

No frameworks for ‘Digital’ Bangladesh!

Do our policymakers even understand how data works?

IN today’s increasingly digitised world where data is the most sought after product and people’s privacy are under increasing threat from both government and market actors, it is of urgent importance to think and talk about how different kinds of data should be governed. In Bangladesh, despite the government’s ambitious plan to digitise the country, such conversations have been severely limited, and regulatory frameworks to distinguish between different kinds of data are either non-existent or woefully inadequate to address the challenges of a data-driven global economy.

A recent report by the Digital Trade and Data Governance Hub of George Washington University ranked Bangladesh in the bottom 10, among 68 countries and the EU. Bangladesh, scoring less than Pakistan and India, lacks personal data protection laws, an open data law for the proactive release of government information, and laws allowing for the right of data portability. The report notes that the country does not have a data ethics framework to guide public servants in using data funded, collected, and controlled by government entities in an appropriate, responsible, and ethical manner. Moreover, there are no guidelines on how nongovernmental entities can share data in different contexts, and no responsible bodies for supporting personal and public sector data-sharing among governmental entities.

The Hub seeks to “help policymakers and the public understand how governments around the world are governing data” and generate a broader understanding of data governance. But are our policymakers plugged into these urgent discussions taking place globally? Are they taking note of the policy recommendations put forward by think tanks who specialise in data governance, and the best practices of other countries that have already experimented with different regulatory frameworks? Are our policymakers even engaging with the basics – much less delving deep into – the intricacies, contradictions, and challenges of data governance?

Unfortunately, the Data Protection Bill put forward by the Bangladesh government – which could have been an instrumental first step towards ensuring people’s privacy – reveal their short-sightedness and inherent refusal to understand how data works. Instead of protecting people and their privacy, the act authorises law enforcement and other authorities to access sensitive personal data both physically and remotely. Its requirement of data localisation (which means that data collected from citizens of a state has to be stored in physical devices located within the state territories) will not only hamper civil liberties, but also reduce IT-based service exports by up to 44 percent, according to local think tank Research and Policy Integration for Development (RAPID).

Notably, the Indian government has recently withdrawn its data protection and privacy bill, which had some of the same problematic provisions as the one proposed by our government, following three years of criticism from human rights advocates and tech giants. Our government, too, needs to think beyond its narrow policy of surveillance, and understand the suicidal implications of such short-sightedness if they want Bangladesh to stay relevant in an increasingly digitised global economy. It must institute regulatory frameworks that protect human rights and enable free flow of information, not restrict freedom and evolution.

Why is BCL cut so much slack?

The rules must be equal for all students

AFTER making the headlines only a couple of days back by calling a strike at Chittagong University (CU) to fulfil their personal agenda – a condemnable act that disrupted the university’s academic functioning, including holding of semester final examinations for over two days – members of Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) are again under the media limelight. Reportedly, two BCL activists, namely Imon Ahmed and Rakib Hassan, who were suspended by the CU authorities on July 25 for one year for harassing some female students on the campus on September 16 last year, sat for the second-year semester final examination with other students on August 3.

The registrar-in-charge’s clarification for why the suspended students were allowed to sit for the final examination is quite unsatisfactory. That the letter regarding the students’ suspension had not reached the department heads even 10 days after the decision to suspend them was announced goes to show how little the authorities regard the concerns and safety of other students, especially female students. Of course, when the news media began reporting on this inefficiency, the acting registrar confirmed that the suspension letters would reach all the departments and the students concerned by August 4. The question is: Why must the media get involved for a major public university to carry out a crucial and urgent task? Are we to assume that BCL members are given too much leeway by university authorities when they are at fault? At least, that is what past records indicate.

In October 2021, the CU authorities suspended 12 students for six months following a brawl between two BCL factions. But within two months, some of them sat for exams, claiming they had not received any letters confirming their suspension.

We believe it is time for the CU authorities and that of other public universities to review the transgressions where BCL activists have been involved. And if the BCL’s claims that the questionable acts of their members are not their business is true, then such “wayward” activists should not be allowed by the leaders to tarnish the image of an organisation that played such important roles in all the major historical movements of Bangladesh. Most importantly, university authorities must prioritise the safety of all their students, and punish those who break rules and the law accordingly, regardless of their affiliation to any groups. The impunity enjoyed by the ruling party’s student wing must be curbed and some form of accountability restored within the student organisation, whose members have become increasingly more ruthless and reckless over the years.

Why the mismatch between what we study and what we do?



