

## Dhaka airport ill-equipped for bird strikes

CAAB must adopt modern, innovative methods to ensure flight safety

WE are alarmed by the lack of preparedness to prevent bird strikes at the Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport (HSIA) in Dhaka, as revealed by a report by *The Daily Star* on Friday. According to the report, the central airport in the country is ill-prepared for such strikes which may cause flight cancellations, minor to heavy damage to an aircraft's structure leading to costly repairs, and in rare instances, loss of life due to crash landing. HSIA's bird control system is rudimentary at best. It relies on only two guns for the purpose. Four other guns remain out of order. The two automated bird deterrents installed on the runway, one using laser beams and the other using sound signals, have been out of service for more than seven years. Given the threats bird collision poses to aircrafts, this level of preparedness is far from adequate.

Airport authorities globally allocate significant resources to drive birds away from key aviation installations. This is because while a bird strike can occur anytime during a flight, it nearly always happens during take-off and landing. The severity of damage to an aircraft depends on the size and number of birds or the ferocity of collisions. Jet engines are particularly vulnerable to such incidents, leading to a loss of thrust following the ingestion of the bird. But the Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh (CAAB) seems to be indifferent to the danger. At HSIA alone, at least 20 aircrafts of Biman suffered bird strikes in 2019; other airliners also suffered similar accidents, although the airport authorities couldn't give an exact number. One can assume that the cumulative costs of aircraft repairs and flight cancellations caused every year will far outweigh the cost of installing a modern system that can automatically detect and deter birds. Why CAAB still hasn't installed one is a mystery to us.

Bird strikes are a fairly common occurrence in airports around the country. In order for any collision prevention policy to be effective, aviation experts suggest a combination of measures using both modern and conventional methods (since when you follow one specific method to drive away birds, it does not work after some days as birds usually adapt to it). Experts think CAAB should also take measures to encourage birds to seek alternative nesting and feeding grounds by removing food sources such as seed-bearing plants and food sources for the insects that birds eat, covering nearby ponds with netting to prevent birds from landing, and clearing bushes and trees that offer attractive nesting sites. The aviation authorities must adequately respond to the danger bird strikes pose and take all necessary measures to ensure flight safety in our airports.

## Violence ahead of Chattogram City Corporation polls

Maintain law and order at all costs

WE'RE worried about the escalation of tensions and violence ahead of the Chattogram City Corporation (CCC) polls scheduled for January 27. On Tuesday, in a clash between the supporters of two rival councillor candidates from Awami League in the port city's Mogoltuli Mogpukur Par area, a man identified as Azgar Ali Babul was shot dead while another suffered a gunshot injury. Both of them were supporters of Nazrul Islam Bahadur, who secured his party's backing for his candidacy and was a councillor of ward-28 between 2010 and 2015. The other candidate is Abdul Quader, a Jubo League leader who was elected councillor in the polls held in 2015 but failed to get party ticket this time. Quader decided to vie in the polls anyway, defying party decision.

The conflict ensued following removal of Quader's posters by some of Bahadur's supporters, and the situation further deteriorated when both candidates went to the same area for campaigning the following evening. Worryingly, a total of 12 former ward councillors who did not get support from Awami League are vying in the polls, all defying party decisions. This points to lack of discipline and central control within the party in Chattogram, and is a likely fallout of the decision to allow parties to field candidates at the ward council election level. In yet another display of the escalating tensions, Ashikur Rahman Rohit, an activist of Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL), succumbed to his injuries yesterday after being stabbed on January 8 over a brawl which ensued between him and his killers. Ashikur and the alleged killers were all supporters of Chattogram's AL-nominated Pashchim Bakalia ward councillor candidate Md Shahidul Alam. The killers are yet to be apprehended.

Such incidents taking place ahead of the polls are a tell-tale sign of things to come. While we appreciate the joint effort by the police and Rapid Action Battalion to detain 26 people including Quader during a prompt drive following the clash on Tuesday night, we would urge them to remain vigilant at all times so that no violence takes place in the remaining days before the election and of course on election day. The polls must be held peacefully, without any fear among the voters or violent clashes among the supporters of rival candidates. Stern action must be taken against anyone violating the law and the electoral code of conduct. And parties failing to control their errant leaders and activists must bear responsibility for their actions.

# Consuming facts without flavours

A reflection on research funding



BLOWN' IN THE WIND  
SHAMSAD MORTUZA

A national newspaper ran a story on January 10 featuring the research expenditure of public and private universities of Bangladesh. Based on the information submitted to the University Grants Commission (UGC), the report exposed the dearth of funding in academic research, mentioning, "125 public and private universities in the country altogether spent only Tk 153 crore—an average of Tk 1.22 crore each—on research activities in 2019, which is only 1 percent of their total expenditure." There is a lot more to it than meets the eye.

According to the UGC report, 34 public universities spent Tk 53 crore on research (an average of Tk 1.40 crore) while 87 private universities spent Tk 100 crore (an average of Tk 1.15 crore) in 2019. In other words, public and private universities in Bangladesh on average spent 1.14 percent and 2.96 percent of their total budgets on research, respectively. The report charts the public private divide by highlighting the operational expenses including staff salaries: the figures for the public universities stand at Tk 4,643 crore against those of Tk 3,631 crore for the private universities.

Without getting into the validity of these figures submitted to the UGC, the report calculated that the top 10 private universities together accounted for more than half of the country's research allocation in higher education. They spent Tk 82 crore to surpass the expenditures of the top 10 public universities, which stand at a meagre Tk 32 crore.

Brac University leads the private universities with an investment of Tk 37.9 crore followed by the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB) with an investment of Tk 12.48 crore. The research has been translated into 179 and 158 publications for these top two universities with research alignment. In contrast, the country's oldest university—Dhaka University—has spent Tk 5.2 crore and produced 472 publications. DU trails BSMAU (Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Agricultural University) and BAU (Bangladesh Agricultural University) to rank third among the public universities in terms of research allocation.

The report, however, does not mention the total number of university teachers, to put things in perspective. As per the UGC report, the country has 15,524 teachers (11,476 male, 4,057 female) engaged in the public universities and 16,070 teachers (11,200 male and 4,870 female) in the private ones. The total number of teachers shown in the report include: DU 2,387, BRAC 722, ULAB 342. If you tally these figures, then the number of research publications per faculty are far from satisfactory. The healthiest publication figure belongs to North South University. It has 885 teachers who produced 1,135 publications against their allocated budget of Tk 6.3 crore. The list also does not credit universities that attract foreign/external funds.

If I may be blunt, from the figures available in the UGC report, not more than five universities have the qualifying number of publications to be considered for world rankings. The figure will further go down if we take indexed publications into consideration. For instance, QS requires 300 Scopus indexed publications simply to be considered for world ranking. So we need to take these facts with a grain of salt, especially when some of these universities are known to have crept into the ranking list.

The twin pistons that move a university forward are teaching and research. Both are important not only for creating a labour force but also for fostering new discoveries that improve our lives and the lives of others around the world. Another important goal of a university is to create an educated citizenry that is empowered to keep on learning even after their graduation and make informed choices as participants in a democratic society.

teacher never felt the urgency to publish more than 20 papers in his/her entire 25-year career. Now, private university teachers are expected to publish at least 2-3 papers a year in addition to their overwhelming teaching load. The universities know that unless they invest in research, it will be difficult for them to stand out from other universities and hang onto a ranking ladder and earn a badge of honour to attract students.

To use research and money in the same breath highlights one simple facet of our contemporary life. Money that was once created to serve humans has become a source of absolute power and authority. One factor for such a paradigm shift involves our over-emphasis on turning everything into assessable and measurable data. We are translating quantity into quality by benchmarking ourselves against various international standards devised by ranking and accreditation agencies. These agencies follow a business model that does

enterprise. Say for instance, we can have a private pharmaceutical company investing in the creation of a vaccine involving the pharmacy departments of several universities. This is a common practice all over the world—and I am sure there are some examples of such partnerships in our country too. If a private company invests in its R&D, its motivation will be profit driven. However, the moment we introduce an academic collaboration, the nature of research investment will change; we will move into the realm of impact and integral investments. One glaring example is when Ganoshasthya and Jahangirnagar wanted to create Covid test kits, there was serious resistance from the health ministry as they were more interested in importing the devices from abroad rather than encouraging local home grown knowledge. The same thing happened when Dr Asif Mahmud was trolled for trying to create Covid vaccines.

All recent scholarships suggest that



Students are the direct beneficiaries of the academic research conducted by their teachers. They receive first-hand knowledge, and often become associates in the research projects of their teachers. The symbiotic relationship between a teacher and a student is indicative of a healthy research culture. While it is important to keep a tab on research funding, it is more important to ensure that such investments are done to promote and create a research culture. The race for facts is symptomatic of the neoliberal milieu in which we are thriving. Neoliberalism tends to measure success in quantifiable entities. The data given above, for instance, can perhaps help us map the academic directions and devise strategic interventions needed for goal oriented improvements. Then again, such investments are stark reminders of the fact that knowledge is fast becoming a commodity. In order to "profit" from knowledge, we are forced to make it "profitable". A traditional public university

not often accept immeasurable human values, ethics, and morals.

Before we get carried away by the research facts and figures, we need to take a step back to decide what we really need for our national enterprise. What role do we really want our universities to play? Do we really want all our universities to become research universities or do we incentivise certain institutions to become our spearheads?

Without a clear idea on research, figures aligned with money will simply encourage the academic brokers to lobby for more funding without any concrete results. And then they will be investing on building buildings, visiting foreign countries to learn about things that can be Googled. Given our limited resources, it is more important to create a research culture in which we learn to collaborate. Instead of pitting one system against the other, we need to create an academic platform where we come together to aid the national

profit-only oriented activities are harmful to society as well as to the entire ecosystem. Impact investing in research ensures that there is a transparent and corruption free environment for research. Integral investing goes a step further to include issues of ethics, morals, and personal values. Integral research is motivated by the desire to address global problems not through competition, but through cooperation. The building block for such desired cooperation is mutual trust, which can be attained only when high ethics, morals, and values are maintained. Profit can still remain a priority, but not at the expense of sustainability.

Let us rethink our investments in education and research that do not simply benchmark one against the other; let us think of investments that envision a crucial role for the academics in establishing a sustainable future.

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## Children need less screen time and more active play

LAILA KHONDKAR

IN August 2020, a Bangladeshi television channel aired a news story on the excessive use of smartphone use by children under the age of 5, and its negative consequences. Many of them are having severe problems with their eyesight, and in some cases, are developing the ability to speak later than normal.

In Bangladesh, many parents use smartphones to make children eat. During that time, the children passively watch the screen. It is also quite common to observe that parents and children are together in a restaurant or any other public place, but there is hardly any interaction—both are busy looking at their screens. These are just a few examples of smartphone addiction. Raising children is the responsibility of parents. We cannot expect smartphones to do it, right?

Many parents complain about the excessive screen time of their children. But who is responsible for developing this habit? If parents let children use smartphones, then they also have to set a limit on using them.

A World Health Organization's panel of experts issued guidelines on the physical activity, sedentary behaviour and sleep for children under 5 years of age in 2019, which emphasised that children must spend less time sitting and watching screens, or restrained in prams and seats. They should also get better quality sleep and have more time for active play if they are to grow up healthy. Quality sedentary time spent on interactive non-screen-based activities with a caregiver (e.g., reading, storytelling, singing and solving puzzles) is very important for child development.

Failure to meet current physical activity recommendations is responsible for more than 5 million deaths globally each year across all age groups. Currently, over 23 percent of adults and 80 percent of adolescents are not sufficiently physically

active. Establishing healthy habits early in life contributes to developing good habits through childhood, adolescence and into adulthood.

"What we really need to do is bring back play for children. This is about making the shift from sedentary time to playtime, while protecting sleep," said Dr Juana Willumsen, WHO focal point for childhood obesity and physical activity. While the WHO guidelines are for children under 5 years, sedentary lifestyle is detrimental for all children.

It is concerning that most parents in Bangladesh are not even aware of the negative impacts of excessive screen time and sedentary lifestyle on children's

sufficient levels of communication skills. This is due to the limited stimulation they receive from their parents in the home environment—as the parents are busy with their smartphones and do not spend adequate time talking, reading stories, or playing with their children. Parental screen time can reduce face-to-face interaction that is vital for children's emotional and intellectual development.

In an article published in *JAMA Pediatrics* (2018), Dr Jenny Radesky (University of Michigan) and Dr Megan Moreno (University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health in Madison) suggested that children learn smartphone habits from their parents. Parents should

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development. They need to realise the seriousness of the issue and take initiatives to reduce the harm before it is too late. There should also be awareness of the fact that passive screen time is harmful. If parents or adult caregivers interact with children while they are watching something on the screen, then that provides stimulation and also facilitates learning.

In some western countries, efforts have been made on limiting the screen time of children for quite some time. But now there is a growing realisation that adults also need to make sure they are not glued to their phones and are prioritising one-on-one time without the use of gadgets. Many children are entering school without

prioritise mealtimes, bedtimes and specific downtimes for family members to unplug and perform tasks together. They have to resist the urge to document everything.

While mobile technologies have certainly made some things easier, they create more demands on parents than they had before: more emails, more feeds to check, more games to play, etc. When parents are engaging with their smartphones, they talk less to their children, respond slower and without paying much attention, and overreact in response to these interruptions. In the long run, this may lead to more parenting stress and damage parent-child relationship.

Parents must limit their own screen time,

as children follow what parents do, not what they say. They should spend quality time with their children, where children get uninterrupted attention. Parents have to make their children interested in various outdoor activities. Parents should provide guidance in developing children's capacity so that they learn to use technology for their own benefits. This should happen before they become addicted to it; as unlearning something becomes very difficult once it becomes a habit.

Instead of losing track of time, parents have to notice how much time has passed when checking their email or social media. When parents use smartphones for shared enjoyment with their children, or to get things done faster so they can return to family time, smartphones could be a positive force. If used wisely and optimally, technology could enhance the quality of parental interactions with children.

While parents have to be very thoughtful in developing proper screen time habit for themselves and their children, it is the responsibility of the state to ensure that there are sufficient playgrounds for children, and they have opportunities to engage in extra-curricular activities. Healthy development of children should be one of the highest priorities for any country, and there must be sufficient investment for that. Unfortunately, we have lost most of our playgrounds and there has been a decline in sports and cultural activities that were available at the community level. This must be reversed. Cultural organisations should also come forward to engage with children and young people.

Excessive and passive screen time for children should be a concern for all of us. Are we concerned enough and performing our responsibilities to address this, so that children grow-up properly to realise their full potential?

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