

## Making sure children get their textbooks on time

*Pandemic constraints make govt's commitment even more laudable*

We applaud the government for its successful distribution of free textbooks among students of classes six to nine starting from the first day of the new year. After a devastating year of battling the Covid-19 pandemic that has been a great blow to school students especially, this is the best news we could get on January 1. To be able to distribute new textbooks among 4.5 crore primary and secondary students free of cost is no mean feat and demonstrates the government's commitment and determination to continue this programme no matter what the circumstances. While this year such a happy event did not see the usual festivity and fanfare it does every year due to the pandemic restrictions, just getting these books have brought smiles to the children.

The way the books are being distributed displays the sensible and careful steps taken by the government to avoid further spread of the virus. Instead of the usual book festival, the formal inauguration by the Prime Minister took place through a video conference from the Gono Bhaban. To avoid crowds gathering, the books will be given at the student's respective school within 12 days following the health guidelines.

We cannot emphasise enough how important it is for these students to get their textbooks this year. Children have not gone to school for almost a whole year now and while TV and online classes have been arranged, for many students they have not been accessible for various reasons. This is especially true for children in remote areas such as in the char areas. Many children have lost their interest in school, others have started working to help out their families. This huge gap in education will be difficult to overcome and will require hard work and innovative strategies from our educators and policymakers.

It is disorienting for children not to follow the usual school routine that chalks out their day and also gives them a chance to socialise. Getting their textbooks on time like before gives a semblance of normalcy and also will allow them to be in touch with their studies even though schools are closed. Self-study should be encouraged amongst children by their school teachers and parents. It is still not known when schools will open given that the pandemic is still raging on. At this time the relevant ministry must engage with the schools to come up with innovative approaches so that the loss of education can be made up and the current school year can go on smoothly. For instance, teachers can be in touch with their students through mobile phones. The challenges are many but they must be met to make sure children can continue to learn. The success of the textbook distribution demonstrates how government's commitment and efficient use of its resources can bring about remarkable achievements.

## Who will recoup Arman's five lost years?

*A case of mistaken identity!*

ARMAN'S is a story that will make a good cinema plot because such things can only happen in a tragic novel, or so we think. In Bangladesh, this happens in real life too. Unfortunately there have been far too many cases of mistaken identity by the police which have sent the wrong persons to jail. And in certain cases these unfortunate persons had to spend several years behind bars, before the mistake was established in the High Court, all because of the fault of the investigating agencies. The case of Bablu Sheikh is too recent to forget. This man had to fight a legal battle for 17 long years before he was finally cleared of charges, in Oct 2019, for a crime he did not commit. According to reports in this daily, it was a case of mistaken identity with him being taken for an accused in a case. And the shoddy work of ACC investigators cost Jaha Alam three years of his life.

Mohammad Arman's is another such case which suggests that the reprobation from the higher courts have made little difference in the way that investigating agencies go about their job. Arman had to languish in jail for five years. But his is not a case of mistaken identity only. His whereabouts were unknown for five days when his family members discovered that he was in hospital in police custody, recovering from the rough treatment by the police to force him to accept his guilt. Even his NID was not enough to convince the investigating officer that Arman was the wrong person.

We are happy to note that the High Court has directed the IGP to compensate Arman for his travails and tribulations. But should it have taken five long years to establish that Arman was the wrong person to be incarcerated? While the money can be a solace to some extent, can it give him back the five years that he suffered in jail, and the agonising five years his family suffered in his absence? There should be strong disincentives for investigating officers to commit such grave errors. Merely paying up the compensation money is not enough of deterrence. We believe that in such cases the investigating officer(s) should be held culpable and put through the course of law.

# A year of anger, with reason



ANDREW SHENG

THE end of the year is a good time to reflect. The devastating pandemic marked a year few of us would ever forget.

This was a year of deep anger with ourselves, our fate, with other people and with the government. We were angry for good reasons, but more so with reason itself. Instead of the Age of Science and Technology, which could conquer disease, prolong our lives and remove social injustices, nearly half the people do not believe in masks, sound medical advice, vaccines or even the daily news.

Science therefore doesn't provide all the answers. If rationality succumbs to irrationality, emotion and anger will shape our choices for the future.

We have been here before. In 1637, amidst the horrendous Thirty Years War (1618-1648) and outbreaks of European plagues, the French philosopher Rene Descartes and his generation despaired over religion and human fate. They embarked on logic and science that transformed Europe to master technology. Specialisation in logic, mathematics and knowledge became successful, because science stripped emotion and humanity out of the search for "objective truth". The discovery of steam and fossil fuels created industrial power. Power generated wealth. Wealth and technology generated concentration, inequality and more power.

By 1776, economics had become the leading social science, with Adam Smith finding laws that revealed truths about the Wealth of Nations. Economics emulated the physical sciences. But politically, the French and American revolutions promised liberty, equality and fraternity. Ignoring the politics, economics became more and more quantitative (scientific) that economists offered mastery over development and growth. Neoclassical economics assumed with perfect markets that the economy was self-balancing, giving both order, efficiency and stability.

The current neoliberal order was founded on democracy, free markets, rule of law and technology, entrepreneurship and innovation. Francis Fukuyama's End of History (1990) assumed that these self-evident truths would lead to a better world. What we got instead was the Revenge of History—that inequality, crime, corruption, political decay, monopolies, distrust and anger came back to haunt us. By 2020, the pandemic confirmed the worst—that technology reinforced concentration, that the rich were more protected against the pandemic and that the poor were most exposed to death and disease because they did all the essential jobs.

Trust was lost because the pandemic unveiled injustices where justice was promised. To regain it, politicians now



People clash with police during a protest against government measures to combat the coronavirus, in Campo De' Fiori, Rome, Italy, October 31.

PHOTO: REUTERS

beat the drums of war to avoid being blamed for their own incompetence of restoring order.

In 1981, the American inventor Buckminster Fuller (1895-1983) argued that humanity must tread along the Critical Path between the existential threats of nuclear war and climate change. For a while, the nuclear threat faded because of the demise of the Soviet Union in 1989, but today, that critical path remains as relevant as ever. We cannot ignore the fact that the pandemic is the interactive result of climate change, globalisation and human interaction with bats and other viral hosts.

With more deaths from the pandemic than the Second World War, the United States is both angry and hurt. The Democrats and Republicans alike are pushing the "Reset" button, but with major differences. Both hark back to a "golden age" that may never return, but with starkly different visions. Without explicitly saying so, the Republicans appeal to a return to white supremacy in power, whereas the Democrats call for a return to the values of liberty amidst diversity. Across the Atlantic, Brexit also represented an emotional response to national sovereignty over European economic integration.

Thus, the centrifugal forces of tribalism are tearing nations apart, creating more disorder than order. Protests, rebellions

and polarisation have risen throughout this decade, according to the global unrest index. This is a dangerous time for all.

What is the solution to our current existential condition? The central thesis of neoliberal market economics is Hayek's political observation that "markets have self-order" and that authoritarianism leads to serfdom. US President Reagan cast that as "government is not the solution to our problems; government is the problem". In other words, the solution is a political choice: either more government intervention or market-driven forces.

After the pandemic, however, most business leaders at the World Economic Forum have judged government intervention positively. Very few are against governments increasing their role because of government bail-outs. Hence, the concentration of power is increasing, rather than decreasing.

But there are fundamental differences in worldviews on how to deal with these power concentrations. The American approach is that democracy will act on technological monopolies through anti-trust laws. Surprisingly, it is the Chinese government that is the first to act against monopolies in tech platforms.

Impatience over quick fixes also push preferences for vaccines and resets, hoping for "silver bullet" solutions that fixes everything quickly. But Asians know from

experience that the virus will mutate faster than vaccines can be discovered. Vaccines themselves are not 100 percent effective, so we can never eliminate it, only live with it. This is why vaccines are less important than social distancing practiced widely.

Complexity thinking suggest that anger and reason are two sides of humanity that cannot be separated. Competition and cooperation co-exist simultaneously, just as crisis and opportunity are inseparable. In that sense, economics, politics, philosophy and technology are deeply entangled with each other, so to assume that a part can explain the whole is fallacious. Humanity and science are not binary opposites, but are part of the whole eco-system of life.

