

Shubho Nababarsho

Let us resolve to strengthen our inclusiveness

TO us, Pahela Baishakh has come to mean more than just the beginning of another new year. Over the last several decades it has become a day when we reaffirm the unity of a nation whose social, cultural and religious tapestry is woven by diverse threads blending in perfect harmony, reflecting the collective psyche and ethos of the eclectic society that we are. And that is reflected in the different activities and merrymaking that people of all walks of life indulge in to welcome the new year. This is the demonstration of the cultural unity in the diverse and multi-cultural-ethnic-religious society that we live in.

It may be mentioned that Iran celebrates the first day of the Iranian calendar Naurauz with similar gaiety and festivity, a celebration that has been praised by the UN for promoting peace and solidarity. Naurauz is also celebrated in countries like Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Russia, Turkey and Iraq, who have population of Iranian descent. The *Vaisakhi*, a celebration of the New Year in the Nanakshahi calendar of the Sikhs, coinciding with the first day of the first month of the Bangla calendar, welcoming the first day of spring, is celebrated with such festivity in Pakistan also. About the same time, spring is welcomed in Thailand, that being the first day in the Thai calendar called Songkran. And all these celebrations are related to agriculture and harvesting. We would thus hope that our celebrations on Pahela Baishakh, will assume more inclusivity in future and that it will be seen for what it is without ascribing any other extraneous connotations to it.

1425 has been eventful in many ways; the national election, students' demand for making roads safer, several fire disasters, to recall a few. We also recall painfully the people who left us in the course of the last 12 months. As we say goodbye to 1425 we need to also take an objective look at things that we achieved and those that we did not, hoping that a critical examination would equip us better prevent repetition of the errors.

On this happy day, we wish our readers, patrons and well-wishers SHUBHO NABABARSHO and a peaceful and prosperous year.

Don't let political consideration override merit in teachers' recruitment

It destroys quality of higher education

THE two-day convention organised by University Teachers' Network to discuss how to improve the quality of education at the universities of the country has highlighted one of the biggest reasons why standards have deteriorated: recruitment of teachers based on their political affiliation. While this is not a new phenomenon, in recent times the culture of appointing teachers who have strong links with the party in power has reached extreme proportions. Regional and political identities get preference during the recruitment process instead of academic results and research work. The result is predictable—Appointment of teachers who are less qualified and capable than other candidates. Apart from the total arbitrariness of such a trend, the consequences for higher education are quite deadly.

Reportedly, university authorities are more interested in increasing their "vote bank" by recruiting teachers of poor quality, but of their ilk. For meritorious students this is frustrating as they are deprived of the kind of education that they had aspired for in institutions reputed to be the best in the country. Universities are places of highest learning and intellectual stimulation that will encourage progressive thinking. They must uphold the highest moral principles that will be imbibed by those who come to study in them.

Universities are places where knowledge is expanded and created through ground-breaking research. Unfortunately, for most of our public universities research is very negligible. In fact, teachers are getting promoted without doing any research which does not conform to the standard criteria of promotion in such institutions.

To have a large number of teachers appointed mainly because of their political allegiance runs contrary to the ethos, philosophy and prestige of university education. It is high time that these universities are freed from the shackles of politicisation. Recruiting teachers based on merit only will be the first step towards that.

LETTERS
TO THE EDITOR

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Time to rise against sexual predators

