

Drives in Old Dhaka must not stop

Safety of the people comes first

THE government crackdown on illegal chemical warehouses in Old Dhaka has already invited severe backlash and protests by local traders as drives against these establishments—prompted by the deadly Chawkbazar fire last month—have continued. A report published in this daily on Monday revealed the extent to which a section of traders are willing to go to put a halt to the drives. During one such drive, a government team was confined to a room for about two hours and a car was vandalised.

This kind of reaction definitely makes the job of the taskforces tougher but drives against the large number of illegal chemical warehouses in Old Dhaka must not stop. This is a litmus test for the government and it cannot cave in to pressure from these traders, most of whom are operating illegally, as they have had enough time to relocate to other areas. Responsibility does not simply lie with the government to ensure that residential areas are free of chemical hazards, but the onus also lies with ordinary citizens to adhere to laws and regulations that bar commercial organisations from being housed in residential buildings. Thus we believe the demand of some owners and traders of illegal establishments in the area that “more time” be given to them is simply unacceptable. Too many lives have had to bear the risk of chemical factories for far too long.

We appreciate that the home minister and DSCC mayor have taken a tough stance on this issue and have adopted a zero-tolerance policy on the existence of these illegal establishments. And we hope that these drives overcome the power of the longstanding nexus between traders and some sections of the local administration which has silently allowed chemical factories to operate in residential areas for years.

Problems with mega projects

Metro rail must be completed on time

IN a recent statement, the country director of Asian Development Bank stressed the need to complete mega projects like the metro rail on time because, ultimately, it is the tax-payers who have to pay back the money taken as loan. Bangladesh has had success in securing finance for multi-billion-dollar projects like the metro rail, but it has had a less than successful track record of keeping projects on track for timely completion. The fallout is obvious. Every time we experience a delay in completion deadlines, the budget has to be revised upwards and the delayed completion of projects, which in our case has been years in the making sometimes, defeats the whole purpose of having undertaken a project in the first place.

While the metro rail was dogged with delays for various reasons, it is now on track. The implementing agency will have to be careful about how it will spend the estimated USD 3.06 billion till 2030 because it has been our experience that the red-tape culture in our country has a debilitating effect on the making of decisions, and the implementation of those decisions. These procedural delays inevitably lay the grounds for our failure to complete projects on time.

We need to learn from our mistakes in the past and put in checks-and-balances that will enable us to keep the project both afloat and on track for completion within the allocated budget. Given that this is public money being spent for improving urban public transport, the sooner the project is finished, the faster it will be possible for thousands of people to travel without being stuck in hours of gridlock.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

“No, Chawkbazar fire won't be our 'wake up call'”

I congratulate Nahela Nowshin for writing such an excellent article published in your daily on February 23. The fire in Chawkbazar has reminded me of a similar incident in the past. In August 1988, a fire broke out in Joynag Road of Old Dhaka, a densely populated residential area with narrow lanes. The owner of a five-storied building had a foam factory just in front of the building and its ground floor was used as the warehouse for foam-making chemicals. Fire started in the factory and it quickly spread and rose up to the 4th floor of the building. A number of people were seriously injured. My brother and his family members were among them. He still feels pain due to the burn injury. Sadly, no charges were brought against anybody for the disaster.

It has become a part of our culture to disregard rules and regulations. We occupy footpaths, roads, river banks, encroach upon a neighbour's land, occupy *khas* land, and build factories and structures illegally. We have laws but they are hardly ever implemented. Unless we change ourselves, many more incidents such as Chawkbazar and Nimtoli are waiting to happen.

Obaidul Islam, KazirMor, Naoagan

National Voters' Day?

Just as voter awareness is vital for fair polls, similarly, fair poll is vital for voter awareness. People are still in a state of stupor after what happened in the recent elections. They have lost faith in the electoral process and interest in casting votes. We do not know if this new trend will ever change. We can only hope for the better.

Nur Jahan, Chattogram

Schooling is not learning

So what's new and what can be done about it?



THE release of the World Development Report (WDR) 2018 of the World Bank subtitled “Learning to Realize Education's Promise,” on February 27 in Dhaka, spurred a flurry of media reports about how poorly the school system was performing.

A popular headline was about 4.5 years of the students' 11 years of schooling being wasted, because on average they learned no more than what sixth-graders should learn. One may quibble about how this precise numerical conclusion was reached, but perhaps few would dispute the message that most children were far behind where they should be in basic competencies such as reading, writing and working with numbers.

More helpful, but hardly comforting, was the explanation based on an assessment of learning through independent sampling of students under the National Student Assessment (NSA) Project.

