

Where is the integrity of our law enforcers?

Culpable officers should be immediately brought to book

A report published on September 23, titled "Dead man talking", has sent shivers down our spine, not because of its title but because it exposes the deep-seated corruption that is crippling our law enforcement institutions and ultimately affecting our justice system. The report reveals how a PBI inspector cited the "statement" of a dead Union Parishad chairman, as a witness in documents presented before a district court, to implicate a former chairman of another Union Parishad in a murder case. In the case documents, the inspector also cited a statement of a retired government official given on a date when the "witness" was not in the country.

According to the accused Union Parishad chairman, the PBI inspector had demanded BDT 20 lakh as bribe from him, and upon his refusal to pay the amount, he along with his son and nephew were implicated in the case by the corrupt police officer. This incident brings to light the alleged deceptiveness of some members of the law enforcement agencies and the threats it poses to our judicial process and justice system. For how can justice be meted out to the actual perpetrators of crime in the absence of accurate, transparent and unbiased investigation reports?

These recurrent reports present a grim picture of our police force, where some unscrupulous officials have made it a practice to take undue advantage of the powers vested upon them by the state to ensure law and order for their own personal gains. In most cases, the authorities at best suspend the errant police officers and form probe bodies to investigate the matter. And often we do not even come to know what measures have been taken against these abettors of crime in uniform.

It is high time the authorities took up the matter of dishonest practices of the law enforcers seriously and brought them to book. The government should also scrutinise the factors that trigger dishonesty among police officers and address them in order to create an environment that encourages integrity and transparency. The authorities should make sure that the police do their duty towards the state and the people by maintaining law and order properly.

Protect our rivers at all costs

Inaction of the authorities unacceptable

WHILE we observed World Rivers Day on September 22 with the high hopes of saving our rivers across the country, the fact remains that those entrusted with the responsibility to save our rivers actually did very little to stop pollution, encroachment and destruction of the rivers. Despite the landmark verdict given by the High Court declaring rivers "living entities", continuous reporting by the media on the conditions of our rivers, enactment of laws, and even directives by the prime minister, river grabbing continues unabated. The National River Conservation Commission (NRCC) chairman has rightly said that the rivers are victims of greed of the wealthy grabbers, who are politically and socially powerful, and blessed by the government's executive machinery.

However, it is good to learn that the district authorities have already started listing the river grabbers, as directed by the HC in February this year. Already, the deputy commissioners of 60 districts have submitted their reports to the NRCC. Now that we have a list of the river grabbers, we hope that these people will be prosecuted according to our law. A special tribunal can be set up to punish these offenders.

According to the HC orders, the Election Commission is supposed to make the river grabbers ineligible for contesting any elections and the Bangladesh Bank is to make them ineligible for bank loans. If they comply with the HC orders, a lot of progress can be made in protecting our rivers.

But above all, the NRCC should be empowered enough to do its job. Making recommendations should not be the commission's only job. It should be given executive power and enough fund to carry out its activities. Currently, it does not have the authority to hold government officials accountable for ignoring river conservation. It can just file cases against the river grabbers and report to the HC on non-compliance of court orders. In order to empower the commission, the relevant laws should be amended, as was directed by the HC.

The missing pieces of our tertiary education puzzle

CYBERNAUTIC RUMINATIONS



HABIBULLAH N KARIM

IN 1994, the country had around half a dozen public universities and zero private ones. A quarter of a century later, we now have 135 universities—a large majority of which are private. This growth in the number of tertiary-level educational institutions is certainly a significant development for the nation, but the question remains: are these universities providing the educational values required for economic growth and social amity?

Each year nearly a million students pass the Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) or equivalent examinations and then vie for around 200,000 university seats. Add to this another 20,000 who go abroad for higher education, most of whom then turn economic migrants and never return to their homeland. Even without them and those who leave the country for post-graduate education and settle abroad, the country still can boast of more than a tenth of its high school graduates ending up with a university degree and the number of such university graduates is increasing by the day. This may be a far cry from the 80 percent share of high school graduates targeted for university education in South Korea but compares quite favourably with other South Asian countries.

But how do these graduates fare in the job market? While we do find that many end up in professions unrelated to their field of study, such as doctors or engineers working in administration, or literature graduates working as economic planners, or soil science graduates working as marketing specialists, but the real tragedy is that almost half of university graduates here are unemployed or underemployed, according to a recent ILO survey.

