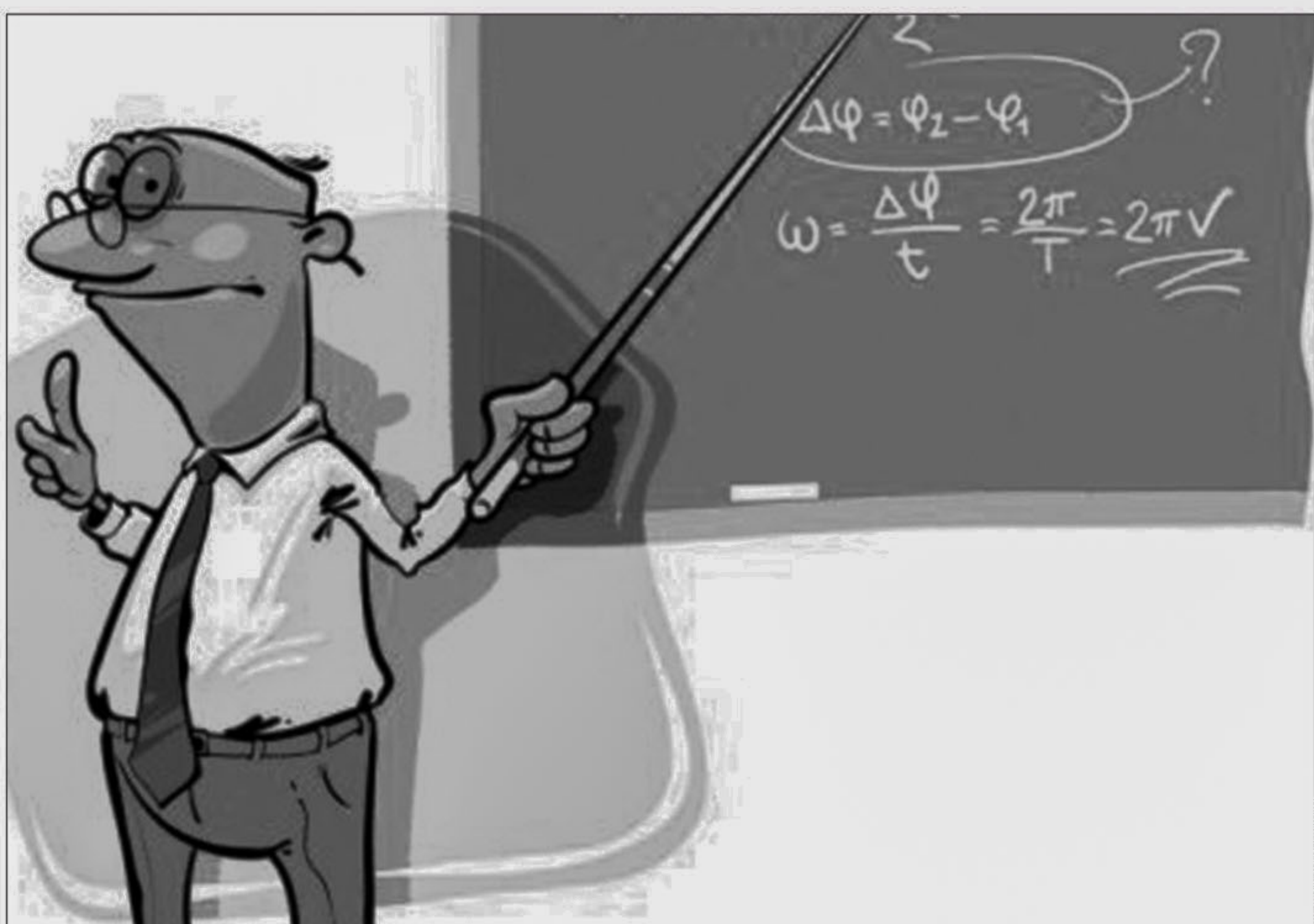


Teachers' evaluation at JU



Teachers must be kept on their toes.

