

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR
LATE S. M. ALI

DHAKA FRIDAY JULY 31, 2020, SRABAN 16, 1427 B5

An Eid to remind us of our responsibility

We must stand beside each other now more than ever

AS we celebrate Eid-ul-Azha during these trying times, it is more important than ever to remember its true spiritual message of sacrifice. This Eid-ul-Azha might not be like the ones we've had before, when we could freely go to the *haat* with others and gather with family and friends on the Eid day—as it is still necessary for us to maintain social distancing in order to defeat the ongoing pandemic. But it's important to keep in mind that the Covid-19 outbreak has put a major dent in the lives of thousands of people and economically destroyed the financial stability of many families, pushing many into destitution. Thus it is incumbent upon those fortunate and better off among us to stand beside those whose lives have been wrecked by the pandemic.

Besides the economic damage it has caused, it has also led many to perish. And many will be observing this Eid without the presence of their near and dear ones on this Earth. As a society, we must show empathy to them as they try to cope with their terrible loss. We must all be ready to be more understanding and tolerant of each other, as all of us will be going through some form of difficulty or the other during this time which, under normal circumstances, would have been a time of celebration.

We appreciate the government's initiative to distribute free rice to the extreme poor ahead of Eid-ul-Azha. The food aid is being given to one crore VGF (Vulnerable Group Feeding) cardholders across the country to ease their sufferings due to the recent floods and the coronavirus outbreak. We hope the government will carry out this duty making sure that there are no irregularities or inefficiencies in the distribution process this time. And we encourage non-government and private organisations to also chip in as there is a great need for much more relief initiatives than what is present.

We would also like to remind everyone how important it is to maintain proper hygiene during Eid-related ceremonies and distributions. The government must ensure that the city corporations and other local administrations diligently carry out their duties so that garbage and other waste material do not pile up on our roads and such public places. And lastly, we hope that Eid travellers will have a safe journey home and back following all the health guidelines, despite the struggles that arise with trying to overcome an ongoing pandemic. We wish our readers and patrons Eid Mubarak!

Higher conviction rate in human trafficking cases can make a difference

Govt needs to ensure quick disposal of cases

IN two recently organised webinars—one by Star Forum of *The Daily Star* and the other by Brac and Winrock International—experts working on safe migration and protecting trafficking survivors came up with some important suggestions that could help reduce the extent of human trafficking occurring in the country. According to them, a higher rate of conviction in human trafficking cases could be an effective way to curb the crime in the country. The slow pace of prosecution has been one of the factors that embolden the traffickers to continue with the crime. They said the seven tribunals, set up to dispose of human trafficking cases, should be made "properly functional" to reduce the number of pending cases. Ensuring protection of the victims and witnesses is another area that needs to be given importance.

In recent years, the incidents of human trafficking have increased alarmingly in the country. Sexual exploitation of women who fell victim to trafficking have also increased. Bangladesh also has been in the international news for some recent human trafficking cases. The question is, despite all these facts, why do people look for ways to go to a foreign land at any cost? The answer is very simple. It is poverty and unemployment that force most people to try to migrate to the middle eastern or European countries.

According to Rohingya lawyer Razia Sultana, Rohingya men and women living in the camps are increasingly falling victim to trafficking gangs. Being deprived of any employment opportunities here, they take on uncertain, perilous journeys through the sea to migrate to other countries for a better future for their families and themselves.

To combat human trafficking effectively and ensure safe migration of our workers, the Overseas Employment and Migrants Act 2013 must be enforced efficiently. According to the law, recruitment agencies must ensure the basic rights of our workers in the destination countries—they must make sure the workers get the job they were offered, the salaries as promised, have proper accommodation facilities, etc. The law also says that these agencies must have a local office through which they would recruit people. But in reality, most of these agencies do not have any local office and they recruit people through *dalals* (middlemen) who are often involved with various national and transnational trafficking gangs. So, bringing these middlemen under the purview of law and making them accountable is crucial.

In addition, creating employment opportunities for our workers inside the country can significantly reduce the crime since unemployment is one reason for unsafe migration. But the most important task is to bring the perpetrators of such crimes to justice. For that, all the seven tribunals dealing with trafficking cases should be made functional. And effective coordination between the special tribunal public prosecutors and the investigation officers is essential to ensure punishment of perpetrators through convictions in human trafficking cases.

Fostering a research culture in higher education



BLOWN' IN THE WIND

SHAMSAD MORTUZA

IN an op-ed published on July 27, Prof Syed Saad Andaleeb reviewed the DU annual budget and argued that the dearth of funding should not be blamed for the lack of research. Since the responsibilities of a faculty member include both teaching and research, Prof Andaleeb suggested that the salary amount shown in the budget (30.71 percent of the total Tk 869.56 crore) should also be considered under research head. He cited examples from MIT and UCLA to point out how faculty members compensate for their own research by bringing in grants. The paltry payment of our public university teachers exposes the chink in the armour of such an argument.

However, Prof Andaleeb raised two very pertinent issues: What is the broad vision or expectation from our universities? Do we want our universities to remain certificate-churning, degree-giving academic institutions, or do we patronise some of our institutions to become flagship research centres?

