

# Creating research-capable institutions in Bangladesh

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Is it possible for Bangladesh to create research-capable institutions similar to ones that are already playing a key role in other Asian countries, driving rapid economic development in the knowledge-intensive era of the fourth industrial revolution?

Today, knowledge is the new currency. East Asia and Southeast Asia are being increasingly recognised as knowledge centres producing high quality research. Although their journey in research is relatively recent, they have fared well, driven by a knowledge seeking culture, in vying with the world's elite research institutions and rising to research prominence.

In contrast, while research in South Asia suggests that it is growing, doubling in quantity every six years, it appears rather lacklustre from a global perspective where, over the last 50 years, viewed in 10-year blocks, the South Asia region published 1.08 percent, 1.54 percent, 1.82 percent, 2.31 percent and 3.94 percent of total global knowledge production. In this uninspiring record of research, India alone published the lion's share (84 percent) compared to 6.4 percent by Pakistan and 3.2 percent by Bangladesh.

These numbers corroborate articles, public discourse, and recent commentaries on the poor state of research in our higher education institutions (HEIs), depicting their lethargic and unimaginative knowledge production capabilities. Different quarters often rue when our universities, especially elite universities such as University of Dhaka (now in existence for a 100 years) and Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (Buet), both well-regarded within the country, fail to figure prominently in the global rankings published annually. This is not to say that such rankings are flawless; but where is the alternative?

Scholars from the advanced West, e.g., Willem Van Schendel, agree with the assessment made by some of us who are from Bangladesh but know intimately the Western, as well as the advanced Asian research

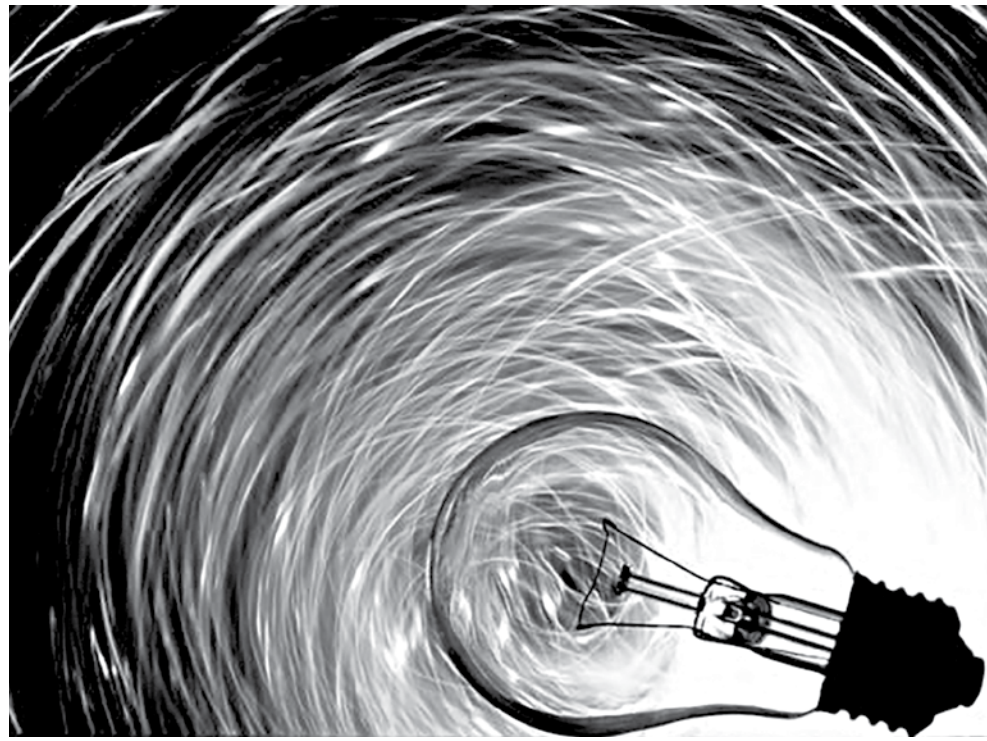
systems. Putting it baldly, Bangladesh lacks substantially in research capability in spite of its incredible human resource base and institution building potential. Consequently, research related to development of Bangladesh by even recognised local scholars remains nearly invisible abroad and often remain unutilised locally for policy purposes.

