

## The NSU incident -- A microcosm of Bangladesh?

On certain occasions, exceptions occur and some people raise their voices against what they believe is blatant injustice. Due to lack of existing mechanisms, they use means that have worked in most democratic countries. The protest by students at NSU started as just that -- a non-violent protest against a decision that they thought was unjust.

MRIDUL CHOWDHURY

THE North South University incident of May 10th of a non-violent protest being dealt with police batons and tear gas is symptomatic of a larger problem that has permeated our entire society -- lack of adequate mechanism to voice grievances and unjust reaction by those in power when grievances do get raised. When a general citizen dies at a public hospital due to negligence, there is no one to complain to since certain quarters are much too powerful. When a female student in a university gets harassed by a local hooligan, she keeps silent since even the teachers do not want to ruffle feathers. When an ethnic minority leader dies during interrogation, no one raises questions since the answers are buried too deep.

However, on certain occasions, exceptions occur and some people raise their voices against what they believe is blatant injustice. Due to lack of existing mechanisms, they use means that have worked in most democratic countries. They protest using non-violent means, sometimes in peaceful manners such as human chains, at other times in not-so-peaceful ways such as blocking of roads and highways and creating public haz-

ards to get attention.

The protest by students at NSU started as just that -- a non-violent protest against a decision of increase in fees that they thought was unjust. While raising fees falls under the prerogative of university authorities, it is also the right of students to feel that the boundary of 'justice' has been crossed. This time they had their reasons -- whether legitimate or not is for readers to decide.

For several years, the NSU students had been paying a fee labeled as 'Campus Development Fee' despite the fact that a large section of those who have been paying this will never even get to attend a single class in the new campus. On top of that, the authorities announced a rise in fees earlier this year to which the students staged a non-violent protest in February successfully, which ended with the VC renouncing the then-announced increase in fees for existing students (quoted from NSU web announcement on 10th February, 2009: "The Enhancement of tuition and other fees are not applicable for the existing students -- NSU Authority 10/2/2009").

This recent decision to raise fees just 3 months after their promise made the students feel betrayed and exploited. What raised the level of frustration was the fact that this new announcement was

made rather 'silently' during the semester break and right before class registration, leaving little time for dialogue between students and authorities.

Seeing no other option, some NSU students gathered on May 10th for a peaceful protest to let it be known that they have felt betrayed by the authorities they have trusted. They were prepared for a mutually respectful dialogue, which unfortunately never happened. What happened was something that no student could ever imagine. The police descended upon the student group with batons and tear gas and quickly things went out of control, leading to unwanted destruction of properties. At the end of it all, some left physically injured, but everyone left with a deep emotional scar -- how could the authorities, many of whom were like father figures to students, allow the police to step in to 'teach the students a lesson'?

Now, who is to blame for this? Perhaps the authorities should have been more respectful about raising fees through a process of dialogue and negotiations. Perhaps the students misinterpreted what the NSU authorities promised on the 10th February 2009 announcement. Perhaps the students should have shown more restraint in letting their grievances be heard. Perhaps there were unruly elements in the protest group who took advantage of the situation. Perhaps there was not enough reason for the police to be called in.

There are a lot of 'perhaps', but what is definite and undeniable is that, just like most other areas of our society, our private universities do not have a well-functioning mechanism through which students can voice their concerns or influence their decisions about the place that they devote their formative years to.

A widely established platform for such dialogue is a student council or student government, the concept of which is generally abhorred by the authorities of private universities. Their standard lines of argument are that it will 'politicise' the university environment and that it will create internal divisions among the youth.

There are two problems inherent in that argument. Firstly, it dishonours the word 'politics' which is essentially the act of organising to defend rights and raise voices in a systematic manner -- it has nothing to do with 'party politics', which is what has garnered infamy in recent decades. Secondly, it also heavily disrespects the youth since it pre-supposes that the youth are divisive and unruly and if given the right to organise to voice concerns and opinions about university regulations and facilities, they will use it for harmful and destructive purposes.

