

The Daily Star

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## Why are railway projects so poorly executed?

Reasons for frequent cost and time overruns must be eliminated

WE are quite disappointed by the poor implementation of projects undertaken by Bangladesh Railway to improve its overall service. According to a report by this daily, five such important projects, undertaken years ago, are facing uncertainty as the authorities could not do anything on time—the bidding process, feasibility studies, appointment of consultants, procuring funds, etc. Reportedly, out of the 37 ongoing railway projects—either government-funded or foreign-funded—the deadlines for 26 have been extended at least once.

Of the aforesaid five projects, one was the procurement of 70 Metre Gauge (MG) locomotives, the fate of which is now unclear due to multiple complications. The Tk 1,946 crore project was taken up in 2011 to mitigate the growing crisis of rail engines and expanding the services of Bangladesh Railway. Although it was supposed to be completed by 2017, those in charge could not even complete the bidding process by that time. The project deadline was extended twice before it went through a major revision in 2018, after which the deadline was extended again, resulting in further cost overruns. The four other projects—renovation of 21 MG locomotives, providing technical assistance for developing rolling stock operations, expanding the Joypurhat-Ishwardi and Akhaura-Sylhet rail lines—are also facing similar problems.

During the past few years, *The Daily Star* published detailed reports on many BR projects marred by this problematic cycle. Many of the foreign-funded projects, like the one for procurement of 70 MG locomotives, are facing uncertainty as the companies supposed to arrange funds for the projects do not want to fund them anymore. According to transport experts, poor planning, weak feasibility study, lack of skilled manpower as well as a serious lack of accountability of the implementing authorities are the main reasons for railway projects meeting such stagnation. In case of the Joydebpur-Ishwardi double-line project, the Chinese government clearly mentioned last year that they did not want to fund it because there was a “lack of in-depth preliminary work and insufficient feasibility study”.

Apparently, the feasibility studies of these projects were never carried out properly. Many important aspects remained ignored and unresolved, and the project authorities had to change many things at the implementation stage, resulting in frequent time and cost overruns. We think the culture of botching up feasibility studies must be stopped if the projects are to be completed on time. The railway authorities, the implementing agencies and consultants all should be held accountable for any slow progress of work.

## A VC should rise above petty politics

They must help create a conducive environment for higher education

A nation looks up to the vice-chancellor (VC) of a university as the personification of higher virtues, knowledge, and wisdom. It is commonly expected that he or she would endeavour to turn their institution into an ideal academic and administrative hub rising above petty political interests, personal liking and disliking. Unfortunately, in recent years, we have seen how many public university VCs have failed to do so, their tenures marked by irregularities and controversies leading to the loss of their credibility. Such irregularities often range from favouritism, nepotism in recruitments, financial misappropriation, arbitrary decisions on matters of campus discipline, indecent remarks, etc.

According to an investigative report by this daily, although there are no specific rules for the appointment of VCs in our public universities, a VC is mostly selected from a pro-government teacher's panel. With years of activism in support of the government of the day, this system of recruitment often makes many VCs impudent enough to overlook rules and regulations and overstep the ethical bounds. The report found that at least 39 out of 48 VCs of public universities have previously held posts in different pro-government teachers' wings. Of them, at least 12 teachers who were directly involved with the AL-backed Blue panel of Dhaka University are now VCs of different universities.

It is also a matter of great concern that a PhD degree, once a mandatory requirement for being a professor, now appears optional for those with political affiliations. For example, the VCs of Shahjalal University of Science and Technology (SUST) and Bangladesh University of Textiles (BUTEX) do not have a PhD degree. Besides, none of the VCs with a PhD degree obtained it from the United States, which has the most well-recognised universities in the world. Clearly, their political affiliations triumphed over their qualifications as a teacher and even past records of irregularities.

People expect a VC to lead from the front and bring about qualitative change in the academic and administrative environment of a university. A VC can either take an institute to the zenith of excellence or to the abyss of failure—and the current trend shows we are heading in the latter direction. This is an outcome that is desirable neither for the country nor for the powers that be. We urge the authorities to leave academic matters to the academics and allow our universities to truly serve the nation through proper direction and able, nonpartisan leadership.

# Let the promises made to SUST students be fruitful



Golam Mortoza is a journalist at The Daily Star. The article was translated from Bangla.

