-old later settled at the University of Dhaka (DU) campus and has been enlightening many young loyal customers, who were welcoming, for the past 16 years. Many students even assisted him financially during his difficult times.

As the pandemic struck, Habibur's business took a blow—from selling books worth BDT 3,000 per day to barely making BDT 500 now—and it became extremely difficult for him to continue with such meagre income. Upon being advised by a regular customer, and with the help of his son, the father-son duo took an innovative approach and decided to conduct the 32-year-old business digitally through social media by opening a page titled, Book Destiny. Much to their delight, the response was overwhelming and continues to garner traction amongst DU's online student communities. Book Destiny has already delivered books to Farmgate, Khilgaon, Lalmatia, Mirpur, Moghbazar and Mohammadpur and intends to deliver outside Dhaka in the near future.

Despite the abundance in sales made online, Habibur's humble efforts bring him back to his endearing salespoint—on the footpath at Shahbagh—where he continues to set up shop. He feels strongly about the physical interaction he makes with his treasured customers. We have seen many startups skyrocketing to become billion-dollar businesses, all because of the opportunities made available on the digital platform. While Book Destiny may not be on par in terms of such magnitude, it deserves praise for being so committed to its customer-base. We believe book lovers should support such a cause and help spread the message. Such innovative ideas can easily be adopted by other booksellers too. Apart from books, there are a plethora of items available online that make our daily lives easier. As the economic crisis continues, with the help of online marketing, especially during this pandemic, it will be an innovative approach for vendors to deliver those products at our doorsteps, benefitting both parties.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Avoid going out unnecessarily

Besides taking over our daily lives, the pandemic has also taken away our right to leave our homes to visit family and friends. Ever since the lockdown was lifted, I have noticed that a large number of people have been going out for unnecessary reasons and not even following social distancing and other safety precautions. I am not saying that people cannot leave their homes, but they must understand that by staying outdoors unnecessarily, they are at risk of contracting the virus and spreading it as well.

Those who are getting out of their homes without proper protection by not wearing masks or gloves, and hanging out in groups, are just making our fight against the virus more difficult. It is absurd that so many people have taken such a careless approach.

Salma Akhter, by email



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

SHAMSAD MORTUZA

URING his regular stroll in the palace garden, Emperor Akbar once saw many crows flying around. He asked his minister, "How many crows are there in your kingdom, Birbal?" Birbal quipped, "There are 95,463 crows in your kingdom, Excellency." "How could you be so sure?" the Emperor asked. "You can get them counted, Excellency," Birbal said.

The Emperor again said, "What if there are less?" "Then some of them must have gone to some neighbouring kingdom for a visit." "And if there are more than that, then?" asked Akbar.

"Then it means that other crows have come to visit their relatives in our kingdom," said the witty minister. Thus Birbal got a suitable reward for counting crows by not counting crows.

Our obsession with numbers while hoping for the coronavirus curve to flatten makes this story quite topical. Every day we are counting new casualties, and counting days for this pandemic to be over. Any discerning reader must have understood by now that the trickster that I am referring to is not Birbal, but a hospital owner who made exorbitant amounts of money by pretending to count Covid-19 patients. However, in so doing, in no way am I equating patients undergoing this pandemic with the crows. Crows are the hapless victims, albeit reference points, in this narrative curve.

However, this analogy does involve an animal, rather its instincts. In lack of subtlety, let me say: Shahed the trickster is an animal. It is not unnatural for a trickster to be associated with animals. Tricksters in folk tales are humans with animal attributes, and vice versa. The cunningness or foolishness of a literary trickster such as Birbal, Nasreddin Hodia, Gopal Bhar, Mulla do Piaja can be interchangeably assigned to a fox, an alligator, a coyote, a possum and the like. In many communities, animals are part of human kinship. Hence, we call the foolish fox an uncle. In Western tradition, an animal belongs to the lower strata as it lacks the thinking faculty—its psyche. According to Aristotle, beasts have sensory perceptions, desires, memory, imagination, and even emotions. But animals don't have a soul, which we may call conscience in today's term.

When RAB nabbed Shahed from the outskirts of the neighbouring country, and its footage was being live-streamed, I told myself, what a scavenger! Yet this man sweet talked to climb up the social ladder. He is a conman who appeared in talk

shows, used his media tag to befriend the high and mighty, and put on a peacock's tail to blend in. I guess now we will have his plumes removed and wings clipped.

