

Partisan meddling in corruption cases must stop

Govt should take note of the HC's observation

We appreciate the High Court's criticism of the government's attempt to get a corruption case withdrawn in Sylhet, terming it a "naked interference" into the affairs of the Anti-Corruption Commission. The strength of any democracy depends on its four pillars keeping each other in check to maintain a fine balance. Unfortunately, in Bangladesh, we have seen the overreach of the executive branch of the government often go unchecked. Therefore, we applaud the HC's decision to call out the government for going beyond its mandate to interfere into the matters of an independent body such as the ACC, particularly on this occasion as it concerns corruption within the government itself.

The corruption case in question was filed against the chairman of Borodal Uttar union in Tahirpur upazila and two others on April 5, 2007, in connection with embezzling 17 bundles of corrugated iron sheets meant for government relief to the poor. The shameful act of pilfering from the poor and the needy has become a common phenomenon, particularly because government officials and others who are behind such corrupt practices are often allowed to get away with them.

On February 11, 2011, the home ministry recommended that the case be withdrawn. Moreover, the government has recommended the withdrawal of over 7,000 criminal cases filed before the Awami League assumed power. The fact that the government has suggested the withdrawal of so many thousands of cases is a glaring example of how the ACC is being hamstrung from fulfilling its duty of investigating corruption and prosecuting the corrupt due to lobbying and outside interference.

Under such circumstances, it would be an absurd proposition to expect the ACC to successfully battle corruption. The government must allow the ACC to function independently and without constantly looking over its shoulder for government approval or dreading disapproval when it comes to investigating cases.

Indomitable spirit of a man who lost both his arms

There is so much to learn from his life

We feel truly encouraged to know about a man in Faridpur who, despite losing both his arms in an accident, has been working with an unbeatable spirit to change his fate. According to a report in *The Daily Star* on Thursday, Kamrul Sheikh was electrocuted in 2018 while working as an electrician. As both his arms were badly damaged in the accident, they had to be amputated. When he came back home after taking treatment at the burn unit of Dhaka Medical College and Hospital for around a month and a half, he found it hard to earn a living and provide for his family. But instead of losing hope, he kept trying to find a suitable work.

Coming from a poverty-stricken family, Kamrul did not study after the primary level and began working to support his family from an early age. There is nothing that he didn't do to survive—he worked as a carpenter, as a day labourer, as a rickshaw puller and finally as an electrician. After coming back from the hospital, he first bought four rickshaws with the money he got as compensation for the accident and rented them out. Then, being inspired by another man who was facing the same challenge as he was, Kamrul sold his rickshaws and opened a grocery shop with the money, which finally changed his fate. This spirited man has even learned to swim, cycle, operate computers and mobile phones using just his legs.

At a time when many people, especially our younger generation, are losing hope due to rising unemployment and poverty in the country, this man from a disadvantaged background has shown us how people can change their lives if they have the willpower. And Kamrul is not the only one; there are many brave and spirited women and men like Kamrul around us who have been working hard for a better future despite the situation around them being extremely adverse. We salute these people's struggle and determination to not give up whatever the challenge.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

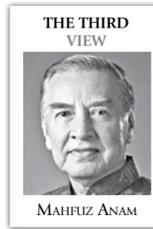
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Will the rape culture ever end?

While the coronavirus pandemic has managed to put a hold on many things, it somehow could not stop the scourge of sexual harassment from spreading. In fact, during the lockdown, many women and girls became more vulnerable than usual and fell victim to sexual and domestic violence.

The recent rape and murder of an O-level student in Dhaka's Kalabagan area has shocked the nation once again. How can someone have the audacity to commit such a horrendous crime despite knowing that the punishment can be death? Is it impunity, or is it insanity? Why have we not been able to tackle the rape culture which has destroyed numerous lives so far? We must find out where we are lagging and take action accordingly. And this needs to be done urgently, given how frequently such incidents are occurring.

Sabera Alam, by email



THE THIRD VIEW

MAHFUZ ANAM

He wanted to be an exceptional journalist, and he was. It was as if he *willed* himself to be what he wanted to be. That was Mizan, the amazing self-made person who mesmerised us with his

professional and human qualities. Never relenting with his tough questions, never forgetting to smile as he did so.

He was born in 1967, the year I joined Dhaka University. His early education was in Jhalokathi and yet he was better educated than many others who had better initial educational opportunities, proving that self-motivation can easily overcome whatever educational discrepancies you may have faced early in life. He did his BA from BM College, Barishal, studying accountancy and yet he distinguished himself as a journalist, again proving that one can gain expertise in any discipline regardless of the subjects studied at the BA or MA level. His life is an example of excelling through sheer willpower. If you want to do something earnestly enough, you can do it. That's what Mizan believed in, that's what he proved and what his life's work stands for.

He was only 53 and already he had become, unquestionably, the best amongst us. So young and yet so wise, so committed, so insightful and passionate, so curious, so untiring in his work, and so determined to get to the bottom of what needed to be told. We journalists are a bit of a jack of all trades, and definitely not a master of any. But Mizan was different. He was the master of what he would write on. While we would hover above the surface, he would delve deep—while ours would be an exercise in coming to a quick conclusion, his would be a laborious and untiring search for all the aspects of a story and addressing all its main and nuanced angles.

