

Social safety nets

Plug the holes in the system

EVEN though Bangladesh is on its way to become a middle income country (MIC), nearly a third of its population lives below the poverty line, making social safety net programmes an integral part of its economic development. Yet, the existing funds allocated to about one hundred plus programmes have turned out to be inadequate to cushion the poor against poverty. Bangladesh's allocation in its social safety nets is 2.2 percent of the GDP, which is paltry compared to other MICs. The problem was highlighted last Sunday at a discussion organised by a leading Bangladeshi daily on social protection strategy and budget.

To make matters even more grievous, half the state support does not even reach its intended recipient because of pervasive corruption, selection of ineligible beneficiaries and other misuse of funds. On top of it all, over a quarter of the allocation is spent to provide pension for government employees! Also, the schemes are not well coordinated and suffer from lack of transparency and accountability.

We believe that the government should prepare a detailed database of the number of people living below the poverty line, which will help the stakeholders involved in understanding the needs of different target groups and strategise result-orientated plans. Improved management of the schemes, along with an efficient use of resources and plugging the loopholes in the distribution process is crucial in making the social safety nets more effective. It is also important to strengthen the monitoring and supervision system relating to the implementation process to make the schemes more accountable.

Draft Road Transport Act

Incorporate critical issues

THE draft of the Bangladesh Road Transport Act is apparently missing some key issues like speed limits, accident probes and victims' compensation according to road and transportation experts. We are surprised that this essential Act is on the verge of being enacted into law without keeping these provisions that will address safety concerns on highways. These concerns are valid as Bangladesh is about to become connected with the wider region under the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal motor vehicle agreement. Hence, it becomes imperative to include issues such as better traffic management and classifying vehicles according to type and weight. These concerns were shared in a stakeholder workshop jointly organised by the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) and the World Health Organisation (WHO) recently.

Needless to say, our roads and highways have been for years a death trap for pedestrians and commuters alike. Reckless driving coupled with unruly pedestrian crossings has turned long road routes into danger zones. Yes, much has been done to address some of the biggest problems like blind corners and road dividers. But a lot still remains to be done. The Act was designed to tackle many of these issues which would make roads safer to use and also allow for compensation of victims. We urge the authorities to take into account concerns raised by various stakeholders and interest groups. It will perhaps take more time to incorporate changes, but the nation and the people will be benefitted by a more substantive Act, which the proposed one is not.

COMMENTS

"PM pays toll for travelling on Hanif Flyover"
(April 10, 2013)

Issam Mosaddeq

Very impressed! The PM is saving the taxpayers' money by paying for her travel expenses.

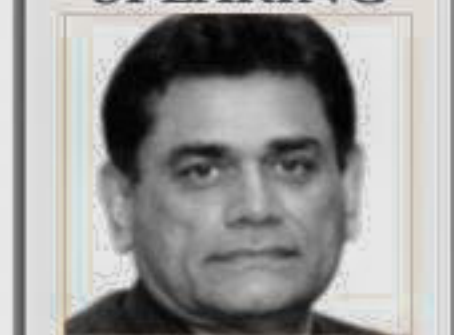
Mahabub Zaman Munna

So what? Rule goes same for everyone.

Nabila Mustarin Husain

Yeah the toll had to be paid by us as well by facing immense traffic.

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING



BRIG GEN
SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN
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long ago. A pair of circus lions had managed to escape from the cage during a performance where the trainer's ability to control the animals had failed miserably. As the spectators ran helter-skelter for their life a smart aleck rushed and locked himself inside the cage. Quite safe from the tiger himself was this man but not the other spectators. It is left to one's imagination as to what happened to those unfortunate enough to be faced with a pair of tigers on the loose, or to the tigers themselves and whether they managed to devour a few or instead were killed by somebody.

