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FOUNDER EDITOR
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Another bright idea to ease traffic?

Adopt measures based on ground realities

WE understand that Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC) and the World Bank are looking into the option to make traffic management possible using a combination of digital and manual options. The current traffic light system which was first introduced in 2004 to ease movement of traffic failed to bring positive results as vehicular numbers have mushroomed exponentially over the last decade. The system was upgraded later on with countdown timers along with solar panels to power traffic lights and total cost of these two projects was Tk 37 crore, neither of which worked. We have had a series of trials-and-errors and funds going down the drain. There is no guarantee that the latest line of thinking will work, which involves a system of traffic police using remote control devices to switch on the red or green lights assessing the traffic flow, will work. In fact no feasibility study seems to have been done to find out whether the latest incarnation of traffic system will have the desired effect or not.

We live in a chaotic city with multiple problems on the roads. Jaywalking is now a national pastime because pavements are occupied. We have non-motorised vehicles occupying the same space alongside motorised vehicles on roads. The fact that Dhaka's road infrastructure is woefully inadequate, i.e. a city this size should have 20 percent roads whereas we only have 7.5 percent. Then there is the question of drivers having little knowledge of traffic laws, random VIP movements—are all factors that need to be taken into account before introducing another ill-thought out programme for traffic control which will simply be a waste of resources. What experts agree on is that Dhaka needs an effective traffic signal system. But what is also needed is to take into account the anomalies that create the conditions for such terrible gridlocks in the city. Unless we address these systemic problems, merely introducing another traffic management system will not bring desired results.

Ensure right and safety of the autistic

They deserve our full support

THE world overserved Autism Awareness Day 2018 on April 2. Official statistics say there are about 44,000 autistic children across the country. However, because of the social stigma which still surrounds the condition despite increased awareness, it is possible that the number is actually much greater.

Bangladesh, according to the World Health Organisation, has been a global leader when it comes to raising awareness regarding autism. The current government has undertaken various programmes with regards to autism which is commendable. And the results of such programmes, too, have been encouraging to see, as the number of parents who now forego superstitions and instead go to doctors and expert institutions for the treatment of their children, have risen. The government had also promulgated two important acts that concern individuals with autism and help protect their rights and ensure their safety—The Disability Rights Law, 2013 and Neuro Developmental Disability Protection Trust Act, 2013. But as experts have opined, the country does not yet have the capacity to provide optimal treatment and support to those suffering from autism, especially in terms of having enough treatment centres that specialise in treating autism.

As the prime minister rightly said in her address marking the 11th World Autism Awareness Day, those who have autism should in no way be neglected by society, as they too are a part of it and may, in fact, "have much more talent" than the average person. And by properly harnessing those talents, we, as a society, can indeed benefit greatly.

We hope the government will continue its good work in terms of raising awareness about autism. Moreover, we urge it to work more proactively with the private sector in order to set up additional treatment centres for people with autism.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Rebecca Haque's "Shadowtime"

Rebecca Haque's piece entitled "Shadowtime: Notes on living in two temporal scales simultaneously," published in this paper on March 25, has drawn my attention. It is without doubt a wonderful piece, which eloquently describes the author's nostalgic state of mind. She also relates her pain of loss to the pain brought upon the nation on March 25, 1971. Although she writes of her own life, there is much for any of us to connect.

A journey from "titli" to "toofani" to "Haque" bears witness to her progress with time, her sweet memories of the bygone days. Haque indirectly refers to Shelley, his immortal west wind, at the end of her piece by saying "Cleanse this earth of wickedness and killing. Wash away our sins. Help us open a new humane Halkhata." "Shadowtime" certainly merits praise.
Mohammad Shafiqul Islam, Sylhet

KNOT SO TRUE



RUBANA HUQ

WINDS of change have hit us. In a recent trip to the West, I missed Spring. A bitter cold wave was then sweeping all across Europe. Even Madrid had snow-capped mountains. It

seemed as if the weather was all set for a change. Every flight that I took, in and out of Europe, was more turbulent with unexpected cold air hitting aircrafts with intolerable cruelty. Actually, even the political weather in Europe reeked of disappointment. Almost every country had a disappointing story of populists and ultra-nationalistic forces sweeping elections, of people's simplicity and thirst for change being taken advantage of, and of a sudden lack of regard for democracy.

The global democratic climate has indeed suffered a blow. The trailblazing shaming examples from the West of how the World is changing from democracy to autocracy is well covered in media. With 71 countries suffering net declines in political rights and civil liberties, marking 2018 as the 12th consecutive year of decline in global freedom, we should be thinking hard. A global picture of rightists winning the elections worldwide in 2017, with the mainstream parties in Germany and the Netherlands struggling to create stability, with the humanitarian crisis of subjecting people to a food scarcity and scheming to win votes in Venezuela by Nicolás Maduro, with Catalonia being unable to find a candidate to lead the region because of most candidates being exiled, arrested or charged with high treason—all these are glaring examples of the regimes' desperate attempt to cling to power.