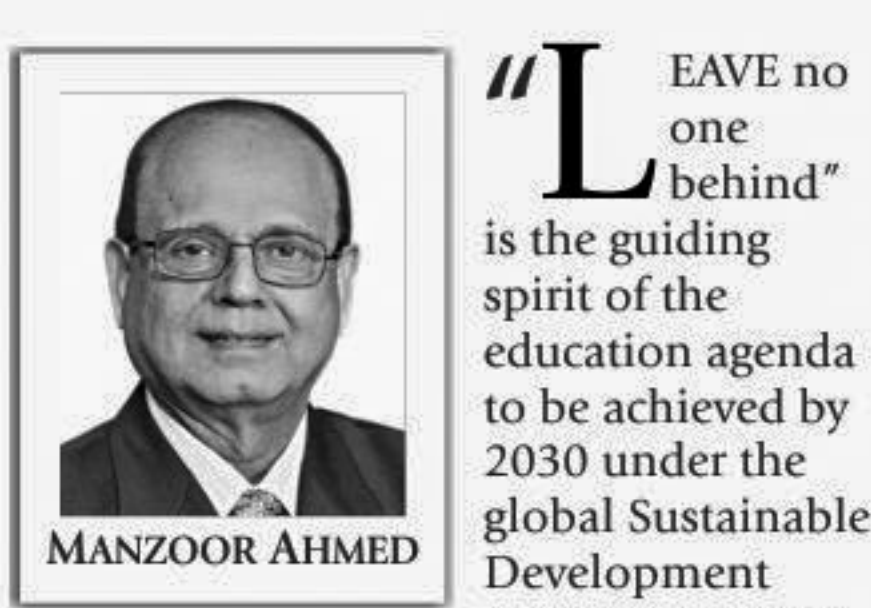
The story of Nusrat Jahan Rafi, who succumbed to her injuries five days after she was set on fire, because of her protests against sexual harassment that she had suffered at the hands of her madrasa's principal, is as tragic as it is unsurprising. Sexual assault or harassment is nothing new in this country. Although not every incident generates the same response, the truth is, almost every case ends up the same way, with the perpetrators getting off scot-free. Will Nusrat's killers be brought to justice? I doubt they will. But even if they are, there is no telling if it will have an impact on the culture of impunity which emboldens sexual predators in our society. Because of this culture and the social stigma attached with sexual harassment, often the victims are forced to remain silent.

It's really important that we break this silence and send a message, loud and clear, that no such offences will be tolerated. Otherwise, tragedies like that of Nusrat will recur and many more Nusrats will have to suffer, or worse still, die, as a result of that.

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EDUCATION 2030 GOALS

Looking beyond one's own turf



“LEAVE no one behind” is the guiding spirit of the education agenda to be achieved by 2030 under the global Sustainable Development Goals adopted in 2015. Bangladesh is a party to the SDG 2030 pledge. How to think and act beyond the sectoral turf of ministries and agencies may be a major obstacle to fulfilling this vital pledge.

On April 6, a draft of a strategic framework for SDG4 (the overarching education goal among the 17 SDG goals), prepared under the auspices of the two Ministries of Education and UNESCO Bangladesh Office, was shared with invited educationists. Senior ministry officials and the chief coordinator for SDGs at the Prime Minister's Office, Md Abul Kalam Azad, joined the discussion.

It was an occasion to take a broad view of the education situation with a longer time horizon, something that happens far too rarely. The study team attempted to look particularly at the state of pre-tertiary education against the global targets. As expected, improving learning outcomes of students, more effective governance and management, improving pedagogy and teachers' performance, and promoting market responsive vocational and technical skills were underscored.

Low public investment in education, around 2 percent of GDP, had to be raised substantially to at least 4 percent to achieve the goals, it was emphasised. Some of the officials, however, pointed to the need for better use of the resources. They also suggested that the investment in education was much higher if educational expenditures of all government agencies and household expenses were counted. This was a poor defence of the present situation because Bangladesh's low investment is actually in comparison to similar direct public education budgets of other countries, excluding the broader government and non-public expenditures.

What was not brought out in the draft strategy frame pointed to problems in the policy making process and

limitations in the imagination of policymakers. I had raised this concern earlier, commenting on the Bangladesh Development Forum meeting, which was addressed by the Prime Minister in January, 2018 ('Questions not asked', *The Daily Star*, January 23, 2018).

In the discussion last year, there was no mention of some unique features of the Bangladesh education system that had proved to be barriers to necessary reforms to make the system "future-ready." These were bypassed again. There is a natural tendency in bureaucracy to guard its turf and not go "out-of-the-box."

For example, unlike any other country, school education from pre-primary to 12th grade in Bangladesh is looked after by two separate ministries. A casualty of the divided responsibility is



the failure to extend universal and compulsory education to grade eight, envisaged nine years ago in the Education Policy 2010.

Looking at it as a matter of transferring grades 6-8 from one ministry to another, rather than as a matter of finding teaching-learning solutions, has put it in a limbo.

