

Will the BCS examinations continue to possess our students?

It is high time we attach value to professions that contribute to society and not just personal ambitions



DURING this pandemic, many of our universities, both general and technical, have set the target of completing undergraduate final examinations before January 31. They have given the highest priority to these particular examinations over all other academic activities, including in-person classes. They have done so to enable final year students of undergraduate programmes to apply for the 43rd Bangladesh Civil Service (BCS) examinations. This week, the University Grants Commission (UGC) requested the Bangladesh Public Service Commission (BPS) to extend the deadline for BCS applications till March 31.

Nowadays, the BCS examinations have come to be the prime goal (if not the only one) in the lives of our students, and they are investing all their efforts and energies in its pursuit. Our educational institutions have also started endorsing this pursuit by complying with the requirements of these examinations. Our students have become so serious about the BCS exams that they start preparing for them as soon as they are promoted to the second year of their undergraduate studies, often at the cost of their regular academic activities. What is more, when they get enrolled in Masters programmes, many of them are not regular and mindful about attending classes. Even when they attend classes, most of their attentions remain occupied with BCS preparations.

Consequently, the very objective of their acquiring subject-based in-depth knowledge through comprehensive reading and research, the objective for which they get admission into a particular department of a university, is ultimately neglected. And we the teachers, in our turn, are day by day getting used to this reality, and are making necessary adjustments to match the priorities of our students.

Why has the situation taken this turn? We need not go far to find an answer. University of Dhaka lecturer Rubaiya Murshed, in a column in *The Daily Star* on

January 2, diagnosed some of the causes behind this. The first cause in this respect is the discrimination and corruption that is rampant in government sector jobs, which prevents our students, the job-seekers, from finding prospective government employment in most areas. Finding no other alternatives, they are compelled to turn their attention towards BCS examinations. According to Murshed, the authorities of the BCS examinations have so far managed to maintain the credibility of these examinations to a great extent, thus making the BCS a first choice for most job-seekers. It is a view that I must agree with, as well as the fact that BCS cadres enjoy a certain level of social status and dignity in our society. Another point presented by Murshed in her column is significant, but also worrying for our society. She deplors the fact that we regard someone's success in the BCS examinations "as one of the most valued achievements in our society", and because of our excessive glorification of this success, our students desperately run after it, sacrificing their



File photo of students queuing in front of the central library of Dhaka University, waiting to get in.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

In a society where there are gross deficiencies in the rule of law, in good governance and in democratic practices, it is obvious that these particular cadres will happen to get greater opportunities to abuse their power, override others' jurisdictions, or obstruct others' legitimate rights. And it happens because they have little fear of being held accountable for their misdeeds.

mental peace and comfort in the process.

However, it should be mentioned that all the jobs of the BCS cadres are not equally valued in our society. Some particular cadres are held superior to others, and it is to the jobs of these particular cadres that we, as members of society, ascribe all the dignity and importance. But why do we attach so much more value to these jobs than to others?

The answer should be sought in our failure to uphold morality and ethics in our social and national life. It is regrettable that we do not hold law-breakers in contempt, do not despise those who are corrupt, and do not resist those who misuse power. Instead, we applaud them for their guts in breaking the law, admire them for their ability to go unpunished after engaging in corruption, and place the powerful over the powerless and the humble. As Murshed rightly writes, we are "assigning value to what should not have so much value". Very often, we overvalue the persons who assume overlordship, or those who exercise overarching power.

In our society, the status and dignity of some particular cadres or of some particular professions have come to be synonymous with the extent to which they can exercise power and earn money, or can establish supremacy and dominance over people and other professionals or cadres, whether it is done rightfully or wrongly. We eulogise them for the power they possess, but we do it mainly because of their opportunity and capability to misuse their power and office.

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In such a backdrop, it is quite natural that the professions or the jobs without any prospects of gaining so-called power and illegal money will lose their lustre and glamour, but the ones involving

those prospects will gain extra brightness and splendour. That is why the glory and recognition of job-holders in the fields of knowledge, research, education, healthcare, science and technology, art and culture, film and media, etc. are fading away, day by day, in our society. Our students are no longer being lured towards the professions of scientists, researchers, educators, journalists, writers, artists, social activists, etc. or even of doctors, engineers, architects or agriculturists, which were once highly sought after.

