

For a free and Independent media

A catalyst for development

ON the occasion of our 27th anniversary that we celebrated yesterday, we must express our sincere gratitude to our readers, patrons, advertisers and well wishers who have, over these years given us tremendous support by placing their trust in us and giving us the courage to continue in our endeavour to engage in ethical journalism. Ultimately, our goal is to serve the people with a deep commitment to uphold the spirit of our Liberation War and its democratic ideals.

While we are blessed to have started our journey with the rebirth of democracy in our nation, we must admit that we have been confronted by various unforeseen challenges. One of the biggest challenges to journalism has been the growing intolerance towards dissenting views and the shrinking of space for civil society. The most obvious manifestation of this has been the way various laws have been introduced to apparently muzzle freedom of expression. The ICT Act and the draft Digital Security Act have left journalists anxious over how sincerely they will be able to practice their craft. For journalism's reason for existence is to expose, express and present the truth and nothing but the truth. If this basic premise is constantly being circumscribed, it will be the death of journalism and the demise of truth.

Technology too, while it has exponentially enhanced journalism in terms of the tools that are at hand, poses a challenge to journalism. With overwhelming popularity of social media, journalism often finds itself sidelined by sensational, often unsubstantiated news as well as outright untruths that pose as news. Thus online journalism has become more important and relevant than ever and needs to be nurtured and protected.

It is unfortunate that many governments today believe that development must come first, before any other consideration, even if it means compromising fundamental freedoms. But development also means strengthening all legal instruments and institutions that ensure fundamental rights and freedoms of the citizens. Thus a free media is essential to play its role as a watchdog holding the state and its machinery accountable to the people. For the government a free media is not a foe; rather it is its most powerful ally because it provides an authentic flow of information from the grassroots that no other source can provide. It is therefore in the interest of development, democracy and public interest that a free media must be allowed to flourish.

From us we can promise that we will continue to be a free and independent voice and pledge to serve our readers and the nation better.

Trucks on the loose!

Uncovered goods-carrying vehicles posing great risk

A picture of a truck carrying iron rods near Dhaka University's TSC area published by *The Daily Star* on Thursday shows the iron rods jutting out into the road, and running in broad daylight despite there being a restriction on daytime entry of goods-carrying trucks into the city. A few metres behind is a motorcyclist wearing no helmet, and talking via a mobile phone balanced precariously between his left ear and his shoulder. The message behind the whole picture is that an accident is never too far away in this city. It is also a reminder of just how easily traffic rules are being violated, and just how reckless some riders/drivers have become.

Laws aside, it is a matter of common sense that trucks carrying goods, especially potentially dangerous ones, would be covered to ensure no mishaps occur. Unfortunately, common sense being not so common, we have uncovered trucks ploughing through the streets, littering them as they go, and creating a public nuisance in the process. Add to them the nauseating sights of dustcarts, which collect municipal waste and haul them to the landfills in broad daylight. The health, security, and environmental repercussions of such unregulated vehicular movements cannot be taken lightly.

There is a rule for all vehicles in a city and these rules are there for a reason: public order and safety. But rules alone cannot bring about the change that we desire. Awareness is also important. So while it is imperative that the authorities enforce the traffic rules strictly, the drivers and motorcyclists, on their part, must also follow the rules to prevent accidents and other disturbances to public wellbeing.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Sharing the responsibility

Before the World War II, Hitler incited majority of Germans against the Jews although the latter was only one percent of the population. The post-war Polish communist regime did even worse: it fostered anti-Semitism without the presence of any Jews, as most Polish Jews who had survived the war emigrated.

Similarly, the Myanmar military and Buddhist extremists have incited the Myanmar population against the Rohingya minority because they are Muslims. The Myanmar military considers Rohingya Muslims as interlopers. So, sending them back to Myanmar would be like sending back the Jews to Nazi Germany or communist Poland. They will face renewed slaughter if obliged to return to Myanmar.

Instead, the international community should re-settle them in third countries. Bangladesh is too overpopulated and small to absorb nearly a million refugees. There are many countries with smaller populations and larger territories where they can be resettled.