If there had been a student government in place at NSU today, this entire process could have been handled much more respectfully and peacefully. The students would have got a forum to ask why they are being charged this extra amount and what it will be used for, and the authorities could have found a respectful way of responding to those legitimate queries and adjusting decisions if needed.

In typical *addas*, students ask what the authorities have done with the tens of crores raised from them in the name of 'Campus Development Fee' over the last few years, and whether it should be the job of the NSU Trustees to raise funds for such expansion -- pent-up frustrations take root since there is no accepted platform to raise these questions and get responses.

The university is not a marketplace where knowledge is bought and sold -- it



Is there no peaceful way to voice grievances?

is a place where some students find their purpose in life, some find the ability to exercise their leadership skills, some find the scope to share and learn new ways of thinking. Even if we take a more pragmatic standpoint and look at students as consumers of knowledge and skill that universities 'sell', there is still the issue of consumer rights that exist in all other spheres of economic activity and the right to get organised to protect those rights.

NSU has led the path in making private universities a viable option for those who can afford it. It will be a shame if it is not able to lead when an opportunity has been handed to it in golden platter to show that it can develop a well-functioning mechanism for authorities, teachers and students to respectfully

come together and decide on issues of mutual interests.

It will not only make NSU a leader in the area of private university education, but it can also be an important milestone in our nation's progress towards a 'truer' democracy. If used correctly, this can be an opportunity for private universities to develop a more mature and mutually respectful relationship between students and authorities, and for students to gain invaluable experience in using civilised and peaceful means to voice concerns. If used incorrectly, this will be a dark spot in our nation's history of private university education.

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## The story of tea workers

More than a century has passed since tea plantation workers settled in the labour lines, to which their lives and livelihoods have been tied ever since. They have no choice and entitlement to property.

PHILIP GAIN

TEA, the second most popular beverage in the world, is believed to have first been popularised in China. For thousands of years the Chinese farmers had the monopoly of cultivating tea. Its cultivation in tropical and subtropical areas is a recent phenomenon.

Tea plantation in India's Assam dates back to 1839. The first experimental tea garden in our parts was established in Chittagong in 1840 and the first commercial-scale tea garden was established in 1854. Since then, the tea industry has been through quite a few historical upheavals -- notable among them are the Partition of India in 1947 and the Independence War in 1971.

Bangladesh has 163 tea gardens (including seven in Panchagarh where tea cultivation started only recently) with 36 of them being considered "sick." One unique feature of the tea industry is that all the land (115,000 ha excluding Panchagarh) granted for tea production is government land. Our tea gardens are huge and the management administer them like the British Shahib and the zamindars used to.

In the production, consumption and trading of tea, those who remain least attended are the tea plantation workers. The tea industry is very different from other industries. The production of tea involves agriculture and industry. What is unique about labour distribution in these two areas is that most of the labour force is engaged in agriculture -- in the tea gardens or the fields.

More than a century has passed since tea plantation workers settled in the labour lines, to which their lives and livelihoods have been tied ever since. They have no choice and entitlement to property. In addition to the wages, which are miserably low, they get some fringe benefits.

The houses in the labour lines are given by the employers. One worker gets one house, which is supposed to be maintained by the employer. However, generally, the workers themselves do the repairing and maintenance. Living conditions in these houses are unsatisfactory. Typically a single room is crowded with a whole family. Cattle and human beings are often seen living together in the same house or room. Some families try to construct an extra house or room for which they have to

take permission from the management.

The maximum daily cash pay for the daily rated worker in 2008 was Tk.32.50. This is a miserable amount. Although the workers get rations as a concession, a family can hardly have decent food. They indeed have very poor quality and protein-deficient meals. Their physical appearance tells of their malnourishment.