To his credit, Mr Sohrab Hossain, Senior Secretary of Ministry of Education observed that dividing school education under two ministerial jurisdictions was not helpful, though he thought it was a difficult issue to raise. "There could be ten divisions under the ministry, but it should be under one leadership," he said. It is, however, not clear why it should be difficult even to discuss, except perhaps because of the urge to protect one's turf.

The education system of about 40 million students and some 200,000 institutions in Bangladesh is uniquely managed, rather mismanaged, by an extremely centralised structure. An upazila has an average of 100,000 school students and 300-400 educational institutions of various kinds. Even a rhetorical mention of decentralised management with accountability is missing in the draft.

Ironically, teachers and their institutions all want to be fully taken over by the central government. The system and mindset of a centralised management have encouraged this counterproductive culture. This may benefit teachers, turning them into government personnel, but appears to do little to improve teaching and learning, with accountability to parents

harsh fact that no specific universalisation plan exists yet for education beyond grade 5 primary education, though the global target is for universal secondary education by 2030. Similarly, there is no agreed strategy or comprehensive plan for other vital SDG4 targets—vocational/technical skill development, adult and lifelong learning, and early childhood education.

The strategy draft recommends an inter-ministerial steering committee for implementing the strategy. It fought shy of a permanent statutory National Education Commission, anticipated in Education Policy 2010, as a mechanism for guiding, exercising oversight and assessing progress and impact of education reforms. The inter-ministerial committee would be necessary, but not a substitute for a national commission.

The SDG Coordinator, Mr Azad, noted that the draft strategy framework team started from the education targets for 2030 and then considered the actors and the actions, rather than carving out first each ministry's tasks in SDG4, the usual bureaucratic approach. He thought turning it around to determine the target-related tasks and decide how the ministries and agencies could put in their effort could be a more effective approach. Mr Azad said such an approach may be considered also for other SDG targets. It is hoped that he would take the lead in this effort.

The need for a transversal rather than a sectoral and segmented approach is being recognised at the international level. The international EFA Steering Committee under UNESCO auspices plans to recommend this approach to the High Level Policy Forum (HPLF) for SDG4 to be held at the UN in July.

The evocative message to HPLF is to think *beyond averages* (looking at the diverse and disaggregated situations), *beyond access* (ensuring outcomes), *beyond basics* (not just cognitive knowledge and skills), *beyond school* (lifelong learning and the community surroundings), *beyond education* (actual learning), and *beyond country* (global citizenship and human solidarity). These are good concepts to go by in constructing the strategy and plan for Education 2030.

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Right to Information: What can we learn from Sri Lanka's experience?

SHAMSUL BARI and RUHI NAZ

SRI Lanka was the last country in South Asia to adopt the Right to Information Act (RTI) in 2017. For many of us who were involved in discussions with our Sri Lankan counterparts before adoption of the law, it is gratifying to note the progress it has made in these two years. There is much that we can learn from their experience and use in Bangladesh.

Readers will recall that a key concern of RTI watchers in Bangladesh has been how to promote the use of RTI by the middle-class. In the earlier years, marginalised communities could be persuaded to make use of the law, but not so with the middle-class. The former quickly discovered its value to expose malpractices in the distribution of government's safety-net programmes and obtain their rightful claims under them. The latter didn't see similar benefits in the law for themselves. And they felt that the use of the law's broader goals, such as monitoring the work of the government and unearthing arbitrary use of power and authority by public officials, could provoke retribution from authorities.

Can Sri Lanka's experience help us in this regard? A look at how RTI has fared in Sri Lanka in the first two years and what role the educated middle-class played in it would help. Two recent reports/publications by the Sri Lankan Information Commission provided us with some guidance.

The more recent history of Bangladesh and Sri Lanka has much similarity. Bangladesh went through long periods of non-democratic military rule, as did Sri Lanka. A Sri Lankan observer says: "In Sri Lanka, which had undergone prolonged civil and ethnic conflict since the 1970s, where for decades people lived in conflict zones not asking questions and not challenging authority and where a climate of fear persisted beyond the ending of the war in 2009, this (positive) development (relating to RTI) was significant." The law has been taken rather well by all, including the educated middle-class. According to another observer: "The slow transformation of an 'information-closed' culture to an 'information-open' culture is evident in Sri Lanka." How has that been possible?

