



PHOTO: KAISAR AHAMED

"Sullen faces like slates of grey—what I'd seen on a walk today." — Jess C. Scott

SNAPSHOT

MAILBOX

Please note we have a new email address:
starweekendtds@gmail.com

October: Breast cancer awareness month

October is known to us as 'Breast Cancer Awareness Month'. It is a matter of great regret that in our country still many women die from this disease every year without any diagnosis and treatment. A recent research on cancer prevalence in Bangladesh showed that at least 7,135 people died from breast cancer in 2016 in Bangladesh and almost all of these victims are women. Still cancer treatment is very expensive in our country. The majority of the breast cancer patients cannot get adequate treatment in the country due to expensive and hazardous medical services. Very few of Bangladesh's cancer patients can go abroad for diagnosis and better treatment. Due to resource constraints and unattainable expenses, a large number of breast cancer patients still remain undiagnosed and succumb to premature death. However, experts suggest that we can considerably improve this disappointing situation simply

through raising awareness. Healthy eating habit and disciplined lifestyle can effectively prevent this fatal disease. Our government should take initiatives to fight cancer by popularising healthy diet comprised of vegetables and fish. However, nutrition of the female members of our family, who often have to do all the hard works at home, is largely overlooked. Experts think that it is one of the major reasons behind high prevalence rate of breast cancer in Bangladesh. We should ensure that female members of our family particularly expecting mothers get adequate nutrition all over the year.

Marshia Afrin
Mirpur, Dhaka

Letter to the Editor of *Star Weekend*

Dear Ms Editor,

Allow me to share with you my dismay when I read last Friday, October 20, the article "Catalunya, the first new independent country since the starving State of South Sudan?", written by Mr Bareesh Hassan Chowdhury, "a recent Political Science graduate", at *Star Weekend*.

The opinion article shows a great number of inaccurate data regarding Spain and also disdain regarding the people of a newly African independent country that struggles, with the support of the international community, to find peace and to move forward for its development and freedom. I felt ashamed for that.

The citizens of the Kingdom of Spain, including the majority of those who live in the Autonomous Region of Catalonia, want also peace, prosperity and freedom. After decades without those values that we consider essential to our lives, we all voted a democratic Constitution in 1978. This Constitution has been the main factor of our coexistence as a unified nation, with a big degree of powers transferred both to our 17 autonomous regions and two autonomous cities of Ceuta and Melilla and also, on another level, to the European Union. The rule of law is, therefore, the rule of the people and every level of government is obliged to it. All Spanish citizens vote every four years for local, regional, national and European elections.

The irresponsible attitude of some, trying to break both Spanish and Catalanian law (as the Bill that frames the self-government of Catalonia was voted by both Spanish and Catalanian parliaments), has forced the Spanish Government, under its powers conferred by the Constitution, to restore the rule of law and the peaceful coexistence of the citizens who live in Catalonia, according with provisions of article 155 of our Constitution and with the support of main political parties. This decision that has to be approved by the Spanish Senate wants to be a temporary one as elections will be called in the Autonomous Region of Catalonia within six months.

I am very much at your disposal to give you further information, as well as your colleagues of *The Daily Star*. Nevertheless, I ask you to publish this letter in your next weekly magazine as an answer to the article of Mr. Chowdhury. I thank you.

Kind regards,

Álvaro de Salas Giménez de Azcárate
Ambassador of Spain in Bangladesh

The opinions expressed in these letters do not necessarily represent the views of the *Star Weekend*.

EDUCATION

Every year, after the university admission tests, we find students who score well, but cannot afford their educational expenses, and eventually drop out. Private banks, on the other hand, offer many lucrative loan products for their customers, including education loans. Education loans, the banks claim, are provided with a view to fulfilling one's dream of higher studies. In reality however, how accessible are these loans to the students who most need them? 21-year-old Adiba Hasnat Deena, who wanted to get admitted to a private medical college in Savar informs that her father managed BDT 15 lakhs by selling off one of their lands in the village, but she needed an extra 15 lakhs for her study. "One of my friends told me about the education loans offered by our banks. I thought the banks will loan me the additional amount, which I could repay after completing my MBBS. But, to my despair, I found out that these loans are actually tailored around the income capacity of parents. Since my father's salary was not up to the required level, I failed to borrow the money from the banks," explains Deena. Deena is now studying chemistry at the University of Dhaka.