As the oldest university of the country, we expect Dhaka University to take up the role. However, sitting on the century's threshold, Dhaka University is gradually falling in research as is evident from its budgetary allocation. This year, it allocated Tk 40.91 crore for research, which is only 4.07 percent of the total budget. In the last academic session, the figure was 5.04 percent, and the year before, it was 6.66 percent. While funding is an issue, the negligence towards—or the absence of—a research culture in our academia is even more worrying.

By research culture, I mean the behaviours, values, expectations, attitudes and norms of an academic community. In the academia, research is related to the career paths of the faculty. In universities in Bangladesh, research is mainly conducted and communicated keeping the objective of promotion in mind. In most cases, the outputs of research take the shape of a publication in a peer-reviewed journal, which is treated as a criterion for promotion. For each rung of the professional ladder, a faculty member is supposed to publish a certain number of publications. For instance, with a total of 15 publications and a higher degree, a faculty member can become a professor in 10 to 12 years if the wind is in her or his favour. Beyond that, any research or publication is voluntary, and there is hardly any incentive or reward. There is no evaluation for teaching, no annual performance appraisal either. The promotion of a faculty member largely depends on spending the required number of years in a position and getting the right amount of publications. If someone gets a high-impact publication

in a web of science journal, she or he earns the same points as someone publishing locally. Even a shortage in the required number of publications or service length can easily be overlooked if the candidate carries the right party card. In other words, the reward system for research is far from fair.

Research centres are also created either to promote certain individualistic or institutional agendas or to rope in a particular grant in which a select few will be benefitted. Within the same institution, there are overlapping units vying for the same target groups. For instance, at DU there is an Institute of Disaster Management and Vulnerability Studies as well as the Department of Disaster Science and Management. The Institute of Business Administration and the Faculty of Commerce are offering similar degree programmes. The Institute

during their stints. The system values quantity above quality.

There is hardly any accountability. Even though most of the bursary comes from the taxpayers, the public universities have failed to create a research culture where they link up with the government agencies and the industry. Because of the absence of this tripartite linkage, avoided in the name of institutional autonomy, we have failed to recognise the stakeholders of our public system. Only a national conversation can help us understand our research landscape.

As long as members of a university think that politics generates higher returns, we are not going to have researchers. Faculty members will simply invest in politics to hold on to offices in place of building their research resumes. Time has come to incentivise research, however. This should be done at the point of entry. Public universities still maintain the

themselves lured by the research culture or academic ambience in developed countries. Imagine how many times we have heard the success stories of Bangladeshi researchers doing marvels in overseas universities! But somehow we do not have the system in place and the research culture in practice to accommodate these brains who had been drained. Even more sadly, there is no initiatives to connect with our brains abroad and create a brain circulation.

On top of that, the quest for research ranking is encouraging an unhealthy practice where our research objectives are being convoluted and dictated by the ranking agencies. Today, each local university must have a global strategy, and align itself with the sustainable development goals to tackle complex humanitarian issues in the areas of health, human rights, economy and the



In our universities, the reward system for research is far from fair.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

of Modern Languages has started giving degrees in English as a Foreign Language, notwithstanding the fact there is a well-established English Department doing the same. These overlapping programmes suggest primarily a wastage of resources, and secondarily a shortage of collegial culture. The university has failed to create a support structure that promotes interdisciplinary research. Every faculty member lives in a silo, and is afraid that in a collaborative project her or his contribution will not be credited. In other words, we lack good practice in our academic institutions.

Often an influential faculty member breaks away from her or his host department, and starts a centre to insulate their research. These "selfish" ventures find administrative support because the administrative heads find it rewarding to count the number of centres, departments and institutes that have been created

primitive hiring process where a faculty member is recruited based on her or his academic performance. In a system that lacks best practices, best candidates are often not chosen. Then again, not all good academics are programmed to be good researchers. Recruiting someone with a Master's degree with no teaching or research experience is one of the primal flaws of our system. Even in our neighbouring countries, degree-level college teachers (let alone those at universities) must have higher research degrees such as MPhil or PhD as their initial recruitment criteria.

Many of our colleagues struggle to write a research paper because they were never taught to do so in their academic years. They had traditional summative assessments in which they could get away with memorising answers right before the exams. The better ones soon become discouraged by the system, and find

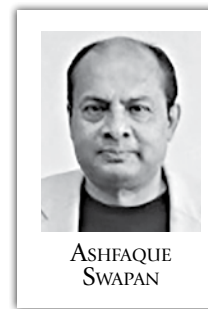
environment. If a university teacher thinks that her or his duty rests in giving lectures in a large classroom and checking bundles of scripts, then she or he will miss the big picture.

Research communities thrive through promoting a culture of public and societal engagement, through working with communities, educators, and policymakers both at home and abroad. Dhaka University can lead the way by boosting knowledge exchange through innovations and industry collaboration. To do that, there has to be a national level policy which can be adopted through a dialogue on research culture—otherwise, we will simply keep on barking up the wrong tree and wait for fruitful research by locating our mouth where the money is.

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

Amazon Kindle, here we come!

