

Salvaging our higher education

Is our higher education in such a state of desperation?



AN Economist Intelligence Unit and British Council survey in 2014 reported that Bangladesh had the lowest employability among university graduates in South Asia—nearly half (47) of graduates out of a hundred

were unemployed compared to 30 out of 100 in India and Pakistan. There are methodology issues about the calculation. Even then, they indicate a serious problem.

An article in *Times Higher Education Supplement* in 2016 reported about Bangladesh's "rickshaw faculty"—a nadir of academic exploitation" (David Matthews, October 12, 2016). It is a reference to ill-paid part-time faculty in the mushrooming private universities who have to run in a rickshaw from one class to another to teach in three or four universities to make ends meet. It spoke about "zombie students" who memorised texts without understanding or thinking and are taught by teachers who have no time to prepare for class or get to know their students.

The article provoked comments from academics in Bangladesh—some agreeing with the depiction and others denouncing it as based on bad research, tendentious, and journalistic sensationalism. Whether or not the story is fair in all its details, it is undeniable that there are serious problems of quality in the private universities as well as the public ones.

None of the Bangladeshi universities finds a place in top world rankings. Only a very few public and private universities are in Asian ranking at the lower end of the lists.

It is remarkably difficult to come up with a definition of quality in higher education and a method to measure this quality that would be commonly accepted. We have to go by indirect evidence of the kind I have mentioned, which are damning enough.

Higher education in Bangladesh is diverse and complex. There are 42 public universities formally established, of which 37 are functioning. They enrolled 3,150,409 students in 2016, including students in their

affiliated colleges. But the mainstream public universities enrolled only 260,084.

The vast majority of higher education students are in over 3,000 colleges under the National University (2.3 million students) and in some 1,200 madrasas under Islamic Arabic University (240,000 students). There is also the Open University which has 256,000 students on its roll in 2016.

The 86 private universities now in operation had an enrolment of 337,000 in 2016—adding up to a total of 600,000 students in regular universities.

The graduates of colleges under the National University are the bulk of mid-level personnel for both the public and the private sector as well as teachers for the K-12 school education system.

It is fair to say that the quality of the National University colleges determines the quality of the large majority of educated human resources in the country. This large segment of the tertiary education system is particularly weak in facilities and faculty, governance and the quality of graduates produced.

Sir Fazle Hasan Abed, founder of BRAC University and BRAC, the largest development NGO in the world, recently spoke about problems of higher education at the Dhaka University Senate Hall (Higher Education Assembly sponsored by Friedrich Ebert Foundation.)

Abed spoke of the goals concerning the kind of persons the graduates should be. "They should have good written and verbal communication skills... be able to think critically and apply scientific reasoning in solving problems... have skills to look at evidence and undertake basic quantitative analysis... be tech-savvy and both use and benefit from digital technology." They also should be "sensitive to the changing global world... accept and respect diversity and the plural identities of human beings which would serve as a moral compass for them."

Abed admitted that BRAC University does not have "a formula to ensure achievement of these goals." But the goals provide "an agenda and help us define the quality outcome we aspire to." Can as much be said for all private

and public universities?

A six-point agenda was proposed by Abed to bring about the changes in higher education so it serves the needs of an emerging middle-income country. He urged taking a systemic view, looking at different key components.

Abed advocated for a new approach in pedagogy and teachers' role in the university, a higher education initiative to improve quality of teachers and teaching at the school level, no expansion without providing for essential quality inputs, providing incentives for research, looking at financing and student loans to make the system equitable and ensure resources for quality inputs, and change in governance of higher education.

Abed spoke at some length on dysfunctional governance that nullified all well-intentioned reform. "Higher education—for that matter all education—needs to be out of bounds for political interference motivated by short-sighted views and factional or individual

interests," he said.

A serious problem is the student wings of the major political parties. Abed recalled a joint statement by five most respected educationists of the country. They had pleaded for severing the political party ties with student organisations.

In April 2010, when the National Education Policy was about to be announced, Professor Kabir Chowdhury, Professor Zillur Rahman Siddiqi, Professor Jamal Nazrul Islam, Professor Anisuzzaman, and Professor Serajul Islam Chowdhury had made this appeal. Three of them are no more today. "This appeal is more relevant today than ever," said Abed.

"Mal-politics—or inappropriate influence of political parties, culture and personalities—has engulfed many aspects of education management and decision-making," Abed lamented.

"It embarrasses me to recite the litany of problems that have been listed in the news media and research reports. It is long and

painful—the wrong side of student politics leading to many kinds of crimes that would be credit to a mafia godfather."

Abed recalled "a glorious history of students' involvement in national politics, especially during the state language movement and in the 1960s and 1970s when students showed the way to political leaders at critical moments."