The dearth of research in Bangladesh's HEIs has been attributed to many factors. Most prominent among these, in our view, are the following:

Funding is probably the most immediate factor. Neither the public sector nor the private sector provides a level of funding that can enable our universities to play in the same league as the Southeast Asian success stories. Another factor is the brain drain phenomenon which has many reasons; but the lack of funding in Bangladesh reinforces other reasons for not returning such as poor administrative support, promotion of undeserving faculty, lack of opportunities to pursue research (in industry and the government), political uncertainties, and a lack of social demand for knowledge.

We have heard, experienced, and reported many complaints regarding the heavy burden of teaching loads. From personal experiences and formal research, we have verified, especially among the private universities, that driving up revenues trumps other loftier goals. While a part of the revenues is used for development of physical infrastructure, the academic administrators do not prioritise research over teaching. If there's no research, what is one teaching?

These and other related factors culminate in what we term "a serious lack of vision for and appropriate incentives" to engage in research. Unsurprisingly, faculty members ask, "Why should I do research?" The payoffs are better for teaching in multiple institutions or for engaging in parochial academic politics that is more conducive to advancement and benefits. Thus, poor "layered" management systems, from the policy level to university administration, are further skewed by rational political and economic calculations that stifle



research which, in turn, fails to serve our national interest.

If Bangladesh wishes to turn around this dismal situation and join the other Asian developing countries, poised to benefit from the fourth industrial revolution, we must ask some hard questions. Key among these urgent questions are:

1. Why have resources not been mobilised or once mobilised not efficiently allocated to promote research?
2. Why have we failed to create an effective research promoting and talent gathering institution like the National Science Foundation in the US and similar entities in Europe, Japan, China, Singapore, Thailand, etc.?
3. What is the correct strategy from here onwards? Building specialised research institutes or modern comprehensive

universities run by competent people with clear goals and little bureaucratic interference? What incentives need to be in place to attract and retain a pool of talented researchers?

4. What are some priority areas (biotechnology, artificial intelligence, mechanisation in agriculture, conflict resolution, trust in government, etc.) in which focused research is to be launched for local impact?
5. How will we know that good research is being conducted and relevant outcomes being produced for the nation's benefit?

A pragmatic approach may be a pilot project in founding a Research Oriented University of Science and Technology (ROUST) with relevant social sciences and humanities disciplines as a part of a comprehensive 21st century research

university programme. The curriculum for such a ROUST may be based on benchmarking with successful universities we wish to emulate. Which models should we follow: specialised versus comprehensive institutions? Why are we not debating these questions?

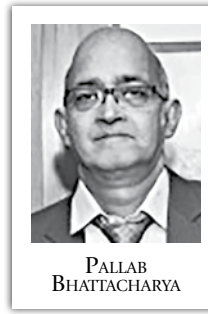
We might reflect on the fact that up until the founding of two research-oriented universities in the US in the late 19th century—based on the German research university model—the traditional US universities were quite weak in scientific-technical research except perhaps in agriculture. But that changed quickly with the founding of research universities which were replicated throughout the US; after WW2 American research universities became models for the rest of the world. Today, the exemplary success of small Asian countries like Singapore shows that given the political will, resource mobilisation, and a solid brand of governance, Bangladesh can follow the ROUST approach with careful planning and resource allocation.

Both of us have done theoretical, as well as relevant empirical research on developing tertiary education with research as a strategic component. Our findings point to the urgent need for Bangladesh to formulate a comprehensive public-private partnership within at least a medium-term strategic science and technology development plan.

Once we have such a plan, we must be prepared to implement it and learn by doing. To this end, the sooner a high-level working group is comprised of the leading thinkers, both within Bangladesh and from among the expatriates with solid track records and international reputation, and activated to take the research agenda forward, the better. Many other Asian developing countries have already stolen the limelight and are leagues ahead of us. Do we have the luxury of losing more precious time?

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# Congress Party lurching from crisis to crisis



**F**UNCTIONAL feud and mutual recrimination among leaders in public, either at state or national level, are nothing new to India's main opposition party—Congress Party. In fact, they are as old as the party itself. But in recent weeks, the turmoil triggered by internecine quarrels has taken a different dimension because it once again underlined the political ineptitude and continued drift in the party's top leadership.

