

# The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR  
LATE S. M. ALI

DHAKA SATURDAY FEBRUARY 16, 2019, FALGUN 4, 1425 BS

## A close call for Suhrawardy Hospital

*Are our hospitals equipped to deal with fire hazards?*

ON February 14, a massive fire broke out at the Shaheed Suhrawardy Medical College and Hospital, one of the major public hospitals in the country, leaving hundreds of patients, with many critically ill, under the open sky in dire situations for hours before they were transferred to other government hospitals.

We are relieved that the patients could be evacuated in time although at least one child patient died during the transfer. We can also imagine that many other patients might have been badly affected during the shifting if not by the fire. This indicates how dangerous such a frightening incident can be if it happens in critical institutions like a hospital.

According to news reports, fire officials believe that the cause of fire may be an electric short circuit, a usual suspect. This raises questions about fire hazard awareness in public hospitals. Did the hospital have functional fire fighting equipment as required by law? Were there sufficient employees skilled in using such equipment? Were regular drills performed to make staff ready to deal with such a situation? Were there enough equipment and vehicles to transfer so many patients in case of emergency to other hospitals smoothly?

It seems that had it not been for hundreds of officials from the fire and police departments, students and intern doctors, hospital employees and volunteers who all acted promptly, the incident could very well have turned out to be disastrous.

We hope the investigation will reveal other details and identify the shortcomings. The hospital authorities must take necessary precautions to avoid such an incident and also be equipped to handle it with efficiency and speed if it does occur, so that patients can be safely evacuated.

## Minister's admission of failure is not enough

*More needed to be done to improve road safety*

TWO consistent features of the Road Transport and Bridges Minister Obaidul Quader's public statements in recent years have been his admission of failure and his pledge to bring discipline in the transport sector, neither of which, unfortunately, has brought us any closer to the promised safety on our roads. On Tuesday, the minister once again owned up to his failure, when his attention was drawn to the sharp rise in road fatalities. He acknowledged the incongruity between the much-touted road infrastructure developments and the appalling safety records—"denial would not yield anything," he said. While we appreciate the candour of the minister, we must say that such statements sound a little hollow at this point given that precious little has been achieved over the last few years in terms of reducing the number of road crashes that have taken so many lives and maimed so many people.

In this connection, one may recall that at least 7,221 people were killed and 15,466 injured in 5,514 road crashes last year, according to Bangladesh Jatri Kalyan Samity. These accidents were mostly caused by reckless driving and operation of unfit vehicles—problems that can be addressed by taking simple precautions and conducting regular checks by those responsible. In fact, as experts say, most of the problems in our road transport sector are results of an administrative failure; in other words, these persist year after year because those who are in charge of the sector are not doing their job properly. The minister has mentioned a number of initiatives that are in the pipeline. As well as these, we hope there will be measures to ensure greater accountability and transparency in the administration, which are needed more than anything at this point.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

### Why are more boys dropping out?

On February 11 *The Daily Star* published a report titled "Boys dropout highest in seven years". The report said that nearly 36 percent of boys dropped out before completing their secondary education. However, it was also reported that the overall dropout rate has gradually been declining, meaning female dropout rate is exceptionally declining.

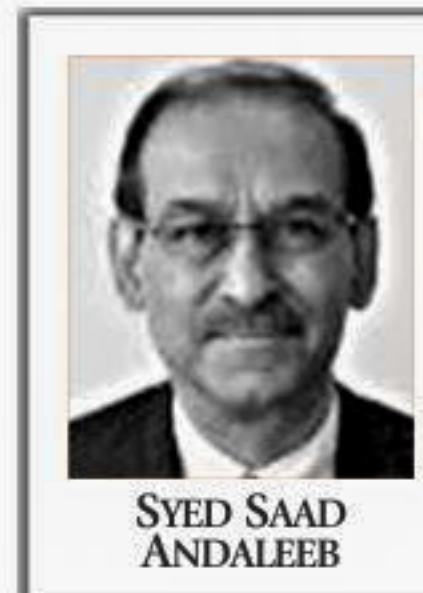
The importance of female education is well-understood. To encourage female education, the government has taken a number of incentive programmes as women in Bangladesh are considered as a vulnerable group.

However, the reported increase in the dropout of boys from schools is worrisome. This could be linked to poverty and child labour. Attention should be given to why this is happening, despite progress in many social indicators.

Ariful Islam, University of Barishal



# Future readiness of Bangladesh's higher education institutions



SYED SAAD ANDALEEB

**T**HE *Daily Star's* February 3rd issue carries a story on page 5 about the acute teacher shortage at Khulna Medical College. It is instructive to take a close look at the

accompanying picture. There is a teacher standing on a raised dais; in front of him are rows of benches with 6-8 students occupying one bench. Then there is only one aisle, "if" the teacher ever ventures down from the dais to interact with the students. If the classroom was full, there would likely be 250 students packing the class. In that event, whether students sitting in the back rows would hear the teacher speak, unless he is using a microphone, is a moot question. Whatever muddled message they would pick up on their brain receptors would certainly not translate to much learning from the day's attendance, if at all.

