

Govt must control hospital infections

Healthcare budgets must be used efficiently to ensure proper care for patients

A joint study, conducted across 11 tertiary level hospitals in Bangladesh, has found that none of the hospitals collect any data on hospital-acquired infections and infection control on their premises. This is quite alarming. Tertiary level medical facilities are usually associated with medical colleges and universities, contain specialised departments, and provide medical help and referrals to thousands of patients every year. The nine public and two private hospitals covered in the study, in fact, represent a quarter of the country's tertiary hospitals, and a third of the public facilities of this scale.

The importance of preventing healthcare associated infections cannot be stressed enough. During the pandemic, there were too many instances of doctors and healthcare workers worldwide testing positive for – and even dying from – Covid-19, as well as cases where patients admitted to hospitals for other health issues ended up succumbing to Covid. Hospital-acquired infections also remain a major cause of death among patients in ICUs.

According to the WHO guideline on Infection Prevention and Control, there should be a dedicated and trained team in each acute care facility to guard against the spread of infections. At the same time, there should be specialised professionals skilled in epidemiology to carry out surveillance of such infections, as well as necessary IT support to document this data – something that is more or less absent from our healthcare facilities.

The recent study, done jointly by icddr,b and the Directorate General of Health Services, identified a number of factors contributing to hospital-acquired infections in Bangladesh, such as overcrowding, lack of beds, inadequate manpower, insufficient toilets, and non-existent wastewater treatment systems. These shouldn't be unknown to the authorities either. The question is, why is nothing being done about this problem despite the huge risk it poses? Almost half of the hospitals surveyed were found to be not maintaining the government-proposed staff patient ratio, and were not even able to guarantee that there wouldn't be multiple patients sharing the same bed.

Patients having to share beds, or sleep on floors and in corridors, should be completely unacceptable in this day and age. Yet, according to experts, around 30-40 percent of the annual development budget for healthcare remains unutilised. Moreover, in 2020, a study found that around 93 percent of medical waste in Bangladesh was unmanaged. Almost half the tertiary hospitals covered in the recent study also didn't have medical waste pick-up or disposal facilities.

Clearly, there is a dire need to expand and improve the capacity of our health sector. Efficient use of budgetary allocations is an integral part of the solution to this. Only a few months ago, a report revealed audit objections claiming that financial irregularities worth Tk 193 crore were committed in the early stage of the pandemic. We cannot help but wonder, if these funds had been used in conducting surveillance for hospital-based infections or giving healthcare workers training in infection control, instead of being lost to corruption and mismanagement, how many more lives could have been saved?

Can we be eight billion strong?

Developed nations must help reduce wealth inequality, climate vulnerability

As we know by now, the world population reached the eight billion mark on November 15, 2022. But this milestone, quite understandably, has been met with mixed feelings. The unprecedented growth has been attributed to a longer average lifespan, better and more accessible healthcare and nutrition, and high fertility rates in some countries. While this is the highest number of humans to have ever existed simultaneously on Planet Earth, it is also true that, after the peak in the early 1960s, the population growth rate decelerated significantly; it currently stands at less than one percent per year. The UN projects that world population will peak at 10.4 billion in the 2080s, and remain largely stagnant around that number till 2100.

But as the UN secretary general has rightly put it: "... as our human family grows larger, it is also growing more divided." With the climate crisis intensifying, the fallout of a war in Europe spilling all over, and middle- and low-income countries struggling in their fight to recover from pandemic-induced effects, this division is becoming more and more unmanageable.

One persistent challenge that humanity faces is inequality, with the top one percent claiming one-fifth of the world's income, and also controlling distribution and utilisation of this wealth. Meanwhile, poorer countries continue to disproportionately suffer the impacts of wealth inequalities and the climate crisis, while developed countries, far from taking responsibility for their contribution to sustaining these vulnerabilities, continue to pursue fossil fuels, deforestation, resource-hoarding, etc. As experts have pointed out, it may seem like eight billion is too high a number of humans which will push the natural limits of the planet, but the real problem is the overconsumption of existing resources by a select group of people, corporations, and countries.

