

# Re-examining the Examination System

Imagination is more important than knowledge  
— Albert Einstein

## BCS Examination: An Appraisal

by Sharif Atiqur Rahman

It is a job where one will be termed as a "servant", but with a scope to act like a true "master". It is a job where you will have a rare combination of power and respect. Here one can earn decently to maintain an honest, normal life. Yes, that is government service I am talking about.

In this country with the world's ninth largest population, every year thousands of young men and women complete their university level education. But having a graduate or post-graduate degree does not ensure one a decent, respectable job. The person just qualifies to join the already existing millions who are desperately looking for a suitable job. A million of applications against ten posts - this is not a fairy tale figure, it is sheer reality! In a place like this, where a decent job seems to be very far from reality, getting employed as a "first class government servant" is literally like a dream come true. To be a government service holder, academic qualifications are not enough. This will only determine whether one is qualified to apply for it or not. Then through a competitive examination, these qualified applicants have to prove their merit, intelligence and efficiency to attain the responsibility of representing the government in various sectors or services. The examination is directed to choose the fittest person for first class government posts and thus ensuring

the smooth and efficient functioning of the government service. This competitive examination is known as the Bangladesh Civil Service examination (or BCS exam). As it is the constitutional right of every citizen to get equal opportunity in getting employed in the government service, and as at the same time millions of qualified unemployed are hoping for such a job, it is expected that these BCS examinations are conducted with the best possible fairness and ensure equal opportunity for all the qualified applicants. But it has been observed that there are some gaps and lapses in this examination system which needs to be taken care of.

### PSC & BCS examination

Bangladesh government has a separate constitutional body known as the Bangladesh Public Service Commission (PSC). This commission is the inheritor of two institutions, the Bengal Public Service Commission (established in 1937) and the Pakistan Central Public Service Commission (1947). One of the prime responsibilities of this commission is to conduct BCS examinations to nominate the qualified persons for different gazetted posts of the government. This commission is also responsible for formulating and advising the government about the procedure of selection for such posts. Articles 137-141

of the constitution states the structure and responsibilities of PSC. At present PSC has the provision for a post of Chairman and eleven members. To assist the commission in administrative purpose, there is a secretariat termed as the Public Service Commission Secretariat with the designation of a ministry/department of the government.

It is alleged that the PSC, the responsible organ of the government for the selection and nomination of the qualified civil servants, is facing problems in fulfilling its responsibilities. Prof. Dr. M. Mohabbat Ali-Khan (Member, PSC) pointed that PSC does not have its own office building even after 22 years of its official existence. In 1988, the government approved the proposal to have a separate office for the commission.

Eleven years have passed since then and still it is housed in a building which was once an airport building and is now shared with the Bangladesh Air Force. Commission has shortage of staffs and vehicles as well. One of the major problems that the commission faces in implementing its constitutional duties is with the designation of its Chairman and Members. Generally the appointed Chairman and the Members of PSC are retired or in-service professionals with the designation equivalent to a Secretary or an Additional Secretary. But after joining the PSC as a Member, his/her

designation comes down and is equivalent to that of a Joint Secretary. The Chairman's designation is equivalent to a Secretary, which is lower than that of the Cabinet Secretary. Due to these, there is the possibility that whenever PSC sends any recommendation or suggestion to different organs/ministries of the government, those proposals or recommendations may not receive proper attention from the concerned authorities.

Surely and certainly, these administrative shortcomings hamper the smooth functioning of the PSC. As a result, it has been observed that many recommendations or suggestions remain in file, locked for a long period.

### Quota system of government gazetted posts

According to the present government policy, 45% posts are to be selected on merit basis and the rest 55% are on district wise quota. Among these 55% district quota posts, 90% are reserved for the warden of freedom fighters, 10% for women and 5% for tribal people. There is a strong public opinion that these quota systems are hampering the efficiency of the bureaucracy. During the pre liberation period, when the West Pakistanis were deliberately depriving the then East Pakistanis, it was logical to demand a quota in the government service for the backward provinces or districts. But in independent Bangladesh, where all the districts/administrative units are getting similar treatment from the part of the government and where there is no existence of even allegations about such biased government policies, there seems little justification for maintaining such district quota provisions. It will encourage kinship in the government service. Besides, in the government cadres, where the number of vacant posts are very few each year, the introduction of district quota will deprive the less populated districts/divisions, every year and the over populated divisions/districts will get the preference. But on the other hand the backward communities of our country, like women and tribal people, should be given the opportunity to increase their representation in the government service, so the quota for them ought to be maintained.

