

Utpal's return is a relief

But what really happened?

WE can only imagine the relief Utpal's mother must have felt when she got a call from her son 10 minutes after midnight last night that he was safe in Narayanganj and would be coming home soon. Utpal is an online journalist with a news portal who disappeared mysteriously in October, an incident that galvanised support for him on social media. The journalist has stated that he was initially mistreated and his abductors kept asking him for money. The young man was taken against his will by some people and kept in captivity for more than two months but again it is unclear why he was kept for so long and why he was released if the object was to realise ransom. People have been disappearing in the country, especially the capital city with increasing frequency with no guarantee that they will ever come back.

Precisely what are people supposed to do when a loved one goes missing without a trace? Can we even begin to comprehend the mental stress family members experience in such a situation? According to the news report Utpal was dropped off by a microbus. Are the law enforcement agencies at all curious about to whom this vehicle belongs to or who the abductors are? The nonchalant behaviour of some law enforcers does little to instil public confidence in these agencies. In fact this silence on the part of the law enforcement agencies only serve to raise suspicion in the public mind. We have written many times before that it is high time the authorities launch a thorough investigation into this matter and find out who or what syndicate is carrying out these disappearances and why they are not being caught.

A remarkable display of courage

Awe-inspiring Ontora bending norms

WE applaud the courage of 15-year-old Ontora who is braving many dangers to serve as a helper on a BRTC bus. In a hopeful image, on the front page of yesterday's *The Daily Star*, young Ontora displays awe-inspiring grit, dangling off a bus during her duty as a bus conductor.

The photograph also shows, disappointingly, Ontora warding off assault from a hawker as he was refused to board a bus at Farmgate. We often see bus helpers in precarious situations, dangling behind buses, putting themselves in varying degrees of physical danger. For Ontora, a female bus conductor, along with the obvious physical danger she faces as a part of her job, she also risks sexual harassment and violence.

It is admirable that the BRTC has employed a woman to do what is traditionally considered a 'man's job'. Although employing a 15-year-old may constitute as child labour, the reality of Bangladesh is such that even a 15-year-old often has to engage in employment in order to survive or support her family.

We commend Ontora for taking up a job in a risky, male-dominated profession, bending many social norms and urge the BRTC and appropriate authorities to create a more conducive environment so that more women can be employed in the sector.

MOYUKH MAHTAB

IT'S that time of the year again, the season traditionally known for weddings and *pitthas*. But seasons undergo changes, and the winter can barely live up to its name anymore. And with that we should reconsider what things we associate with this time—a phenomenon that truly characterises this winter. I propose that the winter of 2017 be remembered as the season of question paper leaks, given the almost daily reports this month, sparing no grade, starting from class I.

Are question papers leaks a novelty then? Well, according to a study by Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB), the trend can be traced as far back as the SSC exam of 1979. And from then, it has only increased, and today it threatens to engulf the entire education system. So, maybe, commemorating our winters for these leaks might lead to actually acknowledging the problem. Maybe then we will finally realise that outright denials or sporadic threats will not be enough to deter those leaking and disseminating exam questions.

For those unaware of why I feel that this issue warrants importance now, here's a list of the instances of question paper leaks I found through only a cursory look at this month's newspapers. December 13: We reported that in Munshiganj all examinations in 119 schools had to be cancelled following leaks of questions for classes II-IV. December 14: Following leaks of questions each of classes I and V, final exams of one subject each were cancelled in 248 schools in Barguna. December 19: In Natore this time, the maths final exam of 123 schools had to be suspended. Gone are the days when question leaks meant SSC, HSC or university admission exams. What lows have we sunk to, if someone thinks that they can now make money from leaking questions for primary school students? What next? Leaking of viva questions for kindergarten enrolment? For those who forgot, the higher levels are already swamped with similar allegations. In October this year, University of Dhaka authorities, when asked about the allegations of the leaking of question papers of D unit admission exam, outright denied it. Questions for some subjects of this year's SSC and HSC exams too were widely circulated—in some cases even openly on Facebook.

