

PM’s call appropriate

Alertness will help avoid road accidents

THE prime minister struck the nail on the head when she called for alertness on everyone’s part to prevent road accidents. It is a good idea too to introduce instructions on road safety at the school level. Awareness about rules of the road ought to be ingrained in the minds of children at an impressionable age so that observing the rules becomes a second nature.

One couldn’t agree more with the PM that the drivers alone are not responsible for accidents, but it is also true that most of the accidents are the results of either rash driving or disregard for the safety of other road-users, or caused by untrained drivers and faulty vehicles. Therefore, infringement of rules, whoever may be responsible, should be dealt with firmly and punishment should be proportional to the nature of the violation. However, what that requires is a set of contemporary laws that should be enforced vigorously. Given the heavy toll of life, not to speak of a large number of accident victims rendered physically invalid due to accidents, implementation of a new law does not brook any delay. Regrettably, the Road Safety Act-2018, formulated after student agitation last year for safer roads, seems to have been stalled, even after the president’s approval. We are dismayed at the reported efforts to water down some provisions about the punishments, which in themselves are already inadequate. And this is being done under pressure from transport workers and owners. For example, punishment for killing by reckless driving carries a maximum sentence of 5 years whereas simple robbery and robbery on highways at night carries a maximum sentence of 10 and 14 years respectively. Such a soft stance on a grievous offence to start with, and now the attempt to take an even more lenient position on deaths on roads, may well compel other stakeholders to ask whether the administration is at all serious about reducing road accidents and the number of deaths. Undue pressures should be resisted and the proposed Road Safety Act should be implemented without any more procrastination.

Buet students take oath to resist violence

Heed the voice of the students

THE horrific murder of Abrar Fahad has galvanised general students of Bangladesh University of Engineering & Technology (Buet) into action. In an unprecedented move, Buet students took an oath on October 16, in the presence of the Vice Chancellor, deans of different faculties and hall provosts, to stand united in the face of terrorism and communalism. Most students want a peaceful atmosphere on campus to pursue their studies and this unusual event demonstrates their intention all too plainly. The minute’s silence observed should ring loudly in the ears of university authorities to pay heed to the voice of ordinary students.

It now falls upon the administration to take a strong stance against any and every illegal activity on campus, including ragging and torture. Students come to this elite educational institution to not only learn but also mingle in a secure environment that tolerates frank expression in a free and unfettered atmosphere. We should not forget that students have always raised their voice for democracy and against autocracy. At every crucial juncture of our history, whether it was against Pakistani oppression or during the war of liberation, students have always been at the forefront of just movements. This time they have raised their voices against all kinds of violence and immoderation. This is so because they speak the truth when there is a free and unfettered environment. The truth cannot be bulldozed or suppressed no matter what the circumstances are ultimately. It is our hope that the university administration will put the welfare of its students before and above all other external pressures. The Abrar murder should act as a cue for other university authorities to begin the depoliticisation process so that campuses can once again be seats of learning and not schools of violence.

LETTERS
TO THE EDITOR

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Justice must prevail!

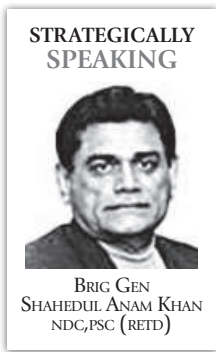
The gruesome murder of Abrar Fahad by the members of Chhatra League, who too were the students of one of the most reputed educational institutions in the country, shocked the citizens to the core.

It was reported that a compensation should be made to Abrar’s family. But all the wealth in the world cannot bring him back to life. The audacity of the crime has left the nation in disbelief. It is truly heart-wrenching to even imagine for a while the pain that was inflicted repeatedly, on an innocent boy. The murderous culprits seemed to have relished the moment, and that is truly horrific and shameful.

We as a nation demand punishment for all of those who are responsible. At the same time, we pray for the departed soul and hope that the Almighty gives his family the strength necessary to deal with such an unbearable loss.

Nur Jahan, Chattogram

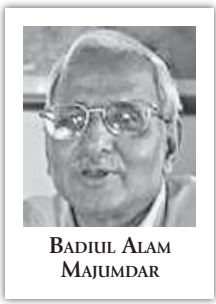




VC. “Where is my failure”, he had counterposed in an interview to this paper recently in the aftermath of the brutal cold-blooded murder of Abrar, and the sordid stories that are still emerging about BCL activities in the halls of Buet.