And strangely, in our part of the world, we too have been mirroring the madness. Instead of championing our own cause, we have ourselves set off good-for-life laws allowing governments in Asia to stay on forever along with promoting questionable judiciary, political intolerance, and media propaganda. Turkey has detained citizens, silenced media outlets, and grabbed businesses, while elsewhere in the Middle East, authoritarian rule, arbitrary arrests and aggressive moves against potential rivals have continued. And of course, Myanmar has continued with ethnic cleansing.

Yet, there was a time when we were way better. The grandeur of Chinese and Indian

empires beat Europe hollow. China's Muslim-born Zhang He sailed nearly a century ahead of Columbus. A good read of Shashi Tharoor's reference to Britain's "historical amnesia" can only make us proud as a subcontinent. And yes...even culturally, when Beatles borrowed from us, we basked in our decolonised glory through "Tomorrow Never Knows," with Beatles running full tilt into Indian music, with them borrowing Sitar from us that made people wonder what kind of "new guitar" had Beatles invented to use in their music, with "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band" being all about Maya, with "Living in the Material World"

than any other broadcaster in the US, forced all of its newscasters to denounce "fake news," in order to promote the Trump Administration's agenda. The prescriptive script of the Group blasted "the troubling trend of irresponsible, one-sided news stories", which were apparently plaguing the US. There has been an outpour of criticism all over the globe.

In the small and limited world of Twitter, there is one mortal who pretends to be God and often speaks the truth that most of us fail to. In recent times, one of his brilliant tweets deserves a retweet and a re-quote. God writes: "Some tweets are

scrutiny. When the real defaulters get to reschedule their loans and escape humiliation, when the economy feeds off bad practices and encourages them in order to sustain dubious creditors, it's time for us to think all over again.

Why do we tread in ways that may kill the positive winds of change that we could capitalise on and champion? Why would we jeopardise the current phase of development, instead of attracting attention to bad turns that force bank boards to make unwise decisions and steer the country in the direction of a financial turmoil? Why would we insist on curbing press freedom when we need



Most recently, the conservative Sinclair Broadcast Group, owning more television stations than any other broadcaster in the US, forced all of its newscasters to denounce "fake news," in order to promote the Trump Administration's agenda. The prescriptive script of the Group blasted "the troubling trend of irresponsible, one-sided news stories", which were apparently plaguing the US.

by George Harrison being the one album of Beatles that was completely influenced by Indian values and ideas, with Lennon's "Instant Karma!" not being news, it was only the other day that we thought we were teaching the world better...

Yet ironically, we have now voyaged back from our decolonised selves and have forgotten to learn from what has passed us, hurt us and has left us hollow, and today we are losing no time and are learning the current lessons from the West, all over again.

Let me elaborate how though. Most recently, the conservative Sinclair Broadcast Group, owning more television stations

timeless" and quotes Trump's recent tweet on how America now needs a president "who isn't a laughing stock to the entire World," how America needs "a truly great leader, a genius at Strategy and winning Respect." Indeed, America.

But this is not what worries me. What worries me is how we are following the West to complete destruction. The most recent proposal from bankers to establish an organisation promulgating a Financial Information Act under the finance ministry and Bangladesh Bank, in order to "prevent negative publication of the media" regarding the news of its directors and loans, deserves close and critical

it the most? As Bengalis, while we stand accused by random quarters of seeking unusual favours from the good hands that govern us, we should also seek strength in the memory of the 1968 Prague Spring and its brilliant banner sporting the following phrase: "For your freedom and ours."

It is for all our freedom that we must strive to be the better amongst many. Hence, we cannot, and should not, mimic the mad, while winning all wars on global goals.

Rubana Huq is the managing director of Mohammad Group.

EDUCATION GOAL 2030

What will it take to reach it?



MANZOOR AHMED

CHILDREN who are in grade one today will be in grade twelve, the final year of high school, in 2030. The Sustainable Development Goal number 4 (SDG4 out of 17

global SDGs) is to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning for all by 2030. Where do we stand in reaching the education goals to which Bangladesh is committed?

In two meetings held in the city recently, policymakers, academics and others discussed SDG4. The Minister of Education Nurul Islam Nahid; Minister of Primary and Mass Education Mostafizur Rahman;

horizon. And, even now, are the right issues and questions being raised?

