

Stop the onslaught on Chuntai Wildlife Sanctuary

Why has the Forest Department allowed it?

A report in this paper has revealed a most horrendous example of how administrative power is abused to destroy precious hillocks in Chuntai Wildlife Sanctuary in Chattogram to grab the logs and sand. None other than a local union parishad chairman, along with his henchmen, have been plundering these hillocks, with the Forest Department and local administration doing absolutely nothing to stop them.

The blatant manner in which the trees have been cut and sand have been extracted, with a temporary road being cut through the forest to transport the loot, is enough proof of the level of impunity this syndicate enjoys. It is ironic, not to mention, tragic, that this sanctuary, built in 1986, was a major corridor through which the now endangered Asian elephants used to travel. Built for the protection of wildlife and natural resources, it was supposed to be overseen by the Chattogram Divisional Forest Office.

So what happened over the years? How could a public official and his cronies carry out such a huge scale of devastation without the knowledge of the Forest Department? A resident of the area quoted in the report said that trucks have been taking away sand, earth and trees every day. With so much activity going on, it is hard to understand how forest department officials could be oblivious of this for so many years.

It is hardly a surprise that the sanctuary, which consists of 7763.4 acres of forest land, is being eyed by greedy encroachers. But that a public official has been involved in this crime, with no effective action from the very department that is responsible for the forest's protection and conservation, is appalling.

Bangladesh is considered a champion of environmental causes worldwide. But the way it has allowed precious natural resources to be depleted and destroyed by individuals and groups connected to power makes us wonder about the commitment of the government in protecting its own environment and wildlife. This includes the Local Government Engineering Department (LGED) plans to build a road right through Ramu reserve forest, which would involve felling thousands of trees. Last July, the government handed over 20 acres of the same reserve forest to the Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) for building a residential training facility. These are only a few examples among innumerable ones.

Over the decades, forest cover has been reduced to 17 percent of the country's total area. Apart from being devastating for the wildlife that live in these forests, the loss of forest cover makes the country more vulnerable to cyclones and other natural disasters. We urge the government to wake up and put an immediate stop to these continuous onslaughts on forest areas. It must first identify and penalise all those departments, groups and individuals that are part of this crime and, in the process, recover these precious forests, including the Chuntai Wildlife Sanctuary.

Bring back 17 lakh missing students

Concrete measures needed to address mass dropouts

With the Covid pandemic having been among us for a considerable amount of time now, its devastating effects on our lives are beginning to settle in and becoming evident through data. As per a report by this daily, published on Saturday, government data has revealed that at least 17.62 lakh students dropped out of educational institutions in the first two years of the pandemic. The University Grants Commission (UGC) reported the dropping out of 2.49 lakh students from universities between 2020 and 2021, while data from the Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics (Banbeis) and the Directorate of Primary Education, respectively, show that 62,104 students dropped out of secondary school and a staggering 14.5 lakh left primary school during the same period. Worse still, educationists believe that many of these students have left behind education permanently.

Of course, at the crux of reasons behind such large-scale dropouts are the financial issues faced by families due to pandemic-induced lockdowns. With almost two-thirds of the total cost of education in Bangladesh reportedly covered by households, when parents lost their jobs and businesses began to count losses, the education of children was unfortunately one of the first big expenses many decided to cut down on. As a result, many children had to drop out and join the labour force, while female students were increasingly subjected to child marriage. This is why, in 2021, the Unicef reported the first increase in child labour worldwide in 20 years. And, as per a report prepared by the Directorate of Secondary and Higher Education, surveying 11,769 secondary schools, nearly 50,000 female students were turned into child brides, while almost 80,000 of them became child labourers in 2021.

What is most disappointing, however, is the government's seeming lack of notice when it comes to addressing Covid-induced learning loss. For one, the budget for FY 2022-23 only had 12 percent of it allocated for education, nowhere near close to the recommended 20 percent. Moreover, as experts have pointed out, the focus has largely been on returning to "normal," without addressing the negative effects of prolonged school closures. Thus, in our second year after schools reopened, authorities have continued to fail in bringing students back to classrooms.