Fringe benefits other than houses include some allowances, attendance incentive, rations, access to khet land for production of crop (those accessing such land have their rations slashed), medical care, provident fund, pension, etc. The Bangladesh Tea Association (BTA) calculates the cumulative total daily wage of a worker at Tk.73. The newly elected leaders in Bangladesh Cha Sramik Union (BCSU) have a different calculation, which is lower than that of BTA.

The wages of Bangladeshi tea workers are much lower than those of Indian tea workers. In Darjeeling, Terai and Doars of West Bengal the daily wage was Rs.53.90 in 2008, which, increased in three steps, will reportedly become Rs.67 in 2011. Strong labour movements have been instrumental in such wage increase.

In West Bengal about 400,000 workers will get this increased wages. Indian workers also get a better deal in accessing fringe benefits such as rations, medical care, housing, education, provident fund benefits, bonus, and gratuity.

The work condition of the tea workers, who spend most of the time under the



Working for a pittance.

scorching sun or getting soaked in the rain, is a concern. A woman tealeaf picker spends almost all her working hours, for 30 to 35 years, standing. The working hours are usually from 8 am to 5 pm (excluding a break for lunch) from Monday to Saturday. Sunday is the weekly holiday.

The tea workers are one of the most vulnerable people of Bangladesh. They deserve special attention of the state, not just equal treatment. But, unfortunately, they continue to remain socially excluded, low-paid, overwhelmingly illiterate, deprived and disconnected.

They have also lost their original languages, culture, history, education, knowledge and unity. In the labour lines of a tea estate, they seem to be living in islands -- isolated from the majority Bangali community who sometimes treat them as untouchables.

How much longer will they stay confined to the labour lines? Will they continue to live as people without choice and entitlement to a land they have tilled for four generations? The employers probably want the status quo maintained for a steady supply of cheap labour. But the tea communities, a little

more conscious now, want justice done to them. They want services from the state and NGOs in education, nutrition and health, food security, water and sanitation, etc. They also want to see their languages, culture, and social identity protected.

The government is going to build Digital Bangladesh and change the lives of the poor, the marginalised and the adivasis. The tea plantation workers are not just poor; they are a particularly deprived marginal community in captivity. They have limited scope to integrate with the people of the majority community and they face great difficulties in exploring livelihood options outside the tea gardens. The tea plantation workers want the state to address their case with care and translate its commitment to them by providing political and human protection.

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Anyone interested in the issues concerning the tea plantation workers will get a mine of information, insights and images in "The Story of Tea Workers in Bangladesh" a 300-page book, "Cha Sramiker Katha" (a 45-minute documentary film on the tea plantation workers in Bangladesh) and a photograph exhibition on tea workers -- all being launched at 10:00 am on May 10 at Drik Gallery (House 58, Road 15/A (New) Dhanmondi, Dhaka-1209). The photography exhibitions on the tea workers, forests and forest people will remain open from 3:00 PM to 8:00 PM (everyday) from May 10 to 19. Documentary films on environmental issues will also be screened during the exhibitions -- 6:00 PM to 8:00 PM (everyday).

### IN MEMORIAM

## Remembering a dear friend

Md. MATIUL ISLAM

M Alauddin, an officer of the CSP of 1952 batch, breathed his last in a Lahore hospital on April 18. He was commissioner of Dhaka division when the Pakistan army cracked down at midnight on March 25. He was taken to Lyallpur and ordered by the Pakistanis to depose against Sheikh Mujib, who was under trial for treason, and suffered untold miseries for not co-operating with the prosecution. Alauddin was an intellectual, a bohemian and bachelor, and left behind only a handful of friends to mourn his death.

I first met him in the Civil Service Academy in Lahore. The friendship that developed continued unabated through the years of trials, tribulations and separation -- when my civil service career came to an abrupt end in 1969 and Alauddin decided to stay back in Pakistan, where he had gone on an official tour but was stranded because of the Indo-Pakistan war.

Alauddin's initial posting on completion of civil service training was in West Pakistan, and later on he was transferred to East Pakistan. It was during his tenure as secretary of the health ministry that he incurred the displeasure of the then governor, Abdul Monem Khan, over the selection of candidates for admission into medical colleges.

