

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR
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DHAKA MONDAY OCTOBER 5, 2020, ASHWIN 20, 1427 BS

Independent institution to conduct dope tests

Will the government provide counselling to those who test positive?

WE have learned that the government has taken steps to form an independent institution to carry out dope tests in a systematic manner to intensify and strengthen narcotics control across the country. The tests will be conducted mainly for higher education admissions, before entrance in jobs and for the transport sector to identify drug addicts. According to the home ministry sources, any authority or private organisation would be able to conduct dope tests through the institution.

The transport sector is a major stakeholder for the government's dope test operation since drivers of public transport are often found to be driving under the influence of drugs, which is believed to be one of the causes of road accidents. So, the government has a plan to check public transport drivers before, during and at the end of a journey to stop them from taking any drugs while on duty. For higher educational institutions, these "special health examinations" will be conducted before admission and before the final examinations of the degree.

While we understand the government's good intentions in forming the institution to stop drug abuse, we would also like to draw its attention to some other issues that should also be addressed simultaneously. Given the existing unemployment problem in the country, frustration among the young people is more prevalent than ever before, which in many cases may force them to turn to drugs. If these people are identified as "drug abusers" during a job entrance exam, how does the government plan to deal with them? Will there be any counselling facilities available for them to deal with their issues? If they are outright rejected from entering a job without getting any scope to deal with their psychological issues, will that not lead them to further frustration and subsequent drug abuse? Also, if a student cannot sit for their final exams due to a positive dope test result, will they not become more vulnerable to further drugs and unsocial activities?

Will the government consider having counselling facilities in all educational institutions, transport and job sectors with professional psychologists and therapists to help those in need? These are some of the issues we hope the government will also consider while moving forward with forming the institution to stop drug abuse.

Scant regard for workers' safety

Whatever happened to worker's safety laws and regulations?

A picture published in yesterday's paper—which shows a group of workers employed in the demolition work of the BGMEA building—speaks a thousand words. They have no personal safety gear whatsoever, nor are there any visible signs of safety measures for the workplace. This picture is not unique—similar scenes can be seen in any number of construction sites, with very few exceptions, all over the country.

The picture narrates most vividly how cheap the life of a daily labourer is, and how dispensable they are, because they would do anything hazardous just so that they can put some food in the mouth of their family members who eagerly await their return. Some unlucky ones do not return, given the conditions they are compelled to work in.

The picture also speaks volumes about the utter disregard for the laws, rules and regulations related to labour which, among other things, obligate the employer to provide a safe and secure environment for the workers. It also speaks of the absence of oversight by the relevant government agencies that have the authority to penalise the errant employers, contractors and building owners.

Workplace safety has been a great concern for us. With rapid growth in our economy, more and more workers are joining the workforce, particularly in the infrastructure sector. There are labour laws and ILP conventions that regulate their work and employment. The building code also specifies the safety measures that the construction companies must provide, both personal and otherwise. But as with so many laws and regulations, our labour laws are observed in their violations only. The construction sector is the worst off in this case.

According to the Bangladesh Occupational Safety, Health, and Environment Foundation, in 2019, 945 workers lost their lives and 266 sustained injuries at their workplaces in various sectors in the country. Of those killed, 156 were construction workers. The number of deaths is nearly a hundred more in 2018. The labour ministry and other relevant agencies and authorities and the labour organisations must address this hazard with due diligence to save more lives being lost in workplaces.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Bangladesh in UN Peacekeeping Mission

It is a matter of great pride for us that Bangladesh has secured the top rank in sending troops to the United Nations peacekeeping missions amongst 118 countries, according to the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) Directorate. It regained the position after sending a 160-member Quick Reaction Force in Central African Republic on July 17.

Currently, a total of 6,731 Bangladeshis are employed in different peacekeeping missions. While we know how dangerous the global situation has been since the year began, it surely is reassuring to know our soldiers are doing whatever necessary to fulfil their peacekeeping objectives. I wish them luck in their missions.

