

# Regenerating Our Universities

by Rehman Sobhan



We need to redirect our energies towards restoring democracy of opportunity into our vision for the future of higher education in Bangladesh. This renewed social vision must be sustained by strong political commitment, accompanied by upgrading and making much better use of the significant professional capacities already available in our universities.

I began my professional career as a Senior Lecturer at the Department of Economics, Dhaka University in October 1957. I chose to join Dhaka University though I had several alternative employment opportunities before me. My decision to join Dhaka University was therefore made as a deliberate choice because Dhaka University at that time enjoyed enormous prestige in Bangladesh (then East Pakistan) society. It was not just an institution of learning but a defining institution in society, which was not only the intellectual centre of society but was the nursery for its future leaders. To graduate to a Professorship at Dhaka University was seen in society as a special distinction.

During my tenure as a lecturer the social ethos of Dhaka University's student population was drawn largely from the upper peasantry and lower middle class. The majority of students came out of village schools and were taught in the Bangla medium until they entered intermediate college. This modest educational background did not constrain their capacity for learning as well as excellence both in the university as well as in their professional careers. Our best academics, many of whom have prospered abroad, our bureaucratic elite and our political leaders all emerged out of Dhaka University.

This central role of the university in the social life of Bangladesh ensured that Dhaka University played an important role in giving intellectual inspiration to the struggle for Bangladeshi nationalism. It's Department of Economics contributed to many of the ideas, which came to constitute the 6-point programme, presented by Bangabandhu, which served as the manifesto of the struggle of the Bangalis for self-rule. Whilst some degree of political division prevailed amongst teachers in those days, this was far removed from the polarization within the teaching community we witness today.

The student community was then more focused in its search for knowledge. They realised that they carried the hopes and investment of their families. However, this pursuit of knowledge was not divorced from an awareness of their social responsibilities, so that the students of Dhaka University were actively involved in democratic politics. The students of Dhaka University had already played a historic role in the Language Movement in the 1950s and in the 1960s were at the vanguard of the struggle against the Pakistani military junta of Field Marshal Ayub Khan in 1962, 1964 and 1969.

This proactive role of students in politics was without prejudice to their academic pursuits. Throughout the 1960s, which experienced several episodes of political turbulence on the campus, I do not remember any significant delay in holding exams nor did students graduate years after they were due to do so. The term 'session jam' had not entered the public vocabulary. Students did not aggressively seek to defer their exams nor were teachers tardy in correcting scripts and publishing exam results in time. To ensure that there was no delay in holding exams, I had the distinction of taking the viva voce examination of Rashed Khan Menon in the Dhaka Central Jail where he had been incarcerated after the movement against Governor Monem Khan. Menon's active involvement in politics did not prevent him from standing 5th in the MA Economics final exam. Another of my students, the late Justice Zaker Ahmed, had the

distinction of having his name attached to a historic judgement of the Pakistan Supreme Court, which ruled that his expulsion from Dhaka University following the 1964-65 movement was illegal. This political involvement did not prevent Zaker from graduating in time or rising to the bench.

Students politics, to the extent that it was motivated by political principle, attracted some of the best students. A number of 1st class level students, who went on to earn distinction in later life, were elected to positions of leadership in the student movement. Mujahid Islam Salim, who is today Secretary General of the Communist Party of Bangladesh, was elected VP of DUCSU in 1970 but also earned a 1st class MA in Economics. Dr. Farahuddin, now Governor, Bangladesh Bank, obtained a 1st class 1st in MA Economics in 1965 but was also elected VP of Salimullah Hall and was an activist of EPSU. This list of students who combined academic excellence with political engagement during the 1950s and '60s and indeed during the 1970s, could be multiplied. The lesson from the 1960s was that teachers could play an active role in the political movement of the day and students could remain closely involved in politics without prejudice to the quality of pedagogy or the pursuit of academic excellence by the students.