Those days are long gone. For almost three decades there has been no student union election in any institution of higher education, "because student politics have been completely taken over by the major political parties and student bodies have lost their independent existence," observed Abed. "Unless this situation changes, the election of student unions, now ordered by the high court, is not likely to bring a positive outcome."

Abed's remedy for ridding higher education from the influence of "mal-politics" are: i) A political decision at the highest level, as suggested by the distinguished educationists, to cut the umbilical cord connecting political parties and student bodies.

ii) The 1973 University ordinances and the 2010 Private University Act may be reviewed to ascertain where modifications may be needed; most important, however, is restraint of the political power structure on claiming control over the education system from a partisan angle.

iii) The University Grants Commission (UGC) should be restructured as the Higher Education Council with enhanced authority and professional capacity so that it can guide the development of higher education in larger national interest without wide-ranging control from the Ministry of Education.

iv) The National University should be decentralised to divisional level with appropriate professional capacity and authority, as was considered at one time but shelved without much explanation.

No nation has become a developed one without building a decent higher education system. The choices must be made now.

Manzoor Ahmed is professor emeritus at BRAC University.



India-Nepal ties: Leaving bitterness behind

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA

AS Nepal Prime Minister Khadga Prasad Sharma Oli wrapped up his foreign visit to India (April 6-8) two months after assuming power in February, the two countries have put behind them a nearly three-year phase in bilateral ties marred by mutual recrimination, suspicion and distrust. In a media briefing after talks between Oli and his Indian counterpart Narendra Modi, Indian Foreign Secretary explained it as a historic visit by the visiting PM during which some "game-changing" decisions were taken by the two countries. But more importantly, both India and Nepal have indicated a clear change in how they will henceforth look at each other. And in this, the China factor has played a role.

To understand the change, it is essential to look back briefly at what happened over the last three years since Oli became the PM for the first time in 2015. India had reportedly tried to stop Oli from becoming the PM three years ago but failed. Then the Oli government was toppled in 2016 and replaced by a coalition of Nepali Congress and Oli's present Maoist ally led by Pushpa Kumar Dahal Prachanda. Oli was convinced that India was behind his ouster. Such was the bad blood created that when Oli spearheaded the communist coalition between his

own party—Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist Leninist) and Communist Party Nepal (Maoist Centre)—back to power in general elections this year, Nepal was considered as a classic example, along with the Maldives, where the Modi government's "neighbourhood first" policy had badly floundered.

When Nepalese parties were busy framing their new Constitution under a parliamentary democracy since rejecting monarchy 12 years ago, India was weighing down on the Nepalese leaderships to address the concerns of Madhesis, people of Indian origin who live along the border with India, about adequate representation in the future provincial and national legislatures. India-Nepal relations took a turn for the worse. The Madhesis enforced an economic blockade for four months to press their demands because Oli saw India's hand behind the blockade. Without naming names, Oli had accused India of interfering in Nepal's politics. Oli played the India card during the run up to parliamentary election this year and got a commanding mandate. It is this mandate and the successful adoption of Nepal's constitution that made the difference. As Indian Foreign Secretary Vijay Gokhale correctly described: "I think the circumstances in 2016 and today are different. The government of Nepal is a government which has been elected on the basis

of a constitution that has been passed."

Oli's pre-poll alliance with the Maoists was helped by China as India misread the political and public temper by supporting the Nepali Congress. The communist majority complicated things for India. It realised the flaw in its approach to Nepal and quickly mounted efforts to reach out to Oli who has always been seen as pro-China. Indian Ambassador to Nepal, Manjeev Singh Puri, gifted a birthday cake to Oli in February and another on the occasion of Holi on March 1. Modi congratulated Oli not once, but twice on the latter's election victory and rushed External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj to Kathmandu to mend the fences even before Oli's government could be sworn in. India also loosened its purse strings and increased its financial assistance to Nepal for the financial year beginning in April this year by 73 per cent.

And when Oli visited India, New Delhi and Kathmandu announced a set of key physical connectivity initiatives including a rail link from the Indian border town of Buxar to Kathmandu and opened up its inland waterways to give land-locked Nepal access to the sea for commerce. India also agreed to expedite some of the other long-pending rail connectivity and power sector projects as delay in their implementation have been a major complaint of Nepal. China has

already given Nepal access to its ports and has been discussing the construction of a rail link that would connect Kathmandu with Tibet. Besides, there is a move by China to supply Nepal petroleum products for which Nepal has so far been dependent solely on India.

During his stay in Delhi, Oli repeatedly talked about a trust-based relationship with India, an unmistakable allusion to the previous trust-deficit. He also talked about refashioning India-Nepal ties keeping in mind the reality of the 21st century. Manjeev Singh Puri also said that the relations "should be taken forward in a manner which is invigorated and which is in keeping with the needs of the time i.e. the 21st century."

