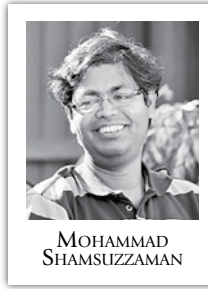


So, you want to kill the university?



WHEN the lockdown was imposed because of the Covid-19 pandemic in March, I shifted to online teaching at a university here in Dhaka. Having taught online for several months, I almost love it now! I confess that my preparation in online teaching was inadequate. I struggled. I defaulted to the assumption that teaching is a face-to-face activity. Shifting teaching away from a university is akin to severing the soul from the body. It's a symbolic death, the death of a university. If, however, universities are indeed in an existential crisis, the pandemic might not be the cause. It might instead be the final straw. Way before the pandemic, universities were losing steam in the pecking order of essential human infrastructures.

As the pandemic exposes, education is no longer the priority of the governments around the globe. The economy is. When the governments worldwide started to re-open following the lockdown, bars and factories as well as courts and sports stirred back into operation. When, however, it comes to education, they are full of waffles about re-opening, as it ranges from fall this year to spring next year to until a vaccine arrives.

How about if an effective vaccine never arrives? We still don't have a vaccine for HIV. In our prostrate surrender to the Covid-19 pandemic and to a possible vaccine lies the absurdity of our time. When the governments around the globe decide that allowing adults to drink is more important than educating their children, they are already perverse. Likewise, when the governments see schools, not garment factories, as a potential health threat, they are uneducated to the point of criminality. Under such circumstances, a university is a perfunctory entity. Who cares about whether a university is on-site or online? Well, students do! Professor Lisa Feldman Barrett in her essay "College Courses Online Are Disappointing: Here's How to Fix it" in the *New York Times* cites a recent survey that claims that 75 percent of students in the US find online educational experiences disappointing. I assume that students in Bangladesh would react alike about

online teaching. And yet the shift to online is lauded by some sceptics of the current university system as a transition already overdue. They claim that the current university system is elitist because it provides for those who come from comfortable economic and intellectual backgrounds. And because the current university system has been stable for centuries, it is dated. This dated system is not aligned to the frequencies of a world that renews its techniques and technologies, as well as its missions and ambitions, every nano second. We live in a whole new world that values education differently. This new world considers a university a service centre, where teachers are instructors and students are clients. Mentoring is replaced with training; enlightenment is replaced with skill acquisition. In this dispensation, an ideal education leads to immediate employment. The current university system falls short on that front. For example, a 2014 Gallup survey found that only 11 percent of business leaders believed that university graduates had the skills their workplaces needed. If 79 percent of business leaders find college graduates ineligible for employment, education must bear the brunt of public criticism. So, the clamour for a new version of education gains momentum.

And the vocal advocates of this version of education are almost always the technocrats. They want education redefined, and the current university system replaced. Elon Musk, the founder and CEO of SpaceX, for example, in a 2008 interview defined learning as follows—"You're basically downloading data and algorithms into your brain." In the same interview, Musk further suggested that education would be better if it were more like a computer game.

If Musk sounds insightful here, he was surpassed by another technology honcho, Marc Prensky. Back in 2001, Prensky published a two-part essay, "Digital Immigrant, Digital Natives," in which he claims that today's students are no longer the people our education system was designed to teach. Today's students, the digital natives, are so deeply immersed in technology that their learning styles, strategies and even brain structures, are different. Teachers, the digital immigrants, must be adequately technology literate to teach the digital natives. Prensky reduces the disciplinary diversity in education

to two terms: "legacy content" (reading, writing, and logical thinking) and "future context" (science and technology). He suggested that regardless of the content, teaching it effectively presupposes inventing a computer game as the primary means of teaching. So, what is the version of education in general they propose, downloading and displaying?

Yes, apparently! If you would like to throw a spanner into this version of education because it reduces education to information

for some of their most highly skilled positions, as Professor Michael D Smith claims in his essay in *The Atlantic*, "Are Universities Going the Ways of CDs and Cable TV"?

What, however, convinces Professor Smith of the inevitable correlation between employment and education? Blaming unemployment on education is akin to blaming the Internet for causing the Covid-19 pandemic. There's no cause-and-effect relation here. Education doesn't cause unemployment. Economics and politics do. When we scapegoat

universities. Universities are not mere concrete edifices. These are intellectual monuments built over centuries. So resourceful and rigorous is the university system these days that it can guide any of its recruits to the limit of her potential. We no longer wait for the random arrival of geniuses like Claudius Ptolemy, Panini and Ibn Khaldun. Thanks to the university system, we depend on a steady supply of talents like Stephen Hawking, Noam Chomsky and Amartya Sen. Dismantling the university system is intellectually suicidal for our civilisation. Universities must continue to exist for the most part exactly as they are now. Even blending online with on-site is a consequential concession.

So, how do we address the mismatch between pristine education and post-modern technology? Education and technology have never been bed-fellows. They often conflict. Technology emerges and evolves much faster than education. While education develops bit by bit, technology arrives and frequently disappears instantly. For example, around 2005 I first started using floppy and shifted from flash-drive to hard-drive to Google drive. I found all these technologies utterly unreliable, and when I shifted from one mode to another, I had to deal with new forms of digital disruption. Exasperated, I sometimes wonder why Einstein's relativity theories, formulated around 1905, don't spawn frequent alternative versions, whereas Steve Jobs's iPhone, which emerged in 2007, already has at least 20 different versions. Can something that can change and fade away so fast be the foundation of education?

If you answer in the negative, you might apprehend that what dictatorship does to democracy, technology attempts to do to education—it strips education of collective voice and vision. It essentialises some individuals and institutions. These individuals are technocrats, not intellectuals; and these institutions are IT farms, not universities. That's a steady development, which portends the death of genuine universities. Should we allow the technically proficient to use the pandemic as an excuse to kill our universities? No! What we're left with because of the pandemic is an ersatz university. The sooner it disappears, the better.

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PHOTO: COLLECTED

management and visuals, hold on. It's already been a decade since some of the universities around the globe leaned enthusiastically in that direction. The rise of MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) is a revolution in education given that they're already widespread, popular and useful. MOOCs have flipped the definition and dissemination of education, for they're not time- and space-bound. They, instead, bring about a whenever, whatever, and wherever version of education. MOOCs are course- and skill-specific, unlike a university-sponsored education, which is programme and specialisation specific. And why do we need a degree from a prestigious university when employers such as Google, Apple, IBM and Ernst & Young have stopped requiring traditional university degrees, even

education for economic and political failures, we don't recognise what education is and does. Education is an ethical, intellectual and humane capital that prepares us for a richer and fuller life to draw on and contribute to the legacy of knowledge, peace and prosperity. Ideally, education envisions and accomplishes these functions independent of employment. However, because education empowers us to transform society at large, it presupposes civic engagement. Employment is but one form of civic engagement with economic implications. An educated person is critical to any economy. It will engage and sustain her, with or without employment. The connection between employment and education is incidental. Unemployment, therefore, doesn't justify the slow-motion disintegration of the

PROJECT SYNDICATE

A Covid-19 bridge over troubled water?

It seems likely that the Covid-19 crisis will increase demand for cleaner, safer water and more reliable and effective wastewater treatment everywhere. But success is far from guaranteed, not least because the pandemic also seems to be strengthening another trend: declining trust in public institutions.

CECILIA TORTAJADA and ASIT K BISWAS

THE Covid-19 pandemic is likely to transform our behaviours, attitudes and policies in many areas. For the sake of overcoming the public health crisis and enabling economic recovery, one must hope that water and wastewater management will be among them.

Delivering clean water and ensuring proper wastewater management has been a global concern since the late 1970s. Significant progress towards this objective was made during the 1980s, which the United Nations declared the International Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation Decade. But the ultimate goal—to ensure that every human on the planet had access to clean water and sanitation by 1990—was not achieved.

The world tried again in 2000, with the less ambitious Millennium Development Goal (MDG) target of halving the share of the population without sustainable access to clean water and sanitation by 2015. This time, the UN declared victory, but included anyone with access to water at all—clean or not.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted by the UN's members in 2015, were supposed to pick up where the MDGs left off. Again, the target is clean water and proper sanitation for all. The deadline this time is 2030. But, as in the past, the barriers to success are formidable.

When the SDGs were introduced, the UN estimated that 785 million people worldwide lacked access to "even a basic drinking water service." The true number is probably far larger. According to UNICEF and the World Health Organization (WHO), some 2.2 billion people do not have safely managed drinking



PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN / STAR

Bangladesh is no stranger to worries about water supply. In May 2019, residents of Jurain took to the streets to protest against unsafe water being supplied by Wasa.

water services, and 4.2 billion do not have safely managed sanitation services.

Contaminated water and poor sanitation are linked to transmission of diseases—such as cholera, diarrhea, dysentery, hepatitis A, typhoid and polio—that affect hundreds of millions of people every year. Making matters worse, nearly 25 percent of healthcare facilities worldwide lack even basic water services.

This is not a developing economy problem. In the United States, for example, two million people do not have access to piped water. Moreover, the water that people do receive often does not qualify as clean or safe: the high profile cases of Flint, Michigan and Walkerton, Canada—where people are suffering long-term health problems, and even premature death,

owing to contaminated water—make that abundantly clear.