Pioneering programme launches Bangla e-books



ASHFAQ SWAPAN

ONLINE juggernaut Amazon owns Kindle, the 600-pound gorilla in the US electronic book space. Its global presence is also formidable. Its dominance in online book readership is overwhelming in the US and substantial in the rest of the world. A pioneering new programme has just launched Bangla books on Amazon Kindle. It is an exciting e-publishing landmark for Bangla.

Thirty books are part of this growing list of Bangla books available for sale on Kindle. These books are also available on Google Books. Authors include such leading names as Bangladesh's Anisul Hoque and West Bengal's Akademi Award-winning author Amar Mitra.

This is a complex story where digital technology, publishing and the future of Bangla intersect.

We Bangla aficionados are rather a quaint, old-school lot. The thought of Bangla literature invariably sends us into a nostalgic reverie, basking in fond memories of the annual book fairs at the Bangla Academy (or its gargantuan cousin in Kolkata). Where's the fun of a digital book where the physical joy of a book nestling in our hands is replaced by ephemeral bits and bytes?

The fact of the matter is it's crucially important to bring Bangla publishing up to speed in the digital age. This is where the 150,000-member Bangla bibliophile Facebook group Boier Hut comes in. Started in 2012 by passionate Atlanta-based Bangladeshi expat, the Facebook group is hard to pin down geographically. Its members run across the length and breadth of the world, and its administrators are in Dhaka, Kolkata and Mumbai, and it boasts of—I kid you not—over 40,000 online Bangla books. These books are available freely, but

Riton is keen to take it a step further. "The Amazon Kindle e-book ecosystem is so big, it just bothers me that Bangla does not have a footprint here," he told me.

Two years ago, he discovered that Amazon Kindle did not even support Bangla. In India, Amazon Kindle supports Hindi, Gujarati, Malayalam but not Bangla. He harangued the folks at Amazon Kindle support. The response was coldly businesslike—it is not clear

Bangladesh and West Bengal.

The whole point, Riton said, was to make publishing economically more viable for Bangla writers. Riton offers authors a straight 30 percent royalty from books sold on Kindle. This is generosity bordering on madness, because to promote its fledgling Bangla e-book sales, book prices are kept as low as USD 2. At that price, Amazon itself often keeps 70 percent of proceeds.



An online advertisement for Bangla e-books on Amazon Kindle.

COURTESY: AUTHOR

there is significant interest in Bangla books to merit support, the Amazon folks said.

In a word, the futile circular logic of a classic Catch-22 situation. Bangla books are not available, so there's no demand. There's no demand, so Bangla books are not available.

Riton, though, wasn't about to take no for an answer. An IT healthcare solutions expert, he worked out the technological kinks. A few months back, he launched a few Bangla books using Unicode Bangla fonts on Amazon Kindle to test the waters.

After that seemed to work fine, he registered a company in Georgia, Boier Hut Publications, and officially joined as a publishing associate at Amazon. Then he began negotiating with authors in

That's okay, says Riton, who is not in it for the money anyway. For somebody whose passion for Bangla books borders on obsession, Riton's goal is more lofty: to help digital publishing turn the tide of what he sees as impending doom for Bangla books. His group Boier Hut says in its mission statement:

"Boier Hut began with a simple premise. The digital age has ushered a new age in the dissemination of books. Many advanced countries have jumped on the digital bandwagon, and e-books have resulted in an exponential increase in the dissemination of books. Bangla books have failed woefully to take advantage of this opportunity. This is where Boier Hut decided to step in. Our goal is to use digital tools to make Bangla books easily available everywhere in the world."

The Facebook page of Boier Hut is a wondrous salon for vibrant discussions of books. Boier Hut multimedia has video chats with authors, podcasts.

The bottom line is that Bangla publishing is struggling to make the transition into financially remunerative digital publishing. This is happening at a time when Bangla publishing, in Bangladesh at any rate, is in deep crisis.

Riton says writers need to be financially compensated, otherwise literature will die. The response from writers in Bangladesh and West Bengal has been overwhelmingly supportive. Talks are ongoing to publish Hasan Azizul Huq and Tanvir Mokammel in Bangladesh and Bani Basu and Mihir Sengupta in West Bengal.

Now with Kindle, there's a big catch. While Amazon Kindle books can be downloaded and read nearly everywhere in the world, it's not available in Bangladesh. The workaround for that is to get it from Google Books, where the same titles are also available for download.

Riton is tight-lipped about initial sales figures. All he will say is that currently sales are in the low three digits. But here's the interesting thing: Just being on the Amazon Kindle space gives Bangla books huge exposure. Amazon has a monthly subscription plan, Kindle Unlimited, where book reading figures are calculated in number of pages read. The plan is available in the US as well as in India. Boier Hut e-books have a cumulative 150,000 pages read to date—no mean achievement.

Riton's goal is to get digital Bangla book publishing going. "Ultimately, if it really takes off, I'm looking forward to the day when heavyweights like Ananda Publishers and Prothoma will start their own programmes on Kindle. Only then will this whole thing work."

(For more information about Boier Hut e-books, visit: eboi.in/kindle or eboi.in/google.)

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