

Schools must follow health protocols

But they need the government's help and guidance

THE government on Sunday unveiled the details of its strategy to reopen schools, and we are happy that the decision to resume in-class educational activities after a long hiatus of nearly 18 months is now finalised. However, as we have previously stressed in this column, resuming in-class educational activities must also take into consideration the issues of health and safety of students, teachers and other school staff. In that regard, the government has included many variables in its reopening plan, and we hope it has done so with the utmost care.

But planning alone, while essential, is not enough—the matter of execution is even more important. And here the government must perform at its best. We must remember that although the government has previously given hints as to what the guidelines for schools reopening will be, the details have only been unveiled a matter of days before schools are scheduled to reopen. That means there is still a lot to be done, and in only a few days. It's naturally going to put a lot of pressure on all schools, while not every school is equally well-equipped to handle that. Thus the government has to provide every type of support that they will need in order to ensure that these schools are ready to provide the facilities needed to ensure the safety of all its attendees—such as funds for sanitising facilities, extra masks for students, teachers and other staff, etc.

Schools also have a responsibility to ensure that the health safety guidelines are strictly followed. It is natural for students to not always want to wear masks that are uncomfortable, or follow strict sanitising rules; it is up to the supervising staff to ensure that these guidelines are adhered to for their own well-being. Moreover, the schools themselves must make the necessary allocations and adjustments to ensure that students are able to maintain social distancing in classrooms, as recommended in the government's directive. In that regard, the government has also recommended that most students—except examinees of PECE, SSC and HSC—should attend classes only once a week for now, and the schools should properly plan the breakdown of which students should attend classes on which days.

As there are still plenty of uncertainties surrounding how well the reopening will work, the government's overall plan, as well as every school's individual plan, will require a certain degree of flexibility. At the end of the day, neither should lose sight of why schools are being reopened in the first place—for the benefit of the students—and as such, should have contingency plans for any future changes or developments in order to be able to respond swiftly and properly.

While reopening schools is an essential first step, the government must keep in mind the learning losses that have already occurred due to schools being closed for nearly one and a half years. Therefore, should the first phase of reopening prove to be a success, the government must have plans for a second phase in which to take steps to recover those losses. For that, the government should immediately begin consulting experts and start formulating further strategies.

Acting on consumer complaints alone is not enough

Authorities must proactively prevent fraudulent business practices

IT is disappointing to learn, from a report by *The Daily Star*, of the rising number of consumer complaints lodged with the Directorate of National Consumer Rights Protection (DNCRP). This shows how widely and frequently consumers' rights are being abused by businesses. But it is also reassuring to know that of the 47,738 complaints filed since 2013-2014 fiscal year, 44,630 have reportedly been resolved, while 6,935 entities have been penalised. This means that, for once, a government department is doing its job by serving members of the public effectively.

However, both consumers and those meant to protect their rights must continue to remain vigilant, as fraudulent businesses are becoming more prevalent online every day.

The higher rate of complaints over the years tells us that people are becoming more aware of their rights as consumers, and that the DNCRP is helping them to defend and protect those rights against corrupt business elements or practices. This is done in large part by the directorate conducting regular monitoring drives—11,953 in FY 2020-2021, through which 22,996 entities were fined a total of Tk 13.36 crore. However, consumers are still being sold faulty, expired, and/or overpriced goods, sometimes at higher prices—especially through online platforms where they cannot verify the quality of a product before purchasing.

We must remember that combating fraudulent business practices from the customer's end alone is not enough. The goal should always be prevention of such practices in the first place. As the chairman of the marketing department at the University of Dhaka explained, relevant authorities such as Bangladesh Standards and Testing Institution (BSTI) also need to do their part to ensure that traders are following the rules of law for product quality. So, while consumers should be aware of what they are owed and of their rights, businesses must also be stopped from taking advantage of the lax implementation of trading laws.

Now that conducting businesses online has become so easy, it is inevitable that traders who violate the laws are subjected to legal scrutiny and punishment. But everyone needs to understand that consumer experience is not just fulfilled by ease of purchase or accessibility to various goods, or even alluring discounts. The authorities concerned must screen any new businesses entering digital platforms, and verify their authenticity before allowing them to sell to customers.

