

## An attractive hub for high-tech manufacturing

### Speed up development of economic zones

ACCORDING to a report by International Data Corporation (IDC), Bangladesh has all the ingredients to become a high-tech manufacturing hub for domestic and international brands. The country has 80 million young people aged 25 or over. We offer a wage advantage over our larger neighbour India of nearly USD 80 per month. The country has other economic advantages that are not lost upon foreign investors. With a GDP of USD 249 billion and an average GDP growth rate of around 7 percent, some 121 public and private universities and some 51 polytechnic institutes are churning out tens of thousands tech graduates, Bangladesh has come under the technology radar internationally.

When we couple these advantages with the government drive to set up exclusive zones: 28 IT parks and some 79 economic zones, we begin to comprehend why companies like Samsung are setting up manufacturing plants in Bangladesh. Bangladeshis spent USD 300 million on laptops alone and that amount jumps to USD 1.5 billion if we add all gadget imports! This has prompted companies like Walton and Huawei to start assembling laptops locally. Indeed, the gadget and laptop market is growing anywhere between 12 – 20 percent per annum. However, while we are generating serious interest from major manufacturers and software companies, we need to get a serious move on fast tracking development of both economic zones and technology parks. Infrastructure development has been a bane in our economic efforts and policymakers need to do something to expedite completion dates.

## All work and no play...

### Give children space to play

A recent study has found that excessive pressure of studies, lack of playgrounds and a perceived insecurity of the outdoors deny our children the opportunity to play in the capital, causing irreparable physical and mental damage to them. The study has also found that girls play less outdoors than boys because of lack of security. These findings serve as a reminder as to how we have failed to give our children a healthy childhood by denying them their right to play.

A recent BBS survey has found that only two percent of Dhaka children have access to playgrounds. Over the years, many of the playgrounds and open spaces in Dhaka have been encroached upon by influential land grabbers—some of them have been turned into community centres, kitchen markets, rickshaw garages or parking lots. Those that are still there are under the threat of being grabbed and turned into commercial or residential plots. Also, the available playgrounds in the capital are neither accessible to children nor child-friendly, particularly for girls.

As a consequence, children in this city are spending more time watching TV, playing video games, using computers and smartphones, etc. A 2017 study found that nearly 80 percent teenagers of Dhaka have more than two hours of screen time a day, while one-third of them spend less than an hour on physical activities. These children are at high risk of depression and other health problems.

Since a lack of sports or physical activities impedes children's physical and mental growth, we must ensure that they have sufficient playtime outdoors. And to be able to do that, they must have more playgrounds in the city which the government must provide by recovering the existing ones from the clutch of the land grabbers.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Who will speak for people, then?

We are shocked to learn that Mozammel Hoque, a leading road safety campaigner and general secretary of Bangladesh Jatri Kalyan Samity, a passenger welfare organisation, has been arrested on a dubious charge over “extortion.”

The organisation has earned wrath of powerful quarters by regularly publishing statistics on road accidents. His colleagues have alleged that the police officers, who arrested him, claimed to have done so with the instruction of the high-ups. Moreover, it's highly unusual for police to arrest an extortion-accused at 3 am. Prothom Alo has reported that the plaintiff does not even know the accused.

It is, therefore, highly likely that Mozammel Hoque has been arrested on a trumped-up charge days before the placing of a proposed transport act that hardly fulfils the expectations of the public.

The arrest of Mozammel Hoque is a new low. His works are purely related to public interest. If people like him are treated in such a way, who would voice for people's rights?

Mahmudul Haque, Dhaka

MOYUKH MAHTAB

THE theme for this year's International Literacy Day, “Literacy and Skills Development”, speaks of a pressing issue of our time, as the rate of job creation in the country struggles to keep pace with the number of people joining the workforce every year. According to data from 2017, the unemployment rate in Bangladesh stands at 4.2 percentage (26 lakh). Add to that the number of those underemployed—people who work less than 40 hours a week or do not earn enough to meet basic needs or work at a lower tier compared to their skills and expertise—and the challenge of cashing in on the oft-quoted “demographic dividend” becomes all the more daunting. So the focus on education that imparts “skills”—defined by Unesco this year as “knowledge, skills and competencies required for employment, careers, and livelihoods, particularly technical and vocational skills, along with transferable skills and digital skills”—is understandable.

According to our Primary and Mass Education Minister, currently the literacy rate in Bangladesh is 72.9 percent. Our achievements in terms of increasing basic literacy (reading, writing and counting) and increasing access to education in the country have been phenomenal, true. But, literacy itself is a term which continues to evolve, and looking at it purely from a market perspective of access to jobs alone can come with its own problems, as the education sector of our country continues to show.

