

Roads and highways still anything but safe

Lack of enforcement of rules continues to be the norm

DESPITE the massive student protest for safe roads, followed by numerous assurances from the authorities that the government will strictly ensure road safety, the number of deaths and injuries on roads and highways during the Eid holidays indicates that nothing has, in fact, changed.

As this newspaper reported, at least 31 people were killed and more than 100 others injured in road accidents during the three-day Eid holiday, while six others were killed in a single road crash the day after. On the following day, at least 15 people were again killed and 20 injured as a bus collided head-on with a human hauler on the Natore-Pabna highway in Baraigram Upazila, even though human haulers are banned from plying the highways.

Yet, if we look at the reports, many of the accidents somehow involved three-wheelers and other slow-moving vehicles that are banned from highways. Also, many of the vehicles involved were found to lack necessary paperwork, while some were also being driven by underage drivers. The fact that this has been the case is again indicative of the lack of enforcement of the most basic rules and regulations on highways, and how such failures by the authorities continue to cost the nation dearly. And the reason why this is particularly concerning is because it shows that most of the promises made by government officials following the demands for safer roads were, in fact, hollow. And although probe committees have been set up after many of the major accidents to investigate the causes of accidents, which too have been well established, most of their recommendations still remain largely ignored. What is the point of having such probe committees if their recommendations are going to be ignored?

Every year, we see countless lives being needlessly lost because of such apathy from the government. According to Bangladesh Jatri Kalyan Samity, 7,397 people were killed and 16,193 injured in road crashes last year. How many more precious lives have to be lost before we see major action being taken? Why is it so hard to enforce the existing rules and regulations and punish the violators?

Bringing light to Jamuna's shoal

Solar mini-grid for remote communities

FOR the people living on a Jamuna River shoal in Sirajganj, dusk meant darkness. Things have changed since 2017 when a local company clinched finance from the Infrastructure Development Company Limited (IDCOL) and set up a Tk 5.14 crore solar power mini-grid to supply the residents with electricity. It has boosted economic activity in Rupsha Bazar where small business operators previously had to rely on generators burning costly diesel. Their costs have practically halved as diesel has been replaced by the power of the sun. Today the mini-grid supplies power to nearly 500 connections to commercial and household users.

Mini-grid solar systems are now sprouting up in unlikely places to bring electricity to communities who live in remote areas of the country, far from the mainstream electricity grid. It is changing the way they live and work. Bangladesh remains one of the world's poorest electricity consumers but if such systems can be replicated on a nationwide scale, it will do much to boost economic activity and help improve the quality of living. Affordable and reliable electricity can and do act as game changers for business and act as a catalyst for employment. School and college-going students will greatly benefit from having adequate light when they study. The mini-grid is a scaled-up version of the standalone household solar system as it provides more electricity to power up energy-hungry appliances like refrigerators and water pumps. We hope the authorities will make the resources available to communities like the one living on Jamuna shoal so that lives can change for the better.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Homage to Kuldeep Nayar

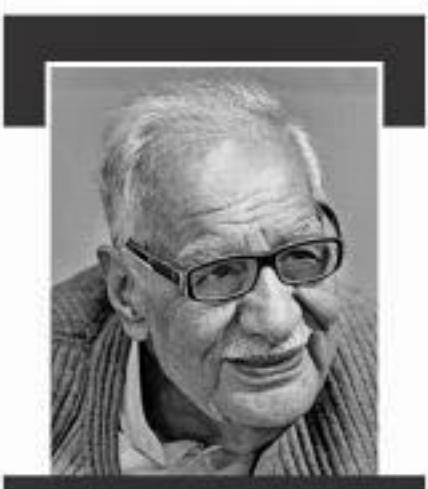
Kuldeep Nayar belonged to a rare breed of journalists. Fearless and uncompromising, Mr Nayar fought against oppression and social injustice his entire life. He was a true champion of democracy and human rights, who never fumbled or faltered to tell the truth or to speak his mind.

I have been a regular reader of his articles that appeared in *The Daily Star*. What was unique about his writing was that he was able to connect his readers instantly with the subject of discussion. His simple, yet powerful style of writing, made him stand out among his peers. But his true hallmark was the clarity of his thinking.

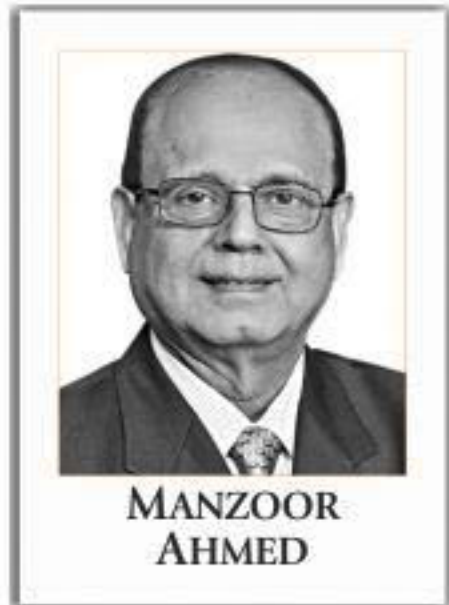
A journalist like him is born only once every hundred years. His death has created a huge void, which surely cannot be easily filled.