Add to this mix the fact that nearly 300,000 mid-level and top managerial positions are filled by foreign workers from mostly South Asian countries, and we have a toxic social concoction of hundreds of thousands of highly educated and frustrated youth twiddling their thumbs while an influx of cheap mid-level managerial workers from abroad fill up a large basket of lucrative jobs that should have been theirs.

Against the backdrop of this dismal

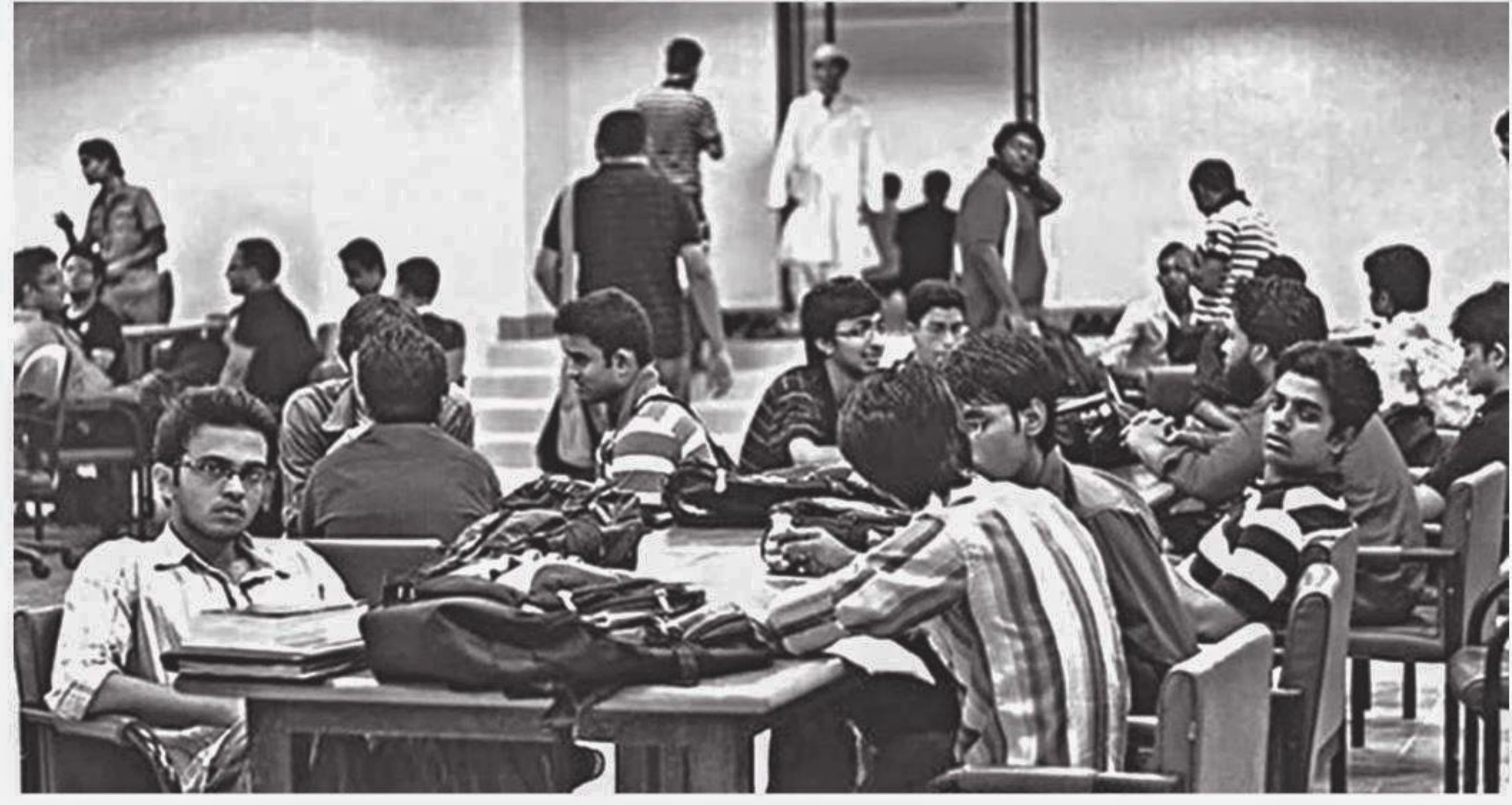
scenario in our tertiary education system and employment prospects, it is no wonder that we see rampant drug abuse among the frustrated youth who, after investing four years of their tireless efforts in a university degree, find themselves without proper career prospects.