Mahmood Elahi, By e-mail

Plugging question leaks

A technical solution



A spate of question leaks in public examinations has left the education authorities deeply embarrassed and, it appears, at a loss about what they can do. It is part of a larger problem of quality and good management of education which need serious attention. However, there is a simple technical solution for question leaks, which can be and should be implemented for the next round of public examinations.

There are various distinct steps now followed in the question preparation process. These include initial drafting of questions, reviewing the content and quality of the questions, selecting acceptable versions, choosing a final version out of two approved sets by lottery, printing the one final set, distribution of the question papers and storing them securely all over the country. On the examination day, the papers are transported to the centres, and finally handed to the examinees in the examination halls.

At any of the steps, the process may be compromised. Measures have been taken and are being taken to protect the process. But it can be seen that these measure have not quite worked. The critical step is the very last one—giving out to the examinees the question papers which have not been already leaked.

The last step can be ensured, irrespective of what happens earlier, by using multiple sets of question papers for the same subject. All the sets can be used in the examination, with each examinee receiving randomly one of the multiple sets in the examinational hall at the last moment. The total number of copies of questions printed would still be the same as the number of examinees, but divided into different sets.

To illustrate the process, several, say eight, sets of question papers can be prepared and printed for a subject. For one thousand students in an examination centre, 125 copies of each of the eight sets can be available, and a student would randomly receive one set at the time of examination. The students

would not know until the last moment which set of questions they would answer. There would be no incentive for or advantage from leaking questions in advance.

Until last year, there were actually eight sets of questions for SSC and HSC examinations prepared by each board for their students. Common questions for the whole country were introduced this year. As a result, the incentive for leaks in theory was increased eightfold.

There were good reasons for having a common set of questions for all eight boards—ensuring comparable levels of



difficulty in questions and assessment standards. These advantages can be and should be maintained.

A large number of questions has to be prepared for each subject in order to construct multiple sets of questions. At present, a large collection of questions is prepared, out of which two sets for each subject are put together and one set is finally selected by lottery, which is printed, distributed and used in the examination. For the suggested approach, instead of one final set, eight acceptable sets have to be prepared and printed.

The Examination Development Unit

located at Dhaka Board (BEDU) needs to have an expert team to make sure that the quality of the multiple sets are maintained, the topics in them are similar and the level of difficulty are comparable. Both multiple choice and short essay questions can be included as it is done now. The prior preparation steps until the final step can be the same as now.

An expert committee appointed by the Ministry of Education last year, based on consultation with teachers, students and specialists, made recommendations regarding necessary reforms in

assessments of students. The public exams then can be less drawn out and can be completed in no more than five days. Student's performance could be shown by both public exam results and transcripts from school.

The committee also proposed that co-curricular activities should be an opportunity for all-round development of students; practicing their skills and competencies related to academic, social, cultural and moral-ethical development of students; and taken into account in overall assessment of student and teacher performance

assessment of students' learning through public examinations and in-school evaluation. It also made suggestions about related issues in curriculum and the teaching-learning process. This writer was a member of the committee.

Among the steps suggested was to look at the nature of public examinations. The committee proposed that these examinations should focus more on competencies in Bangla, English, math, science and social studies, rather than make it a test of every subject and every textbook. The latter should be more a job of annual and half-yearly exams in schools and regular classroom

The committee also suggested making practical examination in the science subjects part of school evaluation rather than public exam. As it is conducted now, it does not add any value to student assessment and leads to an undue disadvantage for students in non-science subjects.

The education decision-makers need to consider the recommendations and decide on appropriate short and longer term actions. One short term action should be the measure proposed for plugging question leaks.

Manzoor Ahmed is professor emeritus of BRAC University.

THE INDIAN ECONOMIC SURVEY

Can we take some pointers?



THE annual budget of the central government of India is immediately preceded by an Economic Survey, designed to provide the background to the budget decisions.

The budget itself, presented on February 1, with its immediate consequences for all Indian citizens and tax payers, usually rather overshadows the Economic Survey. Both are always of great interest to India's neighbour countries, yet for Bangladesh the latter should this year be of particular interest and value.

