

Destroying in order to build!

Felling age-old trees to widen a road

WE welcome the High Court directive on the authorities to maintain the status quo on felling of trees on Jessore-Benapole highway. We would hope that the six-month status quo order stay would be made a permanent stay order.

It is strange that despite the fact that the government has ample land on both sides of the Jessore-Benapole road, the local authorities are intent on felling 2,300 trees, several hundreds of which are two-century-old, to accommodate the increased traffic on the highway. However, it is entirely possible to build a two-lane road and keep the trees in the middle, according to experts and environmentalists.

More than 2,000 trees are not a small matter. From an environmental viewpoint, old trees absorb most carbons from the atmosphere, not to speak of the shade they provide in the hot summers to the travellers. They support more species than the younger trees. That speaks volumes about the significance of these trees.

These magnificent trees are iconic too not only because of their picturesque view but also because they bear the memories of millions of Bengali refugees fleeing the horror of war in 1971.

As reported by this newspaper, a part of the stretch of the Jessore road on the Indian side which the Indian authorities have constructed is a two-lane road with the trees in the middle. So, there's an example to follow.

We urge the local authorities to shelve the current plan and chalk out a new plan of building a two-lane road, which places the trees in the middle. We understand the importance of development, but the kind of development that destroys nature is unacceptable.

Is there no end to traffic violations?

Abusers of law must be severely punished

A collage of pictures in *The Daily Star* on Thursday shows how vehicles continue to move on the wrong side of the road. That tells us something about our mindset that seems to tilt dangerously toward breaking rules. It seems we're respectful of the law only insofar as it ensures our rights and keeps other people from infringing on them, but it is disposable if it stands in the way of what our base instincts aspire to do.

Regrettably, unpunished offences, especially those committed by influential people and representatives of influential institutions, inspire the public to flout traffic rules. Vehicles belonging to public educational institutions, various agencies and VIPs, as well as motorcyclists, are particularly found to be in violation of the rules. Even the occasional traffic drives, penalties and awareness campaigns are not of much help.

The fact is, traffic management is a daily affair, and the rules need to be enforced on a daily basis if a megacity like Dhaka, with fewer roads than necessary, is to be kept under control. More importantly, the law should be applied even-handedly, meaning that equal attention should be given to all traffic offenders irrespective of their status.

That being said, no policy will work unless the citizens extend their wholehearted cooperation to the authorities. Obeying traffic rules is not a matter of choice; we have an obligation to follow them no matter how busy we are, or how urgent our individual needs are.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Tightening family grip on private banks

The Daily Star published a news report titled "Family grip on private banks to tighten" on January 17. The report explained how the recent amendment to the Banking Companies Act gives the owning family near-absolute control of the bank. In my opinion, the government's hands-off approach in dealing with private banks is both reckless and dangerous.

We must remember that a private bank is not an ordinary family property. While a family might own a bank's infrastructure, a bank holds its clients' deposits which aren't part of the owning family's assets. That is why there should be a check-and-balance of power within the bank.

The government cannot afford to expose banks to the total control of a particular group of people such as the owning family. At a time when the entire nation is reeling from the shocking developments in the banking sector, the tightening of the grip of families on banks does not raise the confidence of depositors.

The government must protect the interest of the ordinary depositors. The recent amendment to the Banking Companies Act does exactly the opposite by handing over enormous power to a select group of people.

Tahfim Ahsan, By email

Why rubbish anything critical?

Scholarly and well-informed work should be challenged with scholarly and well-informed arguments, not diatribes

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING



BRIG GEN SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN
NDC, PSC (RETD)

IN what resembled a now-familiar Trumpian outburst, the finance minister binned a report of the Independent Review of Bangladesh's Development (IRBD), a review of the country's development produced by the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD). The IRBD is an empirical study that the renowned think tank has been publishing periodically since 1995. He was not alone—being joined by the commerce minister—in heaping criticism and ascribing motives, including the timing of the publication of the report.

It is difficult to reason the reaction of the two very senior ministers of the government to the CPD report on the state of the economy in the first half of fiscal 2018, and the prognosis for the second half of the current fiscal year, based on the strengths and weaknesses determined on the basis of data obtained from, primarily, national and international sources.