Could public consciousness of history be a measure of social progress?



ADNAN ZILLUR MORSHED

FOR quite some time now, people have been discussing if there are more on-the-ground, inclusive ways to measure a country's progress, rather than supra-quantitative metrics like GDP. So what could be other possible yardsticks? In an earlier column, I proposed a few "experiential indicators" of well-being, such as the quality of public transportation, walkability, waste management, public spaces, and internet accessibility.

Today, I would like to propose a qualitative indicator of social progress: the public consciousness of history (PCH).

First, it would help to explain the relationship between historical consciousness and the idea of nationhood. One of the principal ways the nation-state establishes its authority is by demarcating a territory for the nation. But geographic boundaries, as Ernest Renan would say, is hardly enough—nor are common languages, religious beliefs, and ethnicities. A historical consciousness of unity, centring on both real and imaginary events or places, is assumed to buttress the concept of nationhood. Nation-states exploit this type of consciousness rather conservatively, like a canopy holding together different ethnicities, political persuasions, religious beliefs, and economic conditions under the banner of one nation.

Dominant groups often reinforce and perpetuate this consciousness on behalf of the state. For the French, the French Revolution is sacrosanct. For Bangladeshis, it is 1971. These are part of macrohistories that are expected to galvanise a people with a common national purpose. How people interpret and relate to these types of macrohistories can determine the way they imagine their nationhood and perceive themselves on the world stage.

But PCH, I propose, is a different kind of dynamic, fluid, and organic microhistory that can shape and condition the daily lives of people on various scales. People may or may not develop a meaningful consciousness of microhistories, depending on how economy, society, culture, and education percolate in their imagination of themselves in relation to their idea of the nation. These types of histories can serve as bottom-up strategies for people to negotiate their immediate worlds, their built environments, their natural ecosystems, etc. Are we talking about a society and its general well-being when we are discussing the quality of its public awareness of microhistories?

How, then, do we convincingly measure the state of such an awareness? For example, would assessing how the Dhaka University community reacts to the slated demolition of a historically significant building complex, like the TSC, reveal the state of PCH in Bangladesh?

Does Bangladesh fare well in PCH? Let us ask a few rhetorical questions. Why does the public mostly remain silent when Chattogram's historic area—Central Railway Building (CRB, established in 1872), a rare ecology of centuries-old

trees and hilly terrain—is chosen as the site for a 500-bed hospital? How would the ambulance sirens impact this area if this hospital is built after all? Why is there a blatant lack of public empathy when government agencies cut down "witness trees" (trees present during the surrender of the Pakistan Army) at Suhrawardy Udyan in the name of developing the historic park? Why are heritage buildings across the country routinely torn down to develop multi-storey flats or bland office blocks? Why is there a boat club (now infamous) built on vital wetlands connected to the Turag River?

How does one reconcile Bangladesh's consistent economic growth with a lack of broad public awareness of both the built and natural environments? What is the nature of the relation between economic growth and a nation's collective mental "evolution"?

If Bangladesh has a low level of PCH, let us consider a few possible reasons

cultural imagination of Bengali Muslims.

Third, the lack of stone in a deltaic land failed to create an enduring building culture around which the agrarian people of Bengal could develop a particular historical consciousness. Instead, Bengal's traditional huts were built with perishable materials like mud and bamboo. To develop a dynamic sense of historical awareness, people felt the need of powerful, tangible, and time-defying symbols with a lot of myths around them. Bengal's essential stories are about the heroism and struggles of the peasant, the boatman, the fisherman, and the rebellious yokel rising against the village *morol*, not about Kantaji Temple in Dinajpur or the 60-Dome Mosque in Bagerhat. These buildings are magnificent, but they are not part of Bengal's quintessential mental universe and did not shape the worldviews of Bengal's agrarian society. When we think of the archetypal Bengal, deep down it is

and its contestations should be part of a new curriculum. I recall my own undergraduate years in Dhaka during the 1980s. History students were frequently ridiculed, as if they could not find a more "useful" subject to study. The pervasive impression was that there were no job prospects for a history major. But, of course, the problem was not the discipline itself, but how we as a people imagine the humanities and their values in society. Furthermore, how history was taught as an uncontested and linear chronicle was part of the disciplinary failure.

I was browsing through the website of the Department of History at the University of Dhaka. Most full professors have zero content under their publication heading. There are no hints at their disciplinary expertise. Nor are there any syllabi, nor content on recent doctoral work. Across the website, there is no trace of debating history's disciplinary shifts since the publication



Why was it necessary to select a place like the Central Railway Building (CRB), a historic area in Chattogram with centuries-old trees and hilly terrain, for the project of a 500-bed hospital?

PHOTO: PROTHOM ALO

why. First is geography. The deltaic Bengal's geography—crisscrossed by rivers and canals, always changing course—is constantly shifting, and does not allow any permanent symbols, edifices, and allegiances. In this process, as Akbar Ali Khan implies in "*Discovery of Bangladesh*" (1996), grassroots institutions that could foster a consciousness of history could not take hold in Bengal.

Second is East Bengal's agrarian past. As French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's study of Algerian peasants suggests, within subsistence agrarian economies, the repetitive basis of agricultural activities follows Mother Nature's cycles. Such a similarity has traditionally conditioned rural people to conceive a very localised and fatalistic notion of time. This pre-industrial idea of cyclical temporality is not conducive to a broader historical consciousness. In "*Bangali Musolmaner Mon*" ("*The Mind of Bengali Muslims*," 1976), Ahmed Sofa examined the peculiar ahistoricity that complicates—or rather simplifies—the

still the tranquil sweep of the green paddy field, occasionally punctuated by trees and the homestead. However, it is slowly changing with the chaotic urbanisation of rural Bangladesh.

Bangladeshis have inherited the burden of the ahistorical sensibility of Bengal's agrarian legacy. This is by no means unique to Bangladesh. Many countries with a strong agrarian past demonstrate similar national attitudes. The problem is not with the attitude itself, but being stagnant about it.

We now live in a rapidly modernising, urbanising, and interconnected world. How do we enrich our agrarian inheritance with a modern notion of historical consciousness (by no means uncontested), one that would compel the masses to share the burden of debating history's symbols, contexts, and narratives that matter?

The first step should be to reimagine history as a discipline from primary school to the university level with a new purpose and vigour. Both history

of EH Carr's "*What is History?*" (1961) and the epistemological challenges of postmodernism, postcolonialism, and post-structuralism throughout the last decades of the 20th century. The quality of research and reputation matter in the ranking of universities.

Let us end with an optimistic note. As I have seen in Bangladesh in recent times, the new generation of students are hungry for knowledge that empowers them to think, contest, and deliver. It is important that we discover this hunger at every level of learning as a national asset. The University Grants Commission must re-evaluate the very notion of the "quality of higher education" to create a history-conscious learning community that feels the need to continuously examine the complex relationship between the past and the future.

Adnan Zillur Morshed is an architect, architectural historian, and professor. He teaches in Washington, DC, and also serves as executive director of the Centre for Inclusive Architecture and Urbanism at BRAC University. Email: morshed@cua.edu

A less merry Christmas awaits Britain



KAMAL AHMED

IMAGINE a scenario where a restaurant chain, famous for chicken dishes, is forced to shut down dozens of its outlets due to supply shortage. Food shops too are trimming their menus and superstores, leaving some of their shelves partly empty because they are unable to replenish their depleted stocks. It's real, and it's happening in Britain.

These breakdowns in supply chains are not only affecting small or medium business entities, but big brand multinationals too. Nando's has run out of chicken, McDonald's has stopped selling milkshakes, and superstores have been struggling with dairy products. The latest global giant joining the list of businesses struggling with supply chain crisis is Coca-Cola, which has reported shortage of aluminium cans. Coca-Cola's trouble is reported to have spread beyond the UK and is affecting bottling plants in Europe. The reason behind the crisis is shortage of truckers known as HGV (Heavy Goods Vehicle) drivers. It doesn't matter whether someone drinks milk or beer—everyone is somehow affected by the supply crunch.