GOLAM MORTOZA

ON January 26, Dr Muhammed Zafar Iqbal reached the campus of Shahjalal University of Science and Technology (SUST) at 3am to meet the demonstrating students. The media covered his journey in detail, which makes it hard to believe that SUST teachers and the teachers' association there missed the coverage. Some “highly placed” decision makers of the government also visited Dr Iqbal and Dr Yasmeen's home before they went to Sylhet. It is unlikely that the teachers and their association, or in other words, the politicians and their association, were oblivious to these developments. However, at the time of students ending their 163-hour-long hunger strike, none of the teachers were present. Some were out on a “morning walk” and came across Dr Iqbal, though.

Some of the teachers brought dinner for the confined vice-chancellor. The students barred them from entering, but allowed the police to take the food inside. A few hours before, police had forcibly shut down all food outlets on the campus, making it impossible for the demonstrating students to get food. The previous night, police detained five former students for donating money for the students' cause. When the teachers brought food for the VC, the demonstrating students as well as others were starving. But the teachers did not utter a single word against the closing of food shops. The medical treatment facility was also shut down. Teachers kept mum through all this. Evidently, police did not take these actions without the express will and consent of the administration. That is, the VC.

Dr Iqbal has written an illustrative write-up regarding the student's demonstration. He negotiated with the government, went to Sylhet and convinced the students to end the hunger strike. He acted like any responsible and sensible teacher would. He referred to VC Farid Uddin as a “monster”. He donated Tk 10,000 out of his own pocket for the cause. He also spoke of the brutality of

police, who mercilessly beat protesting students and hurled sound grenades without any reason.

It is now clear that the VC instructed the police to attack students. But who ordered the capturing of the five former students? Who filed the cases? Who orchestrated the closure of the treatment

contaminated by politics. When some SUST teachers made opponents out of the students and organised a human chain, it was quite distasteful. Their students were beaten, wounded by rubber bullets and sound grenades, but they did not protest. Instead, they made up an allegation that the protesting students had been “disrespectful”. As if the respect that they had lost by hurting the sentiments of students could be recovered through such petty measures.

Dr Zafar Iqbal made some promises to the protesting students which prompted them to end the strike. However, those promises seemed unaligned with the tone of the education minister. Although the students submitted a five-point demand, their main demand is the removal of the VC, either by force or through voluntary resignation. The education minister promised that “all demands will be met”, but followed it up with a non-committal statement: “The VC's resignation cannot solve all issues.”

However, we must remember that the VC's resignation/removal and finding a solution to the students' problems are two different issues. The exit of VC Farid would translate to acceptance of the students' demands. After the VC's exit, we can shift our focus towards solving the remaining issues—which cannot be resolved while this VC is holding the fort.

If the government truly wants to make public universities accommodating of general students, they have to acknowledge the existing problems first. The first step towards this realisation would be to stop appointing political leaders in the guise of teachers as VCs. Teachers who have high levels of administrative skills and honest mindsets, whose financial dealings cannot be questioned, and are sympathetic towards the pleas of students deserve the chair of VC. The control of common rooms, guest rooms, and student halls need to be snatched from the ruling party's student wing and given back to the university administration. The proctorial body of a university should consist of honest, skilled and deserving teachers, not people who act as political cadres.

There is a dearth of acceptable personalities in our society. As such, the government is lucky that Dr Zafar Iqbal intervened on behalf of the government? Surely, the government can defend itself against any supposed anti-government activities? Just like most professions in Bangladesh, teaching is also



Why do the education minister's words not align with the promises that Dr Zafar Iqbal made to the protesting students of SUST?

PHOTO: STAR/SHEIKH NASIR

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facilities and food shops within the campus?

Naturally, it is clear that these instructions could not have come solely from the VC or the university administration. Without an explicit signal from the government's higher ups, it is not possible for the police to shut down students' mobile banking accounts. Thus, if the discussion stays confined to what the police or the VC did, the main issue will remain concealed.

The teachers of SUST or the teachers' association did not stand beside the students, neither when they were exposed to police brutality nor afterwards. However, the statement given by the SUST teachers' association had a somewhat constructive tone. The teachers' association of Dhaka University termed the students involved with this movement as a “third party”, and defined the movement itself as an “anti-government initiative”. Firstly, they failed to understand the disgruntled mind-set of the students which fuelled the crisis. Also, even if the movement were of an anti-government nature, why would the DU teachers' association feel the necessity to speak on behalf of the government? Surely, the government can defend itself against any supposed anti-government activities?

