

Our farmers must be protected

Bring them under social safety net programmes, ensure their land rights

ALTHOUGH our farmers are among the section of people who have been worst affected by the Covid-19 pandemic and the longest flood in decades, they are also the ones who have shown extreme resilience in the face of such adversities. It is for their hard work and sacrifice that the country still has a good supply of food grains to feed its population. Needless to say, protecting them from the negative impact of the pandemic should be a priority for the government.

At an international webinar organised jointly by Association for Land Reform and Development (ALRD) and *The Daily Star*, experts and researchers from six Asian countries called for implementing agrarian and social security reforms to protect farmers from the adverse impacts of Covid-19. What they have found is that many small farmers had to sell off their homes and farmland because of increased indebtedness. Moreover, agricultural workers are not being paid properly and pastoralist communities and indigenous people have been impacted as countries have closed their borders because of the pandemic.

Despite bumper production of rice this year, our farmers faced problems in marketing their produce in time during the lockdown at the beginning of the pandemic. Our vegetable farmers have also counted huge losses due to the pandemic. Incidents of land grabbing of minorities and indigenous people have also been reported. Although our government took some initiatives to help the farmers face the fallout of the pandemic—it provided financial assistance to small and medium farmers, declared incentives to provide seed and fertiliser to them to encourage cultivation during the Aus season, also reduced the irrigation charge—many marginalised farmers did not receive any such support and remained unaware of it. Since the pandemic will not go away any time soon, it will be fatal for our small and marginalised farmers who don't have enough savings to sustain for a long time. Under the circumstances, the government should bring these extremely vulnerable people under its social safety net programmes. We also need to have laws to ensure farmers' rights and for the protection of agricultural land.

Sir Fazle's vision will take us forward

A brilliant innovator fighting against poverty and hunger

WHILE commemorating the first death anniversary of Sir Fazle Abed it is hard not to feel a deep sense of loss along with immense pride and respect for a man who can be described as a visionary and leader whose sole purpose in life was to lift people out of poverty. To do this he, along with a few likeminded friends, founded Brac which became the largest non-governmental organisation in the world with an unbelievable track record of success in creating innovative development models that have affected millions of people in this country. In fact, these models have been so successful that they have been replicated by Brac in other countries too.

What was most remarkable about him was his sharp mind and innovative spirit. His most outstanding contributions were in the field of health, agriculture and education. He created entrepreneurs through micro credit schemes and supported thousands of artisans by marketing their handicrafts. He described poverty as being "dehumanising" and so he was determined to change the narrative of poor Bangladeshis to one that envisioned a people who would be empowered, self-reliant, confident and forward looking.

Sir Abed's foresight manifested in the hundreds of primary schools offering non-formal education to hundreds and thousands of underprivileged children making learning fun while equipping them for formal schooling. He realised the importance of providing learning opportunities to children in their very early years resulting in the Early Childhood Development (ECD) and Centre for Play programmes. In higher education, he established Brac University, one of the most prestigious institutions in the country aiming to groom the leaders and innovators of tomorrow. He also knew the importance of research and made sure this was an integral part of higher education. Ground-breaking studies from Brac University is a result of this.

Not surprisingly he has received countless awards and accolades even in the last days of his life. Yet being knighted by the British Crown and receiving distinguished awards like the Olof Palme Prize, Ramon Magsasay Award for Community Leadership or the Leo Tolstoy International Gold Medal or being named the 2015 World Food Prize Laureate, had little effect on his unassuming demeanour. Thus he remained "Abed bhai" to everyone who knew him or worked for him.

Behind the no nonsense department and brilliant mind lay an overpowering compassion for the downtrodden and voiceless and a profound recognition and respect for women's role in development.

He was no doubt, a hard task master and expected only excellence from all his colleagues and employees in this mammoth task of prizing away the chains of poverty and deprivation imprisoning millions. But he was also a much-revered mentor and his biggest achievement was to create an organisation that would continue to carry on his legacy with dedication and determination. A year has passed since Sir Abed left this world but he will remain immortal through the immense work he has done for this country and the work that will continue, guided by his words and deep sense of commitment.

Saving the Kamalapur Railway Station building

ABM NURUL ISLAM

HAVING grown up in Dhaka in the early 1950s, I am aghast at the way we are erasing our architectural heritage. The buildings of Gulistan and Naz cinemas which had deep imprints on public memory has been replaced by an ugly monstrosity of a shopping mall. Our national mosque Baitul Mokarram, one of the first examples of modern architecture in Dhaka and representing modern Dhaka, has been extended by stylistically incongruous gates and minarets besides being surrounded by shops degrading its serenity and visibility. Shahbagh roundabout fountain, an iconic landmark of Dhaka, was replaced with an ugly mass. The Agriculture Laboratory building, a fine colonial structure in Farmgate along the metro line, has already been demolished.

According to newspaper reports, the Teachers Students Centre (TSC) of Dhaka University, a nostalgic place for DU students and Dhaka's citizens, is going to be replaced by a multi-storied building. It has been reported that Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH) building, a colonial era building built to house East Bengal-Assam provincial Secretariat, is also going to be demolished to make place for a modern high-rise hospital. All these amounts to erasing Dhaka's memory and identity.

Architectural heritage is directly affected by insensitive urban planning and design, which in turn results in cultural discontinuity and identity crisis. Numerous water bodies in Dhaka also provided it with a unique character and identity different from other cities of the world, but they are continuously being destroyed. Loss of identity, urban blight, hazards, pollution, traffic and water congestions, etc. may be attributed to lack of awareness regarding the contribution of natural and man-made

heritage of a place in the development and urban design/planning. I have travelled widely and have seen that in the cities of the developed world, landmarks and heritage, both natural and man-made, are being carefully preserved for the posterity. Tourists visit a place to see the identifying objects of a place, both tangible and intangible. Architectural heritage definitely represent the history and society of a place.

In the developed world, the planning process starts with what must be retained and the landmark artefacts (including the heritage buildings) are carefully

with an aim to save this iconic modern building of the 1960's, it is still possible to do.

Being a Buet Alumnus, in my desperation to save this landmark building, I called up several experts from Buet—I was able to reach Dr Qazi Azizul Mowla, professor of Urban Design, Buet. I was surprised to learn that his department had not been consulted so far on the issue of alignment of metro rail line or location of terminals/hub, a matter of national importance. Though metro rail alignment and the location of terminals have an impact

and the inherent risks or vulnerability that are faced by dense urban areas, there is a need for a specialised approach to handle multidisciplinary and multi-focused development endeavours in a holistic manner.

Latest controversies on this topic are the Metrorail terminal in Dhaka University and Kamalapur Area. According to Professor Mowla, saving this iconic building is no big deal but requires some adjustment to the current Metro Rail Terminal/Hub design and coordination between the stakeholders (Kamalapur Metrorail Terminal is in the



Kamalapur Railway Station.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

With the massive rate of unplanned urbanisation, and the inherent risks or vulnerability that are faced by dense urban areas, there is a need for a specialised approach to handle multidisciplinary and multi-focused development endeavours in a holistic manner.

highlighted. But in Dhaka there is a tendency to erase our identity and our past. Dhaka, once known as a city of mosques or the Venice of the east, will soon become a city of shopping malls—a shapeless concrete jungle if the current trends continue.

And now after TSC and DMCH, we hear about the possibility of demolishing the iconic Kamalapur Railway Station (KRS) and erecting a copy some 130 metre away to accommodate the metro rail project currently under construction. A copy is a copy. It will never have the authenticity of the original. Development is needed but it should be a coordinated effort. KRS terminal building, designed by modernist architects Daniel Dunham and Robert Boughey, symbolises modern Dhaka. KRS is heir to the former Eastern Bengal Railway and Assam-Bengal Railway networks of the colonial past. Western zone broad-gauge line and eastern zone metre-gauge is united here in Kamalapur. If the metro rail authority and railway authority work together

on urban design and overall traffic and transportation system of the city, relevant experts of relevant disciplines were not consulted in the past giving rise to controversies time and again. When I asked Professor Mowla what was the reason for this mess and the destruction of Dhaka's artefacts, his answer was simple, rapid and fragmented urbanisation and isolated developmental plans caused these destructions. His opinion is that it is the mindset of sectorial development planners, who ignore all other relevant issues and concentrate solely on their own issues, that is the main problem.

Development will necessitate some changes and some demolitions, but the priorities need to be fixed. According to him, if we can identify the root problems, there are many alternative ways to mitigate them. Architectural heritage are susceptible to the impact of natural and man-made hazards and it is more obvious in the urban areas. With the massive rate of unplanned urbanisation,

planning and design stage). Professor Mowla's idea is not to end the metro rail at or near the Kamalapur Railway Station, but to extend the metro rail a little farther to the south towards Titipara area. The location is a railway land and currently houses the inland container warehouse (the government already has a plan to move the container warehouse to a location outside the city).

To do this, the government doesn't need to acquire additional land and there is adequate space to construct the metro rail terminal or depot or even a multimodal hub. Being on the same side of the road, an internal corridor may connect it with the KRS to transfer passengers smoothly to and from metro terminal and KRS. The idea seems workable, therefore, I would urge the authorities to consult the relevant Buet urban designers and save this and other landmark buildings for the posterity.

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'A teacher at last': The story not told



MANZOOR AHMED

IT was reported in the press that a teacher who topped the list in the primary school teachers' recruitment examination 12 years ago did not get the job. After a long judicial process, and with intervention from the Supreme Court, she was offered the job. Five officials of the Directorate of Primary Education including the former Director General apologised to the court and received pardon for contempt of court (*The Daily Star*, December 15). What remains untold in the story has prompted this article.

Beauty Begum scored the highest in primary school teachers' recruitment test in Gaibandha in 2008, but she did not get the job. When she launched a legal battle, after she crossed the bars of the lower courts, the High Court Appellate Division on August 3, 2017 directed the officials to recruit her to the post in 15

days. When the authorities failed to act, Beauty Begum appealed to the Supreme Court Appellate Division for remedy and to cite the responsible officials for contempt of court. The Apex court, a three-member bench of the Appellate Division, headed by Justice Muhammad Imman Ali, summoned the five officials on December 7 to appear in person.

The former Director General, Dr Abu Hena Mostafa Kamal, (currently the defence secretary of the government), along with other officials of the Directorate of Primary Education, appeared before the judge, informed the court that a letter of appointment had been issued to Beauty Begum, apologised unconditionally for their conduct, and received a pardon.

A friend, the head of a missionary institution in Dhaka, on reading the newspaper account, wrote that the case raised three questions. First, was it a case of administrative corruption; then why did it take 12 years and intervention from the highest court of the land to correct? Secondly, the report mentions the contempt of court citation and the pardon, but nothing about the nature

of the offenses, and the grounds of the pardon. Thirdly, we are not any wiser "how" or "why" this woman was denied an appointment by the officials for this very long period and this colossal failure on the part of the authorities occurred. It is like telling the story of Christmas without mentioning the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, he thought.

Continuing with the analogy of the Christian holiday, my friend wrote: "It is as if we read in the newspaper one day that a thousand reindeer have suddenly invaded Dhaka and are now grazing in

My friend was amazed and puzzled as much by the facts of the story as by an "evident presumption" in the reporting that the facts did not need explaining much and the readers would know what happened. Perhaps so. Because what happened with Beauty Begum is not as "bizarre and incomprehensible" as the sudden appearance of a thousand reindeer in Ramna Park. Actually, it is quite rare for someone in Beauty's position to persist and persevere for 12 years and finally find remedy for her

It is quite rare for someone in Beauty's position to persist and persevere for 12 years and finally find remedy for her grievance. The reporting and the presumption of readers' understanding is symptomatic of how deep-rooted problems in the education system are defined and perceived and solutions are sought in superficial actions.



Supreme Court of Bangladesh.

PHOTO: STAR

Ramna Park. We are told how many, what kind of reindeer, what colour, what they are eating, etc. But the report makes no reference to the absolutely bizarre and incomprehensible arrival of these reindeer. The real story, of course, is not the colour, the type, or the number of the reindeer or what they are eating, but rather the fact that such extraordinary animals should appear here at all.

My friend surmised: "Evidently, there is something about this case which a Bangladeshi reader easily understands and therefore the information I find strangely absent is hardly noticed."

He speculates about why the reporter omitted critical facts and explanation. "It may offend some Minister, for instance. Or it may reveal some terrible truth that everyone knows but that no one wants to discuss, such as that teachers must pay a bribe to get an appointment."

The reporting and the presumption of readers' understanding is symptomatic of how deep-rooted problems in the education system are defined and perceived and solutions are sought in superficial actions. The ordeals of Beauty Begum illustrate corruption, administrative inefficiency, lack of accountability, incompetency of officials, and slowness in judicial remedy.

Above all, it shows a disinclination to get to the root of the problem and bring about systemic change in practice and in attitude.

I have a fourth question besides the ones my friend asked. Will Beauty Begum receive her pay for the 12 years that she was not appointed to her job, when she should have been?

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