On top of this, reports from the ongoing COP27 climate change summit have revealed how developed nations such as the US, the UK, and those in the EU are banding together against efforts to establish a new loss and damage fund to help vulnerable countries recover from climate disasters. According to the Thomson Reuters Foundation, in 2021, climate disasters caused USD 30 billion in damages in developing countries. The current size of the global humanitarian aid is not enough to make up for losses suffered in climate disasters, which are growing in frequency and intensity.

There is a clear need to impose accountability on the developed countries when it comes to helping vulnerable communities in the developing countries, whose lives and livelihoods continue to be at the mercy of climate change and other man-made risk factors. They must take responsibility. We join our voices with the protesters at COP27 and beyond, who are demanding that those largely responsible for climate disasters be made to "pay up" for the resultant losses and damages. Otherwise, the rising global population will only mean rising suffering.

A rudderless education policy is leading us astray



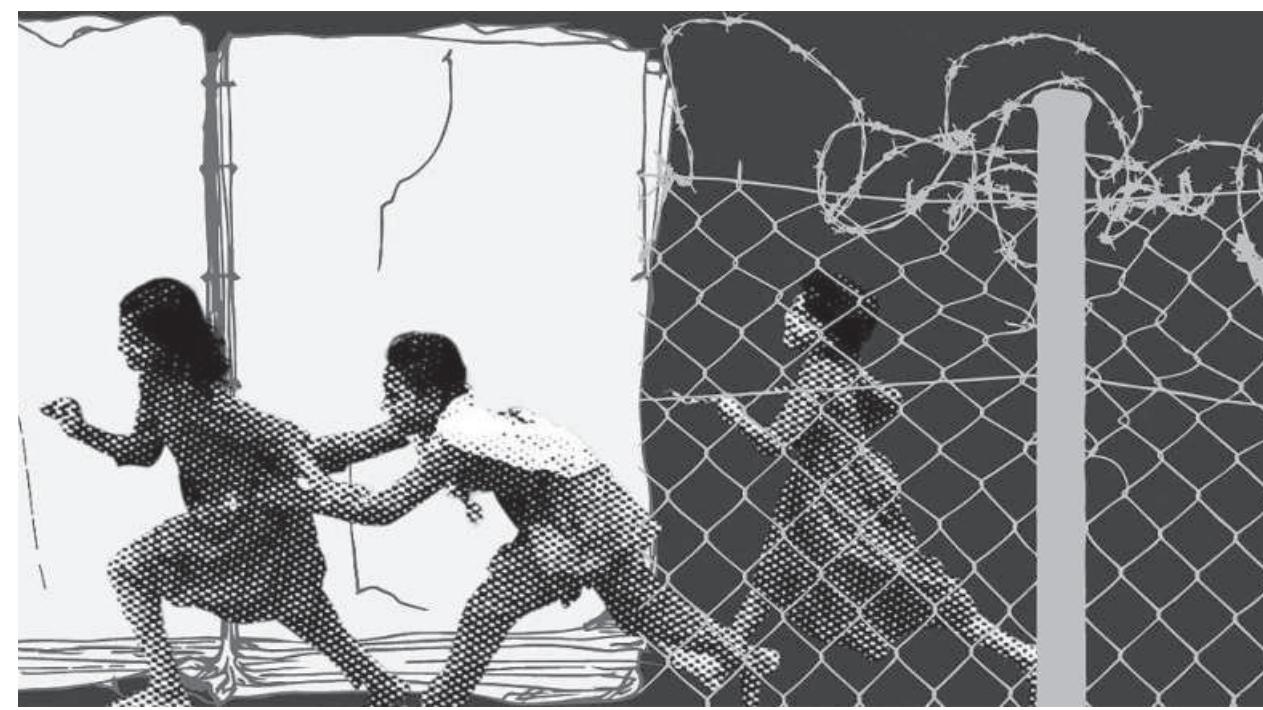
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A question to test Bangla language skills – reading a passage with comprehension, deriving information from it, and expressing one's thoughts and reasoning cogently and grammatically – turned into a major controversy this month. The debate was not about whether the question in this year's Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) examinations tested students' language skills. It was the content of the passage that was found disturbing.

