

School meals can make a big difference

It will significantly incentivise going to school

We laud the government’s plan to provide daily meals for all 1.73 crore primary schools in order to increase attendance and reduce the number of dropouts. While enrolment of students has increased significantly over the years, keeping students in school has been a great challenge for the government. A nutritious meal in school could make all the difference for children of impoverished families. Many students come to school on an empty stomach which makes it difficult to concentrate on the lessons. This often leads to poor grades and children losing interest in studies—resulting in their dropping out. Last year attendance rate of primary students was 88 percent while the dropout rate was 20 percent.

The National Meal Policy 2019, if implemented successfully, has the potential to do wonders for the “education for all” goal. The draft proposal of the policy proposed hot meals five days a week and fortified biscuits on one day. Meals would include fortified rice, vegetable oil, locally grown vegetables and if possible, eggs. Locals and parents, especially mothers, will be involved in the programme which will, no doubt, make sure that it is run smoothly.

As in any large-scale programme, financing is obviously a challenge. Providing quality meals to all 1.73 crore schools will require kitchens in every school, along with cooks and other helpers as well as supervisors to monitor the quality of the food. The ministry is thinking of requesting businesses and banks to spend their CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) funds on this programme. This seems like a good idea but should not be the primary source of financing. The ministry must be able to allocate adequate budgets to make sure the quality and quantity of food provided is consistent throughout all schools. School feeding programmes within the country and outside have proven to improve attendance and keep students in school by improving concentration and interest in lessons. We sincerely hope that the government will go ahead with this policy and implement it on an urgent basis. It is definitely the right step in the endeavour to increase children’s access to education.

Forests and wildlife in danger

World governments should come up with a new global plan

A major report, “Below the Canopy”, jointly written by the conservation group World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and Zoological Society of London (ZSL), has brought to the fore some startling findings. The study found that the population of wildlife in the world’s forests has declined by more than half in just over four decades.

The study—the first-ever global assessment of forest biodiversity—sheds light on the utter destruction being inflicted on the world’s forests and wildlife by human beings. This is happening at a time when the threat of climate change is at its peak. And forests are integral to the containment of greenhouse gases among many other things (such as preservation of wildlife and biodiversity and maintaining food systems).

While the ground-breaking report states the dangers posed to the tropical forests of South America and Africa if large birds and primates were to disappear, we should pay heed to what is happening in our own backyard. Loss of species and deforestation in Bangladesh are taking place at an alarming rate—much of which is being caused by human activity. According to sources in the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, around 1.6 lakh acres of forest land have been handed over to government agencies and establishments, or used for development projects. Official data shows that Bangladesh only has 17.62 percent of its landmass covered by forests, which only points to the fact that it is near-impossible to achieve the government aim to stop deforestation by 2020 and have 20 percent of the landmass covered by forests by 2030 with 70 percent tree density as per the SDGs.

The obvious damage being done to our forests stems from a lack of sincere political will towards conservation efforts. The projects being carried out in the Sundarbans—recently declared a “World Heritage in Danger” by Unesco—are the best-known examples that constitute an utter neglect towards wildlife and biodiversity. The report authors have called for the heads of state to come up with a new global agreement at the 75th UN General Assembly meeting next year, which we believe is timely as well as necessary. The world is in the midst of a climate emergency, and the Bangladesh government too should pay heed to conservationists and environmentalists and reverse the destructive steps being taken towards the environment.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Agartala Airport expanding into Bangladesh

India has proposed to upgrade and expand its Agartala Airport into Bangladeshi territory in Brahmanbaria. Although a detailed technical proposal is yet to be made, this should be dealt with, keeping in mind the political and security issues.

Although some European airports, like Geneva International Airport, operate over the boundaries of two or three countries and seem to function well, the situation is different for South Asian countries. The government should take this decision, given a proper proposal is made at all, with great care, weighing up the pros and cons of allowing India to use our land in such a way.

If it comes to pass, then many people may have to leave their homes near the boundary between the two countries, the repercussions of which may be hard to curtail. International relations experts have also warned how this may affect public sentiment.

Plus, the whole process of how it will be carried out should be formulated explicitly in order to avoid technical problems from both sides.