The situation is so bad that the Anti-Corruption Commission last week sent a letter to the cabinet to step up efforts for stopping corruption in the education sector. That, and the conscientious parents who pointed out the leaks to the authorities has seen some results. In Munshiganj, nine have been arrested. There have been some arrests too of individuals linked to leaking of DU university admission questions in 2015 and 2016. Ironically, one such recent arrest is of an assistant director at Bangladesh Krira Shiksha Protisthan (BKSP), allegedly a mastermind of a question paper leaking gang, who

himself got the government job because of his "connections". All this brings me to the conclusion that question paper leaks and their growing prevalence is not merely a problem but a symptom of a bigger issue with our educational environment. And worse, the intellectual crippling of an entire generation is yet to come.

What the wise parents who pointed out to the authorities when questions were leaked in the recent cases did is not the established practice. The TIB study mentioned earlier found unhealthy competition among and in schools to be one of the major reasons behind the phenomenon of question leaks. Our entire education system today is based on securing top marks at any cost and parents are rightly worried; missing out might mean a bleak future for their wards. This explains the mushrooming of coaching centres, the ubiquity of the

based on testing the memorisation power of students, and the creative questions which were supposed to be the solution, only created a new form of memorisation because of untrained teachers. It is far easier for students and teachers if the "creative" questions are selected from a pool widely available of course. Today, students from grades I onwards spend entire days running from one coaching centre to another. This of course is perpetuated by the school's failing to ensure their fundamental duty: providing the education needed at school. Teachers are without incentive to do their jobs while parents care only about the grades. At the university admissions level—let us take the example of D unit of DU—the questions are so focussed on a student's ability to memorise information, which they can easily look up when needed, that students are willing to do anything to get

corrupt. During my HSCs, one could study a handful of past-years' questions, not for practice, but knowing that among those say 20, 15 would be set in the final questions.

The ACC has pointed out, as has TIB in the past, the sources of our question leaks: namely the education board, BG Press, treasury and exam centres. They have given recommendations on how to tackle the issue such as greater oversight, digitalisation, separation of duties of question preparation and invigilation, checking if any of those involved have children sitting for exams that year. These are important. With that, I would like to add, what we need to fix too is the demand side of things—that students and parents opt for obtaining these questions knowing that it is wrong. And for that, we need to rethink our education system, from the training of teachers to how they teach in classrooms.



A TIB study found unhealthy competition among and in schools to be one of the major reasons behind the phenomenon of question leaks.

PHOTO: STAR

supposedly banned guide books in the market and of course spending money to buy question papers. To quote one parent of a JSC examinee from a report in a daily newspaper, "We understand this is wrong. But our children are not that mature; they exasperate us if we prohibit them from obtaining those questions." And the pressure on children studying for their exams is even more as one could imagine, knowing that their peers might be getting an unfair edge over them. The same report quoted a student saying: "We cannot concentrate on our study without having those questions provided with answers which can be obtained only at Tk 500."

So what brought us here? For one, our education system is now a matter of prestige, where anything other than a "golden" GPA 5 or a background in science is shameful. Our questions are

a coveted seat. On top of that, standardised exams at levels such as grades V and VIII encourage students to study not for learning but for securing grades. And then there is the farce of our textbooks—bland, riddled with inaccuracies and, as the events of this year showed, probably changing for the worse. So, blaming a few "corrupt teachers" for question leaks simply will not do when our entire education system is corrupt and built towards obtaining a prestigious grade.

During my SSCs I remember a fellow student being berated by parents of other students because he refused to pay the Tk 200 to invigilators of practical exams at our exam centre because they thought that him not paying could mean wrath on the entire batch. This is the situation that we have come to, when parents can actually berate students for not being

Without that, we may put an end to leaks with great oversight, but education will continue to be about getting into a good university and a secure livelihood. These are important and realistic considerations of course, but if someone goes through almost 20 years of education without learning to distinguish and act on considerations of right and wrong, to love learning for its sake or without a basic sense of integrity, then where are we headed? Or are we there already, when one hears of university teachers scuffling with students, after almost a decade of corporal punishment being banned, teachers refuse to follow the law, and students beat up teachers after becoming president of a student body of a political party.

Moyukh Mahtab is a member of the editorial team, *The Daily Star*.

A land where promises were kept

NADIA AFRIN SHAMS and ISRAT BIJU

HOW many times in your life do you stumble upon a story that encourages you? Boosts your spirit, makes you believe that there is still hope for us and a light at the end of the tunnel? For us the answer is not as often as you would want it to be. This is such a story though it talks about mundane things like the broken streets of Dhaka city and the sufferings of its regular citizens; but it has a nice ending because someone kept his promise.

Two days after we lost our honourable Mayor Annisul Haq, we were travelling with our colleagues to a factory where we are implementing a project for female workers in the RMG sector. We eventually started talking about our late mayor. Everyone was sad and saying good things about him, that he was a change-maker and how he has taken good initiatives. These were the generally nice comments that we made after we got the news of his death. But then one of my colleagues shared her personal experience with the late mayor.

This colleague of mine lives in Mirpur and a major road to her house was in extremely bad condition. She was telling us that pregnant women, while passing that road, would get down from the rickshaw and walk that part to avoid the risk of miscarriage—and it was like that for as long as she could remember. So one day in frustration, she wrote to Mayor Haq on his Facebook page explaining the sufferings of the regular people and requesting him to fix it. What she did not expect was that the mayor would reply by saying "it will be fixed after the rainy season." My colleague was really happy to hear that from the mayor. But time went by and nothing happened. After waiting a month or a two, with great despair she wrote back again to the mayor, reminding him of his promise. For two-three weeks there was no reply. As usual, my colleague thought, "ok another politician making empty promises, there is nothing new about that, we are used to

it." But three weeks later, Annisul Haq replied to her saying, "budget allocation has been made and the road will be fixed within a month." To her greatest surprise, exactly within a month the road was fixed—he had kept his promise. My colleague was ecstatic, she could not believe that the plight of a regular citizen will be heard, will be taken seriously and acted upon. She wrote back to him with jubilation, thanking him for his service and for keeping his promise. The story doesn't end here, a few days later he replied again saying, "just give me some time, I will fix all the roads." It is a great misfortune for this nation that fate did not give him that time.

Solving the problems of Dhaka is a mammoth task. I wonder what would happen if we had asked Alladin's genie to do it using three wishes, he would probably quit. But our late mayor did not. We all know about his amazing initiatives like starting the Dhaka Chaka bus service in the Gulshan area, installing bins all over the city to keep it clean, clearing out the Tejgaon road and his various other plans for the future. He proved after a long time that he is a leader with a vision, not just another politician with empty words.

We did not know him. We grew up watching him on television and the ingenious ideas he would come up with to create amazing shows. When we first heard this story, it seemed to us that it needs to be shared not just to pay respect to our late mayor but to encourage others to follow his example and follow the path that he had created. He was an outsider to politics, but he dared to enter the labyrinth of our political domain—we believe, because he thought he could make a difference, and he did. He made us believe that you can still demand something from your politicians and expect it to be fulfilled. He lit a light in our hearts and we would sincerely like to believe that someone will step up to hold that candle, and not let that flame burn out.

Nadia Afrin Shams and Israt Biju are development workers.



Mayor Annisul Haq

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Spend public money judiciously

One of the most common and irritating features of life in Dhaka is the constant road and foot-path digging. Such repair works, if needed, should of course be conducted, but it's ridiculous and even doubtful when roads need repairs every year, almost as a matter of routine.

There are multiple media reports about how a huge amount of public money is wasted in these never-ending projects. The fact is, these projects have become an easy way for the corrupt, politically connected contractors to increase their wealth at the expense of the public.

I think the authorities should take steps to make sure that repair projects are conducted in a systematic manner and only when needed, and that the taxpayers' money is spent well.

Suman Kumar Paul, *By email*

Farmers Bank in disarray

Farmers Bank's MD has reportedly been terminated by Bangladesh Bank. A newspaper report said the bank would be unable to pay its employees' salaries for December. The bank, along with eight others, was permitted to operate by the government based on political consideration.

The pathetic condition of the Farmers Bank should serve as a reminder to the government about what might happen when banks are permitted without proper vetting. Unfortunately, it seems more focused on increasing the number of banks when the focus should actually be on improving their performance. Hopefully, after the latest crisis, the government will back off from approving the three new banks that are now in progress.

Naim Zaman, *By email*