

Accepting the realities of mental illness



SARAH ANJUM BARI
ON February 15, headlines in the *Daily Star* highlighted the four main causes of deaths in Bangladesh in the past year. Compiled by the Bangladesh Health Injury Survey 2016, the findings reported 23, 868 suicides occurring in

one year. This has drawn attention to domestic abuse, financial strains, and several other causes that have been known to incite suicide, initiating laudable corrective measures such as the amended Dowry Prohibition Act 2017. However, these figures also hint at another issue that is largely repressed and glossed over in our country. It is imperative that we start addressing the reality of mental illnesses in Bangladesh, and their contributions to many of the key concerns that we are trying to solve.

In 2015, *The Guardian* ran a vivid photo story by photojournalist Allison Joyce portraying mental health patients in Bangladesh. In the pictures, a bald-headed woman squats in a starkly barren room, eating directly from a board holding scattered remnants of her food. A man lies down on a bed merely covered by a crinkled sheet of paper, surrounded by flaky walls that have turned yellow and blue from damp, and a floor covered in pools of white and brown congealing waste. Other pictures show tied up and shackled patients who would be harming themselves otherwise, and a dead girl lying half submerged in muddy rainwater. Captured in the Pabna Mental Hospital, Bangladesh's only state-run mental care institution with only 500 beds, these graphic images mention the 14.5 million adults who were reported as mental patients in a National Institute of Mental Health survey. The story also mentions a doctor working at the hospital who referred to his profession with regret, calling it something that he had 'ended up' in after failing to succeed as a surgeon.

This photo story symbolises the neglect with which mental health issues are treated in Bangladesh. The social stigma surrounding the subject bars people from even considering that they might be facing psychological troubles, let



SOURCE: CARTOONISTS.FTLE.WORDPRESS.COM

alone consulting professionals until the matter reaches extremes. Examples can be found in an article that the *Star Weekend* magazine ran in March last year. The story, titled 'Out in the Open', features two Bangladeshi women who suffered from mental health issues from a young age. One of the women who lives in the UK realised that her troubles with attention span were a cause for concern and not simply the signs of an active mind; she sought help in London and was diagnosed with ADHD - Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. The woman living in Bangladesh suffered from insomnia, weight gain, severe mood swings, anxiety attacks, and even bouts of dizziness; she was advised by parents that marriage would be the cure to her 'loneliness'. It was when her condition worsened to the point of incoherent speech and thought that she was diagnosed with Disorganised Schizophrenia.

Distrust in mental health treatment takes the shape of embarrassment for those living in cities, who worry about what their social circles will say once the news gets out. It isn't

altogether unfounded given the furore with which such stories are spread around through gossip, besmirching the names of patients and families in need of support and respect at such a difficult time. Others, perhaps in fear of facing such scandals, completely deny the reality of issues such as depression and more serious mental illnesses.

The stories in rural areas take on darker tones. If a woman from a village or an underprivileged background were suffering from psychological troubles, the most urgent concern would be about how she would get married. Alternately, a man with mental illnesses would be encouraged to find a wife who would take care of him and free others from having to do so. In neither instances would the patients receive diagnosis and medical help. Worse still, mental illnesses in villages are most often thought of as possessions by evil spirits. Patients who are sometimes even young children are subjected to 'exorcism' practices that involve beating them up with brooms and other violent rituals. Most of them are left with the fate of

being chained or tied up at home, living under the title of the village 'pagol'.

The lack of awareness regarding mental health issues, and more importantly a lack of qualified medical help in these areas, has been contributing to the miserable lives led by these patients.

There is no unified human rights review body in charge of monitoring mental health issues in Bangladesh; neither are there any mental health provisions in social insurance schemes. Meanwhile, the 2007 Report on Mental Health System in Bangladesh, the last large-scale study of mental health issues carried out by the WHO and the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, sheds light on how less than 0.5 percent of the national budget was allocated for health care expenditures in 2005. While we hope that the situation has significantly improved in the past decade, no such noteworthy studies have been carried out ever since, leaving us with no reliable source of information about the state of mental health care in the country.