Shahed by all counts is an animal who does not have any conscience. Or how can one toy with the emotion of the people who are suffering from a fatal disease? Throwing away the test samples and fabricating test results are acts of greed that has its origin in material gain in this earthly life. I am not religious enough to foretell what divine provisions there are for animals of this sort! But I sincerely hope that he gets exemplary punishment to deter others from committing similar wrongs.

According to Investopedia, "Economic rent is an amount of money earned that exceeds that which is economically or socially necessary. Economic rents often arise from market inefficiencies or information asymmetries." One such example is contract rent where involved parties engage in a mutually agreed-upon deal granting one party unequal benefits. The over-invoicing of the price of a pillow during procurement for officials working in the Rooppur Power Plant is a glaring case in point.

A little bird told me, there are some government officials who run or have share in consultancy or trading firms. These officials hire third-party agents,

or second homes in Malaysia. They are the ones who can fly away in chartered planes. Yet when they are interred in their graves, the vaults in which they secured money become useless. But it is the duty of the government to make sure to stop the culture of impunity in which the scavengers have increased manifold. Flushing them temporarily out of the country to show that there are a less number of crows will do no good. If we really want to attain the desired economic growth, we first need to take care of these scavengers who circle over the dead and the dying ones.

In his last public speech, Bangabandhu uttered some unpleasant



Surrounded by officers, Shahed, in blue vest, being taken to the Rab Headquarters right after he was flown back to Dhaka.

Then again, Shahed is just one of many countless crows (read scavengers) that are out there. He is just one conman. There is a controversial con-woman too. A doctor and her husband are breaking bad and making news. A handsome couple—who would have thought! Reality isn't what it always seems. Could it be that they are mere pawns on someone else's chessboard? How do I know? I don't, but any thinking animal can make an intellectual guess by looking at the pattern.

The government has been extra careful to keep its affiliated party cadres away from the fight against coronavirus. It relied mostly on the institutional bureaucracy and its public officials. And these officials in turn often allow a certain type of economic rent to flourish.

give them inside information to get an upper-hand in the bidding process, or do the work themselves under the guise of phony firms. If I have heard it from a little bird, then it must not be a state secret; others who have ears of the big birds must know it too. People like Sabrina, Arif, Shahed are the puppets on strings. Their dance stopped because the cue music had been stopped for them. Now they are performing an act of a different sort. They rose to fame in the first act, and now they are having a spectacular fall at the will of the scribe. Their current job is to keep us entertained and distracted for a while. There are some intelligent people out there who are busy in outwitting the system. They are the ones investing in condominiums in Dubai Palm Beach or Begumpara in Toronto

truth, "My peasants are not corrupt. My labourers are not corrupt. Who takes bribe then? Who carry out black marketing? Who serve as foreign agents? Who does money laundering? Who does hoarding/stockpiling? It is us, the 5 percent educated people. The bribe takers and corrupts are amongst us, the 5 percent educated people. We must change our characters and purify our souls" (Suhrawardy Uddan, March 26, 1975).

The number of educated people has gone up, and so has the level of corruption. It's time we say, bring back conscience; and stamp out corruption.

Shamsad Mortuza is a professor of English at the University of Dhaka (now on leave). Currently, he is Pro-Vice-Chancellor of ULAB. Email: shamsad71@hotmail.com

Not a blue wave, but a blue tsunami

Corona pushing Trump to an electoral abyss

"The Martians—dead!... slain, after all man's devices had failed, by the humblest things that God, in his wisdom, has put upon this earth."

— HG Wells, "The War of the Worlds"



ASHFAQUE SWAPAN

IN "The War of the Worlds," HG Wells' science fiction novel, the world is brought to its knees by a vastly more technologically advanced species. The tides are turned after the humble bacteria triumphs where man failed, felling the Martians.

In an uncanny echo, US President Donald J Trump may have at last found his match in an invisible virus which is resistant to all his bullying and bluster.

First, a caveat is in order. A lot can change before November, when Trump and the Republican Party face a terrified electorate. With less than 100 days remaining, however, the window of opportunity is closing. Fast.

Putative Democratic nominee Joe Biden has a solid, stable margin in nationwide polls. An *Economist/YouGov* poll finds Biden leading Trump nationally, 49 percent to 40 percent.

