

Rape of women and children rising

Why are we allowing this to become normalised?

BAKANGLADESH has seen an alarming rise in child rape and abuse cases in recent times. In the first six months of this year, at least 496 children were raped, according to Bangladesh Shishu Adhikar Forum (BSAF), the latest one being a seven-year-old girl who was murdered after being raped. Moreover, in the last half year, there have been 23 other cases where children, after being raped, were murdered by the perpetrators and 53 cases where they were subjected to gang-rape.

The picture emerging from these statistics is extremely sickening and frightening. That we as a society have reached a point where child rape has become so widespread is shameful. And the problem really is that grave. From 2017 child rape increased by 18 percent in 2018, according to Ain o Salish Kendra. And this year's figure looks ominous. Despite the fact that abuse of children is among the worst crimes that can be committed, the number of such cases being filed is quickly rising. Considering also that many such cases always remain unreported, the actual number of cases of child rape and abuse must be higher.

When thousands of children are being raped and abused every year, we can no longer pretend that this is not a systemic or societal issue. Especially because, along with children, we are also seeing thousands of women being raped every year, as well as that already alarmingly high number increase rapidly, which lends further support to the conclusion arrived at by experts that our society is undergoing a phase of serious moral degradation. But it is not only that; the culture of impunity that has been established over the years—where rapists escaped justice because they were connected to influential quarters—is another reason why criminals commit such egregious crimes without a second thought, believing that they too will not be punished.

That law enforcers and other concerned authorities often fail to give full support to the victims—refusing to file rape cases, for instance—doesn't help either. This, along with other factors leading to the prevailing conditions, must change and the government should immediately act to reverse this horrific trend.

Can vulnerable railway bridges brook delay in repairing?

It is a blatant disregard for passenger safety

IT is unthinkable that decrepit and damaged railway bridges would remain in a state of disrepair not for one, two or ten days but for years together. Yet that is what the general state of railway bridges is, particularly in the Eastern Zone where as many as 18 vulnerable bridges remain unrepaired for a long time. It would not be farfetched to suggest that tracks all over the country are generally in a similar state. And, as one understands, a good stretch of the tracks may not have been surveyed at all.

Given that the railway tracks are built on embanked ground and that these run through numerous canals, rivers and rivulets, they are already very susceptible to denudation and subsidence of land. Standing water in low-lying areas adds even more to the vulnerability, compounding the maintenance problem for the authorities. But that is no excuse for railway tracks and damaged slippers remaining unrepaired for years.

Regrettably, one of the most-used modes of long-distance journey and perhaps the safest of all is no longer so. Indiscipline, corruption and a lackadaisical attitude that generally pervades all the public-service providers, have brought the railway to the poor state that it is in today. According to a report in a leading Bangla daily, there have been 868 accidents in the last five years, mostly because of faulty tracks. The accidents have caused the death of 111 people. The focus on big projects has deflected the attention from regular preventive maintenance and oversight. This, despite the fact that the present government has spent more than Tk 6000 crore in the last decade on the railway.

We have been calling on the government for a long-term development plan for the railway and not allocation in dribbles that are often frittered away on wasteful heads. It is also time to root out the fundamental malaise that afflicts the sector. Without that, the best of plans will go to waste.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

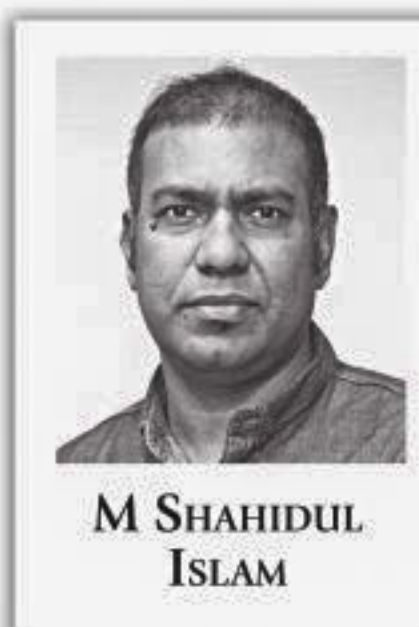
Laws do exist, we must all use them

The main accused in the case of Rifat Sharif's murder in Barguna, Sabbir Rahman Nayan, was shot dead in an "encounter" with the police. This is nothing new in Bangladesh. Odhikar, a Dhaka-based human rights body, reported at least 1,169 people lost their lives in extrajudicial killings between January 2009 and May 2016 in the country.