In short, our future depends not just on science and reason, but on our values. If we value human life, then we should cooperate for the future, even as we compete. The glass is always half full or empty, and 2021 promises as much hope, as well as anger or despair.

As the poet, Alexander Pope (1688-1744) wrote, "To err is human, to forgive, divine."

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## Rice price conundrum



ASM JAHANGIR

AN abrupt increase in rice price has produced deep concern and confusion among policymakers. The concern stems from its negative impact on access to sufficient food grains on the less

fortunate population with the prospect of plunging the nation's food security situation to an alarming level. The confusion, on the other hand, is caused by the occurrence of the price spike in spite of apparent availability of abundant rice with private sector traders.

Plummeting purchasing power stemming from increased rice price is likely to significantly lower per capita daily calorie consumption of the population hovering around the poverty line. This dent in per capita calorie consumption is likely to push many more below the poverty line.

Stability in food grain prices is quintessential in countries where a considerable portion of calorie is sourced from cereals. In Bangladesh, nearly 70 percent of the calorie requirement is met from cereal, most of which comes from rice. Therefore, how crucial a role the stability of rice price plays in ensuring relative food security is easily discernible.

The reason behind sourcing a large proportion of calorie intake from cereals in developing countries is largely economic as cereal happens to be the cheapest source of calorie. In developed nations, hardly 40-50 percent of calorie requirement is sourced from cereals. The rest comes from other rather pricy food like meat, fat and fruits. Vegetables, a rich source of micronutrients essential for better utilisation of other food, however, contain sparse amount of calories.

Regarding the confusion, statistically there should be plenty of rice supplies with the traders from what they procured from the preceding and ongoing harvests. Market price of a commodity, however, is not always determined by the two protagonists in the market—demand and supply. Speculations also play a significant part and at times distort commodity prices. Most speculations

stem from certain rational factors but some are completely baseless.

To counter market speculations and to ensure sufficient market supplies during shortages, the parastatals in nation states hold a predetermined amount of security stock of products vital for the individual nations. In the US, the government holds a considerable amount of fossil fuel to contain abnormal price increase due to either supply crunch or market

with umpteen sellers and buyers is next to impossible. It's only possible in monopolistic or oligopolistic markets where there is either one seller or a few sellers and many buyers.

There must be some other reasons that are playing a role in the spike in rice price. The present government-held food security stock is reportedly a mere 700,000 MT, way below the recommended 1.3 million MT. The

bound to be counterproductive. Besides lowering supplies available for immediate consumption, it sends a wrong signal to the market causing further distortion in market price.

To resolve the rice price conundrum, the government should take immediate measures to import sufficient rice on its own to replenish its food security stock. It should better look for sources who are capable of making expeditious



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speculations.

During my time with USAID/Bangladesh ending in 1997, the recommended level of food security stock for Bangladesh was 900,000 MT. It was subsequently increased to 1.3 million MT to meet any emergencies or to have a firm grip on market prices. The government intervened in the market with sufficient supplies whenever the rice price went 20 percent above the official government procurement price. The intent was to stabilise the price at a level affordable for the low-income population.

Colluding with the aim of artificiality controlling market price in a market

traders therefore got an opportunity to test the government's ability to effectively intervene in the food grain market by slowing down release of their stocks in the market. They are also perhaps envisioning a lower than expected aman production this season and much lower rice production in the upcoming boro season given the worsening Covid-19 situation.

The government is busy procuring rice instead of injecting whatever limited amount they could to increase market supplies to contain the price hike. In a situation of short supply, siphoning off large amounts from the market is

shipments. Also, the government must shun procuring from the domestic market to ensure ready availability of relatively larger rice supplies for the consumers.

Furthermore, appropriate measures must be taken to encourage increased rice import in the private sector until the rice price stabilises. One such measure the government may consider is waiving import duty on rice import for a period of time. It may decide to reimpose appropriate import duty on rice once the supply situation improves.

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