

## Whose fault is it?

### Stop blame-game over question paper leak

**W**E find the education minister's stance of absolute denial of any responsibility and helplessness in checking the leak of question papers for different examinations disappointing. After a meeting with a delegation of the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) at the ministry's conference room, the respected minister addressed the problem by shifting the blame and responsibility completely onto teachers saying all due measures were taken by the ministry to prevent this malpractice and misconduct but unfortunately, the teachers could not be trusted.

The allegations of leak in the question papers of all public exams have become widespread over the last few years. This malpractice is so prevalent that it must be a symptom of a wider problem of moral corruption that has become part of our culture. But what is even more disheartening is that in October, when the question papers for Dhaka University (DU) admissions exams were leaked the DU authorities also kept denying the allegations. It seems like the culture of shifting blame is as widespread as the culture of moral corruption.

We see no reason to single out teachers for such rampant misconduct. While they may be part of the problem, they are certainly not the entire problem. If some teachers are indeed to blame, appropriate measures must be taken. And who is responsible for ensuring the quality of teachers? How can the education ministry absolve themselves of all responsibility? Each party must be held accountable and take full responsibility for their share in the problem. We do hope our education minister will take due measures to prevent unscrupulous individuals, whether they are teachers, public officials or anyone else involved in these question paper leak rackets so that children are not influenced by the poor moral standards that seemed to have spread in our education system.

## Waiting for Godot

### Chittagong city gas crisis

**T**HE city of Chittagong is undergoing a severe energy crunch. As per a report in this paper published yesterday, more than 400 factories in the city have seen their production hampered due to intermittent gas supply and that means a lot of exporters have failed to ship their goods within stipulated timeframes. The situation in the port city has been like this for some time now. Against a daily demand of 400 mmcf (million cubic feet), the city receives an average of around 240 mmcf, which leaves policymakers with a juggling act, i.e. balancing between what gas to give to industry and how much to other sectors including households.

The situation at household level is not rosy. Residents of affected areas have to put up with gas not being in the pipe during normal cooking hours. The same goes for CNG-driven vehicles that must wait for inordinately long hours to top up, and that too not very forthcoming since gas pressure is not up to the desired level. We are told that a certain gas well is supposed to go operational in Samutang gas field next month and that should improve the situation, but then, what guarantee is there that the gas produced there will be allotted to the port city alone?

The situation in Chittagong merely reflects what we have been highlighting for some years now. With no significant new gas reserves being discovered over the last so many years the deficit has now finally caught up with us. We have been depleting our known reserves without making new discoveries. Plans for importing liquid fuel have been there on paper for years and now that the crunch has hit the second most important commercial hub of the country, one can only wonder when that will materialise.

# Why is youth extremism on the rise?

## And why are we asking this now?

### THE OVERTON WINDOW



ERESH OMAR JAMAL

**I**n a study conducted by three eminent Dhaka University professors, frustration, loneliness, drug addiction, lack of proper vision and guidance, and at times affluence were identified as major drivers of violent extremism among university students. The study—*Bangladesh: Facing Challenges of Radicalisation and Violent Extremism*—also identified mal-governance, corruption, absence of rule of law,

the global politics of labelling and a lack of proper understanding of religion to be among the other major causes that are pushing the youth population of our country towards extremism.

According to the professors, the influence of extremism on young people is quite clear to see in the way they talk, dress and observe various national and cultural days. Which is why, despite the laudable work and effort put into the study by the professors, one must ask, was it really necessary for the study to tell us what should have already by now been so obvious?

Hasn't it been very plain to see for quite some time that something is clearly broken in our society and nearly all its aspects, and that the overall impact that this is having on our young people is extremely harmful? Because if it wasn't, then perhaps we were all asleep. And perhaps that is another reason why things have gotten to this point. Because while the youth were struggling to cope with whatever challenges they were facing, it is us who had simply failed to see the signs through their struggles, and it is we who had failed to hear their muted cries for help.

In fact, this could well be the most important reason behind their "frustration," "loneliness," and "drug addiction," witnessing people around them being distracted by a whole host of things, including the blind pursuit of affluence, instead of seeing or hearing them. But then again, placing the entire blame on ourselves may be a little unfair. After all, it is what is most obvious that we, humans, often fail to see.

But now things have reached a point where we have to wake up. That is, unless we want things to go down a path from where there is no return—from losing our youth in things and places that have replaced us. Because that is what these radical ideologies are doing—giving them "a vision" that all human beings must have in order to continue living their lives which are bound to be full of struggles, no matter what "labels" are assigned to them, and "guiding" them down a path of self-destruction in the absence of any proper guides.

Luckily for us, there have been plenty of people who have warned us of the crisis that we find ourselves in today, to whom we can now turn for direction.

