

Alarming rise in dengue cases

Downplaying the problem will only worsen the situation

THE dengue outbreak in the capital has reached alarming proportions during the last two months, as this daily reported on July 10. The number of recorded dengue cases in May and June this year was more than five times that of the corresponding months of last year. Whereas around 946 people were infected with the disease in the entire month of July last year, only in the last nine days of July this year, 1,182 people have already been diagnosed with dengue.

The situation calls for immediate attention of the authorities concerned. Sadly, the statement of the Dhaka South City Corporation mayor who said that "the situation is under control" will not help in any way to fight the problem. Since already three people have died of the disease, it is time the government took all the necessary precautions to prevent the disease from spreading. As this is the breeding season of the Aedes mosquitoes, the two city corporations should intensify mosquito control and cleanliness drives in the city to protect its residents from this deadly disease. They should conduct massive awareness campaigns. And, as cases of haemorrhagic dengue are on the rise this year, the hospitals and clinics across the country should be well-prepared to provide the patients with proper treatment.

Another reason for worry is that the traditional insecticides have become less effective in destroying the mosquito-breeding grounds, as revealed by a study done some 14 months ago. Although this was known by the authorities, they took no initiative to address the insecticide problem. This just goes to show disregard for public health by the authorities concerned.

The responsible government agencies should give all-out efforts to combat this lethal disease before it takes on an epidemic proportion.

Good intention, poor execution

Alternative arrangements should precede rickshaw ban

WE can understand the intention of the DSCC mayor to address the horrendous traffic situation that prevails in the capital city. However, the purpose of reducing traffic congestion is to benefit the people of Dhaka. But instead, the sudden banning of rickshaws plying three important roads has irked thousands of commuters and rickshaw-pullers. For rickshaw-pullers, it is a matter of their daily bread, and for commuters, it is a matter of major inconvenience being left without a viable alternative.

One would like to ask: what alternative arrangements have the authorities made for those who use rickshaws to get to work or to take their children to school? The fact that thousands of rickshaw-pullers have been gathering under the banner of "Greater Dhaka North and South City Corporation Rickshaw and Van Owner Oikya Parishad" and agitating on these routes—putting commuters in distress and causing higher-than-usual traffic gridlock—drives home the point that knee-jerk reactions do not solve problems but cause more pain for city residents.

The city authorities should have made alternative plans, like the buses we keep hearing about that are supposed to join the BRTC fleet, before going for such a sudden measure. And what of the people who drive rickshaws and vans? What of their livelihoods and how will they feed their families and support their dependents? It is true that creating blockades and making people suffer is no answer. Neither is putting into effect an order that may have to be rescinded sooner or later because the essential details had not been thought through before taking a decision which has caused much public suffering.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Monsoon is the right time to plant a tree

The government inaugurates the tree plantation season in June every year, and it continues till September. Tree fairs are arranged all over the country which bring renewed attention to tree plantation. What does not get enough attention, however, is the importance of choosing the right kind of trees that can contribute to plant biodiversity.

Due to the heavy population pressure, only around 9 percent of land in Bangladesh is now covered by trees and even that is decreasing due to the lack of environmental awareness among people. We must accept that replanting trees is a national priority. But many people are still indiscriminately cutting down trees out of greed.

It is common knowledge that excessive carbon dioxide (CO₂) is building up in our atmosphere, leading to climate change, but trees can help reduce this effect. And monsoon is believed to be optimal for planting trees, and the time between the end of June and August is supposed to be the most appropriate since by then, the earth, dry and parched after a scorching summer, is able to absorb moisture and becomes more conducive for planting. Everyone should plant a tree this monsoon and contribute to a greener earth without waiting for the government or NGOs to initiate such a step.

Md Zillur Rahaman
By email

Literature, kerosene and Professor Mahmood



MOHAMMAD SHAFIQUUL ISLAM

THE moment the news of students pouring kerosene on a professor came to my attention, I instantly thought it must be fake news. Either that or I was hallucinating. Because the thought of pouring kerosene on a professor and trying to light him on fire—an attempt to murder—is indeed shocking.