For some cadres in the government service, there is

no alternative but to give preference to the merit. Services in the foreign ministry or law ministry or the services of a doctor, an engineer or a teacher requires extremely meritorious and skillful personnel. Here any kind of quota system will definitely deprive the state from the services of the best-endowed ones.

Another implication of quota system is that this will give the opportunity to a less qualified person to attain something depriving a more qualified one. This naturally results in the decrease of efficiency of the government service. A developing country like Bangladesh, with a population much bigger than its resources, cannot afford to have a less efficient government service. The quota system needs to be reformed immediately. Prof. Md. Mostafa Chowdhury (Chairman, PSC) while talking to this author, informed that PSC is aware of the problems of quota system and has sent its recommendations to the government but it is yet to take any decision.

### Excessive Number of candidates

Each year the number of candidates for government services is increasing. In fact it has increased to an unmanageable figure. The following data reveals the state of affairs.

Examination	Vacant Posts	Applicants	Ratio
1988 (9th BCS)	1,629	37,348	1:23
1989 (10th BCS)	1,247	28,419	1:23
1990 (11th BCS)	1,228	30,677	1:25
1991 (13th BCS)	1,021	37,539	1:37
1993 (15th BCS)	1,127	54,384	1:48
1995 (17th BCS)	2,026	65,502	1:32.3
1996 (18th BCS)	2,041	80,213	1:39
1998 (20th BCS)	1,322	83,277	1:63
*1999 (21st BCS)	934	85,000 (approx.)	1:91 (approx.)

Source: Annual Report 1998, Bangladesh Public Service Commission  
\* As stated by Controller of Examinations, Bangladesh Public Service Commission

These figures clearly show that it has reached to an unimaginable ratio. As a result, the PSC is facing problem in running the exams smoothly and efficiently. Preliminary examination system has been introduced to bring the size of number of examinees to a figure somewhat manageable. As for an example, out of 80,213 candidates, 23,414 passed in the preliminary examination and qualified for the written examination. Still it is a large number for holding a thousand mark examinations at home and abroad with the provision of 64 optional subjects. This makes it time consuming also. It takes about two years to complete the whole process of a BCS examination. As for the 18th BCS examination, adver-

tisement was given in November 1996 and the nominations of successful candidates were sent in August 1998.

Some practical steps can change the situation. Under the present system, a candidate even with any third class in any stage of his academic career can apply for the BCS examination if he/she has second class bachelor degree, or first division in either SSC or HSC, or degree. If the system is reformed in such a way that a person with any third class degree in his/her academic career will not be able to apply, the number of candidates will come down. Prohibiting the optional subject system of examination will certainly reduce the time consumed for holding BCS examinations.

### Examination system

In 1976 and in 1979, two examinations were held as the "Superior Post Examination" to appoint the gazetted civil servants. Those examinations were held with a total mark of 1600. In 1982, BCS examination was introduced which was also evaluated with a total mark of 1600. In 1984, 900 marks BCS examination was introduced on an experiment basis. The present system of 1000 marks BCS examination was approved in

1985. In this system, a candidate has to sit for 500 marks of compulsory subject examinations (General English, General English, Bangladesh Affairs and International Affairs, Everyday Science and Basic Mathematics) and 300 marks optional subjects examination. There are 64 optional subjects divided into four different groups. A candidate cannot choose more than two subjects from any group. Candidates with an average of 45% marks in the written test will pass and appear for the 100 marks psychological test and 200 marks viva-voice test. The pass marks is 40% and the marks obtained in the viva-voice test are credited to determine the position. For technical/professional cadres, can-

didates do not have to appear for the optional subject examinations; they are credited according to their academic attainment in the concerned university examinations. The problem lies with these optional subjects. Candidates, irrespective of their science, humanities or commerce background, apply for the BCS examinations. As it is an examination open to all, the examination system should be able to evaluate the examinees according to their academic background. With the scope of optional subjects candidates normally and naturally want to choose the subjects, which are related to their university education. But this results in a discrimination and students with a background of efficiency in Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, Statistics and some other science subjects or Arabic, Islamic Studies and some other arts subjects or Accounting, Finance and some other commerce subjects in their university education are placed in a favourable condition. The Controller of Examinations of PSC admitted that the records reveal that the candidates opting for these subjects are likely to attain higher marks. While students who graduated from universities in Bengali, English, Sociology, International Relations,

instead of General science and General Social Science. Average pass marks will be 50% and candidates with below 30% marks in any subject will fail. This proposed system was supposed to be implemented in the ensuing 21st BCS examination. But the proposal is now blocked by the Secretaries Committee. It has reservations about the 200 marks viva-voice test and is recommending 100 marks for the viva-voice test instead. Two years have passed since the original proposal was submitted but a decision is yet to come.