Whilst the campus situation of the 1960s was a period of intellectual ferment and political involvement we should not over-romanticise our vision of that period. The 1960s also witnessed the era where the Vice-Chancellor and some teachers of Dhaka University allowed themselves to become the political instruments of Governor Monem Khan to frustrate the democratic movement in the university. The tradition of using armed mercenaries who could be manipulated to serve as the musclemen of Monem Khan to contain the democratic movement in the universities, operated with the full patronage of the university administration to terrorise the campus. These hoodlums who were associated with a student party, the NSF, were responsible for a murderous assault on Dr. Abu Mahmood, then Chairman of the Economics Department at Dhaka University, as an act of revenge in response to a contempt of court suit he had won against the Vice-Chancellor of Dhaka University in a landmark judgement handed down by Chief Justice Murshid in the Dhaka High Court. Not one of Mahmood's assailants were expected to either disciplinary or legal action even though the assault took place in full public view. Between 1966-69 when these NSF hoodlums, who were encouraged to also flourish as contractors, dominated the campus, Dhaka University passed through some very dark days. The tradition of democratic struggle was not revived till the beginning of 1969 when the movement against the Ayub raj was ignited with the students of Dhaka University joining hands with the workers to bring the 10-year autocratic regime to its knees. In that period Tofail Ahmed, who was then Vice President of DUCSU, became a household name throughout Pakistan, for his highly visible leadership role in the anti-Ayub movement.

I introduce this biographical element so as to provide some historical perspective on the future of higher education in Bangladesh. It is important to remind ourselves that Bangladesh's public universities were once institutions of

distinction which served as the first choice of all students seeking higher education, most of whom aspired to go abroad only after completing their MA in local universities. At the same time Bangladesh's democratic movement looked to the students to play a catalytic role in the struggle against oppression.

## The crisis in public higher education

Today the institutions of higher education do not appear to exercise the degree of influence they commanded in Bangladesh society in the 1960s. Whilst these institutions still retain individuals of enormous prestige the institutional image of higher education generates cause for concern. This change in the circumstances of our universities has emerged in spite of the growth in their budgets, in real and relative terms, the increase in the size of their staff and the much larger presence of foreign-trained teachers on the faculties. Indeed, today some of the best intellectual talents in Bangladesh are to be found in the public universities which still remain a national treasure. In seeking to understand the crisis in higher education we should, therefore, avoid simplistic assumptions.

We should keep in mind that part of the problem of the uni-

tion and immunise the selection process of the VC from political patronage, has, instead, deeply divided the academic community and encouraged factions of teachers to seek out external political sponsorship, which has thereby served to virtually tribalise the academic community along political lines. These divisions have disturbed the sense of community, which is essential to the sustenance of university life and compromised the primacy of academic standards as the metric of professional advancement in our institutions of higher learning. Rather than establish academic quality, the system has eroded discipline and made teachers a law unto themselves, whilst the linkage between teachers and students, which is the life blood of a good university, has weakened.

Student politics in recent years is much less driven by a sense of political commitment. In spite of a very positive role played by a section of students in the movement against the Ershad autocracy, in the 1980s, the campus nowadays appears to be held hostage by a minority of essentially apolitical, amoral, armed mercenaries. These commoditised student leaders, tend to use the campus as a platform for their business activities and periodically engage in armed conflicts to oc-

cupy university halls of residence from a rapid expansion in the numbers of students seeking higher education and the rather indiscriminate expansion in capacity to accommodate this expansion. Such a process has impacted on the quality of governance and the quality of teaching. Furthermore, the enormous increase in the intake into higher education has gone hand in hand with deterioration in the quality of the intake, due to the depreciation in the quality of our primary and secondary schools under the weight of an explosive growth in enrolment.

Another structural problem associated with the university reforms of the 1970s, needs also to be noted. These reforms derived from the problems faced by the universities during the years of autocracy in the 1960. The reforms originated from those very problems which had immobilised Dhaka University in the second half of the 1960s. The new reforms were, thus, designed to insulate universities from government pressure, to democratise governance, and academic zamindaris in the university faculties and establish a more accountable academic environment. Regrettably, the law of unintended consequences came into play. The new electoral system, which was designed to democratise the university administra-

tion will not only impact on the future of higher education but on the very essence of Bangladesh society.

## The role of the private universities

Whilst I am addressing a convocation of a private university, it may appear inappropriate, possibly impolite, for me to observe that the growth of the private universities is not and indeed cannot serve as an alternative to the crisis in our public institutions of higher learning. Unlike some of my academic colleagues who have fundamental objections to private universities, I recognise that they have emerged in response to a particular historic situation. As long as parents remain concerned with the state of public education and have the resources to pay for higher education there will be a market for private education in Bangladesh. Before our private universities emerged on the local scene parents were largely sending their offspring to India since only a small fraction could afford to pay for higher education in North America or UK, except if their children were smart enough to qualify for financial aid from these institutions. As a result, many students were ending up in the lesser known universities of India rather than at the best universities in Calcutta, Bombay or Delhi. Our private uni-

versities are structural and derives from a rapid expansion in the numbers of students seeking higher education and the rather indiscriminate expansion in capacity to accommodate this expansion. Such a process has impacted on the quality of governance and the quality of teaching. Furthermore, the enormous increase in the intake into higher education has gone hand in hand with deterioration in the quality of the intake, due to the depreciation in the quality of our primary and secondary schools under the weight of an explosive growth in enrolment.