One hopes the title would be a suitable and terse response to the vice-chancellor’s query. And for that he should also seek answers to two central questions—what is the obligation of a teacher, and whether he, as one, had met his obligation towards his students, not only as a teacher but also as their guardian, he being the vice-chancellor of an institute that has come to be acknowledged as an institution by itself. And I make bold in this regard to posit the same question, given the state of affairs in most of the public universities in the country—many of them under investigation by the UGC for alleged breach of administrative and financial rules, where teachers are split into multiple groups according to their

If teachers indulge in politics, which most of them do, barring an exceptional few, can the students be faulted for following their example?



at the brutal killing of Buet student Abrar Fahad by Chhatra League activists. Buet protesters had said they would continue their shutdown of the university, Bangladesh’s most prestigious, until the VC agreed to their 10 conditions, including the ban on student politics.

The prime minister said last week that each university would have to make its own determination on banning student politics but that she would not support banning student politics nationwide. Some other political figures have similarly come out against a blanket ban.

Yet, the sentiments of most citizens of Bangladesh are against party-backed student politics, which exploits students at our public universities for the parties’ own selfish ends. The law is also against it: the Parliament has already made party-affiliated student politics in educational institutions illegal. (Incidentally, it also made the foreign branches of political parties illegal.)

In 2008, following dialogues held by the Election Commission [EC] with political parties, civil society and journalists in 2007, sections 90B and 90C, relating to registration of political parties, were included as an Ordinance in the amended RPO. The Ninth Parliament, in its first session, duly ratified the Ordinance, making it into law. Ironically, some of the individuals opposing Buet’s decision to ban student and teacher politics were members of the very Parliament that passed the RPO amendments in 2009.

Section 90B(1)(b)(iii) of *The Representation of People Order, 1972* (RPO), the main electoral law of Bangladesh, states that for any political party to be registered, its constitution must include, among others, “specific provisions...to prohibit formation of any organisation or body as its affiliated or associated body [consisting of] the teachers or students of any educational institution or the employees or labourers of any financial, commercial or industrial institution or establishment or the members of any profession: Provided that nothing shall prevent them from organising independently in their respective fields or forming association, society, trade unions etc. and exercising all democratic and political rights, and individual, subject to the provisions of the existing laws, to be a member of any political party.”

It is clear then that the formation of

The answer is blowing in the wind, my friend

political leanings identified by more shades of colour than in the rainbow, where rules are bent to appoint teachers with low grade in exams just to beef up the rank of pro-government teachers—whether our teachers’ community has met its obligation to the nation and to the students, and whether they are really grooming their charges to be the future leaders of our country.

It is not the intention of this piece to point out the many lapses in Buet, and the utter disregard for students’ welfare, wilful or otherwise. It is not only the VC

gratitude for what I am today, a debt, along with the debt to my parents, I cannot ever repay, for they have prepared me for the sunrise-period of my life as much as the sunset days. As I ponder on the point at issue, I ask myself why is it that my recollections of some of the teachers are more vivid in my mind than of some others. Was it their friendliness, their firmness but kindness, their being strict without being punitive, their knowledge and the ability to convey, their patience, capacity to recognise the weaknesses of their wards, treating each

whether the current crop of students in our highest seats of learning would feel the same way about all their teachers 50 years down the line?

The majority of students are for a peaceful productive time in the university. No parents expect to have their child sent home in a coffin. Unfortunately, the atmosphere in the public universities have been vitiated by a weak administration, which, in most cases, has been back-seat-driven by the student cadres of the ruling party. Some of the VCs use these cadres to go after the general students to stifle a peaceful demand. They have turned a blind eye to their illegal activities on the campus. If Buet VC had acted to stop the torment that the BCL cadres were subjecting the students to in the name of ragging in the “torture cell”, such a painful outcome could have been averted. To be unwilling to do anything about a patently bad practice because “it has been a tradition” cannot wash with the public. Ragging was something unheard of in the universities during our time.

Regrettably, political affiliation rather administrative capability has predominated other factors in appointing the vice-chancellors. As the Buet episode shows, it is more than educational accomplishments and university degrees that make for a good and effective institution head who can act in a non-partisan manner and treat all students equally. While no one is apolitical, the teachers cannot allow their political predilections to come in the way they treat the students. And if teachers indulge in politics, which most of them do, barring an exceptional few, can the students be faulted for following their example?

Unlike people who see plenty of ambiguity in Dylan’s affirmation, I find no opacity in what the singer wanted to convey. The answer is right in one’s face, but of course only those who can read the wind, or are willing to, can understand what it conveys. The VC will find the answer to his own question in himself too, if he cares to ask himself.