Though in developed countries, study loans are issued directly to the students against their merit and future job prospects, here in Bangladesh, the situation is different. In order to get a loan for the purpose of higher education, the parents generally have to earn a minimum of BDT 15,000-20,000 per month, to be repaid within the next one to five years. According to a recent report by Centre for Bangladesh Studies, the average monthly income of the bottom 40 percent was BDT 10,657 in 2015.

Many applicants who wish to borrow money for education purposes share similar bitter experiences about the process. "When I applied for a loan at one of the private banks for my ACCA (Association of Chartered Certified Accountants) degree, the bank authority asked for supporting documents of my admission. But the university authorities would not provide the documents before I officially got admitted there. As a result, I was finally refused," says a student applicant. "However, they offered me a personal loan service against my monthly income, but it was small in proportion to my actual need," she adds. She prefers to remain anonymous because her personal loan application is still being processed.

According to Md Lutful Haider, Head of Corporate Affairs, Mercantile Bank Limited, when a bank provides loans for educational purposes, it needs to secure the loan as much as possible, and as such, they use cash or property (for example, house, flat or land) as collateral. "When it comes to education loans, the risk of default is higher compared to a home or car loan. And that's why banks need to be quite strict while giving out loans," says the bank official. Mercantile Bank Limited provides education loans for both local and overseas education and offers up to BDT 5 lakhs for local and 20 lakhs for overseas education. It charges 12 percent interest.

Rasheda K Choudhury, Executive Director of Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE), highlights the importance of education loans in higher education. "Education is one of our basic needs, but the state only provides free education to students up to class eight. What of higher education, where the state cannot ensure free education for all? If we can at least ensure



IMAGE: COURTESY

FINANCING TERTIARY EDUCATION

NILIMA JAHAN

accessible education loans for students, middle and lower income groups will be the beneficiaries," says Choudhury. "But we should bear in mind that the rate of interest should be lowered in order to make it accessible and our banking procedures should be made easier, so that people don't get discouraged."

Many potential applicants also highlight that the excessive interest rate, which is 10-16 percent in Bangladesh, acts as a deterrent for students and their parents. As Anu Muhammad, Professor of Economics, Jahangirnagar University, notes, "We have not yet been able to establish the system of education loans as a feasible option for our students. The rates are exorbitant when compared to the income level of students (or their families) that need the help the most. Even students

who have jobs will shy away from taking these loans for fear of debt."

Bank and economic analyst, and former Chief Executive Officer of Citibank NA in Bangladesh, Mamun Rashid sheds light on why the education loan has not yet become popular in our country. "In Bangladesh, we cannot ensure quality education where a student will be able to repay the money, immediately after finishing his/her education. But, in many developed countries the banks show a positive attitude towards students because the job prospects are better. In Bangladesh, it is uncertain whether the students can repay the money within the promised time," says Rashid.

Another problem is that the central bank does not provide any incentives to the private banks in the form of subsidies, he argues. "If banks were encouraged, maybe they would be more eager to lend money to students," Rashid adds.

However, Anu Muhammad argues that private banks should learn from other countries where education loans are provided at lower rates. "They should not compare student loans with other commercial loans. These should be made available at a minimum profit for the banks," he proposes. "The University Grants Commission (UGC) may form a guideline after discussing the issue with banks, so that an easy repayment student loan service can be introduced," he adds.

Rasheda K Choudhury also argues that we must ensure gender equity and that banks must give priority to women. Otherwise, she believes, people might be more interested in taking loans for male members of the family only. ■



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