The onus now is on the relevant authorities to introduce and implement effective incentives which will help bring dropouts back into schools and universities. School students who want to get back to school after a gap could be offered the option of "bridge schools" wherein the curriculum of any missed grades could be compressed into a course of a few months to prevent learning loss when they get back to regular schooling. The government must also work to incentivise parents and guardians to send their children back to school. As for stopping child marriage, it is crucial that not only are marriages halted from taking place, but that awareness is raised vigorously in communities as to why child marriage is never the option to resort to for the betterment of a girl child.

Will our universities survive in 25 years?



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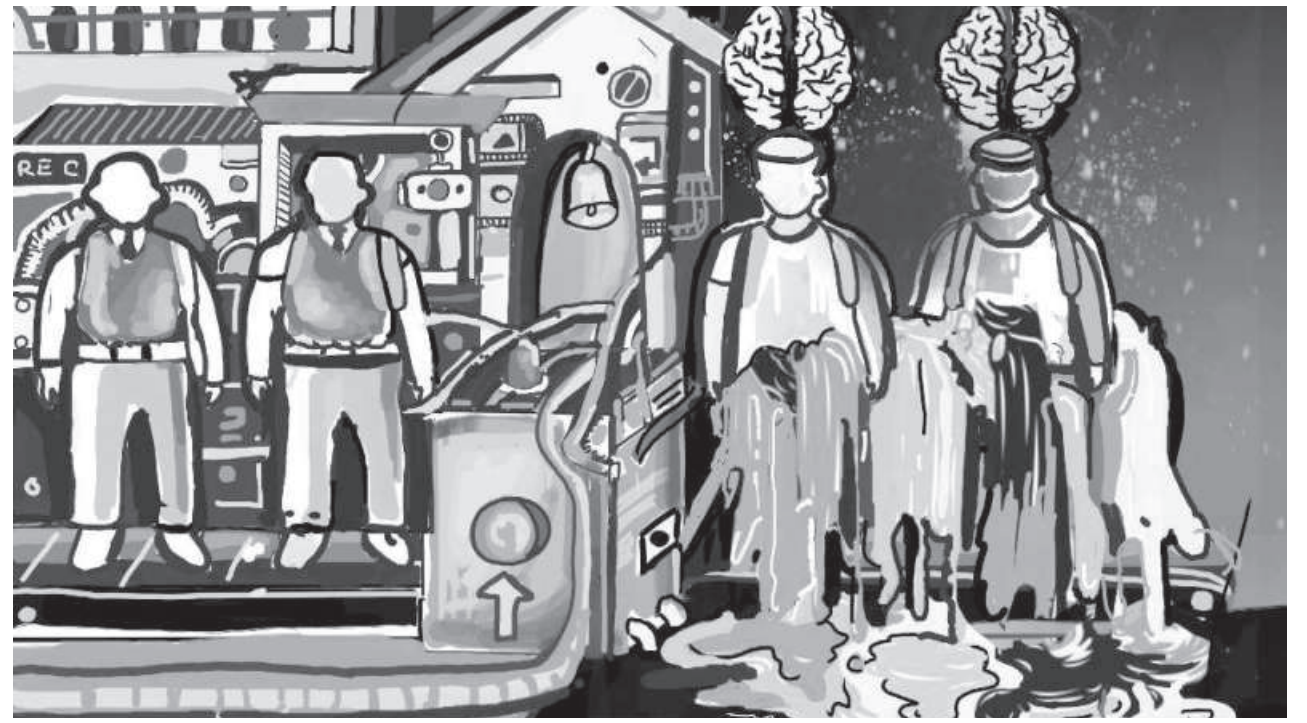
Quality education is the backbone of a wholesome and prosperous society. But finding the "quality" in quality education continues to be elusive in Bangladesh. The "so called" universities (more like community colleges) are rife with social, economic, political and ideological problems that work against building learning organisations. Teachers, the kingpins, don the mantle of educators but have little to show in their academic profiles. For today's new generation of hungry learners, seeking to be actively engaged with illustrious minds, their classroom experience is simply frustrating, backdated, irrelevant, and unpalatable.