Jubayer Ibrahim, Dhaka



MANZOOR AHMED

DOES Bangladesh education need salvaging? The official narrative is equivocal. Most young children are in primary school. The system has expanded to comprise 40 million students, over 200,000 institutions, and over a million teachers. Girls and boys are equally enrolled in schools, a feat not achieved by many developing countries. We do need to work more on improving quality. So why is the despair?

Is it a matter of describing the glass as half full or half empty? This rhetorical question does not capture reality. Is it acceptable that more than three quarters of the children—after five years of primary schooling—cannot read, write or use rules of counting at a basic level (according to the National Student Assessment survey)? But 97 percent of the students pass the primary education completion public examination, which raises questions about what is taught in school and what is measured by the examination.

Is it acceptable that graduates of tertiary education have to wait up to three years to land a job? Close to thirty percent of young people of age 15 to 24 years are not in employment, education or training—a tell-tale category called NEET.

On September 24, 1972, inaugurating the Education Commission headed by Dr Quadrat-e-Khuda at Ganabhaban, Bangabandhu had asked the Commission to expedite its work keeping in mind the requirements of the present as well as the future generations, and to cater to the vocational and agricultural needs of the country and eradicate illiteracy. Forty-eight years later, the same challenges are being discussed.

Most people, besides the quarter of the total population who are students, have views about education as parents, guardians, teachers, academics, and as concerned citizens, most having gone through a school experience themselves. There is no dearth of advice about what may be done. In the complex, large and many-faceted phenomenon called the education system, it is difficult to see the large picture and tempting to either point at diverse partial solutions or come up with a long laundry list of activities.

A favourite solution is curriculum reform—contradictorily proposing addition of new content about various social problems, or reduction of burden and simplifying it, and so on. Student assessment and examinations are another hot topic. Physical facilities—safe building, classrooms, toilet for girls—are a common concern. Decentralisation of education management is recommended to change the present highly top-down structure. IT-based learning and online



PALLAB BHATTACHARYA

INDIA'S main opposition Congress party seems to have shaken off the stupor of a disastrous performance in Lok Sabha elections in May last year and a debilitating internal feud as Rahul Gandhi and his sister Priyanka Gandhi Vadra hit the streets on October 2, to protest against the brutal assault and alleged rape of a Dalit teenager by upper-caste men in Uttar Pradesh and her cremation in the dead of night. From October 3, Rahul was also set to travel to Punjab and adjacent Haryana states, considered granaries of India, to join the farmers' agitation against the farm laws of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government.

It was not the first time Rahul hit the streets since the Covid-19 lockdown was imposed in March. He had done so when he met distraught migrant labourers on the streets of Delhi on their way back home after being rendered jobless in different states in the wake of the lockdown. But that was a cameo appearance. The one on October 2 was a full-fledged political drama as Rahul scuffled with policemen and tumbled on the ground in sweltering heat in Uttar Pradesh's Greater Noida on his way to meet the family of the Dalit woman, whose cremation in the dead of night without her family's presence has triggered a nationwide outcry.

Rahul and Priyanka were prevented from going to the village of the Dalit woman in Hathras when their cavalcade

WORLD TEACHERS' DAY

Time to rethink teaching to salvage our education

instruction as a silver bullet has come to the fore lately.

All of these are important and must play their role. But, each by itself cannot make enough difference in students' learning outcome. How they come together, what is the gel that binds them and makes an impact on measurable change in children's learning, the ultimate criterion, remain the problem.

No education system can be better than its teachers. This is a truism that happens to be true despite all that is said and done about technology-based learning. Are teachers the thread that ties various reform and change initiatives to bring about the transformation in education?

To draw attention to the teacher's paramount role in education, Unesco observes October 5 as the World Teachers' Day each year. The theme of the celebration this year is "Teachers: Leading in crisis, reimagining the future"—an opportune theme as the coronavirus

The small changes that Karmali urged teachers to begin making were to invite students to join in discussion in class, not just listen; give students the chance to take part in teaching their peers; start a social service project in which the whole class can join; find a talent in students who lack confidence; and offer help to fellow teachers who are experiencing difficulties.