On July 5, the High Court warned that law enforcement officials must be careful so that extrajudicial killings don't occur again. While most of us are criticising this recent event, just a few months ago, many applauded the so-called "Hercules" for the extra-judicial killing of alleged rapists. What all this reflects is a nation that's becoming increasingly lawless. We must not allow this to continue because it is not justice. Md. Zillur Rahaman, Gandaria, Dhaka.

The PM's China visit

A friendship that has given both political and economic dividends



M SHAHIDUL ISLAM

IT is undeniable that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has, quite deftly, made the most of the fast-changing regional and global geopolitics, eventually emerging as a strong leader in South Asia. The country's lacklustre institutional development and its deeply divided politics has made it susceptible to external influence. Given its historical ties with

Bangladesh and the geographic reality, India closely observes the country's political development, and successive governments in New Delhi have backed the Hasina government. However, one noticed China's shifting stance towards the Awami League government immediately after the general elections of 2014. It was China and India's strong support to the AL administration that facilitated downplaying the United States (US) and European Union's concerns over the country's electoral process and human rights violations, among others.

The 2014 poll was a crucial turning point bringing Beijing closer to the AL government. This coincided with the US' weakening position in South Asia's geopolitics. Since then, there has been a tectonic shift in the Sino-Bangladesh economic landscape. While the trade and military relations have been strong for the past few decades, China has emerged as the country's top investor in recent years.

With Beijing's political and economic backing, the government has undertaken a host of mega projects in the country aimed at improving its infrastructure. There is, of course, substantial investment from Japan and other countries. Some even see Bangladesh becoming next Vietnam, thanks to the growing presence of Chinese companies in the country with cash and technology.

Besides trade and investment, there has been a spike in people-to-people contacts and cultural relations. An increasing number of Bangladeshi students are being granted scholarships by Chinese universities. One notices the growth of Chinese language learning centres in Bangladesh to cater to the growing demand for human resources given the rise in Chinese men and machine in the country.

Sheikh Hasina too has reciprocated it, extending her strong support to the Beijing-led Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). She even urged India to join the initiative. India and the US are two major countries that have declined to be part of the BRI. Dhaka and Beijing are on a firm footing to develop the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar economic corridor. In dealing with the Rohingya refugee problem, where China has an enormous stake given its relations with Myanmar, the action of Dhaka did not cause much concern for Beijing.

While the changing geopolitics is playing a role in moulding China-Bangladesh relations, some economic forces are causing the convergence of the two countries' economic interests much faster than ever. China is the biggest economic story of our time. According to McKinsey, despite a slowdown in its GDP growth, which has hovered around 6 to 6.5 percent in the past few years, China is adding the equivalent of "another Australia" every year. The country accounted for about 10 percent of global outward foreign direct investment (FDI) in 2017, up from just about one percent in 2000. Being the largest trading nation, China is the leading source of thousands of products, and the heart of the



China's Vice Foreign Minister Luo Zhaohui bids farewell to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina at the Beijing Capital International Airport on July 6, 2019. Hasina returned home after a five-day trip to China.

PHOTO: PTI

global supply chain. It is the second largest importer in the world.

Nonetheless, China has been dominating headlines in recent years not so much for its trade and investment might. There is hardly any precedence in history that a country which is far behind the top economy (the United States at present) in per capita income is competing fiercely with it on the technology front. The Middle Kingdom is home to some of the leading enterprises of telecom, artificial intelligence, the Internet of Things, among others, generating economic tensions with the US. China has become a global giant in financial technology. The country's mobile payments market, for instance, is worth more than USD 5.5 trillion, 50 times greater than the US' volume. There is a growing footprint of Chinese financial entities in South Asia.

