

Traffic management is not a short-term affair

Address the structural problems

THE Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) is planning to include school and college students as volunteers in the fortnightly traffic programme that started on January 15. It is a good idea, but such piecemeal efforts are temporary palliatives for a problem that demands permanent solution, because traffic discipline is an issue that needs continuous attention and temporary measures will only compound difficulties. We have seen DMP launching a month-long campaign to bring back discipline on the roads after the tragic death of two students and the student movement for safer roads, but to little avail.

Nothing much has changed because authorities need to acknowledge the fact that traffic management involves several issues. The structural problems must be addressed seriously. We need bus stops and we need buses to stop there and nowhere in between. The city roads are woefully inadequate given the number of vehicles that ply on them and these need to be widened or we need to construct underpasses, flyovers and u-loops to keep vehicles moving. Children need to be taught at schools the need to observe and obey traffic rules and we need to think of new ways, like public-private partnership ventures that will open up driving schools all over the country where prospective drivers will learn the law of the road through proper training.

The problems on the city's roads have much to do also with people's lack of awareness, and this requires the active participation of media (particularly visual media) as part of awareness-raising campaigns. It must be impressed upon everyone—from drivers and passengers to pedestrians—that safety comes first; both the person behind the wheel and the person on the road are responsible because safety is a joint responsibility. And last but not least is the matter of enforcement where the role of the police is of paramount importance. And those caught breaking traffic rules must be penalised as per law and without exception.

Make Ducusu centre of all campus activities

An election long overdue

IT is good to learn that the DU authorities are hoping to hold the Dhaka University Central Students' Union (Ducusu) election by March 31 this year. The Supreme Court (SC) order delivered on January 6, 2019 has also made it mandatory for the DU authorities to hold the election. The last Ducusu election was held in 1990 and Ducusu was dissolved in 1998. Since then no elections have been held despite repeated demands by various student organisations. As the long-awaited election is going to be held after a gap of 28 years, different student organisations as well as the general students have high expectations from this election. Since presently, there exists no student body in the campus to look after the needs and concerns of the students, Ducusu can again take on the role of looking after the welfare of general students.

Many student organisations believe that there are some rules in the Ducusu constitution which are curbing democratic values and so need to be amended. As a committee was formed which has now been working with various student organisations of the campus and listening to their proposals, we hope that the DU authorities will be able to take a decision to amend the constitution after evaluating their proposals.

Needless to say, conducting Ducusu election regularly is crucial for ensuring a healthy educational environment in the campus. Over the years, the democratic environment in public universities has disintegrated as student politics has become party-oriented and violence on campus has become rampant. There is no coexistence of student organisations on campus. Only through a fair Ducusu election can this culture be changed.

Ducusu was established in 1922, a year after DU was established, to promote cultural activities within the university and foster a spirit of cooperation among students. We hope with the revival of the Ducusu, DU will reclaim its place as the centre of cultural and intellectual activities which it is supposed to be.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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The dangers of obesity in Bangladesh

Obesity is rising in Bangladesh, as indicated by several regional and international reports. The problem lies with the predominantly carbohydrate-rich diet and lack of socio-cultural awareness in maintaining an active lifestyle through regular exercises—in the form of walking, jogging, swimming, etc. Unless the calories added via high-carb food items is properly burnt down, an individual is exposed to the risk of storing excess body fat and increasing the level of glucose and cholesterol in blood leading to numerous health complications.

We really should be careful about what we take in, and try to adapt to healthy lifestyle choices by discarding fast food and carbonated beverages and living on a fibre-rich diet supplemented with fresh fruits and vegetables. We should also maintain an active lifestyle to stay fit and prolong our working life. That said, the first step in that direction is to be aware of the problem and the next step is the decision to make those healthy choices. I think the government should also carry out awareness programmes to educate people regarding the dangers of obesity.

Saikat Kumar Basu, Canada

KNOT SO TRUE



RUBANA HUQ

EVER since 1996, your columnist has been in business. She runs a company that has multiple businesses which once grew from one core business of exporting readymade

garments years ago.

When she first engaged in the business, big factories didn't exist; small ones with four to six lines of production capacity were considered significant players. That was a world of quotas and export restrictions. That was a world, where cell phones had just come in, and the net was barely gaining popularity. That was a time when we still waited for faxes to come. Delays of 15 days were taken for granted and if we ever had floods or unrest, most of us would send the pictures and clippings to our buyers and wait for a sympathetic response. That was an era where we dined with our buyers, called them by their first names, and became friends. Business, after all, was a personal matter where faces across the table mattered.

