

17th Bangladesh Business Awards

Honouring institutions and entrepreneurs

THE Bangladesh Business Awards, jointly organised by DHL and *The Daily Star*, stepped into its 17th year on July 27 when it recognised the outstanding contributions of two companies and two individuals to the country's economy and development. The purpose of the awards was to recognise the contributions of individuals and institutions/business houses and honour their work. And as the finance minister so succinctly summed up, "The award is not only honouring the businesspeople, it is also recognising the contribution of the business community as a whole."

In this respect, there are a few points that we would like to flag. Though the government's ongoing efforts to reform rules and regulations to make the business environment should be commended, there needs to be better synchronisation between the public and private spheres to make doing business easier. There is a need for more favourable policies and simplification of rules of business which can happen if there is greater cooperation among different interest groups that include industries, entrepreneurs and policymakers. The synergy that makes for a convivial business environment, we feel, could be much better.

The Bangladesh Business Awards were introduced with the sole objective to create an environment of excellence that stands out as a challenge for members of the business community to reach greater heights of productivity, efficiency, financial discipline and modern management practices. In honouring the winners, we hope to encourage others in the same fields to emulate their work.

Abductors on the prowl

They must be apprehended

THE Comilla North AL president of the party was picked up on Friday from Lalmatia in broad daylight as he was returning from Jumma prayers. We are relieved that Pervez Hossain Sarkar was later released, almost 12 hours after being picked up. Pervez is not the first man to be picked up in such a manner. But he has been luckier than many victims, some of whom were picked up in broad daylight and some from their homes in the middle of the night. Some never returned, and those few lucky ones who did, suffered a bout of amnesia, it seems, since none of them would recall, or perhaps didn't want to, for some inexplicable reason, the circumstances of their kidnappings and what happened after they were kidnapped till released. Surprisingly, none of the kidnappers sought ransom for release, as in this case too.

And this is where our anxieties are compounded. Although the agencies have denied that they have had anything to do with the abductions, the statements of some of the victims' families point the finger at them. And we are not prepared to believe, as the home minister would want us to, that many of those who have disappeared are either jilted lovers or unsuccessful businessmen. And that is what begs the very question.

We would like to accept the version of the law enforcement agencies, but the question remains that there is a gang who are in the business of kidnapping and going about their ways with complete impunity. There have been many instances of abductions and kidnappings in the last few years, but the police have not been able to trace this group and apprehend them so far. This naturally creates an air of distrust and apprehension about the safety of individuals. And it is for the police to clear that air of mistrust which, unfortunately, pervades public mind. If that is not done, the credibility of the police will remain in question.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Cold-blooded murder of NSU student

The news of an injured passenger who was left for dead by the driver and supervisor of a bus has shocked the nation. The passenger, Saidur Rahman Payel, a North South University student, was badly wounded by the automatic door system of the bus he was travelling on. Instead of taking him to a nearby hospital, the staff of the bus threw him in a canal and left him to die.

They feared that they might have to face backlash and maybe bear the cost of treatment. But how can this justify their inhumane actions? Payel was still alive when he was thrown into the canal to die. We want justice for Payel. Md. Zillur Rahaman, *By e-mail*



UNIFORM ADMISSION EXAMS FOR UNIVERSITIES

What is holding us back?

NAZMIN TITHI

WITH most public universities already fixing dates for admission tests after the publication of this year's HSC examination results, the battle of admission seekers for getting a seat at their desired university is about to begin. Admission seekers along with their guardians will have to go from one district to another to sit for admission tests held at different public universities across the country. Apart from the hassles of the admission process, the financial burden is also considerable for the students, many of whom come from low and middle income backgrounds. They will have to spend a lot of money to buy admission forms, for travel and accommodation, not to mention the money they will be spending for admission coaching. Although a uniform admission test could solve many of these problems, there is little hope



PHOTO: STAR

that the system will be introduced anytime soon.

Back in 2010, the education ministry decided to introduce a uniform admission test or a "cluster system." They suggested that universities of similar characteristics be brought under an individual cluster for which a single admission test would be taken. Under the cluster system, admission seekers will be enrolled at the universities based on the merit list. For example, students would take one test for a place in any of the science and technology universities and another test for a place in any of the agriculture universities and so on. This would give students the option to choose the subject they want to study and also the university they want to get admitted to.