In Bangladesh, the Shanghai and Shenzhen Stock Exchanges acquired 25 percent stakes of Dhaka Stock Exchange. The Ant Financial, the financial services affiliate of e-commerce giant Alibaba, has invested in bKash, Bangladesh's largest mobile financial service provider. Technological cooperation between China and Bangladesh could be the next big story, thanks to the speedy digitisation in both countries.

Amid a host of economic dynamics in the Chinese economy and its growing influence in the regional geopolitical sphere, Sheikh Hasina's policy to strengthen ties with China has been paying dividends, both politically and economically. Not to mention, China is one of the five permanent members of the United Nations.

Economically, while China has become the top investor in Bangladesh, the volume is much lower than what was expected following President Xi's visit to Bangladesh in 2016. Despite the recent surge in FDI, Bangladesh remains one of the lowest FDI recipient economies compared its GDP size. However, following

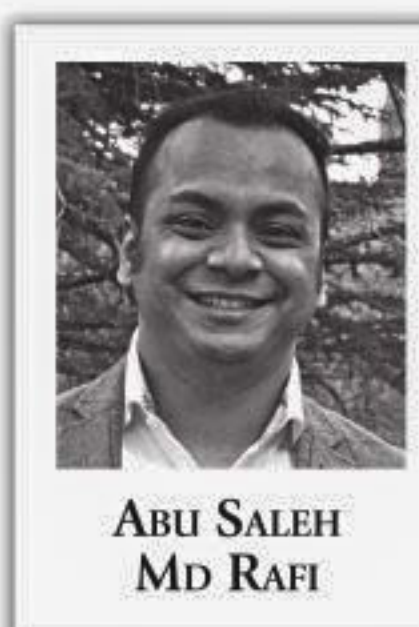
PM Hasina's recent visit to China, one might expect a further increase in Chinese investment in Bangladesh.

No government in the past had the privilege to have access to the deep pockets of Beijing as the Hasina-led current government has today. However, her success and the merit of Chinese investment in Bangladesh would be judged based on two factors—first, how economically feasible the China-funded projects are; and second, to what extent those projects are insulated from corruption. The recent experience does not bode well at all as the per unit infrastructure cost in Bangladesh is one of the highest in the world. Besides, Beijing's investment in some strategic projects in South Asia and elsewhere in the world has fuelled geopolitical tensions, notably in the Indian Ocean regions. Nonetheless, successive governments in Bangladesh have so far made a balance among key regional and global powers.

To sum up, amid the new political reality in Bangladesh and the fast-changing geopolitics in the region in the midst of a de facto withdrawal of the United States from South Asia, Hasina-led AL has managed the relations with China and India well. AL's new yet less publicised political thought, which apparently focuses more on development than democracy, has made Beijing the most important economic partner of the country. The success of such models, as we have seen elsewhere in Asia, notably in the East, largely depends on a sustained economic growth with job creation, better provisions of infrastructure and other services, among others. It is in this context that one can expect even more Chinese involvement in Bangladesh's development agenda in the future.

M Shahidul Islam is a doctoral candidate at the Huazhong University of Science and Technology (HUST), China, and research fellow at the Center for Governance Studies (CGS), Bangladesh. Views expressed in the article are personal. Email: shahid.imon@live.com

Nurturing the dynamism of multilingual students



ABU SALEH MD RAFI

"FORGET English; our students aren't even acquiring Bangla up to the required standard." This was the sentiment of Education Minister Dipu Moni, who recently expressed her frustration

with the lack of proficiency of students in both Bangla and English. And her feelings are valid; Bangladesh still continues to lack a much-needed explicit language education policy for higher education. The public and private universities remain divided in their approach to the language of instruction. Whereas the public universities are imparting complex knowledge using an unstructured mixture of Bangla and English, the private universities are utilising English-only instructional models to meet the demands of an increasingly anglicised world, in turn jeopardising our nation's cultural diversity.

The education minister emphasised the need for teaching "soft-skills" such as communication and humanitarian aspects of education, which we are inadvertently missing out on due to the lack of robust multilingual instructional models. Research shows that the differential linguistic approaches in higher education have resulted in sound content knowledge but poor English language proficiency among public university students, and shallow content knowledge but satisfactory English language proficiency among private university students.

This imbalanced skillset between students in public and private universities is significantly problematic, and undesirable in terms of the global market. Sure, English language proficiency in the international context is a requirement, but it is of no use if students are unable to excel at the subject matter of their chosen academic disciplines. And if they know the material well but cannot communicate it in the required languages, then the chances of being successful in the international market will be slim. In other words, students need both linguistic proficiencies and sound content knowledge to meet the challenges of globalisation.

The bias towards English-only instruction in Bangladeshi private universities and the English departments of public universities has created an "artificial monoculture," which limits students' total linguistic freedom in expressing themselves. In such an environment, students struggle to think, speak and construct knowledge in a meaningful way. And they begin to forget their mother tongue, especially after four years of English-only instruction in university. By contrast, in public universities, English

distinct form of linguistic competence. If teaching practices don't cater to this multilingual nature of the classroom, then we are missing an opportunity to cultivate well-rounded students.

So far, the solution to this growing issue has been countered with the provision of single courses to enhance learning of the specific language. For example, linguistics studies in Bangladesh singularly focus on English language teaching (ELT). In February 2018, the UGC—in the hope to retain Bangla in

providing students with the required language skills for their future careers.

In light of these challenges, Bangladesh needs educational linguists who can help strategise rigorous policies for universities that aim to nurture multilingual repertoires of students. Educational linguists can offer advice on how English can be taught effectively alongside Bangla. For instance, if students learn a science or engineering concept in both languages, they will possess a wider knowledge base, and better communication skills, all of which are invaluable in today's global world.

Strategic linguistic planning can improve learning outcomes in both language and content learning, and also foster a student's self-esteem. Monolingual instruction creates a false impression that students who are better at English are better students, which is not the case. Rather, scientific evidence has shown that students equally fluent in both languages are more likely to achieve academic success. For multilingual students, being able to learn in their mother tongue is empowering. It legitimises their home language and helps students take pride in the fact that multilingualism is a part of their identity. It promotes social justice. It enables students to compare and contrast literature and ideas and harvest critical thinking skills in a way they cannot in a monolingual classroom. The benefits for multilingualism are boundless.

Universities in Bangladesh, therefore, need a more accessible medium of instruction by balancing both English and Bangla, to support language acquisition and content learning, and also bridge this gap between the public and private sectors of higher education. We have to first realise that our students are already multilingual, and then aim to stimulate this admirable trait. Currently, the differential instructional models in public and private universities put multilingualism at a disadvantage, and these methodologies are inextricably counterproductive. We must work to reverse this and change the education system for the better.

Abu Saleh Md Rafi is researching on the Language Education Policy (LEP) of Bangladesh in his Linguistics Ph.D. at the University of New England (UNE) in Australia. Email: arafi@myune.edu.au