The passage spun a story about the enmity between two Hindu brothers, one spiting the other by bringing a Muslim neighbour next door, who behaved in the most unneighbourly way, causing one of the brothers to take the extreme step of migrating to India with his family, leaving his ancestral home.

Whether the story has any connection with reality could be questioned. But it is clearly an inappropriate, insensitive, hurtful and



VISUAL: AFIA JAHIN

Is there a pattern of incompetence, inefficiency, lack of accountability, and impunity among the education personnel and institutions in this country?

provocative text that has no place in an exam paper for young students. The incident came to light because of social media. It could very well have been swept under the rug if a post on this issue hadn't become viral. The authorities doubled down on taking action – to investigate, find the culprits, and mete out punishment.

But does it end there? It has also been reported that during the ongoing HSC exams, another subject test used questions that maligned a well-known writer. Moreover, sets of question papers for "old and new syllabuses" were switched and wrong ones were distributed to students in one test, leading to the test being cancelled. There were allegations of a question paper leak during the SSC examinations last month, which the authorities denied.

Is there a pattern of incompetence, inefficiency, lack of accountability, and impunity among the education

personnel and institutions in this country?

In 2017, in an exceptional initiative, a team of educators was invited by the then Education Minister Nurul Islam Nahid to undertake a "rapid enquiry" of the school syllabus and textbooks, student assessment and classroom practices, and make recommendations for change. The goal was to initiate some common-sense reforms early and consider measures that could be built into longer-term curricular, teaching and examination reforms. After several weeks of voluntary work by the team of academics and practitioners, a set of recommendations was prepared.

There were suggestions about the curriculum and textbooks – improving continuity and articulation of the content, reducing content burden, emphasising "learning to learn," rather than accumulation of facts, and making textbooks attractive and helpful for students, encouraging them to be actively engaged in learning. A model science textbook was designed by a team led by Prof Zafar Iqbal and Prof Mohammad Kaykobad. The ideas were to be followed up by the curriculum renewal exercise, which was foreseen to be undertaken.

There were recommendations regarding public examinations: dropping primary completion and junior secondary public exams, putting much greater emphasis on

school-based student evaluation and short and quick public examinations (SSC and HSC), limiting them to core competencies in Bangla, English, maths, sciences and social studies. With one paper on each subject, the exams could be completed in one week, rather than being dragged on for several agonising weeks for students

shortening the syllabus for SSC and HSC exams. But these things happened as ad hoc and emergency steps, rather than as part of deliberate reforms. The preference appears to be to return to "normal" as soon as possible.

Meanwhile, the curriculum renewal cycle, delayed by the pandemic, has begun and new syllabuses and subject

and their parents.

The matter of memorising guidebooks and notebooks, and the students' long hours with private tutors or at coaching centres, after school or even replacing school lessons, was a worry. It was agreed that these were symptoms of the disease and that there was no ready remedy without the changes in the current practice of teaching and learning and in examinations, and without finding other ways of assessing the students.

It was argued that teachers had to be supported and prepared to make the shift, and parents have to be brought on board. Setting questions for public examinations requires specialised technical skills, for which capacity and mechanism had to be built at the central level.

However, the decision-making culture and practice in our education ministry was such that nothing moved with any sense of urgency. The leadership at the ministry changed in January 2019. New people occupied senior positions. No one remembered the work done by the team of educators, and their proposals were lost in the bureaucratic labyrinth.

Ironically, the pandemic led to some decisions that were in line with the team's ideas, such as dropping the primary and junior school public exams, reducing test subjects and

contents are being piloted in a small number of schools. The institutional memory of work done and ideas generated earlier seem not to have been factored into this trial process. Nor have the lessons from the pandemic for specific changes been put forward in public education discourse.

Coming back to the current examination troubles, are we not reaping the harvest of poor decision-making and inertia in the system?

Reports in the press, commentaries, editorials and public reaction have expressed outrage about the negative portrayal of the characters representing the different communities and the likely inflammation of communal tension. They are also aggrieved by a possible failure of the public exam question-setting process.