On the other hand, large business houses of the country are spending more than USD 10 billion (equivalent to Tk 90,000 crore) each year on foreign workers and services because they cannot fill up middle and upper echelons of management and technical positions from the pool of local workers. This is quite puzzling when one looks at

exists on several levels. First of all, a large number of university graduates focus only on mainstream, employment-friendly degrees such as Bachelor of Business Administration (BBA) and Computer Science Engineering (CSE), without regard for the employee absorption capacity of the local industry.

Secondly, most graduates are found to be ill-equipped with the fundamental tools of learning—language, maths and inquisitiveness—turning out as automatons who can retch-up their forced formulaic course materials, but cannot express their own thoughts coherently in either Bangla or English, and certainly

planners of the country will have to figure out two things. One: conducting a job survey every year and assessing what trades and disciplines are in demand and identify which sectors have recorded the biggest growths in terms of employment; based on the survey result, the universities need to restructure their student intake and faculty recruitment plans. Two: giving special emphasis on soft skills—encouraging students to think out of the box, enhancing their communication skills, allowing students to achieve time-bound goals, and inculcating good work ethic—skills that will help the graduates fit into middle and top layer managerial jobs.



There is an obvious gap between what the local industry demands and what the academia produces.

PHOTO: STAR

the fact that hundreds of thousands of Bangladeshis are working with high repute as engineers, doctors, managers, researchers and corporate executives in Europe, Middle East and North America. Even transnational companies operating in Bangladesh employ a sizable number of Bangladeshis in the managerial ranks.

There is an obvious gap between what the local industry demands and what the local academia produces. After talking to a few university executives (vice chancellors and deans) and industry experts, I have come to the conclusion that this gap

cannot add up or multiply numbers without the aid of calculators.

Then there is the problem of a serious lack of emphasis on a well-rounded education system in line with liberal arts education, which results in the myopia of the graduates—business graduates who have no clue that the country they live in is a parliamentary democracy, or engineering graduates who don't know that the United Nations headquarters is located in New York city.

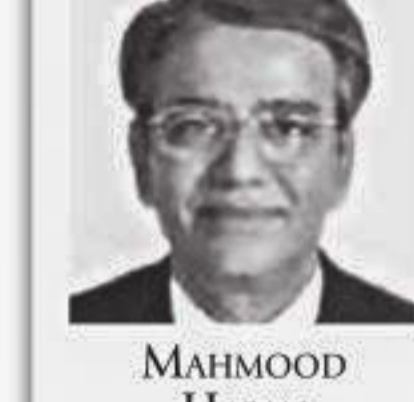
Now to get out of this rut, the universities as well as the education

If the universities can abide by these two simple yet effective principles and combine them with a well-rounded general education programme, we will soon be able to fill all the local industry jobs with local talents, and we shall also be able to fill the ranks of middle and top managers around the world. After all, with the right mix of education and skills, the sky is the limit.

Habibullah N Karim is an author, policy activist, investor and serial entrepreneur. He is a founder and former president of BASIS and founder-CEO of Tech-nohaven Company Ltd. Email: hnkarim@gmail.com

Will the US-Iran relations ever normalise?

FROM A BYSTANDER



MAHMOOD HASAN

IT is amazing that the United States and Iran have maintained an extremely bellicose relation for the past four decades, much to the anxiety of nations of the Middle East. It all began when the Islamic Republic of Iran was proclaimed under Imam Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, following a revolution and referendum in April 1979.

This change of regime was a shock for Washington, which

maintained good relations with Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the last Shah (King) of Iran, who was exiled during the revolution. Diplomatic relations broke off following the American embassy seizure in Tehran and the hostage crisis in November 1979.

The past forty years has been marked by hostile

which the Americans view with alarm. Iran is also accused of maintaining links with militant groups in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Yemen. A nuclear-armed Iran would irreversibly change and jeopardise the security architecture that America set up in the Middle East with allies such as Israel and the Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia, the world's biggest source of oil supplies.

With a view to reigning in Iran's nuclear programme, US President Barack Obama spoke for the first time to Iranian President Hassan Rouhani on September 28, 2013. Rouhani was then in New York to attend the UN General Assembly. That historic conversation paved the way for the signing of the nuclear deal known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in July 2015, which effectively plugged Iran's nuclear programme. The JCPOA was seen as a convenient mechanism for further improvement of relations between the two countries.