The crisis in the Congress' unit in Punjab and the unceremonious ousting of one of its most prominent state leaders Amarinder Singh after the party high command engineered a revolt against him—led by cricketer-turned-politician Navjot Singh Sidhu, who defected from the Bharatiya Janata Party four years ago—is the latest illustration of the ills plaguing the country's oldest party once known as the natural outfit for governing an ethnically, religious and linguistically diverse country like India.

Spurred by the party's predicament in Punjab and elsewhere in the country in the wake of steady desertions in its rank and file, a clutch of its senior leaders spearheaded by Kapil Sibal has questioned the top leadership (read interim party President Sonia Gandhi and her children Rahul and Priyanka,) for allowing the party to be rudderless.

Sibal could not perhaps be more scathing of the Gandhi family. Without naming them, he told the media on September 30 that there was no knowing who were taking decisions in the party. Sibal was backed by many of the group of 23 senior leaders of the Congress who have been demanding organisational elections and a course correction in the party. Within hours of Sibal's criticism of the party high command, he had to face the music as



**Chief Minister of the northern Indian state of Punjab Amrinder Singh salutes in front a war memorial during a ceremony to mark Infantry Day in a garrison in Srinagar, October 27, 2005.** PHOTO: REUTERS

a group of activists of Congress and its youth front staged a protest outside his residence in New Delhi and vandalised his car. Several of the group of 23 "change-seekers," including Ghulam Nabi Azad, Shashi Tharoor and Anand Sharma, condemned in unequivocal terms the "orchestrated hooliganism" in front of Sibal's house. The group of 23 in the Congress was formed last year and it had shot off a letter to Sonia Gandhi demanding organisational poll and collective leadership.

However, the dissident group had gone silent since then and failed to be vocal when needed most after the Congress' dismal performance in the assembly elections in Assam, West Bengal, Kerala and Puducherry in May this year, raising question marks over its efficacy as a pressure bloc.

With just four months remaining for the assembly poll in Punjab, the Congress is struggling to set its house in order in the agrarian state where the raging farmers' unrest against the three farm laws piloted by the federal government last year had put the party on a strong wicket. What was the need for a leadership change in Punjab so close to the electoral battle? One of the reasons that reportedly prompted the high command to show Amarinder the door is to blunt the anti-incumbency.

The biggest advantage for the Congress in Punjab is that its main political rival in Punjab Shiromani Akali Dal, a former ally of the BJP, is yet to shake off the negative fall-out of its long association with the saffron party even after nearly a year of parting of ways over the farm laws issue. The sudden removal of Amarinder as Chief Minister and anointment of Charanjit Singh Channi last week and Sidhu as state Congress chief a couple of months ago were initially considered by some analysts as a "master stroke." That is because Channi, a Dalit Sikh in a state where Dalits formed a very sizable chunk of the electorate, fitted into the Congress high command's political messaging of identity politics for not just Punjab, but for the rest of the country ahead of state assembly polls in six states, including the most crucial one of Uttar Pradesh. But much of the effect of "master stroke" fizzled out as Sidhu resigned as state Congress chief, living up to his reputation as a mercurial person, a trait that first came to the fore during his cricketering career when he walked out of India's tour of England in 1996 following a spat with the then team captain Md Azharuddin. Sidhu has now acquired the tag of a "habitual quitter". He had resigned

from the BJP in 2016 and after a brief dalliance with the Aam Aadmi Party joined the Congress.

But the "master stroke" seemed to have boomeranged when Sidhu resigned as state Congress President as he is reportedly sulking at not getting the chief ministership and resenting Channi's choice of portfolios for his ministerial colleagues and some key bureaucratic appointments. The entire drama in Punjab Congress has shown how deeply divided the party is.

What has particularly aroused anger in the Congress is a meeting Amarinder had with senior BJP leader and Indian Home Minister Amit Shah on September 29, sparking speculations about his joining India's ruling party and drawing a sharp reaction from the Congress. But a day later, Amarinder tamped down the speculations but made it clear he was not going to join the BJP after being "humiliated" by the Congress high command. This too set the tongues wagging on whether the former army officer was preparing to float a new party and jump into the upcoming state assembly elections in Punjab and hurt the Congress party. The Congress' retort to the Shah-Amarinder meeting stood in sharp contrast to the same when other leaders like Jyotiraditya Scindia, Jitin Prasada, Sushmita Dev, Luizinho Falerio and some in Tripura left the party and joined either the BJP or the Trinamool Congress. In fact, the Congress had maintained a studied silence when the TMC poached the former's leaders in Tripura, Assam and Goa, raising the question if the weakened pan-India party, buffeted by defeat in two successive general elections in 2014 and 2019, was succumbing to regional parties.

