

The puzzle of hiding data

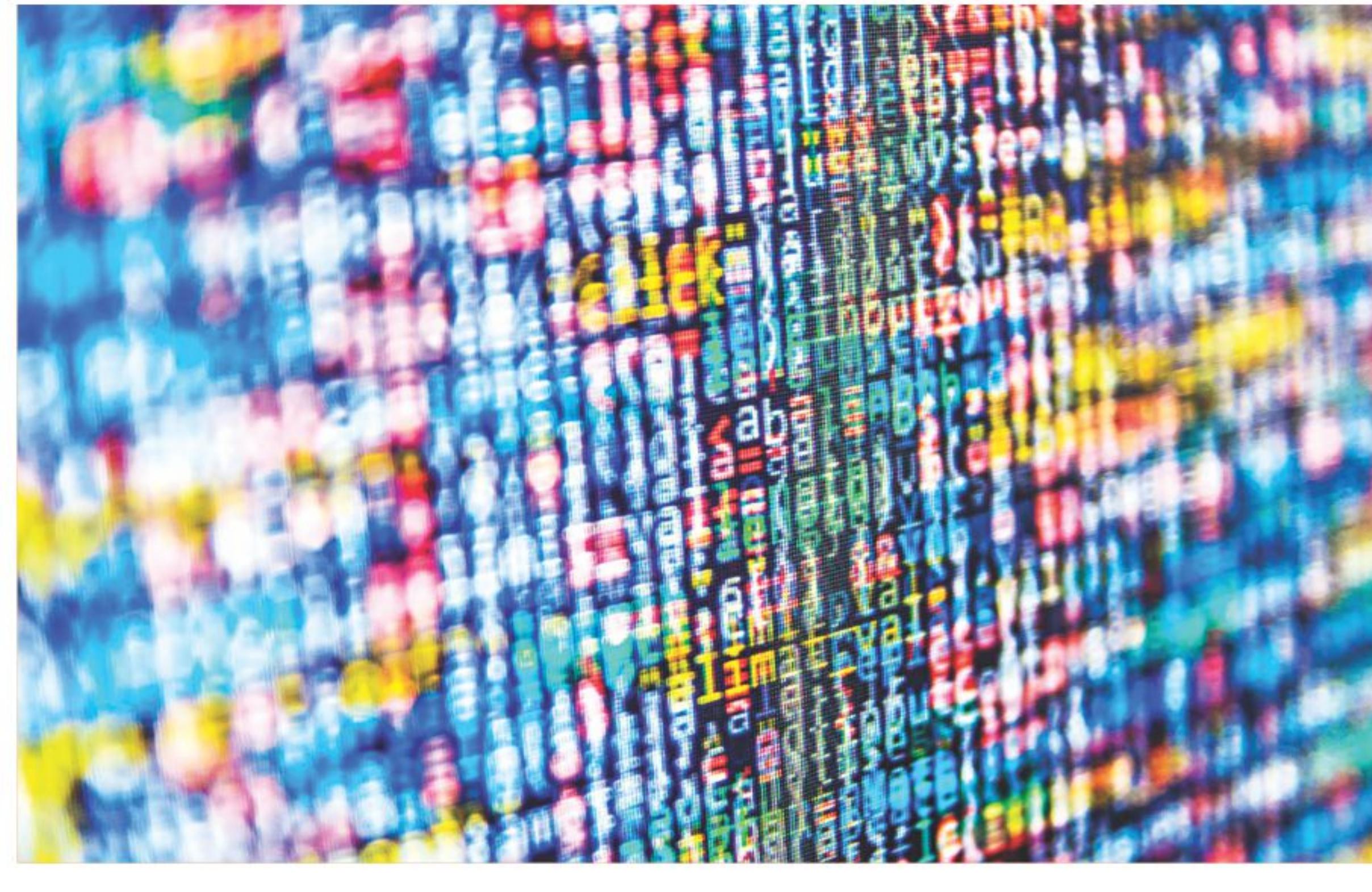
SYED BASHER

ON a recent visit to Bangladesh, noted economist Nurul Islam voiced his concerns about the quality of the national statistics (data) of Bangladesh. Like the quality of some basic food items in Bangladesh, our data quality, too, is questionable. I would like to add another dimension to this subject: lack of access to public data, which shows the shortsightedness of our data providers, who are also depriving Bangladesh of the benefits of rigorous scientific research.

