

Sharp rise in Covid-19 infections worrisome

Govt must respond in a manner befitting the gravity of the crisis

WE'RE deeply concerned about the manner in which the Covid-19 positivity rate in Bangladesh has started climbing again. The daily rate reportedly went up to 10.29 percent in the 24 hours preceding March 21 morning, in a nearly one-point jump from the previous day's rate. Meanwhile, the infection and death figures have been hovering over 2,000 and 20, respectively, over the last several days. Also, more people are turning up to get tested at the centres this month compared to February. The rise in our Covid-19 figures are apparently consistent with the global situation, with the Deutsche Welle reporting on March 19 that some 97 countries had reported more cases in the past two weeks compared to the previous 14 days. If the current trend holds, we may soon have a situation where the government may have to consider imposing a lockdown or other forms of restrictions on movements again to contain the virus.

Clearly, with only 48,40,969 individuals vaccinated as of March 21 in a country of over 167 million, we're far from a situation where the mass vaccination campaign would start to affect growth charts. Countries where there is a robust vaccination campaign in place are expecting to be able to soon bring down the numbers (the EU even claimed to have a target of achieving herd immunity by mid-July). In our case, however, not only have we failed to inoculate the targeted population in the first month of our nationwide vaccination drive by a wide margin, we have also failed to come up with a plan to boost recipient numbers by ironing out problems in widening the coverage. The government has to keep in mind that to contain Covid-19, the speed and coverage of vaccine rollout are key.

One possible reason linked to the recent rise in infections is the UK variant of the virus. Researchers tied with the Monash University have also stressed the need to investigate if any of the 34 unique mutations of the virus found in Bangladesh are responsible for the rise, and to find out whether our Covid-19 vaccines are effective against them. The virus apparently mutated a total of 4,604 times in Bangladesh from April to the first week of December last year, and the absence of our own research and even vaccines means we're ill-prepared to respond properly to the threat of the local mutations, if it indeed comes to that.

These problems and threats call for a more robust, targeted and coordinated Covid-19 response from the authorities. Since a successful anti-virus campaign requires giving equal attention to tracing, testing, treating and vaccinating, the government has to ensure it does so without exception. Besides rigorously enforcing the health safety guidelines, it must trace all potential Covid-19 carriers, especially those traveling from outside, reinvigorate the existing testing and treatment regimes, and of course bolster the vaccination drive in a manner that matches the gravity of the crisis. There is no room for dillydallying.

Salinity getting worse in coastal areas

Govt must take urgent steps to reduce it

A recent survey, titled "Gender-responsive Coastal Adaptation" and carried out by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), has brought to light the hardships faced by people of the coastal areas. According to the survey, 73 percent of the people living in five coastal upazilas of Satkhira have to drink saline water on a daily basis. Among these people, another 63 percent face difficulties even in getting this brackish form of water due to not having access to any other source of drinking water.

UNDP has run the survey on a total of 66,234 households comprising of 271,464 people, and found that the salinity levels of 52 percent of the ponds and 77 percent of tube-wells in the coastal regions were higher than the ponds and tube-wells situated in any other parts of the country. Although the permissible salinity level in drinking water is 1000mg per litre, on average, people of the coastal areas consume water with a salinity level between 1,427mg and 2,406 mg per litre, which has serious health effects. The situation gets even worse during the dry season, when the salinity level of tube-well water in some parts of Satkhira goes up to 6,600mg per litre.

A report published by *The Daily Star* on March 22, 2021 shows that in coastal areas, most people spend more than two hours per day in fetching water, as they have to commute more than a kilometre for this purpose. The UNDP survey has converted this time into monetary value on the basis of the government-run programme "Kajer Binimoye Khaddo (Food for Work)" and discovered that people of the coastal regions are losing around Tk 2,463 on a monthly basis due to spending productive hours in collecting drinking water.

Experts have given important suggestions to solve the problem. Rainwater harvesting, for instance, can ensure supply of safe drinking water during dry seasons. Also, the destruction of coastal ponds by saltwater shrimp farming has to be prevented. Another way of mitigating the problem is by setting up water desalination plants, where water collected from the Bay of Bengal or salinated rivers will be stored in giant tanks and later purified, although the environmental costs of such an enterprise must be taken into consideration as well. The government must sit with the experts and find sustainable solutions to this serious situation and alleviate the sufferings of the people in these areas.

A cancelled 1971 conference in Pakistan sends a message

BLACK, WHITE AND GREY



ALI RIAZ

AN institution of higher learning in Pakistan had to cancel an academic conference about 1971. The virtual conference, scheduled for five days beginning on March 23, was organised jointly by the School of Humanities and Social Science of Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS) and the Institute of Pakistan Studies of Quaid-i-Azam University. The conference was expected to be attended by several academics from South Asia, particularly from Bangladesh and India. The conference, titled "Commemorating 50 years of the 1971 War: War, Violence and Memory", was supposed to feature presentations on the 1971 war, the genocide in Bangladesh and related issues. Although the conference was planned for quite some time, the organisers made the announcement on March 19 of holding the conference. But within 24 hours, the organisers faced such immense pressure that they could not take the risk of holding the event. Although there has not been any reference to any pressure by the LUMS, those who follow social media, such as Twitter, know the extent of belligerent attacks on the organisers. The vitriol was incessant.

This incident is another example of the magnitude of intolerance and insidiousness in South Asia. Unfortunately, there are too many examples of such pugnacious acts. Yet, it should not be considered as another incident in Pakistan that shows the lack of forbearance. Instead, two aspects of the incident warrant attention of those who follow Pakistan, whether from Bangladesh or elsewhere. They have implications and messages for the entire region. Firstly, questioning the official narrative has been considered unacceptable. Secondly, the act of silencing or censoring those individuals or organisations who are trying to offer a different narrative has been franchised; it has now been handed over to individuals loyal to the dominant or official narrative.

Who are the actors of the incidents in Pakistan? Whether there was any pressure from the government is yet to be known, but we can safely assume that the government will not be unhappy with the results. It is well known that the Pakistani establishment, particularly the Army, intends either to avoid the question of the 1971 war, especially the genocide in Bangladesh, or regurgitate their own version of history. The "conspiracy theory"

seen as a tool to mold a nation's youth, interpretations of historical events are often manipulated in response to current events, as heroes become villains across the borders of neighbouring countries, and opposing political parties within nations vie to control the grand narrative of the nation state." In the case of Pakistan, it is not only the 1971 war, but the history of Kashmir and Baluchistan, that hold the same issue. That is why LUMS had to cancel a conference in 2015 on Baluchistan.

Notwithstanding the direct censorship imposed by the state, incumbents often encourage its supporters to get the job done for it. It happens in Pakistan as well as in India. Since the BJP came to power in 2014, the frequency has grown exponentially. Denying visas to invited speakers of conferences, and physically assaulting speakers at public events by BJP supporters have happened in the past. This January, an undersecretary of the Education Ministry issued an apparently innocuous memorandum about some guidelines regarding organising webinars by state-supported educational institutions. The memo states that these

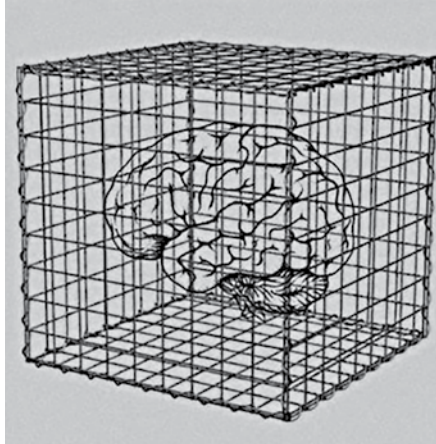


PHOTO: STAR

for 1971 involving India, Russia, even the USA, is so deeply ingrained in the psyche of the establishment that it is reproduced in school texts. In 2010, I had the opportunity to scrutinise some of the texts of Grades 9 and 10. Although it was of no surprise that reference to genocide was missing, the unfounded narratives were a revelation to me. This was being done by the Pakistani state, deliberately, even after four decades of 1971.

Khurshid Kamal Aziz, in his superb study titled "The Murder of History" published in 1986, showed how "history" is being murdered every day in Pakistan. Yvette Claire Rosser's study of school texts in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh highlights how history is manipulated by nation states and politicians to forge a national identity. Her PhD dissertation at the University of Texas at Austin in 2003, titled "Curriculum as Destiny: Forging National Identity in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh" examines the social studies text and argues that "When history is

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institutions must secure prior approval from the ministry of external affairs for organising any international online conferences/webinars. A list of topics is included for which the permission will be required; it reads: "security of State, Border, Northeast states, UT of J&K, Ladakh or any other issues which are clearly/purely related to India's internal matters".

These incidents in Pakistan and India are not only interventions on academic freedom; they have become a regular matter. These are efforts to make the official narrative of history the only history. Such an effort is also discernible in Bangladesh in various manners. Among the legal measures, the most obvious is the Digital Security Act 2018, particularly Article 21. However, the shrinking of space for dissent and freedom of expression is not a result of a single law, although a law can be highly injurious—the supporters of the incumbent can create a climate of fear through direct and indirect pressure. Intimidation, threat and potential violence can and does silence contrarian voices. Those who have been subjected to such harassment in Bangladesh would be able to understand the gravity of it, how frightful the experience can be. Others adopt silence, in fear.

In India, for quite some time, intellectuals, writers, researchers and academics have been fighting the battle against the saffronisation of history. It is not an easy task, neither was it meant to be, yet they have remained steadfast. In Pakistan, in recent years, progressive intellectuals have questioned the official narrative of 1971. The cancellation of the conference and the vicious attacks on the organisers only show the difficulty of the task ahead of them. Their efforts, like those in India and elsewhere in South Asia, have a message—concerned and conscientious persons cannot have the luxury of avoiding this struggle. It is obligatory for intellectuals to speak truth to power.

The conference at LUMS has been cancelled; however, the message it sent is loud and clear.

