

# Break away from this destructive cycle

## BITTER TRUTH



MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

PEOPLE can well remember that the country sustained huge losses in terms of lives and properties during 2013 shutdowns and blockades. According to Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), the losses during the last six months of that year stood at Tk. 50,000 crore. Happily, as 2014 was somewhat peaceful, the business community could make up that loss to a great extent. But with call for indefinite blockade 2015 heralded gloom for the country from the beginning of January. Seldom in the past has this country faced so ominous and bleak a situation as it is facing now. Other than 22 innocent lives lost so far and hundreds of buses and trucks damaged, the all-out blockade during the last nine days has cost the economy several thousand crores of taka with daily count of one thousand and six hundred crore taka as reported by the DCCI.

The blockade call by the BNP and its allies since January 4 has sent shockwaves throughout the country. Panic stricken office goes and factory workers cannot go to their work, traders cannot run their business, buses, trucks, and trains cannot move for fear of bomb attack, and most disquietingly, children cannot attend schools for fear of street violence.

Parvez, a day labourer, was on his way to Ramganj from Gaibandha when his coach was attacked by petrol bomb. He was run over by a



truck when he tried to save himself by jumping down from the burning bus. Murad, a bus helper, was sleeping in a parked bus in Jessore town. The bus was torched before he could come out. He later succumbed to his injury. Now, will the feuding parties think for a moment as to what will happen to their or other victims' families? Why are these innocent and uninvolved persons becoming victims in a clash of the Titans? The irony is that these people voted the politicians to power but have now turned victims of this dirty power struggle!

Belying all expectations of a settlement, our politics is headed towards an ominous and chaotic turn that spells disaster. Because of

poverty, corruption and non-governance during the last few years, the country witnessed a disastrous upsurge of violence that cost hundreds of lives, a steady worsening of the economy and an unprecedented polarisation of the society. People have a feeling that democratic norm is rapidly losing its grip on the society at large, regardless of which party is in power. Liberal minded people are wary of the dangerous consequences of hatred, animosity and intolerance in the political circles on one side and downward slide of economy and business on the other side. Since most people are mute spectators in this dangerous game of power politics, suffering in silent pain and agony, and do not

have any space to ventilate their grievances, politics, perhaps in its worst form, has gained free ground for many whose vision does not extend beyond their personal gains.

People did not know that the taste of democracy could be so bitter! The country has hardly faced such a daunting situation since liberation. People thought that 'politics is an art of compromise,' but now they see that it is a violent game of self-annihilation, and in its worst form, destruction of the country. The battle now is not for restoration of democracy but a way to go to power or to stay in power, by means mostly foul. What is most alarming is that allegedly radical Jamaat cadres are now kill-

ing people without any pricking of conscience. It is no surprise to the people that weapons like pistols and bombs bristle in the countryside like swamp mosquitoes, almost as a deadly plague.

The general people are worried by increasing threats to their lives and profession by the growing menace of violence. But shockingly, this has never crossed the mind of our leaders who are only fighting for policies, ideology and power and not for anything related to alleviation of people's sufferings.

But people no longer want to listen to lip-service by the administration: they want security of their lives, properties and freedom of movement. So they are pleading for



a "dialogue" to restart among feuding political party leaders through non-political intermediaries acceptable to both the parties in the midst of an increasingly serious economic slowdown and unprecedented violence.

People still believe that the country's dreadful torment could possibly be averted if eminent citizens could come out on the street and raise their voice against this anarchic situation. Without further delay, the country must be brought back on track, and this can only be done by a fair display of sanity and political leadership.

At the moment, the ruling party and the opposition BNP and its allies are caught in a crisis of unusual dimensions with the possibility of either revitalising themselves or hastening their doom. To regenerate the nation's confidence, the administration has to act most cautiously and expeditiously, and the actions must be backed by rational considerations, welfare of the masses and a look to the future.

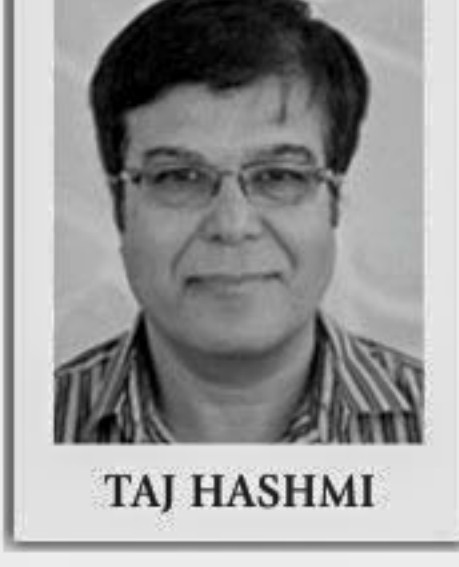
The stakes are too high to leave the contentious issues unresolved. No one in the country would be immune to the pain in this all-out conflict. Worse, aggravated by self-aggrandisement, personal interest and hardening extremist lines that seem to be a fashion of the day, party feuding could wreak havoc far beyond the party interests.

People are now prompted to say what the chaos in the aftermath of the Liberation War could not destroy, democracy did. With consequences so dire, the burden that the ruling party must carry is too heavy for it. If it should falter again, the consequences will only reverberate.

The writer is a columnist of The Daily Star. E-mail: aukhandk@gmail.com

# Degeneration of education in Bangladesh, still a reversible process

## STRANGER THAN FICTION



TAJ HASHMI

What Bangladesh needs today to improve the quality of education at every level is not tons of money but tons of sincere and serious efforts by both the public and the private sectors.

PRIME Minister Sheikh Hasina's recent advice to those institutions that produce medical doctors might have offended some. She asked them not to produce doctors who "kill patients" out of neglect and incompetence. I think her observation about the poor quality of teaching at medical college is also applicable to the deficiencies in other branches of pedagogy in the country.

We should not take the prime minister's terse comment on the deficiency of doctors just as a casual observation, or joke. As well-to-do Bangladeshis avoid consulting local doctors, and prefer foreign schools and universities to the local ones for their children's education, seemingly all is not well in the education system in the country.

This article is the sequel to my last piece in this column, which questioned if Dhaka University was ever the "Oxford of the East" (DS, December 28, 2014). Among other factors, the bulk of the brilliant students' (mainly from Arts and Social Science) preference for civil service to university teaching during the Pakistan period contributed to the degeneration of higher education.

It's time to look into some other factors in this regard: (a) Recently, only two out of 50,000 students qualified in the English proficiency test at an admission exam at Dhaka University. Surprisingly, English is a compulsory subject up to the HSC level throughout Bangladesh; (b) According to media reports, thousands of Indian workers -- who work in Bangladesh illegally as executives in the private sector -- remitted \$3.7 billion to India in 2013 alone; (c) School teachers hardly teach anything in the classroom; they want students to come to them for private tuition, which is well beyond the level of affordability for the ordinary people, and even for high government officials who depend solely on their salaries; (d) Many students don't spend time in the classroom or libraries. They are either full-time political workers or "armed cadres" -- a euphemism for criminals -- of the ruling or opposition parties, or engaged in various anti-social activities, including drug peddling and extortion. Politicians and criminals use unemployable students in their pursuit for power and influence in their constituencies.

The death and destruction during the Liberation War, and the post-independence mismanagement and inexperience of the rulers adversely affected the education system. In their desperation to save millions of starving people, and to get rid of the stigma of being Henry Kissinger's "basket case" in the 1970s, successive governments unwittingly neglected the education sector by prioritising growing of more food and controlling of population growth up to the 1990s.

Although Bangladesh emerged as a secular and socialist democracy, neither has democracy ever flourished there nor have the vestiges of colonialism and special interest groups ever disappeared. Healthcare and education

remain the most expensive "commodities" for the people. Consequently, as the main premise of this article suggests, education has not only become unaffordable for the masses, but its quality has also gone down the drain.

Surprisingly, during the last decade of British rule (1937-1947), ordinary Bengalis had more political freedom, social justice and better education opportunities than what is available in Bangladesh today. Even during the Pakistani period, while Bengalis had inferior rights and lesser opportunities than West Pakistanis, the quality of education was much better and more affordable for the lower classes than today. All public and private schools in East Bengal during the British and Pakistani periods maintained a semblance of conformity in the standard of education. Students from the lowest rung of society and from the remotest village schools could successfully compete against students from well-off families in the urban areas. Not anymore. Now, only children of well-to-do people, who can afford multiple private tutors to coach their children, can excel in public examinations and get into good universities at home and abroad.

What Bangladesh needs today to improve the quality of education at every level is not tons of money but tons of sincere and serious efforts by both the public and the private sectors. First, the government and the school management committees must ensure the accountability of teachers, and the quality of teaching in the classroom.

Second, the country needs more allocations in the education sector to raise teachers' salary, build and update the infrastructure -- classrooms, libraries, laboratories -- buy books and jour-

nals, improve research facilities, and incentivise original research in every discipline. The government can reverse the degeneration of education (a) by admitting that the standard of education has deteriorated a lot (without highlighting what it has achieved in the meantime, let alone playing any blame game); (b) making the second highest allocation for education after health; and (c) adopting one universal system and medium of instruction and not continuing with the three different systems that exist today -- English, Bengali, and Madrassah.

Where have all those philanthropes of the pre-1947 period disappeared? Cannot Muslim Bengalis be as generous as their Hindu counterparts? Why don't the rich and powerful Bangladeshis (and anonymous donors) come forward to improve the quality of education? We know that while sections of the rich invest money to run private English medium schools and universities as business enterprises, there is hardly anyone coming forward to donate generously to build the infrastructure of a secular education system. There are people who would rather spend money to build madrassahs or Islamic seminaries, not for their own children, but for the marginalised poor.

Bangladesh has lessons to learn from the experience of failing states as well as from those who reversed the process of decline and degeneration primarily by revolutionising the education system. We have the bad examples of Algeria and Pakistan, which have nurtured three different mediums/systems of instruction -- French, Arabic, and Islamic in Algeria; and English, Urdu and Madrassah in Pakistan, and created employable French and English elites,

respectively in Algeria and Pakistan. The rift between the employable French/English elites and the backward vernacular elites led to long drawn civil wars and Islamist militancy for decades in Algeria, and Pakistan has not yet come out of the crisis of Islamist militancy and terrorism. The existence of three different mediums of instruction in Bangladesh should ring the bell.

In sum, Bangladesh has lessons to learn from Malaysia and Sri Lanka, not from Algeria and Pakistan. Cheap patriotism finally gave in to pragmatism in Malaysia and Sri Lanka. They no longer regard English as a vestige of colonialism. Mahathir Mohamed considers English language as indispensable as modern technology. Bangladesh can reverse the process of degeneration of its education system by re-emphasising English at every level of education; by substantially raising allocations for modern and liberal education; by making humanities and social science -- literature, history, philosophy, sociology, economics and political science, for example -- compulsory subjects for all students, including those who go to madrassahs, and to medical, engineering and technical colleges (as this is normative everywhere in the developed world). Without visionary ideas and critical thinking by its leaders, Bangladesh can't reverse the process of degeneration in its education system. And nothing but world-class education is the key to peace, progress and prosperity.

The writer teaches security studies at Austin Peay State University in Tennessee. Sage has recently published his latest book, *Global Jihad and America: The Hundred-Year War Beyond Iraq and Afghanistan*.

**QUOTE**  
Life is ten percent what happens to you and ninety percent how you respond to it.  
Lou Holtz

**CROSSWORD** by Thomas Joseph

**ACROSS**  
1 Dope  
5 Philosopher Blaise  
11 Caboose setting  
12 Shrewd  
13 Diva's piece  
14 Manhole setting  
15 Sight from Newcastle  
17 "-pal!"  
18 Biathlon need  
22 Big party  
24 Brown ermine  
25 Baseball score  
26 Thrumman of "Kill Bill"  
27 Comic strip worker  
30 Cotton bundles  
32 Connoisseur's asset  
33 Radius setting  
34 Ethical course  
38 La Scala setting  
41 Mark's replacement  
42 Pressed  
43 Hearty dish  
44 Library stamp  
45 Compared with

**DOWN**  
1 Turkey neighbor  
2 Infamous emperor  
3 Alaskan city  
4 Makes speeches  
5 Bidding option  
6 Fall flowers  
7 Narrow passage  
8 Stage signal  
9 Finished off  
10 Charter  
16 Derby, e.g.  
19 Habit of cussing  
20 Implausible  
21 Greek vowels  
22 Yank's ally  
23 Moon goddess  
28 Fuel gas  
29 "Misery" director  
30 Scrooge cry  
31 Haul in  
35 Olympus group  
36 District  
37 Quilt fill  
38 Central  
39 S&L offering  
40 Whole bunch

**CRYPTOQUOTE** 12-3  
EONCWRII RP CW JBGCV; RX C XGY QVJAP JX UEG JBGCV CVG QRVUI, UEG JBGCV QJGP WJU KGBJNG QRVUI.  
-- NCECUNC HCWQER

**Yesterday's CRYPTOQUOTE:**  
MISERS AREN'T FUN TO LIVE WITH, BUT THEY MAKE WONDERFUL ANCESTORS.  
-- DAVID BRENNER

**Yesterday's answer**

BASH EQUATE  
EXPO PUMPED  
ALIT SOPPED  
MEL TOTS  
LLAMA CAN  
ARSON SCHMO  
WOOF LIMO  
ABOUTS SALON  
YET CRAWL  
WHAM SPA  
JUAREZ SOAR  
ONTIME KURT  
BOATED ITTY

**A XYDLBAAXR is LONGFELLOW**  
One letter stands for another. In this sample, A is used for the three L's, X for the two O's, etc. Single letters, apostrophes, the length and formation of the words are all hints. Each day the code letters are different.

**BEETLE BAILEY** by Mort Walker  
COME DOWN, BEETLE, YOU CAN'T HIDE FROM ME!  
I SEE YOU! YOU'RE NO GOOD AT CAMOUFLAGE!

**HENRY** by Don Trachte  
SAFETY ZONE  
SAFETY ZONE  
SAFETY ZONE