During the first two years of the law, 1,030 appeals were made to the Information Commission by disgruntled

citizens who had made RTI applications to various public offices. Of these, 654 were concluded and decisions made. In the remainder, interim orders were issued by the Commission in most cases, releasing information in stages.

The decisions related to subjects that clearly indicated an educated, comfortable socio-economic context. They ranged from queries about agreements between Sri Lanka and other countries on migrant workers to conclusions of an inquiry into sexual harassment charges against a military officer. To details of salaries and benefits paid out of public funds to state sector/corporate senior executives; to approvals of local authorities given in contrary to law regarding irregular constructions.

It is obvious from the nature of the

It is clear that they originated mostly from the general public and the marginalised communities. Only a few of them bear the mark of middle-class concerns. What could be the reasons for such differences between the two countries?

Higher rate of literacy in Sri Lanka has perhaps facilitated greater public awareness about the law. But in absolute numbers, Bangladesh too has many highly educated citizens who could be equally enthused by the law. One wonders, therefore, if the real reason is fear of negative reactions from irate public officials, confronted with sensitive information requests. Is there less cause for fear in Sri Lanka?

The Sri Lankan reports show a perceptible willingness on the part of both the government and the

emphasised by the Act...We have emphasised the principle of equity between the Public Authority and the appellant while taking into consideration the fact that the greater weight of resources and power lies with the State rather than with an individual citizen." Note the clear pro-citizen stance.

Another encouraging feature is the way the Sri Lankan Commission has gone about giving its decisions in Appeal cases. Almost all the decisions dissected the facts of the cases most painstakingly and interpreted and applied the laws to them most professionally, as would be done by highest courts of law. Each of them bears the hallmark of the Commission's efforts to apply the law to advance its avowed objectives. For citizens, such painstaking attention to the provisions of the law can only be very reassuring.

On the other hand, research on the records of the Bangladesh Information Commission decisions in complaint cases shows that in the years 2016 and 2017, 95 percent of the decisions were taken on factual observation and only 5 percent cases involved an analysis or interpretation of the law. Hopefully some additional efforts on the part of our Information Commission to explain their decisions, with particular reference to the objectives of the law, will reassure our citizens.

Let us, however, conclude on a more hopeful note. While there are not many high profile RTI cases drawing media headlines in Bangladesh yet—as in Sri Lanka—and while there is much frustration among our RTI-users about the restrictive tendencies of our public authorities and the Information Commission itself, the fact that some 7,000-plus citizens are getting positive responses to their RTI requests annually, however innocuous they may be, must be celebrated. In the words of the Sri Lankan Commission: "While the high-profile challenges are no doubt pivotal to urging a culture of transparency in the country, it is that slow and almost unnoticed empowering of 'the ordinary citizen', giving life to a hitherto mostly empty phrase, 'We, the People'...in the constitutional text that is the notable promise of RTI regimes, happening away from the media spotlight as it were."

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topics that these RTI requests did not come from marginalised or disadvantaged communities, who need to use the law for basic personal rights rather than the larger social good. They bear the mark of educated middle-class activists or RTI enthusiasts who set out to expose injustice and corruption.

A quick look, on the other hand, at the list of topics for RTI applications obtained from Annual Reports of the Bangladesh Information Commission (BIC) show that the top six topics dominating the complaint cases before the Commission in the last two years are related to: service matters, land-related issues, safety-net programmes, project approval issues, fund allocation and expenditure, tender-related issues and follow up on complaints.

Information Commission to make the system work. According to the report of the Commission: "Public Authorities have generally co-operated with the Commission in disclosing information following directives issued in appeals, despite a few government entities obstructing and/or delaying processing information requests of applicants." The decisions of our Information Commission unfortunately reveal little such inclination on the part of our public officials.

Equally important is the conviction of the Sri Lankan Commission itself to make the law work: "In delivering these rulings, the Commission has endeavoured to maintain a fair balance between the principle of information disclosure for the public interest as