Amarinder is too astute a politician. Emerging from the meeting with Shah, the former chief minister went on record as saying that he discussed the farm laws issue with the home minister and pressed for repeal of the laws. Amarinder knows farmers are central to politics in Punjab and that it

would be political harakiri if he was seen to be hobnobbing with the BJP in Punjab where there is widespread resentment against the farm laws.

It is not just in Punjab the Congress is facing factionalism. The party is beset with the same problems in two more states—Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan—it rules with a section of Congressmen demanding change of guard. It required a lot of fire-fighting by the party high command to deal with this internecine war.

Questions are being raised once again about the functioning of the Congress high command and about the correctness of the decisions taken by it. The party has been without a regular president for more than two years now after Rahul Gandhi quit from the post in May 2019, taking responsibility for the party's debacle in the 2019 Lok Sabha polls, after which his mother was installed as interim president.

The removal of Amarinder and choice of Sidhu and Channi are being seen as the handiwork of Rahul and Priyanka, as much as their recent induction into the party-fold of young leader Kanhaiya Kumar of the Communist Party of India is. Ironically, Kanhaiya Kumar has, as a former firebrand leader of the CPI's student front in Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru University, was highly critical of the Congress and the BJP in the same breath. He had alleged that the Congress alone was enough to destroy India. Kanhaiya should know the difference between politics in the confines of JNU and a party's electoral politics. He had hoped to cash in on his image as a student leader in the Lok Sabha poll as a CPI candidate in 2019 but ended up losing to a BJP rival in his home state of Bihar. It is the difference between politics in a well and in an ocean.

A lack of coherent strategy is costing the Congress and leading to its shrinking appeal as a national-level challenger to the BJP.

Pallab Bhattacharya is a special correspondent for The Daily Star. He writes from New Delhi, India.

**QUOTABLE Quote**

**GLORIA ANZALDUA**  
American scholar (1942 – 2004)

○ Awareness of our situation must come before inner changes, which in turn come before changes in society. Nothing happens in the 'real' world unless it first happens in the images in our heads.

**CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH**

**ACROSS**

- 1 Pump, e.g.
- 5 Obsessed captain
- 9 Squall
- 10 Bar supply
- 12 Happened
- 13 City on the Missouri
- 14 Set out
- 16 Meditative school
- 17 "\_\_\_ Maria"
- 18 Approval
- 20 "Camelot" lyricist
- 22 Track figures
- 23 Pueblo material
- 25 Prayer finish
- 28 Low points
- 32 Decline

**DOWN**

- 1 Tried hard
- 2 Professional dancer
- 3 Words of approximation
- 4 Came into view
- 5 Hilo hello
- 6 That fellow
- 7 In awe
- 8 Decapitate
- 9 Katey of "Sons of Anarchy"
- 11 Smooths, in a way
- 15 Raptors' home
- 19 Worked the garden
- 21 Billionth: Prefix
- 24 Atlantic resort
- 25 Visibly shocked
- 26 Bit of time
- 27 Sevilla's nation
- 29 Serving as a symbol
- 30 Frees of suds
- 31 Wise ones
- 33 Wrinkly fruits
- 37 Zhivago's love
- 39 Massage

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**BEETLE BAILEY** BY MORT WALKER

**BABY BLUES** BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

**YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS**

S	E	L	F	M	I	L	L
A	V	A	I	A	M	O	U
L	E	D	G	E	Z	O	R
A	N	Y	A	M	E	N	D
D	E	M	A	N	D	S	V
D	A	R	E	S	B	O	N
R	E	D	P	A	L		
R	A	M	S	C	A	N	D
E	R	A	C	I	N	D	E
G	A	L	A	H	A	D	M
I	M	A	G	E	A	L	O
S	I	D	E	S	S	E	R
S	E	E	S	S	T	E	P