

Quality in private universities

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M. ALIMULLAH MIYAN

KNOWLEDGE is the engine of growth for any nation -- be it developing or already developed. "Human capital" has become as important, if not more important, than physical capital in explaining the wealth and poverty of nations around the world.

As Vice-Chancellor of International University of Business Agriculture and Technology (IUBAT) -- I am first and foremost concerned with assuring the success of all universities. I occupy the "upper floors" of the education system. However, I realise that a good building needs a solid foundation.

The foundation of any education system is the primary sector. No country has achieved prosperity without good primary schools able to impart to all children, boys and girls, the ability to read and write, and understand simple mathematics and science. The secondary sector builds on this foundation.

If the foundation is not solid -- if only a minority of children ever master primary school material -- then their performance at secondary and higher secondary levels will inevitably suffer. Many able children will be unable to master the more

advanced material taught at this level. Either they will not enter secondary school or, if they do, they will likely drop out.

Finally, all countries require a good number of teachers to succeed at the tertiary level. Why? One obvious reason is that the training of teachers, particularly at the secondary level, requires post-secondary institutions to train them. That is one career path. Developing economies need professionals in many fields: nurses and doctors in the health sector; accountants, engineers, IT experts and trained managers in the business and public sectors.

Since liberation, Bangladesh has invested in public universities but, as all neutral observers have noted, the public universities face many severe problems:

- While the number of private universities has risen, there are still too few compared to other Asian and South Asian countries;
- Unfortunately, the political parties have excessively politicised the country's public universities. Too often, political considerations have influenced hiring of faculty;
- Too often, political activities by students and faculty have disrupted



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campus life, leading to "session jams" and lengthy delays in students completing their studies;

- The infrastructure of libraries, computer facilities, and labs are often inadequate for good teaching and research;
- In response, many bright students are leaving the country for training abroad. Once abroad, many never return to contribute their knowledge to Bangladesh.

One important response to these problems has been the growth since 1990 of a network of non-government universities.

IUBAT has the distinction of being the first non-government university to initiate collaborative programmes in 1991. The number of private universities has grown from a handful in the 1990s, to over 50 at present.

The number of student attending private universities has grown as well. There were about 30,000 at the beginning of this decade; there were 1,82,641 in 2008. There are now slightly more students attending private than public universities (excluding National University and Open University).

Private universities perform a valuable

service for the Bangladesh economy. They have dramatically increased the number of places available for students to pursue tertiary education. Unlike public universities -- which receive about Tk.650 crore in annual government funding -- private universities cover costs by relying on students' tuition fees.

While private universities have undeniably benefited the country, they are not perfect. Not only are there legitimate concerns about the quality of public universities, there are also some legitimate concerns about the quality of private universities.

The answer to these concerns is not to subject private universities to an ever-increasing number of government regulations and restrictions. That way lies the danger of red tape, politicisation and stagnation.

The answer is that the private universities must themselves establish a credible system for assuring students and their families, employers and the general public that they are providing quality education. In January 2009, the Association of Private Universities of Bangladesh hosted a conference at IUBAT premises organised by its Committee on Quality Assurance. Among the speakers were Dr. Gholam Kibria, an expert educationist from Delaware State University in the US and Prof. Alex Borland, a quality assurance expert from University of British Columbia, Canada.

I take the liberty of summarising their advice to us on the difficult question of assuring quality by accreditation of private universities. The key requirements of

a successful accreditation programme will include the following. The agency must:

- Establish standards for individual courses, academic programmes and universities;
- Establish a competent accreditation (quality-assurance) agency composed of members independent from the universities being evaluated and from the government; (At early stages, this agency should seek advice from similar agencies operating in other countries, and potentially appoint some senior international academics as members.)
- Acknowledge that different universities are at various stages of development and make some allowance in defining standards;
- Advise universities about how to implement the agreed-upon standards;
- Set a time limit on accreditation, thereby requiring universities to be periodically reviewed in order to maintain accreditation.

None of these five requirements will be easy to implement. But if private universities along with public universities are to contribute positively to the social and economic development of Bangladesh we must undertake them to cover all universities in Bangladesh through a unified body.

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People's perception about service sectors

It would be in the fitness of things if the government, instead of blaming the TIB, goes for striking at the root of the problems that have contributed to the growth of rampant corruption and corrupt practices in the service sectors and takes appropriate corrective measures for reducing them to the minimum.

