

# Academia's missing middle

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HERE is a perplexing problem in Bangladesh's "universities," especially in the private universities. A significant number of departments of these universities are staffed by faculty members who are of very senior rank (professors). Then there is a large contingent of fresh teachers who form the lower ranks -- i.e., lecturers and senior lecturers. The ranks of full-time assistant and associate professors are generally quite thin; in some departments, non-existent.

Given this scenario, the private universities are bereft of middle-ranking faculties, hence the term missing middle. Aspire as these institutions may to attain global ranking, getting there is going to be quite a challenge without a full slate of faculty doing quality teaching and research, mentoring junior colleagues, updating the curriculum, building innovative academic programmes, etc.

Many of the senior faculty have retired from their earlier occupations. Their backgrounds can be quite varied and research is not widely practiced by them, especially as many are burdened by administrative duties and teaching loads. As a consequence, mentoring junior colleagues (a significant role of seniors) also suffers.

Associate professors are generally affiliated with the public universities and come to the private universities on loan (given the attractive contracts). They are unlikely to make the bold choice of moving permanently to a private university and help build it into a world-class entity through a sustained programme of research. As a senior Dean recently commented, "they simply don't belong to the private institution; they merely bide their time for the pay check." In fairness to them, however,

tenure and job security may play a large role in their unwillingness to commit full-time. High teaching loads may also dissuade those who really want to build careers as researchers and scholars.

Regarding the fresh faculty, there are commitment issues that result in their constant replacement. Some bide their time while looking for that "perfect" and "lucrative" job. For them the university is only a temporary holding post. Those who really want to build a career will need to earn a higher degree. Only the brightest of the lot will manage to secure a scholarship and go abroad.

Whether they will return from abroad after completion of a higher degree is a moot question. Some may return for personal/family reasons or for being unable to find a fit, but for those who have the opportunity to be a part of an established university or who are able to obtain a job that pays on an international scale, they are unlikely to trade the opportunity for a teaching position back home.

Under the circumstances, a key priority that private universities must pursue is to develop and offer in-house in-country higher degree programmes for several reasons: (1) to develop enduring scholarly programmes and advance higher education in Bangladesh that will build global reputation and facilitate ranking, (2) to halt the brain drain, since the brighter of the lot leave the country for study abroad and (3) as solid academic programmes are built over time, the outflow of foreign exchange spent by students on higher education abroad may be stymied or even reversed.

An immediate imperative is thus to form a consortium of (selected) private universities or even a public-private university venture, as a test case, to offer higher degrees, especially M.Phil. and Ph.D. degrees. This will immediately help

build a career track for junior faculty. To achieve this the consortium will need a critical mass of Ph.D. degree holders with a proven track record (i.e., they have built a record of scholarship by publishing in recognised peer-reviewed journals, written books and/or chapters with recognised publishers, built a research programme, attained international acclaim, etc.) to run the programmes. Since it is unlikely that such a critical mass will be available in a single private university, the answer is to pool faculty resources from several of them.

This is where the University Grants Commission could allow, after careful scrutiny, a group of private and/or public universities to pool their faculty in a given discipline (say engineering, sociology or business) and offer Ph.D. programmes to equip home-grown faculty with the requisite training and degrees and build indigenous academic programmes of excellence.

There may be some concern that Ph.D. degrees from Bangladesh universities may not have the appropriate status or recognition. This is where collaboration with foreign universities is warranted, especially given the knowledge advances they have made that could potentially be harnessed to develop excellent academic programmes. Thus, it is important, in a specific discipline, to work with selected universities abroad, especially those that have the mission of global engagement. These universities also ought to be willing to offer/grant joint degrees. If the degree seekers have to go abroad, it is important that they complete the last year of the programme back in Bangladesh under joint supervision.

The local supervisors must meet scholarly criteria to be able to shoulder this important responsibility; they must also be offered the right set of

incentives so that they are able to continue their scholarly work without facing pecuniary burdens. In addition, those who complete their degrees within the country must be rewarded with attractive positions and remuneration within the community of local universities.

With the two-pronged (local and foreign) approach, the missing middle in the private universities could be efficaciously addressed, thereby giving the local institutions a boost in their academic staffing needs. With a steady increase of properly trained faculty, retained with the right incentives, the quality of private university education ought to improve significantly.

Let us be clear that without faculty well-trained in pedagogy, producing high quality research, attaining global recognition will only remain an aspiration, a mirage.

In their present avatars, if the universities continue on their archaic teaching tracks, churning out students in droves while boosting revenues, they will only be depicted as glorified teaching colleges, not true universities. By filling the missing middle, imbued with strong research skills and where the "creation" of knowledge is at least as important as "disseminating" it, higher education will gain perceptibly in strength.

When the passion for research begins to take root that embellishes teaching and engages with society's multifarious problems, the dream of building world-class universities will become a distinct possibility for Bangladesh. Minus research that possibility is really nil. The missing middle must thus be filled astutely and quickly to serve the true purpose of a university.

The writer is Vice Chancellor, BRAC University and Distinguished Professor Emeritus, Pennsylvania State University.

# Bangladesh can improve its labour rights, but so can the United States

CHAUMTOLI HUQ

RECENTLY, the Office of the United States Trade Representatives (USTR) called on the government of Bangladesh to improve on its labour rights, and in particular to allow for increased unionisation before it would consider restoring trade benefits. In Bangladesh, it now seems to be increasingly accepted that unionisation or some worker constituted collective will help to improve workplace standards. Of course, labour advocates have been arguing this for years, but Rana Plaza provides a tragic reminder that unions play a critical role in improving workplace safety and labour rights. Therefore, freedom of association has been a key criteria in Bangladesh's review on trade benefits. This is a welcome development.

While the US can use its trade stick to exact improved labour rights by suspending GSP it should also use its own legal, political and economic tools to make US employers and multinational companies compliant in enforcing its own labour laws and protect trade union activities both in the US and abroad. If this is not done, any efforts made by local and well-meaning garment owners in Bangladesh will be thwarted as US companies export labour injustice and continue to depress working conditions for workers in the

US and maintain a supply chain that pays garment workers here sweatshop wages.

Economists rightly attribute the widening gulf between rich and poor in the US to the decline in unionisation. The working conditions in Bangladesh's garment industry, and the widening wage gap in the US present a unique opportunity for labour advocates across the Atlantic to make a strong, revived, coordinated fight for trade union rights. If the US trade representative believe trade union rights can help improve labour rights in Bangladesh, then, it can surely help workers in the US improve their economic conditions.

The carrot stick approach to Bangladesh can be forcefully applied in the US to improve labour standards. Companies like Walmart that source from factories in Bangladesh have a poor track record when it comes to labour rights in the US, yet, I see little regulation from US elected officials on its labour practices. In addition, recent US Supreme Court decisions have made it harder to organise workers, including cases like Harris v. Quinn which prohibits unions from collecting dues from public employees who did not want to join. The inability of unions to collect dues to perform its collective bargaining duties means weakened representation for all workers.

American elected officials should pass legislation that restores workers' ability to organise in the US. This is exactly what the



government of Bangladesh was required to do for trade benefits in its comprehensive review of its own labour laws. Trade union rights were the New Deal bargain workers in the US made in exchange for industrial peace. In upholding this bargain, the US should similarly conduct a comprehensive review of its court decisions and laws that discourage unionisation, and pass necessary legislation to keep its bargain. While no economic sanctions can be placed on elected officials, they

should be sanctioned through votes if they fail to take steps to improve workplace conditions for workers in the US.

In any request for licensing, tax incentives or permits, the US should require companies to provide an audit on labour compliance both domestically and abroad. Here, the US government can play a critical role to ensure that its companies do not violate accepted international human rights standards in the workplaces, both domestically and interna-

tionally. Internationally, we must hold our companies accountable for violations of human rights. Recently, Germany passed guidelines to hold its own businesses to human rights standards.

Labour organisers in Bangladesh have suggested that buyers source from factories that have a trade union or at the minimum an independent worker organisation. Such a proposal reminds me of the effort by American unions to encourage businesses to buy union-made products. Union-made can now be a global brand.