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versities have played a valuable role in arresting this outflow and should be commended for their effort.

However, the reality of private education indicates that it is a largely market driven process. For such private enterprises to sustain themselves they need to generate their own revenue base. Whilst private munificence has indeed played a commendable role in endowing these universities, our private sector has neither the historical ethos nor the resources to substantially underwrite these institutions. As a result, a substantial part of revenue for the private universities has, perforce, to come from student's fees which thus have to be set by a market driven process. Parents who pay such high fees expect that their offspring will be able to seek ready employment at home or abroad in order to justify their investment in private education. Most parents who make significant material sacrifices to send their children abroad see this as an investment in a secure profession abroad with a green card as their pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.

Parents who make more modest but nonetheless sizeable investments in private education at home have, today become very selective in the disciplines they are willing to pay

for. Emphasis on business education and in computer sciences as well as in specialist education in medicine and law, are seen to be readily remunerative investments. Widening the facilities in private universities into economics, population and environmental studies is a slower process and usually needs some backing by foreign aid agencies. However even these special programmes provide more marketable skills to the graduates. The newest market-driven process is in the area of IT where investment in training centres have mushroomed and private universities are extending themselves into these areas.

This compulsion to structure the private universities according to the compulsions of the market has played a useful role for those segments of the market and the families, which use their facilities. However the very same compulsions of the market exclude an overwhelming majority of households in Bangladesh from ever being able to aspire to higher education. Students of modest means have to be exceptionally bright to aspire to the few scholarships offered by these private institutions. This suggests that private universities, of necessity, are going to be a socially divisive element in our society where they effectively segregate the affluent elite from the gen-

eral populace. A further constraint originating in a market driven educational institution lies in the narrow academic base of such institutions. Higher education is not intended just as an avenue to employment. It is, above all, a training for future life. Thus all the major universities around the world, public and private, have invested in a holistic, well-rounded educational system with a broad range of faculties, covering not just market-friendly disciplines but the broad range of the sciences, the humanities, including literature and philosophy, political science and history, music and the fine arts. This brings together a broad spectrum of academic scholarship and students of varied academic interests within a single institution, which stimulates the intellectual diversity and vibrancy, which distinguish the best universities. Private institutions which limit their academic scope for market-driven reasons can, at best, aspire to be high quality polytechnics or technical training institutes. Thus, private universities to the extent that they aspire to approximate to the standards of better known private universities around the world, will have to find resources outside the market. Such a broader resource base will enable them to both diversify their academic base as well as the social composition of their student base through a much larger investment in scholarships for students with modest means.

How to bring about this reversal of fortune in public higher education is beyond the scope of my address. A National Education Commission set up by the present government has addressed this issue but we have seen no public presentation of their findings or debate on their message, nor any urgency by the government or parliament to implement their recommendations. Given the low profile accorded to the Commission's recommendations it may be sensible for a citizens task force to be constituted which could spell out a strategic plan to restore excellence in public higher education. This task force could draw upon the more serviceable and implementable elements of the Commission's report and could then introduce further proposals on educational reform, derived through a process of public consultation involving civil society, political leaders, government, university teachers and students. This citizen's initiative should be carried out on an emergency basis since Bangladesh needs to have a priority agenda for regenerating our universities into centres of excellence rather than arenas of despair.

Failure to act with urgency will perpetuate the growth of an increasingly divided society where the small minority who can afford it will continue to privatise their educational aspirations. In contrast, the overwhelming majority of our youth will remain captive within a public education system which leaves them ill-equipped to cope with the seismic challenges originating from a fast globalising world. It is only by providing quality education at all levels that we can democratise opportunities to a level where these are commensurate with public aspirations. By providing such opportunities to all segments of society we can make a broad social spectrum of Bangladesh into genuine stakeholders in building a more coherent and stable social order as well as enormously enhance the development capacity of the economy. Failure to bridge this divided society through a more integrated and democratic educational system is likely to not only undermine the sustainability of our democratic institutions but will perpetuate social unrest and set the stage for social upheaval in the days ahead.