But with the arrival of Donald Trump at the White House in January 2016, fresh sourness from Washington

May and June, six oil tankers were attacked in the Strait of Hormuz and the Gulf of Oman. Washington immediately blamed Iran for the attacks, which were denied by Tehran. Iran also shot down a US military drone claiming that it was on Iranian airspace. Trump tweeted that he called off air strikes on Iran minutes before those were to be launched. However, America deployed a number of warships in the Persian Gulf including an aircraft carrier as a "clear and unmistakable message to Iran" that any attack on the interests of the United States or its allies "will be met with unrelenting force."

But the drone attack on Saudi oil refineries in Abqaiq, on September 14, came as a surprise to the Saudis and Americans. Despite having the most sophisticated air defence systems, the Saudis failed to shoot down the drones. Yemeni Houthi militants claimed responsibility for the attack but Washington blamed Iran for that. Apparently, Houthis got drones from Iran. One wonders whether the Houthis have the technical capability to accurately send drones to Abqaiq. The attack has once again raised tension in the region to new heights. There is still no credible proof that Iran was behind it.

The attack came just days before the Israeli Knesset elections were to be held, on September 17, and in the wake of the G7 Summit in France (August 24-27), where President Macron had announced that France was working towards a meeting between President Hassan Rouhani and President Trump. Trump had said he was willing to meet Rouhani, which was probably to be held in New York during the UN General Assembly 2019. It is difficult to believe the American accusation as it is not in Tehran's interest to scuttle the possible meeting between Trump and Rouhani. Or is it that Tehran is giving a message that it is a power to be reckoned with?

The two options for America after the attack were: either launch military action against Iran or do nothing. Doing nothing would have been seen as weakness. So, Washington decided to send troops to Saudi Arabia to protect Saudi oil facilities and American interests.

Why hasn't the US taken action against Iran? Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif said there would be an "all-out war" if the US takes military action. Indeed, Iran has the capability to wreak havoc on the region if the US attacks Iran. Iran also has missiles capable of hitting Israel. In that case, not only will the Gulf states suffer massively, but oil prices will also skyrocket causing havoc for the global economy. For now, there will possibly be no war, but an accidental conflict cannot be ruled out. So far, despite all the vainglorious threats, Trump has not led America to wars abroad.

After having failed to strike a nuclear deal with Kim Jong-un of North Korea, Trump turned his attention to Iran but with a totally different strategy. With Kim Jong-un, he tried appeasement; with Iran's Ali Khamenei, he is trying "maximum pressure"—as advised by John Bolton, who has recently been sacked.

It is difficult to imagine that, in the foreseeable future, there will be rapprochement between George Bush's "Axis of evil" (Iran) and Khomeini's "great Satan" (America).

Mahmood Hasan is a former ambassador and secretary of Bangladesh government.



Workers are seen at the damaged site of Saudi Aramco oil facility in Abqaiq, Saudi Arabia, September 20, 2019.

PHOTO: REUTERS/HAMAD L. MOHAMMED

invective from Washington and a defiant Tehran. Over the years, almost every American president has tried all kinds of pressures to oust the theocratic regime in Tehran. America's Iran policy is largely dictated by its relations with Israel and Saudi Arabia. Both (Sunni) Saudi Arabia and (Shia) Iran vie for the leadership of the Islamic world and are, thus, antagonists.

In its search for security, Tehran continued to make progress in achieving nuclear weapons capability and modernised its defences, despite harsh UN sanctions. It is Iran's nuclear programme that became the sore issue,

began to flow towards Tehran. Though all the other signatories of JCPOA and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) were comfortable with the provisions of the treaty, Trump, saying the deal was no good, withdrew from the JCPOA in May 2018, and imposed unilateral sanctions on Iranian oil and banks.

But recent developments in the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz have caused jitters in the states of the region. Any military conflict in the Persian Gulf region will disrupt the much-needed oil supplies to the world at large, sending the global economy into a tailspin. In

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Bring back BCL's glorious past

It is a tragedy that Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL), an organisation that has a glorious history of independence struggle, has lost its way, turning into a ghost of its former self over the years. There have been numerous allegations of extortion and abuse of power against this student wing of the ruling party, which were, most recently, highlighted by the removal of its top two leaders for their involvement in demanding bribe from the JU authorities (for a controversial development project). But perhaps this is no surprise that Chhatra League would turn out to be what it is today.

The political culture of establishing control over universities through the student wings of political parties has not only plagued Chhatra League, but also our entire tertiary education landscape. I sincerely hope the authorities will realise the gravity of the situation and strive to bring back the glorious days of student politics. That also includes Chhatra League, which has so much potential to be a platform serving the interests of all students, rather than a few politically ambitious ones.

Abul Khaer
Department of Zoology,
Govt. Saadat College, Tangail