| SPOTLIGHT |

Should there be a democratic student government in BRAC University?

This question was asked to 24-year-old Kamrunnahar Dana, a law student at BRAC, who had been bracing the streets in front of her institution throughout the first week of August protesting injustice.

"Yes," she says simply. Her answer needs no clarification because the demand for representation is a matter of rights.

Such a forum would also allow them to raise their voices against academic and administrative irregularities, she believes.

The students of BRAC University held a demonstration at their campus on July 30, 2017, protesting the alleged assault of terminated law department teacher Farhaan Uddin Ahmed by three administrative staff, including the registrar, and demanding a fair probe.

"The moment some of the students heard that Farhaan Sir was assaulted, they called the other students of our department and eventually within next half an hour, we started gathering at the registrar building. The situation deteriorated when the security guards started assaulting our female students

universities in Bangladesh, there is no representative student body through which students can raise their demands about their educational rights in a systematic way. Though students are a major stakeholder in a university, they have little to no decision-making power within their institutions. Even if a university fails to provide them with a service, they have no recourse but to raise the issue in an ad hoc manner to faculty and administration, with no guarantee that this issue will be solved.

For instance, 22-year-old Tani Akter Rima, a student of Mechanical Engineering at Sonargaon University informs us that her department doesn't have any laboratories, even though they are an essential part of their studies. "We have heard that there is a lab in another branch of our university, in my two years of university life, our teachers never took us there. Whenever we ask our teachers about it, they too agree that it is necessary, but it all stops there. At this point, many of my classmates have almost given up, thinking that their demands will not be accepted," argues Tani.

Besides, recently Tani was informed by a news report that her university has been marked as a 'Very Risky' place by Bangladesh Fire Service and Civil Defence, as they don't have adequate fire and safety measures.

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than improve, the academic environment.

Professor Din M Sumon Rahman of ULAB believes that it would be unwise to encourage a student body. "If we want to formalise student politics, there is a high chance that the polluted politics we see in public institutions will enter here. Most private universities do not have the capacity yet to tackle the complications that would arise should party politics find its way to the campuses."

Professor of English at University of Dhaka and BRAC University, Syed Manzoorul Islam, agrees that in public universities, student politics have been dominated by the ruling party over the years and the scope of leftist students who actually work for the welfare of students in general and their educational issues has become limited. However, he doesn't believe that the solution lies in creating apathetic, apolitical citizens.

"Students should be able to engage through democratic bodies to establish their educational rights, to demand things like libraries, sports facilities, research opportunities or cultural activities. I think the authorities and government should also assist them in this regard," Islam explains. "If we cannot ensure such bodies, a large segment of our future generation will not fully realise the importance of

opportunity to develop their leadership in a democratic way and have little space to express their opinion, a simple buyer-seller relationship is all that exists between a student and her university.

This also leads to a lack of ownership and an apolitical culture. As such, students cannot develop responsibilities towards society or the country. "To prevent the creation of apolitical citizens, we need to have organisations representing the students of our private universities, where they can vote to elect leaders who will represent them when authorities make a decision," argues Nandi.

If the authorities make a decision for the students in their absence, it can never be a student-friendly decision, adds Nandi. Liton Nandi is perhaps best known as a positive example of how student leaders can bring about positive changes, because of his fight for justice for the victims of sexual violence during the Pahela Baishakh of 2015. In the incident where women celebrating on the grounds of Dhaka University were strategically assaulted, Nandi served as a witness on the stand, and also campaigned for justice to be dealt out.

He informs us that Chhatra Union already has a supporter-base in some of these private universities if students who want to exert more power over issues of

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In most private universities in Bangladesh, there is no representative student body through which students can raise their demands about their educational rights in a systematic way.

Is 'politics' a dirty word?

Unfortunately, students, teachers and parents alike seem to conflate student politics with party politics, thinking that student movements would spoil, rather than improve, the academic environment.

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during demonstrations on the third day," says Dana. "Since we had no student body or representatives, things happened on an ad hoc basis," she adds.

Syed Saad Andaleeb, the Vice Chancellor of BRAC University, says that "though he is happy that the students have not caused any harm to the university or public property, the movement could have been more organised."

"If we could directly talk to their representatives, we could have come up with a mutual decision based on their demands," he says.

But who really represent students when no elected student government or union has ever existed in the university?

When the VC was asked whether student governments is needed, he states, "Yes, there is a need for student-led governance for major issues like curriculum design and teacher recruitment."

Then, why has there been no student government in any private university yet? "It's because there are no research findings in Bangladesh advocating that student governance is needed. We are still learning," he says.

The protest successfully reached its goals on August 5, with the authorities agreeing to most of the students' demands. Had there been an elected student body, would the students have had to take to the streets?

Unfortunately, in most private

"We are providing a pretty big amount of money every semester, but we are not getting what we are entitled to from our university. It is our right to have sufficient facilities, but we are helpless as we don't have a proper channel where we can raise such questions, pass our message to the authorities and eventually get a fruitful decision upon mutual discussion," rants a frustrated Tani.

