

Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

Roman chariots and modern train!

The distance between the parallel railway tracks is known as the gauge of the railway. Most commercial railways, except for those running in fairs or exhibitions, are covered by one of the following gauges. These are designated either as Broad Gauge or Standard Gauge or Meter Gauge railways. Mountain Railways are generally of Narrow Gauge. Broad Gauge, which is the widest, measures a distance of 5 feet 3 inches between the two parallel rails. It was pioneered by the British, and laid in England and its colonial railways subsequently. The meter gauge measures one meter between the tracks, and was pioneered by the French in Europe. The narrow gauge is usually set at track width of 2 feet.

Curiously however, the Standard Gauge measures 4 feet 8 1/2 inches or

143.5 centimetre between the parallel railway tracks! Both the dimensions, either in the Imperial or Metric unit of measurement, is a fraction, and not a whole number, which is rather surprising and strange. This railway gauge is widely used by most railways in Europe, North and South America, Africa, Australia and Asia. The exception is the old (British) or geographical India where we have broad, standard, meter as well as narrow gauge of railway which were laid from the 19th century and is co-existing till today!

The history behind this odd distance between the railway lines, called the Standard Gauge, is very interesting. It is rooted in facts that originated from Roman times, long back in history! When the first railway carriages were built, the

same tools and set-up was used, which was used for building horse-drawn carriages. But how did the distance between the wheels of the horse-drawn carriage came to be this fraction, i.e. 4ft. 2 1/2 in. or 143.5 cms? This dimension was based on the width of the ancient roads, dating back to Roman times-- the pioneering age of road building. The Roman roads were built to accommodate the passage of their war chariots, pulled by two horses. The horse, placed side by side, took up a distance of 143.5 centimetre! This dimension later became the distance between the rail tracks for Standard Gauge. It originated in Europe, and later came to America, which preferred the European rather than the British measurements, after becoming independent.

Interestingly enough, it even influenced the building of the American space shuttle at the end of the twentieth century! Initially plans were to have wider fuel tanks for the shuttle. These tanks were to be built in Utah, and had to be transported by railway to the Space Centre at Florida for assembly to the shuttle. It was then realised that the railway tunnels built for Standard Gauge rail tracks, could not transport the desired wide fuel tanks from Utah to Florida! So, in a way the designers of the space shuttle had to compromise their measurement for the width of the fuel tanks based on what the Romans had decided as the ideal width of their roads built for their war chariots!

S.A. Mansoor
Gulshan, Dhaka



PHOTO: AMRUL RAJIB

Is life all about a degree?

Today everyone wants an MBA degree after his name, even if he has done undergraduate in theology, as if MBA is an inevitable requirement even for the post of a clerk. Just open the vacancy announcements, you will see that each and every job needs an MBA degree- this is degradation of the degree.

There was a time, when having an MBA degree was a dream come true and only the deserving candidates used to enrol in this prestigious course. In the first world countries, even today MBA is considered as one of the most respected degrees. In those countries, everyone doesn't get the chance to enrol in universities for an MBA programme. Having one or two years' job experience is mandatory to get an entry in MBA programmes. However, in Bangladesh having a two-year MBA degree is mandatory to get an opportunity even to drop a CV.

I think the compulsion of having an MBA degree should not be there, it has become a rotten piece. There are many fields yet to be discovered, such as 'development programmes' or 'disaster programmes', which can be the most creative opportunity for many of us.

Nasreen Sultana
One-mail

DTH service

It is technology that is developing rapidly all around the world. One of it is DTH service. This service is now available in Saarc countries like India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. This service will replace the dish service providers. Most of the time they cannot provide good service to customers. But it is a matter of regret that the Bangladesh government has not taken the initiative to allow its operation in Bangladesh. It would be a source of optimal revenue collection for the government. And people could get the best entertainment facilities from DTH.

Rubel Barua
Manarat International
University, Dhaka

"Sexual harassment by teacher"

The Daily Star has published a number of letters from concerned citizens regarding sexual harassment by teachers. No doubt, if such heinous activities are actually taking place in our educational institutions, then those should be properly handled by the administration. However, after reading a letter on the topic, which was published on September 25, I actually had to wonder if some letter writers were confusing 'failed relationship with teacher' with 'sexual harassment'. Unfortunately, that's the impression I got after reading Nasrin Pervin's letter published on September 12, 2008. According to the writer, her friend was having a long relationship with her teacher and when the teacher backed out (for whatever reason it might be), then it automatically became a 'sexual harassment by the teacher', just because the guy who was flirting with her friend was a teacher by profession.

I think it was a very narrow conclusion.
M. Anam
One-mail



MUNIR UZ ZAMAN / ORIKNEWS

Earthquake

Apart from the increase in population in the city with non-availability of pure water, erratic electricity supply, intolerable traffic congestions, limited number of roads and insufficient healthy accommodation facilities, the biggest challenge Dhaka will face is earthquake. God forbid if it happens, the outcome will be catastrophic.

We have been hearing about the possibility of a big earthquake for a few years now but what precautions have been taken in terms of procuring heavy cranes, heavy shovels, big

drilling machines etc? If the earthquake takes place, it could be the worst human disaster the world will ever see as it is estimated that around ten million people will die.

I think the Bangladesh government, all political parties and top business personalities should immediately sit together, forget all differences and arrange the necessary rescue equipment on a TOP PRIORITY basis.

Sohel Ahmed
Dhanmondi
Dhaka

Food producers or killers?

This is no longer a new issue that most of the foods we purchase from the markets are made in an unhygienic and frowzy condition. Beyond doubt, most of the restaurant and hotel owners do not ensure cleanliness as their kitchens are found sordid and dirty.

We have become so accustomed to it that we do not feel like doing anything. On 24 September a photograph was published in The Daily Star which was exhibiting a mind-boggling image of a vermiculture producing factory.

How unscrupulous people can be is proved by this picture!!

In this picture workers were kneading the flour with their feet when they did not even wear any sort of socks. They were frequently kneading flour with their bare feet and smoking and perspiring all the way.

Therefore vermicelli was being made with cigarette ash as well as sweats.

Actually the government's intermittent supervision is not enough to make unscrupulous owners ensure cleanliness.

The government made an effort to set things right but it has already fizzled out. Hence, the government should launch a fresh drive against such unscrupulous people.

Hasnat, AIUB
Banani, Dhaka

Nuclear project in Bangladesh

There have been official talks between Chief Advisor Fakhruddin Ahmed and Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao about China's help in implementing the Ruppur Nuclear Power Plant.

China's assistance in building a nuclear project in Bangladesh will surely be a great help for us. Two of the Saarc countries, India and Pakistan, have nuclear plants.

If these neighbouring countries could have nuclear plants, then why could not we have our own? The nuclear plant will enable us to reduce power crisis, the most painful and dreadful thing the people all around the country are suffering from.

It was a commendable move by our Chief Adviser to take help from China to build a nuclear project in Bangladesh. China has been our closest friend and their support is always welcome.

I once again welcome this move by our Chief Adviser.

Minhaj Ahmed
Uttara
Dhaka

Power failures

It is a matter of great regret that there is regular power failure at Kuliarchar, Kishoreganj. Electricity is supplied for only 3-4 hours a day.

The power generation condition is poor all over the country but the situation is critical in Kuliarchar. The problem should be addressed immediately.

Shakil
Kuliarchar
Kishoreganj

Natural gas

A good piece of news that impressed me a lot regarding the natural gas of Bangladesh was published on 24 September in The Daily Star 'Bangladesh Energy Regulatory Commission (BERC) will hold public hearings from today on proposed hike in gas prices ranging up to 65 percent and on conclusion of the hearings, the commission will announce its final decision by October 30.'

It is a proposal given by Petrobangla, the apex authorities regarding oil, gas, coal energy in Bangladesh.

It goes without saying that Petrobangla's proposal should be unanimously supported by all to prevent our natural assets from being wasted and misused.

Tommy Anwar
Uttara, Dhaka

Upazila polls

Firstly, I would like to express my opinion that the current Election Commission has done a lot of improvement upon its work, the electoral laws and preparation of voter list and National ID card. You may or may not agree with me but that is not the issue here. Today, I am raising the issue of upazila polls. I only read what the political parties and the EC want. What about your view points? Why is your political correspondent not doing any investigative reporting on it?

As for me, I am always suspicious of what our political parties want, it cannot be good for the people or the country. I hope this 'No vote' will remain on the ballot paper in the next election, and only this will pull me to the polling centre. If I do not find any suitable candidates, I will definitely cast the 'NOVOTE'.

I did not vote in the last three general elections. I did not wish to vote for the worthless candidates I had to choose from.

I look forward to reading some good articles very soon in your newspaper.

Lastly, keep up the good work. It is a difficult world to be totally free from all influences, but honest intentions ultimately pay off.

Anwar uz Zaman, Dhaka

Dream and reality

After a nine-month long nightmare we got independence. Some valiant sons of this soil sacrificed their lives to uphold our rights and to establish a National Flag. We had a dream.

