

TANGENTS

BY IHTISHAM KABIR

PIRANHA

Over a century ago, in late 1913, Teddy Roosevelt went on an expedition in Brazil to navigate the mysterious and uncharted river called the River of Doubt. The hardship of the trip is unthinkable today. Roosevelt's team ran out of food and had to rely on hunting parrots and monkeys. Malarial mosquitoes tormented and sickened them. They were followed by suspicious Indians who could have attacked and killed them any time. They brought along canoes only to find they were unsuitable for the rivers they needed to travel on.

But the trip also revealed many new things to the adventurers.

Roosevelt and his colleagues, for the first time, saw an unusual fish in the river. The voracious fish had sharp teeth. One day, on the riverbank, Roosevelt's second in command, Colonel Randon, absent-mindedly put his bare foot in the water. In one bite the fish ate his little toe.

In another incident, Roosevelt witnessed a spectacle created when part of a river was dammed off. The fish therein were forced to starve for a few days, after which a cow was pushed into the river. Large numbers of these fish stripped the cow to its bones in a short time in front of his eyes.

In both in these incidents the fish was the Piranha.

Piranha is actually a group of fish found in rivers of South America. There are several dozen species of the fish, most of them concentrated in the Amazon, but also present in other large river systems such as the Orinoco and the Paraguay. Depending on the species Piranhas grow between five and fourteen inches long. They are unremarkable looking flat fish resembling a coloured version of *Rupchanda*. The best known (or perhaps most feared) species is the Red-bellied Piranha.

The defining feature of the



Piranha in distress.

PHOTO: IHTISHAM KABIR

Piranha is its teeth. The upper and lower rows of sharp teeth are finely serrated and interlaced so that when closed, they fit tightly like zippers. Powered by strong jaws, the Piranha produces one of the most forceful bites of any living being.

For these reasons, the Piranha has a fearsome hold on popular imagination. But is this justified? The fish rarely attacks humans; fatal attacks are even rarer. Although it is known as a voracious carnivore, the Piranha is actually omnivorous, eating plant matter (fruit and seeds) along with fish. The common belief that it is attracted to blood is also a misconception.

Nature has its own rules: it often turns the tables on its predators.

In summertime, when the water is low in the rivers and streams, birds such as storks and herons hunt for Piranhas. The only time I saw a Piranha was under these circumstances. In Brazil's Pantanal, high on a bare tree, a Wood Stork perched holding a Piranha in its bill. For a few minutes it flipped the fish this way and that to find purchase. The fish looked sad and helpless dangling from the bird's mouth, its feared teeth amounting to naught. The bird, having found a convenient hold on the fish, flew away with it, presumably to consume it in privacy away from prying tourist eyes.

www.facebook.com/jikabirphotography or follow "ihtishamkabir" on Instagram.

The inequalities in online education

Students in rural areas lag behind due to poor infrastructure

NILIMA JAHAN

Most days of the week, Jagannath University student Ayesha Nijhum is seen sitting in an open field near her house in Gazipur's Kapasia. The second-year student of management attends online classes on her cellphone for about two hours and prefers the field over her house due to the better signal reception in the open area.

She said they started attending two classes online, five days a week, from July. But she had to miss many classes due to lack of stable internet connection in her village, although marks are still assigned to regular attendance.

Farhana Mita, a third-year student of management studies at Government Titumir College, affiliated under Dhaka University, said teachers sometimes end up cancelling classes as only one or two students join the online lectures, although they have over 400 students.

Although the pandemic prompted universities to move their classes online, poor internet connectivity is disrupting the learning process of a large number of students like Ayesha and Farhana, who have been staying at their village homes since the universities closed in March. The closure has been extended till January 16, 2021.

The 2019 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) of Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics found only 5.6 percent of households in the country have access to a computer and 37.6 percent of households have internet access.

University Grants Commission in August asked public universities to prepare a list of students who cannot attend online classes for not having smartphones.

Thirty-nine public universities sent lists of 41,501 students who need assistance. The UGC decided to provide these students with Tk 8,000 each interest-free loan so that they can buy smartphones to attend online classes.

According to UGC Secretary Ferdous Zaman, UGC already sent the money to the respective university funds on December 15. "The

university authorities will scrutinise who need the money, and disburse it on their own. As far as I know, some students already received it, while others will get it soon," he said.

