

INTERNATIONAL DAY AGAINST DRUG ABUSE AND ILLICIT TRAFFICKING

Have we done enough to address the problem of drug abuse?

THE OVERTON WINDOW



ERESH OMAR JAMAL

ON May 27, *The Daily Star* reported that detectives had claimed to have seized LSD, an extremely potent hallucinogenic drug, for the first time in the country during a raid in Dhaka. Three days later, the newspaper published another report that described

how LSD has been smuggled into Bangladesh from the Netherlands since 2017 using the government's postal service.

A number of reports have recently come out on this topic, mostly due to the much-publicised death of a university student who allegedly killed himself under the influence of LSD. But why did it take four years for the law enforcement agencies to finally wake up to this threat? What (or whom) were they under the influence of?

This series of events perfectly describes the main problem when it comes to drug abuse. We as a society often say that the best solution to drug abuse is greater awareness. But awareness for whom? Only the users?

The theme of this year's International Day Against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking is "Share Facts On Drugs, Save Lives", which aims at promoting and sharing the realities on drugs: "from health risks and solutions to tackle the world drug problem, to evidence-based prevention, treatment, and care".

Well, here are some facts: According to data from the Department of Narcotics Control, total seizures of yaba pills in Bangladesh went from being 36,543 in 2008 to 812,716 in 2010, 1,951,392 in 2012, 6,512,869 in 2014 to 29,450,178 in 2016—which indicates that despite the availability of drugs like marijuana and heroin, yaba (a mixture of methamphetamine and caffeine) continues to be the most prevalent drug in the country. And unsurprisingly so, as over the last 10-15 years, increase in the use of methamphetamine globally has outpaced that of any other drug. Meanwhile, it has

been said, both officially and unofficially, that other deadly drugs such as cocaine, ice and LSD (recently confirmed by law enforcers) have also started to enter into the country.

Due to the lack of data, the number of drug addicts in Bangladesh continues to remain unknown. However, estimates (that are somewhat outdated) range from 100,000 to 4 million. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, the incidence of drug abuse during the pandemic has shot up worldwide, just like it did following the 2008 global financial crisis.

The fact that this has happened is quite revealing. It reveals something very important about the demand side of the drug problem: that drug use is fuelled largely by various social factors such as poverty, isolation from friends and family, loneliness, desire to escape from stress, peer pressure, etc. Although many researches have revealed this to be true, in our society, this is barely accepted or understood. As a result, the way we deal with drug addiction or drug users often turns out to be counterproductive.

People who are addicted to drugs need empathy and love to overcome their addiction. These are the two most common threads—along with professional help—that can pull them out of the quagmire of addiction. Unfortunately, there are not enough reliable rehabilitation centres in our country, and most are out of the reach of lower- and middle-income groups. At the same time, we must do more to prevent people from getting addicted in the first place by ensuring that they do not feel alienated from their friends and families or their community. Involving people in social/community activities, therefore, is crucial.

In Bangladesh, young people tend to become dependent on drugs the most. But what is driving them towards addiction? Alienation, depression, and an inability to relate to community and culture could be some of the reasons—problems that are much bigger than drugs, but are leading towards their usage. People in general, and young people in particular, have to believe that they have a purpose to their lives. In the

