

Assaults on Ducsu VP unfortunate

What is the DU administration doing?

WE are shocked by the news of the humiliating treatment inflicted on the new Ducsu VP by Chhatra League activists at the Salimullah Muslim Hall of Dhaka University on Tuesday. It happened after Nurul Haq Nur along with several others visited the hall to submit a memorandum protesting an assault on a student. He was then assaulted, confined in a room for about two hours, and had eggs thrown at him as he was being escorted out by the hall provost. Even his companions were not spared. The incident, which marked the first case of assault against the VP after the Ducsu central committee started to function, was but an extension of the thinly-veiled vindictive campaign that started after he announced his candidacy and went on to win the post. Since then, VP-bashing has been a constant feature of BCL's post-election narrative, and it didn't taper off even after the prime minister urged the newly-elected Ducsu leaders to work together to maintain a peaceful atmosphere on the campus.

All this is especially unfortunate given the decades-long wait that preceded the March 11 election, which had created a lot of expectations. But the manner in which the election was conducted and subsequent developments saw the expectations from the Ducsu election crash-land in a most unfortunate way. New developments indicate an increasingly bitter face-off not only within the Ducsu but also between the student activists on the one hand and the BCL and the administration on the other.

We fail to understand the administration's continued silence and inaction in the face of all the allegations. It must rise to the occasion, take action against the perpetrators and end the BCL high-handedness. On its part, the BCL, which "welcomed" the election after 23 out of the 25 Ducsu central committee posts were filled by its members, should take visible steps to let the new Ducsu committee function properly, avoid interventions by its central and hall units and all such untoward incidents in the future. This is the least it can do to salvage whatever is left of its credibility.

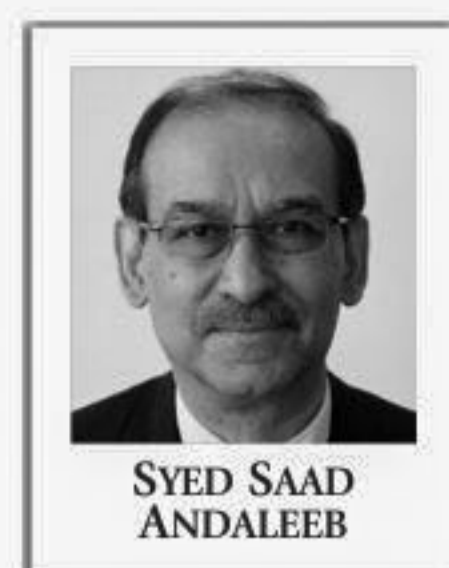
Feed factories still using tannery waste

Implement High Court order immediately

STRANGELY, the High Court order to various ministries that had been directed by the HC in July 2011 to close down factories producing poultry and fish feed using tannery waste remains unimplemented. In fact, the HC had further directed authorities to prepare guidelines within two months of that order that would monitor the use of tannery waste in producing feed. Eight years on, the HC has summoned high officials from the ministries of industries, commerce, food, health and fisheries and livestock and the inspector general of police to explain to the Court why there has been no progress and why contempt of court should not be issued on them for a lack of movement on the issue.

It is no secret that chemically treated tannery waste containing chromium is being used to produce feed that ultimately enters our food chain. This perhaps explains the liver and kidney complications that have risen steadily in the general populace. And while the use of tannery waste has been a lucrative business for both tannery owners and the feed factories, this has been at the cost of public health. The dangerous levels of chromium in eggs and poultry meat have been found in various studies and the impetus should now be on government regulators to take immediate steps to ban the practice. The crux of the problem with the tannery industry remains the safe disposal of tannery waste and this is where efforts need to be given so that the industry starts taking responsibility for the safe treatment of effluent discharge.

Return on research: Academia's new challenge



SYED SAAD ANDALEEB

DISCUSSIONS about research in Bangladesh's higher education institutions (HEIs) have become animated and contentious in recent times.

Being in a leadership position in a private university in Bangladesh, I can attest to the fact that discussions on this issue are pervasive—at the board and leadership team meetings, faculty venting sessions, hallway huddles, opinions on mass media, and social media ruminations.

In a recent meeting of exchange of ideas, a faculty member opined, "I believe that getting involved with [research] is essential to be an effective classroom teacher at the university level. Active research...increases the knowledge of a faculty member."

A senior administrator also said, "A university teacher should pursue both [teaching and research]. Universities are established for creation and dissemination of knowledge. They must thus promote innovation and invention which cannot be achieved without research."

The need to carry out research appears to be fairly well-recognised in academia. Yet, there also prevails a surprising undercurrent—gleaned from "confidential" discussions—about research being important only for promotions, where quantity matters more than quality. After the promotion is achieved, research is seen as useless. The refrain, "Of what use is it to do research?" is not uncommon in academic circles.

