

What's wrong with our university admins?

Highest growth in Asia from Bangladesh Policymakers need to make growth inclusive

THE latest forecast by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) titled "Asian Development Outlook 2019 Update" states that Bangladesh's economy could grow by eight percent. If that became reality, then it would be the fastest growing economy in Asia. ADB analysts believe that this growth is being propelled by "buoyant exports, robust private consumption, higher remittance, accommodative monetary policy and ongoing reform to improve business climate and high infrastructure spending".

In order to steer Bangladesh to the next level of growth, private investment has to be reinvigorated from its present stagnant state. This requires ensuring basic elements such as good governance, transparent financial system, pool of skilled manpower, human capital, incentives, etc. that encourage investors to put money into the economy. Again, when we talk about foreign investment, our score in indices like ease of doing business discourage potential foreign business entities from setting up projects here.

While the latest news is more on the positive side, we have continually been highlighting the issue of inclusive growth. The rich-poor divide has been growing over the past decade and the fruits of the GDP growth have not trickled down to the masses. In fact, Bangladeshi economists have pointed out that much of this growth has been "jobless". Growth for the sake of growth is pointless in such a densely-populated country like ours; every year, millions of young people pass out of colleges and universities with advanced degrees but remain unemployed. Boosting private-sector investment can reverse this bleak scenario and make this growth more meaningful.

Why we couldn't handle the dengue epidemic efficiently Corruption and apathy of city corporations

A research study by Transparency International Bangladesh has revealed what we had feared—that Dhaka's two city corporations did not do their job in taking the necessary steps needed to prevent the dengue epidemic that has taken at least 146 lives. And it was not only inefficiency or inertia that was behind this fiasco but clear corruption. The research has found major irregularities in the buying of pesticides along with unplanned mosquito drives and a lack of a national work plan—all factoring in the outbreak of this epidemic that infected thousands.

This is unacceptable, especially when there have been dengue outbreaks in the last few years. We knew there would be another outbreak this year so why was it not given enough importance at the local and national levels? According to the TIB research, instead of applying larvicide that would have killed the eggs and prevented mosquitoes from breeding, the two city corporations conducted mosquito drives with adulticides. Larvicides, experts say, would have been 80 percent effective while adulticides are only 30 percent effective. We cannot fathom why experts were not consulted before conducting drives that would have actually stopped the breeding of mosquitoes and therefore the terrible epidemic. The study, moreover, says that Aedes mosquito management requires a multi-pronged approach that includes environmental management, organic management and mechanical management.

The allegations of irregularities during purchase of insecticides are quite shocking. According to the report, Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC) bought insecticides from a company that Dhaka North City Corporation (DNCC) had blacklisted, that too at a much higher price than what had been offered to DNCC. The report alleges insecticides and fuel of fogging machines being sold off and larvicide being discarded.

The predictable reaction to this report will no doubt be denial by the city corporations. In this regard, we urge both city corporations to thoroughly investigate these allegations and if proven true, the authorities must take stringent measures against the culprits who have caused unbelievable public suffering because of their greed. The report has given many insightful recommendations including developing a work plan involving all stakeholders, amending existing laws, giving instructions to real estate companies, government and private organisations on how to control mosquito breeding. Proper surveys involving the relevant directorate and icddr, b have to be conducted in Dhaka and outside to identify the breeding areas. The city corporations of Dhaka and other cities as well as municipalities outside the capital should take lessons from this debacle and make sure all the recommended measures are taken to prevent another epidemic next year.



ZOBAÏDA NASREEN

THE last few weeks have been marked by a torrent of revelations about cases of corruption, irregularities and complete subservience to the establishment in the country's higher education institutions. The brazen display of these follies, in three public universities in particular, illustrates the perilous state of our higher education. People are fed up, yet we have not seen any action or sense of urgency so far to amend this situation.

The problems are so endemic that the universities seem incapable of combating them. Politicisation has effectively blurred the lines between the government and a university administration: the administration acts like an extended part of the government. Appointments of senior officials are driven almost exclusively by political connection and loyalty, not their academic work or commitment to education. So the interests of the self-serving administration are increasingly antithetical to the academic values like truth, objectivity, critical thinking, commitment, integrity, respect, and rational debate. It is hard to recall when a vice-chancellor stood up for academic freedom or the autonomy of their institution. Thus, rather than saying "no" to unfair demands, universities are inflaming rapacity and selfishness of the representatives of the ruling party and its cohorts.

In effect, there are widespread conflicts of interest in the universities. Senior administrators, who owe much of their success to the ruling party, are severely compromised; anti-intellectualism and corruption are deeply entrenched in how they function. What is lacking here is integrity, a standard of good practice.

The ongoing student protests at the Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Science and Technology University (BSMRSTU) in Gopalganj, triggered by the suspension of a student for her Facebook post, show how authoritarian and uncaring the administration has become. While demonstrating for the resignation of the vice chancellor of the university for his tyrannical rule, the students on September 21 were attacked by goons allegedly hired by the VC, who wanted to quell the protests by intimidating them. It was clearly an attempt to take control of minds through sheer physical violence.

Earlier in May, the same administration had manipulated the mechanism of serving show-cause notices to crush student activism against sexual harassment. Activities like posting status updates on Facebook and sharing newspaper articles on their timelines were treated as a crime against the university so that no one would dare raise their voice against the authorities. In the eyes of the administration, to criticise was to be guilty before being proven innocent. It again initiated disciplinary procedure against more students for seeking fair price of rice for farmers. Such harsh and violent policing and intimidation

tactics indicate how narrow the focus of the university has become and how ideologically compromised it is that it can so easily attempt to silence critical voices.

But it has been proven time and again that, in the end, suppressive regimes cannot succeed in suppressing liberating thoughts with violence. The students always rise up, and the power of protests is greater than the violence of any repressive rule.

But not just the newer universities—two of the most prominent ones in our country are also witnessing how the authorities and some teachers holding responsible positions have been involved in irregularities and have made compromises to gain favours. The highly competitive admission system at the University of Dhaka has now been called into question after a newspaper report exposed how seven leaders of the Dhaka University Central Students' Union (DUCSU) and residential hall unions—all of them current and former leaders of Bangladesh Chhatra League

planned development project. The drama regarding a top BCL leader's demand for a "fair share" of "Eid expenditure"—and his subsequent accusation against the VC and her family of giving BDT 16 million to local BCL leaders—hints at a collusion between the university administration and the student wing of the ruling party that had been at play until the intervention of the prime minister.

The three above scenarios are totally unacceptable. Do we need any more proof that the whole university system in our country is rotten? How could the entire system come to be structured in a way that the administrators get accustomed to accepting corruption and irregularities as a way of life?

The change in BCL leadership alone will not make much of a difference unless we realise why the liberating social justice mission of the universities has been replaced by the authoritarian developmental desire, and how they were transformed into sites of ruling power from being a counter-majoritarian force—

leaders took up destruction of democracy in universities as an insurance for their lasting rule. Instead of cultivating in the students essential democratic habits and dispositions of citizenship, successive governments used them as their muscles.

Soon, many realised that in social or community spaces, the old problems still existed. So there were some who saw this failure as inherent in our democratic political culture. And democracy started to lose its meaning, appeal and became an empty slogan. Instead of revitalising it as a way of life, one that is participatory and based on social justice, they viewed it as part of the problem. Though the military-backed caretaker regime failed to leave a strong impact, the same ideology is shared by the current establishment: it is an ideology of controlling academia, whereby dissenting and liberal voices could no longer expose the authorities. This development is deeply troubling and is a major source of trouble in the universities today.

The same authoritarian ideology was



Students of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Science and Technology University (BSMRSTU) call for the resignation of its vice-chancellor, on September 19, 2019.

PHOTO: RAFIUL ISLAM

(BCL)—got enrolled in an evening Master's programme just in time to be eligible to contest the DUCSU election. At the same time, 27 other BCL activists also got enrolled flouting rules. The day after the publication of the report, the dean of the Faculty of Business Studies called a press conference and claimed that the department in question had the power to take any decision for the evening course. However, that was not the case: no department could break the rules of admission, even if it was for a professional programme. This explains why some BCL activists used force to silence the protesters who denounced this irregularity.

