



PHOTO: MOSFIQUR RAHMAN JOHAN

“Listen to the trees talking in their sleep,” she whispered, as he lifted her to the ground. “What nice dreams they must have!” — *L M Montgomery, Anne of Green Gables*

SNAPSHOT

MAILBOX

thestarmagazine@gmail.com

When logic takes a backseat

The article published last week addresses an important issue about the Bangladesh cricket team. From 2015 onwards, our team's performance has improved immensely under the captaincy of Mashrafe Mortaza and some new talents such as Mustafizur Rahman who have proved very deadly. In Bangladesh, everyone loves cricket so we have a strong fan base. We had some momentous wins which left strong teams stunned. But whenever our national team loses a match with any side we post acerbic outbursts on social media. Before making such judgements, most of us do not stop to think about how the players have to adapt to new conditions within such a short span of time. Our national cricket team is our pride – it is representing Bangladesh at the international level and so far, it has succeeded. So, from next time, we as fans or reporters should logically judge the results before making emotional outbursts on every public platform.

Rafid Alam
Mohammadpur, Dhaka



PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

Longadu burning: An affront to humanity

The article “Longadu burning”, published in *Star Weekend*, demonstrates the institutional failure to ensure the right of our fellow citizens to live in safety. We all strongly condemn the arson attacks by the Bangalee settlers in three villages of Rangamati's Longadu upazila that has turned thousands of indigenous people homeless.

In recent years, Bangladesh has recurrently been in international headlines for violent attacks against

minority communities across the country. According to a report by Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council, published in January this year, there were at least 1471 incidents of violence against different minority groups in 2016, a five-fold surge from 262 cases in 2015. The aim of such heinous attacks, in most cases, appears to be in order to grab land and other property.

The recent incidents of Longadu have once again

highlighted how vulnerable minority communities are to attacks. This is a human rights issue. Lack of transparency and accountability of the state machinery makes the situation worse. Inevitably, minorities will disappear from the country one day if such a situation continues. Civil society actors need to play an important role in this respect to help resolve the crisis.

Md Khalid Hasan
University of Dhaka

Silenced bystanders

Silence cannot be the answer to child sexual abuse. Parents should make the first move for the safety of their child from the abusers. The teachers of educational institutions may come forward in helping the child for justice if they get support from the family of the sexually abused child. In addition, parents should not follow the norms of silence but raise their voice against the abusers. They should be more concerned about their child and informed about their caregivers on whom they bestow the responsibilities of their child during working hours.

Incidents of child sexual abuse are increasing both in urban and rural areas. The article “Silenced bystanders” published last week in *Star Weekend* emphasised that kinship with the perpetrator should not be a barrier to justice for children who have been sexually abused. The criminal should be punished though the kinship may make it difficult for the family to expose the situation publicly.

Joshinta Areng
Arambagh, Dhaka

The opinions expressed in these letters do not necessarily represent the views of the *Star Weekend*.

EDUCATION

Discrimination. This is the word being tossed around to describe the recent decision to institute a VAT of 15 percent on English-medium schools. Many question why English-medium students are being targeted. Others demand to know why any form of education should be taxed; after all, education is a basic right. However, given a prevailing public perception that English-medium schools are superior to Bangla-medium ones, this form of education has unfortunately morphed into a consumer good. Additionally, English-medium schools on average are also more expensive. Owing to these, the government's stance on education is that it can be taxed. But this is a simplistic generalisation, which refuses to take into consideration the nature of education as a public good. This also disregards the many factors that often compel parents to opt for this form of schooling, not limited to better teacher attendance, better admission policies and more.

English-medium schools are indeed known for being expensive. In fact, schools are more often seen as a viable and highly lucrative business model as opposed to functioning for the betterment of society. Brand name schools in Dhaka charge between BDT 10,000-20,000 in monthly fees alone, whereas admission fee charges can get as high as BDT 1 lakh.

For some, this is a lot of money and the reasoning could be that the schools can afford to absorb this VAT. However, VAT by its very nature is a tax on consumption. The net economic burden of this tool works like that of retail tax. Therefore, whether schools hike up their fees or not, the VAT will still be charged on the full amount of fees and will have to be borne by the consumers, i.e. the parents and the students.

When asked about the matter, Waqar Ahmed, principal of Adroit School says, “We do not charge our students VAT. Even last year when this same debate came up, we paid the VAT ourselves although most schools do not. Now there is an order which strictly forbids us from collecting such VAT.”

If the government's agenda was to come down on schools making too much money, guidelines could have been set instead because not all English medium schools charge the same amount. The addition of VAT does not take them into consideration.

“While certain schools were charging very high fees, the majority of the schools were not. But the new VAT would mean even these schools would become more expensive than before,” adds Ahmed.

VAT ON ENGLISH-MEDIUM SCHOOLS
A discriminatory proposal?

OSAMA RAHMAN



PHOTO: STAR FILE

For parents, the additional VAT would indeed mean a lot more stress than before. This is especially true when one considers that, contrary to popular belief, not all parents who send their children to English-medium schools are well-off. “I promised my son that after class five, I would enrol him in an English-medium school,” says Babul Ahmed, a resident of Mirpur and a chauffeur by profession. Next year, his son enters the sixth grade. Unfortunately, Babul can longer keep true to his word. “A 15 percent VAT on education will out-price many people from affording quality education because the truth is that public schools are not up to the mark and I do not have confidence in them,” he adds.

Babul's fate is similar to many others and he too is a victim of the government's new and increasingly ambitious budget. However, more worrying than the ambition is the means of achieving it. For an economy striving for middle-income status, any negative impact on the education sector, such as levying a high rate of tax, can have serious consequences.

More bad news keeps trickling in with whispers of many schools already mulling charging the extra 15 percent from the new July sessions despite the Supreme Court ruling in February to the effect that the government cannot collect VAT. “The court order prohibits collection of this VAT. This is against the law and so it cannot be collected from the students,” argues AM Aminuddin, the lawyer who moved a writ petition on the issue in 2015. “Education is a basic right. It is not a commodity and so should not be taxed like that. Also, why are only English-mediums being charged? That is discriminatory,” he adds.

Moreover, there are concerns about how the money collected through VAT would be allocated. As AAMS Arefin Siddique, Vice-Chancellor of Dhaka University, remarks, “We do not expect VAT on education as it adds an additional burden on parents. However, it must be noted that our education sector does need investment, especially at primary levels. So, if VAT is being charged, it should be clarified in the

budget where this money is being invested.” The current budget, however, does not dwell on these specifics — a key point that stakeholders should demand a discussion on. If the money goes towards improving the education sector, then the presence of VAT has some merit. But even then, such an issue requires thorough planning, something the current budget glosses over.

While parents, teachers and students wonder what the future holds, at this point we must wonder why such a VAT is levied solely on English-medium schools. Are we punishing parents for opting for a choice of education that many deem can provide a better future? Or is this yet another attempt to exacerbate a form of segregation we could do without? For people to even begin to contemplate their support for VAT on education, the government should at least explain that the money will go back into education and strengthen it. Until then, the cries for ‘No VAT on Education’ will continue and rightfully so.

Osama Rahman is a sub-editor at *The Daily Star*.



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