I do not find it unusual when I see my students, who have already been selected as BCS education cadres, still trying again and again to become cadres related to administration, law enforcement, tax, customs, etc. I do not wonder when I see increasing numbers of medical, engineering or other technical students rushing to apply for the jobs of general cadres, especially some particular ones, and choosing to leave behind their own technical specialisations. But how do we resist this trend? Will the principle of moralising to our students about concentrating on acquiring knowledge and working for the philanthropic good of society come to any use? Should we attempt to convince them that their talents are needed not only for the jobs of some particular cadres, but also for jobs in many other sectors or areas, for the greater interests of our country?

I think mere moral or didactic speeches will not yield any results until or unless we can change the total value system of our lives, creating a new one based on ethics and morality—until we can change this sorry state of our society and build a new one based on the rule of law, a system of checks and balances, and patriotism. We need to build a society where everyone will get his or her dues, where there will be mutual trust and respect among people and professionals, where no hegemony of one profession will exist over another, and where transparency and accountability will be the core principles of our governance. Unless we can build such a society, the allure of certain BCS cadres will continue to work its magic on our students.

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Surviving a pandemic alone is powerful, not pitiful



DURING a global pandemic, living alone may sound terrifying to some and liberating to others. I would say there is no straightforward answer. It can certainly get overwhelming at times, but I have

found it can also be beautiful, courageous and empowering.

I have been living on my own for quite some time now and have been facing a lot of the challenges associated with living alone as a single woman in a patriarchal society. Still, things were different until the pandemic hit, as I used to be at work during the week. Besides the regular tasks of living alone and working full time, the additional responsibilities that come with being safe in this pandemic were humongous. However, they made me even more resourceful, self-sufficient and resilient. There were times I felt lonely, but I simply considered that as a part of the experience through which I had to navigate the pandemic.

The highs
Staying away from workplace toxicity and politics helped me to be in a better mental state and to develop a better routine with a focus on my needs. The emotional eating that results from the stress of workplace drama was not there, resulting in significant progress toward my health goals.

One day, after speaking with a friend, I

learned that his favourite pastime, dancing, was largely on hold due to the pandemic, but he had picked up a new hobby instead—painting. This inspired me to buy my first ever ukulele, something that I always wanted to learn to play. I started learning the western music notations for the first time with the help of a musician friend who happily agreed to give me lessons online.

The challenges
In the times of coronavirus, I need to be extra cautious while living alone in one of the most densely populated cities in the world, since most people here generally do not think about the unconventional challenges solo dwellers might be facing. I know that I cannot afford to get Covid-19, as I can hardly expect any help from anyone if I fall ill.

Living alone definitely became a lot more challenging during the pandemic, in this society where almost everyone lives with someone. As a result, the system only considers the challenges faced in communal/family spaces, ignoring the unique psychological, emotional, socio-cultural, economic, structural and systemic challenges of living alone in a pandemic. Finding reliable online stores, ordering online and getting home deliveries might sound simple, but is quite complex. Online platforms are relatively new in this country, and there are many problems with that system.

For a major period, I was imprisoned in my own house, with restrictions imposed on moving out of the apartment complex. The building owners locked the main door and the rooftop, leaving me feeling claustrophobic at times.

Obviously, there is no opportunity to have shared meals or physical contact. "Touch" being one of my primary "love languages", I keep wondering how long someone can survive without in-person contact. The days when I go out to a pharmacy or a grocery store, it is probably a good thing nobody ever asks how I am doing; I do not know if I could resist the temptation to share all that I have kept unspoken. I do not dare ask others how they are doing. Talking to strangers is not at all a norm in this culture. People act even colder/more guarded in the context of a pandemic that is of a contagious nature.

Last but not the least, I could not do partner dancing—something that takes me out of time and space, bringing me into an energetic reality of altered consciousness. I missed the mystery, the fun, the passion and the poetry that is created on the dance floor.

Coping mechanisms
When work from home started, it was a completely new thing for me. When I learned about a friend's goal to come out of the pandemic as a healthier, fitter and more disciplined person, I quickly realised the importance of maintaining a routine and holding myself accountable to a healthy lifestyle during Covid-19. Maintaining a healthy lifestyle—eating clean, working out and maintaining meaningful relationships are key, now more than ever.

