

Debit cards for farmers

Facilitating access to inputs and fairer prices

"**A**-CARDS", as they are being called is a project financed by the USAID Agriculture Extension Support Activity and facilitated by non-government organisations Dhaka Ahsania Mission (DAM) and CARE Bangladesh, and Bank Asia, a leading commercial bank. The cards are going to be introduced to 110,000 farmers initially in 12 south central and southern districts. Every farmer can recharge these cards up to Tk. 20,000 and purchase required agro-inputs like fertiliser, pesticides, fuel, etc. from designated sellers. The good news is that the interest will be nominal 10 percent on the amount they spend, which is much lower than traditional microfinance institutions who charge cumulative interest of up to 31 percent. The programme is an initiative that will help farmers' access microfinance through banking institutions.

While the cost of taking loans just became much cheaper, the other major advantage of using the system from the farmers' perspective is that repayment of debt on the cards starts only after 6 months. This means farmers who now are forced to sell their produce like rice, wheat, jute, etc. at throwaway prices at the beginning of harvest season to repay traditional moneylenders, can afford to wait it out for prices to rebound at a later stage.

We believe that the digitisation of procurement and finance for farmers is a very important development. It is good to see non-state actors collaborating with mainstream financial institutions working with the government to bring the benefits of technology to those who need it the most. We would like to congratulate this multi-actor initiative and hope for its successful implementation so that the project can be expanded nationwide.

A unique ambulance service

Do not let it run out of steam

IT is not every day we come across a local administration official at Upazila level introducing a service that is so out of the box, it makes us sit up and notice. For the remote villages around Mohadevpur Upazila Health Complex of Naogaon district, pregnant women had a hard time getting to the complex when labour steps in or to get to the health centre because of a lack of requisite transportation. The local Upazila Nirbahi Officer came up with the idea of modifying a batter run easy bike into an ambulance, which effectively solved the problem for people who need to get to the health complex, like pregnant mothers. The transformed mode of transportation allows for two or three attendees to ride the vehicle along with the patient to the health complex and the drivers of these "ambulances" can be reached at any time over mobile phone. The service has been introduced in early January.

This is an innovative idea that takes an already existing and popular mode of transportation and makes changes that cost roughly Tk160,000 - Tk200,000 to complete. The charges for using these ambulances are well within reach of targeted customers who would otherwise have to pay exorbitant sums for conventional transportation, which is not readily available at any hour. We congratulate Mohadevpur's Upazila Nirbahi Officer Mr. AKM Tjkar-Uzzaman for coming up with the idea that works and it is very welcome news that an idea has been replicated across 26 unions of different upazila administrations of four districts to help people living in remote villages reach health complexes in times of need. This service needs to be supported with budgetary allocation by the administration so that the facility remains in operation.

COMMENTS

"InU students' march foiled, strike starts today"
(August 23, 2016)

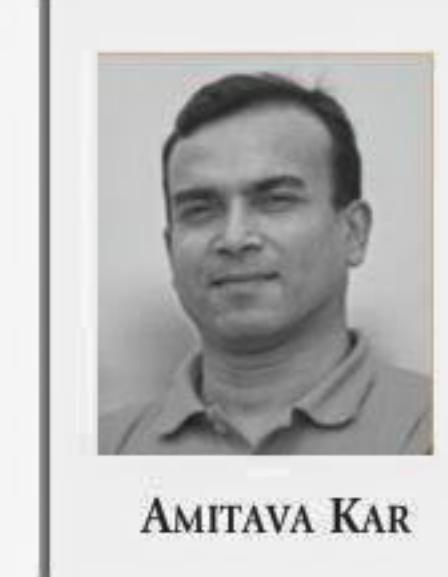
Shafiqul Islam

A just movement; we voice solidarity with the InU students.

"Actor Farid Ali no more"
(August 23, 2016)

Sharhok Barua

My condolences to the bereaved family members.



AMITAVA KAR

WAR remains the decisive human failure of which children are the worst victims. That was my first reaction when I saw the photo of Omran's dust-and-blood-covered face last week at breakfast. Who is this child? Are his parents and family members alive? Is he going to be alright? How much wrong must have been done by all of us before a five-year-old finds himself in a situation like this?