Many stumble into journalism, some get pulled into it, some saunter in because there is nothing better to do. Others choose it out of a delusion of being good writers. But some—and there are very few—stride into it with vigour, energy and a clear purpose, to use this magnificent profession for the betterment of a wider

group. Mizan was of this rare breed.

Matiur Rahman, the editor of Prothom Alo, wrote in his tribute last Wednesday that Mizan wanted "back" his first ten years of journalism which he had spent before joining his favourite newspaper, Prothom Alo, implying that those were not well-spent. This only speaks of Mizan's desire to spend every minute of his profession in ways that were purposeful and of service to humanity. He loved his profession, knew its power, was aware of what it could do to uphold the rights of the oppressed, and he wanted to do just that—serve a wider social cause.

If we look back on the worldview of Mizan, it becomes clear that as a journalist, taking up the cause of justice was almost natural for him. He understood the fundamental importance of a well-functioning and fair judicial system. He was aware of the all-encompassing and intricate web of laws which bind a society together and the tremendous good that a just legal system can do for the people. So the constitution, the legal framework, the judicial system, the various ways it functions became his natural field of work. Once having chosen it, he devoted his full energy to learning about it. He devoted his energy to developing his expertise in it. He started reporting and writing columns on the judiciary which began to attract the attention of lawyers, judges and all the practitioners of the legal system. Very soon, he emerged as an authentic voice pointing out the anomalies of various laws and the disservice that any miscarriage of justice was doing to us as a nation.

His write-ups on the constitution and how the various amendments impacted on its original spirit and purpose are among his most important legacy for us to build on. His book on the constitution and the caretaker government controversy is an important contribution in this field. Rule of law was his article of faith, and any aberration in it was a sacrilege he would always be ready to fight against.

Many of us go abroad but when he travelled, he was always looking for materials to write on. His focus was always on journalism and never on tourism. He loved history but his interest was less in seeing its physical remnants and much more in delving into it so that he could tell something new for the benefit of his readers.

His desire to know more about our

Liberation War was never-ending. He wanted to study it in depth, not from a historian's perspective but from that of a journalist, to tell the story of how a nation began to mobilise, became united to fight, picked up arms and gained victory over a brutal army. He was in constant search for new materials on our independence struggle so he could study it and report on it.



Mizanur Rahman Khan (1967-2021)

Bangabandhu's assassination was another core area of his focus. He understood the importance of that single event and how the assassination impacted on our history and the future development of Bangladesh. Hence his relentless search to learn more about it. It will not be an exaggeration to say that he was obsessed with it. He would collect documents about this tragic event from all possible places and libraries and would write on them. These articles were so important that a book was published under the title of "Markin Daliley Mujib Hatya" (or Mujib killing in US documents) by Prothoma publishers, a subsidiary of Prothom Alo.

He had this amazing quality of perseverance. He would stay with the subject of his inquiry over a very long time. He knew how to look through a huge pile of documents and extract what he was looking for. Those who have never done so would not fully appreciate the uniqueness of this quality. His earnest desire was to go to Washington, DC and do research in the Library of Congress on the US' role during our Liberation War and on the assassination of Bangabandhu. While in DC, he showed an extraordinary capacity for research, a rare quality among today's journalists, and wrote an amazing series of stories from State Department documents

on our Liberation War that lasted for years. According to the Prothom Alo editor, he wrote over several years and every year he would bring out some new and interesting facts about his favourite subject.

A very important lesson that we journalists can learn from him is the importance of specialising in a particular area and then covering it as thoroughly as possible. He chose the world of the constitution, of the rule of law, of rights and responsibilities, of freedoms and obligations, and became an authoritative voice on all of them.

I was Mizan's fan. I read his columns and marvelled at the research that went behind it. I followed his arguments and realised how intricate and well-founded they were. I appreciated his zeal to make a point and felt overwhelmed at the vigour with which he did so. I remain eternally grateful to him for his personal words of encouragement and support and legal advice during my dark days in 2016 of 84 cases, 16 of which were for sedition and the rest for defamation.

It was the "person" Mizan that always won my heart. Ever gentle, polite to a fault, and humble as one can be and ever smiling, he was a gentleman par excellence. He would seldom relent in an argument because of his solid facts but would never be overbearing in letting you know that your facts were wrong. In meetings his views would always be short, precise, to the point and refreshing. I respected him for his work, loved him for his human qualities and admired him for the height he took journalism to. He was among the very few journalists who really saw the beauty, majesty, intellectual width and moral power of ethical journalism and its capacity to serve society. Mizanur Rahman Khan, our favourite Mizan, did. And now he is gone.

Above everything else, Mizan truly represented that critical free spirit that makes an independent journalist. He adored the principle of freedom of expression and freedom of the press, and all his life, he worked for it and stood by it. He knew that without a free press there cannot be democracy, and without democracy a rights-based society cannot be established.

May we all learn to serve the cause of independent journalism as Mizan did.

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THE ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE PROJECT

Are grades all that matter?

The Academic Experience Project is a faculty-student collaborative work aimed to glean insights about the experiences of tertiary-level students. Each Friday, *The Daily Star* publishes an op-ed highlighting its findings. This is the eleventh article of the series.

SAZZAD SHAHRIAR and SYED SAAD ANDALEEB

THE state of higher education in Bangladesh has been stagnating for a long time, with too much emphasis on grades. This is serving as a source of great displeasure and disappointment for the students who generally feel they have been deprived of holistic and quality education. This situation was corroborated in a recent survey of The Academic Experience Project where a mammoth 73 percent of respondents did not think that higher education makes students competitive for the job market. Similarly, dissatisfaction was also expressed with the quality of the academic programmes and faculties, as well as with the utter lack of co-curricular activities that can enrich students enormously.

The job market, it must be understood, prefers applicants who have a good balance between their grades, combined with co-curricular and service-learning experiences. Lack of club and other social activities denies students the option of partaking in activities beyond the classroom. Many students remain uninformed of the importance of co-curricular activities and spend all of their time studying, worrying or engaging in idle chatter.

In most universities, service-learning opportunities are totally absent. "Service learning is a combination of what we know as formal education and applying that learning in a service-oriented way... (it) requires students to demonstrate their knowledge, thus connecting the cognitive to the emotive and resulting in better learning outcomes. It incorporates personal passions with intellect, empowering students to find their passion and exercise useful ways to engage in real world problems... Students take the ideas they learn about in theory and connect them to real problems in practice, creating viable solutions for long-term transformation in society." (Wikipedia)

Missing also are internship opportunities for the multitude of aspiring students who experience nothing of the world of work while they are studying. As defined (Pomerantz), an internship is a structured experience that relates to a student's major and/or career goal; enhances a student's academic, career, and personal development; is supervised by a professional in the field;

is paid or unpaid, part-time or full-time; is mutually agreed upon by the student, supervisor and/or faculty member; and can also be called a Practicum or Co-Op.

The Academic Experience Project showed that students expressed the need for more club activities, as well as practicum opportunities that can bring out the students' latent and hidden talents that they themselves often do not know existed. Not all students are equally academically gifted; some are gifted in other areas such as debating, performing, creative writing, sports, etc.



Without club activities, students have no way of exploring their hidden talents and are left to contend with studying only.

PHOTO: STAR FILE

Without club activities, they have no way of exploring their hidden talents and are left to contend with one thing only: studying. Unfortunately, the creative part of their brain remains mostly unexplored and underutilised—a sad and significant loss for their time spent in an academic institution. And practicum is a good way to prepare them as employees or entrepreneurs.

Many students also felt that career counselling in their universities is non-existent or undeveloped. In fact, most universities don't have anything remotely related to career counselling. The great body of students, even in reputable institutions, have no idea what they will do after they graduate. Some of them don't even find their majors

interesting at all, with no recourse to change tracks. When asked about this, a student at the University of Dhaka expressed his disappointment: "I am doing an MBA, but I am not quite sure about its prospects or where I would get the best value. If only there was some scope of counselling, I would have taken an informed decision about my career." Due to the underdeveloped state of career counselling, even students who are academically excellent find that they don't live up to the expectations of the job market. This may explain the large

gap between supply and demand of job-related skills in professional fields.

A large percentage of students also felt that counselling for mental health needs immediate attention at their institutions. This has been addressed in detail in an earlier op-ed. On this matter, Alvi, a past student of BUET, expressed his frustration, "As a nation, we don't value mental health as much as we value academic success." Every year, students are committing suicide, inflicting self-harm or going into depression from family pressures, academic stress, peer pressure or relationship issues. They desperately need someone with whom they can have a heart-to-heart conversation to get guidance in tough times.

Overall, there was firm agreement

about not having enough activities on campus beyond sitting in lecture-dominated classes and taking exams which mostly test memory and not learning. While the top universities of the world emphasise additional campus and service-learning activities, most universities in Bangladesh choose to disregard them. Students fall into the rut of believing that attaining a high CGPA is all that matters for the job market, or life in general. After four to five years of studying, they find out how badly they have been guided and how poorly their overall potential has been developed.

It's important for the authorities to pay attention to these serious gaps that exist in educating our youth. Questions that arise are: Do we have the professionals who can effectively play leadership roles in these areas to develop meaningful internship programmes, service-learning opportunities, club activities, career counselling roles, and counselling for mental health? If not, can these professionals be developed quickly enough?

Our academic institutions have never seriously attended to the holistic development of our students. With the large and growing number of universities and students, it is these new roles that must be brought into focus to inspire students in diverse ways and attend to their anxieties and concerns. It also points to entirely new areas in which we need to educate and train competent personnel to support broader student needs. These are also new and exciting areas of educational development that have the scope of creating substantial employment opportunities.

A coordinated and holistic approach to higher education is the need of the day. When the administration activates its imagination, and brings about the changes we suggest, the quality of the educational experience will be considerably enhanced and the preparation of our youth to smoothly step into the world of work will be greatly facilitated. We also believe employers will be pleasantly surprised and delighted to recruit from the newly refurbished pool of graduating students.

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