To us, such reactions are very familiar. The response, at best a knee-jerk one, given the comments of the two ministers, is characteristic of the usual diatribes thrown against anyone, or anything, like this report, that is not considered to be in consonance with the views and (mis)perceptions of the government, or does not heap plaudits only for what the government has achieved. The same fate befalls the Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) whenever it comes out with its reports that have to do, particularly, with good governance, opacity in the functioning of the administration and corruption.

Regrettably, such outbursts seldom carry logic and are never backed by counter-facts, as outbursts like this, compelled by the heart and not counselled by the head, are wont to be. In all honesty, the ministers should have complimented the report instead of excoriating it and binning an objective exercise out of hand. Even a cursory look at the report would have elicited a



ILLUSTRATION: ROBERT NEUBECKER

different, and perhaps a more balanced, response.

Regrettably too, the government has reconfirmed what the common public conjures up in their minds after every reaction from ministers—the total lack of tolerance of criticism, unwillingness to accept critiques of any kind, and political branding of an organisation. All three phenomena are alarming and not very conducive to the spread of the kind of political culture that we all wish to see in this country, but which continues to elude us.

The well-reputed research organisation has been virtually equated with a one-eyed jack—it being unable, according to them, to see the achievements of the economy. But that is not what the report informs us. In fact the very initial part of the operative sections enumerates the attainments and the successes of the economy like the GDP growth as well as the per capita rise in income. It also highlights positively the export growth rate.

But the CPD would have failed in its responsibility if it had not pointed out a glaring anomaly—that despite the growth and income rise, the rate of decline in

poverty has reduced. For example, during the period of 2010-16, national poverty rate declined by 1.2 percentage points per annum, contrasted with the decline by 1.8 and 1.7 percentage points per annum respectively for the 2000-05 and 2005-10 periods. Worse still, the rate of decline in urban poverty being only one-fourth of decline in rural poverty per annum during the period 2010-16. And that is something the government should take note of.

That is exactly what the job of a think tank worth its salt is. The CPD has rightly cautioned the government of the likely impediments to achieving the aims of the budget and the SDGs; it also gives pointers and suggestions that would help the government to mitigate some of the centrifugal pressures. For example, can anyone in his or her proper frame of mind fault the Centre's report on the banking sector? This is the most ill-disciplined sector that has wrought havoc on the country's economy. This is a fact that has been acknowledged by the finance minister himself. Thus, one is surprised when the minister says that the country needs more private banks, when he is on

record saying that it is because of the sponsors that most of the private banks have suffered the fate that the badly performing private banks have.

Not only has a scholarly exercise been rubbished and discarded out of hand by the government without really appreciating the real purpose of any such exercise of a research organisation like the CPD, it has also been politically labelled. We are told, by the ministers, that the said report echoes BNP's position. If that be the case really, it will be perhaps in order to remind the ministers that the BNP commands the support and the vote of 30-33 percent of the voters. That amounts to a very good portion of the adult, intelligent populace of the country. And that should not escape the attention of the ruling party.

We would like to see a scholarly and well-informed work repudiated, if at all, by scholarly and well-informed arguments. The ministers' comments resemble nothing of the kind. And that is what is so very worrisome.

Brig Gen Shahedul Anam Khan ndc, psc (Retd) is Associate Editor, *The Daily Star*.