The morning gradually turned into noon and I got busy at work. Life moves on, right? But this time it didn't. The image became more vivid as the night grew darker. What and how does Omran think about the world? What opinions does he hold of adults in general? Will he grow up to believe in rules, in government?

Omran Daqneesh was rescued from a damaged building after a Russian airstrike in the Syrian city of Aleppo. He was, reportedly, one of 12 children on that day—not an unusual number—at one of the hospitals in the city's rebel-held eastern section. Within minutes of being posted by witnesses and journalists, a photograph and a video of him began rocketing around the world on the front page of every major newspaper and social media. Will this moment transcend being just a hashtag or a viral moment to become a movement to end the war?

The end of summer has apparently become an annual custom for the world to wake up to Syria's tragedy through images of its suffering children. Three years ago, it was the photos of gassed children from the Ghouta region outside Damascus, who suffocated to death after a chemical weapons attack on their neighbourhoods, widely blamed on government forces, while they were asleep in underground

bomb shelters. They looked like perfect porcelain dolls lined up in a row, polished and flawless.

Last year, it was the photo of Syrian toddler Aylan who washed up on a Turkish beach after drowning while trying to reach Greece with his family as they fled the war like millions of other refugees. The child was dead. But his body was intact, lying in the sand as if sleeping, and dressed neatly with unmistakable parental love for his long journey.

Moving to Europe as millions have done, poses even greater risks—of drowning on the way, being trapped in detention camps, and finally, after reaching their destination, falling victims to discrimination and hate campaigns.

Syria is not the only place burning. According to estimates made by Unicef, there have not been so many children suffering the consequences of conflicts, crises and natural catastrophes since the Second World War. Some 250 million girls and boys, one in nine children, are

newspapers, shown on TV and shared daily on social media, many of them indescribably more disturbing than Omran's. But for some reason, even minds numbed to hardship are jarred by this one.

Omran stares, disorientated, shocked and above all, weary, as if a symbol of Aleppo's suffering, a representative of his people's pain to the world. He is too shocked to cry. Then he puts a hand to his bloody brow, looks at his palm in surprise, and tries to wipe it



PHOTO: AFP

For millions of Syrian children growing up during this raging war, their present is bleak and their future even bleaker. If they stay in their homes, they are targets waiting to be bombed.

on the chair. We see children do the same all the time—with ketchup, ice cream or chocolate. Not blood.

He looks directly at the camera, at us, in complete silence. What else is an appropriate response to what had just happened?

The silence of a child in war to match the deafening silence of the world in peace.

The writer is a member of the editorial team at *The Daily Star*.

Congress must set its house in order

BETWEEN THE LINES



KULDIP NAYAR

CAN the Congress Party be retrieved? This was the question posed to me. Another one was whether or not the party is relevant. Answering the last question first, I said that a 150-year-old organisation which has loyal members even in the remotest rural areas cannot be irrelevant. The Congress led the independence movement and has ruled the country for more than five decades.

For my generation, Jawaharlal Nehru and Sardar Patel, who were the top two leaders of the Congress, are icons and I cannot forget the sacrifices the people made under their leadership. Their words counted and people would gather at their call whenever or wherever they made them. Back then, the Congress was India and India was the Congress.

The situation began to change after the death of Lal Bahadur Shastri, who succeeded Nehru. I had the privilege of working as the press officer with Shastri. He had doubts about Nehru's succession plans and would often say that *unke dimag me to un ki putri hai* (he has his daughter in mind). But, Shastri would add that it would not be easy.

This turned out to be true because after the death of Nehru, Morarji Desai was the first one to throw his hat in the ring. Congress president K. Kamaraj did not want Morarji who he considered intractable and not accommodative for a country where it was essential to be conciliatory to take the people of different religions, castes and regions together.

Shastri did succeed Nehru but died early of a heart attack in Tashkent, where he had gone to sign a peace agreement with General Ayub Khan, martial law administrator of Pakistan. My feeling is that had he lived, relations between India and Pakistan would have normalised. I recall that after hearing the sudden death of Shastri, Ayub came to Dacha, where the Russians had put the Indian Prime Minister up.

General Ayub said in my presence that "had he (Shastri) lived, Pakistan and India would have become long-lasting friends." Ayub also became the pallbearer of the coffin that carried Shastri's body to the aircraft which flew it to Delhi. I think Ayub did echo the feelings of Pakistan because when I visited the country subsequently, people recollect Shastri's friendship.

Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, then Pakistan's foreign minister, was the spoiler. He did not want to sign a treaty which would shun violence in settling issues between India and Pakistan. And he flew straight from Tashkent to Islamabad and propagated that Ayub had sold the country to India. What Ayub had conceded was that the differences between India and Pakistan would be settled peacefully.

Shastri had made Ayub write on the peace draft he had

brought along "without resorting to arms." The handwritten words in the text are retained by the National Archives of India. Although many people in Pakistan doubt this, the fact remains that General Ayub did sign the peace treaty because he, as the army chief, knew what devastation the wars caused.

With such long and grand heritage, the Congress Party cannot be written off. In fact, the very history of independent India begins with the movement which helped the country roll back the British Raj. It is true that the Congress has come down from the pedestal it had once occupied, but it does not mean that it has become irrelevant.

Can the party be retrieved is a difficult question to



Nehru, Gandhi and Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, All India Congress Committee meeting, Bombay, 1946.

answer. It had two major segments of followers: Dalits and Muslims. Mayawati, the Dalit leader, has cornered the people whom the Hindu religion itself had categorised as *sudras* (untouchables). In fact, there is no religion in the world which makes discrimination against its own people, claiming it to be a part of 'tradition'.

Today when the RSS raises the banner of *ghar wapsi*, it should realise that such a thing cannot happen until the Hindus give up untouchability which is rampant in rural India. People of different castes may have begun sitting on the same bed, yet they still have separate wells and separate cremation grounds.

The Muslim community in India, after the

establishment of Pakistan, have sought a party which is secular. The Congress, however, was not as firm in its ideology as it was during the days of Nehru and Patel. Still, Muslims had no choice because the only alternative available to them after Congress was the Communist Party. But this did not fit into their scheme of things and was too totalitarian and disciplinarian.

If it could sever from the rigid path, Hinduism should have no problems overhauling itself in the face of modern challenges. However, discrimination against Dalits is so deep that I do not expect many strides in this field. This is a challenge before the Hindu community.

The experience so far has been far from happy. At the time of elections, some appeals are made and even top

Hindu leaders from the Congress eat at the houses of Dalits. But all this wears off once the polls are over and people are back to their old moorings of discrimination.

If Congress wants to retrieve its lost influence, it would have to cleanse its own house. Secularism has become just a word and many Congress leaders are as rabid as the BJP fanatics. Secularism is a commitment, an aptitude of mind. We have included secularism in the preamble of the Constitution, but we are far from practising it. And, sometimes, I feel that India is trying to follow Pakistan where people wear religion on their sleeves to prove that they are true Muslims.

The writer is an eminent Indian columnist.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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An appeal to the Prime Minister

We, the students of the Jagannath University (JnU), are requesting the Prime Minister to consider our sufferings. We are facing various problems due to the lack of residential halls. We have no other way rather than staying at rented houses as bachelors. In addition to the other problems of the messes, the recent militancy threats have

added fuel to the fire. No one is willing to rent us houses anymore while the willing few are demanding two to three times more rent than usual. Meanwhile, we did not get back our residential halls from grabbers and illegal occupants. We are now spending our days in a very chaotic situation.

We, now, therefore would like

you to play a direct role regarding this issue so that new halls are constructed in place of the former Dhaka Central Jail in old Dhaka after the name of Bangabandhu and the four national leaders. It will uphold their memories as well as solve our accommodation problem.

Rafikul Islam
Jagannath University

Costly bus service in Gulshan

I am a retired person. I used to travel from Gulshan-1 to Gulshan-2 and vice versa by paying a bus fare of only Taka 5 each time. After the Holey Artisan tragedy, all public bus services were closed in that area as security measure, ignoring the inconvenience of the poor

commuters. Now, air conditioned bus services has been started in Gulshan which charge Taka 15 for travel from Gulshan-1 to Gulshan-2.

I personally think that this new expensive bus service is a kind of exploitation of the situation at the cost of the poor. Before

hundreds of buses used to ply through Gulshan for the convenience of the commuters with lesser income. I don't understand in what way the previous bus services were a security threat. You can't cut the head for the cure of a headache.

Ziauddin Ahmed
On e-mail