The fact remains that only a small proportion of academics are truly proficient and interested in research, despite many challenges. The rest are either miserable due to their publication ordeals (their supervisors simply did not train them well) or have no interest in research. This is reflected in a senior administrator's words: "The performance is far below the average on citations in Google Scholar...even for those departments that are above average, their numbers come from just a few individuals."

How good is our research really? In a recent study on South Asia, it was found that social science research publications are doubling in quantity every six years. Overall, India published the lion's share (84 percent) compared to 6.4 percent by Pakistan and 3.2 percent by Bangladesh. The interesting fact is that the South Asia region published less than 1.6 percent of the global share in 18 years of research production between 1996 and 2013. Citation indexes (where scholars

cite each other) suggest that South Asia remains far below the world average. If the work of researchers is not being cited or used, what is it really worth? The deeper question is: how can this state and calibre of research be changed so that the returns on research can be fully reaped?

While academics cannot be exonerated for the sad state of research in the country, the administrators, boardrooms, syndicates, regulatory bodies and policymakers must shoulder the burden in equal measure. They have simply not been able to provide a unified vision and clear direction on what is expected of the academia, especially on research.

The faculty are the worst sufferers due to a lack of clear guidelines on what would qualify as acceptable

ministry, and their global partners are also obscure, deficient and lacking in vision. For years, they have mostly been tinkering with the national education budget which is hovering around two percent of GDP, and focusing mostly on recurrent expenditures in the public sector. Support for private universities has been relegated to the step-child status with the attendant neglect and ill-will.

In today's knowledge-driven world, we need educational leadership that must envision, energise and guide higher education, especially research, with a deep sense of purpose. The budget should then follow. If the budget comes first, the fate of higher education, or education in general, I'm afraid, is sealed.

Also, counting numbers will not do



SOURCE: EN-LAW.TAU.AC.IE

research. The acrimonious debate on quality and quantity also continues to ring hollow as annual increments and promotions are based on frivolous assessment criteria and "who knows whom."

Top administrators have been quite inept at building a system to promote and reward good research. They include deans and department chairs who often bury their heads in a hole when it comes to evaluation of their own faculty. The divisive politics of what is good research and how it counts towards career advancement continues to rankle both academics and administrators.

Boardrooms and higher bodies across the universities want research but fail to understand what it really is and, therefore, how it ought to be nurtured. Consequently, our public universities have not done well in regional or global rankings. In the private universities, with their emphasis on revenue (i.e. high teaching load), research has been marginalised. Thus, only a few have a lowly standing in regional rankings.

Policies for research crafted by the University Grants Commission, the

any longer. The HEIs must produce quality research. For this to happen, research must be prioritised in selected universities. They must then be provided support in full measure including recruiting quality research faculty (be it from institutions abroad or research partners), compensating them, training them, allocating budgets for the right research setup, and assessing the quality of research produced.

In this regard, as convener of a special taskforce to address research in higher education, my group proposed two ideas: (i) establish a National Research Council "that will set the national research strategy, priorities, policies, and coordinate funding from different development partners and other sources." More on the NRC is available in the *Strategic Plan for Higher Education in Bangladesh: 2017-2030*, and (ii) categorise the universities as research universities, teaching and research universities, and pure teaching universities. The flagship research universities will focus on postgraduate education, offering MPhil and PhD degrees, with dedicated attention to

high-quality research. I don't believe these ideas have gained much traction at the highest policy levels.

It must be emphasised that commitment to research has grown steadily in strength in the region. Japan, South Korea, Singapore and Hong Kong have already begun to compete for research supremacy. India wants to build several world-class universities. Similarly, the Malaysian government is encouraging its top universities to participate in QS World University Rankings. How academia in Bangladesh will shape up in a knowledge-driven world and forge the future remains to be seen.

The returns from world-class research institutions are not meagre. They can fuel state and national economic development. According to one report, "in 2012-2013, the University of North Carolina system...added \$27.9 billion in income to the state economy. In FY 2012, the University of Hawaii generated \$3.61 billion in local business sales, \$1.10 billion in employee earnings, \$194 million in state taxes, and over 28,500 jobs. UCLA has averaged \$1 billion in research funding with over 350 research labs, centers, and institutes...and over 1,800 inventions have come from this research powerhouse." The larger social returns are not fully monetised in these numbers. Indeed, the return on research can be incalculable.

As we marvel at the steady advancement of research in the Asian region and gape at the huge returns it generates in developed countries, it behooves us to think about the future of our HEIs in Bangladesh. This is a question that we must resolve ourselves. Others will not help us become knowledge powerhouses. It is simply not in their interest to see the emergence of another knowledge-driven nation pursuing boundless new opportunities. Indeed, the way to compete vigorously in a world of opportunity is to nurture and guide the nation's knowledge enterprises, especially the universities.

