

## Cash assistance for poor a welcome development

Ensuring transparency is crucial at this stage

WELCOME the announcement from the government that it will be providing another round of cash assistance to nearly 35 lakh poor families facing income losses and hardships amid the ongoing nationwide lockdown. Last year, in the aftermath of the first nationwide lockdown or “general holiday”, we saw firsthand the hardships endured by the poor—especially those earning daily wages like rickshaw pullers, day labourers and construction workers—when their only source of income was cut off abruptly. This year, according to finance ministry officials, each family will receive a one-off cash support of Tk 2,500 before the Eid-ul-Fitr through mobile financial services.

However, we must also remember that a similar initiative was taken last year during the countrywide lockdown, when the government, with inputs from field-level officials, prepared a list of 50 lakh families in need of financial support. Disappointingly, the distribution of money was stopped midway following allegations of anomalies in the list of beneficiaries. It was alleged that the list contained names of families that were financially solvent, and some of the beneficiaries were listed twice or more times. The Finance Division is now said to have cross-checked all the names and struck 14.32 lakh names off the list to reach the final beneficiary number of almost 35 lakh.

Having 14.32 lakh names that did not belong on the beneficiary list is no small anomaly—it is almost 41 percent of the final list, which calls into question the process of compiling this list in the first place. We hope that this time around, the government has taken all the necessary precautions to ensure that the list was compiled in a transparent manner and that the funds actually reach the most marginalised families.

However, giving one-off cash assistance is not a long-term solution; ultimately, we all have a responsibility of following health and safety guidelines to reduce transmission and allow the country to be opened up again. While we also commend the other forms of assistance the government has announced—including the Tk 100 crore fund for farmers who lost their Boro crops recently, the Tk 800 crore for Test Relief, General Relief (GR), Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF), and Vulnerable Group Development (VGD) programmes, the Tk 20 crore disaster fund for the disaster management and relief ministry to provide food assistance to the poor, and the selling of essentials at subsidised prices by the state-run Trading Corporation of Bangladesh—these initiatives will only work if they are implemented with the greatest transparency and accountability. We hope the government will take the strictest measures to ensure that these commendable initiatives are free of corruption and reach the people who sorely require this assistance during this period of crisis.

## Health guidelines during Ramadan

Devotees must protect themselves and others from Covid

RAMADAN, the holiest month for Muslims all around the world, started on April 14 in Bangladesh. This is a time when Muslims engage in self-purification through fasting from dawn to dusk and praying for forgiveness from the Almighty. This year, Ramadan has come at a time when daily infection and death rates caused by Covid-19 are experiencing an unprecedented surge. The spirit of Ramadan encourages us to introspect and show restraint, which in our present circumstances will be best observed through ensuring the health safety of others by staying at home.

According to the instructions laid out by the Ministry of Religious Affairs on April 12, a total of 20 people—including the khatibs, imams, muezzins, hafez and khadims—will be able to perform Tarabi and five daily prayers at a time in a mosque this year. Also, there will be no iftar mahfil and sehri arrangements at the mosques. These instructions have been given to prevent the spread of the virus. Concerned authorities have to ensure that these guidelines are followed properly by the religious community, by conducting regular awareness-building campaigns and also monitoring the activities of the religious institutions.

It is unfortunate that prices of daily essentials, like always, have also skyrocketed before the start of this year's Ramadan. Media reports show that 5-litre bottled soybean oil was being sold for Tk 630 to Tk 650, which was Tk 80-100 more than the usual rate. Similarly, prices of onion, chicken, beef and vegetables have also increased. Although traders have provided various reasons for these price hikes, the fact that the same thing happens every year before and during this particular month only lends credence to the opinion of market experts who have highlighted price manipulation by unscrupulous businessmen as the prime factor behind the spiralling costs of essential food items.

The government has to monitor the market strictly and respective authorities have to punish those who are responsible for the unusual price hikes. Also, adequate supply of groceries has to be ensured so that panic buying by the consumers does not create any shortage of supplies. Effective and affordable transportation systems for the traders of daily essentials during the ongoing lockdown have to be made available too, so that the supply chain does not get disrupted and goods reach the hands of the customers as usual. May the spirit of Ramdan touch everyone.

# Education in a post-Covid-19 world



BLOWN' IN THE WIND  
SHAMSAD MORTUZA

THE onslaught of Covid-19 shows no signs of relenting. While the infection-death curve has been arrested by some countries, our one is still climbing, as if it wants to put a flag of our collective irresponsibility at a greater summit. The disease data from the same time period of last year is of no help in understanding when a plateau can eventually be reached—partly because we are now dealing with a new variant of the virus during this second wave, whereas some other countries are already dealing with their third wave. The end, therefore, is not in sight.

