

'Private universities springing up like tea stalls'

M. OMAR RAHMAN

HIGHER education is at an impasse in Bangladesh. The old model of centralised control of university education which promised (but not always delivered) reasonably high quality, massively subsidised education through a very small number of state-run institutions to a very narrow spectrum of students, has given way to a brave new world of a burgeoning array of private universities (50+ at last count) of variable quality which charge substantial fees for the privilege of attending. In this unfettered world of educational capitalism, private universities in Bangladesh have become like tea stalls, springing up at every corner -- but still mostly in Dhaka. They have evoked a fire-storm of criticism with their detractors deploring their alleged rampant consumerism, narrow spectrum of course offerings, and low quality of instruction. Their critics further castigate them for duping an unsuspecting, desperate public and paradoxically also for providing access to only a very small financial elite. On the other hand, their supporters point to the service provided by private universities in accommodating a burgeoning demand in higher education which cannot be satisfied by the ossified, financially strapped, chaotic public university system. They are optimistic about the public being able to decide on quality, and believe that eventually only the higher quality institutions will survive.

Let us see if we can examine the merits of the points that have been raised by both sides to gain some clarity into this complex and nuanced topic. At the outset it is important to point out that with fifty plus institutions in the private sector and about twenty odd institutions in the public sector, there is likely to be great heterogeneity in resources/quality and one needs to be cautious about broad generalisations.

Private universities in Bangladesh offer at least in principle some distinct advantages over their public peers. These include: (i) increased choice and or access to those students who either are unable (due to increased competition) or unwilling (due to the characteristics of the institutions), to enter the public system; (ii) timely completion of degrees unhindered by session jams as in the public system; (iii) a safe and secure environment free of student violence -- a particularly attractive feature to parents; (iv) a semester system of education where one is evaluated continuously and multiple times in circumscribed courses, rather than in one anxiety provoking end of course final exam which can make

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or break one's career; (v) coursework in English, competence in which is increasingly recognised as the passport to jobs in the global economy; (vi) linkages or the promise of such to universities in North America, Europe, Australia and New Zealand which then provide an avenue for students to pursue higher studies and possibly future employment in the global market place; (vii) the promise of potentially higher quality faculty who are paid substantially more than their public peers and presumably hired on merit rather than through nepotism; (viii) better physical facilities (classrooms, laboratories, libraries, computer centres, cafeterias etc) due to the higher resource mobilisation from tuition fees; and (ix) the promise of expanded research and scholarly activities funded partially through higher tuition fees.

It is important to re-iterate that currently these theoretical advantages are only partially and variably translated into reality in the private university sector. Public universities on the other hand have also made some inroads into addressing a number of their comparative disadvantages. For instance, there has been overall a reduction in session jams; some institutions have changed over to the semester system; more and more courses are being offered in English; more attention is being placed on merit based faculty hiring -- although anecdotally nepotism remains rampant in the hiring process; and new programmes of instruction compatible with global market place demands (e.g. computer science, business administration at the bachelor's and master's levels) are being offered at some of these institutions.

The major structural disadvantages of private universities vis-à-vis their public peers are and remain (i) high financial costs of attendance which limit access to the financially affluent; and (ii) limited curricular offerings catering to market demands.

Although costs at Bangladeshi private universities are typically orders of magnitude higher than in public universities (roughly one lakh taka / year vs. a few hundred taka / year for fees), they are substantially lower than universities abroad. Moreover by allowing students to study at home and not

have to go abroad, they provide attractive alternatives to parents who are loath to sending their children (especially daughters) abroad on their own. While most of these institutions do provide some financial aid to needy meritorious students, from the above financial figures, it is clear that private universities provide alternatives for the most part to the fairly affluent middle / upper class in Bangladesh.