The word "shocking" is an understatement. How can students in a civilised country—in fact, these people are miscreants in the name of students—do such a thing to a professor? This incident should move each and every citizen of the country.

Unfortunately, however, there has been little reaction; we have seen next to nothing in the form of a protest or a rally. Only a handful of professors and students protested the act by posting comments on social media. Professor Abdul Mannan, ex-UGC chairman, wrote an insightful column in Bangla Tribune on July 5, 2019, in which he articulately penned his thoughts on the state of private university education, along with lending his support to Professor Masud Mahmood.

Dr Masud Mahmood, a well-known professor, poet, and critic, has been teaching English literature for about 40 years. His students know well how erudite a professor he is, how knowledgeable a person he is, and how successful a teacher he is. I wrote a few words about him on social media that I would like to share here as well: "Professor Dr Masud Mahmood is one of the best teachers of English literature I've ever seen in my life. He's erudite, and his deep knowledge of literature, outstanding skills of making classes interesting, and wide range of study deserve praise, and are beyond comparison. Himself a poet, Dr Mahmood analyses poetry in the classroom as if he were from somewhere else—precisely, he creates magic in the classroom, and students remain spellbound. His direct student, I've been inspired to be an enthusiast of poetry, to a great extent, because of him. Those who have attended his poetry classes must bear the enriching experience throughout their life... I'm angry, have lost the words to protest the abominable acts of the miscreants whose deeds should never go unpunished, as it's a disgrace to all teachers. Please, ensure exemplary punishment for the criminals so that no one dares to dishonour a teacher this way."

Studying literature requires mental preparation, a certain mindset, something most of the students of English departments in our country lack. In literature, a wide range of areas, including various cultures and myths, are studied. Those who do not hold a liberal attitude to diversity, including the issues of sexuality, should think about subjects other than literature to study. Among a certain number of students, like the ones in University of Science and Technology (USTC), the wrong message about literary studies is being spread.

Professor Mahmood has a pure literary frame of mind, and he looks beyond the ordinary, mundane reality. His classes on Coleridge's "Kubla Khan," "The Rime of

the Ancient Mariner," Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale," Marlowe's "Doctor Faustus," and so many other outstanding pieces of literature are simply feasts for literature aficionados.

Working as a devoted and committed—in the truest sense of the words—faculty member for 40 years in the Department of English, University of Chittagong, Professor Mahmood joined USTC as an adviser to the English department. As per many different newspaper reports, after joining the department, he took steps to bring academic order. Then he found that a few teachers were irregular and they did not care about improvement—they even lacked basic qualities in teaching. Therefore, the authorities, in consultation with the department, sacked those teachers. He might have had no role behind this, but they thought Dr Mahmood might have had a hand behind them being laid off.

Later some graduate students of the department complained that Professor Mahmood openly talked about sexuality in the classroom. They even brought