Hence the following student comment: "I don't know why I was present in the class; boredom was at its peak; teacher was not prepared for the class... Many teachers are toppers of their batches, but they cannot teach. After the first week, most students are lost in a black hole."

Where is the accountability? Teaching is not just about content

One can be fairly confident that the power of private enterprise will make alternate learning platforms stronger and far more creative in the days to come. Private bodies are already emerging to provide focused training in Bangladesh – training that the market demands but that our universities have failed to anticipate in making learning more useful and contextual.

and delivery; it is also about human interaction and connectivity, keeping an open mind, creating a positive ambience, sharing perspective and skepticism, and maintaining a sense of humour – all interspersed with patience, commitment, flexibility, compassion, hope, and a great deal of creativity. The failure of academia to meet the needs of today's learners is already ushering in dramatic change.



In Bangladesh, once a student enters an academic track (a major), there is no way out.

ILLUSTRATION: PRITHI KHALIQUE

For example, technology is changing the educational landscape. Imagine a day in the future when AI, robotics and corporate innovators will develop personal learning programmes (PLPs) catering to the individual learner. With corporate sponsorship, the PLPs will train and craft employees fitted to their needs. Computers will adapt to individual learning capacities, eliminating the competition for a GPA 5 that generally produces parrots! Will our universities be able to compete in this environment?

University degrees, providing little value, may in fact be on their way out. Today's learners are more interested in skills. Hence the emergence of Coursera, working with universities, offering MOOCs (massive open online courses) with certification programmes. Other similar organisations like Udemy, EdX, Udacity, Skillshare, MindValley, LinkedIn Learning, and Google platforms are fast evolving, seeking the sweet spot to cater better to different learner segments. Many are finding a Microsoft certification far more valuable and less costly than a local university degree.

The Internet is also opening up

changing global needs. In Bangladesh, once a student enters an academic track (a major), there is no way out: the student is literally trapped, even if she finds the subject remotely close to her interests. Our universities have still not found a way out for the "trapped" and "paying" student to pursue her dreams.

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Change is coming at us with increasing velocity. Where is the discussion on how these changes will affect our education system? How are we preparing our students for the imminent changes? The volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous future hurtling towards us appears to ruffle few academic feathers, secure in their unproductive "tenured" (guaranteed) positions.

We have already lost significant

and shape change, while the nation remains shackled. If this state of affairs continues, "outsourcing" the training of our youth will grow while our universities languish.

It is time for our education to become future-oriented by liberating our learners to go forth into the world with skills, confidence, imagination and enthusiasm. A "new education" – rising from a Schumpeterian creative destruction process – is in order for Bangladesh to explore the opportunities and meet the challenges that lie ahead. We need to think comprehensively and holistically to fix the education system and enable Bangladesh to attain its goals of a developed nation. Without quality, relevant and value-added education, I'm afraid, our education system will fade into obscurity.

The UGC and other educational bodies of influence ought to consider the imminent changes in their planning horizons and lead a conversation on "What will education look like in 25 years? How should we prepare for it? How can we make our students future-ready?" The proposal is not academic; it is imperative.

Implications of Donald Lu's Visit to Bangladesh

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Barring any last moment change, US assistant secretary Donald Lu will have arrived in Dhaka late last night. Lu is the top diplomat for the US in South and Central Asia, where he has been working for a long time as a State Department functionary.

