

## Police recruitment End political interference

ACCORDING to a report carried in this paper on Thursday, the police high command is pondering changing its current recruitment procedures for enrolment at the level of constables, the lowest level of entry in the police force. The reason -- political interference. While this is an acknowledgement of the reality in Bangladesh we commend the police headquarters for realising the deleterious consequences of the system being distorted to meet the inappropriate demands of the politically powerful to absorb their candidates in the police force, and putting a better system in its place.

It is sad reality that the police bosses are not alone in facing such a predicament. Regrettably, most of the state institutions have to yield to political push, and the recommendations, we are given to understand, do come free. Police recruitment has been a money making device for the politically linked. Sadly, it continues unabated. Needless to say, when recruitment procedures are distorted and corrupted, quality is sacrificed, and when that occurs in an establishment like the police, the consequences are only too evident for the police headquarters not to take notice.

We think it is a good idea that the police planners are thinking of standardising the tests, of whatever the type that may be, because, having separate tests at district level, for what is national level employment, seems quite illogical. The new mechanism hopefully, will ensure a single standard for the entire country. However, the moot point is that whatever recruitment procedure is adopted, unless political interference is stopped, bad eggs and unqualified people will continue to be inducted in the force, perpetuating inefficiency. In the meanwhile the people will continue to suffer.

## Children as decision-makers

### A laudable initiative

IN a culture where children, rather than being listened to, are told what to do, it is refreshing that the local administration of Pirojpur's Zianagar upazila has decided to pay heed to the recommendations of the area's children and implement their plan for road development. In what is a new and novel approach to development, these children are working on finding solutions to the most pressing needs of the community, through the Child-Centred Climate Change programme, run by United Development Initiative for Programmed Action and supported by Save the Children.

As children, they have a unique insight into the lives and struggles of children in the area, and are often in better positions than adults to identify the issues that need immediate attention. The school-going young participants of this programme, noting the difficulty with which they have to go to school in the rainy season, suggested a comprehensive plan for road development, including raising the height of key road stretches and developing over four kilometres of roadway along five important roads. When completed, the project will benefit 15,000 people in the union.

We applaud the NGO as well as the local administration for taking up this initiative of including young citizens in the decision-making and development processes. We hope that this project is replicated in other areas of the country, such that the voices of children are heard in the development priorities of the communities of which they are an integral part.

KAZI KHALEED ASHRAF

THE train arrives at the station, and where the platform begins, a white concrete plaque with dark letters in Bangla announces the name of the station, the name of the town. A small town. The town stretches out from the station like cardio-vascular arteries.

Since the railway was established by the colonial English people as a network of connectivity and control, it carved up the landscape into new regimes of comprehension in which the small town formed a critical node. I remember, as a young boy, traveling with my parents to Jamalpur on holidays. The arrival at the train station was always an event, of entering a world of a different rhythm.

Travelling by train reveals how small towns -- mofussil or chhoto shohor -- form nodes in the geographic matrix of the subcontinent. In the division of regions, mofussils are those areas that are outside large metropolitan places. Came to be seen as backward in that artificial classification, mofussil towns suffered a cognitive regression.

Arrival in a town is now without an event, without a coiled anticipation that was released by the train station. One now mostly takes a bus or drive to the town in which the cognition of small towns has regressed. At the same time, small-town narratives seem to be lost between the overwhelming epic of the big city and the grand mythology of gram Bangla.

We need a new vocabulary that will help us understand the image and structure of small towns before imposing planning and development actions. We need to acknowledge that the small town is not a mini-me of the big city; it is its own ontology. The first thing in the understanding of a small town is the scale of things, the cluster of buildings, their shapes and materiality, the character of streets, and the overall picture of life.

In imagining an aerial view of his hometown Kishorgonj, the author Nirad Chaudhuri writes: "Had there been aeroplanes in our boyhood the town would have had the same appearance to our eyes, when looked at from a height... of five hundred feet, as a patch of white and brown mushrooms in the grass below must have to a little bird perched on a tree. The white corrugated, iron roofs were indeed too hard for the surrounding landscape, but this unattractive material had in my childhood just begun to oust the thatch. The

brown mat walls, however, matched with the trees and the soil." The huts that formed the fabric of the town were flimsy in structure, one strong wind was enough to dissolve the distinction between town and nature. On a return to Kishorgonj from Calcutta after the big cyclone in 1919, Chaudhuri notes: "I myself, arriving home one dark night from Calcutta... had very great difficulty in finding the town among the fallen trees."

Not everything is glorious in small towns. The scale that is valued in small towns is often thwarted by the increasing presence of an alien scale that presents an antithesis. Broad highways, bridges, electrical pylons and boxy governmental buildings are juxtaposed

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"violently" in the environment of small towns. In the 1950s, whether in the film of Ozu or Satyajit Ray, trains or electricity towers were the harbingers of something disruptive or ominous in the fabric of villages and small towns.

