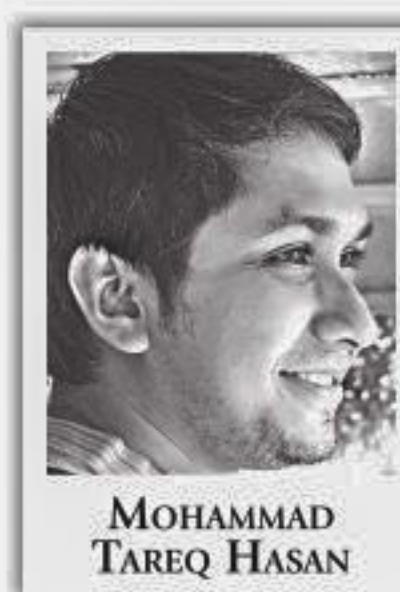


Student agitation: Signs of egalitarian aspirations



MOHAMMAD TAREQ HASAN

ON the morning of July 24, 2019, a few photos of academic buildings of the University of Dhaka surfaced on social media. The caption of the photos read: "Do not pay heed to the rumours and attend your classes and exams. Regular activity is running as normal." Contrarily, announcements were made on the same social media platform urging students to gather in front of the Central Library to protest the affiliation of seven colleges to the university. The university was under lock and key and students did not attend classes or exams for three consecutive days before the student wing of the ruling party broke the locks, freeing the entrances. Protests had erupted due to the perception that the affiliation of the colleges would hamper the academic activities of the university. The protests were subdued before they could meet their goal. Nevertheless, these protests, like several other student movements of the recent past, bear signs of egalitarian aspirations and a desire to break free from an authoritarian political culture.

In an age of neoliberal capitalism in which representative democracy, civil society, dialogue, negotiation and advocacy are the norm, one might think that protests and mass uprisings are irrelevant. However, social scientists such as Alain Badiou and David Harvey have argued that *political change* can come through popular uprisings. Looking into the anatomy of recent student protests in Bangladesh, one could deduce that they are of similar nature—for example, the quota reform movement, the road safety protests,

and protests against VAT on education in private universities. The government had to give in to the demands of students when it came to these three protests. A new law on road safety and changes in driver recruitment and payment were introduced after a series of protests during July 29–August 8, 2018. Similarly, protests against quota in government jobs in April 2018 led to students in many public and private universities boycotting classes, and the prime minister finally announced that there would be no quota in government jobs. Likewise, in September 2015, after a few days of protests, VAT on tuition fees at private universities was withdrawn.

Beyond the targeted goals, these protests altered the status quo, albeit for a short time, and reflected the egalitarian aspirations of students. For instance, on July 29, 2018, students of different schools and colleges occupied the streets of Dhaka after a speeding bus killed two students. For a few days, students directed traffic and stopped vehicles to check the licences of drivers in many cities throughout the country. They used social media to livestream their activities and communicate information about areas of action. VIPs could not use the "wrong way," as they often do, and had to wait in traffic for long hours like the rest of us. An army officer had to drive himself as the driver did not have a valid licence with him and a judge had to travel in another vehicle because of faulty paperwork. Mothers brought food and fed the protesting students in the streets and people in general happily cooperated, generating an atmosphere that we had never seen before. There was a rare sense of unity which we had not witnessed even during the protests for quota reform or the elimination of VAT on education fees.

The protests demanding road



Students stage a demo at the VC Chattar demanding cancellation of seven colleges' affiliation with Dhaka University.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

safety turned violent after the first few days. Law enforcers attacked the protesters, and vandalism and chaos were rampant. Politicians and ministers requested students to retreat from the streets acknowledging that students have shown how traffic should be maintained. Politicians alleged that anti-state forces were trying to destabilise the country under the disguise of student protests. Consequently, schools were declared closed, but students still came out to the streets claiming that allies of the government were trying to sabotage the peaceful protests. They repeatedly demanded a law to be ratified in the parliament for ensuring road safety. All the while, the authorities wanted to sit for a talk with the representatives but students reaffirmed that they "do not have any leaders or representatives,"

and maintained the road blockades avowing "renovation of the state is ongoing." Violence increased and law enforcers became stringent. Subsequently, students vacated the streets as the government initiated the formulation of a new law.