However, Lu has also gained a reputation for his diplomatic method among South Asian diplomats, which is seen by many as "coercive". His involvement in Pakistan, Nepal and Sri Lanka has created such an image in the region. But considering the current trend of Bangladesh-US relations, his visit will surely have several implications including the settlement of political dissatisfaction, the future of the Rohingya, investment, and the Indo-Pacific strategy.

The name Donald Lu became well-known after Pakistan's ex-Prime Minister Imran Khan's allegation. After being toppled, he directly accused Lu to be the conspirator behind his removal.

Prior to that, Donald Lu played an instrumental role in pursuing Nepal to sign the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) Compact with the US. MCC now has become quite a challenge for Nepal to fulfil its commitments. Despite that, Lu visited Nepal last year and persuaded its

parliament to ratify the agreement. It is also reported that Lu had a role in reinstating Ranil Wickremesinghe as the Sri Lankan Prime Minister amid the country's turmoil in order to safeguard US interests.

Hence, after Imran's allegation, Lu became a controversial figure in South Asia. However, in the context of Bangladesh, things may not be the same, considering the visit and Bangladesh's neutrality policy.

Today, he is expected to exchange views with government high-ups, political parties and civil society. He will also meet the Foreign Minister and Foreign Secretary. The main agenda of his visit will revolve around priority issues such as energy, trade, security cooperation, religious freedom, labour, and human rights. Lu will also explore possibilities of expanding economic engagement, and hear civil society perspectives on labour and human rights.

The visit is likely to focus heavily on ongoing questions on internal politics, human rights issues, the GSP scheme, defence agreements (namely GSOMIA and ACSA), the Rohingya issue and its future, and investment in Bangladesh. Geopolitics regarding the Indo-Pacific will likely be discussed, as the US is now prioritising it seriously.

Lu's visit can also be seen as a continuation of diplomatic engagement between the two countries, which has increased over the past two years. Till now, 17 mid and high-level bilateral visits have taken place, including Eileen Laubacher's latest one. Among the 17 visits, Bangladesh has sent seven delegations to the US, while the US has sent 10 to its counterpart. Lu's visit will be 11th in the last two years. The reason behind such a large number of visits is expanding relations and short-term disagreements that need to be solved. The Indo-Pacific strategy and Bangladesh' geo-strategic significance are also behind this deepening engagement.

Bilateral relations are also flourishing, ranging from economic to cultural. Over the years, existing bilateral trade is increasing and reached USD 13 billion in 2022. The US is also the third largest trading partner of Bangladesh, and is the top donor to the Rohingya with USD 1.9 billion. It has also provided over 100 million doses of vaccine as aid to Bangladesh, which accounts for 70 percent of its total vaccine donation to the world.

Amid such expanding relations, discontent has also emerged from both parties. The US appears to be dissatisfied with Bangladesh's domestic politics, while Bangladesh is also dissatisfied with US interference. Sanctions on RAB, which Bangladesh is seeking to lift, also put a strain on

relations. Apart from such political issues, there are some security and economic issues for both countries to discuss as well. The US wants to sign two defence agreements with Bangladesh, while Bangladesh wants to reinstate the GSP and receive greater US investment. And lastly, the US wants Bangladesh to join its Indo-Pacific Strategy.

As a result, Donald Lu's visit will have several implications for Bangladesh. It will increase bilateral diplomatic communication and serve as a continuation of relations. As Lu is the top diplomat for the US in this region, the meeting will provide opportunities for both countries to hold talks on pressing issues. It could also be a personal opportunity for Lu to reconstruct his image by working on mutual interests rather than using other methods.

The latest trends in US-Bangladesh relations is favourable for both countries. Bangladesh's neutrality and balancing policy is also accommodative of US objectives in the region, as it will not pose threats to any rivals. Such routine visits are good signs for bilateral relations, as they provide opportunities to share on disagreements and help to locate opportunities to pursue together. For Lu, it is also an opportunity to reconstruct his diplomatic image. Coercive diplomacy only drives nation away. In this context, Lu's visit may bring many positive implications for Bangladesh-US relations.