The NSA of 2015 showed that 35 percent of class 3 students did not score at the expected level in Bangla reading, and 43 percent could not answer simple questions from reading a Bangla passage. In math, 59 percent scored below the grade level.

Disturbingly, when the grade 3 students reached grade 5 two years later in 2017, their performance was worse. The NSA 2017, not mentioned in the World Bank report, shows that 88 percent scored below the expected score for class 5 in Bangla and 83 percent in math. This is no news in Bangladesh (See “Our children are in school, but can they read?” by Shahidul Islam and John Richards, *The Daily Star*, September 14, 2017).

The Annual Status of Education Reports (ASER), based on national sample surveys, prepared in India and Pakistan by educational NGOs, provides a picture comparable to that of NSA in Bangladesh. Interestingly, these assessments seem to have failed to ring the alarm bell in these countries. One wonders if all of our countries suffer from the Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) syndrome, a neuro-developmental condition noticed among some young children.

According to Wikipedia, ADHD is characterised by difficulty in paying attention, excessive activity, and difficulty in regulating emotions which are not appropriate for a person's age.

Without stretching the analogy too far, one cannot but notice a lack of serious recognition of, or sustained attention to, the problem of our schools' failure, sporadic actions taken reacting to symptoms of problems, and decisions often swayed by emotions and populist views. Reasoned judgement based on evidence and lessons of experience and making hard choices balancing priorities are the casualties of the ADHD syndrome in decision-making.

In this space, an exposition of ADHD in policy and decision-making is not in order. A few hints have to suffice. Students are not learning and teachers are not doing their job—so the solution chosen is four major, high-stake public examinations in a student's school life that become the sole focus of the students', teachers' and parents' time, effort and energy, detracting them from actual learning.

The same public exams have driven students to private coaching and tutoring and reliance on memorising guidebooks and note books. The populist solution—which is often attempted, albeit without success—is to ban coaching and guidebooks.

Communities have set up schools to meet expanding

demands for education, but the schools are not often endowed with sufficient human and infrastructure resources. Instead of working with communities and local government bodies to mobilise resources preserving community involvement and accountability, the solution found was to “nationalise” the schools and declare the teachers central-government employees. No matter that the existing government schools are plagued by many problems of teacher performance and accountability.

School education remains under the jurisdiction of two separate ministries—a legacy of priority to compulsory primary education. Problems have arisen in planning and managing integrated and holistic development of curriculum, teacher preparation, quality assurance, and facilities for universal primary and secondary education—a *sine qua non* for an aspiring middle-income country.

WDR has identified four major strategic priorities to overcome the learning crisis for Bangladesh and South Asia. These are: a quality early childhood development programme to give all children a fair

in the four priorities.

It is justifiably said that an education system is only as good as its teachers. This is little consolation when school teaching is the last occupational choice for a college graduate, as is the case in Bangladesh and likely in other South Asian countries. (CAMPE, *Quality Education: Teachers for the Next Generation*, 2015).

A peculiarity of South Asia including Bangladesh, unlike most other parts of the world, is that graduates with a general degree is appointed as a teacher and then sent for pedagogy training, generally of a year's duration. The result often is that graduates failing to find another occupation land in teaching—with low motivation and commitment to the profession.

The Indian Ministry of Human Resource Development announced in 2017 the plan to replace the conventional teacher preparation with an integrated programme combining a regular bachelor's degree in a general discipline and the postgraduate Bachelor of Education.

The four-year undergraduate course is meant for students straight out of school to train as teachers for



PHOTO: COLLECTED

start in life and prepare them well for school; transforming teaching and learning into a genuinely active child-centred approach; stronger school governance and management; and adequate public investment to support these actions and necessary inputs for quality.

The priorities suggested are not particularly novel, but complex and multi-faceted, comprising many elements. In fact, it can be argued that these areas of action are being promoted by the education development programmes such as the fourth phase of the Primary Education Development Programme (PEDP4) and the Secondary Education Development Programme (SEDP).

The key challenge is how the multi-dimensional strategies can be effectively implemented, producing the desired results. In fact, the evidence that WDR compiled and its analysis point to the education work force, especially teachers, as the common factor and the spearhead of the change and transformation aimed for

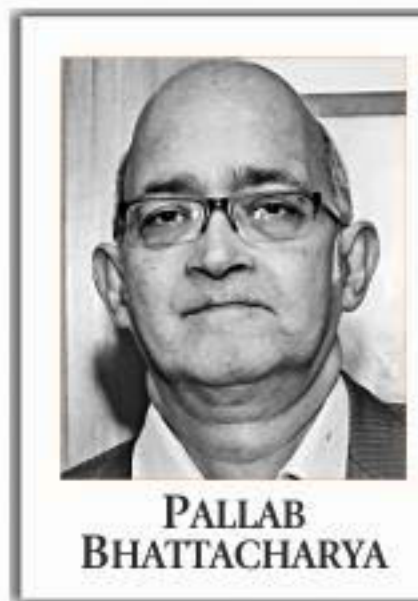
all school classes from pre-primary to senior secondary. However, it appears that its implementation rapidly and widely awaits reconciliation of parochial concerns of both traditional teacher training institutions and general higher learning institutions.

The integrated undergraduate programme allows young people out of high school to be drawn into the teaching profession. It lets them go through a four-year induction to prepare themselves intellectually, emotionally and professionally to make a lifetime commitment.

This is the mainstream approach to teacher preparation in most parts of the world other than in South Asia. It may be the single most important initiative to transform schooling into learning in South Asia. The necessary steps for planning and implementation with a ten-year time frame deserve urgent consideration.

Dr Manzoor Ahmed is professor emeritus at BRAC University.

Pulwama, Balakot dominate India's pre-poll political discourse



TRUE to expectation s, the Pulwama terror attack which left 40 Indian paramilitary personnel dead and the Indian Air Force's assault on Jaish-e-Mohammed training camp in Balakot, Pakistan have been dominating the political discourse for more than two weeks now. This means that the issue of national security is set to join the agenda for the upcoming parliamentary polls in India along with agricultural crisis, “inadequate” job creation and alleged corruption in the purchase of Rafael fighter jets from France—all of which have taken the backseat since the Pulwama incident on February 14. The Pulwama and Balakot incidents have ensured that the issues of national security and the fight against terror will be key components of the election campaign script, more so if such incidents recur, even after farm-sector woes and graft stage a comeback to prominence.

The opposition attacked the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi soon after the Pulwama incident, questioning alleged intelligence failure and the decision to move a large convoy of security men by road in a terror-hit state like Jammu and Kashmir. Ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leaders responded by saying this was not the time for blame-game. Soon after, there was a firm consensus at an all-party meeting that the entire nation is one in tackling cross-border terror, and the opposition threw its weight behind the government in drawing up strategy to tackle the menace. But with the elections approaching, the opposition's criticism of the government in the context of the Pulwama incident and alleged intelligence failure kept resurfacing. Most vocal were Congress

party and its senior leader Digvijay Singh, West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee and the BJP's estranged ally Mehbooba Mufti of Peoples Democratic Party in Jammu and Kashmir.

The opposition aimed at hitting the BJP where it hurt the most as national security has since long been the saffron party's key plank. What the opposition did was to seek details and verification proof of the results of the Indian air strike in Balakot, questioning the wisdom of allowing a huge convoy of paramilitary personnel by road in terror-

home the government's muscular response to terror. Added to the ambience of triumphalism was the quick release of the IAF Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman, who was captured by Pakistan. In fact, the return of Varthaman as well as the world leaders' backing of India's air strike as an anti-terror operation, and putting pressure on Pakistan to act against terror and not to precipitate things further, were cited by Modi as the successes of his government's diplomacy. Hours before the return of Varthaman, Modi, at an election rally in Kanyakumari, Tamil

once again retaliate against the opposition by saying that India's air strike by Mirage 2000 planes in Balakot could have brought better results had the Rafael planes been used. He also said the Rafael deal was not finalised by the previous Congress government because of “vested interests.” The very next day, Congress President Rahul Gandhi, who has sustained a campaign bringing Modi in the line of his fire over alleged corruption in the deal, reiterated his charge.

The slugfest between the government and the opposition turned unsavoury when 21 opposition parties on February 27 flagged the “blatant politicisation” of the sacrifices of the armed forces by the BJP, whose leaders responded by saying that the opposition leaders' remarks made Pakistan happy. What added to the BJP's discomfiture was its senior leader (from Karnataka) BS Yeddyurappa's remark that India's air strike in Balakot would assure the party 22 seats in the state in the coming parliamentary elections. The BJP officially distanced itself from Yeddyurappa's remarks. Both sides have a responsibility that the discourse on a serious issue like national security is conducted in a civilised manner, free from rancour and chest-thumping.

Heated debate and sharp rhetoric on national security are unavoidable in a democracy like India, especially when there is political polarisation ahead of the elections. For the BJP, national security is important as it fits into its nationalism narrative. The question, however, is: will a hard response to terror help the BJP in securing poll victory? Or conversely, will the opposition scoring some points help it earn more seats? Do Pulwama and Balakot incidents have the potential to swing enough votes in any side's favour to either help reach a clear majority or move comfortably close to a majority in the elections?

