

Bangladesh needs the vaccines on time

We hope India will honour its deal with Bangladesh

THE news of India banning the export of Oxford University-AstraZeneca coronavirus vaccine for two months has justifiably created some serious concerns and confusion in Bangladesh. Will we or will we not receive the three crore doses of the much-sought-after vaccine from India's Serum Institute on time, as we have so far been led to believe?

According to Bangladesh's foreign minister, "as the deal was done on the basis of discussion at the highest level", i.e. between the prime ministers of the two countries, no ban that India implements will be applied to Bangladesh. And so, the first 50 lakh doses should come in next month as scheduled, and 50 lakh more doses should continue to come in every month until the three crore doses in total are delivered. The health minister too has reassured that to be the case. To that end, Bangladesh government is set to make half the payment in advance.

The source of the confusion has been a comment made by the CEO of Serum, who said that the vaccine had been granted emergency authorisation by the Indian regulator on the condition that Serum only gives the vaccine to the Indian government for the time being. On November 5, Serum Institute and Beximco Pharmaceuticals signed an agreement through which the three crore vaccines were to be delivered to Bangladesh. But if Serum is only allowed to give the vaccine to the Indian government, and not sell any in the private market, how is that supposed to affect the aforementioned deal?

In a statement released yesterday, however, the CEO of Serum communicated his company's intent to develop, manufacture and supply Covid-19 vaccines for India and the world. The statement further read: "Vaccines are a global public health good and they have the power to save lives"—and that export of vaccines is permitted to all countries. We hope that is indeed the case, and that Bangladesh gets the vaccines as per the original timetable.

The coronavirus pandemic has already done massive damage to Bangladesh, and the light at the end of the tunnel can emerge only from the quick availability and distribution of a safe and effective vaccine. The potential delivery of the vaccines is not just a trivial matter that can be ironed out over months. For Bangladesh, a solution has to be found as soon as possible.

With that in mind, we hope that India will honour its agreement with Bangladesh and deliver all the vaccines on time. However, as experts have suggested, when it comes to acquiring the vaccines, putting all our eggs in one basket is an unwise idea. And, therefore, the government should, first, figure out what is really going on with regards to India banning the exports of the vaccine from Serum Institute; and second, it should look for alternative sources either as a substitute in case something goes wrong with the deal, or in order to bring in even greater numbers of vaccine doses should the deal ultimately go through.

High Court's laudatory observations on BB

Bangladesh Bank governor should act to rectify the system

WE cannot thank the High Court enough for pinpointing the main reason why our banking sector in particular, and the financial sector in general, have come to the nadir of efficiency. Unfortunately, some of the gatekeepers have become sponsors and saviours of poachers and robbers.

The Court has expressed something that was common knowledge but never so bluntly articulated, and it is worth reproducing their observations that go into the heart of the problem. Not only have the justices said that a section of Bangladesh Bank officials, tasked with monitoring the activities of banks and financial institutions, have been harbouring financial thugs for personal gains, they have also pulled up and upbraided specific officials by appointment for dereliction of duty contributing to the country's economic and financial woes. Instead of keeping the commercial banks and financial institutions on a tight leash, they have acquiesced to some of these banks and financial institutions wreaking havoc on the nation's economic security.

The ailing financial sector has occupied a major chunk of time of our economists and think tanks for a long time. The banks and consumer financial firms in particular find regular headlines in the media. Poor management, loss-making banks recouped with public money, adding more and more banks in spite of so many private banks doing so poorly—all betray the lack of due diligence of the central bank. But the situation would not have come to such a pass if those mentioned by the High Court bench would have done their job and earned their keep honestly.

There is hardly a need to recount the consequences of their complicity in the mess. The most deleterious has been the thousands of crores of taka siphoned off to other countries. We believe that those officials of the central bank that have failed to do their duty and those who have actively connived with the financial thugs are responsible for the loss of public money, and should be made to suffer the consequences.

We would also hope that the governor of Bangladesh Bank would note the observation of the High Court and move quickly not only to enquire and identify the accomplices of the perpetrators and subject them to the law of the land, but also to plug the holes so that unscrupulous people do not find their way into higher management level of the bank. Economic security of the country cannot be tampered with by dishonest public servants.

CENTRAL ADMISSION TEST

Have we thought enough about its loopholes?

MOHAMMAD EMDADUL HUDA

FOR the last few years, the higher education authorities have been trying to bring all public universities of our country under one umbrella to hold a uniform, central admission test for their undergraduate courses to reduce the sufferings of candidates. But the universities have largely refrained from responding to this call so far, seeking more time to think over the pros and cons of the system. The only exception to it were the seven agricultural universities that held their admission test in a cluster system last year.

However, the overall situation for holding admission tests is a bit different this year. The outbreak of Covid-19 has done profound damage to the educational activities of many countries, including Bangladesh. In our country, public universities, as well as their private counterparts, have been forced to resort to online classes. They also had to keep most of the regular exams including admission tests on hold for an indefinite period. Admission to public universities for the academic session of 2020-21 has already been late, and if we want to avoid further delay in this regard, we need to find out some shortcut ways to go about it. It is due to this reason and also to ensure admission-seekers have the chance to maintain physical distance, universities have been left with little option but to go for the central admission system.

On December 19, vice-chancellors of 19 science and technology and general public universities—which earlier in the month decided to hold a central admission test for the next academic year—sat together to discuss and fix relevant principles and guidelines. It is some of these guidelines that have prompted this writing.

According to these guidelines, three examinations will be held in total: one each for science, commerce, and humanities students. As for "group change", students are permitted to do so but no additional exam will be required for it.

However, it is not clear whether, to change their groups, science and commerce students will be allowed to sit for the exam of the humanities group, for example. Media reports indicate that a candidate will be allowed to sit for only one examination—and that too the one held for their own group. How, then, will the students of one group switch over to another? A possible solution: some quotas will be reserved for the students of other groups. But can the quota

system do justice to all candidates? Does it, academically speaking, uphold the principle of "survival of the fittest"? What will happen to departments that have traditionally offered equal opportunities to all students seeking admission?

It is generally known that humanities and commerce students do not opt for admission to any science department as they do not have the required background for studying in such a department. But it's a different situation for some departments, if not all, in the humanities and commerce faculties

students of all groups learn English and Bangla as compulsory subjects with equal importance, and therefore, are entitled to equal rights for admission to the English or Bangla departments in universities. To put any barrier to the science and commerce students seeking admission in English department in the name of quota, or in the name of assessment of their knowledge in science-specific or commerce-specific subjects, is quite unethical.

Taking these points into consideration, the English departments of many

selecting candidates on the basis of their language proficiency and reading-writing skills, like it was done once. Already, some universities including Rajshahi University and Jatiya Kabi Kazi Nazrul Islam University have gone back to this type of testing for the last couple of years, overcoming a lot of the challenges that came in their way.

But now, all hopes for the English departments to continue their written tests to select the best candidates will be shattered as this year's combined admission tests will be held only on Multiple Choice Questions. However, a greater damage to these departments can be avoided if the science and commerce students are also allowed to sit for the examination of the humanities group.

How will the English skills of the students from science and commerce groups be assessed when the marks assigned to English are only 10 in the science group examination, and only 12 in that of the commerce group? Their skills in English can be assessed to some extent only in the examination of the humanities group, where greater marks—35—have been allotted to the language.

The English departments are not alone when it comes to specific requirements. There are also other departments like music, theatre, fine arts, etc. that too have specific features and deserve special protection to select candidates for their undergraduate programmes. In some universities, these departments have already been pursuing special measures in their admission tests for this purpose.

Last but not the least, every year a number of science and commerce students take admission preparation mainly targeting the subjects under the social science and arts faculties. It can be assumed that there will be no exception this year too. They have been taking preparation for the last few months according to the syllabuses that these faculties traditionally follow for their admission tests. Now, if they are restricted only to the examination of their own group, it will be very frustrating for them.

Will the authorities of the central admission test consider these concerns of the relevant departments and take necessary initiatives to protect their distinctive features and quality of education and also the rights and interests of the eligible candidates of all groups?

Mohammad Emdadul Huda is a professor at the Department of English, Jatiya Kabi Kazi Nazrul Islam University, Trishal, Mymensingh.



A uniform admission test for all public universities is the need of the hour, but care must be taken to address the concerns of relevant departments and protect the interests of the candidates of all groups.

PHOTO: STAR

where students of different backgrounds feel equally comfortable and many of them go on to perform excellently.

A case in point is the English department. Students willing to get admission to an English department need to have a solid background in English language, along with a knack for critical thinking in reading and writing which is necessary for students of any literature. Therefore, the English department of a university needs to sort out admission-seekers in terms of their language skills and competence in reading and writing. Students lacking these skills cannot cope with the demand of their discipline, which ultimately results in dropouts, frustration, lost semester or poor results in the semester exams. Hence, selecting students for English departments purely on the basis of their test performance in subjects specific to basic science or commerce will be unwise.