With respect to the curriculum in private universities, the repertoire of programmes is relatively monotonous, with most institutions offering the holy trinity of BBA, MBA and Computer Science. The major rationale for this is the general perception (whether true or not) that parents are unlikely to make substantial financial investments on the part of their children for programmes of study that are deemed not marketable. Promoters of private fee based institutions correctly point out that these institutions are just responding to market demands. If tastes were to shift and there was a demand for say "basket weaving" private universities would be only too happy to offer that as a course of study. There is some evidence

about the truth of this position, as recently more private universities have started to offer programmes in English, pharmacy, architecture, engineering presumably responding to market forces. For public universities, massive state subsidies allow for a much larger repertoire of course offerings not driven by market demands (e.g. Sanskrit, theoretical physics etc)

In addition to the above mentioned structural disadvantages (i.e. high costs and limited curricula), an oft mentioned but difficult to evaluate criticism of private universities is the poor quality of students and faculty, relative to their public peers. There are a number of factors which may help explain this difference in student quality, if it exists. High tuition fees and limited curricular offerings clearly limit the potential pool of meritorious students that private universities can draw on. Secondly the relatively short history of private universities works against them in so far as students tend to be risk averse and choose institutions that have been established for a long time.

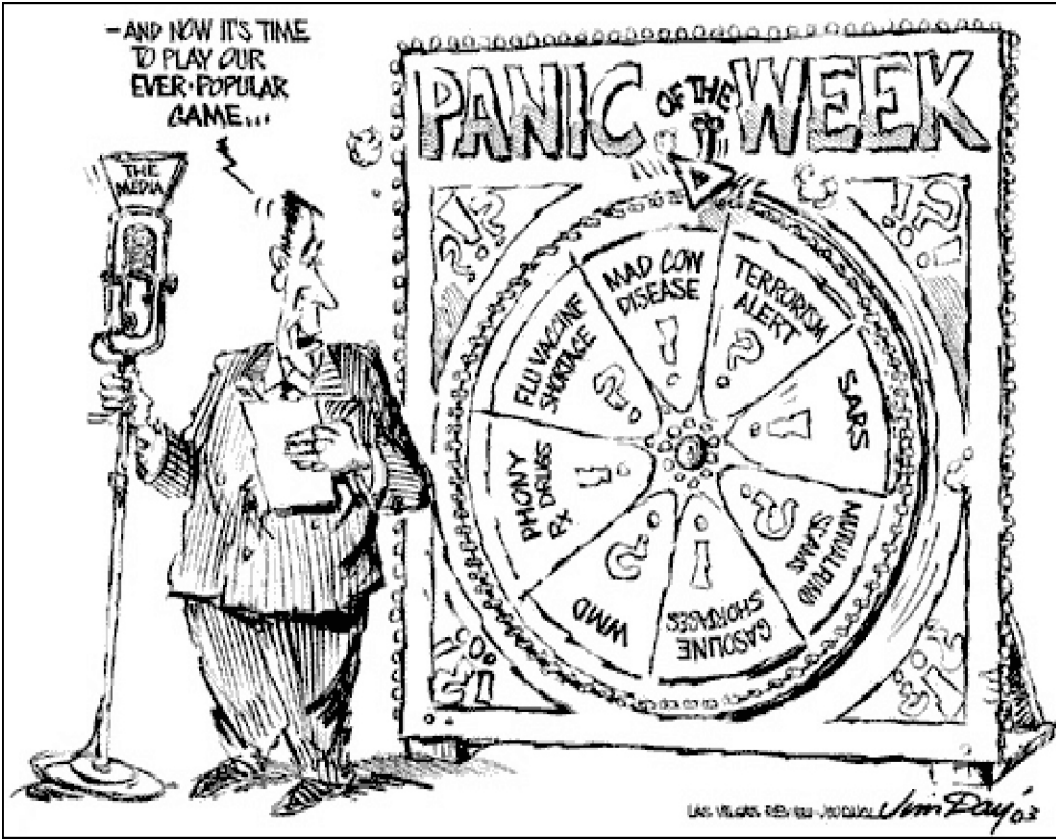
With regard to Public vs. Private faculty quality, again this

is a complex issue to evaluate, as no hard data exists or is at least collated. With regard to faculty qualifications, the flagship private universities (Independent University, Bangladesh; North South University; BRAC University, East-West University, etc) in all likelihood can hold their own vis-à-vis Dhaka University, and other flagship public universities in the subjects that both groups offer. For the rest, the only common denominator is that faculty quality is very variable and anecdotally quite poor in both the public and the private sector. As mentioned earlier however, at least theoretically the private universities have more flexibility in improving faculty quality as they have access to greater financial resources and are not burdened by overly bureaucratic rigidities in faculty hiring and promotion.