Let us admit that public universities should introduce an evaluation mechanism for teachers. Our absolute freedom has turned out to be unbearable to the society and we must be accountable to the public through their children.

ABDUL BAYES

THE Business Studies faculty of Jahangirnagar University (JU) is one of five faculties in the university. It is less than a year old and has just completed a semester. Vice-Chancellor Dr. Shariff Enamul Kabir requested me to take charge of the faculty until a suitable person could be found.

I accepted his offer on three conditions: (a) I shall take no monetary benefits for my services to the faculty; (b) teachers in the newly created

two departments (finance and banking and marketing) would be selected on merit, and (c) teachers of all departments must be evaluated by students at the end of each semester. I am happy to see that all three conditions worked well so far.

In foreign countries, teachers are regularly evaluated by their students. In Bangladesh, some prominent private universities have this practice. I proposed that this process be introduced in my own department, the economics department, but received sharp reactions from

my colleagues who had themselves evaluated teachers when they studied abroad.

The arguments against such evaluation hinge mainly on two points: (a) it would reduce the esteem and dignity of teachers, and (b) students might be politically against a teacher. To me, the arguments are shallow and miss the logic.

First, a teacher's dignity and esteem can only be raised in the society when he/she is accountable to his/her clients, the students. Second, students are generally rational. There is no reason why a teacher who teaches sincerely and regularly should be rated lower, due to political reasons, than a like-minded teacher who hardly goes to the class.

There is another point. Out of say 100 students in the class, there could be at best 5 or 6 who are politically involved. There are also cross-checks in the system. My experience as teacher for the last 30 years says that students always like a good teacher, no matter what his/her political

affiliation is. Likewise, a teacher likes a good student, irrespective of the student's political colour.

Students also do not seem to see that they should evaluate their teachers. You will find walls in public universities everywhere filled with posters carrying different slogans, political or academic. But there is not a single slogan about "academic anarchy" caused by some teachers.

Surprisingly, I have never heard a slogan against session jam. This could be due to the fact that when you pay too little a price for a commodity, you don't care for its quality or perishability. This is the main difference between public and private universities. Public university teachers who teach in private universities have to work like slaves; but they are "masters" in their own domain.

The Business Studies faculty of JU has moved away from the conventional public university mentality and promises to pursue it further. The media can play a prominent role in improving the quality of public universities through more in-depth reports on academic anarchy prevailing there.

During our last departmental meeting, the chair of the economics department said that only 3-4 lectures were held in some courses of a particular year, though the final examination was just two weeks away. In many departments, students are not shown their tutorial marks before examination although academic rules say that they must be.

In one department, a teacher has allegedly been drawing salary for the last 15 years or so although he comes to the department once or twice a year! Serving in private universities or consulting or business firms, at the cost of one's own university, has become almost a regular phenomenon for some of us.

There may be some criticism of our system and modus operandi of evaluation. We agree with our critics, with a footnote that in the department of marketing two teachers and an administrative officer share the same room. Hopefully, in future, with availability of more space we shall be able to fine-tune the mechanism.

But let us admit that public universities should introduce an evaluation mechanism for teachers. Our absolute freedom has turned out to be unbearable to the society and we must be accountable to the public through their children. Only an accountable person is a respectable person. Amartya Sen's "living with dignity and esteem" could be invoked here with slight modifications.

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Discouraging small poultry farmers

The great danger is that by regulating the prices at which hatcheries sell to distributors, but not at which distributors sell to farmers, the government will give distributors a huge incentive to cut out the farmers altogether.

ZEESHAN HASAN

THE Livestock Department issued letters to all thana and district livestock officers saying that it had fixed the prices of poultry chicks sold by hatcheries at Tk.30 for broilers and Tk.32 for layers. This move follows a year of chick shortages brought about by bird flu outbreaks and political lobbying by some farmers for lower prices.