It is a very common allegation that private universities are doing brisk business by charging exorbitant admission and tuition fees from students, but, students claim, in the absence of a collective body to bargain on their behalf, it is difficult, if not impossible, to press forth their demands in a systematic and sustainable manner. "We think about it often, but who'll fight the fight? Most students are self-absorbed and don't really want to take the initiative to tackle the big issues," says Quazi Fahmee Naz, a student of University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB).

One of the few times a student can have a say within their institution is through anonymous evaluation of their curriculum, teachers, infrastructures and other university facilities. However, in some cases, students claim that they don't observe any significant changes that reflect their assessments.

"We have a teacher who is teaching the same lectures—showing the same

slides—for years now and many of our classmates, seniors and juniors, know this. However, we didn't observe any change after our evaluation!" says a student at East West University wanting to stay anonymous. The fact that he did not want to reveal his real name shows that he is afraid his rights will not be protected because there is nobody to represent him.

The situation is worse however in universities of comparatively low standards, where students have no formal evaluation process and hence hardly have a platform to pass the message on to the authorities. However, it is clearly mentioned in the Private University Act 2010 that in order to establish good governance, universities should conduct a meeting at least once a year with teachers, students, guardians, alumni and other stakeholders in order to solve various problems. Based on the findings, the authorities should form and

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implement different development programmes. In reality, when students of different private universities were asked, none of them had heard of or attended such programmes.

At times, students shy away from participating in student-led movements for fear of retaliation from authorities. For instance, the movement against the imposition of the value-added tax on education too was rife with threats of negative sanctions from the authorities, says a former student of AIUB on condition of anonymity.

It appears that private universities, for the most part, want to discourage their students from participating in student politics. In fact, most universities clearly state that during student admission no political activities are allowed on campus. Even students have a tendency to not get involved in political activities, thinking that it would be harmful for their careers and future. Unfortunately, students, teachers and parents alike seem to conflate student politics with party politics, thinking that student movements would spoil, rather

democratic expression and critical thinking, which is a great threat for the nation's future."

Dr. Dina M Siddiqi, Professor of the Economics and Social Sciences Department at BRAC University, sheds light on the role of student bodies based on her teaching experience in different countries. "Students do need a body to represent them and their interests. A student government body—registered with the university, with elected members and a recognised governance structure—exists in most places I've taught," says Siddiqi. "They provide a reliable conduit for communications between the administration and students informed, especially in times of crisis. However, they are not formed exclusively to address grievances but also to make undergraduate life more meaningful. In general, I think that a participation in the political life of the university is an ideal way for young people to learn about citizenship, rights and responsibilities."

In the absence of an established student body, the scope for confusion, manipulation and misunderstanding expands exponentially—especially when things are worked out in an ad hoc manner, she adds.

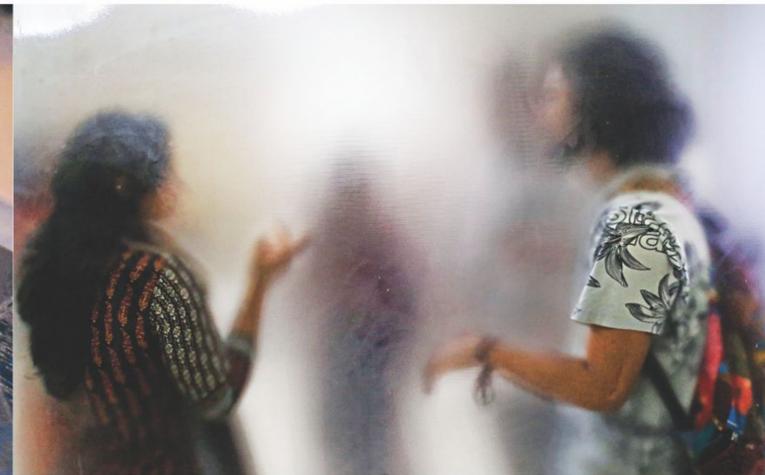Liton Nandi, General Secretary, Bangladesh Chhatra Union (BCU) also argues that depriving students from their democratic rights is not a wise decision. Nandi says that if students don't get the

PHOTO: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

governance within their institutions.

"Currently, we are planning to raise two demands through a convention in September: standardised tuition fees across all universities and a platform for students in all institutions. The students have full potential, but often they are afraid to do anything in fear of retaliation from the institution or their families," he adds.

Students, too, believe that cutting off the head to cure a headache cannot be a viable solution. "Why would authorities fear democratic bodies that represent the true interest of students? It makes us wonder if they want to suppress our voices," says a student of Southeast University on conditions of anonymity.

"If I get a platform to represent myself as a student leader for a thousand students, then at the end of my university life, I will dare to lead 10,000 people in any kind of organisational settings," explains Zahid Gogon, an alumni of ULAB, who played a vital role in the 'No Vat on Education' movement in 2015. "This is a valuable skill that you cannot learn in the classroom."

Student politics does not always mean violence, or petty party politics. Allowing and encouraging students to engage in politics, to engage in decision-making within their institutions, allows them to address the pertinent issues affecting their education while also making them responsible citizens who can take lead to change the world for the better. ∎