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Now that the scenario has changed, budgetary provision for some important items is needed to boost activities at the National Institute of Biotechnology and thereby turn it into an institute par excellence.

**Hiring of Non-resident Bangladeshis:** There should be a provision *inter alia* to hire Bangladeshis expatriates, on part-time basis, to work for projects at the institute whereby they will train local scientists and provide inputs towards successful completion of the ventures undertaken. Once a project is initiated, the scientists concerned face a lot of difficulties that they cannot solve without expert help. A case in point is the production of bio-engineered jute varieties

with qualities of extra-fine fibres, disease and pest resistance and nutritionally rich leaves. We need scientists working at foreign research institutes to come and help us solve problems in some areas. Obtaining a jute plant out of an unorganised piece of tissue which results when a piece of actively dividing plant part detached from the main body is cultured in a nutrient medium is one such problem.

Fortunately, we have expatriate Bangladeshi scientists who may be invited to work at NBI towards solving the aforementioned problem. That's the reason why budgetary provision needs to be made for inviting at least one expatriate scientist per project for a period of six months to a year, to ensure progress and practical results. Dependence on expatriate scientists will be less and less as the project gathers momentum requiring more of routine type of work and less of chal-

enge. **Setting up specially constructed greenhouses for genetically engineered crops:** Sufficient funds should be allocated for construction of suitable greenhouses in NBI, BARI, BRRI in order to contain pollen grains from escape from genetically engineered (GE) crops to outside environment. Millions of dollars will soon be available from some USA sources to the developing countries to breed indica version of Golden Rice fortified with non-destructible vitamin A and absorbable iron. Bio-engineered Golden Rice is a japonica variety and as such it needs to be tailored through conventional breeding to become an indica variety containing only genes for vitamin A and iron. It must be mentioned here that unless facilities to handle GE crops are developed immediately, we may not receive samples of Golden Rice from Professor I Potrykus who along with his colleagues

has developed this miracle rice nor would we get grant from the USA for this purpose. There is no opposition by the environmental activists against this particular variety for a couple of reasons. First, it does not contain any harmful genes from any microbes; and second, it is estimated to save 100 million children from blindness and nearly equal number of women from iron deficiency that severely affects the health of pregnant women in various parts of Asia.

**Provision in the budget for payment of dues to international organisation:** The country was admitted to ICGB membership in 1997 and no provision was kept in the budget for payment of its annual membership fee of 20,000 US dollars. The member governor from the country felt embarrassed when he discovered at the general assembly of ICGB that his country was one of the few defaulters in making the payment. The fact that benefits

that are granted to a developing country like Bangladesh in the form of financial support for holding workshops and projects including purchase of equipment, short- and long-term fellowship are 2-3 times as much as the amount paid for annual membership fee. No membership fee has been paid also to Committee for Science and Technology (COMSTEC) - an organ of OIC for promotion of science and technology in Islamic countries. Whatever has been said for the benefits that may be passed on to member countries by ICGB holds true for COMSTEC. It may help Bangladesh financially for holding international workshops, provide fellowships and support collaborative projects. In order to take advantage of this agency the membership fee needs to be paid timely.

**Travel expenses for Bangladesh representatives to attend international meetings:** It is also important that provision be made in the budget to pay travel cost to Bangladeshis selected or nominated by the government to represent the country. At present there is no such provision to meet the cost of travel for the ICGB representative from Bangladesh to attend the annual meetings of the Board of Governors. Such provision should be made for official nominated representatives from other organisations to attend important meetings.

**Meeting the cost of international trips for young scientists:** It may be mentioned here that there should be allocation of funds to finance trips for young scientists to attend international conferences to present their research findings. In neighbouring countries such incentives are given to scientists below 40 years of age to perk up their research activities.

With so many brilliant resident and non-resident scientists available, the country can certainly reap the benefit of biotechnology. The sacrifice of three million people to attain freedom will be amply rewarded when Bangladesh varieties of Golden Rice would reach every home to prevent blindness and save poor women's health from iron deficiency.

The writer is bio-technologist based in Texas

# Budgetary Provision for Biotechnology

by Ahmed S Islam

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## Garfield @

I HAVE AN IDEA, WHY DON'T YOU NOT DIET, AND THEN CHEAT ON THAT BY DIETING?