### Conclusion

The concerned section of the government should take the matter of reforming the BCS examination system seriously. The following are some suggestions that need attention of the policy makers and the decision-makers as well.

1. The designation of the Chairman and the Members of PSC should be reformed in order to enable them to perform efficiently and with promptness.

2. PSC should be provided with necessary funding and manpower to deal with the growing number of candidates. A separate independent office of PSC should immedi-

ately be set up.

3. Quota system in BCS examination should be reformed. Merit should be the basis for the selection of the civil servants.

4. Qualifications for applying in the BCS examination need to be upgraded.

5. BCS examination system needs to be reformed to give equal opportunity to all the candidates from different backgrounds. Examination systems followed in 'SAT', 'GRE' can be a possible consideration for a new and modern system of BCS examination.

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Typical queue for admission test at a primary school (Tangail).

— Star photo

## A Case Study of Dhaka University

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exam committee chairmen and departmental chairmen ask us to maintain a gap of minimum five days between full unit courses and three days between half unit courses. But in both cases, gap becomes for a week because we have to reschedule the date if the fifth/third day coincides with a Friday/hartal day.

**Faulty question pattern**

Most of the students interviewed cast doubt on the acceptability and utility of the prevailing question pattern in evaluating the quality of students. They were particularly critical about the traditional broad-questions.

Firstly, the broad questions are not helpful at all to develop the writing skill of the students because they, in writing answer to broad questions, do not depend on their own language rather they just reproduce the literature written in the note books/guide books.

Secondly, the traditional question pattern makes students reluctant to study the textbook thoroughly. This is because of excess availability of alternative questions in the question paper. For example, in the course final examination under Arts and Social Science faculties, a student has to answer five questions out of ten or four questions out of eight. In most instances the questions are not divided into groups/sub-groups. Therefore, in most cases, students can get away with half portion of the course syllabus.

Thirdly, the traditional comprehensive questions provide much room for copying.

### Excessive dependence on memory work

Without proper understanding of the tests, only memorisation is of no use because it bears no practical significance. Higher studies should not and must not be based on memory work but ironically memorisation of guide books/photocopies takes most of the time of the university students and in many cases this is their only learning exercise in the universities.

The entire education system (particularly examination system) is responsible for memory based studies. Arfat Azam, a student of Mathematics at Shahjalal University of Science and Technology, Sylhet, said, "In our department only students who have high memo-

rising power can do well in the examination. Though there is popular belief that students of Mathematics have nothing to memorise and they are to understand the subject matter, the fact is reversed in higher studies. Most of the teachers like bookish talks rather than creativity. If you write the answer in your own language you are likely to get less marks than you would do if you had followed the language of the text writer."

When this point was raised, a teacher of English department at Dhaka University said, "These days most of the students do not even touch the reference books rather they only get the guide books/photocopied hand notes prepared by any senior student and learn it by heart to pass the exam. They cannot show creativity/originality in their scripts because they do not have clear conception of the original topic of the syllabus."

### Centrally held annual examination system

Examination is seasonal in our universities rather than regular. In the whole year, the students spend maximum two months in preparation for the course final examination comprising four/five papers. The course final examination covers 70% marks of the total course. In the whole year only three in-course/tutorial tests are taken in which students appear half-heartedly to manage easily obtainable 45% marks.

Centrally held annual examination suffers another grave problem. The examinations are taken on faculty basis. That's why if one department completes the course in time, it has to wait for the time when other departments with faltering steps will complete the course. Given the fact that the invigilation work is done, question paper is mainly set, exam-committee is manned and scripts are looked over by the departmental faculty members, the so-called central examination system is ridiculous.

### Favoritism and politicisation

Sixteen students talked of favoritism and politicisation in examination matters as one of the key problems for which examination-outcome does not truly represent the merit or quality of the students.