One of those people who had only recently come to my attention was John Taylor Gatto, the New York City Teacher of the Year in 1990. In his award acceptance speech, Gatto said, "our society is disintegrating, and in such a society, the only successful people are self-reliant, confident, and individualistic—because *the community life which protects the dependent and the weak is dead* [emphasis mine]." Which is the case today in our society—plagued by "mal-governance," "corruption" and "absence of rule of law," the victims of which are most usually the dependent and the weak.

He said, "The daily misery around us is, I think, in

large measure caused by the fact that—as Paul Goodman put it thirty years ago—we force children to grow up absurd... It is absurd and anti-life to move from cell to cell at the sound of a gong for every day of your natural youth in an institution that allows you no privacy and even follows you into the sanctuary of your home demanding that you do its 'homework.'" Indeed our young people today have no time to spend in nature or with family, and absolutely no "privacy," or as social media teaches them, no need for it even.

Gatto said, "these things are oddly enough just a more cosmetic way to create dependent human beings, unable to fill their own hours, unable to initiate lines of meaning to give substance and pleasure to their existence. It's a national disease, this dependency and aimlessness." Aren't these the same problems that have firmly taken root in our nation today?

a vulnerability in human psychology."

And as further confirmed by one of Facebook's former executive, Chamath Palihapitiya, it is "ripping apart the social fabric of how society works," by curating "our lives around this perceived sense of perfection." Encouraging people to establish "brittle popularity that's short term," leaving people "even more vacant and empty," by "programming" them, even though they "don't realise it."

Lastly, as the study revealed, "a lack of proper understanding of religion among the youth" too is one of the major causes of extremism among university students. Which, again, should come as no surprise in our hyper-secularised society that, despite proferring (non-stop) its high level of tolerance, is completely intolerant of religions, spirituality or any form of transcendental worldview. And which by pushing



Flowers and candles left in respect of those who were killed during a militant attack on the Holey Artisan Bakery on July 1, 2016, in Dhaka.

SOURCE: THE CONVERSATION

According to Gatto, two central reasons for this cosmetic lifestyle are television and schooling. Television, for the more obvious reasons. And schooling, because it has abandoned what he refers to as the "main engine of education," that is, the family. Because if we "use schooling to break children away from parents...we're going to continue to have the horror show we have right now," because "The curriculum of family is at the heart of any good life." But as things stand today, children more and more have broken families (literally or figuratively) and a school to make up for that—a wholly inadequate replacement.

In regard to social media, as the study conducted by the DU professors revealed, it "has cocooned the youth into a shell and has become an important tool for radicalisation." And this should come as no surprise as Facebook founder Sean Parker admitted in early November this year that Facebook (and one can only assume other social media platforms, too) "literally changes your relationship with society, with each other...It's a social-validation feedback loop...exploiting

religious, spiritual and philosophical discussions aside, leaves the door open for these ideas and thoughts to be monopolised by extremists.

And a perfect example of this is how Karl Marx is quoted today as saying: "religion is the opiate of the people." When, in fact, Marx's full quote was, "Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people."

Thus, when people in general lack "proper understanding of religion" and even the secularised ideas they vouch to subscribe to, is it any wonder why the oppressed creatures turn towards extremism in today's heartless world, with their souls looking for something more meaningful than our social media obsessed culture? Or where opiate use itself has replaced religion and spirituality, which in turn is now being replaced by extremism (and their monopolised definition/version of religion)?

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# Bringing multinationals to the stock market



SHARJIL HAQUE

**B**RINGING multinationals to the stock market is one of those long-standing policy challenges regulators have been grappling with for many years now. On the surface, it appears to be an issue of designing the right incentive structure. But what it eventually boils down to is political will. Political will to overrule resistance

from influential quarters and do what's right for the financial sector, and the broader economy.

No one needs reminding that the stock market in Bangladesh has long been called a "casino" or a "gambler's den". People bitterly blame inadequate corporate governance, unfriendly or weak regulations, lack of foreign investment and unscrupulous traders for the state of affairs that led to such amusing analogies. But at the end of the day, if a stock market is not showing the same dynamism as its economy then it's primarily because the majority of corporations serving in the

enough to come to the stock market and share a sliver of their hefty profits with the common people (through dividends and capital gains). Yet these few corporations hold around 25 percent of total market capitalisation, clearly indicating that the ramifications of merely doubling the total number of MNCs in the market are massive. They will undoubtedly bring market stability, vibrancy, attract foreign investment and raise public confidence in stocks.

To be sure, some profit-maximising CEOs will remind us that their firms are already contributing to higher employment, better wages and greater consumptions rates. Why do they need to do more for the country and bear additional costs?