In his first few months, Karmali announced the abolition of the old textbook-based public examinations for grades 4, 8 and 11 and introduction of assessment of minimum competency in language and math and moral development, with more emphasis on school-based evaluation. Karmali believes that the biggest risk is staying in place, sticking to the status quo, when the system is not working for many.

Karmali enjoys an advantage over his Bangladesh counterpart because Indonesia has been spending on education 20 percent of its national budget (of USD 193



STAR FILE PHOTO

pandemic upends all education activities and plans.

Nadiem Anwar Karmali was appointed the Minister of Education and Culture last October when Joko Widodo won a second term as President of Indonesia. Karmali, a graduate of Brown and Harvard Universities, at age 35 was a super-successful entrepreneur who had launched in 2010 the app-based transportation, delivery and payment service Gojek and built it up into a USD 10 billion business. The new minister faces the most formidable entrepreneurial challenge of transforming Indonesia's education. It has the fourth largest population in the world (compared to Bangladesh's 8th largest), 60 million students and 3 million teachers.

In his first Indonesian Teachers' Day message last year, Karmali gave a short speech, "speaking from heart," which went viral. He said, "Changes cannot be started from above. Everything starts and ends with the teacher." He pleaded, "Don't wait for cue, don't wait for orders. Take the first step. Tomorrow, wherever you are, make small changes in your class."

billion in 2020), compared to under 12 percent in Bangladesh (out of a national budget of USD 67 billion in 2020). Indonesia also took steps to decentralise education management involving local government and communities. Taking individual schools as the unit of change, Karmali aims to transform 10,000 schools in the remaining four years of his tenure, so that these become the model and catalyst for change in the whole system. He admits that the results will be truly visible in ten years, but nothing will happen unless a beginning is made.

A comparative disadvantage of Bangladesh along with countries in South Asia—unlike other regions of the world—is that it does not have a well-established, pre-service teacher education programme. Yet school teaching is the single largest field of employment for college graduates. The common practice is to first recruit college graduates as primary or secondary teachers and then let them go for one-year to 18-month pedagogy training. Bangladesh also needs to double its teaching force to reach Indonesia's

VIEWS FROM INDIA

Rahul as street fighter, chance to silence 'Pappu' jibe?

was stopped *en route* after which the siblings had begun to walk. There was no illusion that they would not be allowed to reach the village not only because the village was still 142 km from the place where they had to get off their vehicles, but also because Uttar Pradesh authorities had clamped prohibitory orders there.

Video footages of Rahul walking with party workers, falling during a skirmish with the police personnel, and he and Priyanka being taken away in a police vehicle conjured up the image of agitation-savvy opposition leaders who are no longer willing to be held back by Covid-19 and content with issuing statements, online interaction and tweets. Nothing could possibly be a more reassuring signal for the Congress party and other opposition parties that wanted Rahul to take the lead in the fight against the organisational might of the Bharatiya Janata Party. It has been a matter of unstated unhappiness in the opposition camp that ever since the Lok Sabha poll defeat, the Congress, particularly Rahul and Priyanka, have not been visible much on the ground.

There appears to be three main objectives of Rahul's role as a street fighter. In the short term, the Congress sources hope, it would dent the prospects of the BJP and its allies in assembly elections in Bihar in October-November. In the longer run, it prepares the groundwork for the Congress for the fresh assembly polls in BJP-ruled Uttar Pradesh due in 2022, seeking to recover the lost ground in India's electorally most crucial state. The Congress has over the years been marginalised not only by the BJP but also by caste-based regional parties like Bahujan Samaj Party and Samajwadi Party in UP.

The Congress is hoping that the UP government's handling of the Hathras woman's death would resonate among Dalits in the state as Dalits are a key component of the electorate in the state. There is already anxiety in the BJP, particularly its backward caste and Dalit lawmakers in the state, over the fallout of the Hathras incident which is one more occasion when the BJP government in UP has come under fire over the law and order situation. Most importantly, Rahul in street combat mode could signal the start of a build-up towards his taking over as Congress President possibly early next year.