According to October 21, 1999 issue of the vernacular daily Manabjamine, Hafizur Rahman, a former student of

Bangla department at Dhaka University who failed twice and got expelled twice in honours final examination ultimately stood first class first in masters examination (of 21 October 1999) published a detailed story of how that person had manipulated in the masters final examination and ultimately got away with it.

### Cut and dried syllabus

Unlike the competitive tests (say, for example, the university admission tests or the Civil Service Examination) the university examinations are based on cut and dried syllabus which is hardly adequate for the students to keep pace with the competitive world. Again, showing the lame excuse of time constraint the syllabus is shortened. In the Arts Building, only two classes are taken in a week on one single paper. For instance, in International Relations department, one student has to attend a total of eight classes in a week at masters level. According to controller of Examination Mr. Habibur Rahman, "The syllabus should be more comprehensive than the present one and at least four classes should be taken on one subject (paper) in a week."

Regarding cut and dried syllabus and questions, professor Ajoy Roy of Physics department, in a round-table discussion on "Dhaka University at the threshold of 21 century" organised by the Daily Bhorer Kagoz said, "We have to follow sub-standard syllabus and set sub-standard question because we teach sub-standard students. We receive poorer caliber students than we did three decades ago. How can I communicate with students of physics who are equally poor in English, Bengali and Mathematics, the three major languages of physics?"

### Leakage of question paper

This is the problem that greatly tarnishes the image of the university and questions its status as a sacred institution. Last year, a senior teacher of economics was sacked when the allegation of his involvement in leaking question paper and giving marks for money was proved by the inquiry committee. Last year, also the students of anthropology department protested against the leakage of question paper. The controller of examination Mr. Rahman, admitted this problem. He said,

"Honesty is the best caretaker. If someone's conscience does not strike his mind, nobody can make him honest. Incident like question paper leakage is a big shame for the university as well as for the nation."

### Scope of copying in preparing term paper

Students are asked to prepare term paper on certain issues directly linked to the course. There are no doubt, some good intentions behind these assignments. These are:

i) to develop the writing skill of the student,

ii) to provide scope for practical knowledge,

iii) to develop students perspective, vision and creativity on the subject matter.

But all those purposes will be nipped in the bud if the students prepare the assignment by copying from books or WebPages verbatim. This is what exactly happens in most cases of assignments.

### Inter departmental/faculty discrepancies

A few students raised the problem of interdepartmental discrepancies on examination under the same faculty. In some departments, two in-course tests are taken for 30 marks while in some departments under the same faculty three tests are taken. In some departments, in-course tests are taken for one hour while in another department, under the same faculty, in-course tests are taken for three hours. In some departments, examined scripts are shown before the students to make them aware of their faults while some departments do not publish results of in-course tests and students know the marks of these tests only after receiving the original mark sheet.

Apart from identifying the problems with examination, the DU students came up with some remedies as well which deserve attention of concerned authorities. These are:

1. Precaution should be eliminated from the educational institutions at once and forever. There must be a co-ordination in education at all layers - school, college and university. The authorities at different stages of education should immediately sit together and eke out a co-ordinated educational session. If the final examination of class nine ends by December and the result comes to light by January the SSC ex-

amination must end by September and the result must come to light by January. Otherwise if the college session is from July to June, then the school session must be from July to June rather than January to December.

2. The question paper should be more demanding than the present one. It should seek student's analytical power and creativity rather than power to memorise. More and more short questions should be set replacing the traditional comprehensive questions. Students own language should be encouraged and memorised answers should be discouraged.

3. Repetition of questions in the same form over the year should be stopped. Question pattern should be changed every year.

4. The syllabus should be freed from confinement. It should be more comprehensive and open. Present syllabi are greatly theoretical and detached from life. The syllabus must contain a vision so that students can take help from it in constructing their lives. This is what real examination / education is about.

5. Open book examination system may be introduced to remove copying from examination. Students will have to think more on the subject matter to develop their own perspective and vision if the printed words of books carry less marks.

6. Number of tutorial classes should be increased. Students should be informed of the faults committed in one test before they sit for the next test.

7. The so-called course final examination should be abolished. Semester system should be introduced immediately in all faculties of the university.