Similar horizontal cooperation with no recognised leadership was eminent during the latest student protest against affiliation of the colleges with DU. They demanded the decisions be formalised rather than remaining as promises. Eventually, a committee was formed to explore the provisions for annulling the affiliation of the seven colleges. The process is still underway and, therefore, the protests have been momentarily restrained.

The student uprisings have shown the capacity of the people to collectively challenge state authority which

sociologist Emile Durkheim identified as *effervescence*: a time of *great collective shock* resulting in frequent and active social interaction, possibly leading to a revolutionary or creative epoch. Frequent student protests indicate that memories of large-scale uprisings are significant in initiating protests. Fundamental elements of these protests are: a festive atmosphere, auto-generation, *networks* among protesters created and sustained through social media, takeover of infrastructures (e.g. roads and official buildings), and gradual expansion throughout the country. The organisational character of the protests exhibits a *new form* of organising "discontent". Thus, we can identify much larger implications of these protests beyond the reductive label of "student protests". Despite having seemingly rhizomic and ephemeral characters, the student uprisings, in Alain Badiou's words, have the possibility to womb an "[idea] capable of challenging the corrupt, lifeless version of 'democracy', which has become the banner of the legions of Capital..."

Research on mass uprisings in Bangladesh has always been analysed from the venture points of transferring political power but the student protests show promises of changing the political system from *within*. These uprisings have shaken the image of a powerful *sovereign authority* and claimed *sovereign power* ephemerally that has generally remained unexamined. Nonetheless, student uprisings represent something irreducible to the orderly world represented by NGOs, trade unions, civil societies, bureaucracy, and political parties. These protests reflect a horizon beyond *state authority* and are an expression of egalitarian aspirations.

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Should we be worried about superintelligence?