Research in universities can generate enormous social capital and rich economic dividends. It must, therefore, begin to receive serious attention and will require integrating intention, imagination, innovativeness, integrity, investment, and involvement of various stakeholders—the "6i ensemble". When this happens, Bangladesh, too, can produce world-class research and transform society.

The question is: who will provide the vision? And when?

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Drawing a false moral equivalence

A reader's response

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A recent op-ed piece in *The Daily Star*, titled "Crusading children: Fault in our stars... or ourselves?" published on March 31, was a bit intriguing and, perhaps, rather disconcerting. The author's (Dr Imtiaz H Hussain) original premise was charming—that the involvement of children in social movements was laudable and inspiring because of the innocence and idealism they bring to their efforts. But the example he chose to initiate the discussion was decidedly odd.

First, to compare the suffering of the participants in the Children's Crusade in the 13th century to the plight of Rohingya, Yemeni or Syrian refugee children today is rather befuddling.

But second, and more pertinently, to discuss the actions of those "Crusaders" in the same breath as the efforts of kids in Birmingham in 1963 struggling for racial equality, or youthful protesters in Florida pressing for gun control, or the schoolchildren in Dhaka demanding "justice" and safe streets, is more than just puzzling. The moral equivalence implied here is profoundly unfair.

Do contexts, objectives, methods and results not matter? The Crusades represented an arrogant ambition and a thoroughly misbegotten effort to take back Jerusalem from the Muslims through military aggression, and establish Christian control over the city and the Holy Lands surrounding it. Admittedly, the campaign was located within a pre-existing welter of complex encounters between Christians and Muslims for some time, and hostile memories and ugly perceptions were natural on both sides. But this particular assault was lifted to the status of a Holy War when Pope Urban blessed and inspired the engagement in Clermont in 1095, and the European Knights embraced the cause to defend and advance Christianity (even painting little crosses on their shields to protect them in war, and ensure entry into Heaven later).

The means utilised in this project were brutal, and viciously inflicted. When Jerusalem was captured by the Crusaders in 1099, it was laid waste in an orgy of slaughter and decimation directed at Jews and Muslims. More than 1.7 million people (including Crusaders) perished in this and a subsequent set of sporadic and relentless conflicts that engulfed the



"Taking of Jerusalem by the Crusaders, July 15, 1099" (oil on canvas) by Émile Signol/Giraudon/The Bridgeman Art Library.

region. It should be pointed out that Muslims were not particularly gentle in their responses either.

And finally, it should be remembered that the entire exercise was futile; nothing honourable came out of it, and it ended in not just a military and political stalemate but deep and enduring misunderstandings between religions that persist to this day. Jerusalem remains a site of bitter contestation, generating much extremist and exclusivist fervour, even though all the three Abrahamic faiths have legitimate emotional and spiritual claims over it.

Salah-al-Din (Saladin) re-established control of the city in 1187. This was followed by successive waves of crusades that were unleashed to recover it. The most heart-wrenching, and perhaps the most abjectly manipulative, was the Children's Crusade in 1212.

Some kids, living in a heady and vulnerable environment of religious zealotry and over-wrought

anxiety, were supposed to have had dreams, or received letters from Jesus Christ, and felt emboldened and provoked to take back Jerusalem (consecrated as the location of Christ's Last Supper, the Crucifixion, and the Resurrection). They had no idea about its history or geography, nor received any kind of military training, relevant advice or appropriate weapons. Most of these children died; many were sold into sexual slavery; and a few were lucky enough to escape and return to their parents. They were hapless victims of those terrible times, and were used by confused or cynical adults as sacrificial lambs to fulfill their own "hegemonic" interests.

How does this sad and sordid history, one of the most awkward moments in the history of Europe and the Catholic Church, compare to the nobility, moral authority and political maturity demonstrated by young people involved in various social causes and struggles later?

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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For an affordable and reliable power sector

Electricity is crucial for economic growth, sustainable infrastructure development as well as security and poverty reduction of any country. Our future economic growth depends to a large extent on the uninterrupted supply of electricity. According to an estimate, two-thirds of our population is connected to the electricity grid. This suggests an untapped potential market of up to 60 million people connecting to the national grid in the coming years. The fuel mix of Bangladesh's power plants is heavily based on natural gas.

Against this backdrop, the government plans to reduce dependence on natural gas and move towards coal with plans to generate 50 percent of total electricity using coal-based power plants by 2030. Other solutions include importing electricity from the neighboring countries, importing liquefied natural gas (LNG), and expanding the use of renewable resources, including solar and wind. The Power Division claims to have had major success in the power sector, yet power supply is neither affordable nor reliable today. We must find a way to address this situation.

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