CHALLENGES

- Poor connectivity
- Limited access to smartphones
- Cost of mobile data
- Technical issues in video call
- Hampered communication

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Subsidised internet connection <<
- Infrastructural support <<
- Interest-free loans for students <<
- Free access to e-learning resources <<
- Training for teachers <<

RURAL STUDENTS STRUGGLE TO CATCH-UP

The Daily Star spoke to 20 students of different public universities and colleges who said they have not been able to reap the benefits of remote learning due to poor connectivity and lack of smart gadgets.

Before the pandemic, students could do their assignments and projects at their university computer labs.

"Now when we are asked to complete an assignment in 30 minutes and email it after converting the file to PDF, many of us simply cannot do that on time. This will affect our results," said Ayesha, also listing creating presentations as a major hurdle in this time.

Anwar Hossain, a fourth-semester student of Islamic studies at Dhaka University, said a communication gap exists due to online learning, which affects the lessons.

He said the learning dynamic is heavily affected by the mechanics of video communications platforms. "Often the videos get paused in the live feed due to server issues and by the time they resume, students have

already missed out the point the teacher was making," he said.

Teachers spend a significant amount of time behind roll calls. "Sometimes, over 25 minutes of an hour-long class is spent taking attendance," said Anwar.

Sumaiya Chowdhury, a first-year student of Eden Mohila College, said the unavailability of books and journals in the form of ebooks negatively affects their learning.

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE?

Experts say slow internet connections or limited access in rural areas can contribute to students falling behind academically.

Although the government took steps to widen the reach, it has to ensure affordable and accessible e-learning methods, they added.

"The biggest impact of Covid-19 is the learning loss," said noted educationist Rasheda K Chowdhury.

"Students must be provided with appropriate infrastructure and subsidised internet connection immediately. Otherwise, online classes will not be useful for those in rural areas," said Rasheda, executive director of Campaign for Popular Education.

In a recent survey on the impact of Covid-19 on youth's education, Bangladesh Youth Leadership Centre (BYLC) found that students of certain regions and institutions were disproportionately affected.

The most affected were those who hail from indigenous communities, madrasas, and remote areas including chars, islands, and hills, according to the survey conducted among 698 college and university students and five private and public university teachers in October.

The study recommended students be given digital infrastructural support and subsidised access to the internet by telecommunication operators, along with the state-owned Teletalk.

It stressed the need for accelerating process of providing interest-free loans to students, arranging training for teachers and providing free access to e-learning resources -- e-books, online journals, articles, and online courses.

Covid-19 antigen testing starts in Ctg

ARUN BIKASH DEY, Ctg

Antigen testing for Covid-19 has started in Chattogram from Tuesday on a test basis. Initially, the service is limited only to Bangladesh Institute of Tropical and Infectious Diseases (BITID) laboratory at Fauzderhat, said officials of Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS).

Each test will cost patients Tk 100, said sources in BITID.

Contacted, Dr Sheikh Fazle Rabbi, civil surgeon of Chattogram, said a total of 1,000 testing kits have been given to BITID primarily for antigen testing.

"Only BITID has been given permission for Covid-19 antigen tests in Chattogram for now" he said, adding, "The government will decide about expanding the test after evaluating the outcome of this programme."

Experts said what sets antigen testing apart from RT-PCR tests is that results can be known within half-an-hour of testing, compared to at least 24 hours for RT-PCR tests.

An antigen test reveals if a person is currently infected with a pathogen. Once the infection is gone, the antigen disappears. This test is considered highly accurate for certain kind of patients and can provide results in minutes.

On the other hand, RT-PCR, considered

a gold-standard technology for Covid-19 detection, traces pieces of the virus through analysing sputum or mucus samples collected from the human body -- nasal and throat.

"But the problem with antigen tests is that its scope is limited to patients with symptoms who come for testing within four days of showing these symptoms. In other words, it's not very effective for asymptomatic patients," said Prof Dr Shakeel Ahmed, in-charge of BITID laboratory. "This is why it's not recommended for all."

"Samples of patients, who have symptoms but tested negative for Covid-19 (after antigen testing), are being tested through RT-PCR to be reconfirmed," he said. "No additional charge is kept for the test," added Prof Shakeel.