It is hard to imagine a more ill conceived move than this attempt to fix prices. The government simply does not understand how the market for chicks works, and risks destroying the 50,000 small poultry farms around the country.

In actual fact, none of the hatcheries in Bangladesh sell to farmers. This is because poultry farmers do not have enough money to pay in cash. As a result, hatcheries sell to distributors, who buy chicks in cash and then distribute them on credit to farmers.

There are roughly 2,500 chick distributors around the country, individually setting the price of chicks paid by farmers, which is based on the local supply and demand that they see in their thana. The result is that the price paid by farmers cannot be controlled from the hatchery gate, no matter how hard the government tries to do this. All that the government will be able to do is force hatcheries to sell at a lower price to distributors. There is no way to force the chick distributors around the country to sell at a lower price to farmers.

The great danger is that by regulating the prices at which hatcheries sell to distributors, but not at which distributors sell to farmers, the government will give distributors a huge incentive to cut out the farmers altogether. A distributor getting a broiler chick worth Tk.55 (the current market price) at only Tk.32, as dictated by the government, suddenly has a new option; rather than share this windfall profit with farmers, why not just keep it all by opening a large farm?

Distributors are already controlling most of the financing in the poultry sector. It is a small matter for them to take over the production as well. This will be the effect of the livestock department's clumsy attempt at price fixing; 50,000 small, poor farmers will be put out of business and replaced by 2,500 large, wealthy ex-distributor farmers within a matter of months.

Bangladesh's rural economy has made tremendous gains over the last 15 years thanks to the poultry industry, which has provided employment to around 50,000 farmers who raise less than 1,000 chickens each. Unfortunately, no one outside the industry understands what a unique and fragile situation this is.

Most countries in the world have extremely concentrated poultry industries, with only a few large farmers making most of the output. The number of small farmers in Bangladesh has only been sustained because of the continued efforts of the hatchery industry to foster competition among the chick distributors, and the veterinary services rendered to small farmers.

The government's move to fix prices, unless reversed, means the end for 50,000 small poultry farmers around the country, and concentration of poultry farming in the hands of a wealthy few.

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Does Islam require a Muslim woman to veil her face?



Burqa, or niqab, in addition covers the face and thereby hides the identity of the person. Burqa provides a mesh in front of the eyes, while niqab allows a slit for seeing through. In the current worldwide concern about security, some countries think that burqa/niqab is a threat as a terrorist can hide behind it and carry out destructive activities.

A.B.M. NURUL ISLAM

RECENTLY, there has been a spate of letters in the letters to the editor section of the DS on the Belgian ban on burqa. From mufti to barrister, readers joined in to register their support for the burqa on various grounds.

Amidst the entire hullabaloo, nobody asked a basic question: Does Islam require a Muslim woman to veil her face?

First, let us make clear the distinction between the hijab and the burqa or niqab.

Hijab allows a Muslim woman to cover her hair, neck and bosom, but leave her face open. It is strikingly similar to the dress worn by the Christian nuns. It has been adopted in Muslim majority countries like Malaysia, Indonesia and large parts of the Middle East. It faces no ban in general in the West, except that in France students in public schools cannot wear it as it is thought to be a religious symbol.

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Quranic prescription of dress for Muslim women is contained basically in two verses: 33:59 and 24:31.

In verse 33:59, Allah says (all translations by A. Yusuf Ali):

"O prophet! Tell thy wives and daughters and the believing women that they should cast their outer garments over their persons (when abroad); that is most convenient that they should be known (as such) and not molested; and Allah is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful."

The immediate reason for this revelation was to distinguish the free believing women from the female slaves so that bad elements would not

molest the former.

Yusuf Ali in his commentary on the above verse states: "The object was not to restrict the liberty of women, but to protect them from harm and molestation under the conditions then existing in Medina." He further states: "This rule was not absolute: if for any reason it could not be observed, then 'Allah is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful.'"

