

VCs shouldn't be appointed on political considerations

Demands made in parliament must be taken seriously by govt

IT is encouraging that opposition lawmakers in parliament have recently discussed some important issues regarding higher education at our public universities. While pointing to corruption and various kinds of irregularities plaguing the universities—and blaming the government for its failure to control such malpractices—they also made a very important demand: that vice-chancellors (VCs) must not be appointed on political considerations. Instead, the lawmakers suggested that the government appoint true educationists as VCs to improve the overall quality of education.

We believe that the sentiment of the lawmakers is shared by the general public, who send their children to public universities to be educated and guided by honest and competent teachers. Over the past few decades, our public universities have lost their reputation and prestige due to various kinds of corruption, nepotism and anomalies in teacher and staff recruitments, plagiarism, and also due to their controversial process of VC appointments.

Apparently, we do not have any specific rule for the appointment of VCs. In its absence, a teacher's loyalty to—or affiliation with—the ruling party seems to have become the main qualification for someone to hold the top position. An investigative report published by this daily earlier this year found that at least 39 out of 48 VCs of public universities held posts in different pro-government teachers' wings during their career. The report also mentioned that the chances of getting appointed as a VC rose exponentially if the candidate was tagged with the AL-backed Blue panel at Dhaka University, which apparently produced the highest number of VCs for our public universities.

Thus, the question that naturally arises is: Can these VCs, appointed on political consideration, play their role neutrally for the overall good of a university and its students? The answer is: No. Recent incidents at many of our public universities, including SUST, have proved this quite clearly.

Against this backdrop, there is no alternative to appointing prominent and honest educationists without any political affiliations as VCs, if we want to improve the educational environment and the quality of higher education at our public universities. The education minister, however, said that such honest personalities are not interested in working as VCs and becoming a part of a corrupt system that does not encourage imparting knowledge to students. The government, therefore, should seriously consider the demands and suggestions made by the lawmakers and create an environment where true educationists are encouraged to become VCs and work for building a better educational environment at the public universities.

Why does justice elude indigenous female victims of violence?

Police must protect all citizens, not just the powerful

WHILE violence against women in general is prevalent across the country, the situation is worse on all fronts for indigenous women. They are doubly victimised because of their gender and their ethnicity. In a recent event jointly organised by Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF), Bangladesh Indigenous Women Network (BIWN), and Kapaeng Foundation, statistics were unveiled which show how poorly indigenous women victims of violence are treated by the law and order forces. Reportedly, legal cases were filed with police in only 128 of the 460 incidents of violence faced by indigenous women and girls between 2009 and 2020 in 39 districts.

Another disturbing finding of the study was that around 88 percent of incidents of rape were perpetrated by non-indigenous individuals. It also found that police and administration are often biased towards powerful perpetrators (who belong to the majority Bengali community), and that doctors are even pressurised or bribed to create negative medical reports of indigenous survivors of sexual abuse. Of course, besides underreporting being prevalent, politically connected criminals often force victims to withdraw their cases. Earlier reports by this daily also state how the scopes for reporting violence and seeking treatment and rehabilitation are also inaccessible for indigenous women in remote areas—which further enables the miscreants to commit sexual violence against them.

What is most alarming is the indication that the widespread violence against indigenous women is taking place with the implicit or explicit endorsement of state institutions. What else explains the systematic reluctance of the police to even record cases of indigenous women and girls, much less investigate those cases without bias? The fact that even doctors and hospital authorities are too biased—or too scared—to issue authentic medical reports paints a deeply troubling picture of their impossible struggles.

We wonder why the government cannot take concrete steps to counter sexual crimes and end the impunity enjoyed by powerful groups. It is shameful that crimes against women based on their gender and ethnicity are being committed with so little resistance from government bodies. The law enforcement agencies and administration must remember that they are mandated to protect *all* citizens of the country, not just the majority or a powerful few. As the above study demonstrates, the issue of violence against indigenous women cannot be looked at separately from the wider political issues concerning indigenous communities in the CHT, so the government must resolve the longstanding tensions in the region for peace and security of indigenous women and girls.