When combating the spread of violence in

our midst, we need to notice the psychological causes and implications of the incidents occurring around us. We need to realise that mental illnesses are very real, and very prevalent. The frequency of sexual and physical assault cases point towards a large number of people in dire need of psychological help. The ever-increasing victims of various crimes signal an even greater need for post-traumatic psychological support across different levels of society. In fact, people suffering from mental illnesses are most vulnerable to abuse and mistreatment because of their inability to speak out for themselves, and the tags they would assume as unreliable witnesses in a crime.

Depression can lead to 67 percent higher chances of death from heart disease and 50 percent higher chances of death from cancer; schizophrenia can double and triple the chances of death from heart and respiratory diseases, according to the Mental Health Foundation, UK. The pain suffered by parents, spouses, and most of all, the children of these patients, transcends units of measurement. The more we gloss over these issues, the greater the damage that we cast around us.

The government and institutions across the country need to provide more expansive mental health support, through affordable medical services at the community level, and more importantly through a rigorous spread of awareness. The stigma, and the sheer denial surrounding mental illnesses need to be pushed aside. The responsibility to make these ideas heard falls upon the media - ranging from print, digital, and social media to the books, movies, and TV shows that have more direct access to viewers' minds. It is also up to society at large to extend help and support, so that people suffering from mental illnesses can feel confident to address their problems, and decide to seek help.

We have been striving to evolve as a progressive society - one that frowns upon discrimination and stands up for victims of injustice, regardless of their gender or background. In truly embracing such ideologies, we must learn to perceive mental issues as illnesses - no less shameful than an ailing lung or liver - and combat them with the correct treatment and, above all, sensitivity.

The writer is a student of North South University, and a member of the editorial team at *The Daily Star*.

Bangladesh's energy options

SAKIB BIN AMIN and MUNTASIR MURSHED

LIFE without a sustainable supply of energy is almost unimaginable. The importance of energy is even more supplementary in the context of developing countries, which have traditionally experienced prolonged periods of energy crises. A common characteristic of all underdeveloped nations around the world is the inability to meet their demand for energy, to which Bangladesh is no exception. For instance, use of traditional indigenous energy resources in Bangladesh has proven to be inadequate in ensuring energy sufficiency across the nation. As a result, the country's growth prospects are being hampered. Moreover, the nation's vast dependence on imported fuel has also attributed to an unnecessary fiscal burden, exerting multidimensional pressures on its economic development drives. Furthermore, in the past there was a global trend of being heavily dependent on the use of fossil fuels and non-renewable energy resources which not only minimised their reserves but also caused environmental degradation. As a result, the utmost significance of ensuring the availability of green and affordable energy across the world has been deeply acknowledged through the enlistment of energy as the seventh Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) of the United Nations.

Electricity is the main form of energy that is tapped on both private and commercial scales in Bangladesh. However, the country unfortunately has failed to match its energy demand through employment of its indigenous energy resources as well as from energy imports. Although some progress has recently been made in increasing energy generation capacities, generation in real terms did not proportionately increase mainly due to acute shortage in basic energy



PHOTO: BGR

inputs. Traditionally, petroleum-based electricity power plants in Bangladesh were in action. However, following the oil price shocks in the 1970s, the government decided to employ natural gas in the production of electricity. However, recent shortages have compelled the nation to resort to the use of imported fuels. It is worth mentioning that the primary energy resources and power generation capacity and efficiency are limited in Bangladesh, which obliges it to rely significantly on expensive oil-based power generation in order to avoid major power cuts. Moreover, it has been estimated that at the current rate of natural gas employment and provided no new natural gas fields are discovered any time soon, the country is likely to run out of its natural gas reserves by 2031. Given the ominous concerns, the use of imported High Speed Diesel (HSD) and Furnace Oil (FO) has risen alarmingly which, although added electricity

to the national grid, actually meant that the government's public expenditure budget was inefficiently allocated to pay the corresponding import bills. This had probably crowded out the nation's potential investment in other productive sectors creating adverse economic impacts. Thus, it is crucial for Bangladesh to prepare itself for the near future and plan its fuel diversification strategies keeping in line with the trends in the global energy markets.

