

Besides the PK Halder saga



NO STRINGS ATTACHED

AASHA MEHREEN AMIN

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FOOD prices have been keeping us awake at night, making some of us seriously rethink our diets. Confronted with the news that there was a severe soybean oil crisis reflected by the ludicrous price hike in this essential item, people were toying with the idea of switching to mustard oil, using less oil in cooking or just “going boiled,” which would have been a healthy decision for those who have an irrepresible weakness for greasy samosas and *morog mussalam*, plus can afford such “delicacies.” We have to admit, as Bangladeshis we do consume an extraordinary amount of oil—and onions—hence the panic during sudden shortages in supply of these items. Of course, later we found that it was much ado about nothing, since there were gallons and gallons of it stashed away by mischievous traders in their storage areas, merely so that they could create an artificial crisis and make some money off the oil-less public. While we heaved a sigh of relief at being able to go back to our oil-soaked *begun bhaja* and greasy *Mughlai porota*, other food scares continued.

There was the wheat scare and the rice scare, both of which seem to have been tackled by the authorities for the time being. Now it's the dollar scare, which brings us back to the food scare. It's a vicious cycle.

All this negativity makes one's head spin. Thankfully, there were some positive developments to distract us from the mildly important issue of how to deal with the escalating food prices. There was the much-publicised capture of PK Halder, the great con artist, and the fascinating plots and subplots of how



he, as the top official of a bank, managed to embezzle thousands of crores of taka as loans and launder them to various countries, buying luxurious mansions in Canada, Europe and India, and finally his dramatic capture in India. One has to give credit to this Einstein of a man for being able to distract people from the shrinking food basket. Now there's a candidate for a Bangladeshi remake of “*Catch Me if You Can*” (*Dhorte Parle Dhor*). Move aside, DiCaprio.

Another piece of good and breaking news is that the government has decided to abandon the ambitious “palm tree project” launched in 2017 to trap lightning, which killed at least 336 people last year. It seems someone had an epiphany that palm trees take time to grow and a natural phenomenon like lightning will not wait around for these natural buffers to become adults. Genius.

▲ The city of Chattogram is yet to find a solution to its perennial problem of waterlogging.

FILE PHOTO: RAJIB RATHAN

So, now we have a brand new, Tk 950-crore project to build shelter homes and very cool, techy lightning arresters in the lightning-prone areas of 15 districts. Now now, don't raise your eyebrows, please—Tk 950 crore is peanuts compared to the thousands of crores “redirected” by PK Halder and Co from Bangladesh to foreign lands. In fact, if we can recover at least some of the PK stash, it would go a long way in funding the extra cost of numerous delayed projects. It could be called the PK Halder Redemption Fund, with many more such funds to follow as more and more of such innovative artistes of deception are unveiled.

Talking about projects, the goals of which are a little fuzzy, let's take the four ongoing projects to address the perennial waterlogging in Chattogram, worth Tk 11,000 crore, and how some of them were initiated without some

minor homework—trivia such as having project proposals, feasibility studies, seeing whether the designs were correct or if they complied with the city master plans. According to a news report, one such project, for instance, was worth Tk 5,617 crore in 2017 and supposed to have been finished by 2020, but then was extended to 2022. But by April 2022, only 65 percent of the work had been completed, pushing the project deadline to 2023 with an increase in total cost of either Tk 9,526 crore or Tk 10,420 crore, depending on which government body's estimate is taken. It's no big deal—around a Tk 1,000 crore difference, give or take.

Delays in projects are a rule rather than an exception, which is why even a three-kilometre canal could not be built in the last seven years because of complications with acquiring the land. This is the city, one will remember, where mayors have gleefully said during elections that they would solve all the waterlogging problems of Chattogram (even during the time when it was called Chittagong). While these megaprojects are being delayed, Chittagonians, or rather *Chattogramians*, have the pleasure of getting floods in areas where there was no waterlogging before, thanks to temporary dams in the canals as part of the project to mitigate waterlogging! For those who enjoy living a bit dangerously, Chattogram has also become a city where, at any given time, one may literally disappear into an open drain or canal.

But seriously, we must applaud our government for restricting all “unnecessary” foreign trips of the employees in government or semi-government institutions in a bid to save some taxpayers' money during these hard times created by the pandemic, the Ukraine war, taka devaluation and because of the general apprehension that things will get worse before they get better. Hopefully, this will mean a curb on trips (complimentary of Biman) with a battalion of officials and their family members to Toronto to celebrate Independence Day.

But where do the children play?



NAZIBA BASHER

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“Oh, I know we've come a long way We're changing day to day But tell me, where do the children play?”

— Cat Stevens

SINCE the pandemic began and schools were shut down, my sole worry was my niece's well-being. Will she become isolated? Will she be able to remain physically fit? Could she go into depression?

I could never imagine myself being cooped up in my home for two whole years from ages six to eight. I could never imagine any child, as a matter of fact, in that situation. Until Covid came and I had to witness it first-hand.

No, it was not her education I was worried about—it was her health, both mental and physical.

While there were online classes, tutors and home schooling, no matter how much we tried, as working adults, it was difficult for everyone in the house to ensure she wasn't missing out on “playtime.”

The moment schools reopened, despite financial distress, we readmitted her to a reputed English medium school in the city.

A week in, I asked her how she was liking her new school and how much she got to play with her new friends.

To my utter shock, her response was, “We have a playground but we are not allowed to

Kalabagan to save the Tentultala playground from the hands of police authorities, who were building a station on the field.

The fight and the consequent win reminded us all about the importance of play areas and physical activities for the development of children.

The children who fought alongside the

their study, titled “The Role of Recess in Primary Schools,” games classes, i.e. physical education classes, do not provide a child with the same benefits as recess or breaks, during which they can play.

That's because these classes are much too structured and rely on rules made and imposed by adults (teachers).



School playgrounds are the only place where our children can find some space for themselves.

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

grown-ups, too, began cherishing their playground more than they had done before.

But are we supposed to rely only on these few fields?

I always thought of school as the second place, after the home, to not just ensure a child's mental and physical well-being, but to also encourage it by any means possible. But why are they not doing so?

Out of genuine concern, I began doing some research to know whether my niece's school was doing enough for her.

First, I learnt how “playtime” helps a child by improving their attention and decreasing stress and anxiety (and yes, contrary to popular belief, children also feel these emotions, and our education system does not help). It also helps motivate children to try new things and make more friends.

In a biological sense, playtime promotes the growth of new brain cells, which in turn helps them absorb and remember new information. Meaning, if your child plays more, they can learn more.

But does one “games class” a week ensure enough play?

AD Pellegrini, a retired psychology professor of the University of Minnesota, and RM Holmes, a psychology professor at Monmouth University, conducted research on the importance of recess. According to

For children to reap the benefits, playtime must be “playful,” without a structure or directions from adults—and recess is more suited to serve this purpose.

Some children may want to play “ice and water” or “hopscotch,” instead of running PE class races or playing basketball.

Children consider recess or break times as a small window of time during which they can breathe while coping with the heavy pressure of school education nowadays (my second-grader niece seems to be learning things about Julius Caesar that I even don't know of).

That small window seems to be slowly diminishing in many school systems, not just in our country but across the globe, according to the research.

Researchers also suspect that this is because society and its adult actors see this as a way to “get tough on education,” provide more “academic time” for students, and improve their academic performance.

The lack of playtime, coupled with the intense pressure to excel in class, is weighing down the tender shoulders of our future generation.

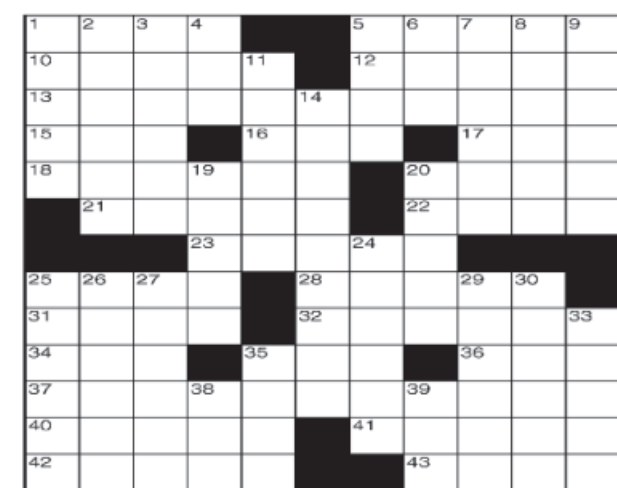
I think it's time we really asked ourselves what we wanted our next generation to be: Free-spirited, playful, active, and intelligent children? Or robots churning out A+s and GPA 5s?

CROSSWORD

BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 It's true
 - 5 Liner parts
 - 10 Once more
 - 12 Justice Kagan
 - 13 Botched
 - 15 Genesis name
 - 16 Guidebook feature
 - 17 High card
 - 18 Ready for the body shop
 - 20 Temple cabinets
 - 21 Shoplifted
 - 22 Exam
 - 23 Lawman
 - Earp
 - 25 Wizard
 - 28 Is patient
 - 31 At any time
 - 32 Foot parts
 - 34 Carnival city
- DOWN**
- 35 Flavor-boosting additive, for short
 - 36 Lyricist
 - 37 Pierced
 - 40 On — (rampaging)
 - 41 Rescued
 - 42 High homes
 - 43 Porgy's love
 - 1 Renowned
 - 2 Desert plants
 - 3 Rhythmic
 - 4 Even score
 - 5 Like an abyss
 - 6 Overhead trains
 - 7 One of the
 - 8 Door sounds
 - 9 Most secure
 - 11 To wit
 - 14 Prepared to blow out the candles
 - 19 Pisa sight
 - 20 Top story
 - 24 Lively dances
 - 25 Singer
 - Ethel
 - 26 Take wing
 - 27 Crystal-filled stones
 - 29 Do some shoplifting
 - 30 TV show
 - 33 Beach bits
 - 35 The Red Planet
 - 38 “Dig in!”
 - 39 Chemist's place

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