

JU must be disability-friendly

Lack of resources and accessibility barriers for students with disabilities

IT is quite shocking that despite being one of the oldest public universities in the country, Jahangirnagar University (JU) is yet to figure out a way to address the needs of its students with disabilities. Although a number of students get admitted under the “disability quota” every year, JU has neither any proper reading materials nor any seats reserved for such students. Moreover, there is no official scribe without whose support it is difficult for them to appear in exams, or even attend classes. Also, the university does not have any funds to cover the education expenses of many of these students who come from low-income backgrounds. In the absence of any initiative to support their needs, many students find it hard to continue their education.

Just imagine: there is no special corner for braille books for the visually impaired students in the university’s central library. This speaks volumes about the apathy of the university authorities towards the students with disabilities. While many higher educational institutions, such as Dhaka University, have made a lot of progress in this regard, Jahangirnagar University is shockingly lagging behind. It is not hard to imagine what students with other types of disabilities face at the university.

The question is: Why have our universities still not been able to ensure a disability-inclusive higher education system, despite the fact that we have all the necessary policy frameworks to do so? Bangladesh ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2007, and formulated the Rights and Protection of Persons with Disabilities Act in 2013. While, as per these laws, all public establishments must be accessible to people with disabilities, we often see them facing difficulties in their educational institutions, workplaces, and public transports. Students of JU are also facing the same problem, as there are no ramps in the academic buildings or residential halls for those who use wheelchairs. If this is the condition of one of the most prominent public universities in the country, one can safely assume what it might be like in other universities.

We urge the administrations of all public universities to take this issue seriously and provide all the support that students with different types of disabilities need in pursuing higher education. There should be enough funds in their annual budgets to cater to the needs of these students. While appropriate reading materials must be made available at all departments and at the central libraries, scribes or assistants must also be employed to support the students taking exams. Furthermore, the buildings at these institutions must have ramps and proper toilet facilities according to their needs. All these changes are essential to make higher education accessible to people with disabilities.

Why is hill-cutting still being tolerated?

Govt must take a firm stance against this act against nature

IT’S disconcerting that the individuals with connections to power continue to demolish hills or hilly areas around Bangladesh. They excavate soil from there and sell it to brick kiln owners or real estate developers to fill lowlands, or for road construction purposes. But the end, however noble or realistic, doesn’t justify the means—especially when there is such a huge environmental cost involved. Unfortunately, the trend of hill-cutting has continued well into the Covid-19 pandemic when most other activities came to a halt.

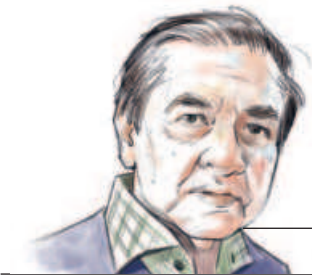
One such hilly area that is under constant threat is Moulvibazar district, where powerful syndicates are involved in ravaging hills to create plots. In the Islamnagar area of Bhatara Union in Kulaura upazila, for example, hills standing for centuries have been flattened to the ground. It has been reported that more than 200 families who lived on the hills for decades are now homeless. The risk it has posed to the local biodiversity is also unimaginable.

There is no reason to believe that the local officials are unaware of the laws on environment or the development in Islamnagar, but they choose to do nothing anyway. Locals have revealed the names of some well-known people who have been cutting hills owned by local residents, including one by a UP chairperson. The Department of Environment (DoE) has made no attempt to stop their activities. It appears that the DoE is unaware of the clear mandate they have been handed by the Environment Conservation (Amendment) Act, 2010, which says, “...no government, semi-government or autonomous organisation is allowed to cut or raze hills, without prior permission from the authorities concerned.” If even the state is not allowed to cut the hills, how come some individuals are?

Our report from Moulvibazar presents a symbolic picture of the predicament our hills are in across the country, which needs to be addressed, so that we can protect the ones that are still standing. Unfortunately, in most cases of environmental destruction and degradation, involvement of local political entities has been reported, but state officials seemed either complicit or unable to do anything in this regard. We urge the government to take a firm stance in this regard, and pursue a policy of zero tolerance to any threat posed to the environment. Raising awareness is also essential to make this successful.

Govt needs to review its practice of appointing VCs

For academic excellence, we are on the wrong track



THE THIRD VIEW

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OF the 48 current vice-chancellors (VC) in the public universities across Bangladesh, 39 are former office-bearers of some pro-government teachers’ bodies. Of the rest, five are known to be associated with the ruling party. A report by this daily has found that if one is a member of the Blue panel—a pro-Awami League group of teachers—at Dhaka University, his or her chances of being appointed VC at any

appoint as VCs. But how unethically low they have stoop to preserve their chairs is the question. VCs appointed on partisan considerations are a part of a complex web of privileges and favouritism, which does not allow them much freedom to run their respective institutions on the basis of their better judgement. They are, in fact, prisoners of all sorts of forces within the campus that have nothing to do with the goals and purposes of a university.