The critical Arabic word in the original verse is jilbab, which has been translated by Yusuf Ali as an outer garment; a long gown covering the whole body; or a cloak covering the neck and bosom.

Whatever may be the interpretation of the word jilbab, it is quite obvious that the requirements were quite strict.

In verse 24:31, Allah lays down:

"And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what (must ordinarily) appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands."

It is seen clearly from the above verse that (1) Allah does not specifically ask for covering of the hair or face, (2) allows display of certain parts of beauty and ornaments (that must ordinarily be exposed) and (3) specifically calls for covering of the bosoms.

Moreover, Allah has not set any details of what could be seen or not be seen of the women, possibly to allow for different cultures, climates and environments that would ultimately come under the umbrella of Islam.

Since verse 33:59 is understood to refer to verse 24:31, it is important to know their chronological order in the revelation.

Sura 33 (The Clans) was revealed in 5 A.H.

As regards Sura 24 (Light), there is some controversy about its exact period of revelation. However, Maududi conclusively shows in his Introduction to Suras that the majority of Islamic scholars accept that it was revealed in the latter half of 6 A.H., i.e. several months after Sura 33.

Maududi thinks that verse 24:31 is complementary to verse 33:59. This is open to question. If someone has already covered herself up as required in verse 33:59, with a loose outer garment or a cloak covering neck and bosom, then what need is there for covering of the bosoms with a veil or sheet as required in verse 24:31?

The more plausible explanation would be that the Beneficent had reduced the requirements in the latter verse. This is akin to the case of drinking, where Muslims were first asked not to come to mosque while in intoxicated state (verse 4:43), and the ban on drinking alcohol came later.

If the move from a lenient to a stricter regula-

tion was hazily accepted, why should not one accept a move from a stricter regulation to a lenient one? After all, it is the prerogative of the Almighty as to what to relax and what to tighten. But our orthodox maulanahs have a propensity to only tighten the screw.

During Hajj, it is forbidden for women performing Hajj to cover their faces: "As for a woman pilgrim, she is forbidden to use perfumed clothes, a veil that covers the face, and gloves" (Fiqh-us-Sunnah). If covering the face were a necessity for modesty, Hajj would have been the right time to enforce it with full rigidity.

In the well-known Hadith (Abu Daoud) narrated by Hazrat Aisha, the Prophet (pbuh) tells his sister-in-law Asma: "When a woman begins to menstruate, nothing should be seen of her except this and this," and he pointed to his face and palms.

Sheikh Muhammad Sayyid Tantawy, former Grand Mufti (1986-1996) of Egypt and Grand Sheikh of the prestigious Al-Azhar University, was of the opinion that the face-veil was a cultural tradition and had nothing to do with Islam. He himself removed the face-veil from a student who was not willing to do so, and told her not to wear it again.

That the face-veil is a cultural tradition is borne out by the fact it was mentioned to have been worn by Persian and Arabian women as early as the 1st and 3rd centuries, i.e. it existed several centuries before the revelations came to Prophet Muhammad (pbuh).

Veiling the face robs a woman of her identity and dehumanises her, and is not required either by Quranic injunctions or traditions of the Prophet (pbuh). Those who still choose to do so are either showing that they are religious or doing it under peer pressure.

Those who recommend it as an antidote to eve-teasing etc. should in fact remind men of Allah's injunction to lower their (men's) gaze and guard their modesty (24:30). Modesty has not been enjoined only on women. I believe that a properly worn sari serves the purpose of Islamic dress for women. Religion is too important to be left (for interpretation) to those who have taken it up as their profession. Most religious professionals, because of their rote learning and lack of knowledge of science and arts, cannot think outside the box and lack a spirit of enquiry. They tend to operate on the principle "the stricter, the better," particularly on women's issues. One Saudi cleric recently came up with the suggestion that women should reveal only one eye in public!

Modern Muslims should study religion and come to their own conclusion on important issues.

Engr. A.B.M. Nurul Islam is a former BAEC and IAEA official.