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Buet Vice-Chancellor Professor Saiful Islam attends a meeting on October 11, 2019 with a delegation of protesting students to discuss their demands submitted after the death of Abrar Fahad.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN/STAR

but also those teachers entrusted with overseeing the affairs of the students in the campus and halls who are liable for negligence and the eventual tragedy. Thus, one is compelled to address an equally important and vital question, which is, responsibility of the teachers.

I had the good fortune to have been shepherded by many very good persons from my kindergarten days till the day I emerged from the portals of a public school after my secondary education into the hard world and, for a brief period, into the university. And I do remember most of them and recall most of their names. To them I owe a deep debt of

of us equally, and above all, shielding us without being overbearing?

In this context, I am reminded of what a renowned American psychiatrist had said about teachers. “What a teacher is, is more important than what he teaches”, he had said. Coming from a psychiatrist, the wise words capture the innate meaning of “teacher.” Reading this acutely insightful comment of Karl Menninger, I find how true it is. If some of my teachers have had a more lasting impression in my mind, it is because of not only what they taught me but also by what they were. To me they were educators, not just teachers. At the risk of sounding facetious, let me ask

Politics of Exploitation

student wings of political parties, like Chhatra League and Chhatra Dal, are prohibited by law. However, the law does not by any means abrogate students’, teachers’ or labourers’ right to political expression, as explicitly stated in the second half of the paragraph: “*provided that nothing shall prevent them from organizing independently.*”

So the decision of Buet authorities in essence puts into effect a law that should have been implemented long ago. If it had, deaths like Abrar Fahad’s may have been prevented. The selfishness of our political parties and inaction of our EC have created an environment in which the excesses of student politics have been allowed to flourish with tragic results.

growing more corrosive over time.

The student politics, as is practiced today, is a politics of exploitation. Political parties use students as their henchmen to provide “street power”. Rather than students engaging in activities in the interest of students through organically grown organisations, student politics exists to cater to the interests of the parent organisations. They are not independent, neither financially nor operationally; they are run by the dictates of the political parties backing them. It is based on a patronage system: Student wings are “clients” of political parties, acting in service of their “patrons”, and receiving support and benefits in return. Such patronage, especially by the ruling political party,

part, in any political activity which disturbs or undermines, or is likely to disturb or undermine, the public order”. Punishment for violations is up to two years imprisonment—but, again, no action is taken against those who flex muscles and otherwise break laws in our campuses because of the entrenched patron-client relationship.

The defiance of the RPO and the violations of the Penal Code have turned our students into monsters and killers. Since independence, we have seen 151 killings in various campuses, the latest being Abrar Fahad’s. Thus, the death of Abrar is primarily the result of the lack of rule of law, which created a culture of impunity not only in Buet campus, but also throughout Bangladesh.



It is clear that the formation of the student wings of political parties, like Chhatra League and Chhatra Dal, is prohibited by law.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

How did political parties circumvent the law passed by Parliament in 2009? By playing games. The parties removed from their respective constitutions the provisions regarding associated and affiliated bodies, and called their existing student and labourer wings “brotherly” organisations—while exercising full control over them, including designating their leadership.

So despite the widespread political consensus and dialogue held by the EC between concerned stakeholders (i.e. political parties, civil society and journalists) from which the law passed by Parliament in 2009 emerged, the parties refused to follow the intent of the law—the ban of student and teacher politics. Business as usual was allowed to continue,

allows members of its student wing to engage in almost every kind of illegal activity with impunity, often with the support of partisan teachers. In this way, our political parties have essentially “weaponised” the student politics on our campuses, as we have seen at Buet.

Clearly, the cost of this defiance of the law, passed by the Parliament, has been very high. Student and teacher politics has poisoned the academic environment of our public universities and turned them into dens of hooliganism and violence, in violation of the Penal Code, which in its Section 153B prohibits any words or actions that “induce or attempts to induce any student or any class of students, or any institution interested in or connected with students, to take

To conclude, bans on student and teacher politics alone by university authorities will not stop violence and other illegal activities on campus. Political parties must commit to stop, directly or indirectly, affiliating with and supporting and patronising student and teacher politics on our campuses. They must also bring an end to the confrontational politics, which causes intolerance and hate for those holding opposing views. In addition, they must commit to ending the culture of impunity and ensuring rule of law. Most importantly, the EC must wake up to its responsibility to enforce the provisions of RPO. Would it?

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