The corruption allegations at Jahangirnagar University have also raised serious concerns. Students and teachers have been demonstrating on the campus since August 23, after allegations surfaced that the VC gave a large amount of money to the leaders of the university unit of BCL so that they would not get in the way of a

and then do something about it. We need to find a way to break the normalisation of thug regimes that operate on public university campuses. Fears run deep. But the tradition of student activism is marginalised or silenced.

In the context of growing concerns about diminishing autonomy and a declining democratic culture in universities, it is necessary to look back at the roads we took to reach this point. This problem, in the end, stems from the lack of democracy.

When people revolted against the autocratic regimes of late 1970s and 1980s, the main slogans were for democracy, for social justice, and against corruption. Following the 1990 uprising against autocratic rule, we re-adopted the democratic political system but in shallow and reductive ways. There was no democratic transformation in our social and economic life. It was a great tragedy that at the end of the long movement for democracy, the new

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behind our abandoning of the ideals of autonomy within the domain of higher education in favour of bureaucratic institutions. Among our 54 state-funded universities, none of the 45 new ones are autonomous; rather they are all government-controlled. Most of these new institutions lack enough qualified teachers and administrators, thus allowing hidden structures of power to take hold.

It is of utmost importance for the future of our academia that any attempt to reform the existing system must not present democracy as "part of the problem and so cannot be part of the solution". Even our civil society members, who are otherwise champions of democracy, had cherished such an idea, but in the end, such a short-term solution never brought anything good.

It is true that if corrupt practices are all-pervasive in a society, the universities alone cannot remain untouched. But the university is one place that should be at the frontline to bring about change, to impart hope for a fairer future.

Zobaïda Nasreen teaches anthropology at Dhaka University. Email: zobaïdanasreen@gmail.com

A world in transformation



ANM MUNIRUZZAMAN

THE world is at a crossroads of major transformation triggered by the process of digitalisation. It involves massive adaptation of digital technologies that generate,

process and share information, and data drive our production and economic activities. The impact of digitalisation is profound and all-encompassing; it affects our lifestyle, education, work, health, resource efficiency, energy consumption and many other aspects of our lives. We are in the process of creating a new world and in many ways we are in uncharted waters. We are likely to face massive challenges in the short run, but if we can carefully navigate through them, it will offer us huge opportunities.

While digitalisation will have an impact on all aspects of our life and economy, how we work is going to be the most affected. The process of digitalisation will completely alter our production lines, supply chain management and the need for skill-sets in our workforce. It will bring whole-scale changes in our workplaces that will result in large scale job losses in the short run. We can classify these jobs in two categories. The first category will be jobs that will disappear or will become irrelevant to human skills. For example, as we go into driverless cars it will take away the jobs of truck and lorry drivers; machine capacity will make the need for many skills like radiology redundant.

The second category deals with jobs that will need total readjustment and re-adaptation with machines or algorithms, like environmental engineers, traffic managers and others. But it will also usher in an era of new jobs and new skills. Jobs that had previously been unknown to our existing workforce will open up, like data

and deep data managers, human-machine interface operators, smart city executives and many more. It is quite possible that there will be massive job losses to start with. In the worst case scenario, the numbers could go as high as a billion. But societies that will be able to grasp the transformation well will take advantage of the new jobs that would be created. We will probably need huge capacity in such jobs such as Machine Optimisation Manager, Cloud or Multi Cloud Providers, Data Scientists and others.

This major transformation will need rapid re-skilling and up-scaling of our workforce. The workers of tomorrow may no longer be singularly skilled as they will have to operate in the overlapping and interlinked sectors of production and economy. Therefore, we will need to train workers of tomorrow to be dual-skilled or multi-skilled. As technology is constantly evolving, it will be essential for our workers to be constantly educated and updated. A classical skill-set cannot last a lifetime. It will call for a dynamic process of skilling and education.

A critical challenge for relatively low tech, labour-intensive third world countries will be to manage this quick transformation with minimum social and economic disruption. These societies can also take advantage of the new situation because robotics and artificial intelligence systems will not only replace human tasks and jobs, but in many cases, it will also be augmenting their skills and capacity thus increasing productivity. This new model of human/digital augmentation must be exploited to the maximum.

Like the job market and our production practices, the process of digitalisation will revolutionise our financial sector and economy. Financial technology or FinTech will completely change the delivery of financial services. It will speed up and diversify our payment processes and the way consumers interact with financial service providers by reducing the flow of cash in interaction. It will aim at creating

a cashless society which will in turn bring a greater degree of accountability and transparency in all financial transactions. In the process, it will also create a massive amount of data. In fact, it will be a data driven economy.

Financial institutions will need cloud-based computing and storage to manage this massive data flow. It will also give them increased capacity to analyse real-time data and thereby facilitate the growth of data analytics and their various applications. This big data can also help financial institutions in not only understanding the financial processes, but it can also be effectively used for future projections. It will also enable financial services to be much more integrated bringing additional actors into the loop, from the moment a consumer makes a payment, to the task of processing the payment, and the payment being received by the service provider: for example, the case of Uber. All will be in a single financial loop. Our financial markets will be completely data-enabled and its efficiency totally data-driven.

One area where digitalisation will have a profound impact on is the creation and growth of smart cities. The world is experiencing a rapid process of urbanisation, and by the year 2050, two-thirds of the global population will be living in urban spaces. The process of digitalisation will provide multiple e-platforms in smart city management, from traffic flow, waste management, energy distribution and management, and entertainment, to all other aspects of urban living.

With the increasing scarcity of resources, this will also provide an effective tool for resource sharing and management in urban spaces like water use, water recycling and water management. With the increased number of cars on the road, which will mostly be driverless, digitalisation will not only direct traffic flow, it will also bring a total traffic management solution in urban streets. A vital aspect of smart

city management would be the way we manage and consume energy. It will enable us to focus on lean energy consumption lifestyle, effective green management for distribution, and renewable energy distribution and storage.

One of the big challenges of urban living is waste management. The digital process will also help in urban waste management policies through automated waste swapping, recycling and reuse. It will provide greater capacity for electronic waste management. In all, it will give us a capacity for urban circular economy. Since most of the service provisions will be on e-platforms, service delivery will be quick, efficient and accountable. Citizens will also have greater capacity to interact with city leaders directly through e-communication platforms, thereby holding them accountable. Since most of these smart cities will go vertical, for greater space management, citizens will need newer forms of entertainment facilities. Digital formats of entertainment will become a normal entertainment platform together with green space activity. As most things in city management will be based on Internet of Things (IoT) or Internet of Everything (IoET), there will be greater degree of human/machine augmentation resulting in higher degree of efficiency and minimum loss of time.

Policymakers need to understand that digital transformation is not a one-time event but it proceeds in waves, driven by technological progress and utilisation of technologies. The current wave is certainly very significant and rapid; more are yet to come. The things that are shaping this wave are Big/Deep Data, Internet of Things/Everything (IoT or IoET), Robotics, 3D Printing, Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning. Together, they create Digitalisation 4.0.

Major General ANM Muniruzzaman ndc, psc (Retd) is the President and CEO of Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies (BIPSS), a security think tank based in Dhaka. He can be reached via email at president@bipss.org.bd.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Our footpaths and hawkers

The Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC) mayor has recently announced that DSCC will soon conduct drives to free up our roads and footpaths from illegal occupation. Although the news brought some relief to the city-dwellers, especially the pedestrians who have to undertake the Herculean task of navigating through the barely useable footpaths, thanks to the hawkers; it has also made us wary of the fact that these drives will only act as stop-gap measures, and within a short period of time, the footpaths will be illegally grabbed again. However, if the authorities evict the hawkers without rehabilitating them, then a permanent solution to free up our footpaths will not be possible. In order to make our footpaths useable again, we must rehabilitate the hawkers first. Development should be inclusive, and the benefits of betterment should trickle down to the all.

Jarina Rahman, Bashabo, Dhaka