However, eight years on, no sign of progress is in sight regarding implementation of the decision. The reason is that our major public universities have been unable to reach a consensus on holding a centralised admission test. Many academicians, students and guardians believe that these universities are not in favour of the system because a centralised admission test would do away with the extra income of the univer-

sities and teachers through the sale of admission forms, invigilation and checking of answer scripts. While that is a major reason, there are other factors that have contributed to this situation.

Some reputed public universities of the country have reservations about holding a single admission test because they believe they would lose their distinction from others and such a test would compromise the quality of the test. Currently, BUET, Dhaka University or Jahangirnagar University hold their admission tests under strict invigilation and security in their own campuses. But in case of a uniform admission test, maintaining the same standard would be difficult. The Association of Universities of Bangladesh, a platform of vice-chancellors of public universities, are yet to come to any decision regarding introduction of a uniform exam system.

Apparently, a large number of students also think the

single test taken, which would eventually limit their scope to get admission in a reputed public university. In the current system if a student fails to get a seat at Dhaka University, they can take a test at another university. However, according to Prof Abdul Mannan, chairman of UGC, this is all a matter of perception. If students in the developed countries can be enrolled at a university based on scores of standardised tests such as SAT or GRE or GMAT, our students should also not fear taking a uniform test, he said.

Then there are prejudices among the general people regarding a uniform system, as was evident from the incident of Shahjalal University of Science and Technology (SUST). In 2014, Shahjalal University of Science and Technology and Jessore University of Science and Technology agreed to hold a combined admission test and had taken all the preparations accordingly. But they had to cancel the decision at the last moment because of protests by the local people who believed that a uniform test would bar the students of Sylhet to get admission in SUST.

So clearly, there is a lack of understanding among students and guardians about the uniform exam system. Farzana Islam, vice-chancellor, Jahangirnagar University, believes that a uniform system is always better because it would reduce the plight of the students. But before introducing this, more research needs to be done to understand the feasibility of the system. "We need to have serious discussions with the teachers, need to hold inter-university view exchange meetings, etc. which have not been done yet," said professor Islam.

From the '80s, our medical and dental colleges have been holding a single admission test. Currently, a uniform test is held for all public and private medical and dental colleges. When Chuet, Ruet and Kuwet were under the Bangladesh Institute of Technology (BIT), they used to hold a combined admission test as well. Clearly, there are examples that a uniform test does work and can make the process easy for admission seekers.

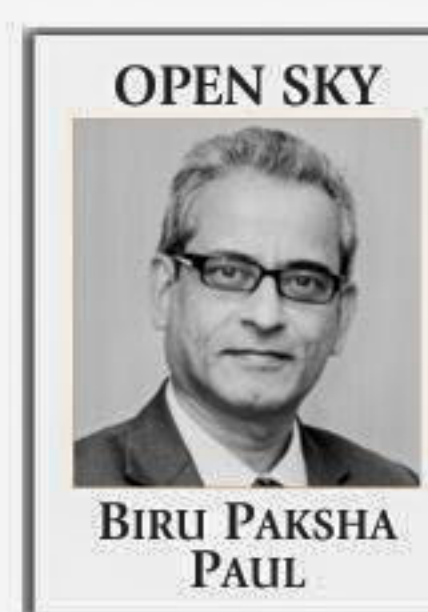
In many countries of the world—from Australia, China, Indonesia, and Japan, to many European countries—a centralised admission test is held for enrolling students into universities. In the USA, although there is no centralised university admission test, a large number of educational institutions admit students taking into account the scores of the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT), as well as their higher secondary school results. Even in India, there is an independent body which holds a standardised test for at least 500 institutions.

Although public universities might have issues regarding implementing the system as there are many subjects under different faculties, for engineering and agricultural universities it should not be a problem at all. Farzana Islam says, "We cannot say for sure that this will be the best system until we implement it. So, I think we should begin with some clusters first, rather than going for a single test for all subjects at one go. We should take one test first for, say, social science or life science, as an experiment, and see how it goes."

We should start the process keeping in mind the challenges of the system. A uniform admission test is the need of the time, which will not only save time and cost of admission seekers, but also reduce session jams that eat away precious time of a student's academic life. Hopefully, this will also stop the vicious coaching business. Introducing the system would definitely be a big achievement for Bangladesh.

