

The Daily Star

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An expensive school education?

Govt must check rising prices of school supplies

HERE seems to be no end to the sufferings of the people of limited income who have been, for several months now, struggling to cope with the insanely high prices of daily essentials and amenities including utilities, transport and healthcare. According to a report by this daily, the prices of stationery items and study materials have also hit them hard now, increasing the cost of education. People are being forced to pay 15-25 percent more for school supplies such as notebooks, exercise books, pens, pencils, calculators and geometry boxes, etc. than what they used to pay two months ago. While a 500-page pack of paper would cost Tk 280 in July, it now costs Tk 380. Even the price of a small-size notebook reportedly doubled to Tk 20 – from Tk 10 – in just two months. Alongside these, the tuition and coaching fees of children have also increased significantly.

While the authorities should investigate what is causing this hike in the prices of school supplies – whether there is any actual reason behind this, or this is just the act of unscrupulous syndicates exploiting the ongoing inflation – our policymakers also need to look into the factors playing a role in increasing the overall educational expenses of children. The latest Unesco Global Education Monitoring Report has found that almost two-thirds of the total cost of education in Bangladesh are covered by households. This definitely points to the weakness of our education system where the state fails to bear the major share of the educational expenses of its population, as it should.

We also do not understand why the guardians of students would have to pay such an insane amount of money to private tutors and coaching centres. Some parents, while talking to our reporters, have said that a private tutor now charges between Tk 2,500 and Tk 7,000 for teaching students of different classes although, ideally, school education should be enough for them. We must ask then: how will the people of fixed income bear such high expenses? Why are our schools failing to provide complete education to our children? In this regard, what is most disturbing is that despite all the talk about stopping the coaching trade and private tuitions in the country, nothing substantive has been done so far by the government.

Coming back to the issue of the cost increase of regular stationery and study materials, we think the government must take some immediate measures to check any unreasonable increase in the prices of these vital learning tools and ensure these are within the reach of all households. It must also develop a market monitoring mechanism to check any illegal practices. If the government cannot take effective measures to reduce the educational expenses of children, we may soon see an increase in school dropouts, child labour and child marriages in the country.

Protect the Munda people

Legal action must be taken against all involved in recent attacks

WERE alarmed to learn of the continued fallout of a deadly attack on the members of the ethnic Munda community at the Dhumghat village in Shyamnagar, Satkhira. Reportedly, a local mob led by two influential land grabbers linked with Awami League carried out the attack on August 19. As revealed by an independent investigation later, they confined all the Munda families of the village to their houses at gunpoint, and destroyed their crops. Narendra Nath Munda, 65, was one of those who dared to protest and savagely beaten as a result, leading to his death the next day. Since then, the community has been living in fear, as their powerful attackers are yet to be arrested.

The incident began – as all such attacks on minority communities usually do – with claims over ownership of land traditionally held by the Munda community. We know from previous experience that such claims are nothing but a ruse to evict them, a legal ploy to further marginalise victims who have no means to defend their land and rights. An Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK) delegation has also found that the culprits had their eyes set on 30 bighas of land owned by the Munda.

So far, police have made little progress in arresting the accused. When asked about the attack, the deputy commissioner of Satkhira has struck a rather bureaucratic note in his response, saying “all administrative measures” would be taken to ensure security in the village and to “settle the land dispute”. We cannot help but ask: What land dispute? Why this lacklustre response to a crisis that can profoundly impact the future of an entire community? And whose side are the administration and police on, anyway?

This community has been living and farming on these lands for generations. The Munda people, mostly farmers and day-labourers by profession, are spread around the Sundarbans Forest. What distinguishes them from other communities is their unique language, culture and customs, which are increasingly at risk. What unites them – and all marginalised groups basically – is their shared vulnerability to assaults on their land by people enjoying the backing of the political establishment and the tacit approval of the administration. Reports of such assaults in the country are becoming too frequent to be taken lightly.

The Munda people in Shyamnagar deserve to live without fear, and without their ancestral land taken away from them. This is the only just conclusion to any legal dispute over their land. We urge the authorities to immediately take measures to resolve this issue for good, punish the attackers and their political backers who orchestrated the assault on the village, and ensure the safety of all marginalised communities in the country.

What future do our youth face?



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ANU MUHAMMAD

THE majority of Bangladeshi people are young. If we consider people aged between 14 and 29 years, they make up around 30 percent of the population, according to government estimates. People aged between 1 and 14 years make up above 25 percent of the population. People who are capable of working – those aged between 15 and 59 years – make up the largest segment of the population: more than 65 percent. The number of people who fall under the 14-29 age bracket currently stands at 50 million, and this number is increasing.

In my opinion, this population segment of children and young people faces the biggest danger among all in Bangladesh today. This danger materialises in different ways. Firstly, a healthy and safe environment that is devoid of fear, which is necessary for them to grow in, is non-existent. Their educational environment is hostile to healthy growth in many ways; privatisation and commercialisation of education have worsened its quality; they don't have playgrounds to play in, ponds to swim in, and trees and greenery are disappearing around them. Playgrounds are gradually being turned into large construction projects, and now children are basically growing up and spending their formative years on the streets or within closed doors.

A major concern at the moment is the fact that in 50 years, none of the services that our youth need to flourish throughout their lives – education, creativity, sports, cultural activities, libraries – have seen substantial growth in Bangladesh. As a result, they are growing up in a dry, uncreative, and cruel environment.



Our youth are being exploited by those with power.

VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

SCAN TO WATCH THE VIDEO



Secondly, the rate of unemployment is the highest among the educated. Meanwhile, those who are in the process of getting an education suffer from a lack of security as well. If we consider the gono rooms of public universities (common space shared by large numbers of students), a first-year student faces immense mental pressure as soon as they arrive there. Student organisations backed by the ruling party control everything about their lives – how they stand, where they go, what they do – they force the freshers to attend political gatherings. If a student faces all these obstacles in their very first year, their academic performance takes a nosedive as a direct result of this. A fraction of these students, often just to survive or in the pursuit of power, end up joining that same group of young people who are being used as muscle power.

the prices of fuel have increased along with that of other necessities, and people are protesting this price hike. When injustice takes place at universities or elsewhere, people try to protest that. In many of these situations, we have seen government-backed student organisations or youth organisations ready to stand against the cause, armed with machetes and sticks. We saw when teenagers revolted demanding road safety, the ones who attacked them were young as well. People refer to them as “helmet bahini,” and this bahini or force is gradually growing.

The female students who find themselves in this predicament face a larger degree of insecurity. We hear news of sexual harassment and rape almost on a daily basis, where young women are the victims. In many of these cases, the allegations are against Bangladesh Chhatra League or other government-backed organisations. They have created this reign of terror by connecting themselves to the powers that be.

A major concern at the moment is the fact that in 50 years, none of the services that our youth need

against other young people. A culture of fear exists in our universities and society in general. When we look at our youth today, we can see what danger and uncertainty they are being hurled into in the name of cementing political power.

My question is: What are the government's plans with this huge population segment who are supposed to take the reins of this country in the future? Does it want them to turn into machines? Does it want them to turn into a group of people devoid of thought, conscience, and sympathy? Is that the government's intention? To exploit them in any way they want?

One beacon of hope is that even from within this mess, the youth is making its voice heard, be that with road safety protests, protests for the Sundarbans, demands of national interest or for democracy. The touch of creativity we see in these protests give us some reassurance, but it's time we started asking questions as to where our government is leading our youth.

Transcribed and translated by Azmin Azran.

PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

The irreversibility of globalisation



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GRZEGORZ W. KOLODKO

JUST over three decades ago, the Cold War ended and the former Soviet-bloc countries began their transitions to market economies, which enabled them to engage with the rest of the global economy. The world's division into three segments – advanced capitalist economies, centrally planned socialist economies, and the “Third World” – appeared increasingly outdated. It was not, as Francis Fukuyama famously put it, “the end of history,” but it was an economic and political breakthrough, and the beginning of the contemporary era of globalisation. Is that era now ending, as many claim?