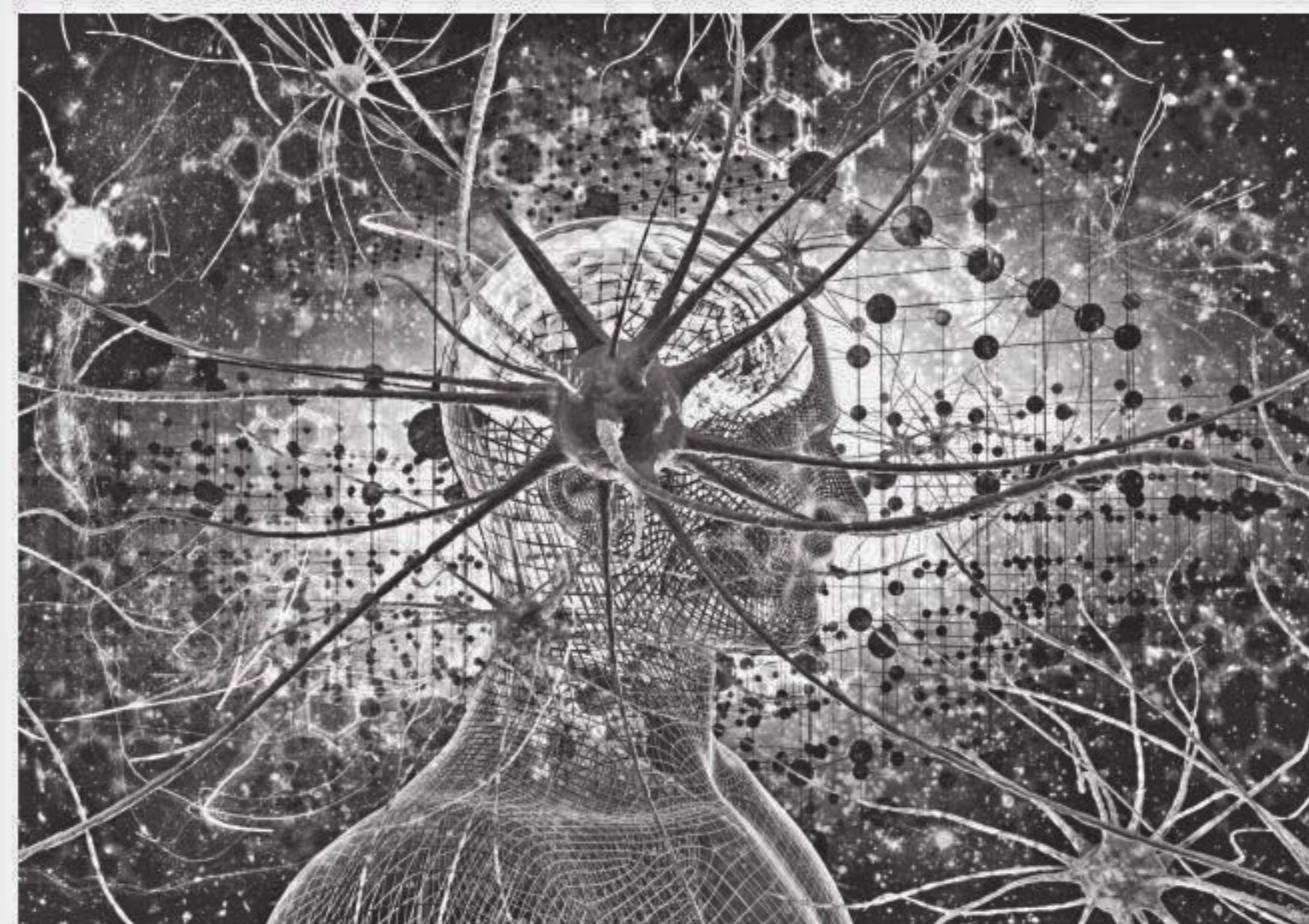


MUHAMMAD MUSTAFA MONOWAR

ANY of us have heard of Artificial Intelligence, but do we know about Superintelligence? Alan Turing, the pioneer of computation, had imagined a programme that could solve any kinds of problem and argued that a machine capable of convincing human subjects that it is also a human would mean that it has achieved human-level intelligence.

Things have come a long way from Turing's days. Artificial Intelligence research has seen many ups and downs over the past decades. From the Good Old-Fashioned Artificial Intelligence (GOFAI) to neural networks, AI research has gone through several seasons of hopes and despairing AI winters. The result is that, the Siri in your iPhone can recognise your voice, Facebook algorithms can detect your face more accurately, Google Translate can convert your language into any foreign languages with near-flawless precision. AIs are also being used in proving theorems, disposal of bombs, and intelligent scheduling.

At first, very few suspected that machine intelligence could improve to a human level in narrow domains. Now, we are being replaced by AIs in areas that require basic skills such as typing or making spreadsheet reports. If a machine can learn so quickly to reach human-level intelligence in narrow domains, there are reasons to worry that it might not stop learning just there.



SOURCE: FUTUREOFLIFE.ORG

Humans are said to have general intelligence, that is, we have a balanced intelligence in all narrow domains which are also connected to each other. A calculator can do calculations, but it cannot play Go. A Go AI can beat humans at Go but it cannot recognise your voice. You, on the other hand, can do all these with surprising ease. This is the difference between general and narrow intelligence.

Today's AIs are getting so competent in narrow domains of intelligence that they are replacing humans in jobs. Therefore, it is reasonable to be worried that it might also become competent in general intelligence at some point and outperform us in general intelligence.

In his book "Superintelligence: Paths, Dangers, Strategies", philosopher

Nick Bostrom considered several pathways to a superintelligence. He believes the development of artificial intelligence could, at some point, lead to the emergence of a superintelligent entity. He posits that a superintelligent entity might have fast computational powers, ability to extend its powers, or even have traits that could have made us superintelligent. Bostrom further argues that if a machine does gain human-level intelligence, the time to gain superintelligent capabilities could be very short.

