

Can the actions of one be the yardstick to judge many?

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NADIM JAHANGIR

THE private university system has had its share of problems. And public universities have had more than their fair share of problems. If there was a mudslinging contest between public and private universities about their shortcomings, public universities would win hands down.

The praise heaped on public institutions is generous to say the least. Perhaps that is because they have produced talented graduates who have gone on to accomplish great things through hard work and perseverance.

Though lesser in number, private university graduates are doing the same. If public universities are judged by their successes rather than their failures, why can the same not be true for private universities?

The public universities are ahead in the game because of two reasons. They have, roughly, a fifty-year head start and they have the luxury of relying on the taxpayer. The first advantage gives them a proven track record to fall back on whenever the success of their graduates is scrutinised, the latter leads them to ignore the economics of financial viability.

It is pertinent to repeat a much dis-

cussed and familiar contention made by proponents of private universities. The traditional definition of a university as a seat of higher learning offering degrees in subjects ranging from extinct languages to particle physics has evolved in line with economic realities. An impoverished nation needs graduates to land jobs that pay rather than ponder the finer points of idiomatic expressions in ancient Latin.

If we readily consume genetically modified food as opposed to organic due to economic realities, why then can we not accept that a business degree is far more marketable than a degree in zoology?

The proof of the pudding lies in the eating. At the moment, demand for business degrees far exceeds supply. So the answer to why private universities concentrate on offering degrees in business is simple -- economics.

The unfortunate events of last week brought to light the charging of a "campus development fee." Talk show pundits and talking heads proceeded to portray this as a common practice at all private institutions. The naysayers either do not know or have conveniently ignored the fact that this fee is not a standard one.

At present, there are several private

universities in the country which have already moved to their own campuses and have far more equitable fee structures that have never included such fees. There are still others who are constructing their campuses without charging such fees.

In principle, however, if one were to make a case for contributing towards developing a campus, it would still hold water. Students have argued that paying for a campus which they themselves will not, in all likelihood, be able to use has no justification.

This age old argument has been used since time immemorial to question why one should pay taxes when the most basic of public services are not provided by the government. Students at private universities who refuse to pay for the development of the very institution which gives them knowledge and recognition should, as a matter of principal, also refuse to pay taxes.

Taxes go toward subsidising education at public universities and since the private university students do not benefit from this directly, they should not pay any taxes either.

In Europe and America, the alumni routinely donate millions for the development of universities they attended. The time for such spontaneous generosity has not yet come for private universities. This kind of philanthropy is possible when the universities uphold their image as not-for-profit organisations where all accumulated wealth goes toward the development of the institution.

Admittedly, some have slowed down

considerably in progressing toward this goal and instead have had to address allegations of misappropriation and wastage of funds. It has done a great disservice to the cause of private sector education. However, countless dedicated and talented individuals are working tirelessly to further the reach of private universities.

When the questionable decisions of a few are compared against the sustained efforts of many, there is no contest. The majority have made a difference. Last year, 466,000 students passed the HSC and equivalent exams. A meager 17,250 seats were available at the public universities. The private universities were projected to absorb 18,730 graduates.

The absence of private universities would have taken these graduates down one of two paths. One would have been to go abroad, and the other, into the national university system. While plugging the brain drain has had limited success, the rigour and content of the curriculum in private universities has given the graduates a far better chance of securing gainful employment than the national university system in its current format ever will. It is difficult, nowadays, to come across a service sector industry in the country which does not employ private university graduates. In the past decade, many have steadily climbed the slippery corporate ladder and now constitute the upper tier of mid-level management in local and multi-national organisations.

Perhaps if the regulators played a more consistent role, much of the criticism surrounding private universities



Public universities have their problems too.

today could have been avoided. It is their duty to root out the bad apples. Unfortunately, the arbitrariness of the monitoring methods and regulations this body creates and promulgates makes its own role tenuous at best. If it takes the regulator five years to publish a report on the adherence of private universities to existing laws, the concept of continuous monitoring exists only in theory. Bringing such uncertainty into the scenario heavily discourages initiatives from those who have a genuine interest in furthering tertiary education in Bangladesh.

These institutions are destined to outlast their administrators who the students feel so hard done by. That day may not be too far when the alumni look

upon their alma mater and feel morally compelled to give back. Private universities have weathered a lot of criticism -- some of it deserved, most of it perhaps not.

The good work of many in the past fifteen years has resulted in students and guardians putting their trust and faith in the private university system. The events of the past week have drawn vocal and silent condemnation from guardians, students, teachers, and administrators. What transpired does not represent the majority of any of them. The actions of a few cannot overshadow the good deeds of so many.

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From Jamuna to Padma

The stakes are extraordinarily high, and it is absolutely essential that the Padma Bridge is prepared and implemented with maximum care. Fortunately, the experience from building the Jamuna Bridge could well serve the government and development partners. It is now time to recall some of the key lessons learned from that experience.