Thus we have an uphill task at hand. The first challenge, of course, is to survive. We have to have faith in science, maintain social distancing, and wear masks to minimise infections. If we do survive this ordeal, the next challenge will be to adapt to the new reality. A lot has already been said about the post-Covid-19 reality. And all will agree that we cannot return to the world as it was once before. An optimist historian reminds us that after the Black Death in the Middle Ages, humans came across the Renaissance, the

one year. But the online learning makes us aware of another type of privatisation. The school from its public domain has moved into private locations. The classroom atmosphere has changed, and the presence of students in their domestic space has created multiple psychosocial issues.

In response, there have been many creative efforts taken by the teachers and policy makers. More and more, people are realising that there has to be a concerted and collective response to stop our students from becoming castaway individuals marooned in lonely islands. Education is a collective effort, and if we do not invest in it, we will simply create further inequalities.

One lesson that we have learnt during this crisis is the need for making science an integral part of our curricula. Every day, we are being reminded of basic hygienic rules to protect ourselves from the havoc created by a microorganism. In essence, we are being reminded that public education and public health are interconnected. In other words, education is not only for those who go to schools or colleges—it is for everyone. The students at home have brought the schooling to a domestic sphere.

Educators themselves have learnt that education cannot remain within the rigid structure of a classroom. The inclusion of television, radio, and the internet has

of being so close to death. We cannot simply assume that we know what the students are going through. Instead, we must create a space so that they can voice out their concerns, helping us draft a public policy for the psychosocial wellbeing of our future generation.

The needs are different in our three-track education system involving Bangla medium, English medium and Madrasa system. These streams with their diverse



The post-Covid-19 world of education may be fundamentally different from what it was before.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

*One lesson that we have learnt during this crisis is the need for making science an integral part of our curricula. Every day, we are being reminded of basic hygienic rules to protect ourselves from the havoc created by a microorganism.*

revolutionary change in the way humans were perceived. Maybe another such revolutionary change is waiting once we turn the corner.

One area that has been hit hard during this pandemic is education. Our lack of preparedness for an emergency shows the wide-ranging inequality that persists. Such inequality can now be measured in terms of the computers and bandwidth that we have (or do not have). Such inequality has exposed the public-private fault lines. The private sector has shown much more resilience than the public one in accommodating digital and distance learning. This has actually widened the gap between learners within the span of

proved that the medium needs to be flexible and accommodative. Then again, the learn-from-home model has made the guardians the proxy educators. The vertical relationship between a teacher and a student has found a horizontal model in which the delivery of education requires new stakeholders, new levels of participation of others.

Returning to school will thus require a new kind of readjustments. Already, the extreme form of individualisation, isolation, quarantine and lockdown have affected the mental health of our students. Many are struggling with the trauma of losing loved ones, the vulnerability of being affected by the disease, and the fear

cultural orientations remain a constant source of discontent. One fix-all formula may not be enough to address the diversity that exists. At the same time, there has to be a clear assessment on how this distance from physical classrooms has affected these three different streams. We will also need to understand whether the skill sets identified for the twenty-first century are equally pursued by all three sectors. More importantly, how did the exposure to technology-driven education during this pandemic change the nature of these streams, and to what extent?

The government must assess the needs and come up with open digital resources for the use of local stakeholders. If we are to rely too much on international and private sources, we will end up having more inequalities within the system. A clear policy needs to be adopted as to how these resources can be effected in a blended or hybrid format in a post-Covid world.

The financial crunch caused by the pandemic will take years to recover—and many of the students will find it difficult to find jobs by the time they finish their education. It can even lead to a point where the very purpose of education will be questioned. Already, there are organisations that brag that

both with certificates, why take the trouble of going through an institutional discipline? Again, the policy makers and civil society will have to play an active role in addressing this issue and clearing the very objective of education. Dodging it will cause more harm. And buoyed by the success of distance learning, if the government stops investing in physical classrooms, then we will enter another crisis room.

This virus has promulgated a great myth of being the ultimate leveller. The reality is far from it. The line separating the Global North and the Global South is more prominent than before. Countries with better technological infrastructure have shown more resilience to come out stronger out of this crisis. Meanwhile, in countries like ours, our supreme faith in the God-given vitamin D available in the sunlight is becoming wobbly by the minute. Then again, the Global North has realised that the virus is a great globetrotter; it cannot corral itself in a safe, sterilised half-hemisphere. There has to be collaboration for the sake of humanity. And education is the cement that can bond us.

