

Rising Covid cases should worry us

Authorities should respond properly to the emerging threat

WHILE the nation's attention was fixed elsewhere, the coronavirus numbers have been rising again, and fast, one should add. In the 24 hours till Sunday 8am, at least two people died from Covid-19, while 1,680 people tested positive. This, according to data from the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), marks the second consecutive day that the positivity rate crossed the 15 percent threshold – for the first time in over four months. On Saturday, at least three people died from Covid-19, while 1,280 people tested positive. A week-on-week analysis prompted a striking observation from the World Health Organization, which said that Bangladesh has the highest rate of infection in the world. In one week, the number of infected people in Bangladesh increased by 350 percent.

This pattern of increase – which, as an expert said, means we've entered the fourth wave of coronavirus – should concern us. The question is, why are Covid numbers rising when Bangladesh has vaccinated a large number of its citizens? Of the three who died by Saturday morning, two had received two shots of vaccine each, while the other had received a single dose, according to DGHS data. This is known as a case of "breakthrough infection", where a vaccinated person gets Covid-19. If this is a sign of things to come, Bangladesh, where a relatively small percentage of the population got the booster dose and where people are still generally lax in following health guidelines, has a lot to worry about.

Experts say that since the coronavirus is constantly mutating, no vaccine can guarantee a lifelong protection against it. Two Omicron subvariants, which are already causing havoc in a number of countries, are feared to be behind the recent rise of infections in Bangladesh. These new variants are highly infectious if not highly dangerous. But the effect of a vaccine, or the antibody produced from one's exposure to infections, gradually wears off after a certain period. This makes it extremely important that we follow health guidelines at all times even after vaccination, and that the majority of the population are given the booster dose (and more doses if the pandemic persists) as soon as possible.

Part of the problem in Bangladesh is people's indifference to testing. Earlier, when the pandemic was at its peak, there was some interest in voluntary testing but that, especially after being vaccinated, seems to have largely dissipated. This has to change. The authorities must launch a new drive to raise awareness of testing and other Covid precautions if we are to handle the new wave effectively. At the same time, the nationwide testing and vaccination programmes should be strengthened further. Following health guidelines, especially wearing masks in public and maintaining safe distance, should be made mandatory again.

Save street children from drug abuse

Govt must rehabilitate them, ensure their rights

WE are alarmed by the findings of a recent study of the Department of Narcotics Control (DNC) that said that 56 percent of the street children in the country are addicted to different kinds of drugs, while 21 percent of them are being used as carriers of drugs. The reason for the situation has also been identified – easy availability of drugs – with 53 percent of the children surveyed saying they can buy drugs directly from the traffickers. The study also identified the districts where the number of vulnerable children is higher.

Although there are no reliable current figures, the number of street children in the country stood at 1.5 million in 2015, as per Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS). These children are deprived of their basic rights – right to food, clothing, home, education, and healthcare. Although there are some programmes taken up by government and non-government organisations to rehabilitate them and provide them with a better life experience, these efforts are nowhere near enough for the vast number of children requiring support.

Living as they do – on the streets, with no support and deprived of all their rights – these children often resort to drugs to feel good about themselves. According to the DNC study, 14 percent of street children said they have been taking drugs since they were 10 years old, which is horrifying. Experts say, young addicts often suffer from various mental health problems. The DNC study has also found that the children often lack the ability to control their emotions, with 64 percent of them identified as being unable to manage themselves. Taking advantage of their vulnerability, drug traffickers sell cheap drugs to them and also use them as carriers. This is a heinous crime. Law enforcement officials must conduct regular drives to catch such criminals who play with children's lives, and legal action needs to be taken to punish them.

Equally importantly, to rehabilitate this large number of street children who remain vulnerable to all kinds of abuse, not just of drugs, the government should create a thorough database with updated information and take measures to ensure their wellbeing. Their education should be its number one priority. The children also need proper counselling to bounce back in life. There are many private organisations in the country who have been working to ensure their rights. If the government and these organisations work collaboratively, the situation can definitely improve for our street children, and they can be saved from the scourge of drug abuse.

Can a new law solve our educational problems?



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THE National Education Policy 2010 anticipated a comprehensive education law that would bring together existing laws and regulations under an umbrella to facilitate implementation of the policy. At least four different drafts of an education law have been prepared since 2011 but were withdrawn upon receiving negative feedback from the public and even the Cabinet of Ministers. The last one in December 2016 met strong disapproval from the Cabinet Division because it was seen to be giving legitimacy to coaching centres and private tutoring in the name of "shadow education" or educational activities in exchange for payment outside the classroom.

Commercial guidebooks and notebooks were another source of controversy. Schools and teachers required students to buy these, while the government provided free textbooks. A new draft, to be presented to the cabinet, restricts and penalises private coaching and guidebooks. What difference can this make? Are these indeed our major educational problems?

Media reports indicate that the new draft retains much of the 2016 text, except the new one putting stricter restrictions on private coaching and guidebooks. The 2016 draft in its preamble invoked Article 17 of the constitution that, as fundamental principles of the state, foresaw: a) Uniform, mass-oriented and universal education, free and compulsory as determined by law; b) Relating education to the needs of society, producing trained and motivated citizens to serve these needs; and c) Removing illiteracy using a timetable determined by law.

A contradiction in purpose and scope for the law arises from the gap between the broad vision of the constitution and the 2010 policy objective of consolidating existing laws and regulations within a legal framework. In other words, the draft law compiles some of the existing laws, regulations, rules, and orders and provides a legal cover for some practices. It does not anticipate change in respect to three key educational challenges: a) Establishing the right to education, b) Education governance reform in relation to decentralisation and accountability, and c) Education financing principles and criteria to ensure adequacy of resources for building equitable, inclusive, and quality education for all. The draft law thus bypasses the real challenges of the education system.

The draft law is also not a right-to-education law similar to those adopted in neighbouring countries such as India, Nepal, and Pakistan (through constitutional amendment followed by supportive legislation formulated in each country). An example is India's 86th constitutional amendment of 2002. Article 21-A was inserted in the Constitution of India to provide free and compulsory education to all children in the age group of six to 14 years as a fundamental right. This was followed up by the Right to Education Act 2009 to implement the constitutional provision. Bangladesh's draft law mentions primary education (up to Class 8) as a child's right, but does not specify how it is to be ensured and what the various duty-bearers' obligations, particularly of the state, would be.

It can be argued that the draft law looks at the symptoms of the disease, rather than the roots of the problem. Poor teaching and learning in schools, and the character and content of too



PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

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many high-stakes public exams drive students and parents to coaching centres and guidebooks/notebooks. Low-paid and poorly qualified teachers are motivated to take on private students and rely on guidebooks. Will the ban on coaching centres and guidebooks, without addressing effectively the deeper causes of educational decline, solve the problems?

The legal provisions proposed regarding curriculum development, teacher preparation and examinations reflect the present arrangements and structures which may need to be changed. For example, educators have suggested that teachers' professional development follow a concurrent approach (combining a four-year college degree and teacher training, instead of the present sequential

There is also the practicality and workability of enforcing the proposed restrictions. Guidebooks will be banned but supplementary materials and digital learning content will be permitted with approval from NCTB. Coaching centres will be closed but centres for assisting those preparing for jobs or seeking admission to institutions and language and skills training will be allowed. Private tutoring by teachers of students from schools other than one's own will be permitted. Coaching organised by schools will also be allowed.

These are pragmatic compromises. But entrepreneurial minds are likely to find ways around the rules to carry on their business. The more complex and subject-to-discretion the rules are, the more likely are occurrences of corruption and nepotism.

In fact, guidebooks, notebooks, and coaching centres are common in more advanced education systems. They are considered helpful for learners and not harmful as in Bangladesh, because they are not substitutes for good teaching in school, and learning assessment does not reward memorisation.

A critical measure of the benefits of the Act would be to ask what value it adds and what can be or cannot be done without the Act.

A permanent education commission is foreseen, which is a civil society demand. Registration of all institutions is required, which will be seen as a positive by educators. Separate teacher recruitment bodies have been proposed. Production and distribution of textbooks will be handed to a separate authority, detaching it from curriculum and textbook development. Inflicting corporal and mental pain to children will be prohibited. These are positive and necessary steps.

There are areas which belong to the sphere of education planning and development rather than the law – especially curriculum development, professional development, performance standards for teachers and education workers, and assessment of student learning and examinations. These are subjects more appropriate for qualitative change and adaptation, which should not be locked down by legal provisions and fixed rules.

approach). There is no advantage in freezing the process with an education law when adjustment and adaptation are already necessary.

As noted above, the law is silent about establishing the right to education, decentralisation of the education system, and financing criteria for equitable and inclusive education.

The law foresees, expectedly, the formulation of rules and regulations in many areas to implement the provisions of the law. It provides for penalties in at least a dozen instances – prison sentences ranging from six months to five years and fines of Tk 50,000 to 10 lakh. Mobile courts and the penal code are to be employed to deter infringement of law. The penal code and courts can, of course, play their role when criminal offences are committed. It is, however, questionable to prescribe a wide range of specific penalties when establishing the breach of law is a matter of judicious assessment in an educational context.

Interestingly, in respect to tertiary and university education, the draft hardly mentions the University Grants Commission (UGC) and vests responsibilities to the "government," on personnel, financing, quality assurance, and even academic matters. Legal authority assigned to the "government" in the case of tertiary institutions can undermine academic autonomy and make the exercise of governmental authority subject to political influence.

A new law is not a panacea. We know too well that laws can serve their purpose only when the key problems are clearly identified, and there is a capacity and desire to enforce the laws. The positive elements of the new education law will help if they can be implemented, and backed up by well-formulated rules and regulations. The absence of some critical elements in the law means that it avoids major education challenges. The aspects that are considered questionable make it a weak law and may defeat its purpose.

Having waited a long time, it would be worthwhile to make the new draft of the education law available to the public once more for feedback and to examine it critically in the context of Bangladesh's SDG4 agenda and its aspiration for a higher middle-income status.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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All arts should be included in the curriculum

Education is supposed to be the systematic doorway to achieving conscious growth as a human being. Of all the things our current educational system takes into account, the arts are always kept on the sidelines as an extracurricular activity.

The pressure of exams and getting good grades seldom leave time and energy for children to practice any art form. As most parents are more focused on the academic results of their children, they try to use any

extra time for academic subjects as well. This leaves us with a whole generation of children deprived of ever making an attempt to become experts in any form of art, other than the occasional mandatory painting classes at school.

Therefore, music, sculpting, dancing, drawing, and poetry should all be included into the curriculum for the well-rounded mental growth of our students.

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