Having done the hard work, may he now rest in peace.

Ehsan Ul Haque, By e-mail



An education system that divides the nation



MANZOOR AHMED

OUR vision and aspiration as a nation is expressed in Vision 2021, marking 50 years of independent Bangladesh, and objectives set for 2041, when Bangladesh aims to become a developed nation. The Global Sustainable Development Goals (2030 Agenda), which Bangladesh has endorsed, provides interim benchmarks of development that have to be reached. All of these milestones for national development highlight the central role of the education system in the transformation that we want to achieve. But can the education system play its role and help fulfil such a lofty mission?

A major concern not discussed much—people responsible for policy-making like to shove the problem under the rug—is the divisive nature of the education system. Three major parallel streams of education divide the nation, entrench social and economic disparities, and stand in the way of building a modern and prosperous nation.

Our present structure of schools has evolved since the colonial period, and had become well-entrenched by the beginning of this century. The mainstream public school system enrolls the majority of Bangladeshi school-going students. A madrasa system, a part of it with government support and an independent stream, serves a substantial minority of students. A small elite section of society send their children to the English-medium proprietary schools.

The result is that our education system divides the nation. It pulls students in three directions. It is unfair and discriminatory in various ways.

One aspect of unfairness is the low quality of schools for the great majority of children. This majority includes madrasa students (both in Alia and Qawmi madrasas), most students in mainstream government schools and in government-assisted Bangla schools (excepting an elite enclave of special institutions such as the cadet colleges and the highly selective private Bangla schools). It also includes students in the mushrooming of low-quality commercial English-medium kindergartens.

Another aspect is that the three major streams prevent our building a common foundation of knowledge, shared experience and values among the young people. Children study and live in different worlds. The opportunities and life prospects disproportionately favour children attending the better English-medium schools and the elite enclave of Bangla-medium schools. Schools cannot resolve all social divisions, but good schools with a shared curriculum can help minimise them. At present, we are reinforcing our divisions inter-generationally.

At the primary level, about 85 percent of students are in the mainstream Bangla-medium schools. The rest are evenly divided between madrasas and private kindergartens (which claim to be English-medium). At the secondary level, about two-thirds of all enrolled students are in Bangla-medium schools; some 30 percent are in Alia (government supported) and Qawmi madrasas, and around 5 percent in English schools. While nearly 95 percent of children aged 6 to 11 are

enrolled in primary schools, not all complete this stage, and only about 70 percent of the secondary school age group are in school or madrasa. (These numbers are estimates, because statistics are not dependable and up-to-date.)

After independence, the first education policy report was that of the Quadrat-e-Khuda Commission, in 1974. It envisioned a unified education system with a common core curriculum in a Bangla-medium public system. English-medium private schools and madrasas would be exceptions. Madrasa education, with a small number of institutions at that time, was seen—following a common primary school—as a vocational stream to prepare people for religion-related occupations, rather than a parallel system from preschool to university.

The Quadrat-e-Khuda Commission report was ignored by the military rulers. Madrasas—both Alia and

divisions in society. The elite representing business, higher bureaucracy, and the higher echelons of the armed forces patronise the private English-medium schools. The middle and lower-middle mainstream of society send their children to government or government-supported Bangla-medium schools. The poor enrol their children in the Alia or Qawmi madrasas for reasons of affordability and/or from a religious motivation.

This structure of schools has suited the political and economic elite, and consequently, there has been little interest among the elite in rocking the boat.

Is this what we want in the modern middle-income and progressive nation which we aspire? If not, we need profound changes to our school system, not just an expansion with some tinkering.

As the country prepares for the parliamentary election later this year and political parties announce



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PHOTO: ZAHEDUL I KHAN

Qawmi—grew rapidly in the 1980s as did the proprietary English-medium schools. Both enjoyed active government patronage and encouragement. Post-1990 democratic governments, both the BNP-led and the Awami League-led coalitions, found it difficult or had no appetite to try reversing the trend.

The 2010 National Education Policy gave lip service to the goal of the Quadrat-e-Khuda Commission of a unified public education system with equity and excellence. It did not lay out any guideline for the major structural reform in the system required to undo the entrenched three-way division. Such a reversal would require major steps in financing, governance, curriculum development, teacher preparation and recruitment and student assessment in the school system.

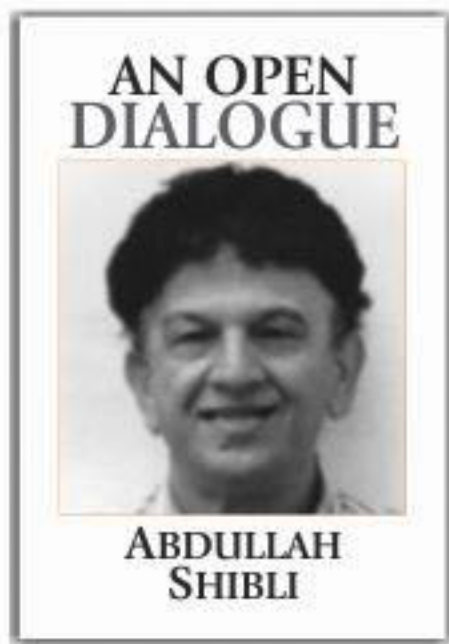
The three major streams clearly parallel the larger

their manifestos, the focus should be on making the education system a unifying force and the vehicle for achieving the development aspirations should receive greater attention. In the past, we have witnessed a rhetorical flourish with follow-up that fell seriously short. Can it be different this time?

The questions raised are difficult and complex. Political slogans and populist pledges will not lead to a solution as they have not so far. A responsible role of the political leadership of the major parties would be to recognise the problem, commit themselves to facilitate public dialogue and consensus building about the nature of the problem and approaches to the solution, and pursue follow-up steps in good faith, shunning partisan and short-term political gains.

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Rohingyas deserve better



ABDULLAH SHIBLI

THE Rohingyas who moved to Bangladesh reached an important milestone on August 25, 2018. The first anniversary of the exodus from their homeland in Myanmar was observed with solemnity in Bangladesh, Myanmar, and everywhere that the Rohingya diaspora have now spread out to. It is not a coincidence that Myanmar's principal spokesperson, State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, came out with all guns blazing to defend the regime ensconced in Naypyidaw and attempted to shift the blame to Bangladesh for the delay in repatriation. "It's very difficult for us to put a timeframe on it by ourselves unilaterally because we have to work with Bangladesh in order to do that," Suu Kyi said on August 21 at the 43rd Singapore Lecture organised by the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute.

"Bangladesh would also have to decide how quickly they want the process to be completed," she added. She also mentioned that 81 out of the 88 recommendations

of the Kofi Annan Advisory Committee have been implemented.

Bangladesh was in the midst of a three-day celebration of Eid-ul-Adha when this blatant lie from the State Counsellor reached the shores of a nation which has been not only offering shelter to a million refugees from Myanmar, but also working on their behalf to facilitate their safe and sustainable return. Her suggestion that Bangladesh might have a vested interest in prolonging the misery of a population, which only came to its soil to escape the brutality of the marauding gangs, religious zealots, and elements of the Tatmadaw (Myanmar army) bent on ethnic cleansing, defies all norms of decency and sound reasoning.

Condemnation of this gross illustration of blaming the victims has been swift, and came from the ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights (APHR) who called for the Myanmar military to be "brought to justice" for its "murderous operation in Rakhine State". In a statement released on August 24, more than 130 members of parliaments from Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Timor-Leste and Singapore demanded that Myanmar be investigated by the International Criminal

Court (ICC). This is "the most united condemnation from the region since the violence began against the Rohingya a year ago." However, one can hope that Aung San Suu Kyi, who was once given the Nobel Prize for Peace, will reflect more deeply on the crisis and offer sound and reasoned advice to—and on behalf of—the government she represents.

In another development, a few days ago, the Independent Commission of Inquiry formed by Myanmar and led by former Philippine diplomat Rosario Manolo met with Myanmar's leaders in Naypyidaw, and promised that the panel will be "independent, impartial and neutral." However, Ms Manolo set a deadline of August 15, 2019 to deliver the report of this commission to Myanmar's president, and this timeframe implies that Bangladesh and the international community must continue their vigilance and keep up the pressure on Myanmar to mend its ways and reconcile itself to the idea of Rohingyas returning to their homeland and reclaiming their rights.

It cannot be gainsaid that in the final analysis, economic pressure is what forced North Korea and the former apartheid regime in South Africa to come to the bargaining table. In the past, the military regime in Myanmar relaxed its grip on power, and restored some basic rights only after decades of tight economic and diplomatic sanctions imposed on the erstwhile dictatorship. Some bad actors in that country still carry on with the old mindset, and will be reluctant to acknowledge and come to terms with the idea of making amends for the abominable acts perpetrated on the Rohingyas in the past year, and way before that. The denial of citizenship, the policy of ethnic cleansing, use of brute power and murder, and instances of rape and abduction are there for all to see, but the ruling coalition in Naypyidaw appear to be in a state of amnesia.

The Rohingyas will be able to return to their homesteads only if the international community steps up and tightens the squeeze on Naypyidaw through a concerted effort combining economic sanctions, selective targeting of the financial interests of its civil and military rulers, and continued diplomatic and parliamentary engagement with the ruling coalition. So far, what we have seen after one year of action and threats is, there is still a feeling in Naypyidaw that the storm will pass. The Rohingyas, Bangladesh, and the international community must increase the pressure on those who perpetrated the heinous acts to be brought to justice and to offer reparations for past misdeeds.



Rohingya refugee women hold placards as they take part in a protest at the Kutupalong refugee camp on August 25, 2018 to mark the one-year anniversary of their exodus in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh.

PHOTO: REUTERS/MOHAMMAD PONIR HOSSAIN

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