The “Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2006” published by Unesco states that the understanding of literacy has expanded from “a simple process of acquiring basic cognitive skills, to using these skills in ways to contribute to socio-economic development, to developing the capacity for social awareness and critical reflection as a basis for personal and social change.” The most common understanding of literacy as a set of “tangible skills”, the report points, can be a very limited view. But this has been the dominating conception that most national and international bodies have

adopted. Critics of this approach have pointed out that literacy as a competence-based agenda, while focusing on outcomes such as access to jobs, leaves out fundamental issues central to education, such as development of critical citizenship.

Paole Freiri, in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, quoting social philosopher Erich Fromm, defines the liberating role of education as the “Freedom to create and construct, to wonder and to venture. Such freedom requires that the individual be active and responsible, not a slave or a well-fed cog in the machine.” Central to Freiri's argument is the importance of “bringing the learner's socio-cultural realities into the learning process and then using this learning process to challenge these social processes”—that is a “critical literacy.” In contrast to this knowledge



ILLUSTRATION: UNESCO

creation and critical thinking based idea of education, Freiri mentions the mainstream form, which he calls “banking education” where “the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing and storing the deposits”—that is an education where students memorise and repeat. In the '70s Paolo Freiri's idea of education gained traction with the UN, especially in developing countries, and the Persepolis Declaration posited that “literacy must go beyond the process of learning the skills of reading, writing and arithmetic, and contribute to the 'liberation of man' and to his full development.”

Our education system, from the ground upwards, is what Freiri calls “banking education”. Yes, our literacy rate has increased, but as the recent National Student Assessment shows, a significant

portion of students in primary continue to perform at levels much below the standard when it came to language and mathematics. The ubiquity of coaching centres and guidebooks, aimed towards giving students shortcuts to good results, which would result in a GPA 5, and then, ideally, to an engineering or medical degree, is indicative of the way education is imparted. The focus, as educationists have been saying for a long time, has gone to rote learning, and parents, in their bid to get their children into good jobs, have created the demand for leaked question papers, at every level of education. Instead of improving quality of teaching-learning in the classroom, the focus has been on increasing the number of GPA 5s in the country.

Even if we keep aside the meagre output of our universities in creation of

knowledge, even primary education—which should be general, inspire a love of learning and teach critical thinking—is now a matter of jobs. Freiri would probably argue that the corruption and other woes we, as a society and country, face today are intrinsically linked with the kind of education our system imparts.

But even in terms of universities, the debate between education for livelihood and education for knowledge continues globally. In 2015, the governor of Wisconsin tried to change the mission of the University of Wisconsin. He proposed to change the university's code from “search for truth” and “improve the human condition” to “meet the state's workforce needs.” This generated intense criticism, and he eventually had to back off. Faced with the global economic

competition and workforce demands, the ideal that education can and should have higher goals than getting a good job, is increasingly under challenge. Valerie Strauss, in an op-ed in the *Washington Post* in 2015 wrote, “Should young people become educated to get prepared to enter the workforce, or should the purpose of education be focused more on social, academic, cultural and intellectual development so that students can grow up to be engaged citizens?” She goes on to argue that it does not have to be an either-or situation in the first place, and to reduce inequity through access to jobs, one must focus on education for work, and for citizenship.

One might not agree that it is the role of education to create better human beings, and say that the adage, “*Lekha pora kore jey, gari ghora chorey shey*”, though problematic, remains true. But recent studies have highlighted that proponents for more trade schools and vocational training miss out on a major downside. “Vocational education, done right, helps workers find jobs when they are young. But as they age—and job requirements change—workers are often not well prepared for the changes,” wrote David Leonhardt in *The New York Times* in 2017. Pointing to research, he argues that imparting critical education alongside practical training, allows workers to adapt to changes in technology and new jobs in today's job market.

So, if not for the sake of knowledge and the higher ideals of education (as if the fundamental questions of existence are not relevant for the banker, or doctor, or car mechanic!) at least for decent and continued employment, we must start to think how we can make our education system into one that encourages critical thinking and knowledge generation. In the process, we can also create a citizenry which can add to the domain of human knowledge, challenge wrongs and take well-informed decisions in life and in work. Without these, our increasing literacy rates may give us more skilled workers and a lower unemployment rate, but not enlightened citizens.

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# A travesty of justice

## The jailing of Reuters reporters is a new low for global press freedom



NAHELA NOWSHIN

THE sentencing of two Reuters journalists to seven years in prison by Myanmar should enrage anyone who cares about basic human rights and press freedom. Not

only was it a gross miscarriage of justice but also yet another reminder of Myanmar's obstinate determination to prevent or punish anyone for unmasking the brutality unleashed on its Rohingya minority.

The two incredibly brave journalists, Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo, accused of violating the Official Secrets Act, were investigating a massacre of Rohingya Muslims when they were arrested in December 2017. After the rigorous sentencing, Wa Lone firmly stood his ground, saying: “We performed according to media ethics. We didn't do anything harmful towards our nation. We didn't commit any crime...This is directly challenging the democracy and media freedom of our country...Since we didn't do anything, we have no fear.”

Courageous would be an understatement to describe what Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo, both Myanmar nationals, were trying to do. They were investigating the murder of 10 Rohingya men by Buddhist villagers and Myanmar troops in Rakhine State. The Reuters report that came out as a result of their investigation revealed the chilling details of the killings—how Rohingya men were bound together, hacked or shot to

death, and buried in one grave, some apparently still alive when buried. The reason this report is so significant and perceived to be so threatening by the Myanmar government is that it not only draws on accounts of villagers who confessed to torching Rohingya homes and killing Rohingya Muslims but this was the first time that soldiers and paramilitary forces were implicated by security forces themselves. By arresting the journalists, the Myanmar government was desperately trying to stop the report from ever seeing the light of day. Although they didn't succeed—it is naïve to think that an atrocity of

long list of well documented crimes against humanity committed by the Myanmar army. The investigative report's lurid shocking details of the crimes only substantiated the fact that there is no moral red line—no boundary not to be crossed—for Myanmar's state apparatus. It is a cruel irony that the journalists who uncovered the pre-planned killings of the 10 Rohingya men are now languishing in prison while those who killed the innocent Rohingya men are happily roaming free.

Myanmar's convenient branding of information acquired by the journalists as “possession of state secrets” is not much different to its insistence that the Rohingya be called “displaced persons”

tougher for journalists who are increasingly being seen as the enemy of the state rather than as part of a fundamental institution of any democracy. In this context, the fearless journalism of Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo, in the face of state repression, is nothing short of heroic.

The throttling of the media is nothing new. Governments have always been cautious of granting the fourth estate “too much freedom”. And with the dawn of digital and citizen journalism, the threat of independent journalism as perceived by authoritarian states has heightened. But just as journalism has evolved with the rise of the Internet, we have tools of state repression—monitors,



Wa Lone (left) and Kyaw Soe Oo have been sentenced to seven years in prison by a court in Myanmar for breaching the colonial-era Official Secrets Act.

PHOTOS: YE AUNG THU AND AUNG KYAW HTET/AFP

this magnitude could be so easily suppressed in the digital age—what they did manage to do is induce fear among journalists in Myanmar and send a clear message.

Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo will now remain confined within prison walls for the next seven years just for doing their job. This is an ominous sign for independent journalism and an attack on a core institution of Myanmar's young democracy. In the face of overwhelming evidence of the mass atrocities committed against the Rohingya—satellite imagery of burnt villages and survivor accounts of rape and killings—the charges against Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo for “possessing state secrets” seem almost laughable. In fact, the Reuters report had only lent credence to the nightmarish stories recounted by Rohingya refugees and a

instead of “Myanmar nationals”. It seems to be part of its longstanding strategy to use manipulative semantics to bend the truth. In a just world, killing the innocent could never have been defended by calling it an act of “violating the state secrets law”.

Global freedom of press has plunged to a new low in recent times. Freedom of speech in dozens of countries is on the decline. Journalists are increasingly facing violence, government censorship, prosecution, and commercial pressure due to the growth of the Internet. And attacks on the media in the name of “fake news” jumpstarted by Donald Trump have almost had a contagion effect. It has given repressive states fresh ammunition to dismiss and discredit reporting that doesn't suit their agenda by calling it “fake news”. This dangerous rhetoric has made the job infinitely

filters, firewalls—for greater control of the online world.

Journalists like Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo are considered to be part of this very threat to the powers that be—and even more so when the crimes in question are state-sponsored. Some viewed this episode as a litmus test for press freedom for Myanmar but it has failed the test miserably. The jailing of Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo not only signals the beginning of the demise of press freedom in the country but also proves that its security apparatus can conduct itself with absolute impunity. One is only left to wonder how sincere Myanmar is about its ambitions of “transitioning” from a repressive pariah to a “democracy”.

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