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The values of Christmas are universal

2020 has made them even more relevant and crucial

WHILE it is the biggest religious festival for Christians all over the world, marking the birth of Jesus Christ and honouring his teachings, the traditional festivities are enjoyed by people from all faiths and creeds. In Bangladesh, the roots of Christianity date back to the 16th century, and there is a small but strong Christian community with its members celebrating Christmas incorporating their cultural roots. This year, Christmas, like all other festivals, religious or secular, will be muted as the world grapples with the Covid-19 pandemic that continues to take lives and cause immense suffering. Thus there are restrictions all over the world on people gathering and celebrating this joyful time with children enjoying the fun of getting gifts from Santa Claus and joining in the cheer that this festival usually brings.

While there may not be the usual festivities of Christmas, it would be befitting to remember the spirit of the day and the teachings of Jesus which contain messages that are universal. Compassion for those who are sick or in distress, regardless of their backgrounds, kindness to each other, forgiveness, renunciation of greed, humility in every aspect of life and spreading peace amongst ourselves—these values have become essential if we are to heal the wounds that the pandemic has left on us. As winter continues and Covid-19 infections keep spiking, and although doctors and other health workers are now more confident about treating Covid-19 patients and many more have survived the disease than before, the number of deaths is still very high. Thousands of families have been left devastated by the deaths of family members, communities have suffered as they lost mentors and visionaries, and millions live in hunger and extreme anxiety as jobs have been lost and there is no food in the house.

Let us all embody the spirit of Christmas and be united in our efforts to combat the pandemic by showing the best part of our humanity, extending a hand to those who need it. There are many such people all around us. Whether it is through sharing our food or wealth, caring for the sick or even a few kind words to soothe someone's anguish, let us show empathy and acceptance, love and support for our fellow human beings, no matter how different they are from us. The pandemic has shown us how important it is for us to be better human beings if we are to save humankind. Let Christmas reinforce this commitment. We wish all our Christian sisters and brothers a safe, joyous and peaceful Christmas.

Futures delayed indefinitely

Take urgent measures to address concerns of DU-affiliated college students

WE sympathise with and echo the frustration of the students of seven Dhaka University-affiliated colleges whose futures have been delayed indefinitely due to the pandemic and the failure of the authorities to take timely measures to address their longstanding concerns. Session jams have plagued the students of these colleges for a long time now, and the pandemic has thrown an already chaotic and mismanaged system into further turmoil. For instance, after years of delay due to session jams, the final examinations of Master's students were finally supposed to be conducted in March, but they were postponed midway due to the virus. Despite repeated appeals to the authorities, the students did not receive a definitive answer as to how and when their exams will be completed and their results disbursed. As a result, most of them have been unable to find jobs and are living in uncertainty and anxiety.

While we understand that the sudden onset of Covid-19 took the authorities by surprise, what we do not comprehend is why they did not come up with a contingency plan early on to minimise the damage to students' lives and careers. When contacted by desperate students, teachers and administrators of these seven colleges said that it was up to Dhaka University authorities to make the decisions. Unfortunately, the latter, despite promises that affiliation with the institution would ease the suffering of students by putting an end to mismanagement and sessions, have paid little attention to these students, and consistently failed to allay their concerns. Frustrations have shadowed the students shattering all hopes that affiliation with DU would change their lives for the better.

Following protests from students, principals of the seven colleges have announced that they would start taking the postponed exams from January 20—that three sessions' final exams, which had been postponed in March, will be resumed on a priority basis, and the remaining four sessions' exams, scheduled to be held in July this year, will now be held using the OMR (Optical Mark Reading) method. But simply holding the exams at this point is not enough. The authorities, particularly DU, must ensure that the results are published within 90 days and effective and immediate steps are taken to address session jams in these colleges.