BLOWIN’ IN THE WIND

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SHAMSAD MORTUZA

TWO female train operators are among the pool of drivers and station controllers who will be in the driving seats of our much-awaited metro rail that is all set to open on our Victory Day. We have already heard of the first-ever all-female crew flying a domestic flight of Biman Bangladesh Airlines from Dhaka to Sylhet on International Women’s Day in 2017. The feat was followed by an all-female flight deck crew in charge of the Boeing 787 Dreamliner that flew from Dhaka to Riyadh in December 2018. The presence of these two female drivers would make a huge statement about the increasing female participation in our national growth.

As an academic, however, I was interested in the background of these trainee drivers. Moriyom Afiza is a chemical engineer from Noakhali Science and Technology University, and Asma Akhter graduated in physics from Titumir College in Dhaka. While I understand Asma’s academic training required for the job, it is Moriyom’s background that intrigued me. Isn’t she overqualified for the job?

It made me think of an entry-level administrative officer we had in the department I was once a part of. She had a bachelor’s degree in electrical engineering from a leading private university. At the interview board, I kept on wondering why someone with her background would apply for a job with a salary of Tk 20,000 per month. She had probably spent lakhs of taka over four years for her BSc degree in electrical engineering, let alone the hours of lab work and studying. She worked another four years with us simply to recover her investment. And hers was not a job with extra incentives.

I don’t know how much a train driver will make on a government payroll, but it sure is not enough to honour Moriyom’s degree in chemical engineering. I am not in a position to comment on the personal reasons for choosing this profession, apart from the media-friendly quotable quote, “I always wanted to be a train driver!” At least in her case, unlike my colleague with an engineering background, she used a taxpayer’s subsidy to go into a system with a minimum financial investment.

But the same question can be asked to those architects, engineers, doctors



No wonder, we end up appointing a person with a literature background (hypothetical example) as the central human resource figure of our public service commission.

VISUAL: STAR

and other professional degree holders, such as agricultural scientists and social scientists, who join the cadre service to serve in customs, police, or even in foreign service. We, the taxpayers, have been paying for your professional degree for a certain profession. We need you as doctors who could prescribe medicines, not as magistrates who would carry out anti-adulteration campaigns with a trail of media followers. We need engineers to work on our power grid, not as consulate officers to issue passports. There is a complete mismatch between what we study and what we do.

The lack is reflected in our policy-level engagement. No wonder, we end up appointing a person with a literature background (hypothetical example) as the central human resource figure of our public service commission, or a military officer with an artillery background as the chief operating officer of the city corporation, tourism, or any other government unit, for that matter. Then we have the irony of graduates in political science or philosophy (having passed through the civil service drill) looking after the doctors and engineers. What’s worse is when the backbencher politicians return with vengeance to

the rise, candidates are forced to make compromises. For a probationary officer in a bank, you will get even MPhil degree-holders in Persian. An employer faced with thousands of applications would end up choosing candidates with much higher qualifications than was originally advertised. After all, it is safe to assume that a person who has spent four years for undergraduate, one year for postgraduate and two years for their ongoing MPhil (which, by the way, was their proxy decision to make themselves useful or ensure their stay in the dormitory while waiting for a job) will get preference over a simple graduate. In theory, that candidate has shown much more perseverance and motivation than a candidate with a two-year BA pass course. But do we need an MPhil degree-holder for a clerical position?

As part of the quality assurance projects, all universities are now instructed to prepare outcome-based curricula. We are now told to incorporate essential skills as employers complain that university graduates don’t have what they require in the real world. A recent study by ActionAid suggested that even 78 percent of students feel

by the system. Everyone is busy with the paper trail, checking the right boxes, and looking good on their CV.

The silver lining comes from a recent announcement of education as a megaproject. One can only hope that this megaproject will entail mega-thinking and planning. What we need right now is an updated pedagogy that understands the human resources that we have. How much of these resources will be involved in knowledge production and innovation? How many of them will be involved in the service sector, and how many of them will go abroad as skilled and unskilled workers? How many of them will get into administration? What kind of aptitude do we need? There are new algorithms and psychological tests to determine the career or creative orientation of a student. Instead of churning out graduates who don’t find any affinity between what they have studied and what they do, we need policy interventions, strategic training, and career-mapping. The demographic dividend through which we plan to utilise the prime time of our young men and women for the exponential growth of our country will be lost otherwise.