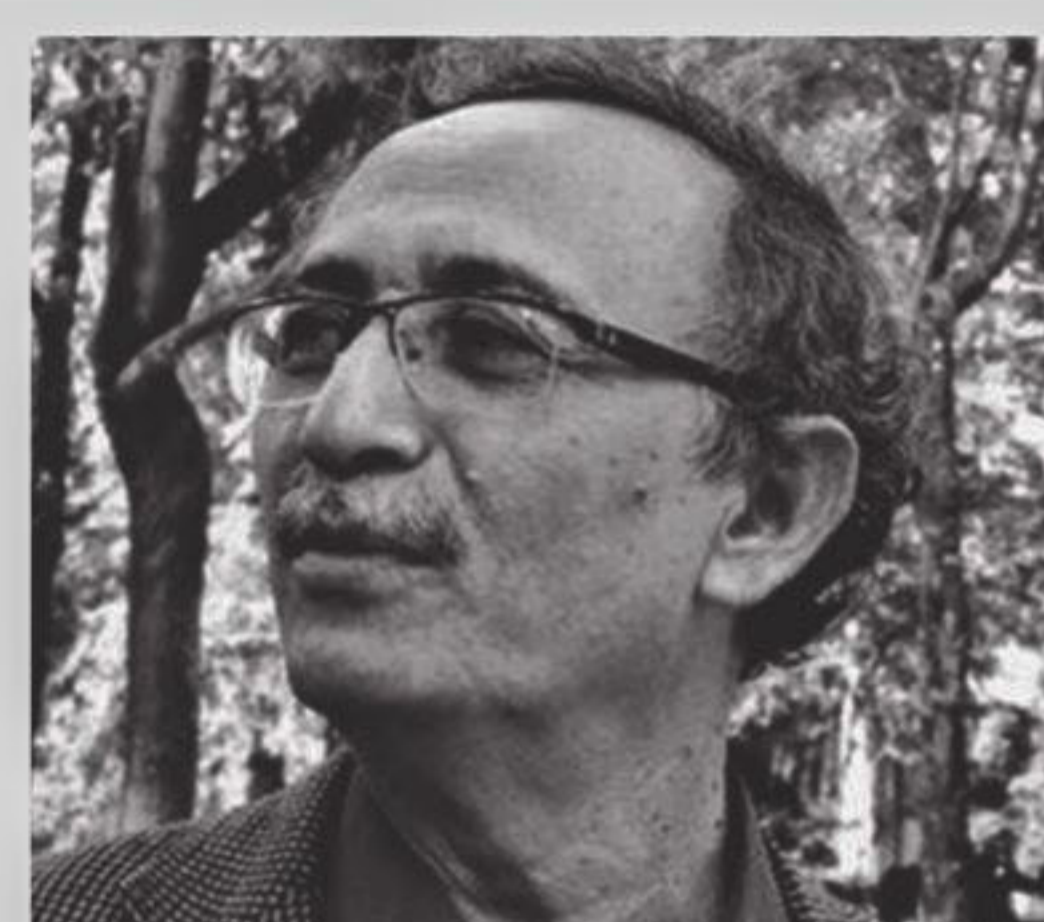
to rescue him, he might have been burnt to death on the spot. The whole episode must have been one of sheer horror for a veteran professor like Dr Mahmood.

The incident gives rise to some questions: what had the USTC administration done to protect Professor Mahmood? How did the students who had brought false allegations against a respected teacher resume their studies in the university? What disciplinary actions had the authorities taken against them? Did they investigate if other conspirators had instigated the students?

A university has its own disciplinary committees, headed by the vice-chancellor, which provide protection to its teachers, students and officials. But how is this university, USTC, running its academic activities in such a lackadaisical state of security with such an administration? The concerned body of higher education should look into the USTC administration.

We should form a common platform to seek justice for Professor Mahmood. The way he was humiliated is unprecedented, and if exemplary punishment is not

The miscreants dragged him out of his office, took him out to the university premises, poured kerosene on his body and one student tried to set him on fire. They even snatched away a valuable book from his hand, tore it up, and threw it away, hurling abusive words at Professor Mahmood.



Professor Masud Mahmood

allegations against him accusing him of harassing female students. They went to the local deputy minister for education who ordered an investigation. Both USTC administration and police found the allegations to be false, and Professor Mahmood resumed working in the department. It's also the first instance that police investigated allegations against a professor. In his column, Professor Abdul Mannan expressed his concern about this incident.

Frustrated by the outcome of their conspiracies, the students, allegedly instigated by others, took the drastic step of trying to kill Professor Mahmood. The miscreants dragged him out of his office, took him out to the university premises, poured kerosene on his body and one student tried to set him on fire. They even snatched away a valuable book from his hand, tore it up, and threw it away, hurling abusive words at Professor Mahmood. If some other students had not come forward

meted out, the culprits and conspirators will essentially be given a licence to attempt to kill teachers in broad daylight. Teachers and students at all levels—schools, colleges and universities—should protest acts of violence in educational institutions and stand by the victims. I humbly request Federation of Bangladesh University Teachers' Association to come forward so that such incidents are not repeated in future.

Above all, it's time for all of us to think about the way we have been treating our educators and whether they are being given the respect they deserve. We need to think about what that means for the values and morals of future generations and for the education system as a whole.

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PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

How – and how not – to restore trust in media



ALEXANDRA BORCHARDT

least because, in the digital age, trusted brands like the BBC or *The New York Times*, which can be expected to adhere to long-established journalistic standards, are vastly outnumbered by upstart publications, blogs, and community reports.