In summary, the lack of hard empirical data makes it difficult to evaluate the over all relative situation of public versus private institutions. The fact that large numbers of private universities have opened up suggests that there is a demand for wider access to tertiary education and that they can provide an alternative to the public sector. Whether this alternative is a credible and sustainable option or not will depend on how private universities position themselves in the future.

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Next: Private universities: Some suggestions for sustenance.



Beyond token

NAEEM MOHAIEMEN
writes from New York

THE US Census recently took steps to be more inclusive. But the subcontinental population is still lumped together under "Indian-Asian." This homogenisation hides the great diversity within the South Asian population. In New York, the arts-political landscape has started to better represent that diversity. There is a new appreciation of a larger "South Asian" identity. Among progressives, there is also a strong effort to be more inclusive -- especially when fighting against communalism and military buildup.

As New York organizations struggle to be more inclusive, the focus is on Bangladeshis because of their high profile in the city's daily life. Over the last decade, partially due to the diversity lottery, Bangladeshi immigrants have been one of the fastest growing new groups in New York. Concentrated heavily in service industries such as restaurants, street carts, shops and taxis, they are a daily reminder of the "other" for many city dwellers. As one of the city's working class populations, they have also come in for a large share of poverty-related violence (two Bangladeshis were killed in Brooklyn last year).

In the newspapers, Bangladeshis are a frequent topic. The *New York Times* started the trend with human-interest stories written by Somini Sengupta (although of West Bengali origin, she focused on the Bangladeshi community). The *Times* stories included the Mujibur-Sirajul duo on David Letterman's TV show, Bangladeshis dominance in the city's building repair business (from one district), Bangladeshi migrants' financial contribution

to their homeland, dominance in the diversity lottery, troubles under Special Registration and economic hardship. Many other newspapers followed the *Times* lead. When these outlets are not running these kinds of stories, they focus on quirkier fare like a popular Belgian Beer Bar (owned by a Belgian-Bangladeshi Sufi devotee), snooty lounges in the Village (owned by a Bangladeshi who is a small legend in New York nightlife), the Sylheti-Bangladeshis who own most "Indian" restaurants and the NYPD cop who claims to be a

Defence & Education Fund (AALDEF). The Asian American Federation and others have advertised specific jobs with duties among the Bengali communities. Some of these positions are filled with Bengali speakers from West Bengal, who are enthusiastic about working with the Bangladeshi community.

While all this representation is a positive step for the community, there is one significant weakness, glaringly obvious in activist circles. In seeking Bangladeshi voices, the people who are approached are often those with

organisations, mosques, temples, churches and shops. This is not always an easy task. Some of these institutions have parochial and conservative politics and are resistant to outreach attempts. In cases involving abuses within the community, there is conflict of interest, as there was with a recent Andolan campaign. The activists of Andolan were fighting a case against a Bangladeshi diplomat who abused his domestic help. The diplomat was a member of many local community organisations, which all closed ranks around him and stymied

long-time activist who now leads Andolan and has deep connections in the community. Cultural group Bishwo Shahitto Kendro (BSK), a branch of the famous Dhaka Kendro, is run by Ashrafur Bulbul who has secular politics and roots in the community. Bulbul was a vibrant presence at a dinner for Committee to Protect Journalists' honoree Tipu Sultan. He was able to bring real-world experience about complex political and geographic rivalries within Bangladeshi groups in Queens. For those of us working on coalitions with other South Asians, it is a necessary reality check to hear about the tensions between organisations representing even the smallest districts in Bangladesh. When most people ask me where I'm from, my answer is "Bangladesh." But many community members will answer "Sylhet," "Noakhali," or "Chittagong" to the same question. The man who answers "Sylhet" is far more representative of the community than middle class organisers who subscribe to a pan-South Asian politics. Clearly, connections with organisations like BSK are needed to build a bridge between activists and the larger community.

