

# The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR  
LATE S. M. ALI

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## Reopening schools in phases would be a good decision

*But govt must strictly enforce and facilitate the health guidelines*

**W**E believe the government's discussion to reopen schools on a limited scale giving priority to the SSC and HSC students is a prudent move. The plan in consideration is to get this year's SSC and HSC examinees to the classroom first. According to a report quoting a high official of the National Curriculum and Textbook Board, work has been completed on reducing the syllabus and this has been submitted to the education ministry. This too is a wise decision that will take into consideration the disruption in studies for students during the pandemic.

While it is crucial for students to get back to school the government is rightly concerned about the risks involved and according to an official of the National Technical Advisory Committee on Covid-19, decisions to reopen will take into account pandemic situation and directives.

Even if the reopening is done in phases with only Class 10 and 12 students coming to school in the first phase, the issues of safety must take priority. This means mandatory mask wearing and physical distancing as well as proper facilities for handwashing, clean bathrooms and regular sanitising of the classrooms and other areas of the schools. Given the state of most schools in both the cities and rural areas, this will be a challenging task. For this reason everyone must be sensitised from the teachers, administrators, students to the school staff to the parents regarding the importance of following these guidelines. Unfortunately we have seen how people disregard these rules in public places and many are not quite convinced of the seriousness of the spread of Covid-19 infections. Rigorous awareness campaigns have to be started through every kind of media and public platform. While we understand why the government is giving priority to SSC and HSC students we hope that students of other classes are also being considered in these discussions as most of them have suffered a huge gap in their education. This is because most students have not been able to avail the remote learning facilities introduced in these last eleven months, as they did not have access to devices such as TVs, computers, laptops or smart phones. Internet access was also not the same in all areas with some having no access at all. These are realities that the government must address as the pandemic is still here and it may be a while before all classes can be held in the classroom. To reopen without ensuring that the resources and facilities to allow for full compliance of health guidelines can be met may have grave consequences. Therefore while the government tries to implement these measures and reopen in phases it must also make remote learning a more viable option. This requires intense discussions with education experts, teachers, BTV and internet service providers so that learning does not stop while students wait for schools to reopen.

## VC coerced to prioritise jobs for BCL members?

*The culture of political appointments of teachers is debilitating*

**A**CCORDING to a recent report published in this paper, Rajshahi University Vice-Chancellor Professor M Abdus Sobhan has "assured" BCL men that they would get the "highest priorities" in getting jobs at the university while the leaders kept him, along with two pro-vice-chancellors and the proctor to the VC's residence, confined to the VC's residence on campus demanding jobs on January 11. The report also states that the demonstration took place as one administrative official was appointed to the university, defying the government's order that postponed all kinds of appointments to RU until further notice. How is it possible that a position as high as that of Vice Chancellor can be treated with such disrespect and belligerence? And how can a Vice Chancellor make statements that imply that a university's highest authority must bow under the pressure of political cadres?

Later, the VC stated that he did not assure anyone about getting jobs and added, "They [BCL activists] were waging a movement. We say many things so that they call off their movement." We can only imagine why the VC reacted that way. It reminds us of a similar situation from 2019, when activists of BCL dragged the principal of Rajshahi Polytechnic Institute (RPI) by his neck and threw him into a pond as he did not give in to their whimsical demands. These are not isolated incidents but a dangerous trend in all public universities where the Chhatra League members wield inordinate power over the campuses, even in recruitment decisions. The implicit impunity that members of student wings of the ruling party enjoy is a known fact, leading to some of them committing all kinds of crimes. The reason behind their entitled and aggressive behaviour is that they have the blessing of some powerful quarters within the ruling party who, despite the PM's repeated calls to purge the BCL of these elements, have nurtured them.

It goes without saying that buckling under political pressure will not ensure that the best candidates are chosen for recruitment. Teachers of universities must be chosen purely on their merit without any bias or fear. Unfortunately this is not always the case and that must change. The administrative standards must be raised across all educational institutions. Moreover, if an impartial governing body could keep watch on the quality of the management of education institutions, including university recruitment, it will ensure that the best candidates are chosen which will benefit the students and as well as the institution. We hope the RU authorities will remain responsible in doing what is right and won't be obstructed by political pressure.

# E-learning: A boon or a bane?



**BLOWIN' IN THE WIND**  
SHAMSAD MORTUZA

**I**N our Viber group, a departmental colleague shared an excerpt from a student's exam script. The student wrote down the title of Jhumpa Lahiri's book "The Interpreter of Maladies" as "The Translator of Disease". As English teachers, we are more prone to receiving funny and nonsensical use of the foreign language every now and then. Often, we have to re-track the thought process of our students to make sense of their garbled up expressions. The usual problems arise when students think in Bangla and try to translate their thoughts into English without the control over the target language. Typically, we notice problems with grammar and vocabulary, but the change in the title of the book was something new. The only explanation we could come up with was that the student had used a paraphrasing tool to avoid the online plagiarism checker of our online learning management system.