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Regional integration in the Bay of Bengal: In search of a new agenda



SELIM RAIHAN

ACADEMICS, policymakers and other stakeholders in the Bay of Bengal region and beyond agree on the need for greater integration in this region. The Bay of Bengal

Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), founded in 1997, offers a platform to carry the regional integration agenda forward. However, the progress in the integration process in the Bay of Bengal region has remained slow. Also, achievements, in terms of trade, connectivity and cooperation, have been little and segmented.

In the context of an interdependent and interconnected world, the national economic and security priorities of the countries in the Bay of Bengal region are strongly connected to collaboration across boundaries. Yet, the question remains, given the record of slow progress, whether there is any prospect of deeper integration in the Bay of Bengal region.

While the importance of trade and investment integration—through trade in goods and services, removal of tariff and non-tariff restrictions and promotion of a regional investment and trade nexus—is critical, deeper regional integration in the Bay of Bengal needs favourable political economy factors.

The political economy perspective shows how various actors influence

national and regional decision-making contexts, as well as the impacts their actions (or lack of actions) have on the integration process. The interplays of different actors shape the political economy perspective. In this context, the role of official institutions (at the regional level and in respective countries) entrusted to carry out the regional integration process is vital.

As a result, the functioning of the BIMSTEC Secretariat and relevant ministries in member countries is critical. Furthermore, the integration process is influenced by the roles of the private sector, private sector associations, civil society organisations and media. The status of regional connectivity and regional trade facilitation in BIMSTEC

can go up by a few times if proper trade liberalisation and facilitation measures are undertaken. At the same time, intra-regional investment can be enhanced through effective operationalisation of the special economic zones in the countries of this region to attract intra- and extra-regional investments. The prospects of larger integration with the regional value chain (RVC) and the global value chain (GVC) can be enhanced if countries can use the regional integration mechanism effectively.

To enhance the trade and investment nexus in the BIMSTEC region, the Free Trade Area (FTA) negotiation needs to be finalised and efforts should be made for a comprehensive economic partnership agreement. There are 14

the China factor in the Bay of Bengal integration process.

Despite the fact that there are diverse interests among the BIMSTEC countries, to make the BIMSTEC process effective, as the largest country in this region, India has a compelling justification to put greater focus on regional connectivity and relations with Southeast Asia. Also, small BIMSTEC countries should see this cooperation as an opportunity in raising their capabilities to enjoy the benefits of integrating with large markets in India and Southeast Asia. There is a need for a range of operational and substantive reforms to enhance the regional movements of goods, services and people, through prioritising seamless physical connectivity and high-quality infrastructure.

Efforts to overhaul the integration process in the Bay of Bengal region requires normative dialogues about the desirable and substantive form of regional architecture. For BIMSTEC to thrive, India, as the most influential country in the region, would have to take the lead, spend resources and take proactive measures to make the BIMSTEC Secretariat the leading institution of the Bay of Bengal. All members of BIMSTEC have to provide the Secretariat with sufficient resources and undertake reforms to improve its capabilities.

Finally, while we talk about the political commitment for regional integration, we should keep in mind that political commitment is not strongly exogenous. It is also dependent on certain factors like domestic politics, bilateral political relations between countries, the country's overall development strategy, and external factors beyond this region, primarily geo-political ones. We often blame bureaucrats for the slow progress in regional integration. However, it is the political elite that finally decides. Unless clear messages and signals are there from the political elite, bureaucrats can hardly make any progress. The lack of effort for integration in the BIMSTEC region is not primarily an economic or bureaucratic problem; it is primarily a political economy problem. There is a need for agreement among the elite—both political and economic—at the regional level. While the economic elite feel the necessity of integration, the political elite are divided. Regular consultations, people-to-people connectivity, interactions among political and economic elites, and promotion of political liberalism can help to reach a "regional political agreement" for a successful Bay of Bengal integration.

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The inaugural session of the 4th BIMSTEC summit in Kathmandu on August 30, 2018.

PHOTO: THE KATHMANDU POST/ ANN

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countries affects trade and investment integration.

Finally, the success of the regional integration initiative in the BIMSTEC region will largely depend on how the political elites in BIMSTEC countries see this integration process, and whether there is a general agreement among them to carry the integration agenda forward. The experiences so far, however, suggest that there has not been any strong momentum of the aforementioned political economy factors in the BIMSTEC region to deepen the integration process.

Now the question is, given the lacklustre progress, do we need any major overhauling in the integration initiatives in the Bay of Bengal region, and therefore, do we need any new architecture of regional integration? In my view, the answer is yes.

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areas of cooperation in the BIMSTEC agreement and they need to be consolidated, focused, interconnected, pragmatic and operationalised. The BIMSTEC comprehensive economic partnership has to take into account the contexts and developments in the ASEAN integration process and also the Regional Comprehensive Partnership Agreement (RCEP). BIMSTEC integration should go beyond the seven-member countries (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Thailand) and include other economically advanced countries like Singapore, Indonesia and Malaysia.

The China factor is critical in the Bay of Bengal integration process. This has both economic and political dimensions. While India has reservations about China due to its bilateral political relations, all BIMSTEC countries, in reality, have China as a major trading partner and a source of foreign direct investment (FDI). Therefore, there is a need for reconciliation of