As a part of its fuel diversification drive, Bangladesh can look forward to replacing fossil fuel and non-renewable energy with renewables in order to match its local energy demand. In particular, the nation can enhance bio-energy usage, an environment-friendly energy option, which can be exemplary in boosting its rural energy supply and relieving people from the burden of waste disposal and also resolve sanitation problems. Moreover, biogas

produced from waste can be used to generate electricity that can be exhausted for the purpose of off-the-grid rural electrification and can even be utilised to run waste management plants. A possible use of bio-energy can also be in the household sector where biogas can be directly used for cooking and heating purposes. In addition to these, bio-energy can be extremely helpful for farmers who no longer have to rely on expensive diesel and kerosene to run irrigation pumps and lighten houses, using biogas as a substitute to these fuels. The abundant supply of solid biomass can even be converted into compressed natural gas that can be employed to run vehicles whereby the import bills, arising from petroleum imports, could be reduced. Furthermore, second generation bio-fuels from *Jatropha*, etc. can also supplement the national energy supply.

Apart from bio-energy, Bangladesh can also tap its superior quality coal deposits for clean coal-based electricity generation purposes, provided skills development in the energy sector is ensured. Large scale coal-based power plants can be set up which, although is subject to time, can resolve the nation's electricity deficit to a great extent, provided measures to protect the environment are ensured.

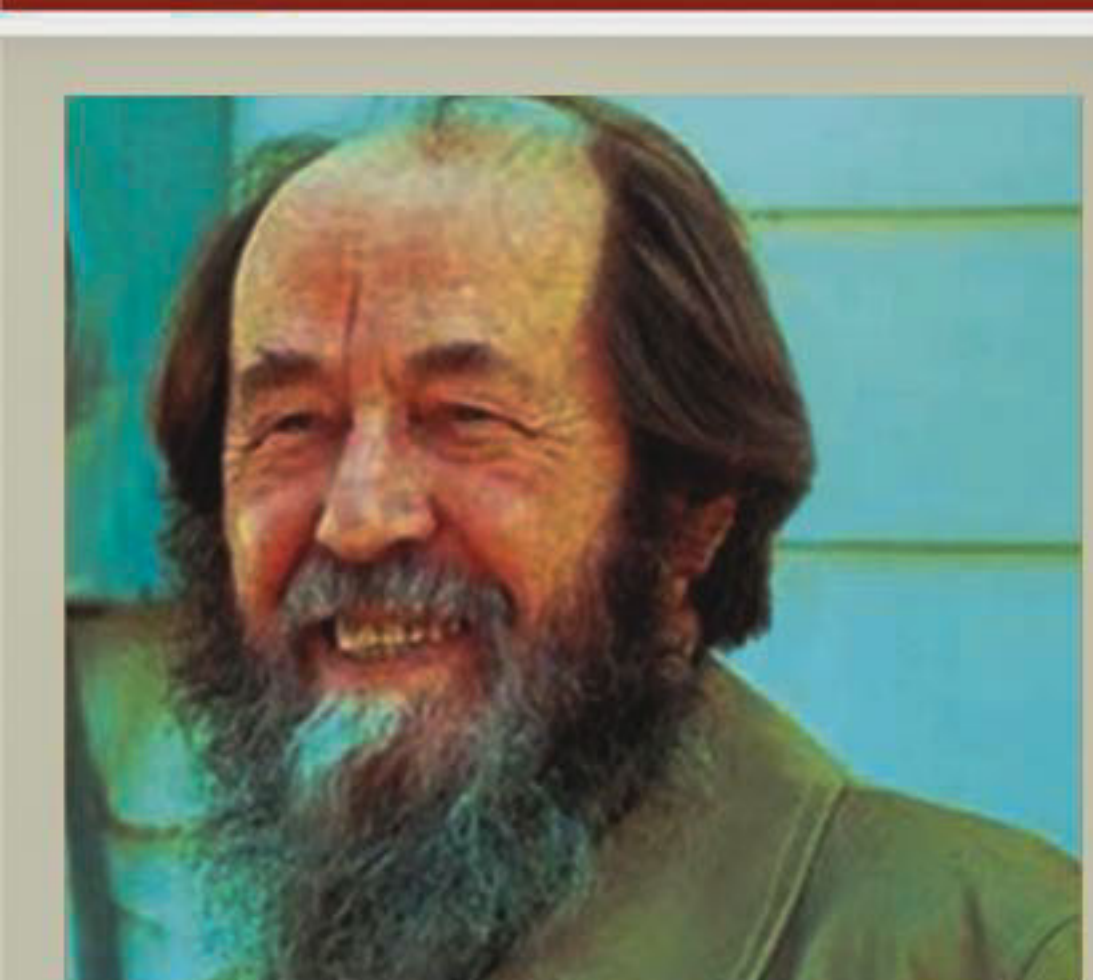
In Bangladesh, solar energy is another viable option; although start-up costs are on the higher side, small scale solar power panels on rooftops can effectively attribute to off-the-grid electrification, relieving demand side pressures. Electricity generated from solar power is relatively cost effective compared to imported oil-based electricity, which makes it a go to option in the near future. Solar energy is believed to be the most efficient and sustainable source of energy with absolutely no contribution to environmental degradation.