8. To keep pace with the developed world, grading system should be introduced replacing the age-old marks system.

9. The University authority should provide more funds for the students who undertake research works. The best research works should be encouraged financially.

10. The present university calendar is like any other normal calendar because there is no hints of start/end of academic session, start/end of different examinations and date on which results will be published. The calendar shows only holidays and the occasions! A true academic calendar should be designed before the start of the next session. In

other words, the next calendar should be an academic calendar in true sense.

11. The proposed academic calendar should not and must not be violated. That is classes must resume, course must be completed, examination must be held and results must be published on the day mentioned in the calendar.

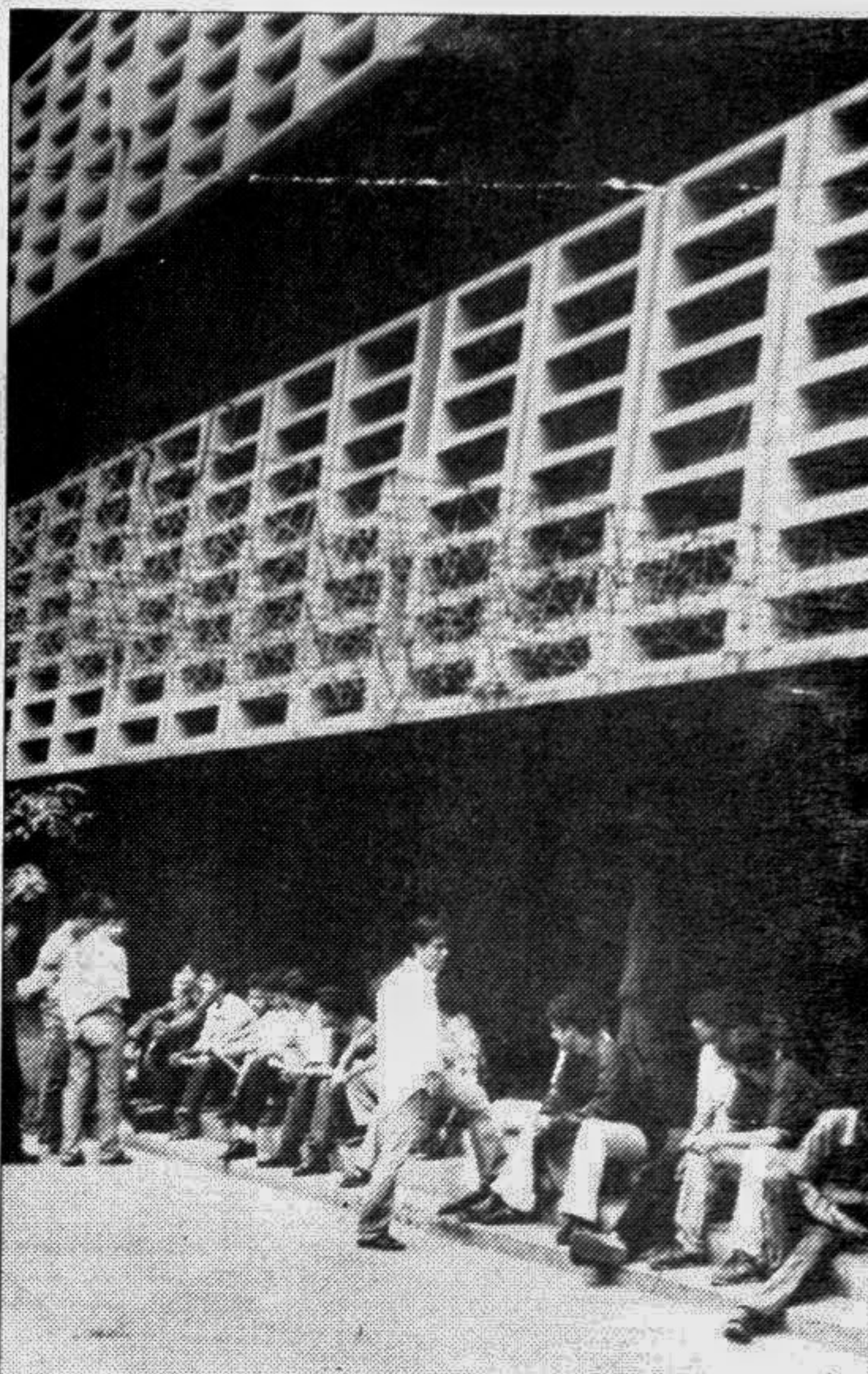
12. The university authority has shown sagacity by keeping the university open on Saturdays, otherwise a government holiday. But ironically, the university observes about three months (90 days) of shut down in the name of academic holidays which is extremely expensive to students. To make the students hard working and more studious, the number of holidays should be reduced by half. This will help teachers and students complete course and appear in examination in time.

13. If the examination days coincide with any natural/artificial (?) calamities (like flood, bolt or hartal) the examination should be taken on the following public holiday. It should be turned into a law so that no instant notice is required. Helpless students must sacrifice the comfort of holidays because our "selfless" politicians do not know how to sacrifice for the sake of nation and its poor people.

The concluding line of this write up may be drawn from an editorial written by a famous journalist of the country who got frustrated when BUET students successfully demanded that classes be suspended so that they could fully enjoy the world cup soccer tournament which in no way coincided with class timings! First few lines of the editorial *All world cup and no study reads* "What fun it is to be a university student in Bangladesh! In other countries it is an onerous state to be in one has to attend classes, listen to lectures, take copious notes, pursue volume after volume, stock the mind with data and undergo gruelling examinations. In brief, one has to work like a dog... But in Bangladesh it is otherwise."

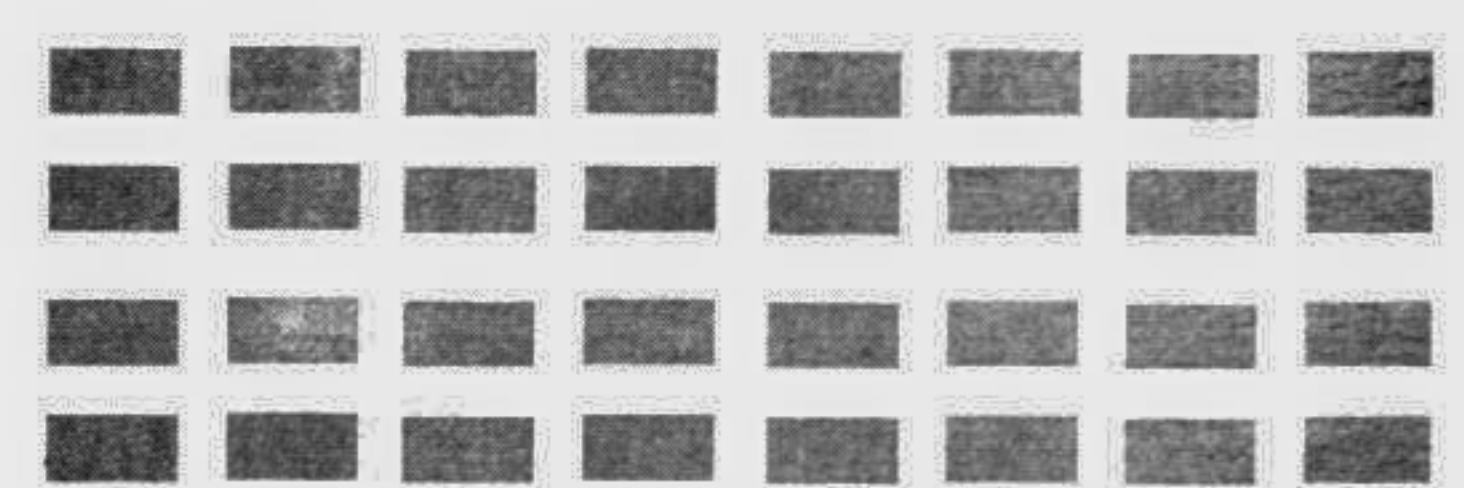
When will the gaps between our examination system and those in other countries, as the editorial said, be bridged? When can we prove our true worth? Isn't it time for the university authorities and the students to join hands and heads to answer the above questions.

The author is a free lance journalist.



Waiting for their term for test (at a higher educational institution).

— Star photo



The topic of our next issue is: **Food Hazards**. Creative suggestions are invited from our esteemed readers. Please send your materials to: Dr Imtiaz Ahmed, Executive Director, Centre For Alternatives, Room No 431, Lecture Theatre, Arts Building, Dhaka University, Dhaka-1000. Tel: 9661900-19, Ext. 4550; Fax: (8802) 8316769; E-mail: imtiaz@bangla.net.