A small town is also an ecology, its footprint creates a careful balance with the regional landscape of agriculture, flood plains and wetlands. The much vaunted "green," an adjacency to "nature" in the form of paddy fields or ribbons of rivers, can literally be glimpsed from one's window in such places. The modernist fantasy of light, green and air that defined the futuristic, modern city is a reality in small towns.

A group of architects studying the nature of a small town looked at Mymensingh: Emerging from the banks of the Brahmaputra, Mymensingh like most towns in

Bangladesh owes its beginning to the banks of a river (until the railway arrives). Nadir paar is an existential orientation in the geography of the town, providing the characteristic river walk and riverside activities. The Circuit House, the DC bungalow, a zamindar's villa, and other loci of power are often close to the riverbanks and create a de facto "civic precinct." Areas around those buildings form a park-like situation with open spaces, ancient trees, and community buildings such as gymnasiums and clubs. Older architecture not only form heritage sites and structures, but lend an aura to the milieu of the town. Mohollas are also unique, characterised by an interweave of low, detached buildings, ponds, orchards, shops, and local lanes.

Specific rituals and festivals, artistic crafts, production of various savouries, and musical or literary traditions give each town its identity. Comilla offers roshomalais at its Matri Bhandar stores, Pabna has its kite festival, and Mymensingh prides itself on its literary "Mymensingh Geetika."

Small towns are immensely walkable. The expression paa fellei (you can have what you need within a stone's throw away). Some have described this as the "horizon of reach," in which one's corporeality is manifested in the property of walking that prescribes what is traversable and available. In a small town, the body knows.

Time is a shadow in small towns. If the big city is structured by time -- what time do I have to reach there, how long will it take to get to that place -- the small town keeps it at bay. In the big city, one has either embraced or succumbed to the impersonal rhythm of the city with its risk and uncertainty. On the other hand, a small town pace can be exasperating, especially to the young increasingly made restless in a telecommunicative world.

In a small town, an emotional investment is not yet superseded by financial or entrepreneurial motivations. An immigrant condition of creating anonymity in the big city is not part of the small town dynamic. People can push back their pasts when they move to a big city, and greet the ever emergent potential. "My Mymensingh," for example, overlaps with "our Mymensingh," while "my Dhaka" is one listless raft among many in the vast ocean that is "our Dhaka."

The writer is an architect and architectural critic, and directs the Bengal Institute for Architecture, Landscapes and Settlements.

# Bangladesh at Bloggerheads

ADNAN R AMIN

LIKE many Bangladeshis, I started concentrating on and paying closer attention to blogging from 2013. February 2013, to be precise. There was a time -- between 2004 and 2012 -- when Bangladesh's vibrant blogosphere was churning out history and research articles, sociopolitical analyses, original literature and personal stories of love and loss. This was a time when blogs were read mostly by other bloggers and were thus isolated from mainstream attention.

Things changed as social media (esp. Facebook) was adopted as a distribution mechanism, resulting in wider readership. A much-awaited, open and rational discourse on 'National Identity' began to take shape in the ether. Bangla language blogs were routinely appearing on website toppers. Gradually, mainstream media started sourcing contents from blog, thereby substantially improving traffic and influence of the Bangladesh blogosphere. The Shahbag Movement of 2013 -- and both its inspiring and macabre aftermaths -- has been arguably the most significant outcome of blog-centric activism. These developments effectively pivoted the category of 'blogger' into the cauldron of simmering national issues.

'Blogging' and 'blogger' have come to occupy various, curious frames. Today, the very mention of the words conjures notions of atheism, virulent anti-religious sentiments, religious propaganda and hate speech. It evokes emotions ranging from discomfort to anxiety to outrage. Yet, at least half our population does not know what a blog is, what it represents and what it can do.

The concept of blogging takes inspiration from a ship captain's log and uses word-processing software to create virtual logs. This enables every online citizen to write, and make searchable, 'web logs' or 'blogs'. Think of a 'blog' as a personal diary and a 'blog post' as a page from that diary. It is a personal account with no institutional mandate or guarantee of factuality or verifiability. There is no restriction on topics, language or media usage either. To put things into perspective: we would not

make any distinction between words written with a pen versus those scribbled with a pencil. It is the meaning or message that counts. Yet bloggers continue to be perceived as a unique category, ideologically motivated and/or unsuitable for the mainstream. This is problematic.

