

Before Trashing the Trash Culture...



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

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One noted thespian has come under public scrutiny for an off-stage speech. Theatre activist and the founder of Aranyak, Mamunur Rashid, lashed out against what he finds a "famine of aesthetic taste" that is plaguing our cultural scene. He was referring to the phenomenal rise of Hero Alom as a social media hero.

The phrase alludes to Zainul Abedin, who used the phrase in the 1950s to highlight the absence of aesthetic sensibility against which he had to paint his famous sketches on the great famines during British rule. As the founder of the Faculty of Fine Arts (established as the Institute of Arts and Crafts in 1948), Zainul's contribution to Bangladeshi modern art is immense. His generation paved the way for a "culture" with a home-grown signature. It is marked by deference from the western import of imperial culture that was confined to the colonial rulers and their local associates. The exclusivity and deference allowed Zainul to become a high priest of our culture, moving away from the cultural habits and preferences of the aristocrats. The appropriation of local figures catapults Zainul into an emerging art scene that was redefining our artistic contour. If Zainul's statement on "famine of tastes" is the birth cry of high culture, Mamun's observation is the lament over the death of such a culture.

Mamun is pained to see the growth of trash culture that has become the consequence of

what was known as low culture. High culture, by design, is exclusive and accessible to an academically literate or culturally sensible audience. Low culture, in contrast, includes various types of popular culture that are characterised by their mass appeal. There are times when the boundary between the high and the low can be blurred. A commercial film with a huge public appeal can now be nominated for a Cannes award to get the high-brow seal.

The rejection of Hero Alom as a cultural entity hint at deep-seated social anxiety. It is not the first time he has been thrown out of the mainstream culture loop administered by some cultural police. In one instance, he was nabbed and humiliated by a police officer for wearing a police uniform in one of his B-movies. Alom was sanctioned for trying to sing Tagore's songs out of tune. Somehow, this self-starter uses this bad publicity to promote himself as a subaltern. He poses himself as someone who is taking arms against "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune." He is not a prince who is born with a silver spoon. He does not have the look or social standing. Yet he has the desire for social mobility. In a democratic culture, such desire is usually encouraged. He exercised his right to be a spokesperson for the mass by becoming a public representative. He managed to give the impression that he had been wronged at so many different levels, prompting public

sympathy and attention.

When Mamun critiqued Hero Alom as a symptom of the trash culture that is eroding our cultural norms and practices, the reaction is forked. At one extreme, there are the sympathisers of the high priests who lament the glory days of high culture. At the other extreme, we have the defenders of Hero Alom who are critical of Mamun and co. for not allowing the downtrodden to move up

six decades. He was shot to fame for his stage performances in Shakespearean dramas and modern theatre. The high-brow actor is now a popular cult figure for his performance as Gandalf the magician in *The Lord of the Rings* or as Magneto in *X-Men* films. The fulcrum of the mass has shifted.

Those who have been traditionally performing public piety must reassess their roles amid the changing culture. Hero

credit for his ambition. Instead of curating his artistic desire or channelling his energy into something productive, the cultural and political police have constantly side-lined him only to confirm his victimhood.

When I started attending Jahangirnagar University as a freshman student of English literature, we had many cultural activists coming from small provincial towns. They were the ones who reigned the amphitheatre, and dominated the cultural and political organisations. Those of us who travelled from Dhaka could sense the condescending attitudes they would have toward us. Likewise, we would hold them as a bit rustic to our taste. Then there were the students from the locality. Even among my friends, despite our hours of hangouts, I could sense the invisible barriers of social upbringing, cultural orientation, and economic condition. We outgrew the silent resentment by spending more time together, and by understanding one another.

The problem that we are now facing is that of subtle racism. The high brows like Mamun consider the Hero Aloms as "upstart crows beautified with our feathers," a remark that Elizabethan playwright Greene made about the rural Shakespeare who was trying to join their league. The tendency to trash the trash culture while highlighting the sweetness and light of high culture is an age-old phenomenon. It was Matthew Arnold who thought of culture as the best thoughts created by bee-like artists who gather sweet honey and waxed candlelight. Now we know the culture as a way of life, a set of practices that endeavour to make meaning for a group. The social media rebels are doing the same. They are no less different than the artists who searched for artistic meanings in life.

Instead of cancelling each other, it is time that we try to learn from each other. We are, after all, on the threshold of a huge cultural leap.



VISUAL: KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD

the socio-cultural ladder. With the rise of internet users, the second group is winning the verbal battle as they are making more noise. A TikTok artist or a YouTube influencer has more followers than the number of people who would go to Bailey Road or Shilpakala Academy to watch a play.

