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FOUNDER EDITOR
LATE S. M. ALI

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Can Dhaka be free from waterlogging?

City corporations are taking up the challenge

We heartily welcome the initiatives of two city corporations to draw immediate and long term plans to solve Dhaka's waterlogging problem. Last year, in December, the Dhaka South City Corporation DSCC and Dhaka North City Corporation DNCC made the bold move of taking the responsibility of the city's drainage system and canal management from Wasa, to streamline the total drainage system under these two bodies. We have seen how, over the years, most of the main canals have been narrowed down by encroachers and being choked by indiscriminate dumping of garbage. The result has been the devastating effect of clogging the canals causing debilitating flooding during heavy rainfall.

There are around 39 canals in Dhaka so the task ahead is quite daunting. According to the DSCC mayor, he will give equal importance to recovering the canals from encroachers and removing the garbage from the canals. According to officials, the city corporations have already started removing garbage from the canals, culverts and drains as part of the immediate plan. They are also taking stock of the pumps at different points that pump out rainwater.

The plans of the DSCC in this endeavour are similar to that of the DNCC. In addition it includes disconnecting the sewerage connection from the storm water drain, encouraging households to set up septic tanks and plugging in solid household waste connections with canals and lakes.

But before any work can be done, it is necessary to free the canals from encroachers. The DSCC mayor has said that demarcation work has already been completed and the next step will be to set up pillars according to the demarcation. Encroachers will either leave on their own or the city corporation will evict them. There are also promises of planting trees along the canals and having bicycle lanes along them.

While it is unfortunate that the problems of encroachment and clogging the canals with garbage have been going on for years with no noticeable efforts to find solutions to the problems, we are relieved that the two city corporations are taking up this task in a concerted manner. Needless to say, this will be a formidable, not to mention, expensive, task. The DSCC has apparently earmarked Tk 981 crore to develop the canals. The two corporations must work together under the integrated masterplan and there has to be proper coordination and cooperation between the two. They must also include liquid and solid management in their plan as suggested by an expert. In addition, the two corporations must sensitise the people, especially those living near these canals not to dump waste into them.

Dhaka's waterlogging problem can be solved if every stakeholder acts responsibly and sincerely. While the city corporations embark on this ambitious project, the city's residents must also play their part in helping to clear the canals. The government, moreover, must extend all its support in helping the city corporations to recover the canals from encroachers. The canals must be free so that they can connect with the river without any hindrance. We hope the corporations can successfully implement this project and relieve the city from its perennial waterlogging woes.

Child marriages increased drastically during lockdown

Govt must conduct national survey and take steps to stop the trend

We are alarmed at the findings of a study conducted by the Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF) on the situation of child marriages across the country. It has found that at least 13,886 child marriages took place in 21 districts of the country during the lockdown last year. We fear that the actual situation must be far worse since the study could not cover the entire country and was conducted only in 84 upazilas of the 21 districts. Also, not all the unions of the 84 upazilas were covered in the study. What is even more alarming is that in around 78 percent of the cases of child marriages, the people involved said they were aware of the legal age of marriage and that child marriage was illegal.

It is really frustrating that parents are marrying off their daughters despite knowing these facts. However, we must also understand the reasons why parents in general marry off their daughters at an early age and also why the child marriage rate increased during the lockdown. The MJF study looked into the reasons behind such a high number of child marriages and found that poverty, loss of earning opportunities and uncertainty over the future mostly led to the families marrying off their daughters during the lockdown. Thirty percent of the respondents of the study cited poverty as the reason that led to early marriage of their daughters. The closure of educational institutions was another major reason of child marriage as girls got stuck at home during the lockdown, as educationists believe.

While child marriage has increased around the world during the pandemic, the situation is particularly worrying for a country like ours where the prevalence of child marriage is usually quite high and the pandemic has just made the situation worse. The question is, will the child marriage rate drop now that there is no more lockdown? Could the government ensure employment opportunities for the families that were left with no work in remote rural areas during the lockdown? Did the government's cash incentives reach these vulnerable families?

Needless to say, without ensuring that the basic necessities of a family are met, reducing child marriage will be very difficult. No matter how many laws and regulations there are, they will not be able to stop this social curse—which is destroying our girls' lives and obstructing the development of the society as a whole—if we cannot reduce poverty from the country. The other underlying factors of child marriage must also be addressed by the government to stop this practice once and for all. The MJF study has given a glimpse of what the situation is in a number of districts. We think the government should conduct a national-level survey to get the whole picture regarding child marriage across all districts.

When the Deaf is Heard

BLOWN' IN THE WIND



SHAMSAD MORTUZA

THE footage is harrowing. A speech-impaired girl is pushed off a running bus for not being able to pay her fare. She was wearing a note saying that she did not have any money on her. The driver had no time for empathy; he asked his helper to throw her out of the bus. Police later attended the injured victim and arrested the driver and his helper. The TV news channel that aired the news had the decency of not showing the photo of the girl, but they did show how the girl was writing to describe the situation. She scribbled how she was feeling a constant buzzing noise in her ears.

The incident happened in Keraniganj in the city suburb on Monday. Compared to all the gruesome news that we consume on a routine basis, this news is probably trivial. It has not gone viral as the beating of an eight-year-old Madarsa student, the death of a writer-entrepreneur while waiting for his court hearing in jail, or the release of a cartoonist who has partially lost his hearing while in custody. Then again, there is an underlying unheard tension that unites all these tenors that run alongside the grand orchestra of our 50 years celebration of the nation.

The four founding principles of the constitution state: nationalism,

socialism, democracy and secularism. The constitution proclaimed fundamental human rights, including freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom of movement, freedom of assembly, the right to education, and public healthcare among others. The constitution is the place where every citizen has the protection to be heard; whether you are a doubly marginalised physically challenged woman, an under-age child forced to join an

in our efforts to differentiate one from the other. It matters when someone who steals millions can cross the border before the issuance of immigration alert. He wore a sign, saying, "I have money" (read, stolen from others) written all over it. Yet that man, the financial guru, according to a press report, managed to get a safe passage. Meanwhile, a deaf and mute girl is pushed off a bus because she has no money. What does it tell us as a society when someone gets a free ride,

animals are more equal than others'. The society in which we are living today is being stretched to two opposite directions. Fifty years after independence, we have developed exponentially. We have earned the respect of the world. Unfortunately, we have also forgotten to respect ourselves, our own kinds. We have forgotten our agrarian roots, our connection to the soil, its rivers. While chasing the development dream, we are forgetting the fact that the freedom that



educational institution out of poverty, a conscientious artist with a desire to point out the follies of the society, or a concerned citizen upset by some political anomalies—the constitution should have you protected. At least in theory.

It is good to see that the police have nabbed the driver and his helper and the teacher who inflicted the corporal punishment. For the other two cases, special provisions have been made; their cases remained unheard for a long time. It was too late by the time the case of the writer-entrepreneur Mushtaq was heard, and the other case of the cartoonist Kishore has salvaged partial hearing—thanks to the untimely death of Mushtaq in the first case. The release of Kishore after the untimely death of Mushtaq simply confirms the interconnectedness of things; how we are all linked to the strings that propagate through time and space to connect us all. Now who controls the string is a metaphysical question that is outside the purview of this present article!

It matters when we forget this essential connectivity at a societal level

and others do not? Our celebration of the golden jubilee will be incomplete if we cannot ensure justice and fairness.

The bus driver at Keraniganj has every right to refuse service to a passenger who has no fare, but he has no right to throw someone out of a running bus. Similarly, a school teacher has the right to be strict to teach his student a lesson, but he has no right to resort to corporal or psychological punishments. No one has the right to humiliate the other in public; both the deaf girl and the madrasa student have their dignities. The state has not given any right to any individual or institution to compromise those. It is safe for me to comment on the wrongs inflicted upon these two individuals. But I do not feel safe to comment on the lapses of the institutions that are bound by the constitution to oversee that such malpractices do not occur. My self-censorship is a sign of social sickness. The lepers in my head long for a saviour figure.

In his political allegory in the "Animal Farm", George Orwell shows that we cannot proclaim equality when "some

we are enjoying today is a result of the blood sacrificed by millions, most of whom came from the peasants' class. It was the tenacity of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to harness the aspiration of the people and give it a green and red contour.

"We often forget an important point in discussions on the Liberation War." The deputy chief of staff during the Liberation War, Air Vice Marshal AK Khandker reminds us. "According to my estimation, during the second week of December the number of freedom fighters was around 1 lakh 15 thousand. 70-80 percent of them came from peasant background. Our history does not recognise their role properly. We often forget that the Liberation War was a people's war and a national war."

Let us not forget the people in our journey towards the golden shore we are aiming at. Let us hear for those who cannot hear, and let us speak for those who cannot speak.

Shamsad Mortuza is Pro-Vice-Chancellor of the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB), and a professor of English at Dhaka University (on leave).

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A historic, trillion-dollar triumph for Biden and US



ASHFAQUE SWAPAN

DESPIITE razor-thin majorities in the US Senate and the House—where corollary lawmakers can be as frustrating as herding cats—Biden has managed the near-impossible task of steering through

Congress a massive USD 1.9 trillion bill about to profoundly change America.

"It would provide another round of direct payments for Americans, an extension of federal jobless benefits and billions of dollars to distribute coronavirus vaccines and provide relief for schools, states, tribal governments and small businesses struggling during the pandemic," *The New York Times* reports. "The bill is estimated to slash poverty by a third this year and potentially cut child poverty in half." These estimates are based on a Columbia University study.

US progressives—myself emphatically included—owe Biden an apology.

At one point in the Democratic battle for the presidential nomination last year, his campaign appeared to be in its death throes. Good riddance, I had thought, and I was far from alone.

Biden's perennial candidacy had an almost pathetic air to it. He gave the impression of a person who's past it, and his mantra of bipartisanship sounded

like an archaic anachronism that seem to advocate unilateral Democratic disarmament at a time of vicious hyperpolarisation where Republicans had a take-no-prisoners strategy.

How Biden has proved us wrong. Biden launched a campaign that was hamstrung by a once-in-a-lifetime global pandemic and a *sui generis* opponent remarkable for his mendacity, mean-spirited attacks and appalling boorishness (his conduct forced the presidential

transformational president.

Yet faced with implacable Republican opposition, and put in a difficult position by his own laudable if fruitless commitment to bipartisanship—Obama's stimulus package never did pack a big enough wallop.

Biden, who never had the Olympian standing of Obama, has done what Obama could not. He has passed legislation that is destined to transform American politics.



Biden has managed the near-impossible task of steering through Congress a massive USD 1.9 trillion bill.

PHOTO: AFP

debate authorities to take a step unprecedented in the western world—they threatened to switch off his mike if he misbehaved.)

Biden ran a warm, informed, humane campaign free of invective and he focused on policy. He conducted himself with coherence and competence in public appearances.

His opponent, former President Donald Trump, won the greatest number of votes ever won by a US presidential candidate—and still lost to Biden.

Now, barely within six weeks of inauguration, Biden's trillion-dollar stimulus bill promises to permanently change the nation's political complexion for the foreseeable future.

It is one of history's big ironies that he was the running mate of a storied US president, Barack Obama, whose intelligence, poise and soaring rhetoric made him appear to be one of America's

To be sure, the credit is not Biden's alone. Biden's secret to success has been that he has deferred to experts when necessary. Right from the campaign throughout the early days of his presidency, Biden has projected an aura of seamless competence.

Take his extraordinarily smooth rollout of administration appointees. With one conspicuous exception, all have been easily confirmed by the US Senate. It's also one of the most astonishingly diverse cabinets ever, bristling with historic firsts—but what's more important—these are all competent, smart folks.

Janet Yellen, the first woman Treasury Secretary, is a former chair of the US Federal Reserve Bank. Princeton economics professor Cecilia Rouse is the first woman of colour to chair the Council of Economic Advisors. Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland is the first ever Native American cabinet secretary.

As far as the USD 1.9 trillion stimulus bill goes, Republicans in Congress, to nobody's surprise, are crying foul. It is true that not a single Republican voted for the stimulus bill, but it's hard to muster a lot of sympathy for Republicans who passed Trump's deficit-ballooning tax law in 2017 without a single Democratic vote.

Biden and Democrats had learned a bitter lesson from the Obama days, when their good-faith attempts at bipartisanship resulted in stalling and ultimately produced a much-attenuated stimulus bill.

This time around, Democrats know time is of the essence. They barely hold the Senate (50-50 with Vice President Kamala Harris breaking a tie), and the House is also pretty close. Upcoming 2022 elections could wrest the Senate away from Democrats. Even now the majority hangs by a thread—any retirement or death could give away the Senate to the Republicans, and then good luck with passing legislation.

Republicans have begun their ritual lament of the deficit and what it would do to our grandchildren who will be saddled with massive debt, a consideration that apparently failed to cross their mind when they backed Trump's trillion-dollar giveaway to the uber-rich in 2017. Past presidents Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush left massive deficits as well, and if Republican lawmakers were worried about it at that time, they have kept it a closely guarded secret.

Congress Republican opposition is in remarkable contrast with their own voters. "Some 70 percent of American adults—including half of Republicans—support the measure, according to a Reuters/Ipsos national opinion poll conducted March 8-9," according to a Reuters report.

The Biden administration and their Democratic allies in Congress are just getting started. House Democrats have already passed a historic voting rights law which faces an uphill battle in the Senate. Massive plans on immigration and infrastructure are in the pipeline.

It's unlikely to be a cakewalk, however. Sweet though it is, Biden and the Democrats have just only won a battle. The war is still far from over—and structural, undemocratic advantages that Republicans enjoy mean the challenge ahead is quite formidable.

Joe Biden has his work cut out for him.

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