The students have lost too many years of their lives as well as resources due to the long-drawn-out affiliation process. They deserve better from the authorities.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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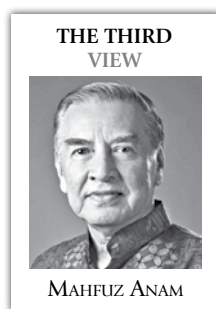
Sanctity of historical sites

It is disconcerting that many people are not aware of the importance of preserving the sanctity of Shaheed Minar and Liberation War related sites. Except in February, March and December, these sites mostly remain neglected. Many organisations use them for holding programmes that does not go with the spirit of our Liberation War or language movement. These places have become popular hangouts for school and college students, and remain covered with electoral posters. It's really unfortunate. We should keep in mind that these sites are symbols of our glorious past. So their sanctity must be protected.

Abul Khaer, Govt. Saadat College, Tangail

Ignoring allegations is not the answer, investigating them is

PRESIDENT, EC AND CITIZENS' RIGHT TO KNOW



THE THIRD VIEW

MAHFUZ ANAM

THE Election Commission (EC) must be above question. But to be so, it must answer all questions. To ignore, evade, downplay or malign citizens who ask the questions is the surest way to sow doubt in the public mind that an attempt is being made to hide, something that is neither good for the EC and definitely not for the future of democracy.

The EC oversees the most crucial of events in a functioning democracy: the national and local elections. It is through that act that people's "will" is expressed, public representatives are chosen, the central institution in a democracy—parliament—is constituted, governance by the electorate (voters) is ensured, an elected government is formed, people's wishes get reflected, public mandate gets expressed, peaceful transfer of power from one political party to another takes place and, in case where the incumbent is voted out, public wrath is writ large. In short, everything in a democracy derives its legitimacy through the process of election. And the EC is solely responsible for making that election free, fair and truly representative. Any blemish on the EC is a blemish on the totality of the above process.

It is for this reason that our constitution gives such a pride of place to the EC and protects it from external influence. It is a constitutional body with its powers and responsibilities clearly delineated, and its functional independence guaranteed, making it a de-facto government in a limited sense during the process of election. The chief election commissioner and other commissioners are protected and cannot be removed from office without following the same process as in case of removing a Supreme Court judge. All this is done only to ensure that the election is free and fair in nature.

It is simply impossible to overstate the importance of the Election Commission. And in the same breath, it needs to be said that it is impossible to overstate the need for the EC to enjoy the highest level of credibility in the public eye. Like justice which must not only be done but also *seen* to be done, the Election Commission too must not only strive to achieve the highest level of integrity but also have that integrity tested through a stringent process of public scrutiny and accountability, especially in financial matters. This is the only way to gain and maintain public trust, which is a precondition for it to conduct credible elections.

The above introduction was necessary to understand and truly appreciate the importance of some highly respected citizens' recent appeal to the president of the republic to investigate corruption allegations against the EC. Forty-two (for us, one Serajul Islam Choudhury or Akbar Ali Khan should suffice) professors, teachers, past advisors to caretaker governments, former government secretaries, academics, senior economists, lawyers, bankers, doctors, human rights activists, civil society leaders and others—all prominent tax-paying citizens and voters of a democratic country—have appealed to the president to set up the Supreme Judicial Council (SJC)

under Article 96 of the constitution to investigate the allegations.

Why SJC? Because the EC, being a statutory body, cannot be investigated by the police, other law enforcement bodies or the Anti-Corruption Commission. Why the appeal to the president? Because only he can initiate the necessary process.

The allegations against the EC are of two distinct categories: a) election-related; and b) corruption-related.

Whether the EC did a competent job of holding a truly free and fair election as per law, whether it saw to it that all norms were complied with, whether it took all complaints into consideration and investigated them thoroughly to the satisfaction of all parties, whether proper post-election examination was made of all aspects of the elections, and whether the election tribunals discharged their duties well, are issues that require detailed examination and expert investigation. While in no way undervaluing their importance, we want to leave the above issues to the experts and to the more knowledgeable.



We, on our part, want to focus on the mundane, the prosaic, the more concrete—issues on which there should not be too much divergence of views as they are more fact rather than opinion-based. They can all be resolved by just going through the relevant papers of the EC. We want to focus on corruption allegations and the need to investigate them both to set the record straight and to maintain EC's credibility, whatever is still left of it, as some would say.

The allegation is that EC members paid themselves Tk 2 crores just for attending events and as "special speakers" about national elections. On this allegation, we have five points to make.

First, does the law permit them to accept any financial benefit from anybody, for any work and under any circumstances? If it does not, then they are clearly in violation of the law. If it permits it, then what are its parameters and have they been exceeded? The EC members' salary and allowances are substantial and cover all areas of their work. So why the extra payment?

The second point is about the amount taken. Even if there are provisions for taking "speaking" or "training" fees, can that amount to crores of taka? One particular official of the EC (a government servant) took more than Tk 70 lakhs as speaking and training fees.

Third, they spoke at training sessions for election officials to prepare them to properly conduct the elections. Isn't this an integral part of their job? So why the extra payment?

Fourth, they are supposed to have spoken at 520 places in 18 days, and in each instance, several of the commissioners were supposed to have been present—a task that appears humanly impossible to accomplish. EC papers show that such visits actually had not taken place. So what really happened? Would it be wrong to ask whether it was a case of false billing?

Finally, was no audit done for all the public money that was spent in connection with the elections? Isn't it mandatory that the money spent be audited? How could the EC not have its account audited?

Another set of corruption charges has been levelled by one of the members of the Election Commission itself, and it deals with staff recruitment involving Tk 4 crore. In his written submission to the CEC, the said election commissioner laid out his allegations in detail, putting his personal reputation and integrity on the line. His allegations merited serious consideration and an independent investigation. Anywhere else in the world it would have received far greater attention than it did in Bangladesh, at various levels including in the media.

There is an additional allegation of misuse of official cars by the CEC and some commissioners. They are entitled to two cars but they are using, or had used, three. Why they should need three cars and how it was shown in the log books of the commission is a question that can be verified easily, if there is the will to do so.

In Bangladesh, investigation of corruption allegations is done by state officials, none of whom have any autonomy of action, and hence it always ends up as a political decision. There are early signs that the petition of the 42 citizens to the president may also go in that direction. It should not. The EC is not a part of the government and the latter should not take the responsibility of defending the former's alleged corruption. The argument that any discrediting of the EC will delegitimise the elections that were held under it is a laboured one, and should not cloud the government's thinking.

I would like to conclude with a reminder that at this stage, we are talking about "allegations" of corruption, not "proof" of the said corruption. The distinction is important and we in no way want to ascribe guilt without investigation. However, the allegations are serious and mostly based on EC documents. We strongly believe that these allegations deserve to be looked into, and it is only through a professional investigation—and not any eye-wash—that the truth will come out and our claim that nobody is above the law will get some credible traction. And hence the appeal to the president.

The nation's eyes are on him now. Will he honour the citizens by listening to their grievances, or will he ignore their voices?

Mahfuz Anam is Editor and Publisher, The Daily Star.

Covid-19 and SDG 8: Reviving economies, restoring livelihoods



SYED YUSUF SAADAT

THE Rule of 70, sometimes also referred to as the Rule of 72 or Rule of 69.3, is a method for approximating the number of years it will take for a number to double, given its annual growth rate. As mentioned in the book "Summa de Arithmetica", by the "father of accounting and bookkeeping" Luca Pacioli, in 1494, it is a simple calculation in which the rule number is divided by the annual growth rate to obtain the approximate number of years required for doubling. Using this rule for per capita Gross Domestic Product (GDP), it can be shown that if per capita GDP grows at 1 percent per year, then it will take roughly 70 years for the average person in a country to become twice as rich as they are today. On the other hand, if per capita GDP grows at 3 percent per year, it will take only a little more than 23 years for the average person in a country to become twice as rich as they are today.

Thus, even small differences in the growth rate of the economy over long periods of time may lead to dramatically different standards of living for the people of a country. So, what are the characteristics of an economy that make it grow faster than others? What policies can the government take to accelerate the pace of economic growth? Regarding such questions, Nobel laureate economist Robert Lucas remarked, "The consequences for human welfare involved in questions like these are simply staggering: once one starts to think about them, it is hard to think about anything else."

The Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 8 acknowledges the importance of economic growth. Unfortunately, Covid-19 has brought in sudden and drastic disruptions that have ravaged the world economy and will most likely produce the greatest rise in global unemployment since World War II. For Bangladesh, the economic fallout from Covid-19 will be multidimensional in nature and massive in magnitude. For example, as of October 2020, real GDP

growth for Bangladesh in 2020 has been estimated to be 1.6 percent by the World Bank and 3.8 percent by the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Earlier in April, the World Bank had forecasted that on a disaggregated level, real growth in Bangladesh economy in 2020 would be 3.5 percent for the agriculture sector, 2 percent for the industry sector and 3.5 percent for the services sector. At this rate, the agriculture sector would create 0.10 million more jobs, whereas the industry and services sectors would create 0.21 million and 0.9 million less jobs respectively, compared

SDG 8 also asserts the need for decent jobs. Unfortunately, despite the rapid economic growth, Bangladesh has struggled to provide productive employment and decent jobs for its young labour force. In 2017, the youth unemployment rate was as high as 10.6 percent, whereas the national unemployment rate was 4.2 percent. Regrettably, the unemployment rate among the youth who had completed tertiary-level education was 13.4 percent. This implies that the education system in Bangladesh is being unable to endow young people with market-relevant skills.



Covid-19 has caused drastic disruptions in the economy affecting the livelihoods of millions of people.

PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

to 2018-19, assuming that employment-to-GDP elasticity would remain equal to that between 2015-16 and 2016-17 and the level of employment would be equal to that in 2016-17. This suggests that the economic slowdown caused by Covid-19 may reduce employment in services and industry sectors, but create jobs in the agriculture sector, which would reverse decades of gradual structural transformation and stall the development of the economy.

Such dismal predictions seem to reflect the ground reality since, as of June 2020, at least 50,000 low-income individuals left Dhaka and returned to their village homes after losing their jobs due to the pandemic.

In 2018, the share of the youth Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) was 26.2 percent in Bangladesh compared to the global average of 21.2 percent. These issues are particularly disconcerting because the country is now at the juncture where it may be able to reap the demographic dividends if it can gainfully employ its enormous young population.

The International Labour Organization has estimated that the fall in working hours in South Asia due to Covid-19 in the first two quarters of 2020 would be equivalent to 161 million full-time 40-hour-per-week jobs. Computable General Equilibrium (CGE) modelling has estimated that almost 140 million

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people in five South Asian countries and 12.37 million in Bangladesh may lose their jobs due to the pandemic. A survey by the Asian Development Bank has shown that the number of online job postings in Bangladesh in April 2020 was only 13 percent of the number of online job postings in April 2019. As of April 2020, 71 percent of urban slum-dwellers and 55 percent of the rural poor had no jobs due to Covid-19.

In the book "Youth Employment in Bangladesh: Creating Opportunities—Reaping Dividends", which I co-authored, we put forward a few suggestions for achieving SDG 8 in Bangladesh that are more relevant now in the context of Covid-19. These include: i) creating a database of youth NEET; ii) linking youth with employers; iii) revolutionising the education system so that it can build analytical competence and instil critical thinking skills in students; iv) increasing availability of technology and internet, particularly in the rural areas; v) reforming technical and vocational training to address the current need of industries; vi) ensuring equal employment opportunities for all without discrimination, prejudice or nepotism; vii) improving access to information at national, regional, and local levels; viii) promoting self-employment through entrepreneurship; ix) providing career counselling for the youth from an early stage; x) fostering an enabling environment for female youth; xi) training informal workers; and xii) seeking employment opportunities abroad.

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