In the run up to the 2018 elections and after, Oli has more than once made it clear that Nepal's foreign policy would not be India-centric anymore and would look to diversify to other countries, more particularly, its northern neighbour China, while maintaining equidistance from New Delhi and Beijing—leveraging its relations with both the giants. By hosting Pakistan's Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi as the first foreign leader to visit Kathmandu since the new Nepalese government took over, Oli was seen to have sent a veiled message to New Delhi about his desire to pursue an independent foreign policy.

However, Oli or any Nepalese leader for that matter knows the crucial role played by India in the Himalayan country's transition from monarchy to a multi-party democracy and how the armed underground Maoists were persuaded to accept the new political order, surrender their arms and come out from underground. The Nepalese political class knows the "special relationship" between the two countries with an open border—how lakhs of Nepalese nationals have for generations unfettered entry into India, study in India and take up jobs in India without any work permit. Nepal does not enjoy these facilities with China. So, it is for the people and leaders of Nepal to decide if they would like to have good relations with India or jeopardise them on a nationalist plank. It is for Nepal to decide whether it pays more to be closer to India or China.

What Oli's visit has done is provide India with an opportunity to rethink how to conduct its much-hyped "neighbourhood first" policy. In Nepal, Oli has repeatedly said that gone are the days when his country was dependent solely on India for its economic development. This is a far cry from the past when Nepalese leaders cutting across party lines used to drive home the point that Nepal's ties with India are a class apart because of geographical continuity and cultural affinities. For the ruling

communist dispensation in Nepal today, an independent foreign policy has become synonymous with the ability to stand up to India under the garb of nationalism because that sells easily in domestic politics.

For India, there are a number of questions to be answered when it comes to dealing with its neighbours like Nepal. Should India stand aloof and watch Nepal shaping its own course of action and hope that Kathmandu does not rush to Beijing's embrace? The limitations of India's influence on the Nepalese political elite was evident when New Delhi failed to nudge Kathmandu to drop a constitutional amendment to address the concerns of Madhesis. India has no option but to respect the electoral mandate in Nepal and deal with the government of the day even if it is not New Delhi's first preference. It raises a much bigger question: should India pick and choose the party it deals with in its neighbourhood? There is a school of opinion in India that if Delhi plays neutral in the political drama played out in its neighbourhood, it may allow China to make deeper inroads with huge security implications for India. Then there are forces in India's neighbouring countries which by their own conduct have not helped India remain neutral.

Pallab Bhattacharya is a special correspondent at The Daily Star.

QUOTABLE Quote

PABLO NERUDA (1904-1973)
Chilean poet-diplomat and politician

You can cut all the flowers but you cannot keep spring from coming.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS	32 Boot part	8 It points north
1 Momma's mate	33 Office helper	9 Bible pronoun
6 Almanac contents	34 Biting remark	10 Dune makeup
11 Impromptu	36 Realty unit	16 Sea dog
12 Hi from Ho	38 Districts	18 Utah ski resort
13 Make sport of	40 Office helpers	19 Close
14 Bourne's portrait	43 Collectively	21 Light gas
15 Comfy spot	44 Tuba part	23 Ignoble
17 Tater	45 Rum drink	24 Abound
18 Hill dwellers	46 Wintry weather	25 Choreography
20 "Lonely Boy" singer		27 Splotchy, as a horse
22 Stellar cat	DOWN	30 In the way of
23 Chicken choices	1 Butter serving	33 Ordeal
26 Lightning home	2 Dedicated work	34 Lure
28 Beginning	3 Daniel Day-Lewis film	35 Florence's river
29 Skilled worker	4 Sits for a portrait	37 Cleveland team, for short
31 Formerly known as	5 Deck toppers	39 Willy
	6 Craze	41 Second person
	7 Ketchikan native	42 Match component

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

A P E D G U I T A R
R O A R I N N A T E
E L S E I G G E D
S K Y W R I T E
R I O A S H E S
S P I N E S T A V E
A I D B A D L Y
P L E A T B A D L Y
S E R V E I L L
I M M O B I L E
E S C A P E I N O N
S P A R E S N E R D
S A T Y R S O R E S

Write for us. Send us your opinion pieces to dsopinion@gmail.com.

BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE FOR DINNER?
LAST NIGHT I HAD A BAD CASE OF HEARTBURN
HOW ABOUT A MILD CASE OF INDIGESTION?

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

MOM, HAMMIE SAID HI TO ME AT SCHOOL YESTERDAY.
THAT'S NICE.
NO! IT'S TOTALLY UNACCEPTABLE! I WAS WITH FRIENDS!
I LIKE TO KEEP MY SCHOOL AND HOME LIFE SEPARATE.
I COULD ASK HIM TO BE LESS POLITE, BUT I DON'T KNOW IF THAT'S EVEN POSSIBLE!