XIAN ZHU AND ARUN BANERJEE

THE completion of the Jamuna Bridge in 1998 was a landmark achievement for the people of Bangladesh, connecting more than 30 million people to the country's transport and infrastructure network. Before the bridge, ferries plied across the Jamuna river with long waiting times for the thousands of car and trucks waiting to board every day. Today, the nearly 2 million vehicles that cross the bridge every year enjoy lower transport costs and quicker travel times. A striking example of the bridge's impact is the travel time from Dhaka to Bogra -- cut from 20 hours to 6 hours.

Most people recognise that the Jamuna Bridge is the single largest investment ever made by Bangladesh and every citizen has contributed by paying various special taxes. What is less remembered, however, is that this highly complex project was managed extremely skillfully by the government, resulting in high quality works, no time delays, and minimum cost over-run.

Now the government is embarking on an equally challenging project -- the Padma Multipurpose Bridge. This is going to be even more technically complex, longer in length, and twice as expensive as the Jamuna Bridge. But the development impact could be even bigger. It is expected to boost socio-economic growth in the relatively underdeveloped south-west region of the country. The bridge would not only lead to cutting down travel time and cost, but would also contribute to improve railway link, telecommunications, power, and gas transmission, in addition to road connectivity leading to greater integration, much more dynamic economic activities and stronger growth.

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Government's ownership of and commitment to the Jamuna Bridge project was critical to the project's success. The government then decided to establish a fully empowered implementing agency, which coordinated and managed the numerous activities and parties involved in the project preparation and implementation.

For example, the government appointed some of its most experienced civil servants to the top positions in the Jamuna Multipurpose Bridge Authority (JMBA) and kept staffing changes to a minimum during the construction phase. The high-powered board of directors, which included several members of the cabinet, performed in an exemplary fashion, making timely decisions on highly complex issues.

An internationally experienced management consultant firm was hired and provided day-to-day support, helping manage contractual matters and implement the Resettlement, Environmental, and Erosion and Flood Action Plans. The firm played an indispensable role in strengthening JMBA's project management capability. Similarly, a panel of world-renowned experts was formed to provide the necessary guidance and expertise on complex technical issues in a timely fashion.

For projects of this magnitude and complexity, it is essential to have a sound financing plan. The total cost

must be thoroughly studied and there needs to be a balance of funding from domestic and foreign sources. Opportunities for private sector financing should be explored. Innovative mobilisation of local resources too should be considered, for example by floating infrastructure development bonds in local currency. Implementation should proceed only when the entire financing has been guaranteed. This was the case with Jamuna Bridge and it never suffered any funding delays despite very large requirements during the peak implementation period.

As the Jamuna Bridge demonstrated, co-financing is an effective mechanism to fund large, complex and risky projects. However, for co-financing to be fully effective, a clear understanding of roles and responsibilities must be agreed upon early in the process. One co-financier must take the lead to ensure that a common agreed approach for preparation and implementation is followed.

For the Jamuna Bridge, the World Bank was designated the lead donor. In order to fulfill this role the World Bank maintained a core group of staff in its field office in Dhaka to provide day-to-day assistance and guidance to all project teams. Also, the same World Bank team that prepared the project remained in charge of implementation. This provided the necessary continuity, skills and accountability during the implementation phase.

Land acquisition and the shifting of utilities and structures should be completed before the start of physical implementation of the Padma Bridge. Comprehensive site readiness is probably the single most important element to avoid delays in large, complex infrastructure projects. This requires early coordination between the physical works team and the teams preparing the social and environmental components.

The preparation and implementation of the social and environmental components of large civil works must be given the same careful attention as the preparation of the physical components. In the case of the Jamuna Bridge, we underestimated the resources needed for the social and environmental components and funding was not firmed up until well into project implementation.

Like Jamuna Bridge or any other such large-scale infrastructure project, the construction of Padma Bridge will require relocation of some households and few commercial activities. These impacts can be largely minimised by taking adequate mitigation measures through designing and implementing an appropriate Resettlement Action Plan.

It is critical to adequately consult the affected people and ensure that they receive a fair compensation before the actual resettlement takes place. Consideration might even be given to splitting the Padma Bridge project into two projects, one focusing on the physi-

cal works while the other focusing on the social and environmental components.

The above key lessons from Jamuna Bridge experience as we see are extremely useful for us to decide on how we want to do the Padma Bridge and any other large scale and complex infrastructure projects. In our view, as long as the government, people, along with development partners will work in the same spirit, with the same strong will and commitment, we could undoubtedly replicate the success of Jamuna Bridge into Padma and other key infrastructure projects in Bangladesh. And doing so will also rewrite the track record of ADP implementation in the recent past.

The World Bank had the privilege of playing a leading supportive role in the planning and implementation of the Jamuna Bridge. We look forward to having a similar privilege to be part of this important project that would improve the lives and livelihood of 30 million people in the south-west region and on the nation as a whole and will bring positive impact on transport, trade, agriculture, education, health and other sectors. We are fully committed to supporting this top priority project in partnership with other development partners.

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Season of mellow music

Regional parties are the vendors of the political marketplace, and the sound of their haggling, compounded with their uncertain quality, has begun to grate on the voter. He did not abandon the corner shop completely -- neither has India -- but he preferred the mall. Between the two principal centres available, he chose the tri-colour variety in 2009.

M.J. AKBAR

HAS the BJP got trapped in the Bosnia joke: nothing can succeed, not even a crisis? As the party thinks its way through the present impasse, it needs two things that politicians avoid since both come with uncomfortable demands: clarity and honesty.

Arun Jaitley, the general secretary who played a significant part in shaping the campaign, summed it all up succinctly when he said: "Shrillness does not pay." It would be too much to expect Jaitley to dwell in public on the shrillness that characterised the rhetoric of too many disparate BJP candidates, the most notable of whom was of course the overblown Varun Gandhi, but one presumes that he has made the point in private

confabulations that must be taking place in the BJP leadership.

No one, and particularly not anyone young, wants the shriek of conflict to disturb the peace of India. Throwing pebbles at any caste, community or gender is a vote-loser. India still loves a preacher, as the epidemic of religious channels on television would indicate, but it has no time for the bully.

Independence is not an esoteric political fact, handed down to us by Gandhi and his remarkable generation. Independence is now the motif of individual life. Young people who go to bars do not interfere with those who might seek solace in the brotherhood of the Bajrang Dal. In return, they expect the Dal to leave them alone to their definition of pleasure.

It is with great difficulty that Indians

tolerate the police; reason forces them to do so even when their instinct tells them to ride around or beyond the law in the small matters of daily existence. Why on earth would they have any patience with a moral police in a free society?

It is perfectly possible to note trends of political behaviour in the changing patterns of Indian life. Urban middle class Indians throng towards malls; the poor aspire to them. The mall is now a community centre for the young. They see merit in order, availability, convenience, and, of course, the air conditioning.

The corner shop is being replaced. The vendor will gradually be displaced. The old market, a collection of individual vendors, now represents haggling and uncertain quality. Regional parties are the vendors of the political marketplace, and the sound of their haggling, compounded with their uncertain quality, has begun to grate on the voter.

He did not abandon the corner shop completely -- neither has India -- but he preferred the mall. Between the two principal centres available, he chose the tri-colour variety in 2009.

The BJP can take comfort in the fact that it is also a mall, but in need of serious redecoration as well as a radical

reorientation in its display of goods. In some basics there is no difference between the saffron and the tri-colour malls. They share a common economic policy, which is after all the meat and bones of the political shop. There is not much difference in foreign policy either. The divergence comes in the culture of the environment. People want *palau* and *papad* to co-exist even if they are not available in the same restaurant. You cannot impose a vegetarian code on a public environment. Freedom means the right to choose, and you can choose only if there is choice.

A modern nation is much more than a collection of skyscrapers or fantasy cities shimmering in the middle of nowhere. It is an idea that permits the individual to live without fear. Sometimes (often?) this absence of fear can degenerate into licence. We need to go no further than the nearest urban street to see how an Indian can stretch freedom into chaos.

I often feel that we need our new highways not for speed but simply for mobility, for they eliminate the Indian driver's ability to overtake illegally, or cross lanes; the only real damage he can now do is to himself.

But no Indian is going to exchange the confusions of intemperate behaviour for

dictatorship. Governments have learnt to abjure dictatorship after the Emergency. Parties who feel that they can invoke fear, whether against women, or lower castes, or upper castes, or minorities have missed the social and cultural nuances of a changing India.

It is entirely symmetrical that Dr. Manmohan Singh should be the first prime minister to be re-elected after Rajiv Gandhi gave the 18-year-old the vote. The young did not give the Congress all its 206 seats. And there were young voters who supported other parties as well. But I suspect that more detailed analysis will show that the young tipped perhaps forty or fifty seats towards the Congress, turning a victory into a decisive victory. In this fact lies a serious danger for the Congress.

The young are wonderful when enamoured; they turn deadly when disappointed. In 2004, India was a bit surprised by the sudden presence of a new government. This time, it was the turn of the opposition to be surprised by defeat. A deliberate vote for continuity has raised expectations to a point where non-delivery is going to extract a heavy penalty.

The days of politics, as usual, are over. You cannot be blasé about a claim that

only five or ten paise per development rupee reaches the voter. You have to change this corrupt equation, because it is corruption, by the rich and middle class that is denying the poor their rights.

We talk glibly of the young. Our image of them is the one promoted in media, in T-shirts and jeans. But this fringe of rich or middle class youth is vastly outnumbered by youth on subsistence levels, in slums and villages. The Naxalite brigades are full of Indian young, and you cannot dismiss them as pernicious enemies or terrorists, without asking what has driven them to the safety of a jungle and the anger of a gun. They were born in India, and are asking for the jobs that can bring them food, T-shirts, and jeans.

A party's crisis is nothing compared to a nation's crisis, and vast stretches of India are in an unprecedented crisis. If the BJP wants to get out of its Bosnia trap then there is only one way out: the rhetoric of conflict must be replaced by the calm of consensus; and the promise of wealth creation has to be accompanied by radical wealth distribution. As Jaitley has recognised, discord is shrill. India wants more mellow music.

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