It is too early to say if the Congress has found its political groove in Rahul taking to street agitations. In the past, he had been accused by critics of not being consistent in this form of politics, by going into fairly long hibernation at times during the most crucial phases in and outside parliament. This time around, Rahul was apparently under pressure following his skipping the entire Covid-19-curtailed monsoon session of parliament recently for a different reason altogether: he had to accompany his mother and the Congress' interim President Sonia Gandhi to the United States for her medical check-up.

The Dalit woman's assault and the unrest among farmers over the farm law reform have come to Rahul on a platter when he returned to India. They provide him with a chance to silence the "Pappu" (a novice) jibe against him. Will he be able to seize it?

Rahul's street politics in Uttar Pradesh or in Punjab and Haryana cannot be just one- or two-off events. They need to be sustained over a long period to enable the party to mount a meaningful challenge to

student-teacher ratio.

School teaching is not the first choice as a career for higher education graduates, especially the talented ones. It, therefore, ends up attracting the "bottom of the barrel" of the graduates. The basic talent gap cannot be remedied by in-service teacher training. The need to think afresh about attracting and keeping talented people in the teaching profession is a major challenge for improving education system performance.

A teacher's professional preparation model following what is known as the "concurrent" approach of combining subject content and pedagogy in the four-year degree programme, followed in most better performing education systems, is likely to be a way out of the problem. This approach would replace the present sequential model. Along with measures to improve career path, incentives and social status of teachers, the approach is likely to break the vicious cycle of poor teacher quality and poor student learning.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina spoke about turning each secondary school in the country into a "digital academy" as a step towards preparing the youth with skills and knowledge for the Fourth Industrial Revolution (Speech at High-level event "Digital Cooperation: Action Today for Future Generations," United Nations Headquarters, on the sidelines of the 75th session of the UN General Assembly, September 22, 2020). Teachers have to be prepared to become the mediators to help students navigate the new learning pathways.

New thinking about the education workforce can be implemented only by adopting a longer term approach and preparing the ground, rolling out the plan gradually, taking into confidence the education stakeholders, including teachers and parents, and applying a transition arrangement so that there is no disruption in the on-going school system. As the new graduates emerge from the programme, they would be integrated into the system. Over a period of 10 to 15 years, a change in the system will become evident. The present arrangement and current lateral entry into teaching will continue simultaneously during the transition, perhaps inspiring the current teachers to aspire higher and perform better.

The new approach to the school education workforce is proposed in the Education Sector Plan for 2021-25 that the government is in the process of submitting to the Global Partnership for Education (GPE). Preparation of the Education Sector Plan is a requirement for seeking international financial support from GPE. The 8th Five Year Plan for Bangladesh coinciding with this time period is also under preparation. The Education Sector Plan and the 8th Plan are an opportunity to reimagine teachers and teaching to make a beginning towards transformative change in the educations system.

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the BJP. There lies the real challenge for the Congress: to pick up the issues that have a direct connection with key segments of the electorate and keep up the momentum.

The ongoing farmers' agitation and the groundswell of protests against the Hathras incident relate to very important components of the society—farmers and women. A farmer-friendly image was one of the main reasons for the Congress' success in successive general elections in 2004 and 2009. The agrarian crisis and the attack on the BJP on this issue was a key reason for the Congress' victory in three heartland states Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh in November 2018, and saw the party putting up an impressive show in the assembly polls in Gujarat where the BJP's supremacy continues for the last two decades. Rahul is trying to tap into the discontent and misgiving among the farmers over the farm sector reform laws, passed recently by parliament.

Another party to take up the Hathras incident in right earnest, besides the Congress, is the Mamata Banerjee-led Trinamool Congress. A day after Rahul and Priyanka made an attempt to march to Hathras, a delegation of Trinamool Congress leaders tried an encore and similar scuffles between the party's leaders and the police were on display. As part of the same strategy, Mamata has been stepping up her attacks on the BJP over the Hathras incident as well as the farmers' protest with the objective of pinning down the saffron party in the run-up to the assembly elections in West Bengal due early next year. When it comes to street politics, very few can beat Mamata, pandemic or no pandemic.

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