Let no one remain outside electricity coverage



A CLOSER LOOK

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TASNEEM TAYEB

BANGLADESH has recently achieved a unique milestone: it has become the first country in South Asia to have 100 percent electricity coverage. India has brought 98 percent and Pakistan 74 percent of their respective populations under electricity coverage. For Bangladesh, hitting the 100 percent mark is significant indeed, given how, even a few years ago, the country was scrambling to provide electricity to its people. In 2009, Bangladesh's electricity generation capacity was 4,942MW, with a mere 47 percent coverage. It now stands at 25,514MW.

However, there is an underside of this success. To understand it, we must first understand what 100 percent coverage means. Despite what it sounds like, it doesn't mean that every single household in the country now has access to an electricity connection. Officials of the ministry of energy, power and mineral resources have also tried to clear the air by saying that they provided connections to all customers who had applied for it. "We have electricity coverage in every area of the country either by national grid or the solar home system... We have coverage, but if anyone didn't apply, we can't force them," said Mohammad Hossain, director general of Power Cell, a technical arm of the ministry.

With the prices of commodities and utilities increasing steadily, electricity has gone beyond the purchasing capacity of many. Retail power tariff has doubled from Tk 3.60 per unit in 2009 to Tk 7.13 in 2021. This means, those who aspire to have new connections will have to think twice before applying. While the government claims that electricity has reached even char areas through the use of submersible cables, many living there will not be able to afford electricity due to its price. In an interview with Prothom Alo, M Shamsul Alam, senior vice-president of Consumers Association of Bangladesh (CAB), said, "Those getting power connections in these isolated areas [chars] will be hardest hit by the high costs of fuel. The income of the marginalised has decreased even further during the pandemic. So, the challenge for the government is to ensure that 100 percent of the people actually get power connections and that they do not face power outages."

The problem is not just the high commodity prices. There is an acute problem of overcapacity in the power sector, which is further inflating the price of electricity. According to Bangladesh



VISUAL: TEENI AND TUNI

Bangladesh's achievements in overcoming the power crisis of the early 2000s is indeed remarkable. But unless systemic problems are fixed, many people will remain outside the electricity coverage.

Power Development Board (BPDB), the country's power system utilisation fell down to 40 percent in the fiscal year 2019-2020 from 43 percent in FY 2018-2019. Going by this data, there is about 60 percent underutilisation of our power capacity, which is significantly higher than the Power Sector Master Plan's target of 25 percent. According to media reports, in

in transmission. Inefficient distribution and transmission are clearly taking a toll on our power generation and utilisation capacity. These issues need to be resolved if we want to make the most of our capacity.

At this point, we also need to look at our sources of energy. As one of the countries hardest hit by climate change,

FY 2018-19, the government had to pay Tk 9,000 crore as "capacity payment" to the electricity producers. In the end, it is the public who has to bear these additional expenses.

This pain point—both for the government and the public—must be addressed at the earliest. "The government is moving towards a no-electricity-no-payment approach, and this could be a good solution to the capacity payment issue, if implemented effectively," said former World Bank lead economist Dr Zahid Hussain, referring to the government's new modality for renewing contracts of five rental power plants.

There is another side to our electricity coverage problem: inefficient power distribution. While sufficient electricity is being produced, it often does not reach the users due to glitches in the grids and distribution channels. Whenever there is a rain or storm, power goes out. Often, due to system maintenance, power is cut off resulting in load shedding and subsequent public suffering. Power outage, particularly in rural areas, is still a persistent problem.