Ever since 2010, our story has had only one tag word: Growth.

In three decades, we have continued to grow at an exponential rate. More specifically, within the last decade or so, our exports have shot up from USD 12 billion to USD 30.61 billion. More factories have sprung up with ever increasing, elastic, flexible production capacities. Production planning has shifted from the tables of the owners to highly sophisticated screens that tell us about what's happening on the factory floor by the hour. We no longer use an eraser on our ruled notebooks with binders to change our production schedule or our delivery dates; we now use the machine to tell us when we can possibly finish production and generate an alert when we run behind our time and action calendar. Our digital lives are marked with red dots, red lines that warn us of our impending failures and when they turn green, we breathe in ease and look forward to a restful night.

The narrative from post 90s has altered. We now speak a language of productivity, calculating minutes, tracking non-performing times. We watch our factory floors on our phones, and monitor our output in the most scientific manner. As a result, Bangladesh today has the most modern, compliant manufacturing facilities in the world. Many of our factories are green and many can safely demand the label of excellence by any global standard from any global brand or retailer.

This transformation has come through

a tale of self-discovery through the last two decades or so.

And yes, our story is linked to people; our logic is linked to labour.

From the minimum wage of Tk 1,662.50 way back in 2006, down to the last minimum wage 2018 being set at Tk 8,000, the discussion has always run on a negative strain. Throughout the journey, while manufacturers have constantly argued against just naming the lowest grade as the only mentioned wage in any business discourse, critics have used the lowest salary grade as a flash card to form a global narrative against our trade. The higher grades are rarely discussed and the better stories mostly remain under the radar.

Do good stories usually make their way through the jungle of propaganda?

immediate reaction, and while the day of the national election approached, suddenly a complaint of one or two grades not having been adjusted properly began to hit a few areas and in no time, a more violent picture began to suspiciously surface while the nation prepared for polls. In the last couple of days, most of our workers have been compelled to leave our factory floors and join processions gaining momentum right outside our factory gates. In spite of the gates being secured, there have been cases of extreme violence, and destruction of assets leading us to wonder about how and why have the manufacturers fallen prey to a negative narrative surrounding a sector that we have spent all our lives building.

While the reality of Rana Plaza hit us

in flames...

Post 2013, majority of us have focused on rebuilding our spaces based on the basic premise of an improved relationship with labour. Machines may help us plan and predict our output, but the logic around labour must win over all considerations. While manufacturers continue demanding better prices, and while brands and retailers try to use their defence of referring to the global competition and decreasing margins, let us just remember two things simple enough to acknowledge, uphold and practice:

There's no alternative but to improve the narrative around owner-worker platform and there's no alternative but for us to bargain for a fair price from our buyers.

And while we ask for a fair price, we need to remind ourselves of the following:

- 1) We have capacities that no other country can grow overnight.
- 2) With the global trading market forecasted to go up from USD 454 billion in 2017 to USD 600 billion by 2020, Bangladesh stands a fair chance of pushing her 6.46 percent and chasing the 34.86 percent Chinese figure of the global market share.

Meanwhile, let's also caution ourselves and address the challenges:

- 1) Vietnam has a claim of 5.89 percent share of the global market with far fewer number of factories than ours. Thus, we need to add value addition to our products.
- 2) With Turkish depreciation of close to 300 percent, Sri Lankan up to 45 percent, Indian rupees up to almost 49 percent, our export challenges are way bigger with an appreciation percentage of .04 percent over the last 5 years or so.
- 3) Efficiency level at our end is stuck at around 45 percent while Sri Lanka has crossed 70 percent, China almost 68 percent
- 4) Most of all, prices from European Union have been going down over the last couple of years. The import price of EU was USD 1589/100 Kg in 2012, dipping to USDD 1497/100 Kg in 2013, going up to USD 1575 in 2014, USD 1561 in 2015, USD 1508 in 2016, USD 1525 in 2017 and finally decreasing to USD 1520 in 2018.

It's natural to expect exports from Bangladesh to go up; but it's equally important to remind ourselves that this vicious cycle of violence and the negative stories brewing at every corner of our export ride can only be put to rest if we are more mindful while dealing with labour. Labour, after all, has a logic of love, which can't go unnoticed or unaddressed.

Dr Rubana Huq is the managing director of Mohammadi Group. Her Twitter handle is @Rubanah.

Labour of Love

a tale of self-discovery through the last two decades or so.

