

Preventing suicides amongst teens

We need to better understand the emotional needs of our children

ARITRY Adhikary's suicide has jolted us out of our comfort zone. Yes, some teachers have been suspended from their positions, but are we aware of the fact that this year's attempted suicide amongst children is double that of last year. Bangladesh Shishu Adhikar Forum (BSAF) has compiled the number of deaths among children over a six-year period from 2012-2018 (based on media reports) and we are told that at least 293 children died by suicide and 22 more attempted it in the last 11 months. Many cases of death by suicide or attempted suicides are never reported. We live in a society where children are stretched to the limit to excel in studies. Experts tell us that the cognitive, emotional, social and physical development of a child does not happen at the same level. But the unhealthy competition for better grades has become a status symbol amongst parents. Those who do not do well are emotionally abused at the family level and then by society at large. The Viharunnisa incident has highlighted the other dark side of our education system. When a pupil caught cheating is made to stand and witness the humiliation of her parents by the school administration, sometimes the experience is too much to handle for a young mind. And we end up with the death of a child. Suicide prevention in our schools requires a major rethink. Corporal punishment may have been declared illegal but it still exists in many institutions. Emotional abuse by teachers, moreover, is equally damaging. Times have changed and we need to realise that it is time to introduce psychological counselling at schools; a safe place for young minds (who by virtue of their age are in a very vulnerable emotional state) to go and seek assistance in this highly competitive and desensitised education system. Children need professional help to deal with stress, and grownups, whether they are teachers or parents, must treat them with dignity and sensitivity.

Bangladesh's worrying global ranking

We must be proactive in fighting climate change

BANGLADESH has been ranked seventh among the countries most affected by extreme weather events in 20 years since 1998, according to the Global Climate Risk Index 2019. Bangladesh's ranking has gone a few notches down as last year the country stood ninth in the annual climate risk index. According to the new report, Last year, 407 people died in Bangladesh due to extreme weather-related events. The country also suffered an economic loss of about USD 2,826.68 million. And globally, 11,500 people died because of extreme weather events and economic damages totalled some USD 375 billion. The situation is particularly worrying for Bangladesh because in recent years, it has witnessed more incidents of flash floods, cyclones, heavy rainfalls and landslides induced by climate change. But are we not also responsible to some extent for the situation? How much have we done to stop unplanned urbanisation, river grabbing, hill cutting, deforestation, air pollution, etc., that have been going on in the name of development across the country? As the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has predicted that risks associated with extreme events will continue to increase as the global mean temperature rises, Bangladesh must be proactive in fighting these events. As the annual global climate summit has been going on in Poland, the LDC group to which Bangladesh belongs, should raise its concerns about how to minimise the increasing level of loss and damage the member countries have been facing over the years. Although many climate experts claim that Bangladesh has been the most resilient and adaptive country to climate change, in terms of fighting environmental degradations, we surely have not done enough. So while we must continue bargaining with the rich countries of the world to lower their carbon emissions which is mostly contributing to global temperature rise, we must also play our part nationally to stop destroying our environment at all cost.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

'Tabligh mayhem'
Tabligh Jamaat has been operating its activities in a very peaceful manner in Bangladesh. And it has been giving the Muslim ummah across the world lessons of peace, fraternity, humanity and unity. So, it has come as a surprise that a violent incident has occurred between two factions of Tabligh wishing to establish supremacy. The factional clash has left one dead and over three hundred wounded. Peace-loving Muslims of Bangladesh do not want such incidents to recur. If anything or any single person, from either faction, is the key reason for this unrest, necessary action has to be taken.
Mufti Abdullah Al Hadi, Savar

Corrigendum
The editorial titled "Find the missing: Families in despair as cases of disappearance remain unsolved" published on December 5 mistakenly referred to former ambassador Maroof Zaman as Maroof Hossain.
We regret the error.

