

Should student politics extend into private universities?

Yes, but not through Chhatra League

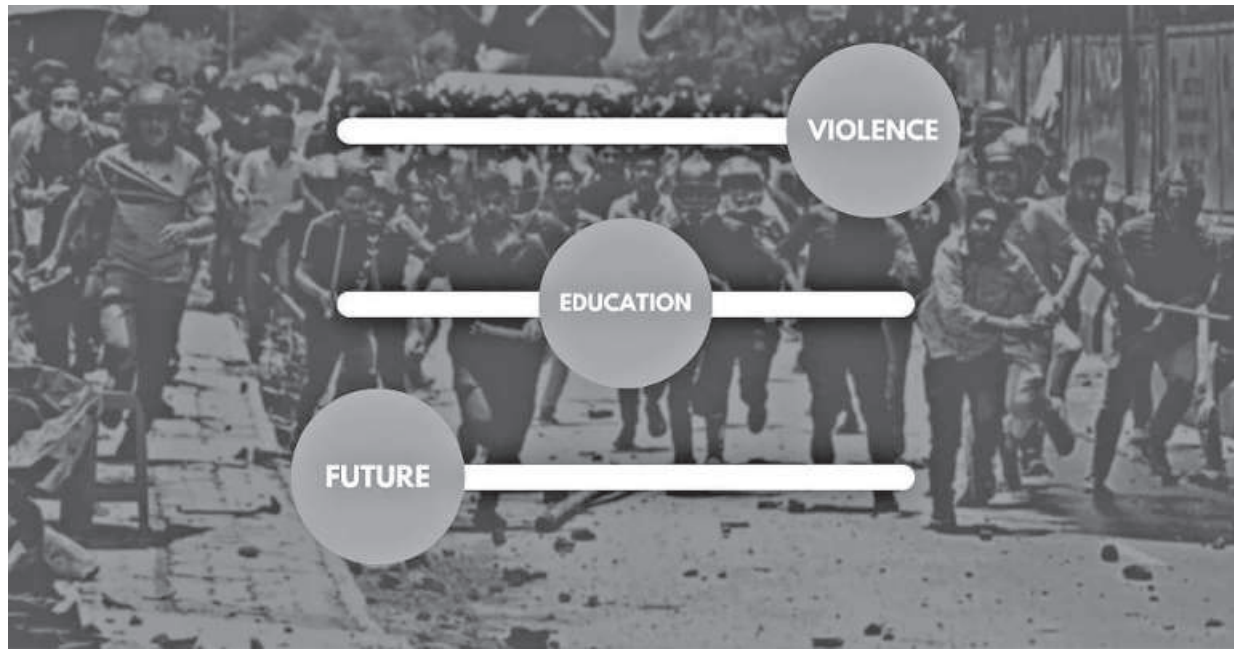


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ANUPAM DEBASHIS ROY

RECENTLY, we have seen the news that the ruling party's student wing is extending itself into private universities by announcing individual committees for various institutions. This development has met with growing concerns from private university faculty members, students, and their parents, many of whom don't want party politics to enter their campuses.

Why is there such an aversion to party politics? The reason becomes clear if we look at the political practices at public universities. It is not an exaggeration to say that the ruling party's student wing maintains a culture of terror within those campuses. The residential halls in public universities are often in their control, and students are compelled to attend party programmes – which takes time away from their study schedule or socialising – if they want to save their seats in the halls. Even outside the halls, the leaders of Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL), the student wing of the ruling Awami League, hold immense power, often instituting unwritten codes of conduct that all of the students must abide by. And if any student dares to say or write anything that goes against the party's interest, they face harsh repercussions, which often translates to physical violence. Infighting among various groups of the same party are commonplace and fighting with other student groups also takes place, making the environment somewhat unfit for



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VISUAL: STAR

education.

Do we really want such practices to enter the domain of private universities, too? The answer is clear: we do not. Extending such practices to private universities will greatly hamper the environment for education on those campuses. That is probably the reason why various private institutions such as East West University (EWU), University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB), American International University-Bangladesh (AIUB), and North South University (NSU) have already instituted a rule

that no party politics will be allowed within the campus. This is a welcome decision.