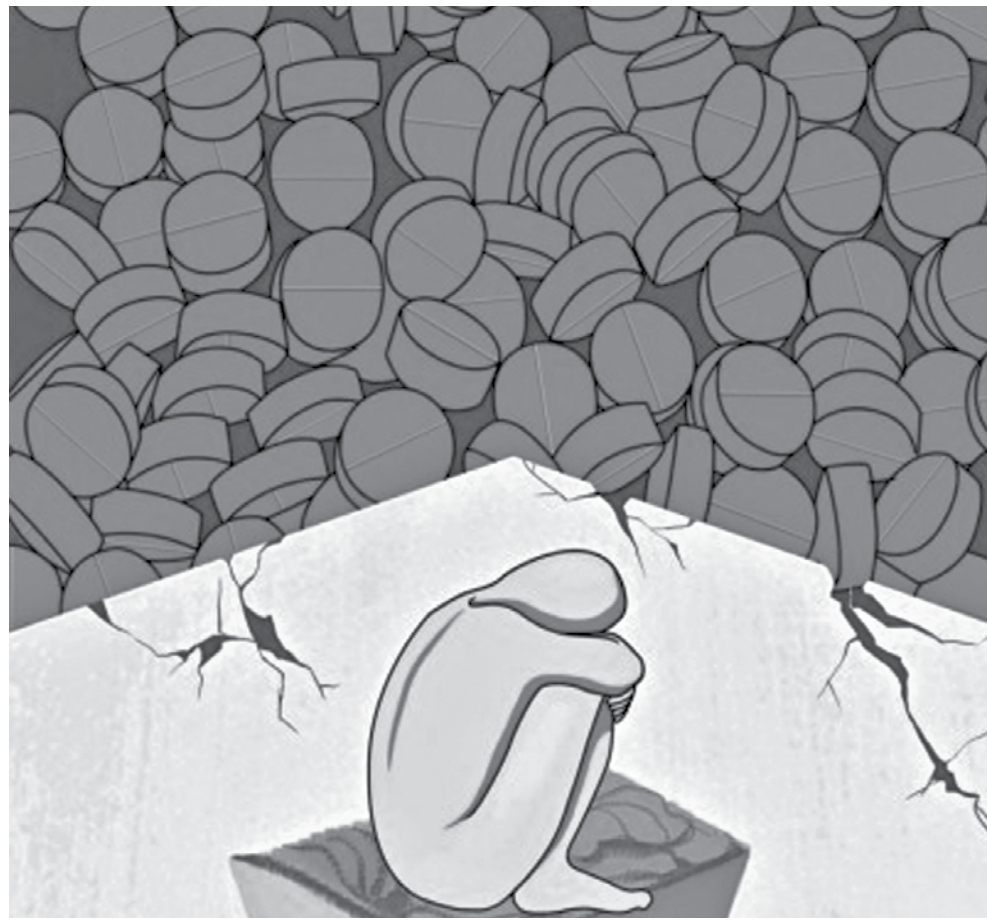


ILLUSTRATION: NAHFIZ JAHAN MONNI

absence of such belief, people tend to get involved in self-harming activities, despite knowing the dangers that these activities pose to their lives. And this is where we have failed.

We have failed to understand the drug problem at a much deeper level than just this, however. For years now, we have seen the government wage its war on drugs, leading to the loss of hundreds of lives and incarceration of small-time dealers and users. Yet, it has failed miserably to stop drug use. That is not only the case in Bangladesh; we have seen other countries (the US, for

example) wage similar drug wars, but to no avail.

Bangladesh is a country that has always suffered from the curse of poverty. This means that there have always been people desperate enough to become small-time dealers to survive. Going after these people, killing them and jailing them cannot stop the supply of drugs. That should be obvious. The only way to reduce the supply is to go after the real kingpins. Why haven't the authorities done that?

The only explanation for such failure is that these masterminds are well-connected

and protected. Consequently, the drug trade is among the most lucrative businesses in the world, meaning that paying off people in power to continue looking the other way happens frequently when it comes to the drug trade. Because of that, it is often connected with other crimes such as human trafficking (mostly to force people to traffic drugs). Which also explains why major drug cartels around the world are often found to be involved in trafficking people. But given the lack of accountability and transparency in our governing system as a whole, identifying and punishing those who are really behind the supply and trafficking of drugs (and people) is no easy thing to do.

Nevertheless, if we want the curse of drugs to stop plaguing our youth and our nation, it is something that must be done. The real masterminds behind the supply of drugs must be identified and punished. On the other hand, by learning from the likes of Portugal, which has addressed the drug problem most successfully, we must be more lenient towards its users by passing law that removes incarceration for drug use—although people caught possessing or using illicit drugs may be penalised by regional panels made up of social workers, medical professionals and drug experts. The panels can refer people to drug treatment programmes, hand out fines or impose community service, which once again should aim to involve people in community activities.

The problem of drug use is not a problem exclusive to Bangladesh. Every country around the world has faced it. Some of them have done so successfully, others have not. We must stop emulating the countries whose drug policies have failed to stop or reduce drug addiction, and start adopting policies that have actually worked. Otherwise, it cannot be said that the policymakers are not equally culpable for the rapid explosion of drug use that we see in Bangladesh, and the enormous social costs and sufferings that come with it.

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M Ayubur Rahman Bhuyan: A great scholar and soul

SYED M AHSAN

MUHAMMAD Ayubur Rahman Bhuyan, a long serving faculty member at Dhaka University's economics department (1970-2004), was an outstanding colleague to fellow academics, a dedicated teacher, and an eminent scholar. While he had graduated with BA Honours and Master's in Economics from DU in 1959 and 1960, respectively, he joined the department as a lecturer relatively late in 1970, having first pursued a career in banking. He completed his PhD in Economics from Lancaster University in the UK in 1975 and promptly reported back for his academic duties at DU. He was rewarded in his career with quick promotions; Assistant professor in 1976 (July), associate professor in the same year (December 1976), full professor in 1984 and a professor in the Selection Grade in 1996, which he retained till retirement in 2004.

His primary field of expertise, springing from his doctoral research, was international trade in all its dimensions. He was perhaps the pioneer in articulating the mutual gains of regional cooperation in trade in the South Asian context, long before the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was even born in 1985. Though the idea of SAARC had received a diplomatic momentum in the late 1970s, the trade issues took a back bench in the early stages of deliberations. The notion of a vibrant South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) is still in the making, even though the entity was officially inaugurated on January 1, 2006. This is all the more a priority given the evident difficulty in securing liberal trade regimes globally, which admittedly stand to benefit most nations. The Doha round



M Ayubur Rahman Bhuyan (1938-2021)

of liberalisation talks, the latest in its wake, ended unsuccessfully in 2016 after a 14-year attempt as the negotiators failed to bridge the demands of the developing world. Fittingly, Professor Bhuyan had materially contributed to the early development of the Doha round of negotiations, among other, by contributing two commissioned reports, respectively in 2003 and 2004, on behalf of the European Union and the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD).

Ayub bhai, as he was fondly known to colleagues and friends, began writing on trade issues with an enormous sweep, starting with the nitty-gritties of export and import demand, exchange control and domestic prices, foreign aid, trade creation

effects of a free trade area—he quickly delved deeply into the larger issues of the economic impact of free-trade agreements (FTAs) and, in particular, the idea of a Customs Union for the South Asian region. The latter, just to remind the reader, refers to a deeper economic union than what the mere FTA would provide; here the trading partners also agree on a common tariff for imports coming in from outside the block. The two research monographs he published in quick succession, *Economic Integration in South Asia - An Exploratory Study* (1979, DU Publications) and *South Asian Customs Union: Prospects and Problems* (co-authored by M Aqilqur Rahman and SAL Reza for ERD, MoF, GoB, 1980) were among the pioneering studies of the genre.

Though trade reforms and policy, foreign aid and economic development had been his core competence, he did venture into the issues of agricultural growth, budgetary process (revenue generation and expenditure priorities), third-world debt crisis, rural-urban migration, environmental and ecological aspects of poverty, sustainable development, and the economic fallout of terrorism, all germane to the developmental prospects of Bangladesh and, indeed, the developing world.

In the early 1990s, Professor Bhuyan, a man of unwavering faith, became squarely involved in what has come to be known as Islamic Finance and more broadly, Islamic Economics. He became active in many international events and presented papers on a variety of related topics. One well known study that came out in this venture was a book he edited in 1996 (*Towards an Islamic Common Market*, edited volume, Dhaka: Islamic Economics Research Bureau).

Though dedicated to teaching and

scholarship, he did not shy away from sharing in the administrative chores befitting a senior academic. He served, among others, as Chair of the Department of Economics (1983-1987), Director (1987-1990) and later Chair (1994-1997) of the Bureau of Economic Research, University of Dhaka. He carried out advisory and consultative work, both on the domestic and international levels. At home he had worked with the ministries of planning, finance, commerce, land, LGRD&C, planning commission, tariff commission, rural development academy, water development board, and the minimum wage board. UNCTAD, ILO/ARTEP, UNDP, FAO, International Development Research Centre (Ottawa), the European Commission, ESCAP, and the International Development Research Centre (Panama and San Francisco) were among his numerous overseas clients. Many of these assignments led to reputable publications as journal articles and/or research monographs.

