WORLD TEACHERS' DAY

'Universities can be saved only by unadulterated autonomy'

Eminent thinker, writer and Dhaka University's Professor Emeritus **Serajul Islam Choudhury** *talks to* **Badiuzzaman Bay** *of The Daily Star about the state of the teaching profession, an embattled education sector, allegations of corruption against the vice-chancellors of 14 public universities, campus-based teachers' politics, and lack of research within the universities.*

This year's World Teachers' Day celebrates teachers with the theme "Young Teachers: The Future of the Profession". How bright is the future of the profession in a country plagued by a dysfunctional education system, where teachers no longer enjoy the formidable reputation they once did? What went wrong?

A number of reasons can be cited for this decline in the quality of teachers and the teaching profession in general. First of all, you can't have education without teachers, and you can't have good education without good teachers. The math is simple. The problem in Bangladesh is that we don't have adequate teachers. And many of our teachers are not qualified either.

I think a central part of being a teacher is that you must continuously teach yourselves. In that sense, you never cease to be a "student" as you acquire new knowledge through your work, research and social engagement. This acquisition (of knowledge) is not like that of a spider, or an ant, or bees that follow a predictable pattern while collecting their food. For teachers, the process is creative. In that, they must use ingenious methods to acquire knowledge and be a better teacher. They are not like the engineers or physicians, although they will have the qualities of both: they will "construct" like an engineer, and prevent, cure and care like a physician. Unfortunately, in Bangladesh, we don't have many creative teachers.
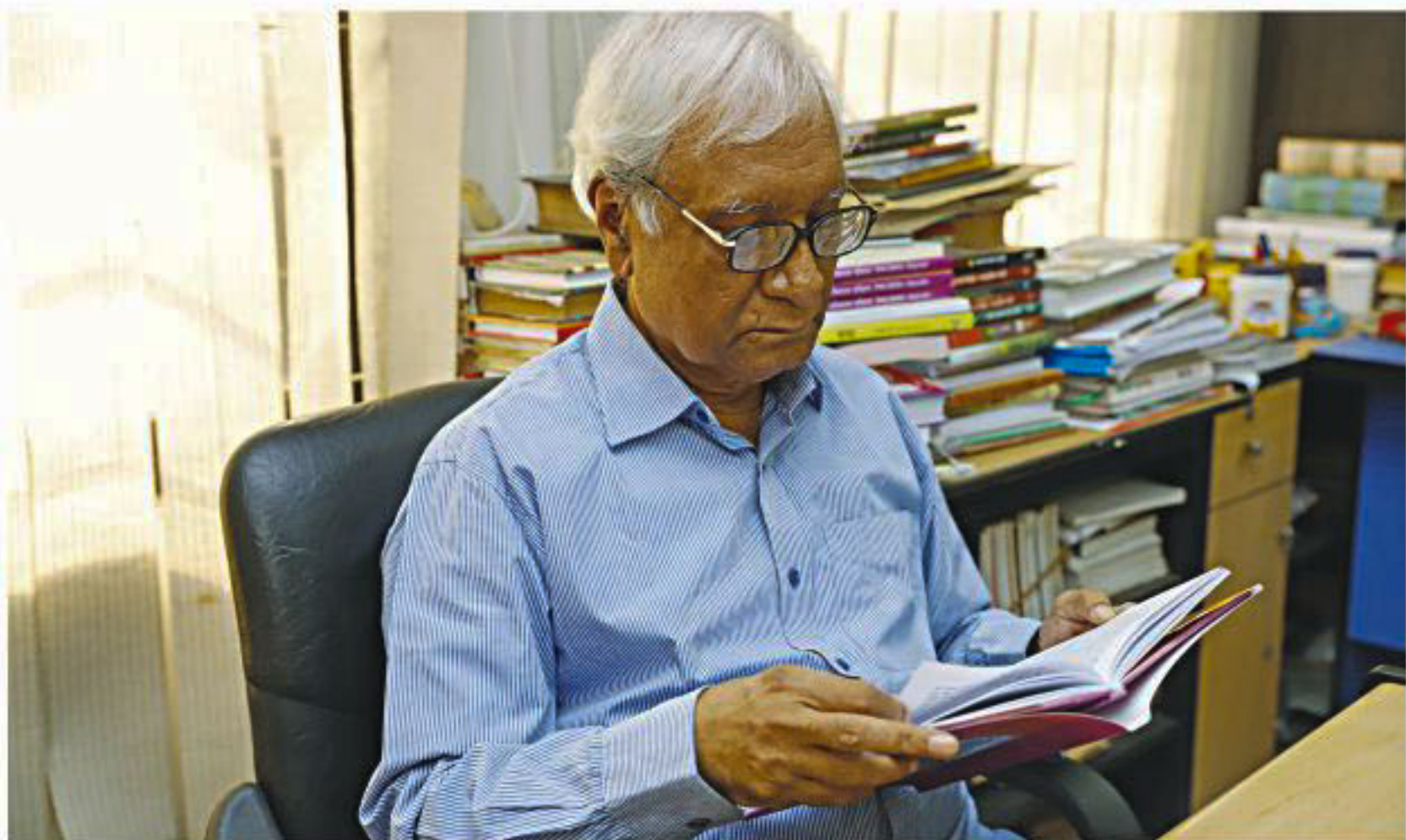
Of course, there are other reasons for the failing standard of our education sector such as our inability to draw talented and motivated individuals to the profession, our policy failures and lack of budget, politicisation of educational institutions, lack of incentives for the teachers, and also a general lack of interest in the holistic view of education. Bangladesh is also saddled with a regressive three-stream education system split into English medium, Bangla medium and madrasa. This system is based on class division, and through education we are actually deepening and widening divisions in our society. Today, the driving principle in our education system is: *"Lekha pora kore je, gari-ghora chore shey"* (he who learns will ride a car)." *Gari-ghora* symbolises riches and wealth. If the objective of a student is reduced to earning money only, they will naturally grow into selfish, egotistical, self-centred individuals.