Moreover, at the SSC and HSC levels,

universities of our country have so far kept their doors open to all candidates, irrespective of which group they come from. However, this is not enough to get the best output from their undergraduate programmes. To select the best candidates for these programmes, what they need is to put them to an effective "written test". Only such a test can properly screen the best candidates by assessing their language skills as well as their capabilities for critical thinking. Our experience shows that any attempt to select candidates through a test based only on Multiple Choice Questions does not yield fruitful results.

Over the last few years, the standard of education in the English departments of our universities has gone down drastically because of, among other reasons, admission tests that are based only on Multiple Choice Questions, in which English is but only a segment. Experts intensely feel the need for

A crucial decade for tackling climate change



SALEEMUL HUQ

AS we welcome the new year of 2021, we also enter a new decade that will culminate with 2030, a year that marks an end point for some very important goals and milestones for the world. For one, it will mark the final year for all the countries to achieve the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as well as the climate change goals agreed in the Paris Agreement in 2015.

It is, therefore, an opportune moment to think forward to 2030 and imagine what we would like to achieve by that year, and then work backwards to plan on how to get there. I will focus on how Bangladesh can achieve both the SDGs and climate change goals in ten years' time.

In terms of what we want to achieve by 2030, we should aim to become one of the world's most resilient developing countries, rather than one of its most vulnerable, which we currently are.

The first point to make is that the two issues are closely related as SDG 13 is about reaching the climate change goals from the Paris Agreement as well. It is also true that the climate change goals can be reached only if the other main SDGs are met at the same time. This means, we need to take a much more integrated approach to our development pathways and investments. It's also important to note that in terms of dealing with the additional public health crisis and economic downturn caused



File photo of coastal areas in Patuakhali being inundated during cyclone Amphan.

PHOTO: STAR

by Covid-19, we need to adopt a much more equitable and greener investment strategy going forward.

The second point to make in terms of the climate change goals is to acknowledge that two goals deserve special attention—one being to reduce our emissions of greenhouse gases through mitigation to keep the global atmospheric temperature below 1.5 degrees Centigrade, but more importantly for Bangladesh to adapt to the adverse impacts of climate change which we will, unfortunately, have to face in the next decade. In Bangladesh—a relatively small emitter of greenhouse gases that cause global warming, but one of the countries that are most vulnerable to the adverse impacts of climate change—we need to focus much more on adaptation rather than mitigation.

In terms of what we want to achieve by 2030, we should aim to become one of the world's most resilient developing countries, rather than one of its most vulnerable, which we currently are.

In my view, this shift will require a massive effort at raising awareness and capacity building in every sector to make us resilient to climate change within the next ten years. I believe that young girls and boys are our biggest resource in this regard, and by investing in them to make them climate change champions, we will not only help Bangladesh become

more resilient but also can export that knowledge to the rest of the world which can learn from our example.

This means providing environment and climate change related education with a focus on problem solving, rather than rote learning, starting from school up to the university level. It also will require providing appropriate vocational training to young people who may not go to university but can nonetheless acquire problem-solving skills required in many different professions.

However, it is at the university and professional levels that we can secure the best short-term gains. Establishing quick training courses on tackling climate change for university students as well as professional training institutes for doctors, engineers, lawyers, planners and others will not only help Bangladesh deal with climate change; it will also be a valuable knowledge resource which we can share with other countries.

Universities can also invite students from other countries, especially those in the league of vulnerable developing countries, to learn about the intricacies of climate change. To cite one example, at the International Centre for Climate Change and Development (ICCCAD) based at the Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB), we've already provided training to several hundreds of students and professionals from

over 50 countries, both developed and developing.

Many other universities in the country have also started to develop similar training courses for both local and foreign students which should be expanded quickly. The universities and research institutions in Bangladesh have already set up a platform, called Gobeshona, to share knowledge on tackling climate change in Bangladesh and other countries.

A potential opportunity for sharing knowledge on adaptation to climate change, particularly on locally led adaptation by vulnerable communities, will be the upcoming Gobeshona conference which will be held online over 24 hours extending over 7 days from January 18, 2021. This will mark the start of an annual global online event to be held every January in the coming decade, where we can share our knowledge with the world on how to tackle climate change.

If we can invest in such initiatives to build capacity over the next few years, then Bangladesh has the potential to not just build its own resilience to tackle climate change, but also to share that experience and knowledge with the rest of the world.

Dr Saleemul Huq is Director of the International Centre for Climate Change and Development at Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB).