

Academia's global standing: The research imperative

Holding RHD accountable

Proactive role of two ministers

We laud two of our ministers for their critical assessment of the reasons behind the poor state of roads that lead to immense public suffering. Not only did they blast the officials of the Roads and Highways Department (RHD) for their poor planning and maintenance of roads, they came prepared with presentations and cited specific examples in their respective constituencies to get their point across. All this happened at a recent seminar organised by RHD at the planning ministry.

What is positive about this seminar is that the RHD officials and the ministers pointed out the bottlenecks in the process of maintenance—important pointers that can be used for future planning.

While engineers and other officials of the RHD highlighted overloading of vehicles, shortage of funds for road maintenance and lack of manpower and poor drainage system as the main factors, the two ministers brought up the crucial issues of faulty road design and basic mismanagement flaws. The state minister showed photos of an overpass without a necessary ramp, a bridge where tolls are collected haphazardly, buses stopping in the middle of the road and a pillar of a bridge blocking a canal. His statement: "we are the challenges" alluded to the inefficiency of the RHD. The finance minister was also very critical about the RHD's role and gave the example of the poor state of roads in his own constituency—Cumilla. He expressed his frustration regarding the inability of the RHD to introduce a modern system of toll plazas, which he had asked the secretary of the body to do at least 30 times.

Such discussions are indeed crucial for solving a problem as immediate as the sorry state of our roads. We appreciate the strong stand taken by these two ministers and feel that this meeting has brought forth the core flaws in the system. Preventing overloading, modification of vehicles, proper road designing, continued repair of roads, modern system of toll collection and preventing buses from stopping at points other than designated bus stops are certainly the first steps that could make a world of difference in road longevity. We hope that such frank and productive discussions between ministers, departmental officials and experts continue and that the solutions are taken seriously.

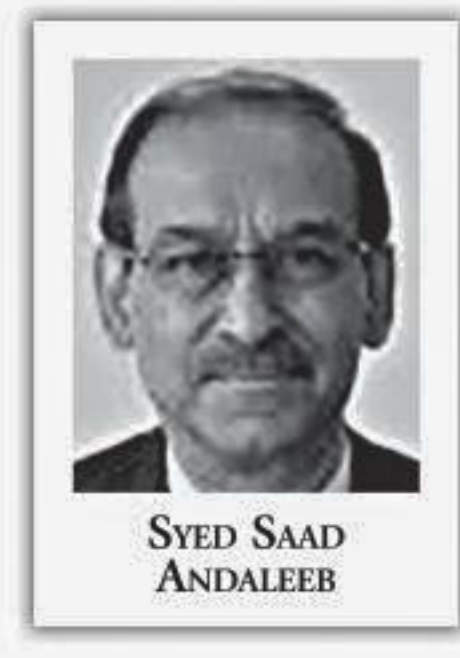
BTCL's high turnover rate of MDs

The reason why it is a losing concern

It is a befuddling tale that the state-owned Bangladesh Telecommunication Company Ltd (BTCL) has been spinning for the 11 years of its life. In these eleven years the organisation has had as many as 19 Managing Directors (MDs), with some of them holding the post multiple times. There is no official reason for such a high turnover rate of MDs but the outcome of this bizarre state of affairs is hardly surprising. From a profitable venture, the company has become a losing concern with a loss of TK 389.36 crore in the last fiscal year.

With a constant change in leadership, the company's top management has not been able to address bottlenecks or take care of its development and plan for the future. It is an example of how state-owned enterprises are run to the ground because of lack of vision and total concentration being devoted to mostly pleasing certain people within the organisation, giving them the post as a temporary position rather than basing the promotion on proper evaluation of performance. In BTCL's case, most of the MDs were picked from within the company except for a few bureaucrats. We are quite mystified by such an illogical way of choosing the topmost leadership, upon whom the survival and success of the company lies.

The chairman of the company's board has been quoted in a report as saying that "hopefully the government has chosen a new managing director who is dynamic and quite younger than the previous ones..." It is rather disappointing that even after 11 years and with such substantial losses to make up for, the board is still only "hopeful" about a younger, more effective leadership. We cannot overlook the fact that BTCL is a state-owned company and run by public funds. It has moreover, a huge potential to be an efficient, profitable company that will provide a valuable service to the people. Thus, it is incumbent on the government to appoint qualified leaders who will be in the top positions long enough to make a real change in the company's balance sheet as well as image. The sooner it does this the less money the government will lose.



SYED SAAD ANDALEEB

RECENTLY an M Phil student, studying service management of hospital patients, emailed: "Sir, I am doing descriptive type of cross-sectional study and I am not testing any hypothesis. Other than mean

and SD [standard deviation] ... my main problem is I don't know what else I can do with [the] scales." The content of the email is emblematic of the quality of research conducted in academia which, unfortunately, gets reflected in regional and global rankings.

If we consider QS Rankings from 2017-2020, only the University of Dhaka showed up in the "world" rankings all four times—but in a low position. BUET showed up in the radar from 2019, again ranked low. In the "Asian" category, the total number of universities ranked was 351 in 2017; 400 in 2018; 499 in 2019; and 550 in 2020. In each of these years, the number of Bangladeshi universities in the QS list were 2, 4, 6 and 7. In contrast India had 23, 35, 76, and 96 universities in the list; Malaysia had 21, 27, 26, and 29; and Pakistan had 10, 16, 23, and 29.

Also, as editor of a journal, the most consistent challenge I faced throughout my 20-year tenure was the quality of the submitted papers. While there was a good flow of submissions, the feedback from our reviewers was disconcerting: the rejection rate was almost 70-80 percent! Quite a few submitted papers did not meet even basic standards of scholarly writing.

I bring this matter to the attention of our readers and, hopefully, policy-makers to make the case that fundamental problems remain in academia in Bangladesh that must be addressed if they are to reach global research standards, recognition in the rankings, and a growing reputation. These problems lie in many different folds and strata of the academic landscape. Herein, I note the most critical ones.

There is a serious training deficit of large numbers of our teachers and researchers as reflected in the opening paragraph. However, they continue to publish because the bar is low and consumers of research are not very discerning. Many researchers cannot

go beyond simple descriptive analysis because they have not been taught otherwise. Thus, the training received by graduate students, who go on to become teachers and researchers, is of limited value, which perpetuates the cycle.

Book publications, quality journals, workshops, seminars, and conferences receive so little support that the nurture of research is virtually non-existent. Many in academia may not even comprehend what is good research. Serious effort, especially teacher development, is thus a *sine qua non* for academic research to reach its full potential.

Research opportunities are also

in the likes of the National Science Foundation or the National Institute of Health in the US, dedicated to nurturing good research that is overseen by a solid brain pool of academics and savvy knowledge managers.

A question that demands serious attention is that of teachers asking, "What benefit will I get from doing high quality research?" Even the administrators in academic institutions, many without any research background, apparently fail to understand the value of good research. Not only do they resist spending money on research; when they do, they have no understanding of how to reward good researchers other than giving them a

dealing with plagiarising faculty?

It is a common refrain that senior teachers do not share their research skills. The moot question, however, is whether the senior faculty do not "want" to share or whether they "lack" the skills and do not want to expose themselves.

The lack of demanding MA, MPhil and PhD programmes is a serious obstacle to producing quality research. Those enrolled in the above programmes may not even know which programme is truly beneficial and which one is a total waste of time. It is important, therefore, to begin establishing a few research universities focusing on graduate programmes only. Over time, additional universities coming onboard with a clear research agenda may be classified as Tier-I, Tier-II or Tier-III depending on their research orientations and commitments.

Policy makers ought to address these fundamental issues and build a solid research infrastructure from which would emanate a steady stream of scholarly work to build academia's reputation. Perhaps non-resident Bangladeshi (NRB) academics can be induced to play a partnering role to improve the research environment.

In addition, there is a need to build a strong culture of peer reviewing, supplemented by an equally strong mentoring programme. Mandating publications in SCOPUS, Thomson Reuters, SJR and other scholarly publication clusters can also be a game-changer. It is also important to engage faculty in the fine art of scholarly writing. Lack of attention to this onerous task usually results in outright rejection by top-ranking international journals. Of the 10 percent invited to revise and resubmit, half are still rejected!

If we are serious about research in academia, let's start with three imperatives: attract the best and brightest to academia, reduce teaching loads from the present ridiculous levels, and generously reward researchers making a strong mark. I may note that not everyone will (want to) be a research star; so, it will be important to nurture separate research and teaching tracks. Faculty members allowed to excel in one or the other, I am confident, will build academic institutions with stellar reputations.

Dr Andaleeb is Distinguished Professor Emeritus, Pennsylvania State University, a former Vice Chancellor, and Editor, Journal of Bangladesh Studies (JBS). Email: jbstudies@gmail.com. This op-ed is adapted from his recent editorial in JBS.



conspicuously lacking. Government and industry need research and ought to engage academia as done in the western world; yet they hesitate to do so because they are uncertain of what they'll get. This is the classic chicken and egg problem; it also reflects a serious lack of a symbiotic relationship between users and suppliers of research. It is important to break out of this template.

There is also a lack of "dedicated" funding within academia. The funds that are made available are often an afterthought and not a part of any sustained research agenda. There is a clear need to establish a National Research Council

small salary increment! Where, then, is the incentive to pursue good, sustained, original research?

Plagiarism continues to be an issue that should not be taken lightly in academia. It leaves a dark stain on the reputation of our universities. If it can be mandated that all publications of the faculty must be placed on the web, the normative social influence of public scrutiny would likely check this practice, especially in the absence of a moral bar. The question is how many universities would have the courage to adopt this stance? Also, how many faculty members would support such a policy? And what is the record of

Rohingya genocide: The Gambia's fight for humanity

HASAN AL-MAHMUD

WHEN almost all the countries are silent about Myanmar's genocide in its Rakhine state and the Rohingya crisis in Bangladesh, a western African country, The Gambia, has raised its voice boldly. Recently, The Gambia has taken Myanmar to the international court for the first time since the Rohingya genocide started a few years ago, and the Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi has been called upon to respond to this allegation as the representative of the country. Here is how and why The Gambia did this.

The Gambia is the smallest country in Africa, but it has a significant influence on the politics of West African nations. Also, it actively participates in solving Islamic issues around the world. The Civil War of Liberia and Sierra Leone (1991-2002) was also minimised through the active involvement of The Gambia. Now, Gambia's Attorney General and Minister for Justice Abubakar Tambadou has filed a case at the Hague in the Netherlands and has been playing a pivotal role in trying to convict Myanmar for crimes against Rohingya that occurred in its Rakhine state. Tambadou has the experience of dealing with the dictatorship that lasted 22 years in his country; he has also worked on the genocide of Rwanda in the UN court, which indicates that he is a suitable person to bring this issue on stage.

A research titled, "Forced migration of Rohingya: the untold experience", published by Ontario International Development Agency, Canada on July 18, 2018, has estimated in January 2018 that during the genocide, the military and the local Rakhine Buddhists killed at least 24,000 Rohingya people; gang rapes and other forms of sexual violence were used against 18,000 Rohingya Muslim women and girls. 116,000 Rohingya were beaten up, and 36,000 Rohingya were thrown into fire. According to the UN reports of September 2018, over 700,000 Rohingya people, although according to the local NGOs the figure is almost 1,200,000, had fled or had been driven out of Rakhine state. Later, they took shelter in neighbouring Bangladesh as refugees.

Myanmar has been accused by various United Nations agencies, International Criminal Court officials, human rights groups, journalists, and governments, including the United States. CBS News

(February 1, 2018), Los Angeles Times (March 13, 2018), CNN (March 12, 2018), Amnesty International (December 11, 2017), Guardian (April 10, 2018), and so on have reported that what the Myanmar military did is a text book example of ethnic cleansing and genocide.

The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs published a report titled, "Rohingya Refugee Crisis" (September 21, 2017) where they mentioned that the UN had found evidence of wide-scale human rights violations, including extrajudicial killings; gang rapes; arson of Rohingya villages, businesses, and schools; and infanticides. Surprisingly, the Myanmar

alone appealed. On the first day of the hearing, Tuesday (December 10, 2019), they appealed to the court to take interim action to stop the genocide. The next day, Myanmar's top civilian leader and peacemaker Noble laureate Aung San Suu Kyi denied genocide having been perpetrated.

In addition to the country's law minister, three other legal experts from The Gambia disputed Myanmar's claims and made statements on Thursday. Their main point was that Myanmar did not deny injustice to the Rohingya; also, the assertion that genocide was not the motive for all those actions taken by the Myanmar army is misleading and

noticed that Suu Kyi did not use the word "Rohingya" in the court. She described them as Muslims, except when she was talking about the separatist mirror groups. From this, it is easily understood just how hateful and destructive the country's attitude is towards them.

The *Atlantic*, an American magazine, asks about Suu Kyi's moral degradation through a headline, "What happened to Aung San Suu Kyi?" They wrote their sub-headline, "A human-rights icon's fall from grace in Myanmar," where they mentioned that Suu Kyi had not done anything practical to stop the killings in the Rakhine state. Her seemingly callous indifference has felt like a betrayal to many outsiders. How can Suu Kyi, an avatar of human rights for so many years, stand by while her government violently tramples them?

When the situation was not in favour of Myanmar, its lawyer Sabas had to agree that crimes against humanity may have taken place in Myanmar, but according to him, it was "not genocide." Myanmar was involved in the crimes, which was proved by another defensive statement by Myanmar's lawyer Stoker: The Gambia has no right to sue Myanmar even if a crime has occurred. In the reply, The Gambia tabled their logic on how they do indeed have the right to talk about this.

The hearing was finished by the last speaker Aung San Suu Kyi, who assured, showing a photo of a football field, that they do not want anything like inter-caste conflict to resume. After Suu Kyi's speech, the president of the court, Yusuf, said that the court is going to inform the update to both parties as soon as possible. The hearing ended with his announcement. In this battle of words, Myanmar was defensive while The Gambia was strong with the complaints and their logic.

Apart from the debate, what The Gambia has done in favour of landless Rohingyas is a remarkable example of practicing humanity. Somehow, The Gambia has fought for Bangladesh as well, as the country is facing many challenges in terms of environment, food, and national security in hosting the Rohingya refugees. Therefore, The Gambia deserves thanks from the people of Bangladesh for standing with them in their time of need.

Hasan Al-Mahmud was a Fulbright Teaching Excellence and Achievement (TEA) Fellow, Montana State University, USA. He writes on contemporary issues, education, and literature.



Aung San Suu Kyi led Myanmar's defence team at the landmark International Court of Justice (ICJ) hearing. PHOTO: REUTERS/YVES HERMAN

government dismissed all these accusations saying it "exaggerations" as *Al Jazeera* reported in the report titled, "Government dismisses claims of abuse against Rohingya" (August 6, 2017).

In these circumstances, Abubakar Tambadou came forward and said in the court, "the lives of the Rohingya in that country (Myanmar) are in danger." He believes that The Gambia may not be a neighbour of Bangladesh and Myanmar, but as a signatory of the Genocide Convention, they have a responsibility to stop and prevent genocide. From the beginning, The Gambia has been asking for support from the OIC (Islamic Organisation of Cooperation), and finally, as a sovereign country, The Gambia

disregard international law.

The Gambia's lawyer Paul Reicher first spoke on behalf of the country during a third day hearing before a panel of judges headed by the ICJ President Abdul Quai Ahmed Yusuf. He repeatedly demanded a speedy interim action against the Myanmar army until the trial was completed. Myanmar denies the motive for genocide in the brutal atrocities committed against the Rohingya. Myanmar's lawyer, Professor Sabas, spoke of seven indicators to prove the motive for the genocide. The seven indicators are in Gambia's petition, and Myanmar has not denied them.

Observing Suu Kyi's speech, Paul Reicher made a vital observation—he mentioned that the court must have

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Donald Trump's impeachment

US President Donald Trump was impeached for abuse of power in a historic vote in the House of Representatives as he becomes the third occupant of the White House in American history to be impeached. The final disposal of the impeachment however needs to be approved by the Senate.

No doubt, US President Donald Trump is a ruthless businessman-turned-politician who has been elected through a controversial election and he has little know-how about US foreign policy and the rest of the world. Several high-ups have already left the White House thanks to Trump's impetuous decisions!

After being elected, Donald Trump has taken many controversial decisions one after another. Most of his decisions not only confuse Americans but also the international community. Many of his tweets tend to be subjected towards mockery and at times it is hard to believe that a US president would write such things! It seems to me that Trump is seriously stubborn and most of his decision are biased adding to the US' foreign policy debacles. Only time will tell what the future has in store for America.

Md Zillur Rahaman, Dhaka