

## An all-encompassing victory for Modi and BJP

*Banking on even better relations between Bangladesh and India*

WE congratulate Narendra Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) for winning a landslide victory in the Indian elections. The 303 seats won by the BJP give it a bigger majority from when it won the elections in 2014, and the increased percentage of popular vote it received undoubtedly shows that its policies have gone down well with the Indian people. Now that the BJP has a clearer mandate, it will be even more interesting to see what policies it implements and whether it sticks to the ideology of Hindu nationalism that it has propagated in the past, pushing the secular ideals of India onto the backseat.

Some of the electioneering issues—such as the topic of the National Register of Citizens of India, and the Modi government offering citizenship to Bangladeshi Hindus—did concern us. But under Prime Minister Modi's leadership, India and Bangladesh have already built upon their historically good relationship. And we hope that during his new term, Modi will continue to lead India down that path.

Despite our special relationship, however, there are a number of issues that need to be ironed out—especially over Teesta water-sharing, which has unfortunately dragged on much longer than expected. Now that Modi has a bigger mandate, we hope that he would address the Teesta issue more assertively as well as the other aforementioned matters that concern our interest.

We hope that after its back-to-back victory, the BJP government will continue to work with the Bangladesh government to resolve these issues through dialogue, in ways that are beneficial to both our countries.

## Bring down number of school holidays

*Too many closures affect quality of education*

WHAT ails our secondary education system? A familiar litany of problems can be cited but a new report by *The Daily Star* has brought into focus a relatively underacknowledged factor: school closures. Secondary schools and *madrasas*, according to the report, have at least 137 holidays—85 public holidays and 52 Fridays—as well as other scheduled and unscheduled closures including that for public exams in many of the institutions. The result: more than half the academic year at those institutions is wasted for no productive purposes. For the students, it means they are hurried through fewer chapters, resulting in incomplete syllabus. They are also made dependent on private tuition. All this eventually affects the quality of education.

This is a problem that can be solved with proper planning, however. Experts have suggested that the number of holidays and closures can be significantly reduced by, for example, cutting down the summer and winter vacations and the durations of public exams. Even public exams like JSC and PEC, which have proven to be of little value to the students, can be done without.

Unfortunately, the authorities seem unaware of the challenges that the inordinate number of school shutdowns poses. A 2012 proposal to bring down the number of annual holidays to 118 days, including weekends and 24 days for midterm and final exams, has been met with silence. We feel that this is an issue that the education ministry should take up on a priority basis. Setting up separate public exam centres may solve part of the problem, especially for those institutions hosting public exams, but the government should initiate reforms for a sector-wide impact.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Prevalence of corruption in mega projects

Though 47 years have passed since independence, we have yet to put in place proper infrastructural facilities needed to achieve sustainable development. The incumbent government has taken up a few mega projects which have already commenced their implementation phase.

Historically, Bangladesh has performed poorly when it comes to the execution of a plan owing to corruption, bureaucratic complexities, poor monitoring and evaluation and politicisation of the e-GP system.

The news of a procurement scandal in Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant recently went viral on social media and people from all walks of life raised the finger at public fund management—which is primarily collected from hardworking taxpayers. The prevalence of corruption in mega projects not only creates mistrust around officials' accountability regarding all public initiatives, but also acts as an impetus for people to be sceptical about the proper allocation of government revenue generated from taxes.

The failure to practise good governance in all the sectors of administration will further deteriorate the possibility of proper implementation of projects by increasing costs, delays, and degradation of quality. Besides, it may further lessen the tax to GDP ratio, which will only hamper development of infrastructure and, in turn, make it tougher to achieve the SDGs.

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AN OPEN DIALOGUE

THE Dhaka University Alumni Association of New England (DUAANE) organised a seminar in Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA on February 24, 2019 to discuss and debate the

low standing of Dhaka University in the global academic arena. The event was triggered by some concerns about the university's low ranking in some recent surveys or "polls". Two very well-respected rankings, the Times Higher Education's World University Rankings (WUS) and QS University Rankings (QS), have left out DU from its panel of the world's top 300 universities.