Let me give an example to illustrate the point. Suppose you want to conduct scientific research on the inflation dynamics in Bangladesh. Since the inflation data is published by the Bureau of Bangladesh Statistics (BBS), you visit its website and immediately discover that you can only get 3-4 years of data. Often this data is not provided in a spreadsheet, so you will have to collect it on your own and create your own spreadsheet. Any researcher would know that one cannot do much with only 3-4 years of data, even though inflation data is available at a monthly frequency.

Of course, you can visit the BBS office to manually collect data from past years from various published reports, assuming that you would find the reports in a single place sorted in ascending yearly order. I am also assuming that you will not have to visit the BBS office multiple times to get your desired data, amid the crazy traffic of Dhaka.

If the prospect of a physical journey seems daunting to you, I have an easy solution for you! You can collect the inflation data from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) database, which provides monthly consumer price index and inflation data for Bangladesh from 1993 to the present. Although the IMF data is usually available through a subscription, it is freely available for selected developing countries including Bangladesh. But the irony is, the IMF takes the data from BBS, who has the sole proprietorship of this data. Why can't the BBS make the data available on its website then? This is certainly not



confidential; otherwise we would not be able to get them on the IMF website anyway.

This reveals a peculiar mentality of our national data providers. Why can't they share the data with Bangladeshis who have a rightful claim on it, when they can share the same with institutions such as the IMF? The problem is not limited to the BBS only. One faces a similar challenge in getting monetary data, for example, from the Bangladesh Bank (BB). Although in many ways, the accessibility and availability of macroeconomic data from Bangladesh Bank are relatively better than the BBS, it too falls short of expectations. The bottom-line is: the websites of public institutions in Bangladesh do not have long-term data archiving options to help researchers looking for macroeconomic statistics.

But this data is often available on the websites of the IMF or the World Bank. The World Bank deserves praise for making its flagship database, the World Development Indicator, open to everyone. Our national data providers (BBS, BB) routinely supply macroeconomic data to these donor agencies but when it comes to sharing the same

data with the public, they seem to have a problem. This, in my view, exposes the colonial mentality of the leadership of our public institutions.

Let's look at the benefits of making data open to the public. Suppose a doctoral student at a US university is writing her dissertation on an economic issue of Bangladesh, and if the required data is available on a BBS website, she can conveniently access it. The net result is that Bangladesh can benefit from new scientific research financed by the US taxpayers' money. Now multiply this gain by any number you like, because uncountable researchers from all corners of the world can now exploit this newly available data for their research purpose. All these benefits come at a low cost, thanks to the digital revolution.

Let me share a personal anecdote here. When I was working as a research economist at Qatar Central Bank, on many occasions, I asked my Arab audience to think why the Bank of Israel makes all their data available online for free, when information is highly guarded in Israel. Of course, the management of the bank is aware of the enormous benefits of open data,

while its Arab counterparts still treat national data as a state secret.

Although, one may be surprised to know that among the twenty-plus Arab countries, the Saudi Arabian Monetary Authority, the central bank of Saudi Arabia, offers an impressive annual database on the Saudi Arabian economy. Even more surprisingly, the flashy United Arab Emirates scores poorly in this regard.

Various government agencies in Bangladesh collect and maintain a lot of data. But these offices do not see the benefits in making it open to the world. In this connection, I think the data providers should be more sympathetic to the students who often face a difficult situation in obtaining the information they need. The citizens are the real owners of the national data, so more attention should be paid to improve data accessibility.

Bangladesh cannot always afford to hire world-class researchers, but it can at least act wisely to make the data open to the public and enjoy the benefits of free scholarly research. All it needs is a change of mindset.