This is not the first time the DMP has come out with their innovative idea of providing safety to the people of the Capital on occasions such as the Bangla Nababarsho or New Year's Eve. We are told that some areas in the city are no go areas after a particular time on the eve of the English New Year, or that we are not to be out on the streets after a particular time as we have been told in this instance. Not for a moment should we doubt their intention or the fact that the citizens' safety is not the topmost priority in the mind of the DMP. We query their method of ensuring that.

The DMP order takes one back to one's public school days or one's days in the hostel where one was expected to return after a particular time, and this was known generally as the sunset rule since that was the cutoff time for the hostel residents to return.

We find ourselves quite in the same position as those facing two tigers on the loose and nowhere to go except perhaps inside a cage. Those who want to enjoy

THE caveat imposed by the DMP on the Pahela Baishakh celebrations in and around Suhrawardy Udyan and Ramna Park, reminds me of a cartoon I saw



PHOTO: STAR

the Udyan's ambience on the first day of the Bangla month will have to end their fun and merrymaking if they are in that particular area, by 5pm. No one will be granted entry into the area after 4 pm. And all these conditions have been laid out, we are told, for our safety. That might sound very reassuring; after all, who is not interested in his or her safety? But it speaks volumes about the society we live in and about the approach regarding a societal sickness.

The police order is provoked by a most despicable incident in the same celebrations last year. Some ruffians had exploited the rush of people in the Pahela Baishakh gathering and sexually assaulted young women taking part in the celebrations. They have neither been caught nor identified. There are many 'ifs' and 'buts' in the matter including the failure of modern technology to recognise and nab the culprits. But isn't it a case of running away from the problem rather than tackling it head on.

What if another untoward incident were to occur somewhere else in the city on the next Pahela Baishakh? Will the DMP curtail that programme next year so that we are all 'safe'?

You know, there would be no accidents if all the vehicles were kept off the road, and if pedestrians were not allowed to venture out on the streets they would not run the risk of being run over by an errant bus driven by an untrained driver without a valid driver's license, and that happens everyday of the week. But have we even in our wildest dreams thought of keeping off the roads? No, instead the best is done to train drivers and to be extremely selective in giving driving licenses, and making sure that the police enforce the traffic rules to lessen the number of accidents.

The answer to the 'tigers' we are grappling with is not to put everybody inside the cage and feel safe. The tiger is still lurking and will pounce on any

unsuspecting victim. The answer lies in collectively facing the demon. And in facing the demon the police must ensure all the necessary security to the people who want to be uninhibited in their enjoyment of the day.

One cannot cut off the head to cure the headache. We cannot run away from a problem, which we are doing in this particular instance. The answer to what happened last year is not in curtailing our normal activity. It is at best an escapist attitude by taking the easy way out. Our life or lifestyle cannot be dictated or affected just because some rogues are likely to behave badly on that day. The more we become defensive the more we expose our weakness and the more we allow these elements to feel like the 'victor' and prompt them to repeat their actions. Meet them squarely.

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PROJECT SYNDICATE

The emancipation gap in Arab education

THE MIDDLE EAST EXCHANGE SERIES



ISHAC DIWAN

because educated citizens of Arab countries tend to be much less emancipated politically and socially, on average, than their peers in other parts of the world. If Arab societies are ever to become more open and economically dynamic, their education systems will have to embrace and promote values appropriate to that goal.

The gap is reflected in the World Value Survey (WVS), a global opinion poll that allows for the comparison of a broad range of values in different countries. Recently, the WVS surveyed 12 Arab countries – Jordan, Egypt, Palestine, Lebanon, Iraq, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Qatar, Yemen, Kuwait, and Libya – along with 47 non-Arab countries. The results allow us for the first time to compare the residents of a sizeable share of the Arab world to citizens elsewhere.

The WVS measures four revealing political and social values: support for democracy, readiness for civic engagement, obedience to authority, and support for patriarchal values that underpin discrimination against women. As a typical country becomes richer, more educated, and more politically open, support for democracy and readiness for civic engagement rise, and obedience to authority and support

for patriarchal values fall.

