

Starving those who save us from hunger



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THE famous Russian writer Leo Tolstoy, regarded as one of the greatest authors of all time, at the peak of his success over 100 years ago, had succumbed to a profound spiritual crisis. The existential crisis of his inner life led to the creation of his autobiographical memoir — *A Confession* — where he asks his all-important question: “what is the meaning of life, if any?”

After a long and desperate search, he claimed to have discovered his solution not in science, philosophy or the life of hedonism, but in those living life in its simplest and purest form. Tolstoy writes, “If I wished to live and understand the meaning of life, I must seek this meaning not among those who have lost it...but among those millions of the past and the present who make life and who support the burden of their own lives and of ours also” — i.e. the farmers.

Bangladesh is a country renowned for its fertile land. This is because alluvial soil deposited by its interconnected rivers when they overflow their banks.

Thus, agriculture is naturally its largest employment sector, employing 47 percent of the total labour force and comprising 16 percent of the country's GDP, as of 2016. Similar to in Tolstoy's Russia, Bangladeshi farmers too have, for decades, “laboured quietly, endured deprivations and sufferings, and lived and died seeing therein not vanity but good”. All the while, quietly transforming Bangladesh from Henry Kissinger's “basket case”, to a country which today, produces enough food to feed its own (massive) population — a fantastic achievement by any standard of measurement, albeit underappreciated, if at all recognised.

With one of the fastest rates of productivity growth in the world since 1995 (averaging 2.7 percent per year, second only to China) according to the World Bank, the agricultural sector has accounted for 90 percent of Bangladesh's poverty reduction between 2005 and 2010. The lion's share of credit for which, undeniably belongs to the small farmers, as according to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) for FY 2014-15, out of the approximately 15 million farms, “84 percent are on average between 0.05 to 2.49 acres and 52 percent are between 0.05 to 0.99 acres” of land.

And yet, it is not the small farmers who have been the main beneficiaries of their blood, toil, sweat and tears. Rather, the main beneficiaries have been those that Tolstoy warned us not to become — the

“parasites”. That is, either the middlemen, or the (not exclusively) local politicians and influential people.

A perfect example of this surfaced only recently in Mokropur union in Habiganj's Baniachang upazila, when farmers there who were left devastated by an environmental disaster alleged that they were denied government aid — Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF) rice — specifically allocated for them. Meanwhile, relatives of the union parishad chairman collected the VGF rice meant for the farmers instead, and sold it in the open market for profit, according to reports.

This is nothing new, of course, but is indicative of an old problem that simply refuses to go away. One pointed out a long time ago by an individual whose

almost the whole of the results of their labour. Our salvation can only come through the farmer. Neither the lawyers, nor the doctors, nor the rich landlords are going to secure it” (*The Life of Mahatma Gandhi*, Louis Fischer).

Unfortunately, looking around at the state of things today only makes one realise just how miserably we have neglected his advice and, in the process, failed to find our salvation and spirit of self-government (ensure social equality, justice and freedom). Thus, we simply take what the farmers of our country provide us with, for granted. Never even bothering to help them out when they are left helpless by environmental disasters and are starving, let alone realise that we would go hungry each and every day



Have we become immune to farmers' plights?

PHOTO: STAR

life was profoundly affected by Tolstoy's work, named Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi.

In a speech delivered on February 4, 1916, in British controlled-undivided India (which included Bangladesh at the time), Gandhi said: “Whenever I hear of a great palace rising in any great city of India ruled by our great chiefs, I become jealous at once and say, ‘Oh, it is the money that has come from the agriculturalists.’ There cannot be much spirit of self-government about us, if we take away or allow others to take away from the peasants

of our life, if it wasn't for their daily sacrifices.

However, the greatest irony of it all is perhaps something that economist Michael Hudson mentions in his book *Killing the Host*. That is, like every other parasite, what the modern day economic ‘parasites’ don't realise is that by slowly leeching off the host and eventually killing it, they are only guaranteeing their own death. Because at the end of the day, the survival of the parasite actually depends on the host, not the other way around.

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SSC exams' standardised evaluation process

First step to a better education system

THE flip side to the disappointing fall in the overall pass rate in this year's SSC examinations is that it reflects the result of a more standardised evaluation system introduced by the Education ministry. It seems that this new grading system reduces the possibility of bias or negligence while checking exam scripts.

This is something to welcome as it will help make sure that these crucial board exams are evaluated in a fair, standardised manner. According to the Education Minister, there were flaws in the previous system. This includes teachers giving marks according to the number of pages written rather than the quality of the answers, no monitoring of examiners and no specific rules regarding how scripts should be graded. All this has been eliminated with the new system; the government has trained the chief examiners who, in turn, trained other examiners following a specific guideline.

Thus although there have been more students failing this year, the new system will ensure a more objective marking system. This is definitely a big step in the goal towards improving education standards in our country. But as proved by the tragic news of at least three SSC candidates taking their own lives because they failed in this crucial exam, the education system itself needs major overhaul. There are huge discrepancies in education standards across the country — the high fail rate among Comilla Board candidates in Mathematics and English is proof of this — and this is where major reforms are needed.