Finally, Bangladesh is advised to participate in cross-border electricity trading across the South Asian region, importing hydropower, the cheapest form of electricity, from Bhutan. It is important for the nation to participate in such regional power trade activities following its relative comparative disadvantage in producing hydropower due to its geographic limitations. Power trade can play a pivotal role in tackling energy insufficiencies whereby excess power can be exchanged with neighbouring nations. It is noteworthy to mention that regional trade among South Asian economies is not as much as regional trade between other countries, especially amongst the developed ones. At present, Bangladesh mainly imports electricity from India. However, it can also look to diversify its import basket in terms of trading partners and can look towards countries like Bhutan and Nepal that have comparative advantages in producing hydropower.

With sustainable clean and affordable energy as a part of the SDGs in the lime light, Bangladesh should ideally consider energy options which not only would mitigate its energy famine but would also contribute to its macroeconomic indicators. Transition from traditional energy to relatively environmental-friendly energy use would help maintain a harmony with the ecosystem, reducing the rate of global environmental degradation. Facilitating this transition would require the government's stern intervention in the financing of projects and the development of the country's energy infrastructures. However, once energy security is assured, Bangladesh can surely achieve much of its other developmental goals.

The writers are Assistant Professor, SBE, North South University and Research Assistant, SBE, North South University, respectively.

QUOTABLE Quote



ALEXANDER SOLZHENITSYN

RUSSIAN NOVELIST, HISTORIAN, AND SHORT STORY WRITER

For mercy one must have wisdom. This has been a truth throughout our history and will remain one for a long time to come.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