It is tempting to anoint middle class professionals and college graduates as Bangladeshi spokespeople -- they are in our midst, highly visible and "share" our politics (or at least use the lexicon). But to truly represent New York's Bangladeshi community, the next generation of cultural and political activists has to come from the working class population that helps to run this city.

Recently, some positive steps were taken to build deeper connections within community organisations. Nahar Alam is a

SHOBAK.ORG

Activists need to start building much deeper connections to the community. This includes reaching out to traditional organisations like cultural groups, political organisations, mosques, temples, churches and shops. This is not always an easy task. Some of these institutions have parochial and conservative politics and are resistant to outreach attempts.

"prince" in his Bangladesh hometown. Columbia University's South Asian Journalist Association (SAJA) has also pushed for Bangladeshi representation in news stories, especially after 9/11.

Within grassroots activist organisations, the Bangladeshi representation is more structural. Asian networks like SAKHI, Workers' Awaz, Asian Women's Federation, Taxi Workers' Alliance, SAMAR magazine, 3rd-I Film Collective, and Asian American Writers' Workshop, as well as non-Asian organisations like WBAI Radio, ANSWER (Act Now to Stop War & End Racism), and Not In Our Name, all have Bengali representation. Bangladeshi language translators are now a feature in organisations like Asian American Legal

pre-existing connections with the South Asian and larger mainstream. A large number of these activist-artists come from middle class backgrounds, even though the vast majority of our community in New York is working class. Often the activists are second-generation immigrants, with a degree of acculturation not present among the rest of the community. This became obvious after 9/11, when most of the mainstream media's queries went to two websites -- drrishtipat.org and shobak.org -- ignoring the numerous Bengali language newspapers.

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Andolan's efforts. Similarly, domestic violence cases are complicated by community organisations that protect abusive men. This also extends to cases of sexual abuse. Two years ago, a mosque official in Queens was accused of sexually harassing a student. The mosque board effectively blocked all efforts at investigations into the allegations (in this they were not that different from the Catholic Church in recent abuse scandals). In situations like this, activists will have to step gingerly to find and work with organizations that do not have these conflicts of interest.

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SAARC: Indo-Pak relations



ARSHAD-UZ ZAMAN

THE much maligned SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) appears to have come to life through the just concluded Summit in Islamabad, capital of Pakistan. It has brought together long time adversaries India and Pakistan.

Interestingly SAARC is not supposed to discuss bilateral political matters. And this precisely what SAARC did and that covered the whole gamut of Indo-Pak differences including the long festering question of Jammu and Kashmir. Prime Minister of India Atal Behari Vajpayee not only shook hands with President of Pakistan Gen. Pervez Musharraf, but held substantive and successful talks. The joint declaration makes it abundantly clear and they have decided to hold composite talks that would cover all issues including Kashmir.

They have rightly emphasised that it is a victory for India and Pakistan and hopefully the people of Kashmir. India has long insisted that Pakistan must not allow her territory to be used for cross border terrorism into Kashmir. Pakistan has agreed on this point.

For Pakistan the most important question was the revival of the dispute of Kashmir. The joint declaration makes it clear that in the composite talks Kashmir will figure. Gen. Pervez Musharraf has every reason to fill gratified as he made it clear eloquently in a press conference following the talks. He was effusive in his praise for Indian leadership and particularly Prime Minister Vajpayee. For Prime Minister Vajpayee it was an important concession since his country and Pakistan fought a war in the high Kargil mountains barely three years ago. Also Indian leadership has never felt comfortable negotiating with Generals. Premier Vajpayee felt that he was making steady headway with his Pakistani counterpart elected Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. He was deeply shocked to see Sharif ousted from power by Gen. Musharraf, who staged a successful coup.

Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee has stated that this would be his last try to find a solution to

THE HORIZON THIS WEEK

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the disputes bedevilling relations between two nuclear neighbours for more than half a century. He has a relatively free hand within his own country. He is the elected Prime Minister and enjoys enormous prestige throughout India and is acknowledged abroad as a remarkable Prime Minister. The fringe parties may make some noises but that would not cause him undue anxiety. It would seem that he has accepted to deal with Gen. Musharraf -- although no real enthusiasm is visible from his side -- because the cross border terrorism was becoming intolerable for the people of Kashmir and causing deep unhappiness in India.

For Gen. Musharraf the situation seems dramatically different. He has mounted a non-stop campaign for a meeting with Premier Vajpayee. He has recently declared his readiness to shed his military uniform by the end of the year. He is a military dictator and has to show some positive result to his constituency -- the Armed Forces. What better prize than to offer them a settlement of the more than half a century old dispute of Kashmir? That his path is full of pitfalls is demonstrated by the fact that within one week in the recent past he was target of assassins. It is curious that the place chosen should be the clearly visible Rawalpindi-Islamabad highway and that at the same spot!

If past is any guide Gen. Musharraf will have to keep a watchful eye and on his own intelligence outfit ISI (Inter-services Intelligence). I recall that in 1964 following the death of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru Pakistani President Field Marshal Ayub Khan decided to extend the olive branch to India. He sent a warm message of condolence to the Indian leadership and lowered the Pakistani flag. I was Public Relations Officer of Field Marshal Ayub and watched events first hand. Ayub's initiative was nipped in the bud as ISI started infiltrating fighters through Azad Kashmir into Indian side of Kashmir. This led to the war of 1965 with consequences we all know. In the recent past Gen. Musharraf has administered a severe blow to the ISI when he took a 180° turn and joined hands with the US and drove out from Kabul the Taliban regime, creation of ISI. Taliban are still making noises.

How strong they are is anybody's guess. Anyhow they enjoy the support of Osama Bin Laden, who has declared war on the USA.

India-Pakistan covers the better part of SAARC. India has a border with virtually every member of SAARC. The 12th Summit was held more than one year late because of wranglings between India and Pakistan. It is when the two sides decided to meet that the SAARC Summit was held. Thus SAARC had become hostage to the Indo-Pak dispute. Yet the achievements of the Summit are not negligible. The seven nations have signed a document setting up SAFTA, a joint trading body, which has been discussed over the years without any result. Since SAARC was created to improve the living standard of the region where live the poorest of the humanity, the creation of SAFTA is no mean achievement.

India and Pakistan are due to start composite talks in right earnest in February. To some extent decks have been cleared since relations had been snapped following the misadventure of terrorist attack on the Indian Parliament some two years ago. Those relations including the bus link have been restored.

India had long argued that Indo-Pak relations were purely bilateral by nature and there was no room for third party mediation. Although the US in order to demonstrate that she has a finger in every pie, has declared that she played a role in bringing about a rapprochement between India and Pakistan, the truth is that the leaderships of the two countries have brought about the beginning of a dialogue of their own bats.

People of goodwill the world over will wish well to India and Pakistan. Due to their unending dispute they have frittered away energies which could have been utilised for nation building activities. In the recent past they have come perilously close to an all out war and when one considers that both possess nuclear weapons, the consequences are too horrible to contemplate. I for one as a citizen of the sub-continent conclude by saying Bon Voyage.

Arshad-Uz Zaman is a former Ambassador.

South Asia's long march ahead

WASIM ZAMAN

THE heads of state and government of the seven-nation South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) which groups Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, held their 12th Summit in Islamabad, Pakistan, from January 4-6. All over South Asia people were hoping that the meeting would go much beyond diplomatic overtures and lay the path for real peace and economic cooperation in the region. The expectations were really high now there are some signs of hope.

South Asian nations have made tremendous progress in the last 50 years, a period which began with independence from colonial rule for most of these nations. The progress is particularly significant because it has come despite the enormous constraints of resources and governance coupled with regular lashes of natural and man made disasters.

The agriculture sector has made dependable progress thus enhancing the ability to feed the 1.3 billion population of the region. Most of South Asia has also developed modern communication and industrial infrastructure. It has taken advantage of manpower needs globally and countries like India has taken a significant lead in the computer software and information technology.

The visible progress in technology and science has also brought about nuclear weapons capability. This of course, poses persistent threat of the use of such weapons, particularly in view of the presence of terrorism. The region has experienced virtually continuous conflict and disorder -- Maoist insurgency in Nepal the faltering peace process in Sri Lanka, persistent enmity between Pakistan and India over Kashmir and Bhutan's military attempts to evict rebels from across the border. These seem to be forgotten by the rest of the world as Iraq and Afghanistan take centre stage. In 1991-2000 military spending increased by nearly 60 percent in South Asia. Such misplaced priorities for investment lie at the heart of the South Asian paradox: developments in technology and industrialisation have failed to bridge the urban-rural divide or lessen poverty, and social and gender inequalities. Too much energy and resources are wasted on amplifying divisions within and between coun-

tries. Religious fundamentalism and lack of toleration, in more than one country, has complicated things further. Only a few years back, late Dr. Mahbub ul Haq, the famous economist from Pakistan, had summarised the situation as follows: "South Asia is fast emerging as the poorest, the most illiterate, the most malnourished, the least gender-sensitive, indeed, the most deprived region in the world. Yet it continues to make more investment in arms than in the health and education of its people".

With nearly 1.3 billion people --

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one-fifth of the world's population -- South Asia has 44 per cent of the world's poor or approximately 522 million people living on less than a dollar a day. During the 1990s, the incidence of poverty increased in Sri Lanka and Pakistan and declined slowly in India, Bangladesh and Nepal. Furthermore, South Asia has some of the worst health indicators in the whole of Asia and the world. Forty percent of global mortality in children under 5 years occurs in four countries: India, Pakistan, Nepal and Bangladesh. About seventy percent of the world's low birth weight infants are in South Asia which has the world's worst record on child malnutrition, with almost half the children under five malnourished. South Asia accounts for about 30 per cent of all maternal deaths that occur globally, which is not surprising since only about one third of the births are attended by skilled personnel.

Though HIV prevalence in most of the SAARC countries remains low and is mostly concentrated in 'high risk groups' the sheer size of the population will influence the course and overall impact of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Of the world's 40 million people living with HIV, nearly four million are in India. A mere 0.1 per cent increase in prevalence rate

translates to an additional one million HIV/AIDS victims.

South Asia, is known to be the most gender insensitive region in the world. Son preference is common in most parts of South Asia. Violence against women in South Asia occurs throughout the lifecycle. Contrary to demographic expectations there are an estimated 60 million "missing women" with sex selective abortion prevalent in many parts of the region. With the exception of Sri Lanka, the ratio of literate females to males is the lowest in the world.

Although these problems have been known for decades and successive governments and action plans have focused on redressing them, progress has been pitifully slow. In order to move forward, the region must focus on human rights, equality of women and men, and the urgency of dealing with human development indicators that are seriously lagging behind. Paying attention to vulnerable population groups constitutes an essential element in a human rights approach and demands priority attention for those most in need.

While primary responsibility under the human rights system lies with individual States, the international community is also duty bound to provide effective international support to deal with shortages of resources and capacities in the region. Time is running out for South Asia to take appropriate actions to meet the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) by 2015, especially the goals related to poverty, gender equality, reduction of child mortality, maternal health and HIV. Reproductive health rights and services are central to achieving the MDGs.

A Social Charter is an important agenda for the SAARC. The Charter would focus on cooperation for eradication of poverty from the region by addressing a host of issues like education, health, women's and children's welfare. Let us hope that, following the summit, actions will follow which will now change the lives of the poor and the vulnerable in the region and thus build the real path to peace and prosperity for South Asia.

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