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Clarification, or admission of guilt?

Bangla Academy statement on Adarsha ban muddies the water further



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Following a social media storm, the Bangla Academy has now explained its decision as to why it barred the publishing house Adarsha from taking part in this year's Ekushey Book Fair, the most desired annual book exposition for publishers and readers. The clarification issued by the academy, however, raises more questions than explaining the rationale behind its decision. The worst part in the academy's attempt to clear the air is the admission in its statement that it had not read the alleged offending book before deciding to exclude its publisher from the exhibition.

The Bangla Academy press release, issued on January 21, 2023, and signed by its deputy director Mohammad Akbar Hossain, stated that the academy's attention had been drawn to news reports in various media outlets, which claimed that Adarsha was not allotted a stall at the book fair. It noted that the lottery for allocations of stalls was scheduled to be held on January 22, 2023.

Up until this point, it seemed the academy was simply refuting an unjustified claim based on assumption. But the statement then added that the management committee of the Amar Ekushey Book Fair had collected the book "Bangaleer Mediocrity-r Shondhane," written by Faham Abdus Salam, and "Unnayan Bivram" by Zia Hasan. He termed it as an attempt to censor or gag freedom of thought and expression.

The academy statement seems to have given more credence to this allegation of the ban being predetermined. Otherwise, why would the committee be screening a particular book before holding the lottery? Why carry out a preemptive action, when it has the authority to cancel any allocation for violating the code of conduct or rules they agree to abide by?

In the past, there were quite a few instances when the academy shut down a couple of stalls for allegedly violating its rules, though not without commotion and protests.

The book in dispute, mentioned in the academy statement, is written by Faham Abdus Salam, who happens to be married to one of the daughters of BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir. This raises questions about his apparent victimisation for political association. Discarding such allegations isn't easy, as the publisher has claimed that the book

was displayed and sold in the Ekushey Book Fair in 2022.

Critics of the academy's decision have termed it a violation of freedom of speech, and against the spirit and ideals of the Language Movement. The Bangla Academy was established on the values and ideals of the Language Movement, and therefore, it should never allow its institutional role to be used as a tool to suppress political dissent.

These decisions, too, are not universal, but are divided along partisan political lines. As a result, such acts of politically motivated censorship keep happening.

Although the Bangla Academy was supposed to be strengthening its independence and self-regulation, the Bangla Academy Act 2013 has made it easier for the government to exercise direct and indirect control over running the affairs of the academy. The Act, which came into effect on September 22, 2013, allows the government to nominate greater numbers to the executive committee than the numbers nominated by the general assembly – the body representing general members – and fellows of the academy.

In the midst of this controversy, the latest story is that the academy has been forced to replace thousands of invitation cards to include the government's emblem above the academy logo, for the first time since the enactment of the act. This is a clear intervention in the affairs of a statutory autonomous body, which is undesired and deplorable.

Despite the fact that Article 20 (1) of the act says, "Subject to the other provisions of this Act, the overall authority of the Academy shall vest in the General Assembly," and article 20(2) says, "The General Assembly shall supervise and review the activities of the Academy and shall give necessary directions to the Executive Council," the dominance of bureaucrats and partisan academics establishes de facto control of the government over the academy.

Unless these legal loopholes are amended, for which strong social unity is necessary, there is little hope that the institution that emerged as an icon of free speech will ever be truly autonomous.

The 'War on Trees' is winning



NO STRINGS ATTACHED

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AASHA MEHREEN AMIN

Unlike the "War on Terror," a script written and executed by US President George W Bush, the "War on Trees" has been far more successful.

The War on Terror actually perpetuated terror by unleashing unprecedented violence on civilian populations, when the US decided that it would have to bomb Iraq to smother them to combat the threat of mythical weapons of mass destruction. The War on Terror has not made the world any safer; it can be argued that human populations are even more vulnerable to terror in many guises and forms as a result of it. Terror keeps multiplying like a crazy virus.

The war on trees, meanwhile, is straightforward and simple. It does exactly what it says – attacks the trees, killing them and its residents along with it – no fuss, no frills.

The latest "kill" was in Habiganj's Chunрагhat, on a land leased by Hatimara Tea Garden. It was a land full of trees – many around a hundred years old – and home to many kinds of wildlife. There were barking deer, Indian civets, langurs, apes, mynas, herons, squirrels, and so on. Near it was the Reema Kalenga Wildlife Sanctuary.

According to a report by *The Daily Star*'s Sylhet correspondent, a horrible tragedy unfolded on January 19. The tea estate decided they needed to expand the tea garden. To do so, they began to "clear" the land – by setting the trees on fire, with all the animals and birds still present. It was their land, and they could do whatever they liked with it.