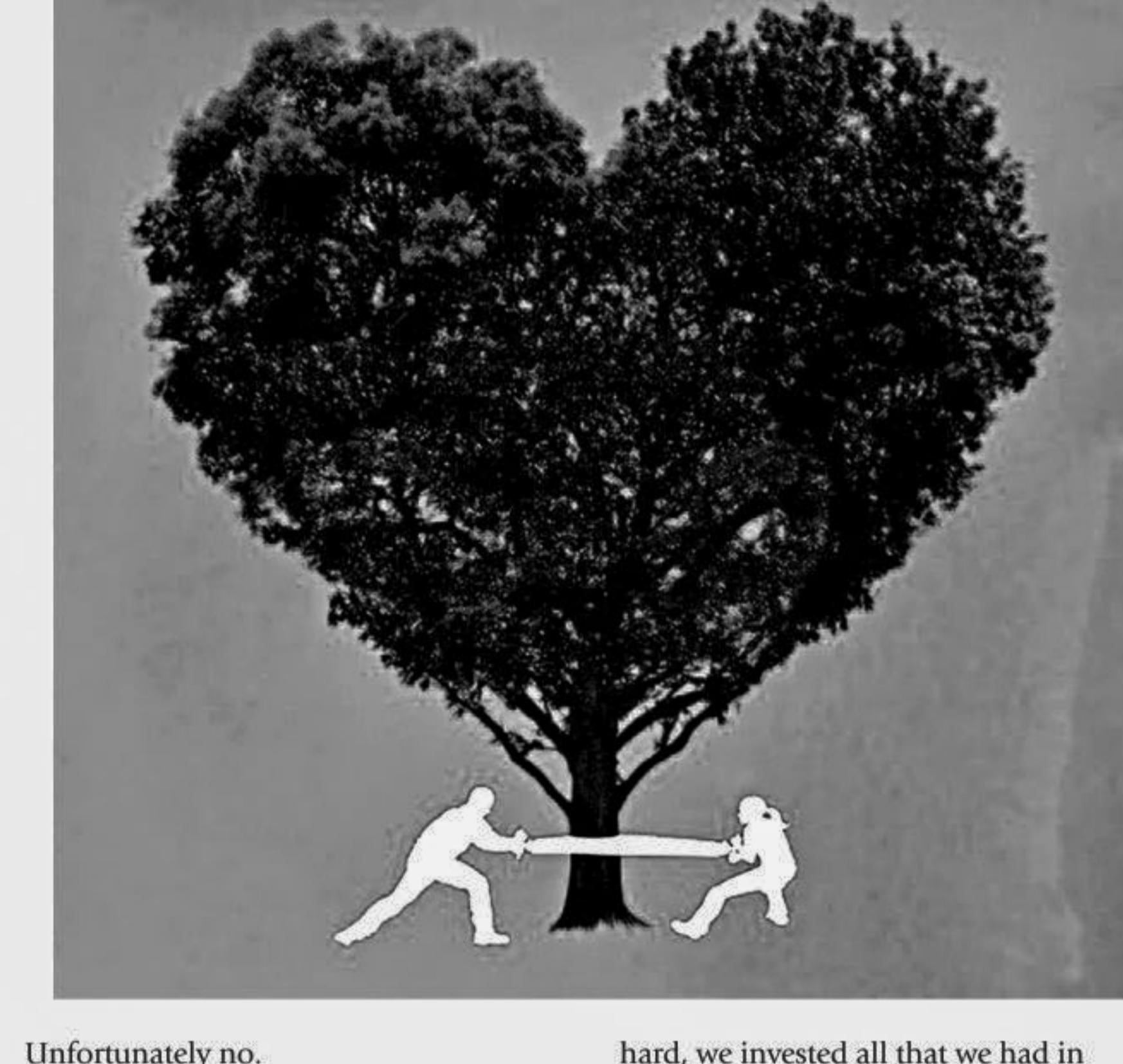
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While the reality of Rana Plaza hit us



Unfortunately no.

Over the past decades, workplace accidents led to growing demands for improved post-disaster reconstruction and recovery efforts. Throughout all this, Bangladesh made significant progress in its efforts at improving emergency response and post-disaster rehabilitation and recovery.

Post-2013, with businesses focusing on structural, fire and electrical safety, a lot has been achieved. Buyers have continued to source from Bangladesh and our quantities have grown in a considerable manner. Yet, while the sector thought that all was good and shining, the minimum wage debate has once again hit the sector. A new gazette with the new minimum wage was published at the end of November. While there was no

hard, we invested all that we had in addressing the image deficit of the sector. While we reeled from the tragedy, we grew closer to our workforce, accepted hikes, reforms, and any prescriptions that came our way. And yet, in spite of the orders growing in number, in spite of the export volume steadily climbing, in spite of a workforce committed to work in the factories, we are currently witnessing the most unfortunate spate of violence that is totally unacceptable and shocking. This must stop. If we see our own workers taking to the streets, let us get to the bottom and identify the instigators as ominous, perhaps familiar shadows lurking around our workplaces. Let us all remember that Bangladeshi manufacturers have not invested their toil and sweat to watch the sector go up

Hill teachers in dire straits

They deserve to live in dignity



NAZNIN TITHI

IT may be hard to believe but Rajendra Lal Tripura, an assistant teacher of Hamachang Furongni Govt. Primary School, has not been getting his salary for the last two years. Talking to him, I was shocked to learn that he has to work as a day labourer under a local *mohajan* (carry bananas from the field to the local bazar)

or do whatever work he could find on a Friday or when the school is closed. Being the sole breadwinner of a family of four, he needs an alternative source of income just to survive. So now he is a primary school teacher and also a day labourer. Many of the primary school teachers in Bandarban, Khagrachari and Rangamati have been living in a similar situation.

A recent *Daily Star* report revealed that some 840 teachers of the 210 primary schools of the three hill districts have been spending their days in financial hardship as they have not been getting their salaries for the last two years. These schools were established under the supervision of United Nations Development Programme and Chittagong Hill Tracts Development Facility (UNDP-CHTDF) in 2010. After they stopped their activities in CHT, the schools were managed by the hill district councils until they were included in the government's nationalisation scheme in February 2017.

In an ideal situation, after a school is nationalised, it should get some basic facilities from the government such as funds to improve the physical structure of the school and to carry out other development activities. Following the nationalisation of their jobs, teachers should be getting salaries and other benefits under government-fixed grades. They should also get training to improve their teaching skills. When these schools of the CHT were nationalised, it was mentioned in the government's notification that the primary education offices concerned would create posts for the required number of teachers and then hire them under the government scheme. But two years into the nationalisation of the schools, no initiatives have been taken to regularise their jobs.

Meanwhile, these teachers had to find an alternative source of income to survive. Some of them have been working as shopkeepers or running small businesses while those who have some land are involved in cultivation. Then there are those who do not have any other option but to work as day labourers.

Talking to Jagadish Tripura, headmaster of the Hamachang Furongni Govt. Primary School, I learnt that after the school was nationalised, the teachers had managed to get stipends for students from the

government. Apart from that, nothing much has improved—either for the teachers or for the students.

With the meagre salary primary-level teachers get, living a decent life is almost impossible. They are paid less than the salary of an upper division clerk of a government office. The situation of government primary school teachers is a little better than those of the non-government ones. In recent years, we have seen non-government primary school teachers take to the streets to press home their demands of nationalisation of their respective schools as well as their jobs. The teachers of the government primary schools have long been demanding the promotion of



Primary school teachers of the three hill districts have been spending their days in financial hardship as they have not been getting their salaries for the last two years.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

both trained and non-trained head teachers to the 10th grade of the 8th National Pay Scale and declare them as second-class gazetted officers and promote assistant teachers to the 11th grade. Currently, trained headmasters are getting their pay in the 11th grade while non-trained headmasters are in the 12th grade.

Although there were assurances from the government that they would look into the matter, their demands have not been met. And the slow pace of the whole process of nationalisation is also very depressing. It is simply not understandable why it is taking so long to regularise the jobs of the abovementioned 840 teachers of the CHT. There can be no justification for

this delay when the teachers are living under such difficult circumstances.

Such hardship no doubt will have an adverse impact on the overall quality of primary education in the hill districts. When teachers have to work without salaries for years, what will motivate them to do their job sincerely? A survey conducted by the Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE) in 2015 found the rate of teachers' absenteeism in primary schools to be 11.3 to 12.7 percent. No doubt, when teachers are deprived of their basic rights, this rate would increase.

Indigenous communities living in the hill districts have to face discrimination in many forms. There are still many villages without any primary schools at all.

The present government has expressed its commitment to remove the hurdles that primary school teachers have been facing across the country. It has also pledged to provide indigenous children with books in their mother language. The government's positive attitude in safeguarding the indigenous communities' rights is praiseworthy. And we hope the government puts its words into action and takes initiatives to solve the complications that are preventing regularisation of jobs of such a large number of teachers and help them live with dignity.

Naznin Tithi is a member of the editorial team at *The Daily Star*.