The new standardised evaluation system gives us hope that the Education Ministry will be as diligent about making qualitative changes in the curriculum, learning facilities and the quality of teaching so that in years to come the GPA 5 and pass rates will rise because more and more students deserve the grades they get.

BCL men at it again!

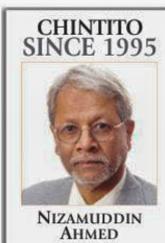
Hooliganism in student politics becoming the norm

ON Wednesday, BCL leaders and activists confined the Vice Chancellor of Begum Rokeya University (BRU) to his office, demanding appointment of BCL leaders to university posts. The story is not new. Last December, BCL men stopped a recruitment test at Rajshahi University and forced job seekers out of the examination hall. They had been pushing the authorities to give the job to BCL men. Last month, BCL activists refused to allow examinees at Chittagong University to enter the exam hall, because the authorities did not allow one of their men to sit for the exam. In the same month, BCL men clashed with law enforcers and construction workers in Chittagong over the issue of construction of a swimming pool.

At this point, we cannot euphemistically say that this is the work of a few errant members. The cases are too numerous to count. What this points to is a lack of discipline within the BCL. These men know they can get away with such activities with minor reprimands in most cases. And that many of these threats are directed at and inside universities speak loads of the culture that seems to have permeated the BCL — not even educational institutions are sacred.

In January, we published an editorial lauding our Prime Minister call to the BCL on the occasion marking their 69th founding anniversary that they should prioritise education above all else. Yet, not much has changed. We urge the central leadership of the party to push for a change to this culture of violence and hooliganism in the name of student politics. Implementation must come from the top in this regard.

Astounding, bewildering and confounding



CHINITO SINCE 1995

EVER since the second IPL, obviously I could not do it any earlier, it has been a matter of wonderment for me why the three-piece cheerleaders are all non-deshi. Isn't that amazing,

with the flavour of Bollywood ubiquitous in and outside the stadiums?

The puzzled amongst you who may construe that the three letters stand for anything but the Indian Premier League should switch on to relevant TV channels covering cricket Live or as news. That would be almost three-fourths of the broadcast market, often six in a row on the remote control, with Hindi commentary affording some variety.

rest, the initials do not stand for medical doctor, but the outstanding cine-dancer is married to someone, who (God!) didn't know at the time of the engagement how popular an actress Madhuri was. Lucky guy, ignorance did not cost him the marriage.

As to why all the female cheerleaders at a cricket ground are imported (occasionally we see some traditionally-dressed men doing the romp), my survey tells me it is because no Indian lady agreed to do the frolic only when a four or a six was hit, or when an opponent's wicket fell; they want to dance all the time, and that too not for money when they are supporting their team.

When it comes to trading cultures, I have also been made to wonder why security operations in our country have to be inked in English. On special days of the year we stress our vocal cord to

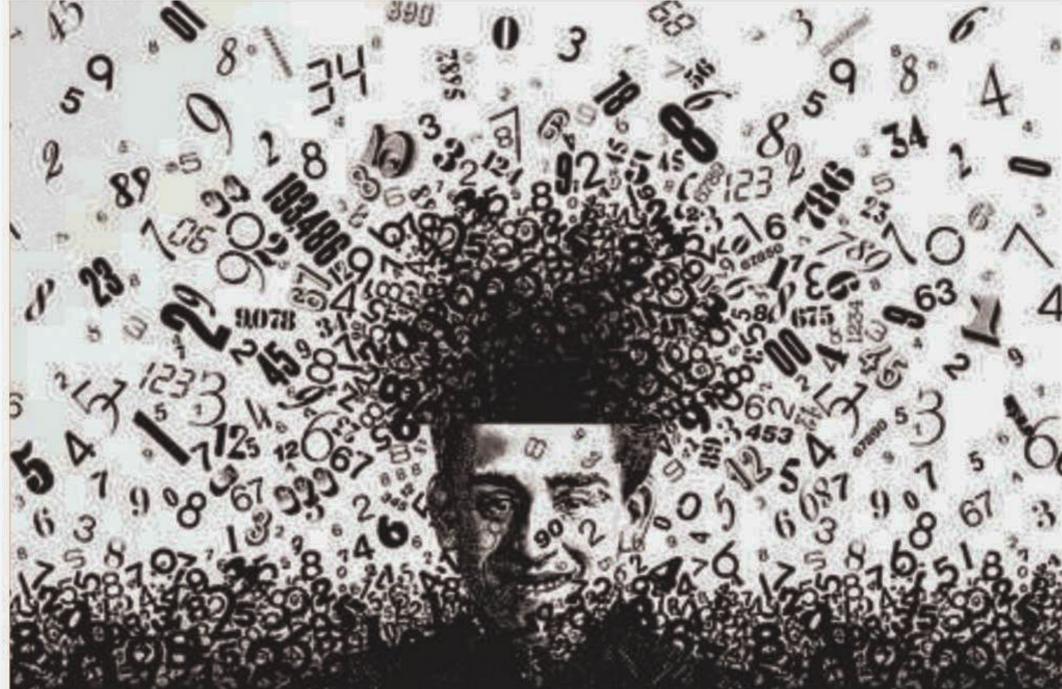
mission would be a failure if called “shariken” (I am from Barisal where h is s) or “Padma nodirdheu”.