Unsurprisingly, the fire spread to the sanctuary, increasing the death toll – though "officially," there is no such thing. Three days passed but no one from the local administration, not a single forest official, came to stop the fire as living beings screamed their death

cries. Around 140 trees were cut down and burnt. Operation Clear Forest was successful!

No doubt, most of the traces of this crime have been cleverly covered up. The dead bodies of animals and birds, that our correspondent saw himself, have probably been buried or turned to ash, along with the trees. The tea estate representatives can shrug their shoulders and say that they own the land, end of story.

But is there no law that states that you cannot just cut down trees and burn them, along with all the wildlife in them? What about the Wildlife (Preservation and Security) Act 2012, created to monitor and protect wildlife, and the laws against violating sanctuary rules?

The constitution mandates the state to protect all wildlife. Not that the constitution has stopped anyone from grabbing land, encroaching on river banks, filling up water bodies, and destroying the habitats of thousands of animals and birds before. Which makes it easy for various government agencies and development projects to also take up pieces of the pie – or, in this case, forest. According to reports, this amounts to about 1.65 lakh acres of forestland. The results are balding forests in Cumilla, Gazipur, Mymensingh, Tangail, and more.

Reserve forests, in fact, are the prime targets of this war on trees. Don't forget the various forms of "essential construction" approved by the government, which involve felling hundreds and thousands of trees.

Think of the 20 acres of a reserve forest in Ramu, given to the Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) to build a residential training facility. Recall the image of stumps of freshly cut trees in one of the remote forests of Bhola's Manpura Island to fuel brick kilns (*The Daily Star*

Star, March 2019). Imagine the reality if the Roads and Highways Department succeeds in getting the 174 acres of the Ramgarh-Sitakunda Reserve Forest in Chattogram – one of the oldest reserve forests in the country – to widen a road going through it. Dread the catastrophic effects on the Sundarban mangrove forest when the Rampal Power Plant is in full operation, along with over a hundred industrial projects close by.

The war on trees has been kept alive and kicking in our cities, too. Chattogram has lost half of its greenery to real estate development. Dhaka's concrete jungle has eaten away thousands of trees, leaving wild animals and birds homeless and lost. Monkeys attacking city dwellers and desperately looking for food, dwindling bird populations, and no respite, for animals and humans alike, from the glaring sun and choking smog – all a result of this insatiable desire to obliterate any kind of greenery in sight if it comes in the way of urban development. Which is why your neighbour may send an assassin at an unholy hour to saw off your cherished *krishnachura* tree. It is why housing projects will involve taking up every bit of the land, shaving off the original trees, and leaving no space for new ones to be planted.

In Singapore, wilfully destroying a tree can lead to a fine of up to 10,000 Singapore dollars. Even if the tree (to be felled) is within one's own property, applications have to be made to the government body concerned, stating the reasons why the tree must be cut. Closer to home, Hyderabad has become the only city in India to be given the distinction of being a "Tree City of the World" by Arbor Day Foundation and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).

So why are we on this suicidal path while cheerleading environmental conservation abroad? How have we forgotten why we need our trees, our forests that shield us from cyclones and tsunamis, that give shelter to precious wildlife and absorb the toxic carbon we so copiously produce? Why are we so fixated on this insane war on trees?



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S/Opinion

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ACROSS	34	Wire
1	Dairy buy	38 Sweet-talk
5	Aesop's works	41 Miss Marple
11	Valhalla VIP	42 Disinclined
12	Friend of George and Jerry	43 Gorillas and gibbons
13	Lady of Spain	44 Dull finishes
14	Firstborn	45 British stable
15	Lift, stateside	46 Ultimatum words
17	Salon stuff	1 Manner
18	Sailing boats	2 Revered one
22	Analyse grammar	3 Simple chart
24	Copying	4 Rascals
26	"The Matrix" hero	5 Yard divisions
27	Join the big leagues	6 Brass and bronze
30	Vigilant	7 Unjust charge
32	Clear sky	8 Use deceit
33	Gear part	9 Print units
34	10 Ready to go	10 Ready to go
35	16 Pub product	16 Pub product
DOWN		
19	Pinot or Merlot	
20	Lusty look	
21	Place for a coin	
22	Book unit	
23	Bunches	
28	Snappy answer	
29	Ultimatum words	
30	Poker card	
31	Legislative holdup	
35	Sediment	
36	Over again	
37	Clutter	
38	Motor part	
39	Director	
40	DuVernay	
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N	O	P	E	T	S	K	N	E	E

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