If America fails to hold its own companies accountable to human rights standards for its workers and for workers abroad, then, any pronouncements to improve labour standards will show the US at best as a hypocrite and worst, an economic bully.

Finally, there is a critical organising and political role that workers in the US can play at this moment in both by demanding not only their own right to organise using domestic channels, but also to demand trade union rights of their fellow workers in Bangladesh. Unions and worker organisations need to be made a key part in the global supply chain, otherwise we will not see an improvement in labour standards globally.

The writer is a Senior Research Fellow with the American Institute for Bangladesh Studies (AIBS) examining the garment industry. Follow her on twitter @lawatthemargins

## BEETLE BAILEY



## by Mort Walker



## HENRY

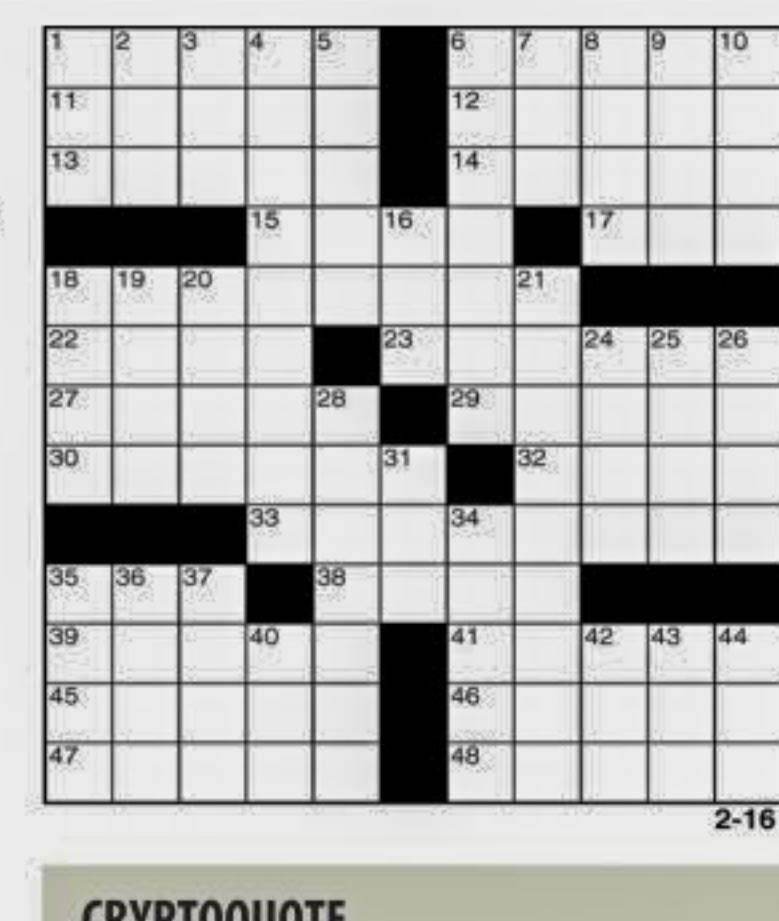


## by Don Trachte



## CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS  
1 Gem side  
6 Tex-Mex treats  
11 Have -- to grind  
12 44th commander in chief  
13 10th commander in chief  
14 Nation on the Red Sea  
15 Beach crawler  
17 Finish  
18 Internal affairs target  
22 Heaps  
23 39th commander in chief  
27 Become prevalent  
29 I love you: Sp.  
30 31st commander in chief  
32 Whirl  
33 Snobs  
35 Wager  
38 Tater  
39 State that produces taters  
41 Simon and Diamond  
45 37th commander in chief  
46 Comic strip worker  
47 Comic pens  
48 Hearty dishes



Yesterday's answer  
CRYPTOQUOTE  
DNV WQJV DZ KMXV NWRMGSU SK MORZKD MOFMUK M LMOKV-LMV LZQ DNV WQJV DZ QWQVDS.  
-- N.O. RVGTVG

Yesterday's CRYPTOQUOTE: WHILE I RELISH OUR WARM MONTHS, WINTER FORMS OUR CHARACTER AND BRINGS OUT OUR BEST.  
-- TOM ALLEN

Liberty, when it begins to take root, is a plant of rapid growth.  
-- George Washington



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