This makes me think about our national anthem sometimes. In it, there is a line that is profoundly melancholic and yet quite rousing: *"Ma, tor bodonkhani molin hole, o ma, ami noyonjole bhashi"* (If sadness, oh mother mine, casts a gloom on your face, my eyes are filled with tears). If you think carefully, there is both sadness and a *resolve* to remove the source of this sadness. Here, we picture our country as a mother who nurses, protects and cares for us, and anything that affects her affects us also. But the system that runs it is, and has always been, patriarchal in nature, which in turn is a capitalistic and bureaucratic system. The objective of our Liberation War was precisely to break this system, and create in its place one that can accommodate the finer feelings expressed in the line above. This spirit should be revived today. This is where education comes, as only it can lead us to a more just and fairer society.

Recently, the role of vice-chancellors came under the critical spotlight, especially after protests in some universities and a drive by the UGC to investigate allegations of corruption against the VCs of 14 public universities. This is a big number indeed. Does this represent a crisis at the highest levels of the universities?

The VC of a university is a guardian and a role model for the students. So, care should be taken before appointing someone to the post. In our public universities, appointments are often made based on one's political affiliation, not one's academic qualification, leadership quality, and moral integrity. In a way, these people are at once victims and beneficiaries of the existing education system. Since they are appointed based on political considerations, keeping their political masters happy is part of their job. But corruption and irregularities were there before too, so questions may be raised as to why the drive was not initiated before. Is the UGC failing? The UGC's role has never been well-defined.

Another thing is, public universities are supposed to be autonomous. And they are, but only on paper. Autonomy works only when there is a strong sense of responsibility and accountability: the VCs are accountable both to the students and the teachers. The VCs must be kept under observation and held liable for their action, or lack thereof. Usually it is done through the student unions and teachers' associations. But this will not work when those representative bodies are morally compromised and worried only about their own parochial interests. This is why they're failing to perform their all-too-important duty to safeguard autonomy in the universities.

So autonomy on paper is basically no autonomy at all?

It's tragic and quite ironic, actually. You see, there was no autonomy in the Pakistan period, even on paper. All universities were under government control. There was no freedom, no flexibility, no tolerance for diversity. The fight for autonomy was thus part of the bigger struggle for the country's independence, and it wouldn't have come if Bangladesh were not liberated. After liberation, we had expected that the universities would use their autonomy to set up a model for how to use it and practice internal democracy, with their own democratically elected syndicate, elected senate and representative bodies, elected VCs, etc. But that didn't happen. It became more evident after the restoration of democracy in 1991, when one group of teachers sided with the ruling parties while another group opposed them—both trying to score political points off their rivals—all the while the state used it to its advantage. Autonomy was lost along the way.

Given the situation, is there any justification for allowing what we know as "teachers' politics"?

The idea of having associations for teachers—and indeed students—with elected representatives is embedded in the principles of autonomy. Teachers' bodies are not merely some professional associations. Teachers are expected to use their platform to uphold the spirit of autonomy in universities and see if their administrations are working properly. They will play an oversight role. There are two basic objectives to be accomplished from this exercise: i) to achieve academic autonomy/freedom; and ii) to achieve academic excellence. Having elective principles means there can, and should, be differences of opinion among the teachers, but these differences should be based on ideological grounds, not for any material or personal gain. But that kind of politics is not practiced now. Today, pro-government teachers get elected in the association because pro-government candidates are preferred during recruitments. Like democracy is being abused in our country, the autonomy of universities is being abused too.