At the seminar, attended by many former faculty members of DU, there was almost unanimous agreement that the quality of education at DU has been declining for some years. Several problems including lack of resources, the effect of political influence, and the role of private universities were identified. However, and most importantly, the panellists primarily turned their attention to the methodology used by the polling organisations. As an invited panellist, and a former faculty of the university, I was asked to share with the participants my thoughts on the low ranking and to offer some suggestions to improve the state of affairs. I will provide more details on this later.

By the end of the seminar, we had a good idea as to why WUS and QS ranked Dhaka University, my alma mater, so low. And the consensus was that one does not have to look very far to find the reason for the low ranking. The key finding is that the faculty of DU are lacking in their research publications in refereed journals. This is not to say that our professors and research staff are not engaged in writing books, journal papers, monographs, research papers, or survey reports. They are doing so, and probably in volumes every year. But they do not receive the attention of the rest of the world for an important reason. These papers, however well-written or well-documented, lie buried in obscure journals, and seldom see the light of day in refereed journals! As a result, they escape the attention of other researchers. And that is a shame!

It needs to be noted that the methodologies used by WUS and QS are very similar. There is general agreement in the global academic community that the reputation of a university depends on the quality of its students, faculty, and scholarship. Every university, whether in

# Elevating the rank of Dhaka University



The Curzon Hall building in Dhaka University.

SOURCE: YOUTUBE

the US, Europe, China or Singapore, hires and promotes faculty on the basis of their teaching abilities as judged by their students, their research capabilities and contribution to their respective discipline and, above all, their publications in peer-reviewed and world-class professional journals.

At DU, faculty members have the guarantee of a lifetime job regardless of their performance once they are hired. In all other institutions in the WUS and QS list, faculty performance is evaluated each year, and promotion, known as tenure, is conditional upon satisfactory evaluation by their peers and students in three areas: teaching, research and service. In a predominantly teaching institution, the weight on research is less than that on teaching and service, while in research universities such as Harvard, Oxford, National University of Singapore and Tsinghua, the faculty members are expected to publish in top-notch journals and be cited by their peers.

Some of Bangladesh's newspapers gave a lot of coverage to the latest round of rankings which has caused a lot of soul-searching and finger-pointing owing to the low rankings of Bangladeshi universities. One newspaper headlined: "Why were there no Bangladeshi

universities among Asia's top 417?" The VC of Dhaka University claimed that the ranking organisation made use of outdated information according to an interview with a local journalist. This view was shared by the VC of Shahjalal University of Science and Technology who added: "Bangladeshi university websites are too skeletal to present the current information about our institutions. Our teachers publish many research papers, but they are not updated in the websites. I am working to make sure my university improves them in the annual reports."

However, both of these VCs miss an important point. It is not sufficient for the faculty of the universities of Bangladesh to engage in research and publish them in local journals! What's important is that our researchers consider sending their articles and monographs to internationally renowned journals where they will be reviewed by other professionals before they can meet the criteria for acceptance. WUS and QS also consider a similar yardstick known as "number of citations" for each university. After an article or book is published, it must be cited by other researchers and recognised for its originality and the discovery.

So, what is the solution? Sometimes

the way forward, as they say, is the way back. Professor Serajul Islam Choudhury, an eminent educationist and professor emeritus at DU, takes stock of what needs to change to move forward. To quote him: "The research budget is very poor; the lack of quality research publications is not helping much. Classrooms see very little quality studying. Students are more concerned with their livelihood than learning. And sometimes, teachers are too busy teaching at private universities. They grow tired moving from one university to another. And many administrative heads are more concerned with politics than improving academic standards."

At the DUAANE seminar, I was asked to offer three suggestions to enhance the ranking of DU. My recommendations, adopted by the gathering of distinguished DU alumni, were to institute a faculty tenure system based on merit, encourage student evaluation of courses, and ensure the independence of Dhaka University from political interference.

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# One step forward, two steps back

*The plight of women journalists in Afghanistan*



AFGHANISTAN is a dangerous place for women. According to a new global index developed by Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security, and the Peace Research Institute of Oslo,

Afghanistan is the second worst country for women in the world, after war-ravaged Syria, followed by Yemen. Domestic violence, sexual exploitation and honour killing are prevalent in the country, especially in the rural areas, which are still strong footholds of the tribal warlords and the Taliban.