M. ABDUL LATIF MONDAL

IT is a recognised fact that the service sectors of Bangladesh cause hardships and sufferings to the people. It is not that the service sectors in what is now Bangladesh did not harass the people during Pakistan period or during the British colonial days. But people's sufferings have increased manifold during the last three decades or so. People's perception is that service sector establishments in the government are places where red tape, harassment, bribery and other corrupt practices are common features.

The experience of the people is that the service sectors that harass the people most are police, judiciary, land administration including registration, taxes and customs, education, health, ports (air, sea and land), city corporations and

paurashabhas, and utilities such as electricity, gas and water.

In order to ascertain the nature and rate of corruption at different government and non-government service institutions or sectors through the experience of households as well as to make appropriate recommendations for the prevention and control of corruption and corrupt practices, Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) conducted a survey on 6,000 households (3,480 in rural areas and 2,520 in urban areas) between June 2009 and May 2010. The findings of the survey, titled "Service Sector Corruption: National Household Survey 2010," covering 13 service sectors, were released on December 23.

The TIB report clarifies that corruption is not limited to bribes only, rather negligence to duty, inordinate delay in the disposal of cases, nepotism, amass-

ing wealth by using force, etc. have also been treated as corruption.

The survey makes a comparison of corruption in the service sectors between the present survey (2010) and the last survey (2007). This may be seen in the table below:

The above findings show that in the survey of 2010 judiciary was the most corrupt among the service sectors in the country. Law enforcement agencies, land administration, taxes and customs, and electricity stood second, third, fourth and fifth in the list of most corrupt service institutions. Except in three or four service sectors, corruption in other service sectors has also increased.

The survey revealed that 84.2% of the households surveyed throughout the country were victims of corruption while receiving service from the service sectors. The bribes amounted to Tk.9,591.6 crores during the survey period, each household paying Tk.4,834 as bribe. This prompted the chairman of the Anti-Corruption Commission, Golam Rahman, to comment: "This is not the full picture of corruption in the country; this is just a part of the picture. Prevalence of corruption is more than this survey revealed." It may be relevant to mention here that the TIB's maiden survey on people's perception and experience about corruption, which

was a part of the Global Corruption Barometer (GCB) 2010 in 86 countries and was released in Dhaka city on December 10, showed that of the top five corrupt sectors in the country, three belonged to the service sector. These were police, civil service and judiciary occupying the first, second and fourth positions respectively.

There have been mixed reactions to the findings of the TIB. While the findings seem to have been well received by the people in general and the media, the law ministry, the police and some lawyers have felt aggrieved. Law Minister Shafique Ahmed has questioned the appropriateness of the methodology of the survey and termed the findings as "untrue and misleading." State Minister for Law, Qamrul Islam, has gone to the extent of terming the TIB report as a ploy "to indirectly hinder the trial of war criminals." Three defamation cases -- one in Comilla and two in Chittagong -- have been filed against the TIB by three lawyers for "demeaning the judiciary."

Dhaka Metropolitan Police Commissioner Benazir Ahmed, at a press conference, questioned the credibility of the TIB report and said that it was published with a motive. But, he did not explain what the "motive" was.

In its editorial of December 25, *The*

| Sector | % of households affected by corruption | |
|------------------------|--|------|
| | 2010 | 2007 |
| Judiciary | 88.0 | 47.7 |
| Law enforcing agencies | 79.7 | 96.6 |
| Land administration | 71.2 | 52.7 |
| Tax and customs | 51.3 | 25.9 |
| Electricity | 45.9 | 33.2 |
| Agriculture | 45.3 | -- |
| Local Governments | 43.9 | 62.5 |
| Health | 44.1 | -- |
| Insurance | 19.2 | -- |
| Banking | 17.4 | 28.7 |
| Education | 15.3 | 39.2 |
| NGOs | 10.1 | 13.5 |
| Others | 34.1 | 35.5 |
| All Sectors | 84.2 | 66.7 |

Daily Star wrote: "While corruption perse is one of the challenges to good governance and stunts government efforts to deliver the goods to the people, the main cause of our worry is the involvement of two major institutions of the government, that are considered the two most important apparatus for providing good governance, in corruption -- the judiciary and the law enforcement agencies. When rule of law becomes rule of men, and when money is used to buy justice, there is little confidence that the public can repose in the government to ensure its security. And when people suffer from insecurity, nothing can stem the erosion of public

credibility about the government." It would be in the fitness of things if the government, instead of blaming the TIB, goes for striking at the root of the problems that have contributed to the growth of rampant corruption and corrupt practices in the service sectors and takes appropriate corrective measures for reducing them to the minimum. Here the Anti-Corruption Commission, which has been established with the main objective of preventing corruption, has also to play its due role.

M. Abdul Latif Mondal is former Secretary.

Finance minister on traffic congestion

Why is it that the finance minister is targeting only the private cars? What about the government vehicles? Why should they not be required to abide by the same restrictions? Why shouldn't ministers, secretaries and other top brass of the government organisations follow suit and fill in their cars to their full capacity while commuting in the city?

HUSAIN IMAM

FINANCE minister Abul Maal Abdul Muhit has recently come out with an interesting suggestion. He said that, in order to ease the traffic congestion of Dhaka, his government was thinking of either banning private cars from the city or making it compulsory for the private cars to carry 4-5 passengers. The idea seemed to me not only unrealistic but also unreasonable.

Take, for example, the case of a family of two left behind by their children living abroad. They need and therefore have a car. What will they do if they have to go out in their car? Will they ask for two or three persons from the street to accompany them to their destination?

Or, does the finance minister, or for that his government, expect this couple not to own a car and instead be prepared to hang on the door handles of a public bus and make their way to the destination? It might be too much to expect from the couple.

Then again, why is it that the finance minister is targeting only the private cars? What about the government vehicles? Why should they not be required to abide by the same restrictions? Why shouldn't

ministers, secretaries and other top brass of the government organisations follow suit and fill in their cars to their full capacity while commuting in the city?

It is more than 60 years that the British government ended their colonial rule in this part of the world. It is strange that our rulers, never mind if they are elected by the people, still consider themselves as masters and the public as their servants and not vice versa. May God help the people of this country!

One shouldn't, however, be surprised at what our ministers want us to swallow. We are accustomed to it. It is not the first time that we have been entertained by our ministers' fantastic ideas. When there was scarcity of rice in the market, the then finance minister Saifur Rahman wanted us to eat cabbage instead of rice. The food adviser of the immediate past caretaker government of Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed advised us to eat less.

Now Finance Minister Muhit tells us to keep private cars off the streets because the government is unable to solve the problem of severe traffic congestion of the capital city. If you cannot, you must have your car full to its capacity. One wonders whether it is innocent humour or a cruel joke.

You have allowed car traders to import cars and sell them to the public. The public buys the cars after paying custom duty, VAT and what not. You have asked the car owner to convert it into CNG system in order to keep the environment free of carbon-pollution; he has done it at a huge cost. Now the energy minister wants to deny him CNG and the finance minister wants him to keep his vehicle off the street. How can we describe these intentions save as cruel jokes?

You do not have adequate number of CNG auto rickshaws. The few you have do not run on meter. You allow them to charge two to three times the rate fixed by the authority. You do not have a safe and easily available taxi cab service that could encourage a person to do away with owning a private car. You don't have an efficient city bus service or a metro rail that can serve the transport requirement of a middle class family. You do not have pavements worth the name alongside the streets that could have allowed the public to walk instead of depending on cycle rickshaws and paying through their nose.

You cannot make the public or the vehicle operators strictly follow the traffic rules because your traffic administration as well as law enforcing agencies are weak in manpower, lacking in training and with some of them engaged in corruption. You allow shopping malls to grow without ensuring adequate parking spaces. You do not build multistoried parking spaces in the busy areas of the city so that vehicles do not have to park here and there, causing traffic jam. You do not repair the roads or keep them free of unauthorised occupiers to ensure free flow of traffic. You do not ensure safe zebra crossings for the pedestrians to cross the roads.



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Instead of addressing these issues first you want to transfer the liability of this huge mess onto the people's shoulders through a process of denial. That is not acceptable in a democratic society. The government will be well advised to get rid of such mentality of denying the public basic amenities and engage in more realistic and constructive exercises that will help overcome the multifarious problems of the city dwellers.

It is nearly two years that the present government has been in power. During

this period, it may claim to have made considerable progress in many a sector. But, as I had mentioned in my previous columns, I still maintain that if the present government has miserably failed to show any sign of improvement in any sector it is the transport sector, the urban transport sector in particular, and this failure may prove very costly in the long run.

To overcome the ever-increasing traffic congestion of Dhaka city, construction of a subway rail or an elevated expressway should have started by this time. It didn't.

It has been a long time since we heard about a circular river transport system around Dhaka. Nothing happened except a ceremonial inauguration of the project by the communication minister with two 30 person capacity motor vessels. We heard about 5-6 flyovers across the rail crossings of the city. No progress is in sight as yet. It is probably time for the prime minister herself to personally take stock of the situation and act quickly.

Capt. Husain Imam is a retired merchant navy officer.