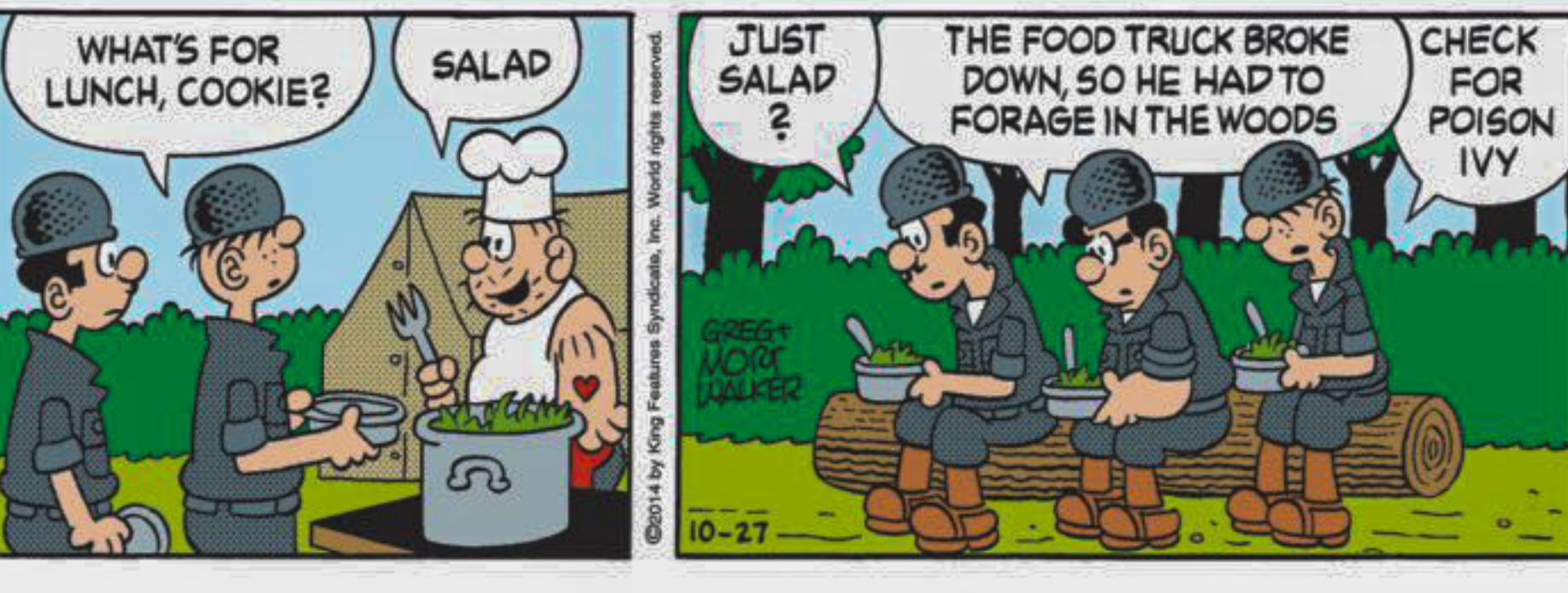
- ACROSS**
1 Grant and Laurie
6 Went to the polls
11 Quiver item
12 Pol's concern
13 Sleep sound
14 Odorless gas
15 Irregular
17 TV's Curry
19 Finger count
20 Ravine
23 Rooming house tenant
25"- La Douce"
26 Place to get in
28 Flightless birds
29 Charm
30 Lab animal
31 One or more
32 Composer Rorem
33 Center of activity
35 Toil
38 Plant pest
41 Knuckle-head
42 Director Sergio
43 Black Russian ingredient
- DOWN**
44 Sanctioned
1 Possesses
2 Ornate planter
3 Fail to reach first
4 Saddle part
5 Make better, as a deal
6 Female fox
7 Troubling sign
8 Sandy color
9 Freud topic
10 Cozy retreat
16 Green
17 Hiss of history
18"- Rae"
20 Feb. 2 VIP
21 Love, to Luigi
22 Did kitchen work
24 Astronaut Grissom
25 Suffering
27 One batting result
31 Main artery
33 Fishing aid
34 Olympics weapon
35 Tyler of movies
36 Hubbub
37 Auction action
39 - tizzy
40 Singer Shannon

11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22
23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40
41 42 43 44

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

MARIN FIRE
OLIVEDICER
SAVEDUNITER
ASISSCENIC
IKARPITGET
CARPARKS
NAILARTS
LEGHARPORTS
AXEMANSODA
MINORCAPERT
ALIBICAGENT
SEES TARTS

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker



BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott

