

DIGITISED PUBLIC EXAMINATION

An innovation to solve many problems

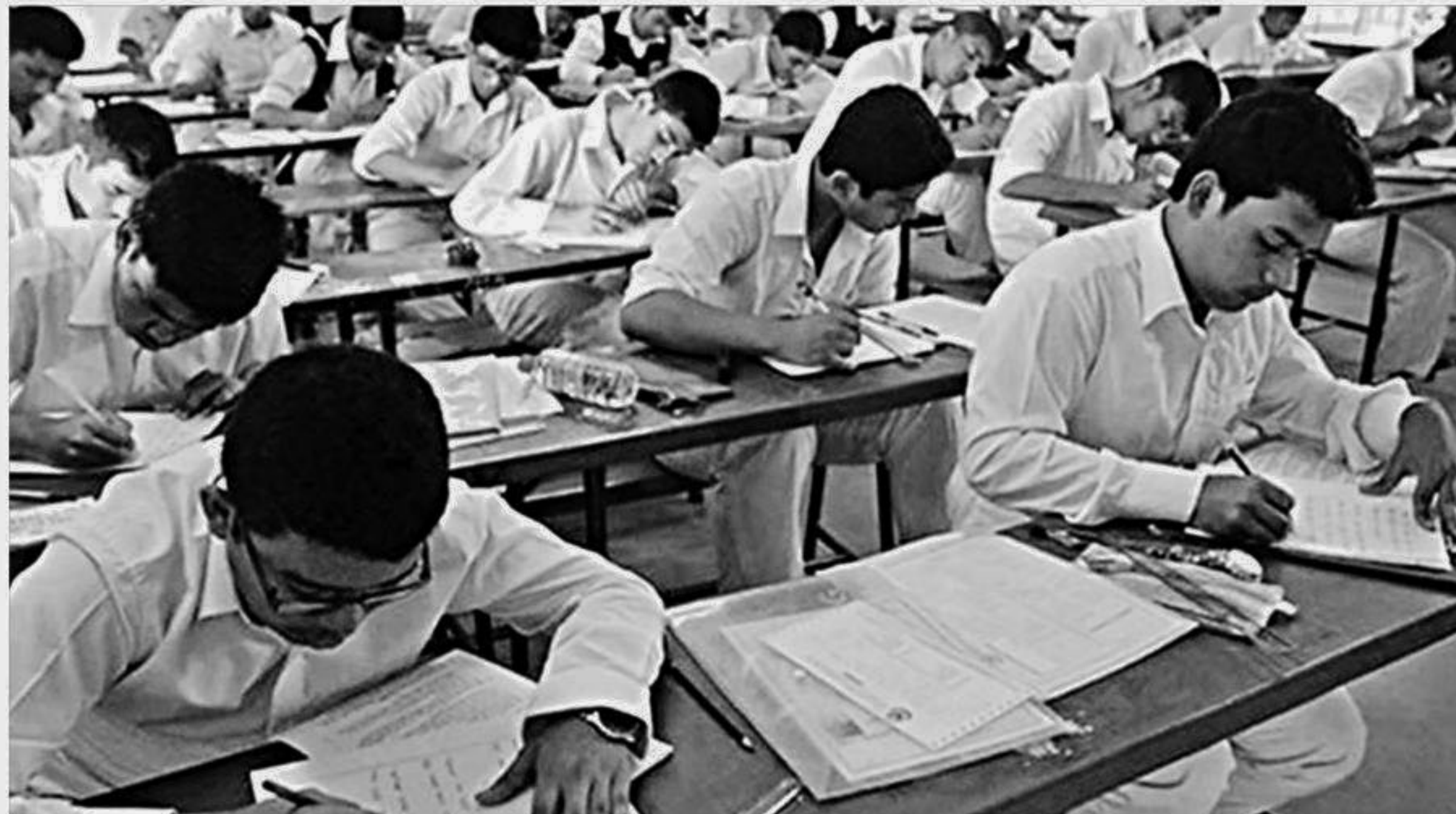
ANUPAM DEBASHIS ROY

THE government is finally considering something that could really stop the question paper leak crisis. The education secretary has reportedly hinted at using tablet computers for taking tests. In this method, a question set will be prepared randomly from a question bank 30 minutes before the test.

This is a great idea because it has positive benefits outside of its intended use of limiting question leaks. Firstly, switching to a digital platform would save millions of pieces of paper and decrease the environmental cost of our examinations. Using tablets would also reduce many other costs ranging from OMR machine maintenance/operation cost to the cost of ball-pen ink incurred by the students.

If proper randomisation of the question can be done by ensuring the same level of difficulty for each unique combination of questions, cheating through collusion would also become unviable. In that case, the need for invigilation would also be minimised and the exam can operate without disruption. Also, if randomised MCQ questions appear on the device screen, they can be instantaneously graded by the device and the score of the examinations may be made available to the students right after the examination. And if the examination format is further expanded so that the whole examination is MCQ-only, the need for graders will also be eliminated—making the examination process swift, efficient and virtually costless (compared to the current system).

Let's do a simple calculation to prove this point. In 2017, 3,096,075 students took the PEC examination, 2,090,277 took the JSC examination,



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PHOTO: STAR

1,425,900 took the SSC examination and 1,183,686 took the HSC examination. Even if the vocational and madrasa examinations are discounted and an average number of 10 subject tests are taken into consideration, this would mean printing 77,959,380 question papers at the cost of Tk 38,979,690 (assuming a cost of Tk 0.5 per paper printing cost). Add up the costs of additional invigilation, the OMR operation and the public examination bureaucracy over a five-year period, the total cost would likely exceed the cost of a basic tablet computer that costs around Tk 5,000 in retail. Even if that is not the case, the social benefit that would be created from the decrease in question-paper leakage and collusion-based cheating would justify the minimal public costs that the project may incur.

Therefore, from a pure cost-benefit perspective, the education ministry should move towards the digitised public examinations that it is reportedly pondering. Furthermore, it should consider moving to an all-MCQ examination model from the current mixed MCQ/essay structure. Under such a model, public examinations will be so easy to administer that they can be used at every grade level instead of the four terminal grades (5th, 8th, 10th and 12th). The examinations can then be much shorter, less stressful and more useful. Making the examinations lengthy, subjective and high-stakes hardly makes the score data more comprehensive or dependable. Short MCQ-only examinations that ask creatively designed questions can produce more dependable data due to the accountability associated with

instant grading across the board.

It is also harder to fudge MCQ test score than for essay questions (which our government reportedly does to inflate achievement data). The data from the MCQ-only test would give a better picture of which schools are doing better, which are doing worse and which ones need more funding or care than the others. It will also give us a general sense of the standing of the student population in comparison with their expected achievement level and the student will be less likely to get bad essay score for having a bad essay grader (which is not very uncommon). In that vein, the more frequently the examinations can be administered, the better the data would be.

Also, the student can potentially get a certificate for the grade they pass on the digitised public exam

even if they have to discontinue their education after a non-terminal grade (grade 5, 8, 10 and 12 in the current system). This should increase the incentive for students to stay in school even in the in-between years of public examination. If development economists like Abhijit Banerjee, Esther Duflo and Amartya Sen are right, increasing such incentives could lead to a decline in the school dropout rates. Fully digitised examinations can additionally be a harbinger for increased educational access to non-traditional students. In an ideal scenario, the test could be administered year-round by the Union Information and Service Centers (UISCs) and students without access to traditional educational institution (say a street child who has only ever been to an NGO school) can easily take the test and earn a government certificate that they can use to get a job later on.

But cannot leakers just turn hackers and leak the questions digitally in the 30 minutes time window granted by the current proposal? They might. But if the questions are instantly generated at the click of a button when the students start the test, that risk may be averted. What if they hack the whole question bank? It won't matter. The question bank (that should contain 5,000-10,000 critical/creative questions) might as well be public and the tests might as well be open book. Let the students learn the thousands of answers and they will achieve subject matter mastery anyway. Let the students find the answer in the open book and they will achieve critical reading and research skills. The benefit of in-test cheating in any shape or form should still be minimal because of the time cost associated with cheating in a randomised timed test. Therefore, regardless of the venue of the exam, the exams would still be efficient and productive.

As such, the proposal of digitising at least part of the public examination is certainly a step in the right direction. It is more beneficial than the current system of public examination and if successful, it has tremendous potential for growth in the future. Of course, there are possibilities of corruption and bureaucratic inefficiency creeping into the process like many of its other projects. But if it doesn't and the idea is implemented correctly, the digitised public examination system may become the flagship project that would vindicate the legacy of the current administration and create new frontiers of educational innovations for administrations to come.

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The Rinkus and the Rajus



NAVEED MAHBUB

DESPITE the apparent cordiality, there is the undercurrent of a race for the shotgun position, that is the front passenger seat of the car. Ok, the term "shotgun

position" comes from the person sitting next to the stage coach driver sitting on the top of the stage coach with a shotgun in his hands as a means of protecting the passengers in the stage coach in the Wild West.

Now, the contenders for this particular "shotgun" position of the snazzy, black Mercedes minivan in the Tame Tame Down Under are the singer Tahsan and the comedian Naveed. Ok, there is also Minar, the other singer, who is too polite and shy to even try to throw in his (signature) hat into the ring.

With our concert over in Sydney, the producer takes us out sightseeing where all three of us want to sit in the front. Tahsan's weight is his celebrity status, my weight is my weight, literally, from being a few years older and a tad wider at the waist. Meanwhile, poor Minar is relegated to being the baby with no chance of sitting in the front and almost being confined to sitting in a child safety seat in the back. Neither of us makes the offer to the other: "Would you like to sit in the front?" For it is an offer that can never be refused. So, it really boils down to Tahsan and myself—whoever "casually" walks over to the front passenger door as the vehicle is remotely unlocked by the producer.



It's not that the view isn't there from the seat in the back (middle row, there's a third row, we'll come to that later). It's just that the glasses are tinted, and all said and done, there is plenty of attenuation of the light coming in, thus reducing visibility significantly.

Ok, now the third row. It is almost automatically assumed that this claustrophobic area will be occupied by Rinku, the drummer and Raju, the bass guitarist, to whom we never even bother to offer the middle row seats, let alone the shotgun position. As if it's not humiliating enough that they are practically nonexistent on stage, for all

eyes are always on the vocalist, who is usually in the front. Whereas without the bass, it is all a hollow, tinny cacophony and without the drums, there is no shepherding beat. But such is life, the bassist and the drummer are the indispensable second fiddle (no pun intended). And even when they are at the point of exploding their vocal chords during the performance as they "sing along" with the main vocalist, nobody pays attention to them. Besides, the sadistic sound engineer mutes off their microphones anyway. At the end of the show, if the singer is gracious enough, he will introduce the band where each member will do a 10-

second solo, take a bow, and go back into oblivion.

After the show, the fans do not scramble to the door of the green rooms of the band members, but only towards that of the singer. The drummer and the bassist are the ones with a lack of job security—when the band breaks up and the vocalist embarks on his/her solo career, they are further down the totem pole of nobodiness. Ringo Starr didn't have the foresight—as The Beatles broke up and John Lennon, Paul McCartney and George Harrison went their own ways laden in gold, Ringo managed meagrely with

Thomas the Tank Engine.

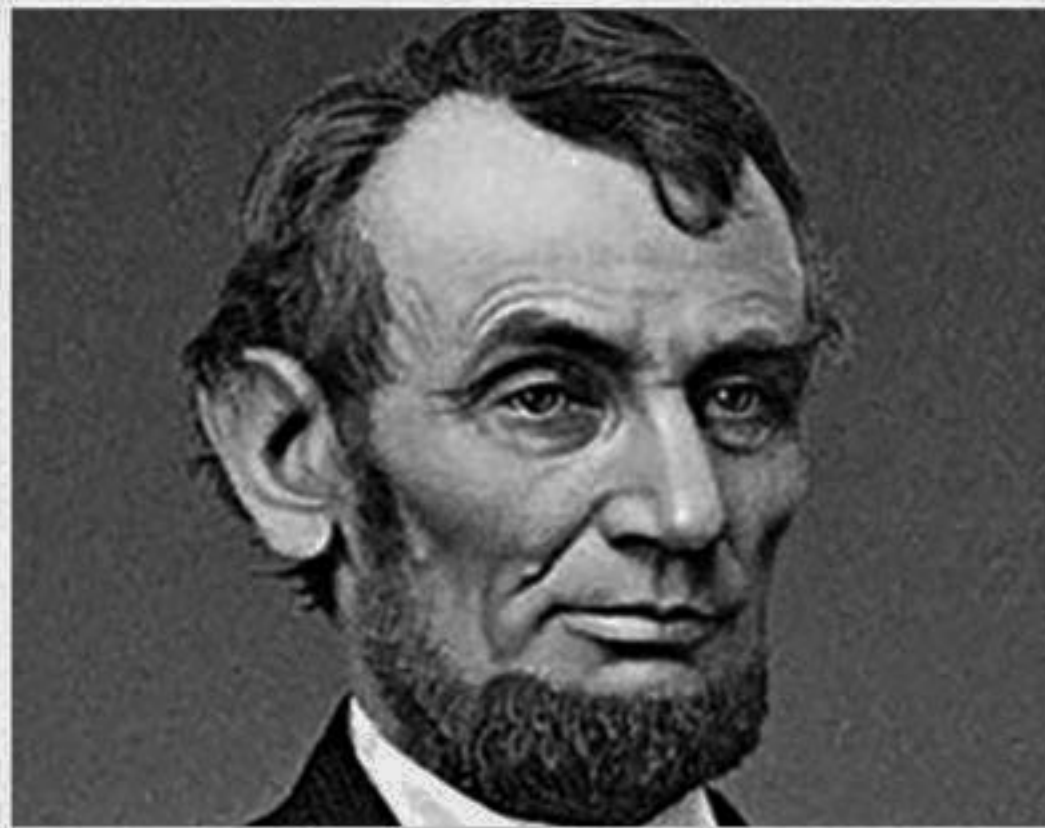
But there are the clever drummers—Phil Collins of Genesis and Don Henley of The Eagles, whose voices appeared from behind the maze of the drums, each eventually ending up with stellar solo careers.

Such is the life of all the Rinkus and the Rajus, relegated on stage and off stage, seen but not heard, heard but not seen, but are always, and will always remain the indispensable, unsung heroes. In 1952, Abdus Salam, Abul Barkat, Rafiq Uddin Ahmed, Abdul Jabbar gave their lives so that we could speak, write, hear, think, compose, sing, recite, reprimand, praise, criticise, plead, forgive, beg, scream, yell, whisper...and eventually email, text, comment, troll, blog, vlog, YouTube, Tweet, Instagram, Snapchat...in a language that is OURS—Bangla. But there were also the Rinkus and the Rajus, the bassists and the drummers, in the form of the other thousands who took to the streets 66 years ago as well as the millions who roared in protest from their own little nooks and corners across a vast land in the East and in the West, for the simple, fundamental right of being able to do all that in his own language called the mother tongue. As such, our respect and gratitude to not only the lead vocalists, but also to all the unsung bassists and the drummers.

Dhonnobad!

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QUOTABLE Quote



ABRAHAM LINCOLN (1809-1865)
16th U.S. President

No man is good enough to govern another man without that other man's consent.

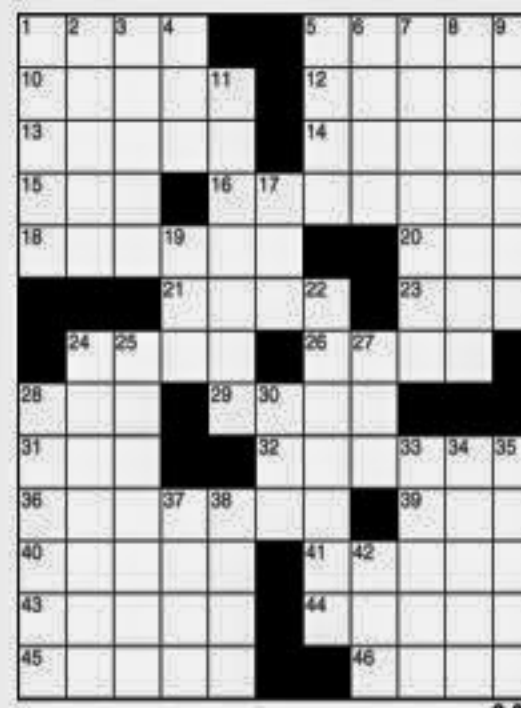
CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Chickadee's perch
- 5 Duo quadrupled
- 10 Desert spots
- 12 Analyze grammar
- 13 Marlins' home
- 14 15-Across, familiarly
- 15 Juan's wife
- 16 Breaks away
- 18 Hush-hush
- 20 Holiday lead-in
- 21 Med. sch. subject
- 23 Take in
- 24 Robert Burns' "—Shanter"
- 26 "Puttin' on the —"
- 28 Vault part

DOWN

- 29 Bankrupt
- 31 Crunch targets
- 32 Duel helper
- 36 Fastens down
- 39 Once called
- 40 Mall business
- 41 Martini gamish
- 43 "Blue Sky" star
- 44 More pleasant
- 45 Over
- 46 French father
- 1 Prop for Poseidon
- 8 Actor Emilio
- 9 Social service
- 11 Answer el jefe
- 17 Seventh letter
- 19 Zodiac animal
- 22 Checks the fit of
- 24 Like Sherpas
- 25 Make a getaway
- 27 Kin of Ltd.
- 28 Fight, hillbilly-style
- 30 Exploit
- 33 Kept in reserve
- 34 When pigs fly
- 35 Plow pioneer
- 37 Spur on
- 38 Oboe part
- 42 Sassy talk



YESTERDAY'S ANSWER



BEETLE BAILEY



BY MORT WALKER



BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT



BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