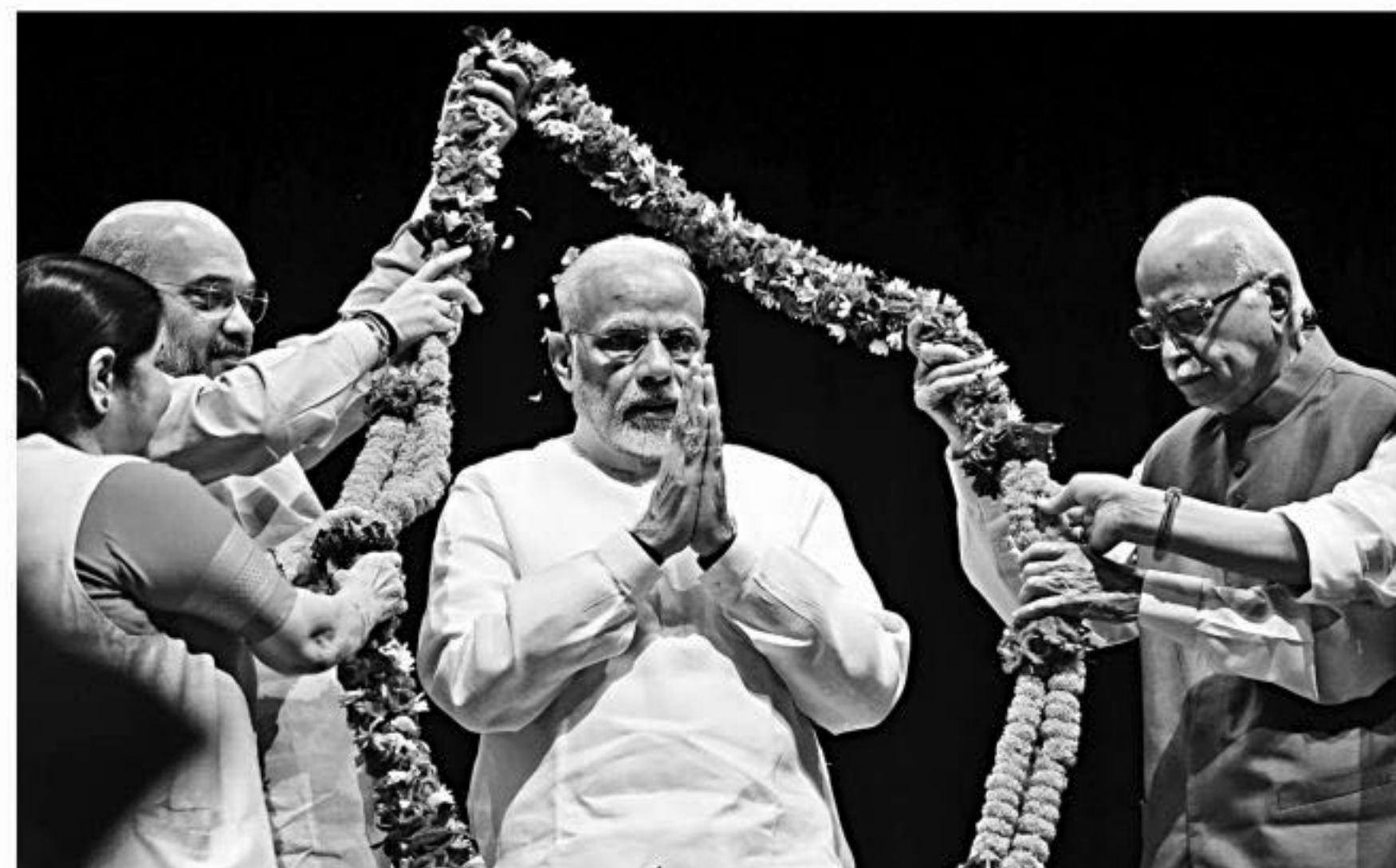


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hit Jammu and Kashmir. Mehbooba and Mamata said Indians have a right to know what was the result of the Balakot assault in view of the government's “ambiguity” surrounding the details of the issue. What tended to help the opposition were the remarks of BJP leader SS Ahluwalia that the IAF strikes in Balakot “were not aimed at inflicting any human casualty but to send out a message that India can do it if it wants.”

After the Indian war planes' strike in Balakot, the BJP and its top leaders led by Modi left no opportunity to drive

Nadu, mounted an attack on the opposition for questioning his government for the Pulwama attack and demanding details of the Balakot air strike. In fact, he resorted to his favourite compare-and-contrast method of juxtaposing India's lack of military action in response to major terror attacks in the country under the Congress party rule against the Balakot air offensive. His signal was clear to voters: India needs a decisive leader who can bite the bullet.

At an India Today conclave on March 2, Modi also took the opportunity to