How do you fix a problem where teachers, who are the most advanced individuals in society, have no ideological commitment? That said, teachers must be allowed to form groups and have differences. There can be no question of banning politics for them, however undesirable its effects may be, because the alternative is not very desirable either, as it will mean reverting to the dark days of total authoritarianism. To find a way out of this quagmire, I think a deeper engagement with these issues and self-reflection on the part of teachers are needed.

There has been much discussion lately about the lack of research in universities. What's your opinion about that?
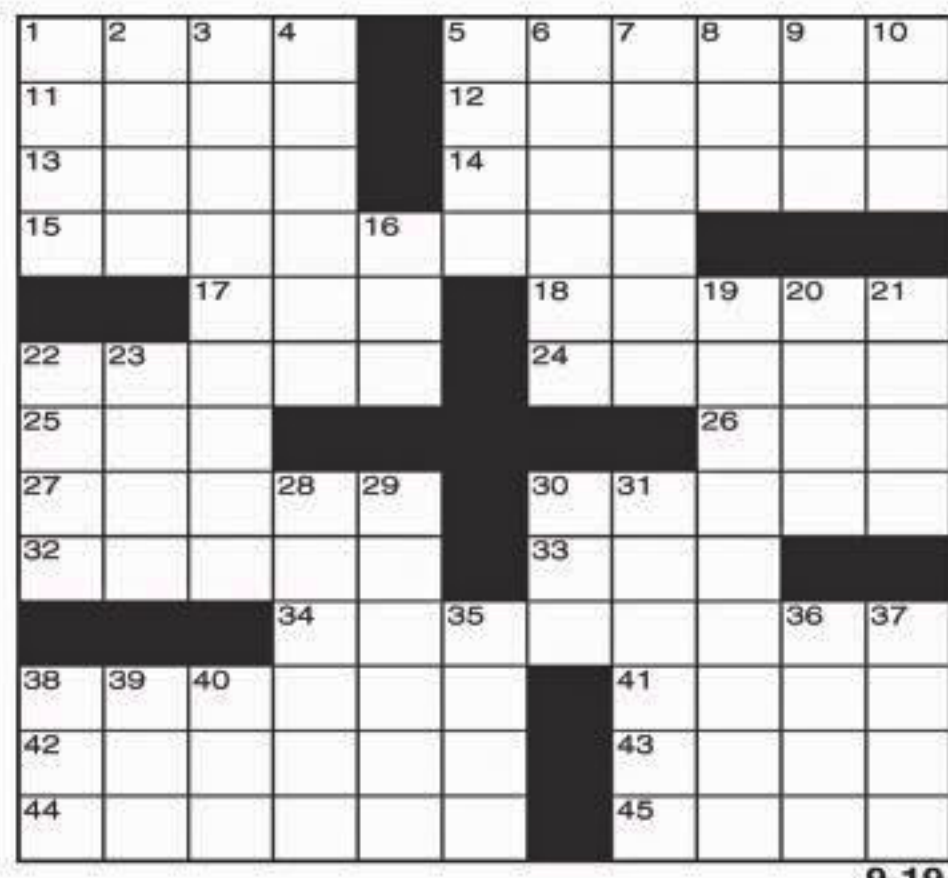
No problem in our education sector can be seen in isolation from its social context(s). If enough research is not being undertaken, it is because there hasn't been enough interest in that. There is no value for knowledge in our society, no honour or recognition for the knowledgeable. Not in our society, nor within the universities. Within the universities, there is a distinct lack of interest in research and creating new knowledge. Teachers are preferring the surety and comfort of money earned through teaching at private universities—or consultancy work or various kinds of projects—to the less attractive prospects of academic research. Professional advancement for the teachers is not being encouraged. This advancement is possible only through research, formal or informal, otherwise teachers will just be repeating and rehashing themselves. This is an affront to the intellect of the students and also the profession of teaching.

That said, funding for research is also very important. There should be regular lectures, conferences, seminars, symposiums, debates and such interactions. There is no dearth of institutes, centres and trusts in our public universities, but the effect of their work on society is neither too visible nor far-reaching. We should reverse this cycle and create an environment in which generating new knowledge will be actively encouraged. A teacher has a social commitment—to transmit the knowledge and experience that they have acquired—because a university is, after all, a social institution. A society funds and maintains this institution for the society's benefits, not for the benefits of certain individuals or classes. There are various ways for this transmission of knowledge: writing, producing, protesting, leading innovations, participating in cultural and social movements, etc. Without an awareness of these responsibilities, one cannot be an effective teacher.

Professor Serajul Islam Choudhury
PHOTO: **STAR**

BEETLE BAILEY   by Mort Walker

BABY BLUES   by Kirkman & Scott