"To evaluate the quality of antigen tests, we will compare the results with that of RT-PCR tests with a good number of samples," he said.

Contacted, Dr Hasan Shahriar Kabir, Chattogram divisional director of DGHS, said if the result of Covid-19 antigen test proves to be authentic, other establishments across the division will be allowed to conduct the test.

At present, apart from Chattogram district, the government has permitted the test only in Brahmanbaria, he said.

'Missing' teen found dead in pond

A CORRESPONDENT, Munshiganj

A teenage boy was found dead in a pond near his house in Gazaria upazila of Munshiganj yesterday, 18 days after he had reportedly gone missing.

The deceased was identified as Md Hasan Mia (17), son of Md Shamim Hosen, said police.

According to family sources, Hasan had been missing since December 21 last year.

The body bore several injury marks, said Md Rois Uddin, officer-in-charge (OC) of Gazaria Police Station.

Hasan's family said they looked for him during the last 18 days, but to no avail, added OC Rois Uddin.

Police recovered the body around 11am after locals found the body floating in the waterbody, said the police official.

The body was sent to Munshiganj General Hospital morgue for autopsy, he added.



A boy shows off his catch of the day to a friend, both beaming after a successful fishing run at Barishal's Bakerganj upazila yesterday. The littlest things in life can end up in a shared moment of happiness with a friend.

PHOTO: TITU DAS



Workers shout their slogans, fists raised and flags drawn. Under the banner of National Garments' Workers Federation, they brought out a rally in front of Jatiya Press Club yesterday, demanding security benefits for all RMG workers.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

COUNCILLOR POSTS

AL rebels resolute to contest CCC polls

ARUN BIKASH DEY, Ctg

Many Awami League rebel candidates for Chattogram City Corporation (CCC) councillor race are determined to contest the polls, despite the party's strict order of not doing so.

The election has been deferred to January 27 from March 29 last year due to Covid-19, according to Election Commission.

Among the pro-AL councillors elected in the last polls in 41 wards, 14 failed to get party backing this time. Of them, 12 submitted nomination papers and did not withdraw candidacy despite warning from party leaders.

The candidates believe they have "voters' support from grass roots". Many of them also alleged that they fell victim to "conspiracy" and "injustice".

Mahbub-ul-Alam Hanif, joint general secretary of AL, at a programme in the port city on December 19 reiterated the intention of taking action against those who would compete for the councillor posts, defying party decision.

He also warned them that they would not be given party nomination or support in any polls in future.

Abul Fazal Kabir Ahmed Manik, who was elected councillor of ward-14 in the last CCC polls, said AL is not backing him

this time. "Councillor polls is non-political. So, there is no question of defying party decision," he said.

Immediate past councillor of ward-33 Hasan Murad Biplob echoed him.

Similarly, Abdul Quader said he will vie for the post in ward-28 as per "locals' demand". About the warning, he said he has been serving the party for 37 years. "If the party does not evaluate my contribution, I have nothing to say," he added.

Saber Ahmed, who was elected councillor in ward-32 in the last polls, however, said he would have withdrawn candidacy, if it was possible. Now, there is no scope to do so, and top party leaders did not hold any meeting with them regarding the matter.

AL insiders said the party will not take any action against such rebel candidates right now, considering possible damage to the campaign for mayoral post. They will face the music after the election is held.

Contacted, AJM Nasir Uddin, AL Chattogram city unit general secretary and member secretary of AL election management committee for CCC polls, said the party is strict in its decision of taking stern action against the rebel candidates.

The former CCC mayor said, "If anyone wants to stay in the party, they must follow its decision."

Two killed in road accident

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Pabna

Two women were killed as a truck hit a battery-run three-wheeler on Bogura-Nagarbari highway at Parkola in Sirajganj yesterday morning.

Police seized the truck but its driver managed to flee.

The accident also left two persons injured, said law enforcers.

Kajoli Begum (60) and Saleka Begum (62) from Parkola Guchchogrom in Shahzadpur upazila, Sirajganj died on the spot, said Shahzadpur Police Station Officer-in-Charge Shahid Mahamud.

The injured -- Md Anser Ali (38) and Mukta Khatun (25) from the same village -- were undergoing treatment at Shahzadpur Upazila Health Complex, the OC added.

He said the accident took place around 8am as the truck driver lost control over the steering.

A case was filed in this connection.