

COMBINED UNIVERSITY ADMISSION TESTS

# Why a unified system is necessary in Bangladesh

MD SHAMSUL AREFIN

UNIVERSITY admission procedures vary from country to country, and sometimes from institution to institution in a country. In many countries, prospective university students apply for admission during their last year of higher secondary school or community college. In some countries, there are independent organisations or government agencies responsible for organising centralised admission tests and the processing of applications.

Before we discuss the situation in Bangladesh, let us take a look at the various admission tests in various countries. Australia, for example, has centralised processing units for admission to undergraduate degrees for the high school graduates of Australia and New Zealand. In order to enter university in Brazil, candidates must undergo a central public examination called "Vestibular," which lasts about one week and takes place once a year. They have created a unified, national university application system known as SISU for all kinds of admission in the university level education.

In the People's Republic of China, high school leavers are required to sit for the two-day National College Entrance Exam (Gaokao), the results of which determine which university they can attend.

In India, university admission tests are organised by an independent body. Preference is given more to a student's performance in the tests than their past academic record. The applicants are ranked by their exam grades, and they can choose universities/programmes based on their grades. Among such entrance tests are the Joint Entrance Exam, Common Admission Test (CAT), etc.

Germany, Greece, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan and some other countries have centralised admission tests for the enrolment of students into universities.

In Turkey, there is a highly competitive, centralised university admission system. Every higher secondary school leaver is entitled to sit for the standardised university entrance exam in June, which is organised by the Student Selection and Placement Centres under the Ministry of Education. A point system is used to control access to each course. Students have to submit a list of up to ten of their preferred institutions or universities, and these are taken into account when universities work out course requirements after the exam

results have been published.

In the United States, there is no single, nationwide university admission system. But there are a number of post-secondary admission tests used by its 3,000 institutions, including the Scholastic Assessment Test. The SAT is a three-hour, non-academic exam intended to measure basic skills. At the time of admission, most universities look for the students' SAT scores in addition to higher secondary school certificates.

Students must also list their academic qualifications and extracurricular interests in their curricula vitae. Universities charge a fee of up to USD 50 for each individual

their own preference.

Any student with an HSC or equivalent certificate is entitled to apply for the test. Admission tests are almost entirely based on the curricula set by the central admission agency like the University Grants Commission in Bangladesh.

Critics of the system, however, complain that because computers match students to courses on the basis of their total score, aspects such as a student's personality are not taken into consideration, which can cause difficulties in case of people-based subjects.

In many countries, universities make their first round of offers just days after

higher than the number of seats available.

Unlike Europe, it is not possible in Bangladesh to create a system in which students with a science background can automatically qualify for entry to an arts course, because of our school curricula. However, it is entirely possible to introduce a Combined University Admission Test under the University Grants Commission which will reduce the time it takes a student to prepare and sit for admission tests, and minimise their costs and sufferings.

Courses that lead directly to professional qualifications, such as engineering and medicine, may be targeted



PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

application. Application forms are usually available a year in advance and closing dates differ from university to university. As there is no central administration body, students send their application forms to the institution itself. Students are notified of their acceptance between April and June and take up their places in autumn.

In many developing countries, university admission systems use a common point method administered by the University Grants Commissions. Students submit a list of up to 20 course choices to the Central Applications Office (CAO) by the beginning of February each year. They can choose ten degree courses and/or ten diploma/certificate courses. Students are urged to list them in order of

the exam results of the central admission tests are published and the second round of offers come sometime later to fill up any vacancies left. Applicants are entitled to a place on the highest preferences that tally with their exam score.

Italy prides itself on its long-established principle of "free access" for every school leaver to all degree courses. Any Italian student with a school leaving certificate has the right to enrol for any degree course at any state university. This system has worked because the supply of students does not exceed the demand for students for enrolment.

But in some developing countries, including Bangladesh, the scenario is completely different as the number of students seeking admission is much

first for arranging separate combined admission tests, and then gradually, general universities may also be brought into a centralised admission test system. All we need to understand is why many countries have gone for such systems, which, if adopted in Bangladesh, will obviously ease the sufferings of millions of admission seekers across the country.

I think the authorities of our education sector need to consider this option. The good thing is, it will not require huge investment on the part of the government. That said, caution must also be exercised so that question papers for the centralised admission tests are not leaked.

MD SHAMSUL AREFIN IS DIRECTOR GENERAL, ANTI-CORRUPTION COMMISSION.

## Seventy years of Partition

### The state of the region

TWO of the countries of the subcontinent—Pakistan and India—celebrated their Independence Day on the 14th and 15th August respectively. Seventy years ago in August the region saw the end of the colonial rule and division of the land creating two countries out of one. A lot of water has flown through the Indus and the Ganges during this time which has witnessed tumultuous events that have had far-reaching consequences on the democratic and socio-economic fabric of the countries, including the splitting of Pakistan.