The state of our banking sector

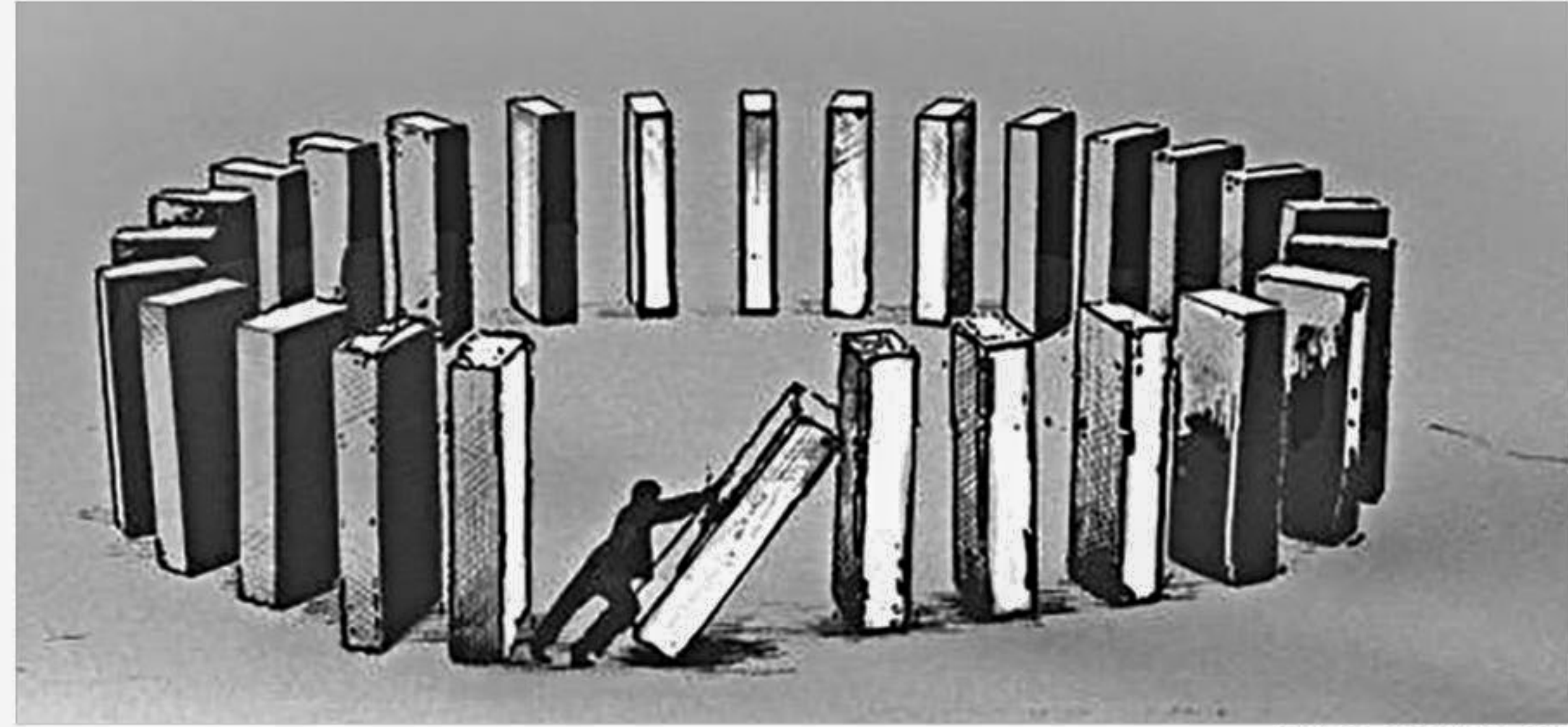
An 'informed' take on the increasingly 'uninformed' comments



ON November 18, the finance minister surprised almost everyone (not for the first time) by saying that those who highlight the sorry state of the banking sector are all "uninformed". While some who were shocked by this pointed to the "fact" that between 2011 and 2018, the government had given handouts of around Tk 13,660 crore to banks—to save them from collapsing into their self-dug abyss of mismanagement and corruption—as "proof" contradicting his statement. Some brought up the "fact" that defaulted loans grew by about 176.5 percent between 2009 and 2016—and beyond since—according to Bangladesh Bank (BB) data, as being another irrefutable "evidence" that glaringly refutes his statement.

Yet, what surprised me the most was... that among those guilty of being "uninformed"... was eminent economist and former interim government adviser Wahiduddin Mahmud, who said, "It's very unfortunate that the country's banking sector is infested with scams and there is a relation of capital flights with the irregularities in the banking sector." Who would ever think those two are related? Not me... and certainly not the finance minister... it seems. Worse still, Mahmud "cited" the theory of path dependence to say that if the tools which were used to protect anomalies in the sector had become weak, irregularities would increase... *cough* as if they haven't already *cough*... Literally basing his "uninformed" comment on "historical evidence", of all things. Can you believe it? I didn't think so. What I also found hard to believe was that... another of these "uninformed" individuals—Aftab ul Islam—happened to work for the Bangladesh Bank as director, who said that the country's financial health was in a very bad state because large-scale bank loans were being scheduled and rescheduled due to intervention from the government. Islam, also the former president of the American Chamber of Commerce in Bangladesh, now "uninformed", did not help himself when he added that the central bank had turned into an extension of the finance ministry, implementing all the decisions that came from the government. Wait, no, that's wrong, the finance ministry is run by the finance minister... so I guess that's a good thing he finished off by saying, right? Maybe he is just "partially" uninformed... Moving on... Unlike him, an individual who is clearly fully "uninformed", had said, "standing in the middle of parliament" (would you believe it?), that what happened in the banking sector was "dacoity" (robbery), and that no action could be taken against those responsible for such dacoity because they were being backed by his own party members. This individual, is

none other than the finance minister himself... Wait, what? Why did he say something so "uninformed"? Oh, I know... its only because dacoity is not a bad thing anymore that he said it. In fact, it's most likely an honourable profession... no doubt. Quickly moving on... An individual who must surely be uninformed, former adviser to the interim government, Mirza Azizul Islam, said that the banking sector was in total disarray because of massive irregularities, lack of good governance and political meddling. Can someone please explain to me how massive irregularities, lack of good governance and political meddling could be responsible for the banking sector being in total disarray, when the banking sector isn't in total disarray at all, as the finance minister suggested in his November 18 statement? Hmm? Clearly, he (who? *wink*) must be totally "uninformed".



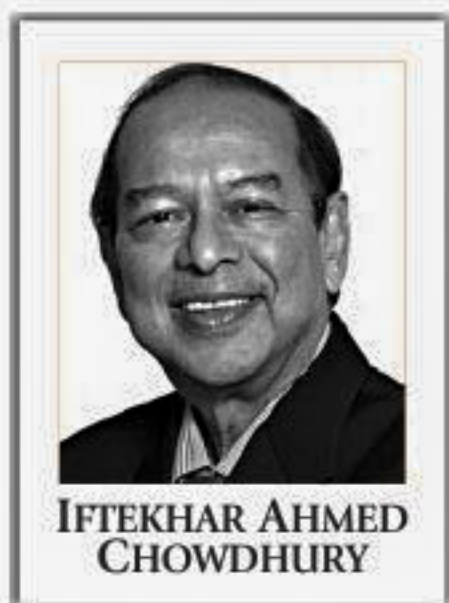
In all seriousness though. What should truly concern us, as a society, is that this problem of being "uninformed" is quickly spreading like a contagion. Infecting even a former central bank governor like Salehuddin Ahmed, who said that the country's banking sector was now facing multifarious problems like growing non-performing loans, political intervention and hostile takeover. What I can't understand is... what's his problem with non-performing loans growing? I mean, he never complains about GDP growth. Or the growth/expansion of the universe. So why is he complaining about non-performing loans growing? Uninformed, or suspicious? You decide! What is not up for debate, however, is the fact that comments like the "new bank licences" were granted "on political grounds"—suggesting corruption or nepotism is at play here—by the finance minister made on November 1, is completely "uninformed" in light of

the finance minister's comment on November 18. But just ignore the "fact" that "both the comments" were made by the finance minister for a second. After all, it's only three out of the four new banks that have ruling party members somehow tied to them. The other is only being set up by the "non-governmental organisation"... yeah right... Bangladesh Police Welfare Trust. Which means... it could also be not-for-profit... like nearly all the other state-owned banks at this point. Lastly, in a country seemingly plagued by "uninformed people" (and certainly not irregularities and corruption in the banking sector), another of these uninformed individuals, Bangladesh Institute of Bank Management director Taufiq Ahmed Chowdhury, said (citing figures not from an uninformed individual, but from an entire uninformed institution, the central bank of our country) that the loan scams in the state-owned

banks and recapitalisation fund provided to them from the public exchequer was like a vicious cycle never seen before in Bangladesh. For your information Mr Chowdhury, even if that's the case, it "has" been seen in other countries in the past, like the finance minister said. And, in some countries, since at least a year before here (although for not as long). So it's not like what you're saying is not something we don't know already. What we don't know, is how long that cycle can continue—as the finance minister also pointed out, when he said, "I don't know how many times loans can be rescheduled, but it seems like an unending process"—before the system collapses completely. But at this rate, we will soon find out. And when we do, we will be certain to let you know... so that you can finally stop being so, "uninformed"! Ersh Omar Jamal is a member of the editorial team at The Daily Star. His Twitter handle is: @ErshOmarJamal

Westminster model and its democratic dilemmas

Relevance to South Asia



PART from its contribution to civilisation in the form of the English language, the great civic legacy of the Anglo-Saxon tradition, emanating from the British Isles is said to be its political system. Received wisdom has it that the Westminster model of democracy, as this has been termed, is perhaps the most ideal set of norms enabling the fruition of the best qualities of human life and existence. Increasingly, however, in contemporary times, the veracity of this extrapolation is being questioned, even in the land of its birth. As the United Kingdom grapples with the issue of its planned disentanglement from Europe, otherwise known as "Brexit", the deficiencies of the system are coming to the fore. Can the current Parliament take a decision that would impact the lives of all Britons for all times and call it a righteous act? Would that be a reflection of democracy, which the English elite in the nineteenth century, with their limitless admiration for ancient Athens, fashioned their political institutions to resemble? As this is being played out, how are countries, like those in South Asia, who, largely erroneously, claim to follow the