In this case, we see a conflict between two powerful groups. One is the owners and trustees of private universities in Bangladesh, and the other is BCL. Both of them have lobbying powers with the government, with one having a

need to be reconciled while keeping the interests of the students in mind.

Which group ultimately prevails will depend on which one has the higher power within the prevailing structure, and how important BCL thinks its project of forming individual committees for private universities is. An interesting arrangement is possible, where there will be

of student leaders may make it increasingly hard for private university authorities to keep things in check and avoid their power practices. Only time will tell what happens, but in the era of party politics seeping into every sector, it is not unimaginable that private universities will eventually be proliferated by party politics, too.

But what do the students of our private universities really need? Should they be kept entirely divorced from all politics? That doesn't seem to be the right choice either, because we have seen that these students have historically had issues and needs that needed to be addressed through political means. In the "No VAT on Education" protests in 2015, private university students staged a powerful movement that was definitely political in nature. Their way of congregating, organising, strategising, making demands, etc were all political. Organisations and semi-organisations were formed that were political. However, they were rights specific and issue-specific, and they were necessary to serve the interests of the student body. They were not simply an extension of the national political parties that would use the students as head counts for their rallies.

Such rights organisations are extremely necessary, and the best method of fostering that is to institute student unions or student governments at every private university. Through these bodies, students would be able to collectively bargain with the authorities of their universities and present their demands for a better educational environment. If there is a need to negotiate tuition fees or things of that nature, the student government can do that as well. All students should be able to participate and vote in the student government elections, and the elected bodies should have term limits. This would ensure that students are

represented in a bargaining body and their voices are heard by the authorities. This will also increase a student's sense of belonging to their institution, and give them an incentive for good behaviour if they want to become a future leader. This mechanism would also foster leadership skills for students who can then employ those skills in their careers. Even future independent political figures and parties can grow out of this process.

In this case, we see a conflict between two powerful groups. One is the owners and trustees of private universities in Bangladesh, and the other is BCL. Both of them have lobbying powers with the government, with one having a strong financial standing in society and the other directly linked to the regime.

Therefore, I propose two solutions. Firstly, Chhatra League should be kept outside of private universities so that their reign of terror does not seep into that sphere. Secondly, student government bodies should be constituted at private universities under the auspices of the authorities, so that healthy political practices and collective bargaining procedures may grow. The second policy will also aid the first objective of keeping the toxic Chhatra League politics out of private universities, as there would be less of a political vacuum for them to fill in. A mixed approach of these two solutions can bring about the most positive change.

Transforming education beyond tokenism



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MIR AFTABUDDIN AHMED

WHAT defines public interest? If effective public policies can be used as tools to promote public interest, what prevents us from leveraging the state for the collective well-being of society to the extent that it satisfies the comprehensive needs of the public? "It depends" – is the answer that academics and policy practitioners provide.

Yet, irrespective of what a certain society represents or values, the categorical role of education in enhancing the notion of public good is perhaps the one universal truth to which we all relate to. If investing in education is understood to be in public interest, and if the state propels the notion that Bangladesh is a country that has witnessed unprecedented levels of development over the past decade, then by definition our education sector should be a prominent channel via which the nation can celebrate its developmental achievements. Sadly, the story is quite the opposite.

From villages to cities, one has gotten accustomed to hearing about GDP growth over the past decade. Yet, while there have been political messages and tokenistic proclamations regarding the need to strengthen the education system, the numbers tell a different story. For the 2022-2023 fiscal year, the government decided to allocate roughly 1.83 percent of the GDP towards the education sector; in fact, this year's allocation for education as a percentage of GDP is lower than that of last year. Budgetary volumes have kept increasing quite vividly over the past decade; however, the trend in education spending as a share of GDP has remained stagnant around two percent.

A 2020 report of Unesco indicates that Bangladesh is lagging behind



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ILLUSTRATION: BIPOLO CHAKROBORTY

compared to its neighbours with smaller GDP sizes – such as Bhutan, Nepal and even Afghanistan – when it comes to education spending. Unesco defines the optimal average public expenditure on education as roughly four to six percent of GDP. And even as the pandemic demanded a policy response from the government which would mobilise additional resources towards this sector, such has come merely in the form of empty promises and words. The reason why education is not an attractive developmental vehicle for political regimes is due to the very nature of its outcomes. Theoretically, education is a merit good – an economic commodity that has concrete well-being implications and, to a large extent, intangible external benefits. Yes, a quality

education will guarantee good jobs and improve the quality of life for the citizens. But its long-term effects are in the form of an intellectually competent and progressive society – one which questions the status quo and stimulates innovation.