The US presidential race is determined by an arcane system of state-by-state victories. A Change Research poll shows Biden ahead in the six battleground states of Arizona, Florida, Michigan, North Carolina, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin.

The scrupulously non-partisan Cook Political Report is the gold standard for handicapping US political races. "This election is looking more like a Democratic tsunami than simply a Blue wave," wrote its highly-respected analyst Amy Walter. "Republican strategists we've spoken with this week think Trump is close to the point of no return. A couple of others wondered if Trump had reached his 'Katrina' moment: a permanent loss of trust and faith of the majority of voters."

Trump's flaws are many—his mind-boggling mendacity, his sorry parade of aides, his embarrassing failure to grasp important issues, his brazen penchant for pardoning convicted acolytes.

However, it's the corona crisis that's ultimately proving to be his undoing. "Poorer nations throughout Latin

America, the Middle East, South Asia and Africa are bearing a growing share of the caseload, even as wealthier countries in Western Europe and East Asia enjoy a relative respite after having beaten back the worst effects through rigorously enforced lockdowns." *The Washington Post* reported. "And then there's the United States, which leads the world in new cases and... has shown no sign of being able to regain control."

There is a simple reason for this mess. The US is unique among developed nations in fighting science instead of embracing it. Wearing a mask in public, standard elsewhere, is a matter of bitter partisan debate. The Trump

home to a quarter of the world's reported coronavirus infections and deaths, despite being home to only 4.4 percent of the global population.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta is one of the world's most respected research institutions, sought out by the entire world to deal with public health disasters like this. Yet four former CDC chiefs lamented in an article in *The Washington Post*: "It is extraordinary for (CDC) guidelines to be undermined ..."

"The four of us led the CDC over a period of more than 15 years, spanning Republican and Democratic administrations alike. We cannot recall

His tone-deaf response to anti-racist protests are particularly anachronistic. It echoes another Republican president who targeted white resentment of Blacks in the last century, the disgraced President Richard Nixon.



Democratic presidential hopeful former Vice President Joe Biden, left, and US President Donald Trump.

PHOTO: AFP

administration recently handed US media talking points undermining its most respected and top infectious disease specialist, Dr Anthony Fauci.

"The fight with Fauci illustrated what, to many supporters of Trump, has been a disturbing pattern: ill-timed battles with little evident public support that do nothing to... articulate a rationale for another term in office or contain a pandemic that is both crippling the nation and dooming his re-election chances," CNN reported.

What's so heartbreaking is the US is paying a terrible price for it. The US is

over our collective tenure a single time when political pressure led to a change in the interpretation of scientific evidence."

They added: "We're seeing the terrible effect of undermining the CDC play out in our population. Wilful disregard for public health guidelines is, unsurprisingly, leading to a sharp rise in infections and deaths... China, using the same mitigation tools available to us and with a far larger population, has had just a tiny fraction of the 3.1 million cases reported here."

"Trying to fight this pandemic while subverting scientific expertise is like fighting blindfolded."

So, what's Trump's response to all this? Mean tweets about his pet peeve *du jour*, and dark observations about the other issue where he has failed to grasp the nation's zeitgeist—massive nationwide protests against the recent racist police killing of George Floyd, a Black man.

His tone-deaf response to anti-racist protests are particularly anachronistic. It echoes another Republican president who targeted white resentment of Blacks in the last century, the disgraced President Richard Nixon.

"Trump in recent weeks has repeatedly reprised two of Richard Nixon's most memorable rallying cries, promising to deliver 'law and order' for the 'silent majority'. But... America today is a radically different country than it was when Nixon rode those arguments to win the presidency in 1968 amid widespread anti-war protests, massive civil unrest... and rising crime rates," Ronald Brownstein writes in *The Atlantic* magazine.

"Trump hopes that reprising Nixon-style messages about disorder will allow him to mobilise massive margins and turnout among the white voters who feel threatened by these changes. But the country's underlying evolution shows how narrow a path Trump has chosen. He is betting the Republican future on resurrecting a past that is dissolving before his eyes."

What's true for *haute cuisine* is just as true for politics: You can't make the same soufflé rise twice.

And thank goodness for that.

Ashfaque Swapan is a contributing editor for *Siliconer*, a digital daily for South Asians in the United States.