The trend of belittling our mother tongue, threatened since Muhammad Ali Jinnah and Liaquat Ali Khan of 1947, is overpowering in all spheres of our life. Except for swearing in Bangla when we are really angry, our schools and colleges (Bengali-medium included), shops, businesses, TV programmes, restaurants, hospitals, apartment buildings...you name it, are largely in English.

You will even hear some parents speaking in wrong English with terrible articulation, in their vain attempt to be different from others on the street, in a shop. Such low mentality existed among some of us during the Pakistan era when Urdu was flaunted as the dialect of the ‘different’. We concluded with 1971. And, now a new frontier.

Admittedly, the usage of English is

We are systematically relegating Bangla where English can be avoided. Regrettably, I see some fashion shops being named something like lahenga or janabe-ala. You do not see so much English in China, Japan, Korea... And they are today considered Big League countries by any measure.



In reference to 'three-piece' above, those of you (neurologically sullied) who are pondering on the colour, cut and carry of the daredevils' dress (sorry Delhi) should be clear that the allusion was to the three lovely ladies that usually make up an on-field ensemble. It's obviously not challenging to wear the not-so skimpy outfit in the world's largest democracy, but the trio qualify as daredevils because of the *mudra* they dare to enact, what with MD watching.

Now to put your boggled mind to proclaim that *tirish lokkho* martyrs laid down their life, that their sacrifice shall not go in vain, that we shall ride the waves to cross the sea... all of these warfare to save a flower, to make our mother smile. Yet, in hunting criminals and laying siege on terrorists, we Bangalees rely on “Operation Super Seagull” or “Operation Black Torch”. One argument could be that lawbreakers, illiterate in many sense, do not understand English and so these words help to keep the encounter secret from them. Their case is that the surreptitious

unavoidable under prevailing globalisation, and in the sciences, but we are systematically relegating Bangla where English can be avoided. Regrettably, I see some fashion shops being named something like *lahenga* or *janabe-ala*. You do not see so much English in China, Japan, Korea... And they are today considered Big League countries by any measure. Pride in mother tongue, not by rhetoric, but by its widespread usage is one ladder to progress.

Rhetorical too over several decades has been the Muslim *ummah*, which

disparagingly failed to prevent a division in the brotherhood. It baffles common sense how the destiny of one single Muslim president, in this case Bashar al-Assad, could bifurcate the Islamic world at the cost of two million lives over the past seven odd years. And no one is thinking of stopping the bombardment of children, infants and the unborn. All this blood, so that one man can oversee the death of 470,000 people, 55,000 of them children.

More recently, a few have gone the Putin way and some Trump, at least publicly, while the duo have a good laugh after office hours because they are dying to move closer to each other. Perplexed also by the knowledge that many of the Muslim countries, despite their P and T, maintain bi- and tri-lateral relationship with each other to prove that your enemy is not always my enemy.

Patriotism today is narrated by hired cheerleaders, as appreciation comes from the strangest of quarters. *Phoren* appears better only to the nincompoops while intelligent countries/states are closing the ranks and their water bodies. The selfish leader will prefer to trade nationalism with a civil war even it will keep in power. Day in and day out, even while tweeting at three in the morning, they propound that the *Tal* tree is mine. All this on television, and no one blinks an eye.

Political science has for long been residing in the attic, and we wonder why we see so many strange bedfellows. Geography has gone all topsy-turvy and still climate change to a few egocentrics is a conspiracy. People dying is a very bad thing, very bad, if they happen to be of some other race or country.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Illicit financial flows from Bangladesh

As per the latest Global Financial Integrity report, Bangladesh has lost between USD 6 to 9 billion to illicit financial outflows in 2014. This is roughly enough to build three Padma bridges. The loss of USD 75 billion between 2005 and 2014 would cover the entire fiscal budget for Bangladesh twice.

It is extremely disheartening to witness these events at a time when there is little foreign direct investment, with the wealthy transferring their capital out of the country instead of investing in Bangladesh. Bangladesh is enjoying the extra benefits of population dividend or population bonus, i.e. when working age (15-64) population is much more than dependent population (0-14 & 64+). Of our 10 crore (60 percent) working age population, 25 percent are unemployed, and 2 million youth are entering the job market every year. There aren't enough jobs to meet this demand. Under the circumstances, Bangladesh needs huge investment that can in turn create new jobs.

The situation calls for an international law by the UN against illicit capital transfers, which would hold tax haven countries responsible. In addition, anti-money laundering laws must be strengthened in their enforcement. Finally, anonymous shell companies must be eliminated so as to curtail trade misinvoicing, and enhance transparency.

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