

Least concern for the most vulnerable

Street children have zero protection from dengue

This year, Bangladesh is experiencing one of its worst dengue outbreaks yet. Even before the peak season, the number of cases has risen beyond 20,878 and the number of deaths from dengue has reached 106. Amid such a deadly outbreak, street children have unfortunately remained the most overlooked, while also being the most vulnerable to infection. According to a report in this newspaper, most street children are, in fact, not aware of dengue fever. Living the majority of their days under the open sky, these children are very vulnerable to dengue, but have zero access to treatment for it. Their best bet is to find shelter under a polythene sheet or in a slum – neither of which seem very safe, especially for children.

As it is, dengue infection can be most dangerous for children. Because of the lack of nutritious food they have access to, street children tend to have even lower immunity. Add to this the lack of medical care available to them, their lack of knowledge about dengue and how to treat it, and many of these children are surviving purely on luck.

Although there is no comprehensive data about the number of street children in Dhaka – which itself is a grave travesty – the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) conducted a survey in 2022 and estimated that the number of street children in the country might be over one million, 48.5 percent of whom live in Dhaka. And 20.9 percent of these children are involved in waste collection activities, which means the likelihood of them being exposed to Aedes mosquitoes is extremely high. So, it can be safely assumed that a vast number of street children have been suffering silently from the disease, while the entire government machinery has been totally oblivious to their plight.

This is completely unacceptable. It is time for the government to wake up to the sufferings of street children. Firstly, the government needs to collect reliable data regarding street children and seriously look into fixing the glaring problem of homelessness in Dhaka. It is shocking that while the government has been obsessed with its megaprojects, such a basic yet devastating issue has remained practically ignored.

In relation to the dengue problem, the government should establish medical centres in every ward of both the city corporations in the capital to provide free dengue tests and primary treatment, while spreading word about them among street children. Additionally, if any of these children become seriously ill, they should be referred for specialised treatment at designated hospitals, free of cost.

Repair the 147 bridges in Barguna

Why such neglect from the authorities?

For a government that takes great pride in the massive development work it has undertaken all over the country during its tenure, there are too many stories of dilapidated infrastructures, institutional neglect and public suffering. In Barguna, for instance, as many as 147 out of 200 bridges are now unusable due to a lack of maintenance and repair, according to a recent report. The 200 bridges were constructed by the Local Government Engineering Department (LGED) in 1997-98, but no repairs have taken place over the past two and a half decades. Some of the bridges collapsed years ago, while others have been severely damaged due to various cyclones or their parts being stolen over the years. Meanwhile, some bridges have partially collapsed. But the locals, including school children, are still using them at great risk to themselves.

It is inconceivable that the various local authorities, under successive governments, have allowed so many bridges to wither away, without taking any initiative to repair them. In the process, they have made life difficult and dangerous for the local communities. In Barguna Sadar upazila, for instance, hundreds of auto-rickshaws, motorcycles, and pedestrians are still using a bridge that was broken in the middle two years ago. Another bridge in Mahishdanga village of Amtali caved in and stayed in this state for two years, but the residents still used it for lack of an alternative. At least 20,000 people of 10 villages, including students of eight institutions, are suffering as a result. When asked, the executive engineer of LGED in Barguna said he "hoped" tenders for these bridges would be offered by the end of this year, which means it is anybody's guess when such a project would even be initiated, and how long it would take to complete the bridges. What are the local communities to do in the meantime?

It is evident that the fruits of mega-development are not reaching the far corners of the country. We need localised development that is attuned to people's needs and sufferings. We need to prioritise repair and maintenance of the existing community infrastructures, no matter how unglamorous such work may seem compared to initiating megaprojects in a given area. We urge the LGRD ministry to take urgent steps to address the communities' concerns, without wasting any more time with bureaucratic hurdles.

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For every rally, there is a counter-rally



THE STREET VIEW

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MOHAMMAD AL-MASUM MOLLA

The political situation in Bangladesh seemed to face a new twist at every turn throughout last week, till it culminated with BNP's grand rally on Friday, followed by its demo at Dhaka's entry points the next day. We don't know what will happen in the coming days, but it is evident that they will be challenging, with the political parties sticking to their guns – "election only under Sheikh Hasina" versus "election only if it is without Sheikh Hasina." The prevailing practice of the ruling party announcing programmes to counter those of the main opposition camp, confrontational as it may seem, appears to be testing the strength of Awami League's party machinery.