What makes Bangladeshi blogs stand out are the content, nature and temperament of the conversations taking place. Typically, dominant Bangladeshi blog narratives either frame present politics in terms of the History of 1971, or link it to the global schism over Islamist ambitions and terrorism. Let us note that these narratives are not shaped by the technology of blogging, but by

especially if one holds that unless you are offending someone, you are not doing it right. Apart from the unforgiving, slander-happy readership base, the Bangladeshi blogging experience is shaped by the twin threats of extremist wrath and state controls. The former especially has prompted many a bloggers to seek asylum in the West.

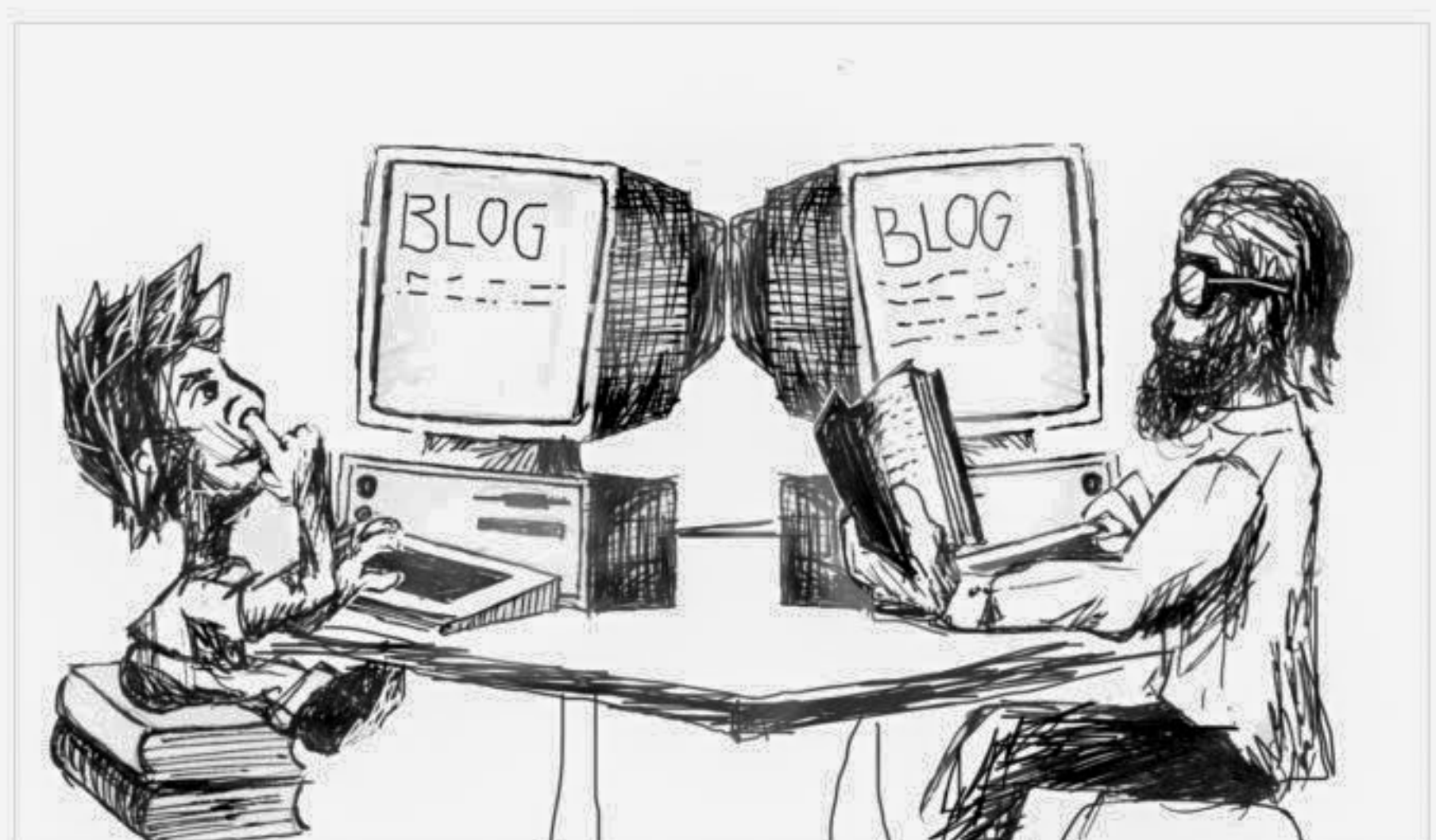
In a recent op-ed, blogger and Shahbag activist Mahmudul Haq Munshi (a.k.a. Shopnokothonk) explains why he now lives in Germany. He describes the reign of terror unleashed upon secular, freethinking activists of Shahbag. His personal security was further

his stature, centrality and contributions in this struggle. It is not unlike how 'prison time' is used as a measure for veteran politicians.

In spite of the flurry of reports on hounded bloggers and invisible assassins, not much is known of the actual contents being generated on either side. There is still no academic or legislative line separating Critical Questioning from Hate Speech. Very few citizens have actually read the blogs and comments. Most have chosen to consolidate existing political stands, instead of entertaining dissent and alternative narratives. Similarly, media reports have vilified attacks on Religion and bloggers alike, without deconstructing the Religion-Secularism binary. That is why Bangladesh needs young thinkers like Munshi to interpret and contextualize online conversations. The greater civil society needs to be included in these debates. If life and death conversations are taking place on the blogosphere, then no one can afford to remain isolated.

Lastly, it is important for blog bearers, sharers, haters and regulators to remember that blogging is just 'writing': intrinsically no more credible than a scribble on a napkin. For older generations habituated to the 'printed word' being associated with reasonable standards of credibility, this may be counterintuitive. Today, many blogs look like genuine newspapers or research outlets, but have to submit to no editorial, quality or grammatical standards or controls. Many blog posts refer to yet others as their means of verification. This circular reference makes it difficult for ordinary readers to ascertain the truthfulness of a blog post. The age of blogging is opening up space for difficult and critical conversations. This process is creating a fair amount of turbulence, prompting all parties to employ propaganda and fabrications. This is a fight for our attention, our support, our opinion; and we cannot continue to be oblivious. Here's to hoping that we all remember that the 'Age of Information' is also the 'Age of Misinformation'.

The writer is a strategy and communications consultant.



Amanda-Googe

unresolved issues that keep Bangladesh from historic closure. The moral and ideological fractures surfacing in our blogosphere are rooted in the history and politics of Islam in Bengal, directed by the spirit of 1971 and lately, viewed through a post-9/11 lens. All of this is what makes blogging so contentious in Bangladesh.

History, readers may note, is not without a sense of Irony. After four decades of independence, Bangladesh is taking stock of history, consolidating national history and leveling with war-criminals. Yet this national stocktaking was brought about by thinkers and activists with little or no accountability.

Being a serious blogger in Bangladesh is no laughing matter:

jeopardized after he threw a shoe at the corpse of war-crimes accused Ghulam Azam. On other occasions, he claims to have barely escaped petrol-bombs lobbed from the wayside.

Munshi also makes some intriguing claims or revelations. One is an anecdote about ambitious activists who include their names in concocted lists of 'Islamist targets' and submit them to various media outlets. Allegedly, they do this to elevate their status and importance. Rivals allege that amplifying one's actual risk enhances chances of finding asylum in a foreign country. Interestingly Munshi too seems to use life-endangering situations as evidence of

## COMMENTS

### "Tortured" BB official hospitalised" (January 13, 2016)

Rashed Iqbal

TDS is writing "alleged" which is very insulting to everyone who's been tortured this way in the last couple of years.

Elius Raihan

In Bangladesh, if anybody says, "I am suffering from police-phobia", s/he might not be wrong. Some policemen act in such a way that it seems they have the license to terrorise people.

Akhtar Hossain

In the western countries, people call police for help. But in Bangladesh, it's safer to stay away from the police, it seems.

Kamrul Islam

Exemplary punishment should be given to that policeman to set an example for other corrupt police officials.

### "Lawmaker's attempt to grab minority's land" (January 11, 2016)

Anis Rahman

The rule of law should always prevail regardless of the party that ascends to power, but then again we are talking about Bangladesh! Our legal process is skewed in favour of the political elites!

Salahuddin Jamal

Political leaders have been regularly indulging in property grabbing of the minorities.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

### Facebook scam

Recently my wife received a Facebook message from one of her friends to 'like' her picture in a profile photo competition. My wife went ahead, logged into that website and clicked 'like'. Later on, my wife received phone calls from some of her friends saying my wife was asking for money through Facebook. We found out her account was hacked. Then we started receiving more phone calls, especially from Bangladesh (we live in Australia now). One of our friends had already transferred Tk 20,000 to a bKash account.

Later on, we managed to regain that account and when we logged in and went through the message

history, we were surprised to see that the scammer used my wife's account to message her friends in Bangladesh through Facebook messenger. The scammer had requested one of my wife's close friends to bKash Tk 20,000 and promised that s/he will transfer the money into their bank account the next day. The chat seemed very casual which means anyone could fall into this trap. The scammer also sent the "like my profile pic" link to all of my wife's friends hoping to hack a few more accounts. I hope that The Daily Star will help our readers be aware of these sorts of scams. I also hope that BTRC will take action to stop this.

Hasib Mahmudul VIC, Australia

### Bank drafts for govt jobs

- Most of the government organisations demand bank drafts worth Tk 500-1000 from job applicants who apply for a government job. It seems like a kind of torture to applicants who are still unemployed. They face many difficulties to collect that money. We request the government to change this system for the interest of the unemployed youths of the country.
- Md. Mukul Mia
- BAU, Mymensingh