

Absence of voters speaks volumes

Lack of public confidence in the electoral system

IT is clear from Thursday's experience that we have had a ritual of an election. The extraordinarily low turnout of voters during the Dhaka North City Corporation election speaks volumes about the general apathy that has developed in people regarding the electoral process. Reports from the first few hours of voting indicated that there were hardly any voters at the polling centres around the city. And this indicated a disillusionment with the way elections have been held in the past.

During the voting hours the Chief Election Commissioner shrugged off responsibility of the low voter turnout saying that it rested on the shoulders of the candidates and the political parties. But that is just passing the buck. Of course it is the responsibility of the Election Commission to ensure that there is a high turnout at the polling centres. The low turnout is a reflection of the disappointment felt by the people during the 2014 national elections (with 150 unopposed seats) and more recently, the 2018 national elections when the EC did practically nothing in the wake of allegations of harassment of opposition candidates and their supporters before the polls, the absence of opposition party polling agents, stuffing of ballots, orchestrated long lines at polling centres, voter intimidation and so on. In fact the EC did not take any significant action before, during or after the national election to address any of these issues. Why would the public then suddenly develop enough confidence in the EC to come out to vote again in the mayoral election?

The DCC North elections are very important and we have seen in Anisul Huq what a committed mayor can achieve for the city for which he was very popular. His sudden demise put a halt to much of the crucial development work. That there were no major opposition candidates contesting does not bode well for the country's democracy. Compared to the last mayoral elections when candidates were very active in reaching out to the public, this time around the atmosphere was very dismal and it wasn't just the bad weather that resulted in the poor voter turnout that we saw on February 28 regardless of the Election Commission's claim of a 50 percent voter turnout.

Voting is a people's right and the fact that most voters chose not to exercise it gives a message of a lack of confidence in such a major component of the democratic process.

Let us therefore stop deluding ourselves and put our efforts in rebuilding people's confidence in the voting system in order to make democracy functional. And it is up to the ruling party and the EC to create the space for opposition parties to exercise their right to take part in politics and for the people to exercise their franchise in a free and fair manner. If we want our democracy to survive that is the only way to go.

Prepare hospitals to tackle disaster situations

Safety measures absent in most

THE recent incident of fire at Suhrawardy hospital has once again exposed the fact that our hospitals are not at all prepared to handle any emergency and post-emergency situation such as fire or earthquake. In a recent roundtable on preparations of hospitals in tackling disasters, experts opined that safety compliance of hospitals must be improved to tackle any disaster.

In the case of Suhrawardy hospital, as we have seen, it was much easier to evacuate patients because the hospital had enough space and was designed in a proper way. However, if the hospital had the necessary fire safety equipment and its staff were properly trained, the situation could have been brought under control sooner. But this is not the case for most of our hospitals, especially private hospitals, which do not have enough space and are not properly designed to handle such situations.

In order to ensure patients' safety during emergency, hospitals must follow the rules: they must have emergency fire exits, train their staff and conduct regular fire drills. In addition, hospitals should be designed in a way so that the patients at the CCU and ICU can be evacuated to safety without much difficulty. Also, there is no alternative to raising awareness among public about fire safety. Lastly, in order to make sure that our hospitals follow these rules, a taskforce should be formed to monitor safety compliance of hospitals.

DNCC Election: The alternative facts and life imitating art

BLACK, WHITE AND GREY



ALI RIAZ

OSCAR Wilde wrote in his 1889 essay "The Decay of Lying" that, "Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life." Little did he know that a century and a few decades later his words would be true in the most literal sense. The events around us, often seem so dramatic that we ask: is it true? On the other hand, perceptive authors of creative genres such as novelists and poets, foresee what could be a reality. George Orwell's novel, 1984, although was an imitation of life under totalitarian regimes, particularly then Soviet Union, has now become true in various countries all around the world. The notion that the ministry which deals with war and defence can be named Ministry of Peace, the ministry in charge of rationing and starvation can be called the Ministry of Plenty, the Ministry of Love will oversee torture and brainwashing and the Ministry of Truth's task will be engaged in propaganda under the guise of news, entertainment, education and art, do not seem very outlandish any longer. They might not be named as such, but many are acting in similar ways. The essence of these labels that official narratives is just the opposite of the reality on the ground. In recent years, it has assumed a new name: alternative facts.

The term alternative facts entered the public discourse in January 2017 after US President Donald Trump's Counsellor Kellyanne Conway used it to defend a blatant falsehood about the size of the crowd at Trump's inauguration. But this Orwellian term is far from a slip of tongue or a matter of interpretation of facts, it is a political stance about truthfulness and creating an impression that truth is of little significance. Extensive discussions about "alternative facts" in the past two years in media and academic have clearly underscored that "alternative facts" is not only absence of truth or simple falsehood, but instead a tool of those who shun democracy and steps toward authoritarianism. Kellyanne Conway's statement was an early sign of the trajectory of the Trump administration as anyone in the US now can testify. But unfortunately, the Trump administration does not have the sole monopoly over constructing "alternative truths", there are others who are equally apt in this regard.

Official narrative about the Dhaka North City Corporation (DNCC) election held on Thursday, is the latest example in this regard. The news and accompanied picture that the state

television BTV crew had created fake ques of voters in front of a polling station during election to show the presence of voters in a live report was nothing short of a blatant effort to create "alternative facts". As the state television, it was BTV's responsibility to produce the narrative that it was a successful election. But truth be told, the DNCC election, boycotted by all major opposition party, drew little attention of the voters. The result was a forgone conclusion: the ruling party's candidate will win big. The voters didn't bother to show up and it became evident from the early morning. Polling officials were seen napping at some centres, according to media reports. Yet, the Home Minister claimed during the day that "voters are teeming

third of voters cast their votes.

The statements regarding the voter turnout is not the first instance of constructing "alternative facts" in Bangladesh. It has become the norm where the powers that be has established an exclusive monopoly of deciding what is truth and what is not. Recently, the government, purportedly clamping down on "porn site" blocked a major Bengali Blog and, lo and behold, Google Books. That is the state of politics or the absence of it, as I have alluded to in my recent column "Politics Gone Missing" (*The Daily Star*, February 25 2019).

The non-existence of enthusiasm about the election and then a low turnout clearly sends a message of no confidence on the current arrangements

came down to counting the ballots, election officials found 70 percent were blank. It triggered a panic and a new election in four days was announced. The next Election Day was bright and sunny, and the voters turned out from the early morning. When time came to count the ballot—the result was astounding—83 percent blank. Subsequently, a state of emergency was declared, and the president proposed to build a wall around the city to contain the revolution but eventually left the city.

The weather followed by an unusual way of making their antipathy known were the uncanny similarities between Saramago's novel and what happened in Dhaka on Thursday. The absence of voters is as much a protest as is in case of



PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

at polling centres," and "it is false that the voters have lost their enthusiasm for the polls". The Chief Election Commissioner (CEC), somewhat acknowledging the low turnout, shrugged off any responsibilities saying, the commission cannot take responsibility for low voter turnout; instead he laid the blame squarely on the feet of the political parties. However, at the end of the day, the Election Commission Secretary estimated a 50 percent turnout. The pictures and reports through the day do not add up to such a high percentage. EC's account of votes secured by candidates, especially the ruling party candidate Atiqul Islam, provides an impression that at least one-

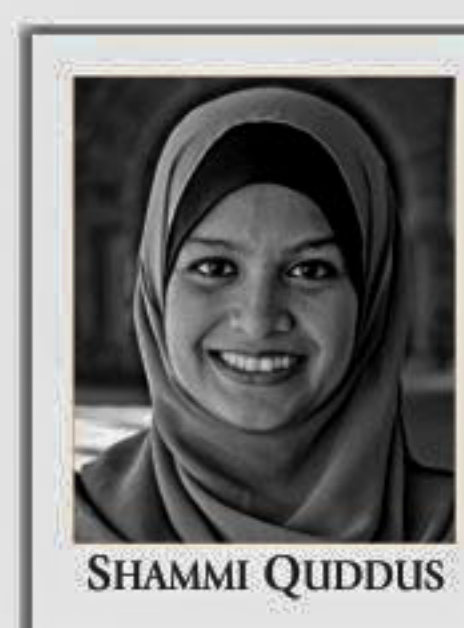
of elections. The voters voted by their feet, we can assume. Interestingly, the scenario seemed very much like the Nobel Laureate Jose Saramago's novel "Seeing", sequel to his famous novel, "Blindness". The novel is set in the city which had experienced a mass epidemic of blindness four years ago. All except one citizen became blind. The novel starts with the election day in the capital, it was a rainy day—pretty much like Dhaka on Thursday, and in the morning no voters show up—none. That made the elections officials and politicians jittery and suspicious of the situation. The rain stopped at three o'clock in the afternoon, voters showed up at four o'clock "as if they had been ordered to do so". When it