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

## A US battle between democracy and the fear of it

Republicans want to curb voting to ensure minority rule



ASHEFAQUE SWAPAN

HELLO from Georgia, ground zero in a massive US political battle. Here I am

in Atlanta, still smarting from a disconcerting national media glare since the recent kerfuffle about a new voting law passed by the Republican-controlled Georgia legislature. The force of the backlash and the counter-backlash is enough to give you vertigo.

It wasn't that long ago when Georgia was considered a dependably Republican sleepy Southern backwater. US President Joe Biden's victory in Georgia in the presidential elections last year and a shocking Democratic sweep of run-off elections this January have made Republicans sit up and take notice. Biden was the first Democrat to win Georgia in 28 years, and Sen. Jon Ossoff and Sen. Raphael Warnock's victories in January were a stunning reversal for Republicans, who had expressly designed the run-off system to ensure a lopsided partisan advantage.

So recently, Republican legislators in Georgia passed voting legislation. Critics say it curbs voting rights, and all hell broke loose. Biden compared the law to those of the so-called “Jim Crow” era of egregious racist laws. Atlanta-based corporate heavyweights Delta and Coca-Cola expressed displeasure. Major League Baseball cancelled a scheduled fixture from Georgia, causing serious economic pain.

In response, Republican Gov. Brian Kemp made a frenzied round around conservative media launching blistering attacks on “woke” corporations and liberal “cancel culture.” So, what's really going on? Some critics may have indulged in hyperbole—it's not really Jim Crow, as Biden says, but more like Jim Crow Lite. Having said that, the Republicans have an extremely serious charge to answer. While we can go down into the weeds in an abstruse debate over the merits of the bill, the most curious thing about the law is that it is essentially a solution in search of a problem.

Despite a global pandemic and record turnout, the elections last year

in Georgia were a spectacular triumph. This is according to—get this—the same Republican state administration itself that now touts this law. So why this elaborate attempt to reform the voting system after such a great election?

Part of the reason is that the rabid base of the Republican Party, egged on by former President Donald Trump, believes Biden won a “stolen” election.

To this day, Trump's vicious lies about a stolen election—summarily thrown out of US courts—have created a toxic climate with potentially devastating

becoming a white grievance party faces an increasingly steeper democratic challenge.

So what to do? There are two obvious ways out of it. One is to woo the constituencies that represent a growing demographic—young people, people of colour, women. The Republican Party's own post-mortem after its candidate Mitt Romney lost to former US President Barack Obama in 2012 made exactly that recommendation.

Then came Trump. He gleefully took the party in a completely opposite direction.



Democrats and voting rights activists are alarmed by the new Georgia voting legislation enacted recently.

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS/DUSTIN CHAMBERS

implications. Polls show a staggering number of Republican rank and file do not recognise the legitimacy of the duly elected president of the US.

During a recent meeting with Republican donors, Trump was at it again as he lashed out at the Georgia governor for not doing enough to get him his due “win” in Georgia in 2020. The Republican base is in la-la land in significant part, thanks to right-wing media like Fox News and Newsmax. Both face billion-dollar lawsuits for spreading the canard of “stolen” elections and crooked voting machines.

Of course, there's far more to it than that. As the demographics of the US change, the Republican Party's bet on

*The rabid base of the Republican Party, egged on by former President Donald Trump, believes Biden won a “stolen” election.*

This is what a slew of measures proposed by Republican-controlled states aim to do. Under the rubric of voter security, pretty much all these measures end up making it difficult for constituencies that—surprise!—traditionally vote Democratic, like people of colour and poor people. The Brennan Center for Justice, a liberal-leaning law and justice institute at New York University, counts 253 bills in 43 states that seek to tighten voting rules.

The decennial US census has added another arrow in the Republican quiver. Every 10 years, based on new census data, states get to restrict their constituencies. With a majority of states under Republican control, expect Republicans to carve up constituencies into bizarre-shaped districts to maximise partisan advantage.

Experts say if Republicans have their way, Democrats will lose the House come 2022 even with current voting trends. Democrats are fighting back with a proposed federal law that mandates more inclusive voting practices.

Republicans will tell you that this is all leftist propaganda, that all they are doing is securing the vote. It was only Trump who blurted out the truth last year in May about the Republican fear of an expanded franchise when he dismissed a Democratic-led push for reforms such as vote-by-mail, same-day registration and early voting.

“The things they had in there were crazy. They had things, levels of voting that if you'd ever agreed to it, you'd never have a Republican elected in this country again,” Trump said during an appearance on Fox & Friends.

So, who will win, democracy or the Republican fear of it? Stay tuned.

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