SDG4 has seven targets about what is to be done and three means of achieving the targets. The first target requires that all children complete free, inclusive, quality primary and secondary education by 2030. Target 2 is about providing early childhood development services and pre-primary education for all children.

Targets 3, 4, 5 and 6 are about skills for work, eliminating illiteracy and expanding lifelong learning. Cross-cutting issues of gender, inequality and inclusion are built into the targets. Target 7 is about the purposes of education—the whys rather than only whats and hows of education.

The discussion at the two meetings brought out the fact that serious structural and operational obstacles still remain to be recognised. The right questions need to be asked, actions and priorities decided, and



No coordinated plan for school education or even a mechanism for preparing one exists.

Chief Coordinator for SDG Affairs at the Prime Minister's Office Abul Kalam Azad; and Secretary of Ministry of Education Md Sohrab Hossain, among others, spoke in the meetings about education responses to SDG 2030 at the Institute of Education and Research, Dhaka University on March 31 and April 1.

A workshop was organised by the two ministries of education, UNESCO and Campaign for Popular Education on April 1. Officials from the two ministries, academics, NGOs and aid agencies talked about developing a strategic framework and action plan for SDG4.

The good news is that key people are discussing issues, strategies and action plans. The concern, however, is that this discussion is happening when we are already in the third year of a 15-year time

implementation steps are to be taken with strong political support.

Take target one—completion of free, good quality primary and secondary education by all children. Will all of grade 1 children today complete quality secondary education in 12 years? This question is not even being asked. The focus is still on grade 5 universal primary education.

What happens after grade 5 up to grade 8 is hamstrung by the responsibility for school education being divided into the turf of two ministries, unlike anywhere else. No coordinated plan for school education or even a mechanism for preparing one exists. We cannot be a real middle-income country if a large proportion of young people are without a high school education.

Serious decentralised planning and management with accountability along with rethinking of priorities for spending will lead to better spending and better outcome.

It is now well-recognised that early growth and development of children is critical for their intellectual, social and emotional development and later success in education and life, which is the domain of target 2. A one-year pre-primary education starting at age 5 is being implemented, though it has serious quality deficiencies.

A comprehensive early childhood development policy has been adopted in 2013 by the government which tasks the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs (MOWCA) to guide and coordinate action in this area. But the issue falls between stools because education authorities do not see children younger than 5 as their remit and MOWCA is not equipped and without the clout to give the lead. A symptom of the problem is that MOWCA has not even been present in the meetings.

That the profile of jobs and skills required for them will be very different by 2030; that there is huge unemployment and underemployment among the youth; and that technical and vocational education and training (TVET) must be strengthened needs to be figured in the discussion. But the strategy seems to be expanding TVET, and raising the proportion of secondary students, including madrasa students, in TVET.

All evidence suggests that expanding the programmes we have now will not prepare the students to be productive and capable workers that the market demands. So, a mere expansion of the current programme cannot be the answer. Moreover, the current programmes do not even begin to serve the needs of workers in the informal economy, for which no coherent strategy and plan for skill development exist, but

which absorbs over 80 percent of workers.

All agree that the competencies students acquire, i.e., the quality of education, constitute the most serious and complex challenge. There is also a general agreement that the skills, capability and dedication of teachers are central to quality improvement.

The strategy so far is confined to more training for teachers. It bypasses the need for new, out-of-box thinking about attracting and retaining "the best and the brightest" in the teaching profession and creating the conditions for teachers to perform at their best.

There are conflicting narratives about resources and budgets for education even from officials. Under two percent of GDP and 10-to-12 percent of national budget for education, and per student school-level annual public spending of around USD 100, are all extremely low even compared to other developing countries. But a senior official said that funding is not a problem, because Tk 1,200 crores for primary education remained unspent in 2017.

There is clearly a problem of planning, priorities for allocations, and the capacity and management of spending. Teaching staff is the largest item of cost in education adding up to over 80 percent of the operating budget of education. We need to double the number of teachers in a short time and have more capable and committed teachers, as noted above. Infrastructure, despite improvement, remains woefully inadequate. We need to make school a place of pride in every locality and community.

Serious decentralised planning and management with accountability along with rethinking of priorities for spending will lead to better spending and better outcome. The MPO (monthly pay order) mechanism for government assistance to schools has become riddled with corruption and inefficiency. A performance-based approach has to be tried out. These are questions still to be asked and their answers must be found.

The assumptions, targets and implementation mechanisms of subsector plans now in the works for primary, secondary and non-formal education remain largely confined to present structures and patterns of planning and management. The system remains trapped in current ineffective habits and practices. Formulation of SDG4 strategy and plan, even at this late date, is an opportunity to ask the right questions and act accordingly.

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