the characters of Seeing: "the simple right not to follow any consensually established opinion." The silence is not always a consent. Terrence Rafferty, in her review of the book in *The New York Times*, pointed out that Saramago turned repression into farce. Interestingly, the title of Rafferty's review was "Every Nonvote Counts" (*The New York Times*, April 9, 2006). Those in charge of election and in power should understand in earnest that the message is clear.

In following the DNCC election, it appeared to me that Saramago's perceptive novel has come to life, or as Oscar Wilde wrote: Life imitates Art.

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Stop shaming stay-at-home women



SHAMMI QUIDDUS

THE importance of women having financial independence cannot be overstated. It is the number one reason women stay in an abusive

relationship as they would not be able to support themselves or their children outside of it. As a working woman myself, I am earnest in my efforts in encouraging other women to earn and manage their own money. At the same time, there is a difference between encouraging women to work and shaming them if they choose not to.

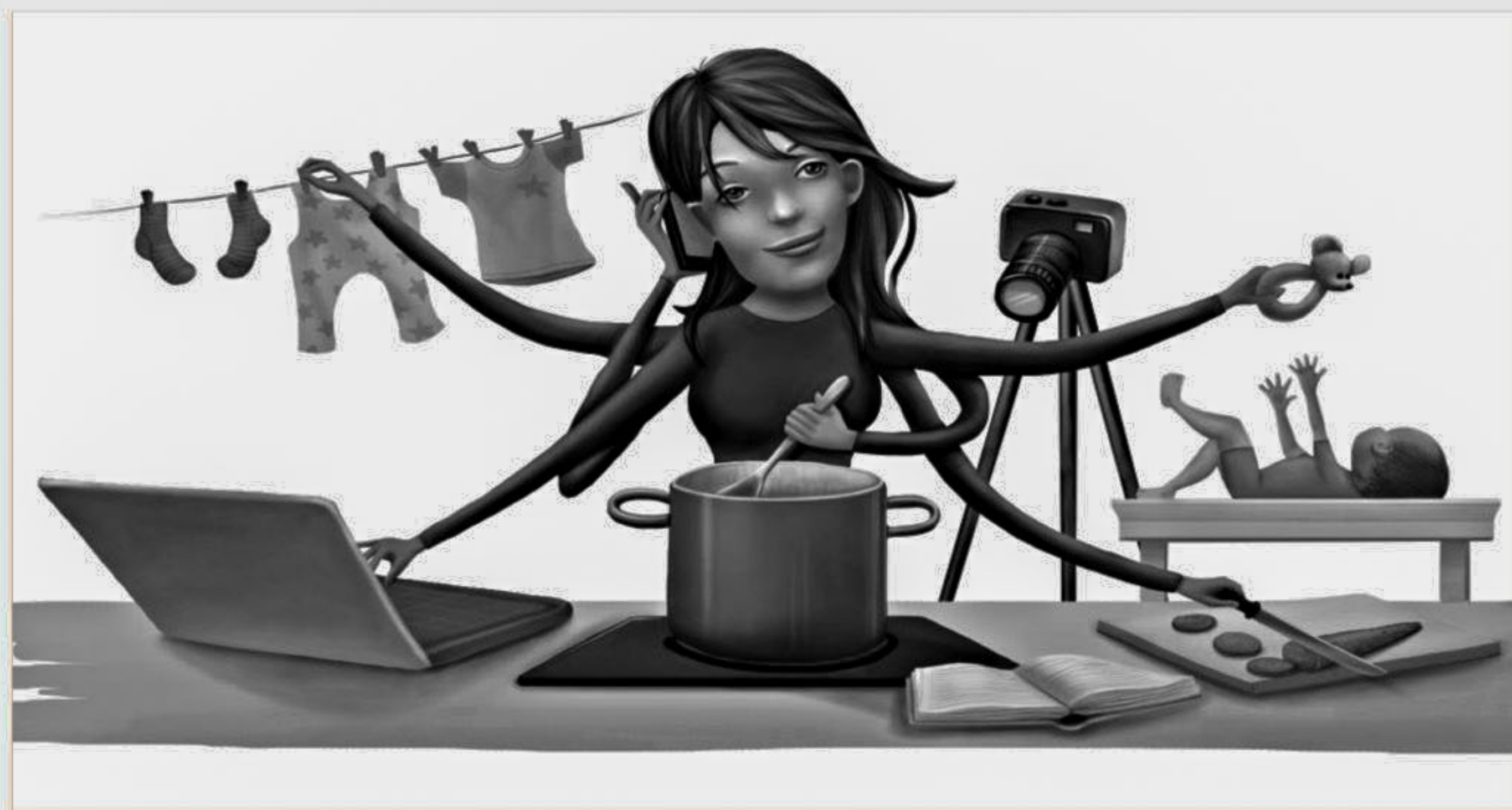
I see women being called lazy, being a burden or having wasted their education if they do not work. While any of those descriptions can be true for an individual (women and men), it cannot be used to broad-brush an extremely complex socio-economic phenomenon.

