

Language Martyrs' Day

Our love for the mother tongue must go beyond rituals

AS we observe the 69th Anniversary of the Mother Language Day, we pay our deepest respect to those who laid the groundwork for the movement to establish the right to speak in our own language, to those who led the movement and to those who made the supreme sacrifice on this day sixty-nine years ago. But seldom do we comprehend the significance of this day. We forget that 1952 not only asserted our nationhood and accorded a pride of place to Bangla internationally, it also established the syncretic character of the nation and acted as the precursor to our independence. But how much have we been able to fulfil the dreams of the language martyrs? It is time for some self-examination. While we can rightfully take pride in the fact that this day has been recognised universally by the UN as International Mother Language Day, we will not be remiss in suggesting that the language languishes from neglect both at the individual and official levels. There is little of substantive work in making the use of Bangla widespread in the country and at all levels of education, particularly higher education and our administration. Proficiency in other mother languages is taken with pride. Apathy towards the language has become a part of the elitist culture. While we resisted the Pakistani rulers in their effort to dilute our culture, we ask how much have we been able to retain the pristine character of the culture that is germane to this land? Our service to our mother language must go beyond words and manifest into actions. Admittedly, a second language is essential in today's globalised world, but its practice and learning cannot come at the expense of Bangla. We suggest that the teaching curricula be revised at all levels of our education system. One of the areas that needs to be addressed is our higher education, where Bangla is neglected totally as a medium of instruction. Lack of adequate books in Bangla, both in original and translated, is one of the main reasons for this situation. A look at the situation in the principal seat of higher learning in Bangladesh, Dhaka University, will give a clear depiction of the matter. Reportedly, except for the Department of Bangla literature and a few others in the arts faculty, not many books written or translated in Bangla can be found in the academia. At Dhaka University's sciences, biology, earth and environmental, and engineering and technology faculties, only 34 out of the 3,201 reference books are in Bangla, according to the syllabus of the departments. Seven of the 13 departments of these faculties do not have a single reference book in Bangla. This poses as a major obstacle to students who have studied in Bangla most of their lives and are suddenly having to learn from English texts. The matter needs immediate attention of the DU authorities. However, in our effort to enrich and expand the use of Bangla countrywide, we should not ignore the need to preserve and help flourish the languages of many other ethnic communities, whose languages and cultures are being obliterated over time. That would be the best way of showing our gratitude and respect to the Language Martyrs and heroes.

Building collapse in Keraniganj

Why were the building codes not followed?

FREQUENT incidents of building collapse in Dhaka have become a major cause for concern for people living in buildings that are built on water-bodies or canals. On Friday, a three-storied building in Dhaka's Keraniganj collapsed on a nearby pond, injuring seven people. According to the deputy assistant director of Fire Service and Civil Defence in Keraniganj, the building could have collapsed a long time ago because the soil it was built on was weak. Basically, a pond was filled up to construct the building without any permission from the authorities. Luckily, no lives were lost in the incident.

As more and more unauthorised buildings are being built on filled-up water-bodies and canals inside the capital and on the outskirts of the city, posing serious risk to people's lives and properties, the authorities responsible are just not doing enough to stop such illegal practices. Rajuk, being the authority that is supposed to ensure buildings comply with the building codes, has to shoulder the responsibility for what happened in Keraniganj.

The incapacity and inefficiency of Rajuk to ensure building safety have been exposed in various incidents of building fires and collapses over the years. The collapse of Rana Plaza, which killed over 1,100 people in 2013, is a glaring example of the failure of Rajuk to prevent building owners from violating the building codes. The FR Tower fire in the city's Banani in 2019 was another example of Rajuk's inefficiency to carry out its responsibility.

In 2018, Rajuk conducted a survey to find out which buildings that were built violating the building codes and found that around 1.31 lakh completed buildings out of some 1.95 lakh did not comply with the code. After the Banani fire, it conducted another survey to identify buildings flouting the building codes. Unfortunately, we do not know of any steps being taken against the violators so far. Compared to the incidents of Rana Plaza collapse and FR Tower fire, the building collapse in Keraniganj might seem very insignificant. But, if Rajuk cannot check such small-scale violations, how would they check the other major building code violations? Therefore, Rajuk should be made to answer for how the building in Keraniganj was built without its permission in the first place. Moreover, the local government authorities, the Department of Environment (DoE) also did not play their role to stop the construction of the building. The lack of accountability of the relevant bodies that ensure that buildings are constructed safely has led to these dangerous conditions that can lead to the loss of lives.

Can raising the minimum wage sometimes hurt the workers?

A quick lesson on economics and politics



AN OPEN DIALOGUE

ABDULLAH SHIBLI

RAISING the minimum wage is supposed to benefit the workers, particularly those who are making less than the minimum and are struggling to make a decent living.