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LEST WE FORGET Remembering Captain Mustafa Anwar

ZULFIQUAR RAHMAN

THIS year July 24 marked the birth centenary of Captain Mustafa Anwar, who was a pioneer Bengali Muslim pilot in the Indian subcontinent. Born in Jessor in 1917, he was the eldest of the poet Golam Mostafa's six children. With the passing of his mother, Jamila Khatun, at an early age, he assumed responsibility for his five siblings. His two brothers, the late Mustafa Aziz and Mustafa Monwar, both went on to become renowned artists.

Throughout his childhood, Captain Anwar had a passion for flying that kept him driven and motivated. His early education was at the Hare School in Kolkata. In 1935, he was admitted as a cadet to Dufferin, a prestigious British merchant marine training ship. Despite his humble background and the competitive programme, his hard work and determination earned him a good reputation as a cadet. He was awarded the Sawyer Prize for the most efficient senior cadet captain and also obtained an "Extra First Class" certificate.

After Dufferin, he joined the B.I.S.N Company as a ship's cadet. After two years of sailing, due to acute seasickness, he changed his profession. In September 1940, he took up flying and joined the Civil Air Reserved Corps as a cadet. In 1941, after further training as a pilot, he received his pilot's "A License" from the Bihar Flying Club. He then completed a flying instruction course to become an instructor. In 1945, he received his "Pilot B Commercial License." At the dawn of Indian commercial aviation in 1946, Captain Anwar joined Mistry Airways as a commercial pilot.

In April 1946, Captain Anwar met and married Susmita Roy. After the separation of India and Pakistan in 1947, Captain Anwar joined Indian Airlines as a commercial pilot and when the airline was nationalised, he became their VIP pilot. When Zhou Enlai (the first premier of the People's Republic of China) was invited by Jawaharlal Nehru to visit India, Captain Anwar was commissioned to fly him to and from Kunming. Captain Anwar is also the author of the book *Civil Aviation in India* which was published in 1955. Upon joining Pakistan International Airlines in 1959, he migrated to West Pakistan with his wife and their two children, Prodip and Babli. At the time, he was the most senior pilot in Pakistan, inclusive of both civil aviation and the air force, with 14,500 flying hours.

Captain Anwar's flourishing career came to an untimely end, on August 14, 1959, when he died in a plane crash while observing a training flight of a junior pilot and an American instructor, on his day off. The entire flying community was devastated by such a great loss. At the time of his death, he was 41 years old. Captain Anwar was laid to rest at the Azimpur graveyard in Dhaka. His death was reported not only locally, but also in newspapers such as *The Guardian* and *The New York Times*.

Captain Anwar is survived by his wife, Susmita (90), his daughter, Monisha Anwar Huq (Babli), four granddaughters and three great-grandchildren.



Captain Mustafa Anwar

Of what value is primary school completion?

JOHN RICHARDS and SHAHIDUL ISLAM

NEARLY all children now enrol in grade 1 and 80 percent are reaching grade 5, currently the final year of primary schooling. In the Primary Education Completion Exam (PECE), a mandatory national exam introduced in 2009, the latest pass rate is 98.5 percent. This is a success that cannot be ignored.

But can students who complete primary school read and do simple sums? A recent survey we conducted revealed that among children who had reached grade 5 (but not higher), 72 percent could read a grade 2 level story and only 40 percent could solve grade 2 level subtraction problems. In a large-scale national survey commissioned by the Directorate of Primary Education, only 25 percent of grade 5 students performed "at grade level" in Bangla and math.

PECE has led to a large increase in parents paying teachers to be tutors for children preparing for the exam. Many are concerned that tutors spend too much time making students memorise probable PECE questions, often using commercial guide books rather than helping students learn basic skills, and that grading of the PECE exam does not tell us what children really learn.

Seeking clues to this puzzle, we conducted a pilot survey in Nilphamari to measure student learning in reading and mathematics. We

selected children who were in primary school or had completed grade 5 but did not go beyond. About 75 percent of the sampled children were attending or had attended a government primary school, about 20 percent an NGO school, and five percent a private school. The questions we asked on Bangla and math were simple, based on elements of the grade 2 Bangladesh government school curriculum.

We were inspired by the work of ASER, a non-profit learning survey organisation in India. Aser in Hindi means impact; the letters also stand for Annual Status of Education Report. Their premise is that children with primary education should be able to read, write and do basic sums—at least at the grade 2 level.