Societal expectations

In Bangladesh, a woman is expected to do academically well. However, as soon as she nears graduation most families will prioritise her marriage while her male peers will prioritise landing a first job. Women are not easily allowed to leave the parental home for work. She is expected to follow around her spouse for his career thus making it hard to build her own. We raise our girls to prioritise family for 20+ years but suddenly expect them to behave differently when trends change.

No one is doing the dishes

A married woman will work equal hours as her male peers and then return home to take care of the household. In addition



to caring for children, women are also expected to take care of aging parents on both sides. Not to mention, there are families whose children may have special needs. To shame such a mother as being "lazy" or "wasting her education" is cruel.

Economics

When a child comes into the picture, costs go up significantly for a family. Hire extra help, shuttle the children back and forth between family members, and—for those who can afford it all—the cost of day care. These costs may eat up a significant portion of what a woman may be earning. She may end up quitting her job because it just doesn't make economic sense to work.

Lack of flexibility

Our workplaces were designed by men

for men who had a stay-at-home wife to take care of the home. In that world, we are trying to fit the needs of women who do not have a husband at home to cook dinner and certainly cannot birth and nurse babies. Flexibility is one of the things that helps retain women at work — hours, location, maternity leave. Workplaces are barely catching up with the need to ensure maternity leave let alone flexible working hours.

Discouraging men to do their share Shaming caregiving as a cop-out discourages men from being involved in it. If anything, we need to reverse the narrative. We need to elevate caregiving to the prestige of "working in an office" so that men want to devote hours to the family instead of their corporate overlords.

I am a working woman and I recognise all the privilege that allows me to be one. I was raised by a family where most women worked thus it wasn't difficult for me to imagine a career of my own. No one pressured me to get married. With a young daughter, my husband and I rely heavily on both sets of grandparents to look after her. We have the financial means to hire extra help as needed. Most women do not have these privileges. Those who preach hopefully will pause to check their own privilege before telling a woman that she needs to go out and work.

It seems, as a woman you are damned if you do and damned if you don't.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Making the most of US-China trade war

The United States' trade war with China, started on the basis of intellectual property rights violation and the repeated devaluation of the RNB by China against the US dollar, has led many world leaders to rethink the way the world economy has so far been globalised.

The ongoing trade war and the resulting retaliatory measures taken by the two sides have forced their respective businessmen to find alternative partners in order to protect their business interests. Bangladesh, the second largest exporter of RMG products, can make good use of this.

Bangladesh could become a preferred country for US buyers. We already have a long relationship of trade with the US. In the meantime, various international trade fair events held in countries like France and others have allowed our business owners to showcase the products their companies have to offer.

Our government should also come up with a comprehensive strategy that will allow our manufacturers to make the most of this golden opportunity.

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