The demand to raise the minimum wage from time to time comes from unions, political parties, and policy analysts. In the USA, the support for raising the minimum wage has been building. One of the promises candidate Joe Biden made was to increase the minimum hourly wage to USD 15. After being sworn in, Biden has spoken out in favour of legislation to raise the minimum wage within the first 100 days of his administration. It is expected that a higher minimum wage, as Biden proposes, would lift some workers out of poverty, and raise the wages of millions more. Unfortunately, there is also the possibility that during this crisis, raising the minimum wage may also hurt the job prospects for youth, low-skilled, and women workers.

Resistance to raising minimum wages comes typically from two sources, employers and economists/policymakers. And they are a strong band. Employers see any increase in the minimum wage as an attack on

market condition or under-employment conditions. When the price of labour goes up, employers can resort to using less labour and more capital per unit. A related mechanism emphasised by some economists is wage compression, i.e., along with some redistribution from profits to wage, there is a "...possibility that employers may compensate for higher wage costs at the bottom by cutting wages of workers who are nearer to the top."

The Raise the Wage Act, introduced on January 26, 2021 by some Democrats

organised in order of priority. President Biden won the White House by pledging to respond to the pandemic with many liberal policy proposals, and raising the minimum wage across all sectors, which was one of his most popular proposals. But only if wishes were horses.

For those not familiar with this expression, let me elaborate. "If wishes were horses, beggars would ride" is a proverb and nursery rhyme, first recorded about 1628 in a collection of Scottish proverbs, which suggests if wishing could make things happen,

Recession, with employment reduced by 10 million jobs, 6.5 percent off the February 2020 level. In economic terms, some states in the US have suffered more during the pandemic than others. Twenty-seven states have lost more than 5 percent of their jobs. New York, Hawaii, and Michigan have seen a sharp rise in unemployment, growing poverty, and lack of jobs. If the federal government now passes a minimum wage legislation, the job prospects for many who are not highly educated might be dimmed.

A renowned columnist for *The Boston Globe* newspaper wrote an op-ed titled, "The cruelty of a higher minimum wage". And the columnist, Jeff Jacoby, was not using the word "cruelty" sarcastically! Jacoby argues that while it is hard to live on USD 15 an hour, it is "infinitely harder, however, to live on USD 0 an hour. And that is what many of the least-skilled, most precarious workers in America will be making if the hourly minimum wage climbs by more than 100 percent."

The nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office's recent report shows that the minimum wage hike to USD 15 an hour by 2025 would result in 1.4 million unemployed. Past economic studies on the impact of minimum wage legislation on jobs have been inconclusive. When the first minimum wage law, The Fair Labour Standards Act of 1938 (FLSA) was passed, it was reported that the effect was mostly felt by unskilled African-American workers, and the Labour Department reported that between thirty thousand and fifty thousand workers lost their jobs within two weeks of FLSA.

While many big retailers such as Walmart, Costco, and Target support a higher minimum wage and have consistently raised wage in some states to USD 15 an hour, there is pushback from their smaller competitors. Increasingly, many small businesses and the restaurant industry are voicing their opposition to raising the minimum wage now when demand for some products and stores has declined. In some parts of the country, competitive wages are lower than the national average.

Interestingly, some analysts in the media have questioned the motive behind the push to raise the minimum wages now. The big corporations have benefited during the pandemic and are now doing well. E-commerce leader Amazon boosted the starting pay for its warehouse workers to USD 15 an hour last year. Others have done the same. At the end of the tunnel, there will be a shakeout and the increased cost of labour will enable the big corporations to squeeze out the SMEs, it is alleged.

Dr Abdullah Shibli is an economist and has been working in higher education and information technology for 35 years in the USA and Bangladesh. He is also Senior Research Fellow, International Sustainable Development Institute (ISDI), a think-tank in Boston, USA.



in the Congress, would gradually raise the federal minimum wage from USD 7.25 an hour to USD 15 an hour by June 2025, and then index it to rise at the same rate as median hourly wages.

It now appears that Biden is backing down. On February 16, he conceded that he is open to negotiation on his proposal for a USD 15 minimum wage, a centrepiece of his USD 1.9 trillion coronavirus relief bill. First, he suggested that he could be open to a longer phase-in than the current plan of five years in the Democratic Party legislation. In addition, he indicated that a lower number, for example, USD 12 or USD 13, could be beneficial while having less impact on business owners.

During the Covid-19 economic downturn, workers have suffered a decline in income, an erosion of their savings, and other injustices that the economic system inflicts on the working class. In the coming years, as national economies bounce back and economic policies are recalibrated in light of the lessons learnt, policymakers everywhere, particularly in the USA, are working furiously on their "To Do" list.

Like his predecessors, President Biden has his own "To Do" list. It is a list of policy goals or tasks one would need to complete, or things that one would want to do. Most typically, they're

then even the most destitute people would have everything they wanted. Similarly, the minimum wage legislation that Biden and others on the liberal wing of the Democratic Party promised, is facing resistance from not only the Republicans, but also the conservative Democrats.

Undoubtedly, the minimum wage has always been a hot button issue in the USA. Students taking their first undergraduate economics course in college learn that if the wage level is pushed above the competitive equilibrium rate, demand for labour will be less than supply. This gives rise to excess supply or unemployment. In the USA, some parts of the country are already experiencing unemployment in excess of 10 percent and there is concern that raising the hourly minimum wage from USD 7.25 to USD 9.5, while benefitting some workers, will hurt many others. Two groups stand out. Those with minimum skills who can't find a job and others who are currently employed in low-skilled jobs but are facing the risk of job cuts.

The question that my readers might ask, "How can raising the minimum wage face such resistance? Isn't the right to a minimum income enshrined in the American ethos?" The short answer is, it all depends. The country as a whole lost more jobs than in the Great

Is the priority list of vaccine recipients being maintained?

AFIA JAHIN

NOW that the few crores of Covid-19 vaccine doses are finally arriving in Bangladesh in batches of tens of lakhs (and many more have been promised to be on their way soon), a new challenge has presented itself for those in charge of distributing the vaccines. That is, the challenge of organising the inoculations in such a way that those who are most vulnerable to the virus are immunised before everyone else.

According to the CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) in the United States, it is recommended that the initial supplies of vaccines be administered to "healthcare personnel and long-term care facility residents". Given how much more susceptible the elderly are to the virus, they are also usually included in the list of persons to be prioritised during the initial stages of the vaccination programme.

Bangladesh's Covid-19 vaccination campaign is also in line with this, as only people aged above 40 years and frontline workers are supposed to be vaccinated on a priority basis during the current stage of the plan. However, there are some sizable loopholes in the registration process, and people who do not fit the priority criteria are being able to successfully register for and receive the vaccine.

In order to get the vaccine, one has to register online through the website surokkha.gov.bd using information from their NID card and fill out any other required details. If a frontline healthcare professional, above the age of 18 years, wishes to register for the vaccine then they simply need to put in their National Identity Card number in order to get in line and receive the Covid-19 vaccine.

Of course, this presents an issue as there is no way for the automated system to verify that the individual is actually a frontline healthcare worker. In a report



People crowd the vaccination centre of Shaheed Suhrawardy Medical College in the capital to get inoculated against Covid-19. PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

published on February 15, 2021, an official linked to the vaccine registration process (choosing to remain anonymous) told *The Daily Star* that because "the DGHS has no complete list of public and private healthcare staffers in the frontline, the bar was withdrawn recently." He also added that the list which they were provided was not in a "format that supports the database of surokkha.gov.bd".

Even though frontline professionals aged below 40 years of age had to have their NID numbers sent through their respective organisations (and then to the DGHS) in order for them to be uploaded to the website's server, there are still major gaps in the registration process which allow many individuals who are not qualified for the priority-based vaccines to still get inoculated.

However, what might be considered more disconcerting is the DGHS's response to a mishap of such a scale. It was said by the director of the

organisation's Management Information System that, "...the system will not understand who is a health worker and who is not. In the long run, everyone will register and we have to vaccinate everyone. Now if anybody does this [faking professional identities], we cannot do anything about it."

It is understandable—and truth be told, expected—that those in charge of vaccinating a nation of over 16 crore people, with many limited resources, would slip up quite a few times along the way to achieving the aforementioned goal. The issue of insufficient human and other resources is present in Bangladesh no matter what the crisis is. As such, it is commendable that the government has been able to procure the number of vaccines that it has, and that the inoculation process in our nation has begun at the same time as that of other countries with much better stocks of these resources.

Still, this bit of necessary efficiency and success does not automatically discharge the authorities of the responsibility of sticking to their promises. When a rule such as the one in question (that of frontline healthcare workers' vaccination being prioritised) is put in place, it gives people a sense of security and acts as confirmation that their government genuinely has their best interests in mind.

It also goes without saying how important a rule such as this one is. But, alas. While the elderly (in this case, those above the age of 40 years) need to be vaccinated first due to their special physical vulnerability to the virus, the other category of people whose vaccination must be prioritised are those who are most exposed to the virus. Obviously, healthcare staff who are constantly in contact with and are spending the majority of their 24 hours tending to diseased individuals fall under this category.

If those who are personally making sure that we are protected from Covid-19 cannot themselves be shielded from it first, then that exposure will inevitably trickle down to the rest of the population as well. Sure, more and more people are being vaccinated each day. But that does not justify purposely slowing down progress wherever we can achieve it.

It is now more important than ever before—during a global pandemic—that our government must urge all those institutions that are part of the inoculation programme to be strict and vigilant.

The vaccines have arrived and we are thankful for it, but the journey does not even come close to ending here. Now is our opportunity to pull our weight and fight the virus (and its looming variants) with not just the preventative vaccines, but also our own willpower.

Afia Jahin is a member of the editorial team at *The Daily Star*.