The data, however, reveal that Arab countries lag behind countries at similar levels of development. Arabs have a lower preference for democracy (with a gap of 11 percent), are less civically active (a gap of 8 percent), respect authority more (by 11 percent), and embrace patriarchal values much more strongly (by a whopping 30 percent).

Two characteristics of the Arab world could explain this: its predominantly

percent, while the gap between those with secondary degrees is only 5 percent. And similar effects can be seen for the other three values. Education, it seems, has a weaker effect on social values in Arab countries than elsewhere – by a factor of about three.

Thus, those seeking to foster openness in the Arab world should focus not on the impact of Islam, but on the education to which the region's residents are exposed. Indeed, one likely

been designed for indoctrination. Most of them are characterised by rote learning, disregard for analytical capabilities, an exaggerated focus on religious subjects and values, the discouragement of self-expression in favour of conformism, and students' lack of involvement in community affairs. These features are all geared to promote obedience and discourage the questioning of authority.

It may seem paradoxical that secular regimes were responsible for Islamicising education. But it makes sense if it is recognised as an attempt to exploit local cultural characteristics to reinforce the indoctrination effort (as has been done in China). Blaming local culture, which societies largely inherit, is not constructive. Recognising that autocratic regimes purposefully neutralise the modernising potential of education for the sake of their survival offers a road forward.

Unfortunately for the Arab world, it is a rather narrow road. Elites will not willingly reform education if doing so puts their survival at risk. Civil-society activists will need to fight to change the values underpinning their education systems, by encouraging civic engagement, inculcating democratic principles, supporting gender equality, and promoting diversity and pluralism. Only by ensuring that these values take root in every school will they grow strong enough to change the course of Arab societies.

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Muslim population and the autocratic governments that have ruled much of the region for the past 50 years.

According to the WVS, religiosity does indeed promote conservatism, but not more so in Arab countries than in the rest of the world. Still, given that Arabs' religiosity score is about double that of people elsewhere, this factor does partly explain the region's conservatism. But what is more interesting is the role that education plays – or does not play – in promoting social and political openness in the Arab world.

The biggest differences between Arab countries and the rest of the world can be found among the educated. Consider preference for democracy. On that measure, the gap between Arabs and non-Arabs with a university degree is 14

explanation of the observed gap in social values is that education is being deliberately used as a tool of indoctrination, with the purpose of consolidating autocratic governments.

Indeed, with the introduction of mass education in the 1960s, education in the Arab world was placed in the service of top-down nationalist projects. Then, in the 1970s, after state-led modernisation pushes had failed and governments had become increasingly repressive, education policies were infused with conservative, religious values – first in order to fight leftist opposition groups, and later to compete with Islamic groups on their own terrain.

A review of the pedagogical literature on the region's education systems reveals the extent to which they have

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Install a deep tube well in Bashabo

The inhabitants of Bashabo area in Dhaka city have been suffering from acute water shortage. The water supplied by Wasa is inadequate and polluted. In our area, the supply pipeline of the Saidabad Water Treatment Plant is connected with the Wasa pipeline which pollutes the supply water. That's why this connection needs to be severed immediately.

We get some fresh water from local tube wells but the existing tube wells are inadequate to meet the local demand. That's why I urge the authority to install at least one tube well in Cenral Bashabo. There is a vacant government land in the area that can be used for this purpose. It will cover the holdings from 97 to 101 and 117 to 122 and give relief to the people.

Zibun Nahar Ashraf

120, Bashabo, Dhaka-1214.



Child living in police station!

An eye-catching report and the attached photograph from Dinajpur, was published in an English daily on April 10. It reflected positively upon the good side of our policemen. This is a real life case of a group of humane police personnel, who have adopted a young child abandoned by both his parents! This is indeed a very noble deed that needs to be recognised and appreciated by the top police officials.

Local voluntary organisations can also extend a helping hand for the education and other needs of the child. It will indeed be good to see that the child, despite his unfortunate circumstances, becoming a useful citizen of the country.

Engr.S.A.Mansoor
Dhaka.