Kafr Qasim massacre was part of an ethnic cleansing plan



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MOTASEM A DALLOUL

THE archives of the Israeli occupation forces recently released court documents related to the trial of Israeli soldiers who brutally massacred 49 Palestinians on October 29, 1956. The massacre took place in the Palestinian town of Kafr Qasim.

It was the first day of the Israeli, British and French invasion of Sinai, which came in response to Egypt’s closure of the Suez Canal. Israel imposed night curfew on most of the areas with high Palestinian (Arab) populations in Israel.

Late Brig Gen Issachar Shadmi was the commander of the Israeli army brigade which was in charge of Kafr Qasim, located in the centre of the recently occupied Palestine that became Israel, or close to the Armistice Line with Jordan, which controlled the West Bank at the time. He ordered the curfew to start earlier that day and ordered his officers to strictly implement it.

Palestinian or Arab farmers, who were at their farms outside the village, returned home without knowing anything about the updates related to the curfew. The border police officers commanded by Shadmi mercilessly opened fire at the unarmed farmers, killing 49, including the elderly, women and children.

The massacre was widely condemned, even by officials from the Israeli occupation government, which sent Shadmi and the other officers involved in the massacre to trial and sentenced all of them. The officers spent a very short time in prison before they had a presidential pardon.

Regarding Shadmi, the highest commander of the area at the time, the judges ordered him to pay a fine of 10 cents, according to *Haaretz*, for pushing up the curfew without the approval of the military governor. The judges claimed he did so “in good faith.” This way, the issue of the massacre was closed, but the court documents revealed on Friday disclosed new facts about it.

The transcript of Haim Levy, who was a company commander, showed that there was a clear order to shoot Palestinians who broke the curfew without knowing about the change of its starting time. Levy also said, according to the court documents, that he had been told by battalion commander Shmuel Malinki, “It is desirable that there be a number of casualties.”

Milinki told the court that he answered the soldiers, who asked him how they should deal with the Palestinians who did not know about

the change in the timing of the curfew, that they should kill them. “*Allah yerhamu*,” he said in Arabic. It means, “May God have mercy on them.” This proves that there were plans to kill Palestinians, prepared before the massacre took place.

To prove that the intentional killing of Palestinians was a major order related to the situation at Kafr Qasim, Commander Gabriel Dahan said, according to the *Jerusalem Post*, he had been told by Melinki “without sentiments, it is better to have a few dead, so that there will be peace in the area.”

During the hearings, the Israeli soldiers mentioned, several times, a plan called “*Hafarferet*” (“Mole”), which was prepared to be implemented during the invasion of Sinai, but Israel wanted it to start spontaneously – not to be initiated by its army, like the invasion of Egypt.

As part of this operation, Levy said that there were measures meant to move the Palestinians from their homes, including curfew imposition, property confiscation and moving entire villages from place to place. According to the *Jerusalem Post*, Levy said in the case of Kafr Qasim, “the entire population of the village was to be moved to Tira.”

The aim was not only to move Palestinians from one area to another area inside Palestine or Israel, but to move them out of the country. Levy said that the Israeli occupation forces were told “not to put lookouts and checkpoints on the eastern side [of Kafr Qasim] so that if the Arabs decided to flee, they could and would be allowed to go over the Jordanian border [Armistice Line].”

Levy also said he understood there

was a direct link between shooting the Palestinians, who violated the curfew, and changing Israel’s demographic makeup. “The connection is that, as a result, part of the population would get scared and decide that it is best to live on the other side. That’s how I interpret it,” he told the judges, according to Wafa news agency.

All of these statements prove that the Kafr Qasim massacre was part of an ethnic cleansing operation and the following court proceedings, which were kept secret for more than six decades, were just an attempt to whitewash the Israeli occupation army’s crimes.

This is normal in Israel, which has a track record of this injustice. Shadmi, who was fined to pay only 10 cents over brutally commanding the massacre of 49 Palestinians, was found by the Israeli court to be acting “in good faith.”

His colleague at Kadoorie Agricultural High School, Yitzhak Rabin, whose bloody history included the killing of about 1,000 Egyptian prisoners when he was the chief commander during the 1967 war, was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize just for claiming to have reached a peace deal with the Palestinians.

Moshe Dayan, Menachem Begin, Yitzhak Shamir and others massacred Palestinians and shed plenty of Palestinian blood, and they are being referred to by Israelis and non-Israelis as heroes. Even the Israeli leaders today are doing the same. The current Israeli Defence Minister Benny Gantz, who took pride in bombing Gaza to the Stone Age, is still portrayed as a “dove of peace.”

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