The outrage is justified. But the real concern is that the episode is symptomatic of larger problems on two fronts. Many have spoken about the undercurrent of intolerance and communalism that remains strong in Bangladesh and is powered by the culture of political opportunism in the country, the region and the world that exploits and fans intolerance and communalism. The other serious problem is the rudderless navigation of our education system as described above. We need to be concerned as a nation about both.

Bangladesh stumped by 'blind love'



CHINTITO SINCE 1995

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I was never an arithmetic wizard, but once upon a time, I could add up three-digit numbers with ease. Then came the magical calculator; thereon, handling more than two plus two became a matter of doubt. One does look silly before a shopkeeper, or flabbergasted at a Bangla restaurant where Khokon adds up the cost of two rice portions, three veg plates, two large fish and two small, three chicken dishes, *daal* and salad before you can say, "Bring me the bill."

In the days when cricket was played as cricket, umpires could boldly signal a dismissal and gain the tacit approval of most in the galleries. A boundary-line decision was usually signalled sportingly by the chasing fielder. Then arrived the DRS. Field umpires became overly and lazily dependent on technology even in situations when the runner was a metre away from the popping crease at the bowler's end. Blind as a bat, you could say.

Umpires are human beings, believe me! And, in spite of their stern gaze, tight lips, ability to arm three sweepers and head-carry four caps, they have been guilty of blind love for their

amorous choices, usually icons and big teams – in every format, from club to international level. Liking leads to love, then to greed and fear, but more on that topic another day.

In a crucial Super 12 match in Adelaide in the recently concluded T20 Men's World Cup, unfortunately for Bangladesh, the umpires, despite being repeatedly pleaded by the batting side, did not refer to the system a fake-fielding allegation against Virat Kohli. When you are stung by the love bee, you don't see the fault of the one you favour. Conversely, you can hurt an adversary, willingly.

Low catches, boundary line doubts, and Bangladesh wicketkeeper's hands ahead of the stumps before the ball passed them are subjected to umpteen slo-mo replays. And here is a team, brought in to bat reluctantly before the rains could seep reasonably below the outfield, being denied even one review. In fact, Shakib Al Hasan requested the umpires to delay resuming the match as the outfield was still wet – but to no avail.

Those umpires know their numbers well. That awarding Bangladesh

five penalty runs because of Kohli's attempt to obstruct the batsman could ultimately mean goodbye for India from the T20 World Cup. The judges played the being blind card. True to their calculation, India won that crucial match by exactly five runs.

How umpire Marais Erasmus did not see Kohli's synchronised throw is mind-boggling.

because he is a highly well-paid regular umpire in the IPL. He must have done a good job, for he was appointed an infield official in the final match.

African is a highly well-paid regular umpire in the Indian Premier League (IPL). He must have done a good job, for he was also appointed an infield official in the final match. Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) has decided to raise the issue of controversial umpiring with the game's governing body. But we don't expect them to raise their now useless index finger long after the final has been played.

I would be adjudged LBW (lying before the world) if I insinuated that we are the only victims of bizarre adjudication. But, another white cane

umpire, in Bangladesh's 11th over in the match against Pakistan, signalled Shakib Al Hasan out LBW off Shan Masood. Surely Bangladesh was unwise not to seek a review, because TV replay showed the ball hitting the lower edge of Shakib's bat before hitting his pads.

On normal days, you have them DRS-ing even clear-cut run outs, but against Shakib Al Hasan the terribly mistaken umpire was trying to flaunt his 6/6 eyesight. His biased vision and abject judgement were caused by his blind love for a superior team, costing Bangladesh a semi-final berth.

Now, a group of researchers have come up with a proposal to save cricket from such gross partisan umpiring bordering on nepotism. Less reputed and upcoming teams may finally get some justice. Decisions could soon be made by an instant poll of select panellists – that is, live online voting by nominated formal national cricketers from all the cricket-playing nations. I have faith in those who have held a bat or bowled for their country. Their reputation among their international compatriots will be at stake.

To resuscitate cricket to its days of Donald Bradman, Frank Worrell and Kapil Dev glory, players will have to own up to contentious issues that are common during fielding. Kohli should have owned up, but he was not born in the 1960s.

Let cricket be organised and administered, played and officiated with the highest level of integrity at all levels and formats. After all, the game was once known as the game of gentlemen.