Under an open sky

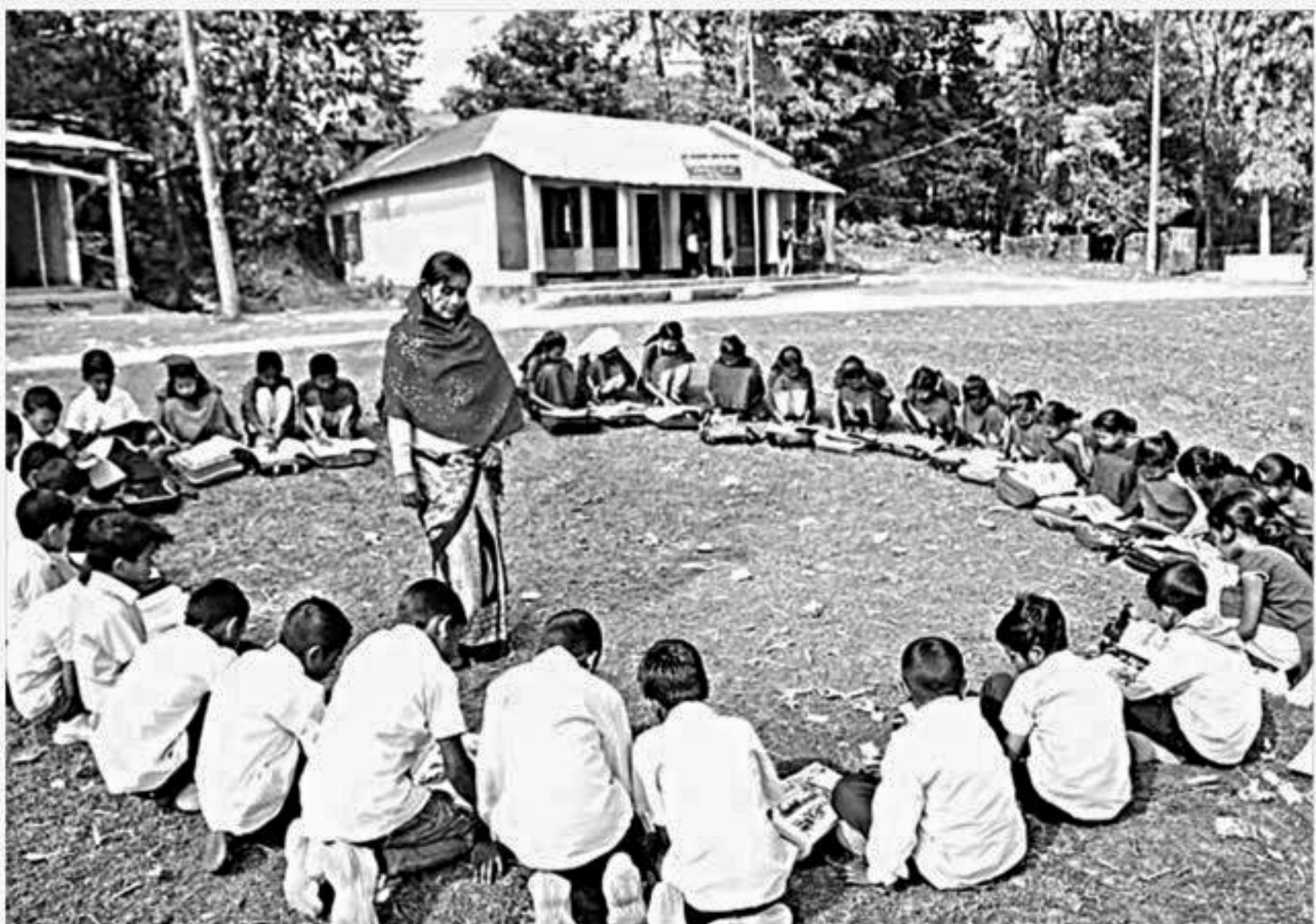
Exploring new and old dimensions of education

LITTLE MATTERS



SHAGUFTA HOSSAIN

LAST Sunday, the front page of *The Daily Star* displayed an image of a classroom. In the photograph, a teacher of Chhalia Government Primary School in Sylhet was seen as



A teacher of Chhalia Government Primary School in Sylhet imparting lessons on the school playground due to a shortage of classrooms. PHOTO: SHEIKH NASIR

imparting lessons upon her students on the school playground. About 30 students, deeply engrossed in the books in front of them, are seen sitting in a circle surrounding their teacher standing in the middle of the circle.

The girls and boys look happy. Content. Amidst the deluge of depressing news that dominates headlines, this picture gave me some semblance of joy.

Unfortunately, the caption did not evoke the same emotions as the

which, through creating digital learning platforms, are making access to education free and easy. Provided you are digitally connected i.e. have access to computer facilities and the internet.

My futuristic friends insist that Artificial Intelligence (AI) is the future of education. Although few people go as far as to say that teachers will be completely replaced by robots, it is anticipated that eventually artificial intelligence will either take their jobs or reduce teachers to mere robots themselves. We are assured however that educators need not worry about robots taking over schools. Not anytime soon, at least.

Although I consider myself fairly futuristic, these are circumstances that are making me confused. Aside from the numerous reports that highlight a gender and class divide in terms of accessing technology, I also wonder if it is truly possible to learn effectively through "digital education".

The VAK learning style theorises that

kinesthetic learners do best while touching and moving. So using material that they can touch and feel, or utilising room for physical movement is when these types of learners learn best.

Before we get carried away by this digital revolution, it is necessary that we ask ourselves, is the digital space accommodating for different kinds of learners? It gets even more complicated when we think about children with special needs.

There is also something inherently impersonal about a digital medium. Psychologists iterate that humans are defined by their ability to interact with others. The inability to touch and feel enables us the luxury of a certain kind of detachment. It is somehow easier to be cruel to someone you cannot see. When you don't see the emotions you are evoking in someone, you are afforded a sense of comfort in your cruelty you would not otherwise be. Being human involves engaging in relationships that reflect attributes such as empathy, caring, compassion, love and kindness. Isn't it possible then that as machines replace humans, the basis for human relationships erodes? What happens to the very attributes that make us human?

My *nani* used to say when she was in school, if she missed a class, the teacher would come to her house in the evening to find out if something was wrong. But as classrooms grow bigger and teachers fewer, we often find it difficult to do the bare minimum of knowing the names of our students. My *nani* also grew up close to nature, climbing trees, playing with mud, often running or cycling under open skies, connecting not only with other humans but also nature.

While educational outcomes are usually measured by subject-based learning and pass and fail rates, which make measurement significantly easy, we have to wonder if the purpose of education in creating a better society is being accomplished. Can we create better societies if we foster disconnected human beings?

As part of the explorative journey in the theory of education that I frequently engage in, I draw a lot of inspiration from Rabindranath Tagore. We rarely think of him as an educationist. I am not sure why we are so quick to discount him. It could be because he did not write a central educational treatise. Or it could be the colonial legacy we have such difficulty shaking off. In any case, Tagore's ideas, garnered through his

various writings and educational experiments at Shantiniketan, set the precedent for inclusive education decades ago.

He envisioned an education that was deeply entrenched in one's immediate surroundings but connected to the cultures of the world. The curriculum he idealised would revolve organically around nature with classes held in the open air under the trees to provide for a spontaneous appreciation of the fluidity of nature, emphasising the necessity of an empathetic sense of interconnectedness with the surrounding world. Much like the photo mentioned above that happened as a result of inadequate classrooms. Nature walks, running around and climbing trees, and excursions were a part of the curriculum and students were egged on in their pursuit of life cycles of insects, birds and plants. What better way to learn biology?

Other elements of his model include mutual respect among student and teacher, co-creation of knowledge, teaching history and culture for the progress that had been made in breaking down social and religious barriers, etc.

Tagore envisioned his "classrooms" as a meeting ground of cultures, a learning centre where conflicting interests are minimised. In his essay *A Poet's School*, he describes a school where individuals work together in a common pursuit of truth and realise that "artists in all parts of the world have created forms of beauty, scientists discovered secrets of the universe, philosophers solved the problems of existence, saints made the truth of the spiritual world organic in their own lives, not merely for some particular race to which they belonged, but for all mankind" (Tagore 1922: 171-2).

As I read and watch and try to learn more in these confusing times, I can't help but question how Tagore would feel about education that is only a click away. Would he have rethought his values and deemphasised connection? Would he have felt irrelevant? Or would he have looked at the photograph of the teacher at Chhalia Government Primary School and thought, "This is exactly what I was talking about," before looking at the caption and be thrown off. Maybe he would be exactly as confused as I am.

Shagufta Hossain is the founder of Leaping Boundaries and a member of the editorial team at *The Daily Star*.