First of all, a partisan VC will have to take care of all teachers who belong to the same party—starting from their appointments, promotions, placement in various positions of power and leverage, to granting study leaves, foreign scholarships, allocations of living quarters, etc. In time, factions develop within their supporters based on how

Serajul Islam Chowdhury said, “Only those who have sound academic background and can play the role of a guardian should be appointed as VCs... The main job of a VC should be to create an enabling environment on the campus in which all bodies, including student unions, are functional, and cultural activities and critical thinking can flourish.”

Time has come for the government to ask a fundamental question: Do we want our public universities to become centres of academic excellence? Do we want these institutions to produce scholars of global stature, who can make us active participants in the international intellectual scene? Do we want to keep pace with the knowledge revolution that marks the 21st century? Or do we want our public universities



public university increases exponentially. The message is very clear: if you are a part of the government party or belong to its various wings, or can outshine others as a “big drummer” in the government bandwagon, your future is made in the academic hierarchy of public universities.

So, have these VCs, appointed clearly on partisan lines, served the ruling party’s interests? Have they, in any way, raised the intellectual profile of the Awami League? Have these VCs been able to prove that the Awami League is truly committed to improving the academic quality and atmosphere in public universities? Has any VC of a public university been able to improve relations with their students? If the answer is an emphatic no in each case, then shouldn’t the ruling party review its policy of appointing such VCs?

A ruling party’s proclivity to reward those who help them come to power is nothing new. Practically every government does it. So why should we take issue when our government does the same? Well, the answer is simple. In choosing our VC candidates, we usually lose sight of the academic qualifications necessary and the overall image and public stature of the individuals concerned. Over the years, political loyalty has overtaken academic status. What serves as the personal reputation of academics has practically nothing to do with their accomplishments as teachers, writers, authors, but more to do with how vociferously they have been able to uphold the party line, regardless of its impact on their respective institutions or the time-honoured profession of teaching.

Why can’t the present government appoint VCs who are from the party and have, if not impeccable, then at least highly regarded academic credentials? Why do the choices veer to the bottom, particularly when we all know that there are plenty of highly qualified teachers within the ruling party?

Of course, the government has certain expectations from the people they

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If competent and willing, the VC of a university becomes its students’ guardian and protector, who shows them the way to excellence in every aspect of life.

FILE PHOTO:
SHEIKH NASIR

The way our public universities are currently run is not in tune with either the goals of Digital Bangladesh, nor the needs of the 4th Industrial Revolution, much less the technological transformations that most forward-looking countries are preparing for.

much benefit each of them received. This necessitates more benefits to be dished out to keep the VC’s support base intact. This pushes them further towards arbitrary actions, making them more controversial. And the cycle goes on.

Then comes the more difficult task of keeping the ruling party’s student wing in line. From the admission of party honchos who will be later used to intimidate and force non-partisan students to fall in line, to distribution of hall seats, to allowing them to pass class tests and annual examinations, to protecting them from police when involved in criminal activities, to giving them various financial deals including construction contracts—the management of the student wing drags a VC more and more into the quagmire of malpractice and irregularities. Such a VC is unable to take any disciplinary action against any student who may have the ruling party tag. This drastically compromises the VC’s moral standing among their students, assuming it was there in the first place.

The question we want to raise is: Do partisan appointments actually serve the interests of the ruling party? Take the case of the former VC of Rajshahi University, who made 138 appointments of teachers and staff on the very last day of his tenure and bent university rules to appoint his daughter and son-in-law as teachers. What sort of a person does such a thing? What level of common sense—or lack thereof—and what utter disregard for the law, regulations, system or practice could make a VC stoop to such malpractice? Another case is of Nazmul Ahsan Kalimullah, the former VC of Begum Rokeya University. Throughout his tenure of 1,447 days, he was absent from the campus for a total of 1,207 days—more than three years out of four. What weird mentality could have led him to such behaviour? If he was so loath to go to the campus, why did he take the job? Did the Awami League gain anything by such appointments?

In a recent comment to this daily, Professor Emeritus of Dhaka University

to produce nothing more than slogan-chanting BA or MA degree holders, most of whom may be able to increase the muscle power that maintains the ruling party’s physical control of the campuses, but can do very little to increase our brain power that will ultimately determine whether Bangladesh becomes a knowledge producer or remain its consumer only?

The answer to this simple but vital question will determine the future of our public universities. The global and regional rankings of Bangladesh’s public universities speak volumes of what we have done to the once famous universities of ours.

Here, a mention needs to be made and tribute paid to the teachers and students who, in spite of all the shortcomings and partisanship, keep the flame of knowledge burning. It is because of their tireless efforts that we still have whatever little academic atmosphere that still remains in our public universities.

The way our public universities are currently run is not in tune with either the goals of Digital Bangladesh, nor the needs of the 4th Industrial Revolution, much less the technological transformations that most forward-looking countries are preparing for.

The most tragic reality is that our country’s total intellectual environment is anti-creative, which is most likely strikingly exemplified by our lack of investment in research and support to our scholars. In fact, scholarship is trivialised and partisanship eulogised in considering most of the things academic. The fundamental freedoms—of thought and expression—that are keys to an academic environment remain elusive in ours. In fact, these freedoms marked the golden days of Dhaka and other public universities in the past.

This reality must change if we are to become a developing nation where a nation is judged not only by its physical infrastructure, but also by its intellectual infrastructure, of which public universities are a crucial element.