Although 90% of the admissions were on merit, the governor had kept to himself the selection of 10% of the candidates under the governor's quota. Always ready to help friends, Alauddin made a few selections out of the governor's quota and landed himself in trouble. The governor first sent him to the Staff College in Lahore for 3 month's training, then gave him a punishment posting as the additional commissioner, Chittagong division.

Alauddin remained unperturbed. The posting came as a boon for him as he could now pursue his other interest of studying the tribal life of Chittagong Hill Tracts, which he used to visit espe-

cially during the Eid holidays. This interest in tribal life also took him to the far-flung areas of Kafirstan, Gilgit, Dir, Chitral in NWFP. His book, Kalash-Paradise Lost on the Kalash tribe was a masterpiece, for which Raja Tridib Roy wrote the foreword.

Alauddin was a loner and would surface in unexpected places all by himself. It was in Habiganj, which had been struck by a cyclonic storm causing serious damage to life and property and where he was busy in relief work, that he encountered Monem Khan who came on an unannounced visit to assess the damage and supervise relief operation. The governor instantly realised that he had wronged a dedicated officer and immediately posted him as divisional commissioner, Dhaka, where he became my neighbour.

In March 1971, Alauddin was still the commissioner Dhaka division when, on March 3, there was a mass uprising after the announcement that the Dhaka session of the National Assembly had

been postponed indefinitely.

His official bungalow became a shelter for a large number of police constables. Alauddin was Urdu speaking, hence he had the trust of the Pakistan army who were then looking for senior officers who had cooperated with the separatist forces. His personal intervention saved the lives of a large numbers of DCs, SPs and other prominent persons.

I was then working in the private sector and was residing in Dhanmondi. In June, 1971, Alauddin came to see me and mentioned about the summons he had received from the army to proceed to Lyallpur to depose against Sheikh Mujib. Alauddin was to be one of the key prosecution witnesses to prove that Sheikh Mujib had fanned the mass uprising and hence was guilty of treason.

Alauddin steadfastly refused to incriminate Sheikh Mujib and the prosecution had to declare him a hostile witness. He was mercilessly cross-examined by Mr. Manzur Quader, the

eminent lawyer engaged by the government of Pakistan to defend Sheikh Mujib. Alauddin gave a vivid description of Sheikh Mujib sitting in the dock, smoking his pipe and smiling all through the proceedings. After a month or so, Alauddin returned to Dhaka.

Alauddin was then transferred as member, Agricultural Development Corporation (ADC). On an official tour to West Pakistan in the last week of November, 1971, he got stranded in Karachi due to the out-break of war and could not return to Dhaka.

Prime Minister Sheikh Mujib on his return to Dhaka enquired about Alauddin to reward him for his courage and bravery and was informed that he had decided to stay back in Pakistan. The government of Pakistan treated him shabbily. For a long time, the government denied him any posting and he became a virtual destitute.

In the meantime in Dhaka, I managed to get hold of his old Volkswagen and kept it in the backyard of my house. A

few months later, Mr. M.K. Anwar, also a victim of Yahya Khan's regime, came to Dhaka from Karachi where he was working for the Habib Bank and gave me a torn piece of paper on which Alauddin had scribbled "Received Rs.10,000 from M.K. Anwar. Give him my car." Alauddin was a past master in brevity. This was one such example.

During my posting in New Delhi in Unido, I was a regular visitor to Lahore and spent a lot of time with him. My last visit was in August 2008. He was a very frail, old man and could manage to walk only with a stick. Both my wife and I realised that this was possibly our last meeting, and that came to be true. On April 18, he breathed his last in a Lahore Hospital where he was shifted in a critical state with kidney and liver failure.

In Bangladesh, he has left behind a large number of friends and admirers. This article I hope will rekindle their memory of Alauddin, to mourn his death and to pray to the Almighty for resting his soul in peace.

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