Why do I bring this up? Even if there was no acute shortage of teachers, they would still be teaching in that same classroom layout. And what would they be doing? Lecturing. And why is that a problem? Because today's pedagogy (more correctly, andragogy) stresses learner-centric education, not the age-old teacher-centric approach that ignores student engagement and active learning while continuing to promote rote learning and regurgitation, a phenomenon that is remotely linked to learning.

According to a researcher, "Pedagogy is the process of accompanying learners; caring for and about them; and bringing learning into life." The focus has thus shifted sharply—from teacher to learner. Yet, our educational institutions continue to remain embedded in the past—no innovation, no change, no desire to be future-ready; and the incapacitated students they continue to produce will someday run the affairs of the nation. It must be understood that what and how we teach our children will have far-reaching and future effects on almost every aspect of society.

At a time when the learner-centric rhetoric is rife with terminology such as critical thinking, flipped classrooms, group discussions, problem-solving, simulations, role playing, case analyses, research, and much more, I ask whether these tools can be used in the type of classroom depicted in the picture? Unfortunately, this situation prevails

across the nation—classroom after classroom with rows of benches, tight spaces, and little room for meaningful student interaction. Can any learning really occur in this environment?

Research suggests that, "Young people [today] don't want to be passive learners: They are content producers, not just consumers. They communicate in different ways than older generations, in shorter bursts, and they are used to being a part of large networks that allow for instant feedback on their thoughts and ideas." Today's learners dwell in the era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Instead of helping this new breed soar, the classrooms of the 21st century in this country are virtually clipping their wings. More importantly, in the digital era, why are our students stuck to benches?

also need other fundamental changes, especially in our teachers and teaching. Despite having a segment of great teachers, it is not an exaggeration that many others do not take classes regularly, the classes are not interactive, the traditional lecture method remains firmly ensconced, some teachers do not have a clear idea of either content or materials, course syllabi are horribly out-of-date, learning assessments are questionable, the exams require rote memorisation of mundane/trivial facts and much more. These are fundamental flaws, as is the classroom layout situation, that fail to shape hearts and minds.

An even more fundamental problem is that the most vital sector—education—for an aspiring

funding, accountability, and autonomy of those who run the ship. There is simply no room for politics or intervention here. The supply chain (primary, secondary, and higher secondary education) in particular deserves serious scrutiny if higher education is to serve its purpose. Steeped in rote memorisation and dulled capacity to think imaginatively, students from the lower tiers are just not prepared to meet the challenges at higher levels. Decidedly, a serious mismatch exists between what higher education ought to be and the facts on the ground.

Universities can and must serve as changemakers of changemakers. The desire and will to bring this about must cascade down to the interface where the



An ongoing class at the Khulna Medical College.

PHOTO: STAR

How are we dealing with these issues at the policy level? *The Strategic Plan for Higher Education in Bangladesh: 2018-2030* envisages the traits that graduates will display (p. 10); it goes on to say, "Our vision is to see our higher education graduates as critical, conceptual and reflective thinkers 'possessing advanced technical competence... possessing effective communication, management and problem-solving skills; committed to the pursuit of excellence... and are driven by the desire for lifelong learning.'" This is good, but visions are stratospheric; the reality is far different as the picture portrays.

Surely, changing the classroom layout and environment will not be enough. We

nation like Bangladesh, climbing the economic ladder, attracts many who never aspired to be teachers; they are there either because they couldn't find more suitable employment or they were looking for something part-time. Is this what our future nation-builders deserve? We also need to assess how the nation's teachers stack up against those who go to other cadres or professions—the pay, the benefits, the facilities, the opportunity for training, the incentives to interact globally, etc. Why would the best and brightest choose teaching as a profession unless they are crazy, deeply passionate, or plain inept?

To fix education, at all levels, several matters require immediate attention: recruitment, training, incentives,

rubber hits the road. That means the institutions of higher education must shed their benign, indifferent and laid-back attitude. They must also stop thinking of themselves as mere cash cows or avenues for employment. Rather they must take forward the task of imparting education that nurtures the thinkers, the writers, the managers, the inventors, and the problem-solvers. Nations thrive and forge ahead when their educational institutions take on the mantle of changemakers and cultivate the art and science of learning in their bid to prepare future generations.

Professor Syed Saad Andaleeb, Ph.D. is Distinguished Professor Emeritus, Pennsylvania State University, USA and Editor, *Journal of Bangladesh Studies*.

# CURTAIN DOWN ON 16TH LOK SABHA but up on Indian poll script

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA

**T**HE coming parliamentary polls hung all over the political circles in the Indian capital on the last day of the final session of the outgoing 16th Lok Sabha on February 13. Electoral politics was in full play on the day both inside the Lok Sabha, where Prime Minister Narendra Modi delivered his final speech in the current House, and at the historic Jantar Mantar, Delhi's popular protest site about a kilometre away from Parliament House, where a clutch of anti-BJP parties held a sit-in reiterating a call to oust Modi-BJP in the elections.