I feel extremely lucky that my favourite Zumba instructor continued to teach classes online. Not only that, but all my instructors who are based in faraway lands started to offer classes online. That gave me the opportunity to continue classes that I once

attended in person, with teachers that I admired. One hour of Zumba is one happy hour in a day.

Whether dancing with a group of people or dancing on my own in the kitchen—dance makes me feel happy to be alive. My morning rituals include meditating, listening to upbeat music and sitting in the sun. The sun that falls on my skin and the wind that touches my hair reminds me to be grateful for life. Often, I touch an egg or an onion to feel their texture, to feel alive. Having an attitude of gratitude helps me to survive. I am grateful to the people who speak to me about things other than Covid-19; talking about Covid-19 has become the new perfunctory conversation. I am also grateful for those people from all different time zones who work hard to find time to video chat with me. These moments of connection, though distant, are the best gifts possible.

Instead of counting the numbers of people infected and dead, I try to keep myself busy counting my blessings.

I do whatever it takes to nourish and nurture myself, without judgment. At times, it means listening to the same song repeatedly, and other times it means changing the songs way too many times. I sing out loud, not needing perfection or an audience to enjoy my singing. I realised that I have been given the gift of music to feel joyful, and I can sing and wash dishes at the same time.

The lessons
Quite often in our daily lives, we race around and fill our days with one activity after another, as activity is thought to be good, and lack of it bad. We forget to sit

still, to contemplate clouds or stars, or to pet an animal. In the pandemic, I learned the art of stillness and discovered the energy that comes from sitting still. I learned the importance of setting aside time to do "nothing" and not feel guilty about being "unproductive".

Surviving a pandemic all by myself has also taught me about minimalism. For many months, I only bought the necessities—groceries and medicine. The pandemic keeps reminding me about *Memento Mori* (remember that you die) and makes me remember repeatedly the dispensability of material things.

Something that never really made complete sense to me in the past, started making sense—while living alone during the pandemic with no physical contact with other human beings, I understood why my yoga teacher used to teach us to kiss our feet and hands and say to ourselves "I love me."

The pandemic has helped me connect with the people who matter. I reach out to check in on people. I try to be "present" when they share their feelings. Talking to others also helps me put things in perspective. The pandemic has created an opportunity to unveil ourselves to others and appreciate the beauty of rawness. Even the most reserved people have become courageous enough to be vulnerable and to have honest conversations with others. Those to me are the most magical and precious moments during a very difficult pandemic.

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QUOTABLE Quote

W SOMERSET MAUGHAM
(1874-1965)
British writer.

To acquire the habit of reading is to construct for yourself a refuge from almost all the miseries of life.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Pageantry
- 5 Tile holder
- 10 Finished
- 11 Make happy
- 12 Floor model
- 13 Fulminated
- 14 It may be studded
- 16 Energetic person
- 20 Entirely
- 23 Approval
- 24 Eat away
- 25 Burger topper
- 27 Oklahoma city
- 28 Reply to "Gracias"
- 29 Guaranteed
- 32 Sticky situation
- 36 Author

DOWN

- 1 Cacao holders
- 2 Kitchen need
- 3 Office note
- 4 Moved with stealth
- 5 Angry look
- 6 Make fresh
- 7 Feedbag bit
- 8 Try out
- 9 Rocker Nugent
- 11 Old outhouse
- 15 Mosaic piece
- 17 Cuzco native
- 18 Crucifix
- 19 Writer
- 20 Buchanan
- 20 Soup veggies
- 21 Pakistan tongue
- 22 Stadium sound
- 25 Ice chunk
- 26 Showy flower
- 28 Old radio parts
- 30 Outfit
- 31 Stimulates
- 33 Tennis star Lendl
- 34 Foray
- 35 Building wings
- 36 One of the March sisters
- 37 "Believer"
- 38 Helium, for one

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BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

A	S	T	O	R	L	E	S
U	H	R	A	R	O	M	A
N	O	R	A	D	A	L	I
T	O	N	D	R	I	L	L
S	T	I	L	L	E	D	I
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E	S	T	E	E			
B	O	D	A	L	L	O	W
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E	V	E	N	T	S	A	G
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