

## FOCUS

## Regenerating Our Universities

by Rehman Sobhan



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.

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 active in student politics and 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. Farashuddin, 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 Mursid in the Dhaka High Court. Not one of Mahmood's assailants were exposed 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 regime 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 despite 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-

sition 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 accountability 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 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 commodified student leaders, tend to use the campus as a platform for their business activities and periodically engage in armed conflicts to oc-

cur in society but an integral part of society so that in the end we are all responsible for this state of affairs. It is our prevalent divisive political culture, which has exposed our academic community to the maladiction of partisan politics and elevated armed mercenaries rather than politically dedicated persons into the vanguard of student politics. It is our irresponsibility as citizens which has permitted us to turn our backs on these cradles of learning. Today the elite of society, our political leaders, our professional and business community who were themselves the products of our public universities have turned their backs on these institutions. They are increasingly sending their children to private universities, to India and further abroad where they can afford it. The best students are seeking escape abroad via the English medium schools who train them for O-levels and SAT so they can escape abroad as early as possible.

Whilst we can neither blame nor stop parents, including ministers who are also parents, for wanting to rescue their children from 'session jams' and campus instability, turning our backs on these public institutions is no solution. Indeed, this irresponsible attitude is driving our public institutions into an irrevocable crisis which

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

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.

versities is 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.

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 1960s. 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 zanadars 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-

tive university halls of residence as an urban version of *char dakhla*. It is thus, inconceivable for the better students to aspire to positions of leadership in the student movements so that student politics has become victim to a version of Gramsci's Law where bad politics drives out good politics. It is not surprising that such mercenaries readily switch political loyalties from regime to regime in order to seek the political patronage necessary to secure immunity from the law. Since national politics has also become increasingly dependent on money and arms this symbiotic links between students and politics is mutually rewarding. This contemporary version of student politics is a far cry from the spirit of political commitment and sacrifice which motivated student leaders such as Sirajul Alam Khan, Sheikh Fazlul Haq Moni, Abdur Razzaq, Rashed Khan Menon, Motia Chowdhury, Tofail Ahmed, Abdur Rab, Shahjahan Siraj, Mujahidul Islam Selim and many others during the 1960s and even in the 1970s.

I do not intend to explore the underlying dynamics of this deterioration in the state of our public institutions of higher learning. This is a serious and tragic development, which needs to be addressed and corrected with a sense of urgency. Our universities are not islands

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 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.

**Restoring excellence to public higher education**

My conclusion, however, does not lie in my suggestions on how to improve the standards of private education but returns to where I began, the need to restore excellence to the system of public higher education.

However much our private universities will expand they will not be able to accommodate the hunger for higher education which burns within every household in Bangladesh, however remote may be this dream from the circumstances of the family.

Historically, education was seen by all strata of Bengali society as the one available avenue of upward mobility. This compulsion remains dominant even today. For most families in Bangladesh seeking higher education our public universities remain the only available avenue. Since intelligence is not awarded in line with income and social status but is randomly distributed, failure to provide higher education of acceptable quality to these large reservoirs of undiscovered human talents lying dormant throughout Bangladesh is both morally repugnant as well as economically wasteful.

The most dynamic societies in the contemporary world have reached out to the mass base of their population by investing in quality public schooling for all citizens and then providing opportunities for the best products from these schools to graduate into the system of higher education. The post-war Social-Democratic revolution in Europe originated in the democratizing role played by providing high quality public education to all citizens, irrespective of their social origins. This system made it possible for the sons and daughters of farmers, coalminers and bus drivers to go to the universities of Oxford and Manchester, to Sorbonne and Uppsala and to go on to become cabinet ministers, professors and distinguished professionals in their respective countries. A similar process of democratic

education drove growth and social change in Japan, post-revolution China, Korea and Singapore.

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

education will be sustained by strong political commitment, accompanied by upgrading and making much better use of the significant professional

capacities already available in our universities.

This regeneration of our academic capacities will be achieved by heavy investment of budgetary resources towards transforming Dhaka and other universities into centres of excellence along with investment in further such institutions of public higher education.

This renewed investment in public higher education will, however, only be meaningful if the use of such resources is kept both accountable as well as transparent and is accompanied by structural changes in the governance of our public institutions of higher learning.

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 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 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

tempt the 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.

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By providing such opportunities to all segments of society we can make a broad social spectrum of Bangladesh

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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.

This article is largely based on the author's Convocation Address delivered on 3rd June 2000 at the Fourth Convocation Ceremony of Independent University, Bangladesh.

## Budgetary Provision for Biotechnology

by Ahmed S Islam

logical research is a *sine qua non* for the country's economic development. Perhaps, that is why adequate fund was not forthcoming to support building up infrastructure and projects relating to various aspects of biotechnology.

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 of pan-excellence.

**Hiring of Non-resident Bangladeshis:** There should be a provision *inter alia* to hire Bangladeshi expatriates, to work for 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

which 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.

**Payment in the budget for payment of dues to international organisation:** The country was admitted to ICGEB 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 ICGEB 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 (COMSTECH) – 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 ICGEB holds true for COMSTECH. 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 Bangladeshi representatives to attend international meetings:** It is also important that provision be made in the budget to pay travel cost to Bangladeshi 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 ICGEB representative from Bangladesh to attend the annual meetings of the Board of Governors. Such provision should be made for official nominated representatives 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 Bangladeshi 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

### Garfield



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