A BBC report quoted one HGV driver saying that he had a 40 percent rise in his pay package due to the crisis in the haulage industry. Supermarkets such as Tesco and Aldi have been offering bonuses and other incentives to boost recruitment, but the labour squeeze continues. The HGV driver shortage is also affecting civic services provided by the local authorities. *The Independent* reported on Friday that bin collection within 24 local councils had

been disrupted due to self-isolation rules and a lack of workers to drive the lorries. A survey by the Road Haulage Association (RHA) estimates that there is a shortage of about 100,000 drivers.

One of the main reasons behind this shortage is Brexit. Many Eastern European drivers who left the UK following its exit from the European Union have not returned. The ongoing supply shortages, once again, has stoked the political

rules, however, have been gradually easing. Realising the seriousness of the shortage, the government has now begun consultations for changing the law to make licencing easier.

Recently, lobby groups for the retail and transport industries jointly wrote to UK Business Secretary Kwasi Kwarteng, warning that the impact on supply chains was getting worse, and urged for allowing European drivers on temporary work

that as the private sector is raising the drivers' wage as a quick fix to overcome their business challenges, the public sector is finding it even harder to maintain its level of service. On Saturday, one of the UK's largest suppliers of seasonal flu vaccines said the flu jab delay of up to two weeks was due to driver shortage. Doctors have expressed fear that the delay could result in a surge in flu cases this year.

This is the second shortage of workers affecting the British economy as it comes amid a crisis in the farming sector due to the lack of seasonal workers' availability. Before Brexit, Eastern Europe was the main source of Britain's seasonal workers. Some farmers were forced to let some of their crops rot in the field, and a few others opened up their gates to allow the public to pick their produce free.

As companies across the retail, transport and hospitality sectors are struggling to deal with these shortages, both the CEO of the frozen food retail chain Iceland Foods Ltd and wine manufacturer Accolade Wines have warned that Christmas could be a little less merry this year. Explaining the hurdle, some business leaders say that the retail industry usually starts stocking for Christmas in September, but they are now getting much less of the required supply. Analysts warn that extra costs in getting supplies would certainly push up the prices. Businesses say that even if the government immediately allows foreign drivers, recruiting them would take four to six weeks, which means a solution to the UK's supply chain crisis would not happen overnight. Never before people in the UK have realised that everything at their home is likely to have been on a truck at some point, and how skills shortage can affect them all.

Kamal Ahmed is an independent journalist. His Twitter handle is @ahmedk1.

Some business leaders say that the retail industry usually starts stocking for Christmas in September, but they are now getting much less of the required supply. Analysts warn that extra costs in getting supplies would certainly push up the prices.

debate over the so-called Brexit dividend. Expressing frustration and anger, some pro-EU activists are calling for a rethink about the future. However, it must be noted that the Covid-19 pandemic has caused further aggravation.

The RHA, however, blamed a few other issues, too, for the shortage of drivers. One of those is the historical problem in recruitment, work-life balance, and the high cost of training HGV drivers.

It added that the ongoing global pandemic also had some impacts as the licensing authority paused all licence qualifying tests. There is a huge backlog of driving tests, including the HGV ones. The isolation and quarantine rules, too, caused unpredictable and sudden abstentions from duties. These

visas. Logistics UK, a representative body for freight firms, and the British Retail Consortium (BRC) said that while Brexit and Covid-19 had caused lorry drivers to leave the UK, a temporary visa could lure them back. But the business secretary insisted that the industry should strive to tackle the shortage with local recruits, which some observers compared to rubbing salt on the wound.

Latest groups joining in the call for urgent actions to tackle the shortage of HGV drivers are leaders of the Local Government Association (LGA) and medical professionals. LGA leaders have called on Home Secretary Priti Patel to relax immigration rules for heavy goods vehicle drivers in order to ease the disruption. They have also pointed out