The face of globalisation has changed significantly since those early years. While economic and political globalisation initially went hand in hand, economic globalisation soon pulled ahead. We now have a globalised economy, but without an effective system of global governance. The European Union shows what an integrated economy with advanced policy-coordination mechanisms looks like. But the institutions that were supposed to do this on a global scale – such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, the World Trade Organization (WTO), the International Labour Organization (ILO), and the World Health Organization (WHO) – lack adequate instruments for economic-policy coordination.

As a result, the divergence between

political and economic globalisation is not only growing, it has lately begun to look like a clash. A political backlash against “globalism” in many countries seems set to unravel three decades of economic integration.

But looks can be deceiving. It is true that political globalisation is in retreat, driven by the Covid-19 pandemic, the new cold war between the United States and China, and the hot war in Ukraine, which spurred the imposition of harsh sanctions on Russia. It is also true that these shocks have caused severe economic disruptions; they have hampered the production and distribution of goods and services, obstructed technology transfer, tested international financial arrangements, and undermined multilateral cooperation.

Moreover, public opinion has increasingly turned against globalisation, which many mistakenly blame for trends like accelerating inflation and deepening income inequality. This has often led policymakers to eschew pragmatism in favour of populism and protectionism – the nemeses of global economic openness.

But politicians, media commentators, and economists have been far too hasty in predicting the demise of globalisation. In fact, economic globalisation has only temporarily lost its momentum. Despite its drawbacks, globalisation supports economic growth, not least

by enabling cross border trade, which enables producers to take advantage of economies of scale. Recent shocks have strained, not doomed, the global supply chains.

Likewise, cross-border capital flows, including portfolio and direct investment, support efficiency by enabling resources to reach places where they can be used more profitably. Though the pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine war are affecting these flows, the world is big enough to absorb liquid savings. A capital surplus somewhere will soon be used elsewhere.

Furthermore, despite the apparent shift in public sentiment against globalisation, the connections that support it – such as tourism and sport – are alive and well. While these spheres are under stress, people's enduring desire to travel and connect will continue to facilitate demand and growth.

Ultimately, economic globalisation is irreversible. After this period of turbulence – and the difficult social, cultural, demographic, and technological adjustments that it entails – greater openness will win out. This process will be hindered, however, as long as political globalisation fails to keep up.

The world is currently at risk of splitting into two separate blocs: one led by the US and the EU, and the other dominated by China and Russia. The Economist Intelligence Unit predicts that these blocs “will cement themselves into the geopolitical landscape and use economic and military levers to court countries that are not aligned with either side.”

But, even if such a split does occur, confrontation is not inevitable. The two groupings can compete and cooperate peacefully, without reaching for “military levers” (which, in any case, could be rendered useless

if economic levers are used well). The key is a more effective form of political globalisation.

The EU will be critical here; it does not have to take sides in the Sino-American rivalry, and could thus play a central role in both the blocs. China, for its part, should seize the opportunity to strengthen its international standing.

As for Russia, it will see its stature significantly diminished, owing to its despicable aggression against Ukraine. Nonetheless, the country should not be excluded from global economic exchanges; Russia is simply too big to be ignored, let alone “cancelled.” Meanwhile, African countries, as well as India, will play an increasingly significant role in the global geopolitical game.

This points to an unavoidable feature of future political globalisation: multipolarity. If forthcoming summits – from the G20 summit in Bali, Indonesia, to the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Sharm El Sheikh, Egypt – are to be successful, participants must accept that the days when one or two powers could impose their will on the rest are over.

Regional initiatives – such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) – can also provide political scaffolding for economic globalisation. Business – a natural ally of economic globalisation, and thus an enemy of political deglobalisation – should work harder to support these processes.

Short-sighted politics can be allowed to override economic pragmatism for only so long. The cascading challenges that humanity faces can be managed, but only with enlightened political leadership capable of providing the kind of strategic vision needed to support economic globalisation and achieve social and ecological balance.