Though we have got freedom and now we are one of the developing countries but we should ask ourselves what we have achieved as a nation. We have passed 37 years after getting independence. We had elected governments from 1971 to 2007. But we have observed that all the politicians except some exceptional ones used to cry hoarse before every election for democracy, but nothing was done for the people. We elect an MP from each constituency as our representative and finally we elect a government through an election. But nothing has worked so far.

How long shall we have to wait for an efficient government?

Mohammed Moïn Uddin Reza
Dhaka City College
Dhaka

HSC certificate and mark sheet

I am informed that the education ministry is planning to make the mark-sheet appear in the HSC certificate along with the grade. This could make the whole admission thing for HSC students a lot easier as the university authorities could easily judge a student's merit by the marks. Also, it would require less time for the admission process.

But we do not know whether the plan is being implemented with due sense of urgency.

Zaki Muhtadi
Shegunbagicha, Dhaka

Literary community

In a letter to the editor, I responded reflexively and rashly to a review of the recently published anthology-- Language for a New Century: Contemporary Poetry from Asia, the Middle East & Beyond (WW Norton & Co., 2008) by Khademul Islam in your publication.

After having shared a series of exchanges with the author, however I'd like to amend that sentiment to ask a different question. Of what purpose is a literary clique if its exclusion is to the detriment of an entire nation? Working as an editor in America, I reached across to many poets and academics in

Closing of BDR shops



According to newspaper report, BDR shops are going to close by the end of this month. This is really shocking news for us. In fact, the government's move to open such shops was appreciated by all. We city dwellers were really happy and rely on these shops to get safe fish, vegetables and fruits. We should be grateful to BDR authorities for their good management of these shops and contribution to society. The shops ensured cheaper price as well as genuine goods for the buyers.

We think all classes of people have enjoyed the facility so far. We don't know the reason why the BDR has taken such a decision. We would request the BDR and the present government to reconsider the matter and continue the programme for the welfare of the people.

Zahir U. Hider
Senior Engineer
Customer Services & Operations-SAI, SITA

Cyber café

A few days ago, I went to a cyber café. When I was about to finish my work, I peeped at my front monitor where two school boys (wearing school dress) were seated. I was astonished to see their monitor. They were browsing a porn site and whispering.

This was definitely undesirable. The authorities concerned should look into the matter.

Md. Ariful Haque
Dept. of Microbiology
University of Chittagong

Dialogue

If the top two leaders and the common clients of a top barrister, Khaleda and Hasina, sit together, ultimately the politicians and the business people, who backed the dialogue, will feel happy.

But what will happen to the distressed people of the country? How to reduce the huge gap between the rich and the poor?
Saif Tinku
Baridhara, Dhaka

Bangladesh to take the pulse of contemporary Bengali literature.

Yet it seems each person I contacted responded in seclusion for their own ends or ferried me off to others, knowing full well that the anthology I was helping put together would help represent Bangladesh on the stage of global poetics. Had some conversation between those various members of the intelligentsia and literary community taken place, the problems of translation or inclusions alluded to by Mr. Islam may have been mitigated. All of that said, I believe the anthology is an invaluable artefact for many reasons, not least of which because it creates conversations, such as this one, that wouldn't otherwise be taking place. Glad to contribute in some small way to the visibility of Bengal literature.

Ravi Shankar
Associate Professor, English
Central Connecticut State
University

Tobacco and environmental hazards

Since tobacco requires large quantities of water, fields are mostly located near water bodies. Since large amounts of pesticides are used on the tobacco plant, the chemical residue flows back to the water bodies when the fields are irrigated.

Needless to mention, the contamination spreads when this water is used for domestic purpose. Not only pesticides, but huge amounts of fertilizers are also required during the cultivation of tobacco. Since tobacco rapidly depletes the soil of its nutrients, the soil has to be replenished over time using expensive chemical fertilizers. A survey revealed that on an average 300 kg or more of chemical fertilizers such as urea, triple super phosphate and zinc are used for cultivating an acre of tobacco. In addition to fertilizer costs, the harm tobacco cultivation does to soil fertility is a further cost of

tobacco cultivation.

For flue-cured tobacco, large rooms or barns are constructed and these are kept at a constant temperature for about 72 hours till the leaves acquire the characteristic tobacco taste, aroma and colour.

In Kushtia and Chittagong Hill Tracts, where flue-cured tobacco is more popular, wood is primarily used for curing. About six tons of wood is required to cure the tobacco grown on just one acre of land. Huge areas of forests in the Chittagong Hill Tracts region have disappeared over the past few years, and a substantial portion has been tobacco-related deforestation (see table 2). About 30 percent of the total cost of tobacco production is for curing the leaves. In the hilly region, hills are also being cut to create flat land for growing tobacco.

Abdul Kaddus Ripon
Dhanmondi, Dhaka