Not surprisingly, such incidents have eroded trust in water utilities. Today, at least 3.5 billion people worldwide—in both developed and developing countries—lack confidence in the quality of the water they receive. In South Asia, with over 1.7 billion people, there is not a single town or city where people trust their water utilities. Those who can, often rely on bottled water or point-of-use water treatment systems.

The Covid-19 crisis could be a turning point. Yes, universal access to clean water and sanitation has been on the world's radar since the late 1970s. But the current pandemic has made it a universal interest. While frequent

hand washing is widely regarded as one of the most effective ways to prevent the transmission of Covid-19, the UNICEF/WHO estimate implies that three billion people worldwide lack the facilities to do so. And with the pandemic underscoring the link between clean water and public health, the bar for what qualifies as "clean" has been raised.

The Covid-19 crisis is also changing how people think about wastewater—a resource that has been grossly undervalued in the past. As some cities have recognised, properly treated wastewater can be channelled toward human, industrial, agricultural and environmental uses. Wastewater is also a valuable source of energy, but very few utilities worldwide use it that way.

Overall, developed country cities have a much better record when it comes to collecting and treating wastewater. But even they are not realising its full potential. As the WHO has noted, analysis of wastewater's composition can provide reliable information on pathogens and chemicals at the population level. In 1989, Israel introduced wastewater surveillance to measure the spread of poliovirus strains that could cause poliomyelitis.

Now, wastewater analysis is emerging as an important way to assess community spread of Covid-19. Contaminated, untreated wastewater itself does not appear to pose a transmission risk. But it offers a means of gauging infection rates in communities, and a possible early warning system for new outbreaks.

In the Netherlands, traces of the Covid-19 coronavirus were detected in untreated wastewater six days before the first case was reported. Traces were detected in untreated wastewater in the Swiss city of Lugano when only one case had been confirmed, and in

Zurich after only six infections. Wastewater surveillance showed that community transmission in Valencia, Spain began earlier than previously believed.

Australia, which has also detected the virus in untreated wastewater, now plans to carry out routine testing to anticipate outbreaks. Tokyo has already begun to take weekly samples from untreated and treated sewage. Samples from 15 sewage treatment plants will be frozen and stored until methods for extracting and analysing the virus are established. In Singapore, the National Environment Agency has initiated a pilot surveillance programme to screen wastewater samples. Crucially, such approaches can work only in places with effective wastewater collection and management.

It seems likely that the Covid-19 crisis will increase demand for cleaner, safer water and more reliable and effective wastewater treatment everywhere. This could accelerate progress toward the SDG on water and wastewater. But success is far from guaranteed, not least because the pandemic also seems to be strengthening another trend: declining trust in public institutions. Changing this will require water utilities all over the world to improve their management and communication practices significantly.

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ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY



AUGUST 8, 1974
Resignation of US President Nixon

Faced with the near-certain prospect of impeachment for his role in the Watergate scandal, US President Richard M Nixon announced his resignation on this day in 1974 and was succeeded by Gerald Ford the following day.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Havana native
- 6 Blubbers
- 11 Love, to Luigi
- 12 Paintball cry
- 13 Fancy feather
- 14 Book part
- 15 Corn unit
- 16 Bedroom sight
- 18 Massage
- 19 Attack command
- 20 Mo. neighbor
- 21 Word on an octagon
- 23 Mink's cousin
- 25 Negative link
- 27 Utter
- 28 Colorful flower
- 30 Tears
- 33 Drama division

- 34 Visibility lessener
- 36 Use pews
- 37 Stole seller
- 39 Summer sign
- 40 Clarifying words
- 41 Arkansas' Plateau
- 43 "Superman" star
- 44 Shilling change
- 45 Door sign
- 46 Finished

DOWN

- 1 Frolics
- 2 German vowel
- 3 French Quarter site
- 4 Ulna's place
- 5 Calls for
- 6 Cuts in two
- 7 Guitar boosters
- 8 Site of a Cleveland park
- 9 Straight
- 10 Exacting
- 17 2016 Olympics host
- 22 Cook's need
- 24 Road goop
- 26 Oil company
- 28 Shrewdness
- 29 Eurasian deer
- 31 Use an awl
- 32 Excited
- 33 Burning
- 35 Search blindly
- 38 Gushing review
- 42 Meditative school



YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

C R O C W A G O N
R O D E C A N I N E
A M E N R I G G E D
B E S T C A S E
M A Y A N S D O E
E X A L T M A I Z E
A L P B O N N E T
T E S T B A N S
O N F I L E E S A U
R E A C T S R E P S
B O N E S S E E K

BEETLE BAILEY

BY MORT WALKER



BABY BLUES

BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT



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