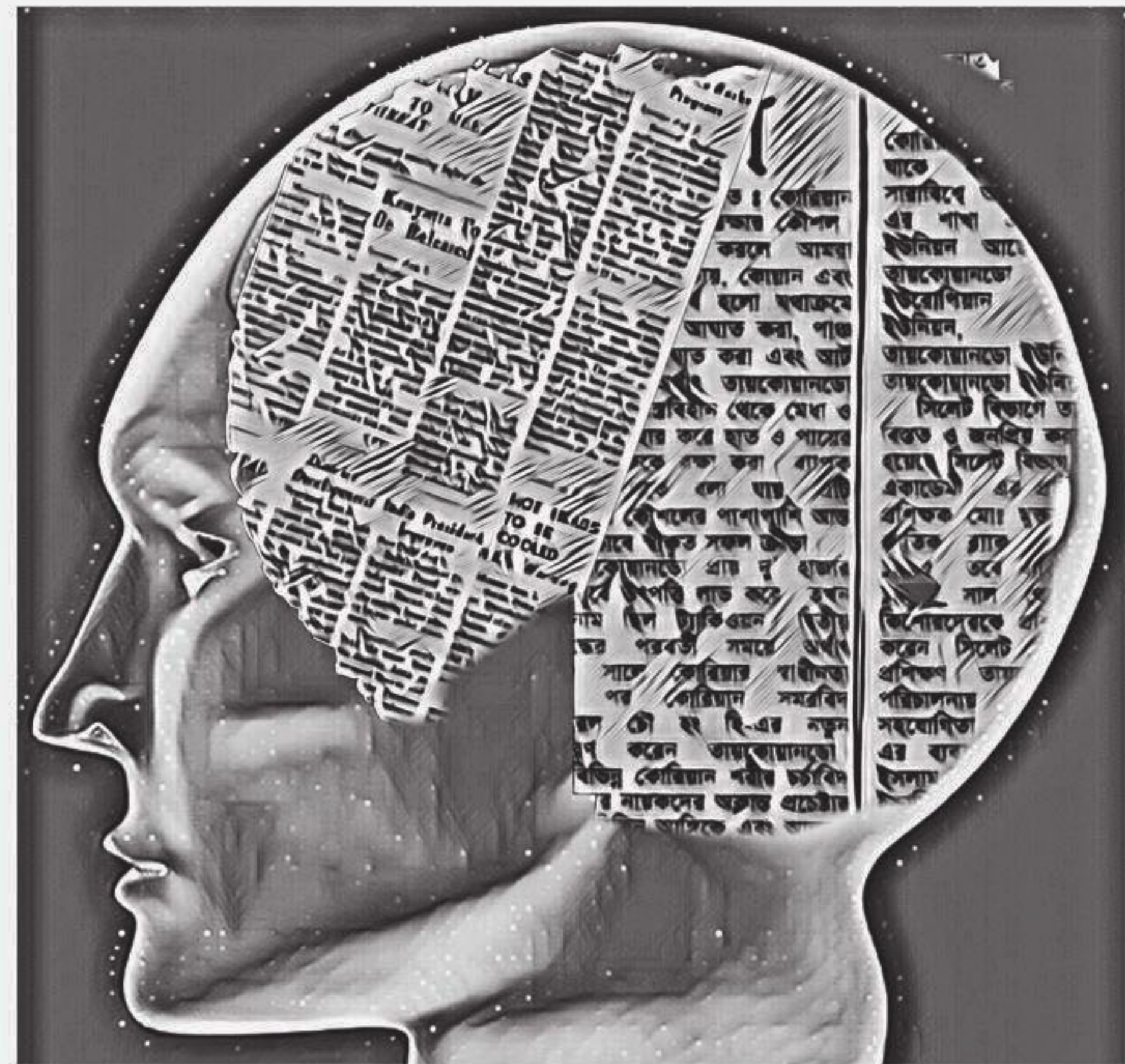


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does not have the same monolingual privilege that it has in private universities. Students, therefore, tend to lack English language proficiency because teachers themselves are not trained to teach both languages effectively to the emerging multilingual youth. The last phrase is key here, because more often than not, students enrolling in both public and private universities generally speak both Bangla and English in their daily lives, which means they inherently possess a

higher education—included a Bangla language and literature course in all universities. While this may be a step forward, the inclusion will fail to achieve its goal unless Bangla itself is integrated into content learning. This policy of teaching Bangla as a course replicates the previous policy of teaching a language separately as an additional course, such as English for Today or English Grammar and Composition in pre-tertiary education, which has not succeeded in