At ULAB we have a zero tolerance policy against plagiarism. All online assignments and submissions go through an originality checker allowing us to detect copied material. The attempt to bypass the artificial intelligence by the student raises some serious concerns about e-learning and assessment. It adds to a larger problem that goes beyond the simple assumption that our education is in crisis.

According to an article published in *Plagiarism Today*, "synonymised plagiarism" is a new threat for education. There is a scheming enterprise that is profiting simply from changing the contents of published materials and presenting them as something new. For instance, Shakespeare's oft quoted adage "To be or not to be that is the question" can be changed to "To exist or not to exist that is the query" to beat the plagiarism checker. There is another trend of academic cheating that is becoming rampant. Students (often researchers and scholars) use double translations to camouflage the original source. For instance, an article written in English can be first changed into Russian and then back to English. Then by fixing the usual errors, the same article/essay can be given a new look. The rush for publications and

ranking is often blamed for such deceitful attempts. However, a human examiner's discerning eyes can be more vigilant than the computer algorithm—something that our students (and colleagues) often do not realise.

While online teaching has its pros, we need to be alert to some of its cons. The normalisation of cheating is one of them. What worries me more is the mindset: we are raising a tech savvy generation that

finds it thrilling to beat the system. Moral scruples take a back seat as searching for cheat-codes in computer games or even hacking the system becomes normal. For many students, online learning is an extension of the games they play. As educators, we have tried to adjust to the new reality of online teaching in the last one year, but there is a growing concern over its impact on our students.



Given the lack of devices and internet data concerns, we cannot always insist on having live classes. Many students do not turn on their videos citing privacy or technical issues. There is no way of verifying whether these students are actually attending their classes, let alone sitting for their own examinations. The regular temptation to cheat has become a part of their behavioural essence. As someone who studied science up to the Higher Secondary, I often ask myself what good was it to dissect those frogs in my biology lab or to wait for the nitrate ring to appear in my chemistry lab classes! I now know that they have taught me patience and made me curious about

I am probably overstating the concerns. There are many students who have taken full advantage of technology to express themselves in many different multimodal creative ways. In a normal semester, we get to see performances of skits or wall papers as class presentations. This year many of our students have made short films, created animations using online apps, curated blogs, which you normally do not expect in a traditional English department classroom. Many of them signed up for online courses with overseas universities through Coursera to learn new things. Online teaching and learning has allowed them to find this type of freedom. Many others are bogged down.

Thankfully, there are talks of reopening of schools in February. The influence of the lockdown has been overwhelming for most of the students. According to a recent report more than "500,000 children under 18 in England, with no previous problems, will need mental health care due to the devastating economic, health and family pressures caused by the ongoing coronavirus crisis"

(RT.com). The long term closure of schools has given rise to depression with suicidal thoughts, self-harm and eating disorders. I do not know of any survey on Bangladeshi children involving the impact of coronavirus on their mental makeup. Before moving to online teaching, my institution's student affairs office did conduct a survey in April 2020. We asked questions about the students' confidence level on dealing with online courses, support structures at home, stress management, financial concerns, healthy lifestyles including food habit, spirituality, physical exercise, substance abuse and so on. The gathered information has allowed ULAB to migrate to online teaching quite successfully; more than 90 percent of students have re-registered in the last three semesters, proving that our students have confidence in our mode of delivery. We are all beginning to see the benefits of blended learning, and are optimistic of maintaining this hybrid model even after the lockdown is over. The move towards online teaching has tested our resolution. We have learnt to adopt and adapt, to outpace and outgrow the virus and its atrocities.

Nevertheless, in the last one year, we have also learnt how stressful online learning can be. The over reliance on non-human entities has grown in the absence of human interactions. Our behaviour has become automatic and mechanical. If someone dies, we do not shed tears; we write RIP or post an emoticon. In the hyperreal world of social media, we create avatars to curate some constructed images of our selves. We no longer see anything bad in such false representations. As Oscar Wilde once put it, "Illusion is the first of all pleasures". The student paper that I referred to at the beginning can boast of its ingenuity. Instead of trying to use the source with proper citations, the student concerned simply ran it through an app to defamiliarize it and present it as an original work. They probably had a self-gratifying feeling thinking that they could outwit the system. I will be worried if this feeling stays with her/him even after s/he graduates. That person will turn out to be a cheat without realising that the only person he/she is cheating is himself/herself. The problem is that they are not alone. The system is allowing many such individuals to thrive and flourish in full glory. It is about time we run a reality check on our virtual avatars.

Shamsad Mortuza is the Pro-Vice-Chancellor of ULAB.

## Biden's balm of normalcy soothes US

*Nation in crisis seeks succour in joyous unity*



ASHFAQUE SWAPAN

**A**MERICA'S quadrennial celebration of peaceful transition of power is one of its more hallowed traditions. Having said that, I've never been a great fan of US presidential inaugurations. Like American party conventions, there is a slick, confected feel to it, awash as it is in platitudes and hyperbole that come across as overwrought.

However, at critical moments of crisis, a presidential inauguration can take on historic significance.

In 1933, Franklin D Roosevelt reassured a nation reeling from the Great Depression that "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself."

In 1977, Jimmy Carter, an unassuming peanut farmer from Georgia, reassured a nation shaken by the political scandals of disgraced President Richard Nixon with his quintessential American decency.

The inauguration of President Joseph R Biden and Vice President Kamala D Harris on January 20 is another such inauguration.

A global pandemic has turned the world upside down, and the US, one of the worst affected nations, has paid a heartbreaking price with over 400,000 deaths from Covid-19. On January 6, lawmakers hid under desks as the US Capitol was overrun by thugs egged on by the sitting president. The last time the US Congress was attacked was by the British in 1814.

And what of outgoing President Donald J Trump? Attempting to list even a few of his transgressions is as futile as trying to drink from a fire hydrant. Suffice it to say that among his many, many egregious breaches of all norms of decency, he chose to sneak out of the capital, earning the dubious distinction of becoming the first US president in 150 years not to attend his successor's inauguration.

I'm sure I'm not the first person to wonder what it is about the new president that helped him achieve the remarkable feat of defeating Trump, who won more votes in a presidential election than any previous candidate, by a whopping seven million votes. Biden's appeal has never been about just who he is. It's been more about who he represents and what he is against. It's hard to recall a time when governing styles and values in the federal government have been in greater contrast than a future Biden administration and the outgoing Trump administration.

Trump was all about riling up his supporters, off-the-cuff tweets, seat-of-the-pants governance, a callous disregard for science and policy, the fanning of flames for a fevered yearning for a lost past of racial dominance.

Biden, on the other hand, represents an America that looks much more like its future. More importantly, his campaign always seemed to me to be a communal project of Obama-era wicked-smart

appeal must go to Trump. Trump's awful conduct had resulted in such a wacky, scary, dystopian reality that Biden's decency, humanity, kindness, honesty—in ordinary circumstances unremarkable, even pedestrian traits—seem so utterly appealing.

It all came together in the inauguration ceremony and the later festivities. Credit is also due to Republican Party lawmakers—including

ensure that strapped states don't have to bear the cost. . . They want to launch a massive public education blitz, aimed at communities sceptical of the vaccine."

Going back to the inauguration, the most stirring moment for me was the performance of one of America's most popular folk songs, made famous by Woody Guthrie:

"This land is your land, this land is my land/From California to the New York



Joe Biden is sworn in as the 46th president of the United States by Chief Justice John Roberts as Jill Biden holds the Bible during the 59th Presidential Inauguration at the US Capitol, in Washington, US, January 20, 2021.

PHOTO: REUTERS

experts and volunteers. Sure, Biden is the face of it, but once he clinched the nomination, from his campaign to the announcement of the members of his administration, all his steps give the impression that the entire effort is powered by a well-oiled machine eerily reminiscent of the quiet competence of the no-drama Obama era. Am I the only one to be amazed that Joe Biden, whose penchant for gaffes was regarded with affectionate indulgence, has not made a single misstep throughout this extraordinarily demanding campaign and transition?

The inauguration ceremony, along with the heartwarming celebrations later, had the hallmarks of the Obama administration. Biden's special sauce is his genuine warmth and humanity.

In one of the stranger ironies in recent times, some of the credit for Biden's

ferocious partisans like US Senators Mitch McConnell, Ted Cruz and Josh Hawley, Rep. Kevin McCarthy and outgoing Vice President Mike Pence. It is a tribute to the Republican Party that the institutional integrity of US democracy survived the onslaught of Trump and his enablers.

Thanks to the mess left by Trump, the next four years are not going to be a cakewalk for the Biden administration. However, the incoming administration's successful management of Covid-19 vaccination will make its path easier. The early signs are promising.

"Biden's team members intend to use the Federal Emergency Management Agency to set up thousands of vaccination sites in gyms, sports stadiums and community center," Ezra Klein wrote in *The New York Times*. "They want to mobilise the National Guard to . . .

Island/From the Redwood Forest to the Gulf Stream waters/This land was made for you and me."

The words resonated with particular power because they were uttered by a performer of Puerto Rican descent and had the full endorsement of the president of the United States of America.

I am an ageing first-generation immigrant whose faith in his adopted country was shaken by vicious expressions of xenophobia in the last few years, also endorsed by the (then) US president.

I was close to tears as I heard Jennifer Lopez sing those beautiful words. I really felt, once more, that this wondrous land, America, is my home as well.

Thank you, President Biden and Vice President Harris. Thank you, America.

Ashfaque Swapan, an Atlanta-based writer and editor, is contributing editor for *Sillconeer*, an online South Asian publication.