Take the instance of the British actor Sir Ian Murray McKellen. His career spanned over

Alom knows that there is a glass ceiling that stops someone from a humble origin to move up. His rustic accent, skinny figure, and apparently talentless performance work against him. To compensate for his shortcomings, he appeals to those in his condition: a multitude that wants to change their lot. Alom plays the victim to pose as a martyr in the culture wars. I guess, he deserves

How the poor dodge the pangs of hunger



AN OPEN DIALOGUE

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ABDULLAH SHIBLI

One of the takeaways from the finance minister's March 19 pre-budget session with economists was the unanimous appeal to the government to address the budget's impact on the common people. It will not be an exaggeration to contend that the budget of the ordinary person has taken a big hit in the post-Covid era. Families in the lower-income categories have seen their real income decline due to geopolitical tensions, food insecurity, global inflation and supply chain gnarls. "Shrinkflation" has forced millions to go without

line, a slogan, repeatedly brandished in the past, particularly during an election year, has now lost its lustre.

One needs to be wary of confusing the two threats that the poor face: "death by starvation" and the "pangs of hunger". They are different. First, government statistics may not reveal any death by starvation, but the pains of hunger and malnutrition are omnipresent. Secondly, the effects of starvation and hunger are clinically quite different, and attempts to equate them are akin to comparing apples and oranges. Let's consider starvation first.

have been forced, at times during the year, to also reduce the quantity of food they would normally eat, while those experiencing severe levels would have gone for entire days without eating, due to lack of money or other resources to obtain food. It's not a big surprise to me that many of our poor and low-income people are cutting back on their budget for food and all the items they purchase.

To understand this phenomenon, known as shrinkflation, lets us consider the budget of an urban family with a household income of Tk 22,000 per month. He is the family's sole bread earner, paying Tk 6,000 for housing and spending the rest on food, transportation, school supplies, fuel, entertainment and clothing. For this family of four, the food budget eats up more than half of the income, and its share could have increased if he had some savings. Over the last year, prices of rice, wheat, pulses, edible oils, sugar, salt, protein diets, milk, and baby food have increased by 20-40 percent. But now they have cut back on food since all other bills have gone up. The urban poor, including the rickshaw pullers, service employees, and small business owners, are all confronted with this lose-lose situation.

The human toll, as pinpointed by World Economic Forum's Saadia Zahidi, a Forum Managing Director, may be severe: "Real wages are falling and can't keep pace with surging prices. In low and medium-income countries, food and energy security could easily lead to social unrest."

The impact on rural and urban poor may show some odd patterns. In recent times, in general, urban people have been facing a higher rate of food inflation relative to the rural population, while the picture is the opposite in the case of non-food inflation.

To combat the current situation, our social welfare programmes must reach out to the target groups, including eligible senior citizens. Policymakers should use social welfare policies to protect the poorest from rising prices. Allowances under social safety net programmes for the poor should be increased.

These policies could include targeted safety nets such as cash transfers, food, and in-kind transfers, school feeding programmes, and public works programmes. Research also shows that calculating inflation indexes for different income groups provides better information on inflation actually experienced by the poor and should inform the design of social safety nets.

Finally ask the leaders, instead of parroting, "nobody dies of hunger", why couldn't we raise the bar and say, "there is not a single child who suffers from malnutrition. There is not a single person who dies from a

lack of medical care and there's not a single elderly who goes hungry?"

The other day, I asked a rickshaw puller, "Can you tell me if there are any days when you go without a meal?" he demurred. "I have a large family, and

some of them have to make sacrifices," he added.

When I asked him if his earnings had increased with the rising economic prosperity level, he said, "No, sir. I hope you understand how

we, the poor make a living, but most importantly, how we make our ends meet." In other words, they said, we're trying to make do in this day of inflation with less or, as some people said, "I have *barkat* in my family".

IBA Institute of Business Administration



BBA ADMISSION TEST

31ST BATCH (SESSION 2022-2023)

BBA Admission Test (Session 2022-23) of the Institute of Business Administration (IBA), University of Dhaka will be held on **Friday, 05 May 2023 from 03:30 pm to 05:30 pm.**

ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA:

1. For Applicants Who Have Passed SSC and HSC or Equivalent Exams:

Only students who have passed their SSC or equivalent exam during 2017-2020 and HSC or equivalent exam held in 2022 are eligible to apply for 2022-2023 academic session. They must have a minimum **8.0** as total of SSC & HSC GPA (including the 4th subject). Candidates must secure at least **3.5** GPA in both the exams to be eligible to apply.

2. For Applicants Who Have Passed IGCSE/O-Level and IAL/GCEA-Level or Equivalent Exams:

Students who have passed IGCSE/O-level exam in at least 5 subjects (including mathematics) during 2017-2020 and IAL/GCE A-Level exam in at least 2 subjects (final result of at least one subject must have been published in 2022) are eligible to apply. Out of the 7 subjects in IGCSE/O-Level and IAL/GCE A-level, candidates should get minimum **2 A grades, 3 B grades and 2 C grades.**

Candidates from O-level, A-level or from all other boards outside the country have to obtain "Equivalence Certificate" from DU at the beginning of their application process. To get equivalence certificate, please visit the DU admission website: <https://admission.eis.du.ac.bd>. Those who have already received their equivalence certificate in the process of applying in different units of DU, do not need to apply for the equivalence certificate again. If an applicant faces any difficulty to obtain "Equivalence Certificate" from DU, s/he is requested to contact "IBA Helpdesk" immediately.

3. No candidate is eligible to sit for this year's admission test, if s/he had appeared in any admission test of the University of Dhaka, including IBA in 2022 or before.

SELECTION PROCEDURE

All **Bangladeshi** applicants must take the Admission Test. The test has two components: Written and Communication. The components of the Written Test evaluate applicant's aptitude in: Language, Mathematics, and Analytical ability. In order to pass the Written Test, an applicant must obtain a minimum qualifying score in all sections. Applicants will be selected for the Communication Test, on the basis of their performance in the Written Test.

Foreign nationals with a score of at least 1265 out of 1600 in SAT Reasoning Test (with at least 600 in Math and 575 in reading and writing) may be exempted from the Written Test, but must appear in the Communication Test.

HOW TO APPLY

The application is to be made online (at <http://admission.eis.du.ac.bd>) starting from **Friday, 31 March 2023 (from 4:00 PM) to Tuesday, 18 April 2023 (till 3:00 PM)**. Application fees of Tk. 1250/- (including online processing fees & bank service charge) is to be paid latest by **Tuesday, 18 April 2023 (till 3:00 PM)**.

Admit card can be downloaded from **Thursday, 27 April 2023 to Thursday, 04 May 2023 (till 3:00 PM)**. For detailed application procedure, visit the IBA website at <https://www.iba-du.edu> or the DU admission website: <http://admission.eis.du.ac.bd>

For further information, contact the IBA Helpdesk at 01772563303 or 01871130956 between 10:00 am - 3:00 pm any day or email at bba-admission@iba-du.edu.

Director
Institute of Business Administration
University of Dhaka, Dhaka-1000

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two decent meals and cut back on the consumption of fish, meat and eggs, which provide essential nutrients for their body. In today's comments, I will focus on hunger and malnutrition affecting the working poor.

While the government is declaring a victory over poverty, citing the forthcoming Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES), eminent independent social scientists in Bangladesh and economists at the March 19 conclave strongly disagreed. "The way that the price level is increasing, and the impact it had on low and middle-income people, it is counter-intuitive that the number of people below the poverty line would decline," said Professor Mustafizur Rahman of Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD). Research by South Asian Network on Economic Modelling (SANEM) in March only confirmed my view that many more poor people are going hungry now than before.

At a recent gathering in the City of Cambridge in Massachusetts, USA, the visiting foreign minister of Bangladesh was questioned on the country's economic conditions. He did not flinch for a second before he declaimed, "Nobody in the country dies of hunger". This oft-quoted

Last week, the head of the United Nations World Food Programme warned that up to 345 million people worldwide - or roughly 50 times the number known to have died from Covid so far - could face starvation as food prices soar and shortages increase. This figure represents a doubling in global food insecurity since early 2020. Bangladesh's poor did not escape this global scourge's wrath. The landless casual workers in rural areas and the urban poor face a bleak prospect. Already, roughly 20 million people in the country are facing acute malnutrition.

Various news accounts highlight the coping strategy devised by the low-income and the poor to survive the ire of inflation. Families on a tight budget have turned to kitchen markets known as "Fokinni Bazar" which have sprung up in many slum and poverty-stricken areas. One such market that has gained prominence is located under Bijoy Sarani Tejgaon Flyover and is frequented by rickshaw pullers, day-labourers, shopkeepers, and other people from low-income groups in the area.

People experiencing moderate levels of food insecurity will typically eat low-quality diets and might