For the last decade, ASER has conducted surveys of primary school age children throughout rural India. Students are considered literate if they can read a short simple story with no more than three errors. They are considered numerate if they can solve two two-digit subtraction problems, requiring carryover.* What ASER found has generated a national public debate about the state of education in India. It has inspired a similar annual survey in Pakistan.

In our sample, 30 percent of children who reached up to grade 3 could read the story and 18 percent could solve the two subtraction problems. Children who had reached grade 5 did better, but more than a quarter could not



SOURCE: GLOBALPARTNERSHIP.ORG

read the grade 2 level story and 60 percent could not do the simple subtractions.

In ASER's 2016 survey, the comparable results across India were, in grade 3, 25 percent able to read the story and 28 percent able to do the subtractions. In grade 5, 48 percent could read the story and 51 percent

could solve the two subtraction problems. Our sample students performed above the Indian average in reading, but below in arithmetic. Surely, these results are unacceptable for either country!

We draw two conclusions from the pilot. A simple survey should be part of a regular nationwide assessment of student learning and used as a measure for tracking change in primary education and making quality improvement decisions.

Second, PECE not only gives wrong signals about student outcomes, but also subverts the learning process. It should be discontinued. Genuine assessment of actual competency—an ASER approach as part of it—should be used.

The government and development partners are currently engaged in planning the next phase of the Primary Education Development Program. This is the perfect time to consider these ideas.

*We used the story in ASER's 2014 survey. It is of similar difficulty to grade 2 Bangla textbooks. Here is the translation:

"Tithi is the only daughter in the family. Dad and Mom love her very much. She likes to eat fish. Her father brings fish home every day. She then keeps hanging around her Mom. When the fish is fried in oil, she becomes very happy. Tithi eats three to four pieces of fish altogether. Father takes Tithi to the market. Some days father brings hilsha fish from the market. On those days, Tithi's happiness has no limits."

A typical subtraction problem required subtraction of 36 from 73.

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QUOTABLE Quote

FRIDA KAHLO
Mexican painter

Nothing is worth more than laughter. It is strength to laugh and to abandon oneself, to be light.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 30 Meringue base
- 33 Many a time
- 34 W.C.'s 1940
- 6 Turkish governor
- 11 Sufficient
- 12 Joust wear
- 13 Staggers
- 14 Dictation pro
- 15 Suffering
- 16 Vigorous fights
- 18 Suffer
- 19 Toronto-to-D.C. dir.
- 20 Caustic stuff
- 21 Plane part
- 23 "The King"
- 25 Silent assent
- 27 Confession item
- 28 Dance's de Mille
- 30 Meringue base
- 33 Many a time
- 34 W.C.'s 1940
- 35 Takes ten
- 36 Easy mark
- 37 Early
- 39 Boxing great
- 40 Out of bed
- 41 Stylist's spot
- 43 Took steps
- 44 Extreme
- 45 Padlock holders
- 46 Studio stand
- 47 Powerful beam
- 48 Sufficient
- 49 Joust wear
- 50 Staggers
- 51 Dictation pro
- 52 Suffering
- 53 Vigorous fights
- 54 Suffer
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- 93 Early
- 94 Boxing great
- 95 Out of bed
- 96 Stylist's spot
- 97 Took steps
- 98 Extreme
- 99 Padlock holders
- 100 Studio stand

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

S	H	A	G	C	H	A	M	P
HOME	S	L	A	T	R	E	R	O
OPEN	T	O	R	E	R	O	R	O
DINGBATS	H	I	G	H	A	T	S	S
SPOILS	D	I	A	S	A	S	A	S
LAPSE	O	D	D	L	O	L	L	L
ALALA	A	L	A	R	A	R	A	R
POLECATS	B	A	T	H	M	A	T	S
NOMORE	A	L	O	R	E	O	R	S
IDIOTS	I	D	I	O	T	S	Y	O
PEAKS	P	E	A	K	S	E	A	R
SEAR	S	E	A	R	S	E	A	R

BEETLE BAILEY



4-7

BABY BLUES



BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