Pakistan has had to suffer many setbacks since its birth, not least of all the loss of the two main architects of its independence—Jinnah and Liaquat Ali Khan. The inability of the central leadership to address diversity of the country and the provincial discrepancy coupled with the democratic deficit led to its eventual dismemberment in 1971. In spite of the considerable development and economic progress Pakistan has made so far, interventions in politics by the army almost every ten years since 1958 have stunted the growth of democratic culture in that country. Extremism and terrorism have taken a very heavy toll on the country on all counts.

India was, for the many newly decolonised countries of the world, a role model of democracy, secularism, an epitome of inclusive and tolerant society. The inherent democratic culture of the Indian leaders, who guided India through the seminal stages of its independence, helped to strengthen its democratic institutions. Democracy and secularism were synonymous with India which earned it accolades from the rest of the world. However, one sees a gradual denudation of the values and ethos which have stood India apart from others, with a sudden rise of communalism in the country. If one accepted Hindutva as an expression of Hindu nationalism, its manifestation in the form of 'goraksha' vigilante groups—which target the Muslims—not only denits its past credentials but causes concern among its minorities also. The UP government run by a yogi is testimony to how Hindutva firebrands are gripping India also.

Bangladesh has more than a vicarious association with 1947. We suffered the trauma of the killing of the Father of the Nation not long after our liberation. Democracy in Bangladesh too had stumbled, and we have had our share of military interventions, but we feel confident that democracy in the last 25 years has taken root. However, the fissiparous forces of extremism and religious intolerance have tried to raise their heads from time to time. But we have managed to keep these in check. Nonetheless, the only means to ensure that such tendencies are snuffed for good is an egalitarian society served by a truly democratic dispensation reflecting the true aspirations of the people. Anything short will defeat the reason for which we parted ways with Pakistan in 1971.

Last seventy years of a decolonised and independent subcontinent have many things to rejoice in, but it is not an unalloyed celebration. We should have done better.

## A ludicrous act

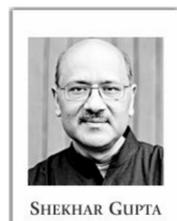
### Removing topsoil of embankment to repair it!

IN a disastrous move, the Water Development Board (WDB) gave directions to repair breaches on the embankment of Shib river in Chasigram area under Mohonpur upazila of Rajshahi. The initiative was less than a well-thought-out move as topsoil was being removed from the length of the embankment that was to be used to repair the damaged portion of the levee. It has both locals and experts worried who argue that cutting soil from the levee in the rainy season to repair the breaches will further weaken the embankment and that is precisely what has happened.

We are not sure whose bright idea it was to fill bags with soil instead of sand, as soil is more prone to being washed away and sand particles, being denser than soil, are better suited for the task. The floods have already adversely affected substantial areas of agricultural lands and the last thing we need is counterproductive interventions by local authorities.

The structure that needs repair should be done with the correct material which has been ignored by WDB and now more areas of Rajshahi's Mohonpur upazila have experienced fresh inundation. It is time to stop this madness and take sensible corrective measures to strengthen the embankment and not weaken it.

# Do minorities matter?



SHEKHAR GUPTA

HAMID Ansari's concern over unease among Indian minorities came just after Pakistan swore in its first Hindu cabinet minister in 20 years. Truth is contrary to this clickbait.

Let's set this argument up by borrowing our courtroom judges' method by stating the bare facts first. We will argue and conclude later whether it is a good or a bad thing.

With the departure of Mohammad Hamid Ansari, Indian political history has opened a new chapter. I have checked, even deep-trawled the history of many short-term governments, but failed to find another instance at least in the past 50 years when none of our top political positions—president, vice-president, prime minister, speaker of Lok Sabha and top ministries (home, finance, defence, external affairs)—was held by a member of one of our minority communities. I know, you'd be tempted to Google and prove me wrong on this, but please do remember that not just Muslims and Christians, but Sikhs are a minority too.

Check instead the names of the members of the Narendra Modi cabinet. It's unique in our independent history for having just one member of a minority in the main cabinet: it's NDA partner Akali Dal's Harsimrat Kaur Badal with the all-important portfolio of food processing (or minister for chutney, pickles, jam and juice, as her resentful loyalists say). Go further down to junior ministers and some names will pop up. Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi is the seniormost minister of state from the minorities now, with independent charge. Please note his portfolio is minority affairs. We also find MJ Akbar as MoS, external affairs.

I don't find any others, although names sometimes can be misleading, especially for Christians. So, is this council of ministers also unique in not featuring any Christian? That, when BJP's allies rule some predominantly Christian northeastern states. Besides Meghalaya,

Mizoram and Nagaland, almost entirely Christian states, and Punjab and Jammu and Kashmir, none of the remaining 24 Indian states has a chief minister from the minorities. Carry on further. The Modi-Amit Shah BJP is the strongest national political party since Indira Gandhi's heyday. Who are its most visible minority faces besides those holding political office: Shah Nawaz Hussain, SS Ahluwalia and maybe, next to him, Tajinder Pal Bagga.