Nazmin Tithi is a member of the editorial team, *The Daily Star*.

Quota issue from an economic perspective



OPEN SKY

BIRU PAKSHA PAUL

TRUTH shall prevail against lies and falsehood. And economic truths are often ruthless. They don't care for human sentiments or short-term political gains. The issue of quota in public service recruitment is basically an economic one and, despite the lull in student protests that we now see, it may emerge again

since there will be no overnight fix of the soaring unemployment in Bangladesh. Actually, the number of unemployed people in the country has touched one crore (ten million). Forget what the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics says about unemployment. It basically follows the defective definition of the ILO which shows our unemployment rate as low as 4.4 percent—which is equivalent to America's! In truth, the rate would be no less than 20 percent had we followed the US BLS standard.

For now, the quota agitation has been quelled through some palliative manoeuvres by the government, but the operation was all but faulty and incomplete. It's like the surgeon has stitched the cut but left the knife in the lower abdomen; the pain will be back and the patient will scream for his life. The quota-related turbulence is fundamentally an economic disequilibrium. Efforts to give it a political colour by the detractors have just added some fun to an otherwise dull life in the summer.

One need not be an economist to understand that quotas, price ceilings or price floors are distortive for the market. For instance, the minimum wage rule is an example of price floor. The US government keeps it close to the market outcome. As a result, the US enjoys a much lower unemployment rate than Europe, where minimum wages plus the benefits for the jobless are high. The recent decisions of President Trump to raise the wall of tariffs are equivalent to having some quotas that will hamper better allocation of resources and may create trade war with China. We are quite comfortable when it comes to criticising Trump, but we fail to recognise the barrier that we have raised and protected over time in Bangladesh's domestic market of employment. It's an irony.

Quotas exist in many countries including the developed ones. But they try to keep it as minimum as possible, fulfilling the needs of groups in need of special (read humanitarian) consideration. Preserving a reasonably minimum number of quotas for the physically challenged people and minority communities is a universal practice. But Bangladesh has



PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

taken this practice to a whole new level.

The latest round of quota protests ensued from frustrations over a high unemployment rate. There is no doubt about that. Students observed the ever-increasing quotas (now 56 percent) with alarm, depriving them of their right to merit-based recruitments and ruining their future prospects in the process. And that's quite natural in a society where jobs are scarce.

One interesting development was the formation of a high-level committee for quota review. Our past experiences with such high-level committees show that their findings are most likely to remain secret or be dumped (e.g. probe on BB's fund heist). This quota committee, after an initial failure to submit recommendations on time, asked for an unusual time extension of 90 days. Again, metaphorically, it was like starting to read a book on "how to extinguish fire" when your neighbour's house is already on fire. One wonders though about the 90-day extension. Isn't it too long? Is the committee inventing a new complicated formula of astrophysics? If the basic logic is understood, wouldn't only nine days be more than enough? Haven't we already got the report of the parliamentary committee? We forget that a delay of 90 days may haunt 90 thousand young people for the rest of their lives if their valid age for applying for a government job expires by the end of that period.

The PM was right when she acted out of her political wisdom and scrapped the quota system entirely. She saved the nation from a volcano that was about to erupt. She didn't ignore the employment issue for the

ethnic minorities and physically challenged people. Nor did she forget the special arrangements for the children of freedom fighters.

The fact is, quota is bad for the quality of human capital which would be the most important force in leading us to the threshold of a developed nation. Since the early 1990s, market liberalisation led South Asian nations to prosper. This requires a competitive labour market in a free, fair environment where jobseekers are employed based on their merit, not because of some quota privilege. Candidates who now enjoy the privileges of the quota system and are trying to protect it would be automatically employed if they are competent. And that is more dignified than getting a job with the aid of quotas, thus depriving the nation from the services of more eligible candidates.

The PM's initial thoughts in this line were a great synthesis of economic benefits and long-term political vision. Unfortunately, all these perceptions are now part of history and we have mummified the peaceful quota movement by hammering the forerunners. And those students who turned against their own kind as a political move, insulting and assaulting quota reformists in various universities, should realise that they are digging graves for their own future prospects. In all likelihood, the soaring unemployment in the country will trigger agitations against this unjust and growth-disruptive system again. Economic truths may be bitter, but they are unavoidable.

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