Even in "retirement", Professor Bhuyan remained active both in affiliations with some private universities in Dhaka as well as by rendering consulting services for the European Commission on a study of bilateral potential FTA between BGD and India and more broadly assisted the Ministry of Commerce in the Uruguay Round of trade negotiations. Sadly, Covid related complications, presumably accentuated by pre-existing health conditions, cut his life short, as he quietly passed away last month in a local hospital. He is survived by his wife, a daughter and two sons and a host of grandchildren, not to speak of an even greater army of well-wishers.

Last, though not the least, we note that personal charm, a caring nature, and gentle manners were all hallmarks of his great

personality. These personal qualities were among the first reflections of many of his former colleagues upon hearing the news of the loss. Some quotes are necessary to impart an impression. "He was a gem of a person and always ready to help people who needed it. He was also a deeply religious person. I feel very privileged that he had great affection for me..." (Professor MA Rashid); "Extremely saddened to hear of the passing away of Ayub Bhai. We were colleagues in the department. A very nice person, a good teacher, and an excellent administrator as the chairman of the department..." (Professor Barkat-e-Khuda); "Deeply saddened to hear the passing of Ayub Bhai, who was a wonderful human being—always kind to everybody—a good and dedicated teacher..." (Professor MG Quibria). These spontaneous remarks were all offered once the news spread in group communication by my former classmates, who had been his DU colleagues at different times. I personally had not been fortunate enough to have been a colleague nor a co-worker, though I had known of his work and had met him on numerous occasions. Another close friend and classmate, Professor Siddiq Osmani, though not a DU colleague of Professor Bhuyan but had research interactions with him, went on state that: "he was an excellent academic and a very nice person—he was always especially kind and generous to me."

While we are all mortal, some of us are lucky enough to leave behind a legacy of knowledge and personal virtues for others that remain. Professor Bhuyan was among such a group of souls who keep on living beyond their time on earth.

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QUOTABLE Quote

MORIHEI UESHIBA
Japanese martial artist (1883-1969)

Your spirit is the true shield.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Start a hand
- 5 Rough push
- 10 Bars on cars
- 12 Sheets and such
- 13 "Hush!"
- 14 Make better
- 15 Ivy League student
- 16 Play part
- 18 Notice
- 19 "Raging Bull" star
- 21 Even
- 22 Cub Scout leader
- 24 Deceitful
- 25 One born under the zodiac sign of Cancer
- 29 Contented sound

DOWN

- 1 Stunned
- 2 Driven out
- 3 Like edelweiss
- 4 Oahu garland
- 5 Thin board
- 6 Yonder fellow
- 7 Infant outfit
- 8 Furniture layer
- 9 Cut off
- 11 1984 Jeff Bridges film
- 17 Jazz fan
- 20 Due to get
- 21 Belonging to those folks
- 23 Souvenir shop stack
- 25 "X-Man" sort
- 26 Marigold color
- 27 Lake of Alberta
- 28 Warren's "Ishtar" coster
- 29 Louvre location
- 31 Carried
- 33 "Why don't we!"
- 36 Rep.'s org.
- 38 Mai tai base

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BEETLE BAILEY

BEETLE BAILEY

MY COFFEE IS TOO COLD, THE OFFICE IS TOO HOT, AND MY TRASH IS FULL!

DON'T YOU KNOW WHO IS IN CHARGE HERE?!

WE ARE

YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

J A P A N C O M B S
A S I D E A W A R E
B I N D S B E N I N
B A H T R A S H E S
E G O S I R O R E
R O L L B E L L S
S E O N T E E
S C O O T S C A T O
P E A V I S O R O
A R M R E S T V A T
I M E A N O P E R A L
N O R M A M O R A L
S N A P S P E S T S

BABY BLUES

BABY BLUES

THEY WOULDN'T DARE.

BY MORT WALKER

BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT