

Imperative of coexistence: Public and private universities

And that is healthy competition that is good for the country. As I have stated, public and private universities can coexist as a matter of course, as complementary institutions ultimately benefiting the country.

SHAHID ALAM

COMPARISONS, as the saying goes, are odious. In many cases, they are, but in others they could be helpful in determining yardsticks or in establishing comparative perspectives.

For instance, it would really be a superfluous exercise to compare Harvard University and Massachusetts Institute of Technology with Cambridge University and Oxford University in terms of institutions of higher learning. They are all establishments of academic and scholarly excellence, perennially in the top echelon of universities anywhere in the world.

It would perhaps be more instructive to know that the two American institutions are privately run, while the British universities are public bodies with autonomous identities, much like Dhaka University.

In fact, Dhaka University was modeled after Oxford, although no one in his/her right mind would dare to extend the linkage beyond the ideals behind the establishment of the two institutions. In this case, any attempt at drawing a comparison would truly be odious.

A more general association between the British and Bangladeshi systems of higher education may, however, be made in order to understand a certain mindset regarding higher education in the aver-

age citizen of Bangladesh.

Bangladesh, via the interlude of Pakistan, inherited and established the systems and institutions bequeathed by the British Raj, although, in most cases, not with the same degree of efficiency, or probably as a precondition for achieving efficacy, the development of a mindset for the spirit and philosophy underlying them.

Higher education is one of them. For a long time, we stuck faithfully to the inherited tradition of a three-year Bachelor's (Honour's) degree (here I am restricting myself to institutions of higher learning in the Humanities, Sciences, and Social Sciences), which was awarded after successfully passing examinations in a prescribed number of subjects at the end of three years of study. Only recently have public universities like Dhaka University switched over towards an arrangement approximating the American system of higher learning.

Traditions, including some that have outlived their time, generally die hard in Bangladesh, so this country lingered on with the inherited British system long after its modification became due in the context of changing times. This crucial point requires a lengthy discussion that falls outside the purview of this write-up.

Tradition has also played a major role in the reluctance in much of the population to accept another demand of the

time -- the necessity of private institutions of higher learning in Bangladesh.

Again, the influence of Great Britain, with its public higher education system (it has only one privately established university, The University of Buckingham, 96% of whose students have expressed satisfaction with its programs!), seems to have contributed to this mindset.

However, having said that, in the United States, every one of its constituent states boasts at least one public university to its name, of which a few are of high caliber, like the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (along with the University of Georgia, the oldest established private university in that country) and the University of Michigan, while the University of California, Berkeley, and the University of California, Los Angeles, are right up there with the very top private institutions. The point is, the two, public and private, are not mutually exclusive.

They should be complementary, covering for shortcomings in each other, or just creating a synergy through having their individual strengths combined towards benefiting the country's higher education.

I was a student of, and a lecturer in, Dhaka University. I was a doctoral student at, and taught in, Boston University, ranked among the top universities in US and the world by all manners of evaluators. It happens to be privately run. Now I teach at a private university in Bangladesh.

From my experiences in teaching, and combining that with my knowledge of the state of education, society and economy in this country, my feeling is that private universities can, and do, contribute to

those sectors, often by complementing the contribution made by public universities. None should dispute that contribution. It is enormous, and, in the prevailing social, political and economic situation in the country will remain that way for the foreseeable future.

However, that very same situation also contributes to a substantial chunk of students aspiring for university education being unable to make it to the limited number of seats available in the public universities. But we already know that. Just as we know that the private universities have taken up the slack, and are providing them the opportunity to receive that education. And, they are completing that education without having to go through the hassles of session congestions, overlaps, campus political disturbances, and other such disruptions.

In fact, these factors figure seriously in the decisions of a number of bright students in specifically selecting private universities to get their education in. The putative and real benefits to the society and, yes, economy, and, obviously, the graduating students, of an uninterrupted education are by no means negligible, and studies could be carried out for assessing this impact.

At this point, one may expect people to be questioning the quality of education they have been receiving. Well, it is uneven across universities, and even within them -- from department to department. But, that last could be expected in even the very best institutions in the world. And, yes, there are private institutions that might not match up to the standards of the generally recognised better private universities, but that is not surprising either.

For every one of the top 100 universities in US, there are probably at least 10



Universities must complement each other.

that are well below the mark, some not much better than the mediocre institutions in this country. And, it could realistically be expected that, in the hustle and bustle and/or euphoria of establishing universities following the decision of the government then in office to allow free market to operate in the education sector, some sub-standard institutions would crop up. It is conceivable that the market will see to it that they are phased out.

Whatever the future brings in the context of private sector education, it would be churlish to deny that a good number of graduates from private institutions have established themselves in different sectors of this country's society and its economy, having gotten their

jobs through open competition, usually also involving graduates of public institutions, or succeeded as entrepreneurs through sheer enterprise and merit.

Obviously, at least some private universities are imparting the kind of education for their students to compete successfully in the tough job market, particularly in the most visible and desired sectors. And that is healthy competition that is good for the country. As I have stated, public and private universities can coexist as a matter of course, as complementary institutions ultimately benefiting the country.

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Women and economic war

This is how the poor women embarked on creating assets for their households. They seem to realise that income per se is not sufficient to pull them out of poverty. Small grants through assets could be more useful and productive: Women fighting an economic war need that kind of help.

ABDUL BAYES

As we all know, cyclone Sidr, which swept over Southern Bangladesh in 2007, caused colossal loss to people and properties. The price of any climatic change or other natural hazards generally falls heavily on the poor, and this was also the case with Sidr. The livelihoods of the poor were shattered, with razed houses, uprooted trees, damage to standing crops, and loss of livestock.

Survival was shrouded in deep darkness with no light at the end of the economic tunnel. We were told that some of these poor households were almost crossing the poverty line, but Sidr pushed them back. No food, no clothing, and only a shelter under the sky for many days.

The women of our story have seemingly overcome the rot through a post-Sidr rehabilitation program of the European Union (EU). It was implemented by Brac. These women were found to be genuine candidates for financial grants from EU to regain their liveli-

hoods. Brac picked them through information gathering from the people of the locality. More than a dozen economic activities were stipulated to help the poor, but the women under consideration were employed in cash-for work in road construction/maintenance.

Admittedly, these types of works are mostly manual, and are usually done by men. But economic hardships sometimes erase that kind of division. Anyhow, 20 women of our sample from Modhyam Chandra village under Amtoli Upazila (Borguna district) got work for 7 months (6 days a week) at Tk.100/day. Mentionably, a few of these women are widows and heads of their respective household; the husbands of others are day labourers. As reported, each of them earned, on average, Tk.17, 500 after completion of the work. We are told that, in subsequent attempts, each of them was also provided with a cow by the EU so that they could build up some assets to sustain the income so generated.

Let us look at the allocation of the



Fighting against the odds.

meager amount of money that they fetched. Almost all of them leased land with that money to grow crops. In fact, the largest chunk of the money was diverted towards that end. The decision of leasing land came from their common feeling that, after getting livestock, leasing land would help in procuring food for the household, and feed for the livestock.

The women expect that they will get 5 maunds of paddy from the land they

leased. If that is so, they could get food for four months from their own fields. This compares with no food from own production in earlier periods. The other part of the income went into repairing the houses. Two of them also helped their husbands by buying vans to generate income. By and large, only one-fifth of the women's income went for consumption and the rest went for investment. Mentionably, the husbands' meager

income was mostly spent on daily necessities.

The women informed us that they could not eat two times a day in the past; now they have three meals easily. Before Sidr, buying biscuits for the kids was beyond their means; now they can buy apples, if needed. By and large, the women of our story could come out of the poverty-cave that they were thrown into by Sidr. But all said, they are still haunted by the taunt that women, like men, carry bricks on their head for the construction and repairing of roads.

They were also refused any help from their earlier mentors on the plea that they did not work for their households during the few months they worked on roads. The women are not even allowed to take the livestock to the grazing lands of their former employers. But these pernicious acts do not seem to provoke them anymore, because they are fighting an economic war, and must win it.

Going further south of Amtoli, we met 15 women who were provided with vans/rickshaws by EU. The vans were for the males as they had lost their livelihood during Sidr. However, the condition was that the husband would deposit Tk.30/day in his wife's bank (bamboo poles or mud-pots located in the house). The husbands earn, on average, Tk.200-250/day, and that money to the wife goes as rent for the rickshaw/van. This is man-

datory, failing which the transport could be forfeited or future assistance could be at risk for the household.

We are told that most of the women bought goats with that savings. For example, 5 of them now have 5 goats each, generated from the one they bought with that money. Interestingly, half of the sample women also pay Tk.200/month for insurance, in the hope of undertaking bigger investment in future when the insurance will mature and more money will pour in. They are also using the savings for the repairing their houses, and for children's education.

By and large, their expenses are mostly investment expenses for generating future income. The decisions about investments are taken jointly with their husbands. But three of the sample women performed very poorly on account of serious illness of the husband, larger family with higher dependency ratio, and indecisions about future plans.

This is how the poor women embarked on creating assets for their households. They seem to realise that income per se is not sufficient to pull them out of poverty. Small grants through assets could be more useful and productive. Women fighting an economic war need that kind of help.

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Is it a new chapter?

The party can begin "a new chapter" only if it stops using religion for achieving its political ends. When the BJP stands in the way of punishment to the culprits in Gujarat or those who demolished the Babri Masjid, the party only proves that it prefers wallowing in the waters of bigotry and communalism to seeking the secure shores of secularism.

KULDIP NAYAR

THIS was like searching for a needle in the haystack. I was looking for a word of remorse or regret in the reams of statements by the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) on the Liberhan Commission's Report on demolition of the Babri Masjid and on the stepping down of L.K.Advani from the office of opposition leader in the Lok Sabha. But I was disappointed. Not that I was expecting a change of heart in the party. Yet I imagined that some leaders, at least from among the young who are supposed to have taken over the reins of the party, would feel sorry for the masjid's destruction and the killing of hundreds in the wake. It would have sent a message that the BJP was trying to shake off its past and paving a new path of conciliation and consensus.

Instead, there was defiance and justification of the demolition and deaths in the observations that the BJP leaders made. Remorse was needed, not to humiliate the BJP but to let it realise that a society, founded on the spirit of accommodation, expected the wrongdoers to make amends.

Advani has gone to extent of saying that the high mark in his political career was the rath yatra from the Somnath temple to Ayodhya where the Babri Masjid stood till December 6, 1992. Still the din raised by the BJP and other leaders of the Sangh Parivar cannot drown the charge that they are responsible for the destruction and the death right up to Mumbai where scores were killed in early 1993. The Sri Krishna Commission report at that time named Bal Thackeray, the Shiv Sena chief, and other leaders of his party. No action has

been taken so far.

The Liberhan Commission has named Advani as one of the 64 accomplices in the destruction of the masjid. There is nothing to ensure that action will be taken against any one of them. What should the nation infer if they get away with all that they did? Advani has said that with Sushma Swaraj as his successor in the Lok Sabha and Arun Jaitley as the opposition leader in the Rajya Sabha, "a new chapter" has begun. The change of personalities does not usher "a new chapter," the change of policies does. The BJP has given no evidence to suggest that it has jettisoned its communal agenda or that it has distanced from the fanatic RSS, which has imposed its trusted man, Nitin Gadkari, as the party's head in place of Rajnath Singh. It is the same old wine of the RSS prowess in a new bottle.

When the BJP has no courage to throw out the RSS, which has been riding its shoulders for decades, the party can indulge only in rhetoric but nothing worthwhile. In the face of the Congress party's arrogance, the BJP can attract support provided it does not follow the Hindutva line. At present, the BJP is part of the mob which is out to destroy the country's ethos of pluralism. It has no faith even in India's constitution, which

consecrates secularism in the preamble itself.

The Manmohan Singh government, shockingly, has placed before parliament the Action Taken Report (ATR) on the Liberhan Commission's findings. But the government does not contemplate any punitive action against those who planned and pulled down the masjid. True, Justice Liberhan did something unpardonable when he took 17 years to submit the report, which also has some howlers. The BJP only concentrated on those to defend itself. But the verbal mistakes do not falsify the fact of demolition.

The question is, who is responsible for destroying the masjid? Thousands of kar sewaks had assembled at Ayodhya. They had with them crowbars, ladders, hammers and ropes to pull it down. However big the congregation, it cannot destroy a cemented structure without implements. To attribute all this to the sudden surge of people's anger is to shift the blame when the culprits have been caught red handed.

No doubt, the Muslim community would feel betrayed if the 64 people named by the Commission go scot-free after what they have done. But the nation on the whole would equally be horrified if the guilty are not punished. The

majesty of law would come down tumbling. And communalists would have a shot in their arm. It is already a bad scenario which the country faces. The killing of 3,000 Sikhs at Delhi in 1984, nearly 100 Christians in Orissa two years ago and some 2,000 Muslims in Gujarat in 2002 has disfigured Indian's image as a pluralistic society. In fact, the message going around is that the minorities are not safe. On top of it, if there is no action on the Liberhan Commission's recommendations, India may damage its secular credentials beyond repair.

The government's proposed bill to ban the communal parties makes little sense when the Congress, the Biju Janata Dal and the BJP are guilty for their acts of omission and commission in Delhi, Orissa and Gujarat respectively. Banning merely the nomenclature of communalism will not do. The party can have a secular name as the BJP. The target is to eliminate parochialism. The proposed bill should address all this. A somewhat similar bill was before Parliament during the days of Nehru. But it was dropped because communalism could not be fitted into a precise legal term.

That the BJP is a rightist party is understandable. The Congress is more or less the same. What is not acceptable

is the BJP's communal approach because it poses a threat to the very idea of India, the concept of unity and secularism. The RSS, the BJP's mentor, should learn a lesson from the neighbouring country. Religion does not unify the country, pluralism does. India's strength is its diversity, which the different communities represent.

The pull of religion could not check the Bangladeshis separating from Pakistan because the Urdu speaking West Pakistanis did not accommodate the language, Bengali. The LITE was a product of the Sinhalese inability to cope with the Tamil identity in Sri Lanka than that of the Tigers' assertion. When the BJP ruled the country for six years, it kept aside its agenda of mandir.

The party can begin "a new chapter" only if it stops using religion for achieving its political ends. When the BJP stands in the way of punishment to the culprits in Gujarat or those who demolished the Babri Masjid, the party only proves that it prefers wallowing in the waters of bigotry and communalism to seeking the secure shores of secularism. The day the people see that the BJP has stopped mixing religion with politics they will consider that the party has begun a new chapter.

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