Fariha Maimuna, University of Dhaka

NAMIA AKHTAR

THE myriad stories of sexual assault that flood my Facebook feed are reflections of the sexism and misogyny that are deeply ingrained in our social fabric. These are inescapably omnipresent in every walk of life palpable in women’s invisibility. It seems that women do not exist, and even if they do, they are very few in number, sending a clear message that the public space is for men to occupy.

Every time I visit Dhaka, I wonder, “Why there are so few women on the streets?” Is it the invisibility of women that makes the street unsafe for us? Perhaps it does. In other cities of the world that I have visited, I found equal presence of men and women on the streets. I do not feel unsafe taking a walk even after midnight, when I am abroad. There is no one to gawk at me, no one to utter rude remarks.

At my new home in Europe, no one even bothers to stare at women in bikinis, let alone assault them sexually. However, in my home country, I feel unsafe—unsafe to walk alone, or take the public bus. I am afraid even if I am wearing a burqa, a sari or a salwar kameez—what if I get assaulted? Who will protect me?

The police refused to file Nusrat’s case saying it was a “no big deal”. Only after a nationwide campaign protesting her murder was the police officer sacked and her case brought to the court. Sadly, she found no justice when she was alive. In this country, rapists and sexual predators are usually allowed to go scot-free. Instead, I have seen victims being blamed for violating the rules of invisibility and for taking control over their bodies.

The victims of the 2015 *Pahela Baishakh* sexual assault, allegedly committed by some members of the ruling party’s student wing, were criticised for wearing makeup and saris and for taking part in the Baishakh celebrations, while the perpetrators were not brought to justice.

Tonu was accused of similar charges, for not covering her face; and Rupa, for travelling late at night. In all the cases, the perpetrators have been allowed to walk free, while the victims were blamed. There simply was no strong political will to punish the rapists. This is how the law of our land works—letting criminals walk free.

Neither the society nor the state is there to protect victims of rape or sexual assault. On the contrary, there have been incidents where the police have assaulted rape survivors. State institutions are essential for the implementation of laws. But according to a TIB report, our

law enforcement agencies are the most corrupt in the country. So, where do we seek help when the state and society turn their back on us?

In our gender-segregated society, rape and other forms of sexual assault are normalised as boys are introduced to women through commercial Bangla films and pornography. A majority of teenage boys grow up perceiving women through the lens of pornography, where women are treated as sex objects to satisfy the male fantasy. Among male circles, women are repeatedly referred to as *maal* (commodity).

Perhaps the root of this problem lies



in the way we educate our sons and daughters. We are preoccupied with the daughter-guarding mindset putting unprecedented restrictions on their mobility and sexuality from childhood. The female body is strictly regulated by the binary construction of appropriate and inappropriate attire. I have been to places where women are skimpily clothed, but no one bothers to scrutinise their bodies. However, in conservative Bangladesh, where a woman is dressed from top to bottom, she is frequently subjected to sexual harassment. The safety of bikini-clad women in European

beaches and the vulnerability of burqa-clad women in our country show that attire is not responsible for a woman being raped; it is the people’s mindset that is.

On the opposite side of the spectrum, sons are brought up with unlimited freedom of mobility. They are allowed to explore their mobility and sexuality without much restriction. Parents do not regulate their sons’ pornography watching habits or restrict them from using degrading words to describe women.

A friend of mine complained that her husband’s “friends” used to send him pornographic images until she blocked

silently suffered because their husbands had affairs—no protest ever took place for them. When a disabled woman is repeatedly raped for months and goes through the horror of abortion, it is considered unfortunate, but men do not take to the streets demanding punishment for the rapist. These are the double-standards within which our society operates.

Decency upholds an individual’s self-esteem, and “maleness” needs to be redefined as a man’s ability to accommodate modesty. We need to teach our boys that the strength of a man is reflected in his self-control, not in

If It Ain’t Broke...



HUMOROUSLY YOURS
NAVEED MAHBUB

Aedes carry out their (supposedly) lethal, low altitude air strikes on all the couples of all the species on board that are known to mankind. Which begs the question, wasn’t there some equivalent of the TSA (Transportation Security Administration) that could have denied boarding rights to the red-tailed flying falcons? And mind it, it is no exaggeration to compare the red-tail to the red-cape of Superman, for the red “NS1” logo, surely visible under a magnifying glass, stands for “One Nefarious Superman”...