In a mathematical graph, if one draws the path, it looks as if the path slowly ascends, and then suddenly, within a short time, it escalates. The point where it escalates is therefore often termed "take-off." According to

Bostrom, a slow take-off case, where we would know that a superintelligent entity is taking over the world, is unlikely. He shows that there are valid reasons to believe that a fast take-off where we would have no time to know what is happening, or a medium take-off—where geopolitical chaos could descend with people trying to take advantage of the impending crisis—is more likely.

So, what can we do to ensure that we are safe in case a superintelligent entity arises?

Some philosophers have proposed that we give it a goal that is aligned with our interest, since it is unlikely that after becoming superintelligent, it will listen to us. However, even having a superintelligence with goals aligned with us, which machine ethicist Eliezer Yudkowsky terms "Friendly AI", is risky. If we give a Friendly AI some narrowly envisioned goal, it can result in serious trouble for humanity. Giving a goal to a Friendly AI to make everyone smile, for example, could result in unforeseen circumstances where the whole planet is immersed in laughing gas. Machine ethicists, thus, emphasise giving a well-thought-out goal to a superintelligence so that it does not accidentally harms or even destroys us.

What can we do to save ourselves from a superintelligence destroying us, consciously or unconsciously?

Yudkowsky offers an approach that honours our collective will and dignity. He argues that we should give such a goal to a Friendly AI that is based on our common morality, and will be beneficial for all of us in the long run. He further argues that this should not

be decided by a person or community alone, but the whole civilisation should have a say in it.

The hardest part of this solution is to find a common moral ground. It seems from the recent events that morality is somewhat going out of fashion. Or maybe that we have formed a diverse sense of morality for ourselves. Coming to a common moral understanding and developing a code will then be difficult for us. If we are to create a superintelligent entity that would be far more capable than we are, giving it a proper goal should be highly considered. Such a goal should have proper moral ingredients, otherwise, the superintelligent entity might not treat us the way we would like to be treated.

While the scientists work relentlessly on improving computational power to make our lives better, we must not rule out the possibility that a superintelligent entity is imminent. Specialists predict that a human-level machine intelligence will be invented by 2022-2075, which is within our lifetime. After that, the take-off to superintelligence could happen roughly within the next 2-30 years. This means that we do not have much time at our disposal. It is high time we started preparing for that and worked towards a consensus about what forms the basis of our moral values. Failing to do so before a superintelligence arrives might lead to very unfortunate conditions for our civilisation.

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ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY

AUGUST 2, 1990
IRAQ INVADES OIL-RICH KUWAIT

This invasion and Iraq's subsequent refusal to withdraw from Kuwait by a deadline mandated by the United Nations led to military intervention by a United Nations-authorised coalition of forces led by the United States.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Forays

6 Scarlett's last name

11 Cupid's missile

12 Ford's predecessor

13 Serenity

15 Leather color

16 Two some

17 Utter

18 A googol has

20 Arrested

23 Kind of pool

27 On the summit of

28 Curbside cry

29 Army healer

31 Like some jackets

32 Hawk's grasper

34 Toward the stern

37 Promise

38 Toast spread

41 Easy task

44 Slip

45 Accounting check

46 Colorless gas

47 Prom group

DOWN

1 All ears

2 Open space

3 Persia, today

4 Sawbones

5 Norway neighbor

6 One way to travel

7 That fellow

8 Line of symmetry

9 Writer Jaffe

10 Tennis star

Roddick

14 Owned by us

18 "Hush!"

19 Peaceful protest

20 Zodiac animal

21 Ignored a diet

22 Sign of approval

24 Dapper fellow

25 Log chopper

26 Pot cover

30 Bat abode

31 Yogurt choice

33 Old card game

34 Pinnacle

35 Forest danger

36 Small seabird

38 Green stone

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40 1969 World Series champs

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

C	R	A	B	A	L	I	T		
P	A	U	L	A	H	O	N	O	R
A	R	M	O	R	A	G	A	P	E
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BEETLE BAILEY

by Mort Walker

BABY BLUES

by Kirkman & Scott