You could counter this with a similar count for the Congress, Left and heartland parties claiming to be secular. But it only strengthens our first conclusion: India's minorities have never been so out of the power structure. They are justified in having a sense of unease about it.

Our politics provides the most fascinating paradoxes, rooted in reality laced with folklore. LK Advani and Atal Bihari Vajpayee (the order is deliberately chosen) resurrected their party from the ashes of 1984 by working on one of these: the Hindu majority's minority complex. Contrary to the true-believing, Left-secular chic view, it wasn't all fictional or orchestrated by calculated mass self-pity.

Decades of Congress rule had seen Nehru's hard yet relatively easy secularism yield to Indira Gandhi's in-your-face minorityism and then Rajiv Gandhi's historic capitulation over the Shah Bano case. It was so dramatic it even left his own party's liberal Muslims disillusioned: rising Muslim star and a MoS then, Arif Mohammed Khan, who grew out of Aligarh Muslim University student politics, quit in protest. For the conservative Hindu (not necessarily BJP voters) this was contrasted with the same party's reformist zeal in enacting the Hindu Code Bills. How could the same party now woo the Muslim clergy like this? This gave Advani an opening and this minority complex among the majority changed Indian politics in a fundamental way. The result is today's minority-mukt Bharat Sarkar.

In 1993-94, I wrote a monograph "India Redefines its Role" (Adelphi 1995) for the London-based International Institute for

Strategic Studies (IISS). Anticipating the rise of BJP as India's dominant political force, it discussed this phenomenon. Answering his first no-confidence motion as prime minister, Vajpayee quoted from it and said, with a tone of deep regret: something unusual has happened. The Hindu majority has acquired a minority complex. He wanted this debated.

Far from defending it, he was noting it with disappointment and the promise that he would do something about it. Please note, therefore, that in 1998 he was applauded for highlighting the majority's concern. Two decades since, Hamid Ansari is attacked for noting the same concern among minorities. We need to listen to him as seriously as we did to Vajpayee. Presuming that Vajpayee was right, has our politics over-corrected

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subsequently? If so, is Ansari flagging a genuine concern? Is a rectification called for? And finally: do minorities matter? \*\*\*

Three young, imperfect and distinct Asian democracies have wrestled with this question. In an interview with me in 1993, late Shimon Peres had said the only nations in a vast expanse from Bay of Bengal to the Mediterranean which allowed all their citizens—including Muslim minorities—a fair vote were Israel and India. So minorities did matter to his country but it didn't give them full democratic rights and choices available to its Jewish citizens. This dilemma, squaring the ideology of a Jewish state with modern, liberal democracy, was brought to us John Le Carré readers through the mind of

Khalil the protagonist of his *The Little Drummer Girl*. If Israel wanted to retain the West Bank territories and gave all its Arabs the vote, it would cease to be a Jewish state. If it denied it to them, it would no longer be a republic. Israel does remain an odd democracy, where everybody has a vote but not equality. No questions are raised if its Arabs can't rise to high positions.

Subsequently, Pakistan has joined Peres's two democracies, if a spasmodic one. Like Israel, it's an ideological state and faces the same question. If minorities have equal political rights, can it be an Islamic republic? Its founders put the white strip in its green flag to represent the minorities. But in politics, they continued with colonial-style reserved constituencies for minorities. It yields interesting tokenisms like the new minister for interprovincial coordination Darshan Lal, or even a moment of secular pride in commemorating its army's first Sikh officer, Harcharan Singh, or now a Hindu martyr, Lance Naik Lal Chand Rabari. At the same time, a politician who justifies abduction and forcible conversion of minor Hindu women is celebrated, widespread victimisation continues to drive Hindus out, diminishing their population. Of course, besides Hindus, Sikhs and Christians there are also minorities such as Ahmadis who are dismissed and persecuted as godless apostates.

The Indian Right has a point in previous Congress-secular governments playing the game of minority vote banks. It's also true that the minorities voted against the BJP and kept Congress and allies in power and now, as demonstrated in the Uttar Pradesh elections, their vote banks do not matter. Of course, our government will ensure their safety, improve their social conditions, but please do not ask for a share in power, barring a tokenism we might create at some point: our own Darshan Lal. We will then be choosing the Pakistani answer: minorities do not matter. Let us conclude with a question: as we redefine our nationalism, is Pakistan to finally be our inspiration?

Shekhar Gupta is an Indian journalist. Twitter: @ShekharGupta

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

### Withdraw recruitment fees

Three lakh eighty-nine thousand applicants applied to sit for the 38th BCS examinations against only two thousand twenty-four posts. According to the information provided by the Public Service Commission, a large number of applicants won't be able to sit for the examinations just because they couldn't pay the fees. It's really unfortunate. The fee may not be a big deal to many, but some students may not be able to afford it. Considering the inability of some applicants to be able to pay such fees, the Bangladesh Bank had removed all such fees on recruitment exams in the banking sector. We urge the concerned authorities to do the same for all the government, non-government and private recruitment exams as well.

MD. TOFAZZEL HOSSAIN  
 KUSHITIA