Yes, yes, a healthy couple of every

species must be on board, but does that mean every VARIANT too? Weren’t the Anopheles enough for posterity—to drive us insane with their nocturnal philharmonic orchestra at the symphony hall called the human earlobe? Weren’t they enough to maintain the ecological balance and keep the toads happy? We humans would gladly have traded dengue for malaria, as it came to America choosing between Clinton and Trump.

But no, they, the Aedis, made it on board, probably sailing first class into posterity. I can well imagine how they drove every other species on board up the wall, or should I say, the railings, as they played history’s first day and night match—Aedes during the day, Anopheles at night. And no, no clapping! That could squat the maestros—the Anopheles, the Culex and especially the Aedes must be allowed to continue with their all you can suck buffet. For these couples are on a triple date, this is their honeymoon on the Carnival Cruise and no one, not even the mightiest, or the strongest, or the tallest, or

the fiercest, are allowed to touch them with a 10-foot pole of a mosquito zapper.

After the deluge, the Ark makes landfall. The mosquito lives through time to become our blood relative, literally speaking. For they have our blood in them, and our blood has our formalin. That’s not to say that to the mosquitos, the spray is totally bull, in fact, to them, it is actually *Red Bull*.

So, like every year, the Aedes storm troopers are back—better, stronger, faster. In comparison, Count Dracula pales into insignificance. Amidst all the negatives around us, they present us with the only thing that is positive—NS1.

But we have taken measures, albeit reactively. After all, if it ain’t broke, why fix it? It’s too much effort to be proactive, right?

So, aside from the blitzkrieg of sprays, combatant mosquitos are being brought in from the UK, perhaps as part of Brexit, which don’t bite, but sure can give love bites as they are expected to be enamoured with the local female

Aedis (sorry local Aedis studs, you lose out to your fair and handsome, Anglo-Saxon, expat counterparts), then have khaki coloured kids. And guess what, the progeny will not carry the dengue virus.

Yay! But that is the grand scheme. It’s like we are building luxury apartments in Baridhara (which, by the way, apparently has the largest concentration of Aedes larvae), asking them to be occupied by people for free and not only that, providing them around the clock room service, again, gratis, and then, all of a sudden, we want them out of there.

That is the hospitality we have accorded to the Aedes—providing them with a plethora of stagnant water to breed in. Perhaps we can check under our refrigerators for the “likes” accorded by the Aedes on to the accumulated condensates as often as we check the “likes” on our Facebook statuses. Perhaps we can take care to ensure the Baldha Gardens we are building on our balconies and rooftops do not end up becoming Hatirjheel. Perhaps we can keep an eye on the water reservoir that we are using to build 10 storied apartments, hoping that the Aedes won’t fly that high up (think again!). Let’s take an effort beyond just washing our cars and then drying up our compounds, only to have the roads inherit the stagnant water. Let’s take a peek at our flower vases...There is SO MUCH we, as individuals, can do to not create the romantic bedrooms for the Aedes.

But for now, they are here. So, let’s now get *Odomos*, if we can afford it, that is. For it is now a rare commodity fit to be displayed only in glass showcases under lock and key, under the scrutiny of CCTV cameras, sold as “bhoris”, weighed on the gold scale, smuggled in through Dhaka Airport by way of human orifices, transported in G4S armoured vehicles, escorted by armed guards...The *Odomos* seller is in a blood sucking contest with the Aedes. There is one difference between them though, the Aedis sucks blood only during the daytime.

Anyway, we play the game of Russian Roulette, hoping against hope that we are not on the lunch menu of the Aedes. Meanwhile, go have some green papaya, supposedly it’s good for your platelet count. As to what you want to increase in your blood stream, the choice is yours—platelet or formalin...

Naveed Mahbub is a former engineer at Ford & Qualcomm USA, the former CEO of IBM & Nokia Networks Bangladesh turned comedian (by choice), the host of ATN Bangla’s *The Naveed Mahbub Show* and the founder of *Naveed’s Comedy Club*.
Email: Naveed@NaveedMahbub.com