As things led up to an imminent showdown, there was anxiety all around about what would happen. It began with BNP announcing a rally on July 27, followed by Awami League's youth wing Jubo League rescheduling its rally, previously set to take place on July 24, to July 27. On July 26, however, the Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) said it would not allow any party to hold rallies on a working day to prevent public suffering, and suggested that BNP hold its rally in Golapbagh, the same ground where the party held a rally on December 10 last year. BNP refused and held an emergency meeting. It was at this time that Awami League's student wing Chhatra League said they wanted to hold a rally at Dhaka University, while Jubo League wanted the old trade fair ground in Agargaon for Thursday. At 9:30pm, BNP announced that it would hold the rally at its preferred venue, Nayapaltan, on Friday – the weekly holiday. Soon after, the Awami League fronts decided to follow BNP's footsteps and postponed their programmes to Friday, to be held at the south gate of Baitul Mukarram National Mosque, not too far from Nayapaltan. Police gave both parties permission to hold rallies under 23 conditions.

There were a few things, both good and bad, that stood out during these two days of political hyperactivity.

Both parties held mammoth rallies peacefully on Friday. Tens of thousands of party workers and leaders made their way to Dhaka, but there were no incidents of clashes between the two rallies, despite close proximity. This indicates that both parties have the capacity to hold peaceful rallies if their



PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

There were a few things, both good and bad, that stood out during the two days of political hyperactivity in Dhaka.

leaders will it, as they did this time. In other words, when people's safety is at peril due to political turmoil, it is probably because the politicians do not care, not because law enforcers are not working hard enough.

Although it happens to be a prevailing practice, this culture of "counter-programme" only indicates moral insecurity. Sure, BNP did the same when it was in office, but perhaps it was because of such pettiness that the party has been out of power for the last 16 years. It is not befitting for a party like Awami League to copy BNP's tactics on the field. Such tactics are only making the party an object of ridicule. One need only look at the jokes and memes being shared on social media to get an idea of the public's reaction to this practice.

So, what if BNP holds a huge rally? One or two huge gatherings are certainly not enough to pose a threat to the government. They certainly attract attention and people sit up to listen to what those on the streets have to say. But there is another aspect to the story. Take the divisional rallies for example. They gained a lot of attention

and media coverage specifically because of the obstacles on their way, and it made for a great story of the underdog. If the government had not put up those obstacles, the divisional rallies would have garnered far less media attention and enthusiasm. The fact is that putting up obstructions to prevent opposition activists from

police. Awami League's presence at the same locations where BNP would stage its sit-in naturally led to clashes. There were contrasting scenarios in the treatment of BNP leaders picked up from the streets. A formidable student leader who went on to become a BNP stalwart, Amanullah Aman was assaulted by police and then admitted

coming to a rally ends up attracting media coverage.

The police's role, unfortunately, has become blatantly partisan. They set up check-posts at Dhaka's entry points and searched vehicles to see whether BNP men were coming to join the rally. But at the same time, vehicles carrying Awami League men were allowed to enter the city without any delay.

During the search, police officials checked people's mobile phones, violating their right to privacy. Some people found to have photos or texts related to BNP rallies were detained, and some were even arrested. This was further proof that the police were not being neutral. BNP announced at Friday's rally that it would hold sit-in demonstrations at the capital's entry points on Saturday. That evening, Awami League said it would hold peace rallies at the entry points, too. At midnight, the DMP denied permission to both parties. But BNP said it would observe its programmes anyway. In the morning, we saw police and the ruling party's members taking their position at the entry points. There were clashes between the BNP, Awami League, and

to a hospital. The prime minister sent her personal assistant with a fruit basket to enquire after Aman's treatment and condition. This is the kind of camaraderie and warmth that people wish their politicians always shared instead of acting as eternally embittered rivals.

On the other hand, there was the case of Gayeshwar Chandra Roy, a BNP leader who was beaten mercilessly as he fell on the street. Bleeding from the temple and unable to walk, Gayeshwar was helped into a police vehicle, which took him to the police hospital and then to the Detective Branch headquarters for lunch. Pictures and video of his sumptuous lunch with DB chief Harun-or-Rashid were leaked on social media and went viral, perhaps in an attempt to embarrass a senior politician.

It has been many months – years, in fact – since the streets were crowded with political rallies. It was after many years that the two archrivals seemed to go head to head. Their limitations notwithstanding, it is this perpetual rivalry between parties that might eventually strengthen our democracy and the institutions that safeguard it.

Education for most Indians is still a 'bust.' What about Bangladesh?

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JOHN RICHARDS and SHAHIDUL ISLAM

The Economist, in a recent issue, devoted many pages to the state of education of children belonging to non-elite families in India: an editorial chastising Indian politicians for the failure of government primary schools, an article summarising evidence on Indian students' limited ability to read and do basic arithmetic, and another on the education success of Vietnam relative to that of India.

The British magazine's critical editorial is hard to contest: "Although India's brainy elite hoovers up qualifications, education for most Indians is still a 'bust'. Unskilled, jobless youngsters risk bringing India's economic development to a premature stop... India is still doing a terrible job of making sure that the youngsters who through its classrooms pick up essential skills." Much of this criticism applies to other South Asian countries, too.

In a lengthy article, The Economist summarised results from the Annual Status of Education Report's (ASER) biannual large-scale surveys on children in rural India since 2008. These surveys are conducted in students' homes by Pratham, a highly respected Indian civil society NGO.

Though school infrastructure and enrolment have improved in recent years, with more children attending schools that have toilets, running water, and sometimes even computers, learning has not kept pace. Nationwide, the best ASER results were in 2008. Results declined over the next decade, due partly to higher enrolment rates. In the 2018 survey (conducted before the pandemic), 50 percent of Class 5 children could read a short story at the Class 2 level, and 28 percent could solve the most difficult arithmetic problem (divide a three-digit number by a one-digit number). Due to school closures during much of 2020-22, the results of the 2022 ASER survey are well below those from 2018.

The first step in improving schools in India – and other South Asian countries – is to acknowledge the severity of the problem. While most Indian children are attending school at least till Class 5, the majority of children of ages 10-14 cannot read a simple Class 2-level story. As per ASER's recent surveys, from low-income Indian families with some discretionary income, over a quarter of children are attending "low-cost" private schools. The results in these schools are not

ideal, but are significantly better than in government schools.

There is no single solution to improve school outcomes. But, in the context of Bangladesh, some ideas are worth discussing.

The Economist's article on Vietnamese schools emphasises superior training and management of teachers relative to India. In Vietnam, government teachers take their responsibilities more seriously, and behave as professionals. In part, this is because the remuneration of Vietnamese teachers comes from bonuses based on school results. In Bangladesh, the government could call on the Directorate of Primary Education (DPE) to change the system of remunerating government schoolteachers. Instead of designating teachers as civil servants with fixed salaries, the DPE could introduce incentives that encourage government teachers to take their responsibilities more seriously. City corporations may negotiate an independent role in managing municipal schools. Teachers could be hired on a temporary basis to work alongside regular teachers, especially in districts with weak education outcomes. These teachers could be trained and supervised by private professional development institutions.

We also need to think of an all-inclusive education system. A number of children never enrol in schools, or drop out early. Many NGOs have demonstrated that non-formal primary schools can enable these

students to successfully complete the primary cycle of education. In recent years, the funding for NGO schools has declined. To combat this, individuals and large companies could set up private schools that serve these children. But given that the NGO sector in Bangladesh is mature relative to most other developing countries, it would be a huge loss if NGO-run education programmes disappeared due to lack of funding. Instead of setting up private schools and assuming the burden of management, individuals and large companies could instead sponsor NGO-run school programmes. They could also carry out audits and set goals for the NGO schools they support.

We understand that a one-size-fits-all approach will fail. Assuch, whichever approaches are taken, community leaders and other stakeholders need to agree on one non-negotiable agenda: improving learning outcomes. That said, in Bangladesh, we need an independent research initiative to be integrated into this process for the evaluation of students' learning and the system's performance. The purpose of evaluation and assessment is not to compare one school with another. Instead, evaluations should aim for knowledge mobilisation and policy advocacy at every level, while keeping all stakeholders informed. The other aim is to increase support and attract more of the middle class and elite to join the initiative to improve the education status of Bangladeshi children.