The two separate events brought out some components of the poll strategies of the two sides and their campaign narratives. Modi, in his speech, made a strong case for stability and a clear majority by voters. On the other hand, the opposition leaders, including Congress Party President Rahul Gandhi and West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, sought to build on their efforts to firm up a united front to take on the BJP in the polls glossing over the fissures among them by deciding to go for a pre-poll pact and a common minimum agenda.

To have a proper understanding of the BJP's campaign narrative, one should read Modi's February 13 remarks in conjunction with his speech in the same Lok Sabha about a week earlier, where he slammed the rainbow coalition of regional parties and the Congress, and emphasised the importance of a clear majority by posing the coming poll as a choice for the electorate between a "majboot sarkar" (a strong government) and a "majboor sarkar" (a political tour de force).

Modi said India has become the sixth biggest economy in the last five years, is poised to turn into a five trillion-dollar economy in annual economic output and has become the centre of economic activity with initiatives like "Make-in-India" because it had a majority government. By contrast, he termed the opposition alliance in the making as a "mahamilavat" (grand adulteration) and suggested such an arrangement was associated with graft, instability and dynastic politics. In the February 7 speech, Modi took to the "compare and contrast"

method juxtaposing the performance of 55 years of other parties' rule in India since independence and 55 months of his government's performance since 2014. He responded to the opposition's allegation that his government was undermining democratic institutions by digging into history and underlining that it was during the Congress Party's rule in India that the Emergency was imposed in 1975, snatching away the basic civil liberties enshrined in the Constitution and toppling governments in states belonging to non-Congress parties.

Two features stand out in both the speeches of Modi in the Lok Sabha: the prime minister's tirade focused more on the Congress than any other party

opposition party on February 13 to give their fledgling unity a touch of credibility. Hence the decision on a firming a pre-poll alliance and a common minimum programme to shake off the BJP's criticism of their joining hands by disparate groups for the sake of opposing Modi. The "Modi hatao" slogan heard at the Jantar Mantar sit-in only served to add to the perception that the only binding factor among the opposition parties is the opposition to the Modi-BJP. There is a need for them to go beyond that and come up with a positive agenda that is credible enough to be a viable alternative to the saffron party's—something not seen so far.

At Jantar Mantar on February 13, Mamata came up with the details of

Trinamool Congress vs the Left and the Congress on one hand and the BJP on the other in West Bengal, Congress vs the Left in Kerala, SP-BSP vs Congress in UP and AAP vs Congress in Delhi. This is a contradiction inherent in any collaboration move among traditional rivals trying to forge a partnership against a common objective—BJP. It is precisely for this reason that the TDP refused to enter into an alliance with the Congress in Andhra Pradesh because both the parties are main contenders for supremacy in that state.

These fissures in the anti-BJP coalition caused by compulsions of state-level politics were too evident for all to see on February 13. A few hours before Mamata joined the Jantar Mantar rally, her party came under fire by Congress lawmaker from West Bengal Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury and the Left who attacked her government for chit fund scams that cost common people crores of Rupees. An upset Mamata conveyed her feelings to former Congress President Sonia Gandhi on this. Mamata's readiness to tie up with the Left also carries little conviction because the latter stayed away from her January 19 Kolkata rally.

Even in Jantar Mantar on February 13, Mamata and Left leaders did not share the dais together and visited the venue at different times. What further added to the opposition's discomfiture was Samajwadi Party founder Mulayam Singh Yadav, who said in the Lok Sabha in its final day's session that he hopes to see Modi as PM again. Not only did that take the opposition parties by surprise, but also struck a contrarian note at a time of unity chorus among the anti-BJP outfits. Mulayam's son and SP President Akhilesh has formed up an alliance with BSP and this is going to be the principal challenger of BJP in Uttar Pradesh. An embarrassed SP was at pains to explain that Mulayam's remark was in sync with the niceties of a farewell speech on the last day of the 16th Lok Sabha, but many think the comment's political import went much beyond the cover of farewell courtesy which talks about only good things about a person.

Pallab Bhattacharya is a special correspondent at *The Daily Star*.



Lok Sabha

indicating in the process that the Rahul Gandhi-led party will be by and large the BJP's main rival in the polls. That is understandable especially after the Congress' impressive victories in three heartland states late last year after having been in power in just a handful of states before that. Secondly, he is posing the coming electoral contest as a stability versus instability choice. Electoral strategy is all about a blend of generating fear about your rivals and weaving hopes of a change for the better, especially among the aspirational and therefore restless youth.

Modi's articulation of "majboot sarkar versus majboor sarkar" is in sharp contrast to the frantic efforts of the

opposition alliance, stressing on state-specific alliances among anti-BJP parties as also at the national level. She said whichever party is the strongest in a given state should take on the BJP in their areas and cited that Aam Aadmi Party should fight in Delhi, Samajwadi Party-Bahujan Samaj Party in Uttar Pradesh, Trinamool Congress in West Bengal, Telugu Desam Party in Andhra Pradesh and Congress in Madhya Pradesh, Punjab, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh in order to not let the BJP win by capitalising on a split in votes. But herein lies the most difficult challenge for the anti-BJP coalition because some of the regional parties are also pitted in a direct fight against the Congress in some states: TDP vs Congress in Andhra Pradesh,