

Don't neglect primary education

Govt has to look into the decline of students

A recent government report has revealed a concerning statistic: the number of students in all primary-level educational institutions in the country has reduced by over 8.32 lakh in 2023 from the previous year. The implications of this decline is no doubt significant, as primary education is the foundation for bringing up a skilled, informed generation to ensure Bangladesh's prosperity. While officials have highlighted the country's declining birth rate and a new, more accurate software at the Directorate of Primary Education for this decrease, there are other pieces of the puzzle which, if not resolved, can have grave repercussions for the country's future.

The Covid pandemic dealt a major blow to education, as financial struggles brought on by it forced many to take their children out of primary school or transfer them to Qawmi madrasas. Infact, financial insecurity continues to be one of the biggest detriments to primary education. According to UNESCO, households account for 71 percent of total education spending in Bangladesh, one of the highest in the world. The average annual family cost per child in 2023 was Tk 17,294 for primary education, stated the Education Watch 2023 report. To put things in perspective, the average monthly family income in 2022 was just Tk 32,422. News of parents taking their daughters out of school and marrying them off circulated all around during the pandemic, and unfortunately the trend has continued since then.

Meanwhile, many of the government-run primary schools are in no shape to cater to the children, reeling from the absence of a proper learning environment, lack of safety, and poor infrastructure. Only those from the low-income group see these institutions as an option—and even they prefer madrasas in many cases.

In this scenario, this year's budget for education is Tk 94,710 crore—only 1.69 percent of the GDP, the lowest in the last 16 years. The drop in the number of students, revealed by the Annual Primary School Census 2023, might very well be due to a falling birth rate and improved software, but we cannot ignore the contributing factors that have been plaguing the sector for years. When more than 60 percent of Class 3 students and 70 percent of Class 5 students do not have the expected grade-level proficiency in mathematics (according to an assessment), it is clear that our primary education is faltering. The government must address these cracks to ensure that all children in the country get access to the best primary education possible.

Must commuters risk their lives every Eid?

Take effective actions to prevent road crashes

It seems we have no escape from the recurring nightmare of road crash fatalities during Eid holidays. This Eid-ul-Azha, too, at least 92 lives were lost in road crashes across the country between June 13 and June 17, according to Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA).

Reportedly, Road Transport and Bridges Minister Obaidul Quader quoted the BRTA data and warned about the urgent need for policies to regulate motorcycles and easy bikes, which accounted for most of the recent crashes. While we are glad that the minister has expressed concern over this issue, the history of three-wheeler bans or the government's feeble attempt to prevent unfit and unlicensed vehicles from operating on the road and then backtracking on their decisions don't give us much hope that any such policy will be formulated or implemented soon.

For more than a decade, road crashes during Eid rush have been on the rise. It is incomprehensible why no effective steps have been taken to prevent these tragic incidents in the last 10 years, especially when the same government has been in power during this time. The current regime has undoubtedly excelled at developing Bangladesh's roads and communication infrastructure, but it has failed to make those very channels safe for people to use. The reasons behind road crashes are not unknown, neither are the solutions. Even simple measures such as increasing traffic monitoring on the roads after Eid could prevent many deaths.

As the road crash fatality count goes up with each passing hour, the government should stop providing lip service to the issue and take some real actions, such as creating dedicated lanes for different types of vehicles, not allowing unfit and unlicensed vehicles on the road, increasing traffic monitoring, and giving exemplary punishment to reckless drivers. It must start treating the epidemic of road crashes with the seriousness it deserves.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY



'Hand of God' goal by Diego Maradona

On this day in 1986, Argentine football legend Diego Maradona scored his memorable "Hand of God" goal (the ball struck his hand, but the referee mistakenly thought it had hit his head) to help his team defeat England in a World Cup quarterfinal game. Argentina went on to win the tournament.

Sylhet's flood is the price we're paying for ignoring nature



Pavel Partha, an ecology and biodiversity conservation researcher, is director at Bangladesh Resource Centre for Indigenous Knowledge (BARCIK). He can be reached at animistbangla@gmail.com.

PAVEL PARTHA

The flood that we are seeing in the Sylhet region is happening due to multiple reasons. As the monsoon season sweeps across Bangladesh, rainfall will naturally increase. Sylhet is the wettest region in the country. Heavy rainfall is a common occurrence there since it is located just below Cherrapunji, which is often called the wettest place on Earth. However, the severity and frequency of flooding in Sylhet and the surrounding areas in the past two years indicate that this is not merely a natural event, but a crisis exacerbated by human actions.

Firstly, the intense rainfall and subsequent floods are indeed influenced by climate change, which is causing abnormal weather patterns and extreme rain in short durations. Every region has a water-carrying capacity—as in how much water it can absorb and channel without flooding. When the rainfall exceeds this capacity, waterlogging and flooding occur, as we have regularly seen in Sylhet.

Sylhet has always been known for its hilly terrain. The region experiences significant rainfall on the high grounds, which then flows down to the lowlands and river basins, our haors. Historically, this water movement was natural, but unplanned and anthropocentric development has disrupted this balance. The region's unique topography and natural habitat have been ignored in the development process, which has led to severe consequences. The huge number of water bodies spread out like spiderwebs have largely been filled up, mostly illegally.

In the high-lying region, illegal hill-cutting has been rampant, with hills often levelled completely so people can build infrastructure. This destroys the natural landscape and reduces the land's ability to manage rainwater, leading to worse flooding. Cutting hills in any way is illegal. However,



The floods in Sylhet highlight the urgent need for a balance between development and environmental conservation.

PHOTO: SHEIKH NASIR

cutting hills at angles up to 30 degrees is still manageable. Cutting over 45 degrees causes significant damage. But we are cutting hills at 180 degrees—completely levelling them and destroying the area's geographic identity.

We are often inconsiderate of the fact that an area does not belong solely to humans. Sylhet's rich ecosystem includes rivers that traverse national boundaries and sustain both human and other lives. Yet, indiscriminate development has ignored environmental considerations, filling up rivers and ponds, and now water has nowhere left to go. This, coupled with poor drainage systems choked by plastic pollution, exacerbates the flooding problem. We cannot confuse flooding with waterlogging. Flooding is a natural phenomenon. Waterlogging here is largely a result of human error and negligence. If we could control plastic pollution,

the drainage system would be more efficient and cause less waterlogging.

For my work, I have travelled to various areas around Sylhet. Historically, Sylhet's elderly and Indigenous people recall that the floods we see today are unheard of. This is because the drastic changes in the landscape, driven by unregulated development, have fundamentally

funds are made available, we lack comprehensive plans to mitigate the flooding and waterlogging crises in Sylhet. There is an urgent need for better climate diplomacy and negotiation to secure adequate funding and formulate effective, inclusive strategies.

Our talks and discussions around climate change are largely about economic damages. We also must consider the non-economic losses caused by flooding. Two years ago, I visited some flooded areas around Sylhet. Many of our folk songs that make up our cultural identity are from that region. It broke my heart to learn that the local women and Bauls had lost their song books, either written by themselves or passed down to them for generations, to the floods. The destruction of cultural heritage represents a loss that is immeasurable. These songs, passed down through generations, form an integral part of our identity. When floods destroy such cultural treasures, the loss transcends monetary value.

To address these challenges, we must rethink our development mentality. Sustainable development involves preserving natural landscapes, maintaining forest covers, and protecting river ecosystems. Projects should not only aim for economic growth but also safeguard cultural and environmental heritage. Inclusion of all stakeholders in development projects fosters a sense of ownership and ensures that diverse perspectives are taken into account. When designing big projects, we should select local leaders and representatives with the help of union parishads and city corporations and make an inclusive project that gives everyone ownership. This will also save money and increase efficiency.

The floods in Sylhet highlight the urgent need for a balance between development and environmental conservation. By adopting sustainable practices and inclusive planning, we can mitigate the impact of extreme weather events and protect both our natural and cultural heritage. The time to act is now, for the sake of our environment, our communities, and our future.

As told to Monorom Polok of The Daily Star.

PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

The spectre of neo-fascism is haunting Europe



Slavoj Žižek, professor of philosophy at the European Graduate School, is international director of the Birkbeck Institute for the Humanities at the University of London, and the author, most recently, of *Christian Atheism: How to Be a Real Materialist*.

SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK

The surprise in this month's European Parliament elections was that the outcome everyone expected really did come to pass. To paraphrase a classic scene from the Marx Brothers: Europe may be talking and acting like it is moving to the radical right, but don't let that fool you; Europe really is moving to the radical right.

Why should we insist on this interpretation? Because most of the mainstream media has sought to downplay it. The message we keep hearing is, "Sure, Marine Le Pen, Giorgia Meloni, and Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) occasionally flirt with fascist motifs, but there is no reason to panic, because they still respect democratic rules and institutions once in power." Yet, this domestication of the radical right should trouble us all, because it signals a readiness by traditional conservative parties to go along with the new movement. The axiom of post-World War II European democracy, "No collaboration with fascists," has been quietly abandoned.

The message of this election is clear. The political divide in most EU countries is no longer between the moderate right and the moderate left, but between the conventional right, embodied by the big winner, the European People's Party (comprising Christian democrats, liberal-conservatives, and traditional

conservatives) and the neo-fascist right represented by Le Pen, Meloni, AfD, and others.

The question now is whether the EPP will collaborate with neo-fascists. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen is spinning the outcome as a triumph of the EPP against both "extremes," yet the new parliament will include no left-wing parties whose extremism is even distantly comparable to that of the far right. Such a "balanced" view from the EU's top official sends an ominous signal.

When we talk about fascism today, we should not confine ourselves to the developed West. A similar kind of politics has been ascendant in much of the Global South as well. In his study of China's development, Italian Marxist historian Domenico Losurdo (also known for his rehabilitation of Stalin) stresses the distinction between economic and political power. In pursuing his "reforms," Deng Xiaoping knew that elements of capitalism are necessary to unleash a society's productive forces. But he insisted that political power should remain firmly in the hands of the Communist Party of China (as the self-proclaimed representative of the workers and farmers).

This approach has deep historical roots. For over a century, China has embraced the "pan-Asianism" that

emerged towards the end of the 19th century as a reaction against Western imperialist domination and exploitation. As historian Viren Murthy explains, this project has always been driven by a rejection not of Western capitalism, but of Western liberal individualism and imperialism. By drawing on pre-modern traditions and institutions, pan-Asianists argued, Asian societies could organise their own modernisation to achieve even greater dynamism than the West.

Pan-Asianism tended to oscillate between its socialist and fascist versions (with the line between the two not always clear), reminding us that "anti-imperialism" is not as innocent as it may appear. In the first half of the 20th century, Japanese and German fascists regularly presented themselves as defenders against American, British, and French imperialism, and one now finds far-right nationalist politicians taking similar positions vis-à-vis the European Union.

The same tendency is discernible in post-Deng China, which political scientist A James Gregor classifies as "a variant of contemporary fascism." Harnessing economic impulses for the sake of nationalistic projects is the very definition of fascism, and similar political dynamics can also be found in India, Russia, Turkey, and other countries.

It is not hard to see why this model has gained traction. While the Soviet Union suffered a chaotic disintegration, the CPC pursued economic liberalisation but still maintained tight control. Thus, leftists who are sympathetic towards China praise it for keeping capital subordinated, in contrast to the US and European systems, where capital reigns supreme.

But the new fascism is also supported by more recent trends. Beyond Le Pen, another big winner of the European Parliament elections is Fidiias Panayiotou, a Cypriot YouTube personality who previously gained attention for his efforts to hug Elon Musk. While waiting outside Twitter's headquarters for his target, he encouraged his followers to "spam" Musk's mother with his request. Eventually, Musk did meet and hug Panayiotou, who went on to announce his candidacy to the European Parliament. Running on an anti-partisan platform, he won 19.4 percent of the popular vote and secured himself a seat.

Similar figures have also cropped up in France, the United Kingdom, Slovenia, and elsewhere, all justifying their candidacies with the "leftist" argument that since democratic politics has become a joke, clowns might as well run for office. This is a dangerous game. If enough people despair of emancipatory politics and accept the withdrawal into buffoonery, the political space for neo-fascism widens.

Reclaiming that space requires serious, authentic action. For all my disagreements with French President Emmanuel Macron, I think he was correct to respond to the French far right's victory by dissolving the National Assembly and calling for new legislative elections. His announcement caught almost everyone off guard, and it is certainly risky. But it is a risk worth taking. Even if Le Pen wins and decides who will be the next prime minister, Macron, as president, will retain the ability to mobilise a new majority against the government. We must take the fight to the new fascism as forcefully and as fast as possible.