Useful comparisons can be made in this general field of taxation. Both India and Bangladesh have low levels of tax revenues compared to many other developing countries, let alone developed ones.

This latest 2017–18 Economic Survey, presented by Chief Economic Adviser, Arvind Subramanian and his team, is exceptional on two counts. Firstly, it is able to draw on an unprecedented range and amount of data drawn from the massive spread of digitalisation, including the Aadhar biometric identification of nearly the entirety of the huge population and the increasing recent success of the amended General Service Tax (GST) in expanding tax registration. Analysis of this data has enabled much better and more up to date understanding of the Indian economy.

Secondly, it has also enabled a remarkable expansion of the survey into the complexities of the socio-economic background to the bare economic statistics and analysis. This includes the

likely effects of climate change on Indian agriculture, the extent, causes and social consequences of the growing male/female imbalance in India's youth and the way most of India's economic growth is captured by a tiny rich minority. It illustrates the lamentable quality of Indian education and the very low expenditure on it and on R&D as shares of GDP.

Despite the disparity in size and seven decades of separate development, India and Bangladesh still share many social and economic characteristics and can learn from each other's experiments, successes and failures. Both are experiencing the rush to urbanisation, the information revolution, the problems of providing jobs for the young millions entering the work force



Arvind Subramanian, Chief Economic Adviser to India. PHOTO: REUTERS

and many complex social tensions between the forces of modernisation and conservatism. Both have democratic parliamentary systems and political parties which reflect these massive changes in their societies and continual dangers of freedom of press, adequate political space for oppositions and independence of key institutions.

Such similarities must not be over emphasised. To take one example, in India the GST is an attempt to move towards a single internal market, replacing the state border taxes and delays which enormously increase transport costs and hamper the development of new medium size firms. This has been difficult as states relied heavily on such levies for their own revenues. Bangladesh already has such a single market and need only concentrate

on improving its communication infrastructure.

Useful comparisons can be made in this general field of taxation. Both India and Bangladesh have low levels of tax revenues compared to many other developing countries, let alone developed ones. Yet their governments cannot avoid having to take the lead in funding the enormous sums required both for infrastructure for growth and for attempting to raise the questionable quality and range of education, skills training and health services.

Both face difficulties of corruption, tax evasion and capital flight. Both are finding new tools in digitalisation, VAT extension etc and report some success. Subramanian estimates that tax revenues, following demonetisation and GST

movement to find urban or overseas employment is leading to the "feminisation" of Indian agriculture—often in entrepreneurial leadership as well as in labour. How far is this also a Bangladesh phenomenon? Agriculture in both countries has always been heavily influenced by monsoons and natural disasters but now faces the gradual impact of climate change. Subramanian here has access to an unusually wide range of survey data which points to a 20 percent to 25 percent loss in farm income in the medium term as temperatures and extreme weather events increase. He advocates to greatly increase the proportion of India's irrigated land area and a focus on modern sprinkle and drip irrigation, particularly given the lowering of north India's water tables. Some areas of Bangladesh are comparatively water rich but we face our own problems of salination etc. Facing climate change, both countries need scientific and political collaboration on water issues which range far beyond even that of the Teesta.

One last surprising example from the Indian Economic Survey treasure trove of new data and analysis relates to gender bias. Although there are exceptions in tribal groups committed to matriarchy, it has long been recognised that in much of India the birth of a boy is generally strongly felt as a blessing and that of a girl child as a future dowry burden. The preference for at least one son to care for parents in old age, with the modern ability to establish the sex of the unborn child for medical termination has led to a huge gender imbalance in India's young population and "missing girls" in tens of millions. Expert analysis of data shows that 65 percent of male births are that of the family's last child.

These findings come at a time when India is already concerned over horrific cases of gang rape and child sexual abuse. The growing shortage of young women, combined with traditional barriers to sexual experience is building up dangerous levels of male frustration. Again, how far are there similar trends in Bangladesh? We know family violence, abandonment of wives is common but also stringent laws are in place against harassment of women/girls. What can our predominantly Muslim country teach India and what can we learn from their debates?

Selina Mohsin is a former ambassador.