Just like most professions in Bangladesh, teaching is also

# A man who sought transcendent beauty through science

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SYED MAHSAN

THIS January 24 marked the sixth death anniversary of Syed Twareque Ali, who was truly a gift from Bangladesh to the world of science. “A deep thinker, who sought transcendent beauty through the truths of science”—is how a distinguished colleague, Professor Goldin of Rutgers University, described him at a 2016 memorial in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Twareque Ali's entire adult life was devoted to science. True to his character, he also died on the job, while at a conference in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Twareque's childhood was quite unremarkable, except for the seriousness of his academic intent and his yearnings for academic excellence. His schooling began at St Gregory's High School and College in Old Dhaka, then moving on to St Anthony's in Lahore, and finally returning to St Gregory's, where he stood first in former East Pakistan for the Matriculation examinations of 1959.

Having obtained First Class in both BSc Honours and MSc in theoretical physics, and following a stint at the Atomic Energy, Twareque went to the University of Rochester to study under Gerard Emch, a pioneer of quantum mechanics. Following his PhD, he continued to hone and eventually perfected his skills through a series of multi-year post-doctoral and visiting scholar positions during 1973-81. From the University of Trieste (1973-75), University of Toronto (1973-78) to the Technical University of Clausthal (1979-81), he journeyed on an extensive research collaboration with fellow scientists who became close friends, mentors, and co-researchers for life. As one of them put it, Twareque was “someone with whom one could discuss the meaning of life's

joys and disappointments without self-consciousness.”

Having once met Twareque bhai (as I called him) in 1965, I was overjoyed when in 1981 I learned that he would be joining Concordia University in Montreal as a faculty member. I had been teaching economics there and we became very

mechanics. Franklin E. Schroeck, Jr. stated in an obituary that “the three of us founded the field together.” The trio, of course, consisted of Eduard Prugovecki (one of Twareque's mentors), Twareque and Schroeck.

His subsequent work is harder to describe to lay readers, which involved geometrical methods in quantum mechanics, “phase space”, “quantisation”, and “coherent states”. Beyond the names already cited, Twareque also met, in his travels in the late 1980s, Jean-Pierre Antoine (of the Université Catholique de Louvain, Belgium) and Jean-Pierre Gazeau (of the Université de Paris). The three bonded extremely well and, over the next 26 years, went on to publish a large body of work including three books and over a dozen journal articles.

Twareque spread awareness of “advanced science” in the not-so-advanced world. He instituted regular advanced seminars and courses in Benin (in West Africa), China, Cuba, Poland, and later in Malaysia. He devoted a lot of time for the organisation, fundraising and participation of the above events.

He was a polyglot who had full functionality in teaching and scholarly writing in French, German and Italian, not to mention English. As his brother Yusuf recounted, in their daily commute to St Anthony's from home in Lahore, both the brothers had picked up sufficient Urdu to sing along to tunes such as Ae Mere Dil Kahin, Ye Raat Ye Chandni, etc. He had an uncanny memory that transcended beyond science to the more ordinary joys of life: poems, jokes, ghazals, and these too in several languages. Twareque bhai could apparently recite endless poems, from the sublime to the ridiculous.

After his death on January 24, 2016, The Journal of Geometry and Symmetry in Physics ran an obituary for him in its 2016 issue, as did the Centre de Recherches Mathématiques, an institute he had helped found. Many renowned scholars contributed to these volumes. May his soul rest in eternal peace.



Prof Syed Twareque Ali (September 26, 1942 – January 24, 2016)

PHOTO: INSTITUTE FOR MATHEMATICAL RESEARCH (INSPEM), UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

good friends. Concordia became his new home for the remaining 35 years of his relentless work, and till his final breath.

There is much to be said about the man's lengthy and impactful work in the arenas of physics and mathematics. For the uninitiated, quantum mechanics is the branch of physics relating to very small molecules and atoms and their constituents. The latter are known as “fundamental” or “elementary” particles, which are not composed of other particles. Classical mechanics, by contrast, deals with physical objects as well as heavenly bodies. The problem with classical mechanics is that it is not very useful at the level of atoms and electrons. Hence, the birth of “quantum” ideas.

A large amount of Twareque bhai's work falls under stochastic quantum