First, let's not forget that these MNCs are here because there is demand here. If one leaves, another will soon take its place. Second, while it is true that these corporations do pay higher wages than their domestic counterparts, undeniably, the total number of employees in these firms—especially in "white-collar" jobs—is still minuscule compared to our huge population. As long as profits from these businesses are restricted to a small

encouraged to see that the government had requested on numerous occasions that the MNCs go public. Commerce Minister, Tofail Ahmed for one, has long advocated bringing these firms to the stock market. So much so that he stated outright in media that "these firms are taking profits away by doing business here while the country benefits very little from it." But the government's actions are clearly not enough.

So what will it take to bring them to the market? Let's recall that a listed company already enjoys a tax rate 10 percent lower than its non-listed counterpart (except for banks, telecoms and tobacco manufacturing firms). Some argue that owners don't want to relinquish control of their corporations. So the Bangladesh Securities and Exchange Commission requires that these firms only offload 10 percent of their shares to go public, which can hardly be called any real "dilution" of ownership. But none of these have enticed MNCs.

Paradoxically, some of these same corporations are listed in the bourses of neighbouring countries like India and Pakistan where tax incentives are comparable to ours. Clearly then the cost of disclosing financial statements and following other regulatory guidelines is not so great that it damages profits. So the upshot of all of this is that MNCs are not coming to the market simply because they don't have to. Not in Bangladesh at least.

So the way forward can be considered in two stages. First, the government can offer further reductions in tax rates (suppose 20 percent) to MNCs, and this should be equal for all sectors including banks and telecoms. They can offer additional reductions of 15 percent if the company offloads, let's say, 25 percent of shares instead of just 10 percent.

In the event that this still does not attract MNCs, the government has to seriously consider what could well be its last option. Implementing a law that requires mandatory listing of MNCs after they operate in Bangladesh for a certain period of time, say 10-12 years. This idea was floated before, but never gained momentum, and time is ripe for regulators to seriously consider pros and cons of this option. Needless to say, the hefty profits these firms enjoy year in and year out will ensure that they will not pack up their bags and leave if forced to come to the market.

To be sure, the top management of some of these firms who have influential connections in the government will try to pour cold water over mandatory listing. So the government will need substantial political capital to fend off such resistance. But history reminds us that when it comes to political will to do what's right for our economy, we have fallen woefully short. Those of us hoping to see a more dynamic and stable stock market ardently hope that the government will seriously consider this option and muster the grit needed to do what needs to be done.

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country are not listed in the market. And when a few big multinational corporations (MNC) dominate entire sectors but are not listed, the disconnect between a seven-plus percent growing economy and a listless equity market is inevitable. The telecommunication sector is a good example where all but Grameenphone remain detached from the market.

Grameenphone was the last MNC listed in the market, some eight years ago. Since then, our GDP has more than doubled: from USD 100 billion in 2009 to around USD 240 billion today. And more than 50 MNCs profited from a burgeoning middle-class and rising consumerism that drove economic activity for much of the last decade. If anyone is keeping count, only 13 have been generous

group of owners and employees, these MNCs are in all likelihood contributing to, and not reducing, income inequality. That the recently published data by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics ("Household Income Expenditure Survey", 2016) showed income inequality has risen since 2010 despite higher economic growth lends credence to such a view.

Not that it should be surprising. Employees in these organisations most likely receive better access to credit, Worker's Profit Participation Funds, and discounts when buying their own products. What do the common people get except for overpriced products from oligopolistic firms in sectors like telecom or consumer packaged goods? Those of us observing the market are, to some extent,

## LETTERS

### TO THE EDITOR

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### Stop school-level politics

The Daily Star published a letter titled "Don't bring politics into schools" on December 15, 2017. The writer of the letter was shocked to hear the formal declaration of school committees by the Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL), but the reality is that such committees already exist in many schools, though informally.

Student politics used to be a platform for those who want to lead the nation. Nowadays, however, it has become a path to amassing money illegally and gaining political influence.

For long, student politics was limited to college and universities. Now as politics have entered the boundaries of the school, it will seriously harm our secondary education system and its students. The government and society should not allow teenagers and children to be involved in political activities through such means.

Md Zillur Rahaman, By mail

### Obstacles we must overcome

According to the United Nation's World Economic Situation and Prospects 2018 report, Bangladesh is set to become one of the fastest growing least-developed economies. As estimated in the report, our GDP growth rate will be 7.1 percent in 2018 and 7.2 percent the year after.

Despite such tremendous economic progress, there are a number of obstacles that we must overcome. Economic inequality coupled with social and political imbalances pose a danger to our national growth. Corruption too needs to be checked for economic growth to benefit the nation as a whole.

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