particularly in 1828; two, Statutes or body of laws passed by the legislature; three, Common Law which are customs and traditions of ages recognised by Courts as well as its judgments; four, Parliamentary Conventions, adopted by the sovereign legislature, whose decisions are all of equal status and can never be unconstitutional as "the law of the land knows not the word or the idea"; five, "Rule of Law" which asserts that "a person can do anything, unless the law says otherwise"; and finally, but importantly, works of authority by astute minds in society whose legal interpretations are cited as sources of Constitutional Law. One such person was Walter Bagehot, who deserves particular mention. For it was he who crafted the first ever significant tome on the subject of the "The English Constitution". Bagehot argued that the critical element in the system was the "fusion" between the "dignified" (monarchy), and the "efficient" parts (Parliament), with the former "exciting and preserving the reverence of the population", and the latter, actually, "working and ruling". He saw an important role for the monarch (comparable to what might be the roles of Presidents in South Asia?) which involved "the right to be consulted, the right to encourage and a right to warn". However as the norms developed in South Asia, this important role was eroded. Also absent in South Asia was the

always understood by many that separation of power is also sought to be followed in unitary situations as in Britain, where institutions like the independent judiciary, apolitical armed forces and civil service, the Bank of England and the House of Lords also exercise the restraining power on the elected executive. Each has a space of operation recognised in the unwritten Constitution, even though it is not formally codified. That is because in the most ideal of situations, a first-past-the-post voting system with single-member constituencies will mathematically produce elected governments with minority popular support. This challenges the theory that election victories are reason for absolute power, which is why Lord Hailsham described the British system as an "elective dictatorship". Of course the beauty of the uncoded Constitution is that whenever democratic deficiencies are identified, course corrections can be easily undertaken. It may be difficult for mature democracies to sustain without this kind of separation of powers, in one form or another. In British India, the 1935 Act was an interesting attempt to impose the Westminster model in as codified a form as practicable. All Constitutions adopted by currently independent South Asian States thereafter are heavily influenced by it. In Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) the drafting of the original Constitution in the early 1950s was assisted by Sir Ivor Jennings, a British expert. The current imbroglio in that country suggests that it did not quite work. His Ceylonese experience allowed Jennings the wherewithal for a mature assessment about the rest of South Asia, particularly India. On that country he made an interesting observation in 1952. To him the Indian Constitution was "far too large and therefore too rigid", too caged by its history, and too unwieldy to be moulded into something useful through judicious interpretations. His conclusion was that the Indian Constitution would not endure. But it did, or at least has, so far. That is because—and to the credit of—Indian leaders, whether globalised like Jawaharlal Nehru, or more homespun like Narendra Modi, have devised methodologies, largely in response to perceptions of public opinions, to create in whatever amorphous manner, a system with a stable equilibrium, hovering between a Union and a Federation. There is need to bear in mind, in all mature political milieu, or in any that aims at maturity, which includes Bangladesh, that rigidity in conforming to "a priori" constructs like codification of State principles effected in another age and time, in response to issues of that period, is not necessarily the best path to stability for the present or the future. Flexibility could better provide the resilience for systemic survivability. The institutions within the State structure ought to have their constitutionally endorsed space to interact with one another, providing the community governance in consonance with public aspirations. The latter, the voice of the people, should be the most sacrosanct constituent element in any democratic system, and indeed must be, if the system is to sustain. History is replete with examples of societies which have failed to act accordingly, and as a consequence, have come to grief. Dr Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury is Principal Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore, and a former Foreign Advisor in a Caretaker Government in Bangladesh.



Palace of Westminster, the sit of the Houses of Parliament, UK.

PHOTO: JOVICA TRAJKOVSKI

Westminster model, react? These are questions to which this essay will attempt to respond. So, what is the British Constitution that gave birth to the Westminster model? The truth about such a Constitution as such is that it does not exist. At least not in a codified form. It is an amalgam of mores drawn from several diverse and distinct sources: first, historical documents such as the Magna Carta that King John signed with the opposing feudal lords in 1125, and which is the base-stone of the political architecture though now considerably altered,

"mystique and pageantry" that surround the titular Head of State in the Westminster system, that to Bagehot, complemented the mundane act of ruling by government, rendering the latter more effective. Codified Constitutions, where they exist, as in the United States, enjoy a supremacy because they function as compacts defining the federal design between the component States and the federal authority. The principle of separation of powers, propounded by philosophers like Charles de Montesquieu, is a priority to contain the excessive power of the executive. It is not