However, a return on education from an investment perspective is difficult to ascertain in the

percent of the total expenditure is carried out in the final quarter of the fiscal year. This is another trend that indicates both a lack of planning and execution. Management of the national education system at the hands of ministerial bodies and government agencies – particularly the inability to holistically reform archaic and deeply outdated syllabi – is another story in itself. Teachers are underpaid, and they are sent to teach without appropriate training. While the government does from time to time showcase its supposed interest to stand by the teachers by investing in training programmes, this remains at a scale that is embarrassingly unsuitable.

So what are the solutions? For one, democracy needs to function in Bangladesh. The parliament, which has effectively become a rubber stamp body over the past decade, has failed to account for the serious lack of state funding towards education. Elected representatives must debate

on the political ambivalence towards this sector. Policymakers need to identify solutions to not simply increase the quantity of educational institutions in the country, but do so with a greater focus on creating infrastructure that promotes the quality of education in Bangladesh. Creating an ecosystem for the enhancement of critical thinking, research and promotion of soft skills should be instituted across the board – primarily by reforming the national syllabi followed in classrooms. Eliminating rote memorisation techniques and replacing them by leveraging creative learning practices is a demand of time. Investing in technology is important, but at the same time, investing in the basic needs of schoolchildren such as desks and books is perhaps even more prudent.

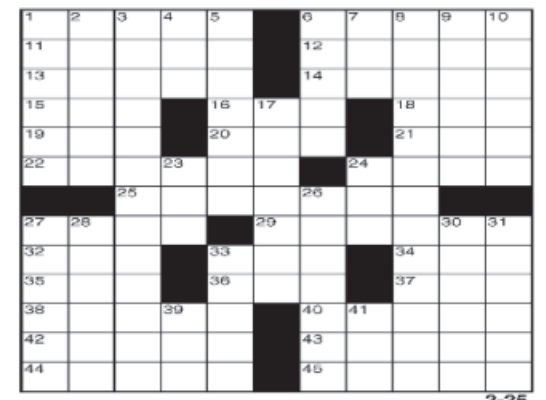
As a nation, it is integral to agree that our education system is failing to uphold the public interest of creating a more qualified and intellectually

solutions-oriented future generation. Recently, Education Minister Dr Dipu Moni fittingly said that Bangladesh should discuss topics like robotics or artificial intelligence in light of how the world is progressing. While I absolutely agree with the education minister, I ask her to look deeply and conscientiously at the state of Bangladesh's education system. I ask her this question: If your government refrains from putting policy weight behind the education system to the degree that educationists and experts have been demanding for years now, then isn't it valid for the people to assess your statement as nothing more than tokenistic?

It is in the public interest for Bangladesh to have a radical transformation of the education system, and the reality is that only the state has the capacity to do this. Whether it chooses to do so in the near future may very well define the sustenance of the economy and the collective future of Bangladesh.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Caesar subject
 - 6 Fancy neckwear
 - 11 Stand
 - 12 Pound resident
 - 13 Out of style
 - 14 Lazy sort
 - 15 They hold power
 - 16 Writer Brown
 - 18 Bullring cry
 - 19 Swelled head
 - 20 Galoot
 - 21 Sturgeon eggs
 - 22 Finds another purpose for
 - 24 Light touches
 - 25 Took stock?
 - 27 Milk choice
 - 29 Alter, as a program
- DOWN**
- 1 Dueling sword
 - 2 Grove fruit
 - 3 Omaha is on it
 - 4 Cart puller
 - 5 Sewing items
 - 6 Imitative
 - 7 Lawn makeup
 - 8 Moab is on it
 - 9 Spotted cat
 - 10 Low cards
 - 17 Neighbor of Germany
 - 23 Total
 - 24 Ab's neighbor
 - 26 Intelligent
 - 27 Egyptian emblem
 - 28 Joe's veep
 - 30 Respectable
 - 31 Brings to bear
 - 33 Air outlets
 - 39 Before, in odes
 - 41 Longoria of TV



AUGUST 27 ANSWERS



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