Not surprisingly, therefore, as claims of "fake news" have proliferated in recent

years, trust in news media—established and otherwise—has plummeted. According to the Reuters Institute's Digital News Report 2017, those who regularly consume news do so with significant scepticism. Only about 50 percent of users trust the media brands they choose to consume; far fewer trust outlets that they do not use. With too many options and too little confidence in media, nearly one-third of people have given up following the news altogether.

But news journalism is not an expendable luxury. It is a critical public good, enabling citizens to make informed decisions, while helping to hold those

in power accountable. It can serve that function only if it is a quality product—and people know that. Delivering such a product, however, is no straightforward task.

The first problem is that there is no clear definition of what constitutes quality journalism, which raises the risk that the standard of "quality" will become a tool of censorship. When Adolf Hitler wanted a book burned, he would assert that it did not meet the "standards" of Nazi ideology. Similarly, a government today could cite quality issues to attack critics' credibility or to justify denying them journalistic credentials.

Some organisations concerned with the future of the media are trying to circumvent this danger by developing trust indicators. Most notably, the Journalism Trust Initiative, led by

organisation can be trusted equally.

Of course, some organisations have a proven track record of following certain procedures to minimise mistakes and respond to errors that do slip through. But these are likely to be the same organisations that already enjoy significant public trust. Whatever trust they have lost in recent years will not be offset by a new label affirming their quality.

As for the publications that would benefit from such a label, they are more likely to be smaller, newer, and thus poorly equipped to deal with the extra layer of bureaucracy that a certification procedure would entail. Organisation-level quality certifications could thus hurt new entrants, while helping incumbents.

The alternative to organisation-level certification would be to focus

on individual pieces of content. But this would be a herculean task in terms of volume; worse, it could create perverse incentives, as journalists chase certifications in much the same way they now may chase awards, sometimes to the detriment of the work. The German reporter Claas Relotius won multiple awards for his brilliant storytelling before it was revealed that the stories he was telling were not true.

In any case, the question remains: what exactly constitutes a quality piece of content? Does it simply have to be fact-based? Does it apply only to serious political and business news, or does

it include lifestyle, entertainment, or human-interest stories? These questions are complicated further in the digital ecosystem: some blog posts may count as journalism, but that certainly isn't the case for all of them.

Journalism will never be like, say, the airline industry, where strict standards and procedures apply to every action and product. But, until recently, it didn't need to be: journalists adhered to codes of professional and ethical conduct, and were overseen by bodies that took action in the event of a breach. Doing it right was the default—even though the concept of "right" has always been open to interpretation.

That is how societies work. An individual does not need a "trust certification" to participate in a family or community (though China's government would like to change that). The social contract establishes certain behavioural norms with which people generally comply; labels are needed only when trust is broken.

This is the status quo to which journalism must return. That means, first and foremost, individual organisations taking responsibility for the quality of their content and adhering to a set of rules, including oversight and editing, to ensure it. When this cannot be done within the organisation itself—say, when a citizen journalist is operating in an anti-democratic environment—external bodies could do the job.

In establishing such systems, lessons could be learned from collaborative reporting projects like the one that covered the Panama Papers, in which researchers enjoyed individual freedom—ensuring a plurality of voices and healthy competition—but had to meet certain standards. As technology advances, automated fact-checking could also be introduced, especially in less-resourced newsrooms.

In an age of unprecedented access to information, true and otherwise, people of all ages must improve their media literacy. But that does not let media organisations off the hook. With the help of an aware and critical audience, they must monitor themselves and one another, as they have done in the past.

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Reporters Without Borders, is creating voluntary guidelines and a best-practice framework that will evolve into an official certification process. Some organisations champion traffic-light indicators, like those used in food labelling, while others argue for an ISO 9000 system reminiscent of industrial quality management.

But what, exactly, would these systems be certifying? The most logical answer might seem to be media organisations. But even first-class newsrooms produce plenty of second-class content, owing to factors ranging from a lack of available sources to simple human error. This implies that not all content from a given

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