The fact is, in the last few years, we've spent little on enhancing the capacity of our power distribution system. Since 2009, according to BPDB, while around USD 15 billion has been spent in electricity generation, only USD 2.6 billion has been spent in distribution and USD 1.5 billion

we need to consider how we can move towards cleaner sources of energy. In this regard, Dr Hussain suggested that while, in the last 15 years or so, we've had to resort to short-term palliatives—regardless of their environmental costs—we need to work towards reaching greater equity and sustainability now. "We may not completely erase the usage of fossil fuels from the energy mix, but we need to consider if we can be more efficient. Gas is cleaner than coal, and we need to look at whether we can retrofit the 30-40-year-old power plants that we have through technical upgradation to enhance their efficiency," he said.

Bangladesh's achievements in overcoming the power crisis of the early 2000s is indeed remarkable. But we can only be cautiously optimistic about its impact on our overall growth prospects. The power sector is riddled with systemic problems which will keep adding to the electricity costs, taking it further beyond the purchasing capacity of the common people. Unless those are fixed, many people will remain outside the electricity coverage and power outages will continue to be an issue.

It is high time the authorities addressed these longstanding issues so that the entire nation can reap the benefits of the 100 percent electricity coverage. To become self-sufficient in electricity in the real sense of the word, we still have a long way to go.

A citizen's solution to Dhaka's traffic problem



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RECENTLY, the mayor of Dhaka North City Corporation recommended an odd-even-c rationing solution to Dhaka's perennial traffic problem. Previously, a similar method was adopted in New Delhi. Its benefits and drawbacks, as experienced by residents in India's capital, are more or less known. However, when we compare the public transportation facilities and overall civic facilities in both capitals, we find massive disparities. In Delhi, people can rely on public transportation, but in Dhaka, there simply aren't enough roads, railway tracks, and public spaces, not even a functioning traffic monitoring system.

To be frank, there can be no single, universally applicable solution to the traffic problem, so allow me to drop my two cents in this regard with some recommendations that I think we can implement. While I'm just a citizen and no expert on traffic management, I think these and other solutions as offered by experts indicate the sense of urgency that must go into any effort.

First, I think each institution with more than a hundred students or employees who commute on a daily basis—such as schools, universities, corporate houses, factories, etc.—must have a shared transportation system on a common route. Students should be supplied with enticing perks such as free passes and well-behaved, well-educated transit staff to encourage them to use public transportation. Many students from wealthy families use private cars to get to and from school, as seen on the streets of Dhaka. Our children should



Is there no end to Dhaka's crippling traffic problem?

PHOTO: STAR

be taught the virtues of sharing for the sake of the city. It is our responsibility to teach them how to use and protect public facilities and spaces.

Second, Rajdhani Unnayan Karttripakkha (RAJUK) has a vital role to play in road network mapping and, therefore, traffic control. Since every city should have an adequate quantity

places where people can easily get on buses or other public vehicles.

Fourth, the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) should be more careful about the condition of motor vehicles and the training of its staff. It is the job of the BRTA to make sure that public transportation workers have decent wages, adequate facilities, education, and training. A separate entity as part of the ministry could be set up to do these things. A special law should be passed that would require bus owners to provide certain facilities for their workers. The roadworthiness of any vehicle plying our streets, and the eligibility of drivers, should be kept in mind.

Fifth, automation of vehicle entry doors, fee payments, and a centralised system of monitoring are paramount. Considering the sheer size of this city and the number of public buses that operate here, a central monitoring system, combined with a digital payment system, will address practically all of the difficulties that we face. These goals can be achieved by using existing technologies with the help of local professionals. Aside from that, the road safety law should be properly and evenly implemented to bring some semblance of order to our otherwise chaotic transport sector. It will also help if bus owners are held accountable for any accident or disorder caused by their vehicles, drivers and other staff.

Finally, there should be more U-loops, underground passages and such structures that can help large crowds of people move without putting additional burden on the roads.

Dhaka is one of the most populated cities in the world with extremely inadequate road coverage, so bringing discipline on its roads and reducing traffic jam would be a herculean task. We can only tackle the challenges of maintaining this massive population hub by sharing and correctly utilising our resources.