According to the same index, 37 percent of Afghan women are illiterate, and a third of the female population are married off before they turn 18. Girls as young as 12 are often married off to older men, who are more often than not already married and have children of their own. Maternal mortality remains very high and in the rural areas, there are frequent reports of honour killings, perpetrated by kin.

Afghanistan is an even more dangerous place for women journalists. According to data of the Committee to Protect Journalists, seven female journalists were killed in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2018, five of them murdered. And the recent assassination of Meena Mangal, who was not only a renowned TV journalist but also a parliamentary adviser, only goes to show the vulnerable position of women in Afghanistan's society.

A week prior to her murder, Meena Mangal had even posted a message on her Facebook timeline saying she had received death threats, and still nothing was done by the law enforcement agencies to give her protection. Meena was shot dead in broad daylight and her killers have not yet been brought to book.

In 2006, Karen Fischer, a journalist of Deutsche Welle, was killed along with a colleague while out on a mission in Baghlan, about 95 miles northwest of



Former Afghan TV journalist Meena Mangal was shot dead earlier this month by unidentified gunmen. Mangal was an outspoken activist for women's rights.

Kabul. They were shot in the tent they had set up. Their personal possessions remained untouched by the murderers.

In a similar incident in 2014, Anja Niedringhaus, a photographer for the Associated Press, was shot dead in public, when a man walked up to her car, shouted "Allahu Akbar" and opened fire on her. What is disturbing is that this time it was a police officer who had committed the crime. The death penalty of the said police officer was later reduced to a 20-year jail term by the Supreme Court of Afghanistan.

Zakia Zaki, a middle-aged Afghan woman who had started the Peace Radio, was assassinated in 2007 by unidentified gunmen who had broken into her bedroom and shot her dead in her sleep. Her fault: she had not paid heed to the threats of the Taliban who had asked her to pull the plug on her radio station.

Journalists in general have to navigate

a treacherous path in Afghanistan to bring out the actual news, and they are often the targets of militants. For women journalists though, the path is even more difficult, given that they are not only targeted just as journalists, but more so because they are female journalists.

Last year while talking to UN News, Sediqa Sherzai, news director of Radio-TV Roshani, a media outlet in the Kunduz province of Afghanistan, talked about the dangers her female colleagues have to face day in day out: "When insurgents seized Kunduz in 2015, they came immediately for our station because they didn't like our content focused on women's rights." She also said that her female colleagues are not only facing threats from insurgents, but also from the men in society who do not want women to work in the media industry.

Ever since the fall of the Taliban in 2001, the media industry in Afghanistan

has witnessed a boom. Yet, female journalists still have to brave threats and abuse to carry on with their work. Mahsa, an Afghan journalist, recounts a tale of horror that she had to face to continue her work: "I have been threatened by the Taliban, corrupt authorities, warlords and even the government. But none of these threats will ever stop me from what I do."

According to International Media Support, 70 percent of female journalists in Afghanistan have been subjected to threats when reporting on sensitive issues including politics. The Afghan Journalists Safety Committee has said that they have taken measures to improve the safety of female journalists in the country, including creating a team that helps female journalists and supports them. They are also collaborating with women's organisations to facilitate the work of female journalists.

Last year, on the occasion of World Press Freedom Day, in a similar tone, United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan's (UNAMA) chief, Tadamichi Yamamoto, said that the United Nations was continuing to push the Afghan government "to implement measures to improve journalist safety and foster an open media where no voice is silenced through fear."

In a country like Afghanistan, where the Taliban has systematically and often violently deconstructed the fabric of a society which had previously been relatively inclusive, female journalists today have to walk down a perilous path to bring out real-life stories. And the government must take a strong stance to support female journalists in their work by formulating policies and enacting laws that will support their work.

The gender-exclusive and misogynist mindset enforced by the Taliban must not go unchallenged. The people in power must come forward to the aid of these female journalists, so that these brave women no longer have to live in fear for their lives. So that they can fearlessly go out there and break stories without having to dodge sinister bullets. But can the current Afghan government create such a society?

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