

Why did Tagore have to be 'disappeared'?

Removal of the statue reveals the state of our freedom of expression

How ironic – or perhaps how fitting – that a statue protesting the recent incidents of censorship and repression in Bangladesh must meet the tragic fate of “forced disappearance.” Its removal by the Dhaka University authorities without so much as a warning or a show-cause notice to the artists who installed it on the campus, and the wording used to justify such an action, only solidifies the message the artists were trying to push forth in the first place: that the freedom of thought and expression in the country are under attack.

The statue in question was that of Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore, with his mouth taped, holding a book that had a nail pierced through it. It was set up on Tuesday by leftist students of DU near the Raju Memorial Sculpture, apparently to highlight the current climate of censorship and shrinking space for free thinking and creativity in the country, and was supposed to be in place till the end of February. The statue's placement near the entrance to Ekushey Boi Mela – a day after the Bangla Academy filed an appeal challenging the High Court order to allow Adarsha Prokashoni a stall at the fair – could also be interpreted as a criticism of the increasingly rigid stance of the academy on censorship of books that challenge the dominant state-endorsed narrative.

We recognise that there is an issue of permission, and that the DU authorities cannot simply allow everyone to arbitrarily erect statues on the campus without oversight or say. However, we are completely taken aback by the authorities' explanation – that they demolished it as it represented a “degraded culture” and that the poet's sculpture was “distorted.” What exactly do the authorities mean by “distorted” or “degraded culture”? We can only assume that they take issue with protest art and demands for free speech, for that is clearly what the statue signified.

If anything is out of place in a university that is historically linked to progressive student politics and mass struggles for emancipation in the country, it is the DU authorities' heavy-handed handling of the matter. It goes without saying that a university campus is one where students should be free to explore and exchange ideas, engage in constructive debates and experiment with different modes of artistic expression. Unfortunately, over the years, we have seen our campuses being held hostage by ruling party cadres, with the administrations implicitly or explicitly furthering the interests of the ruling party and clamping down on dissent. The space for critical thought – which ought to be a crucial component of higher education – is sorely missing on our campuses, and indeed in our society at large.

The ban on Adarsha Prokashoni, as well as on Jannatun Nayeem Prity's book *Jonmo o Jonir Ithash* from the ongoing book fair, have already painted a bleak picture of artistic freedoms – or the lack thereof – in the country. We are alarmed to see that bodies such as the Bangla Academy and DU, which ought to be autonomous and custodians of free thought, are now playing increasingly authoritarian roles, arbitrarily shutting down critical discourses and artistic expressions. We urge the authorities to remember our foundational and constitutional commitments to work towards a society where, to quote Tagore, the mind is without fear, where knowledge is free, and where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way.

The world must take responsibility

Global action needed to help Turkey-Syria earthquake victims

The Turkey-Syria border and the nearby region, one of the most active seismic zones on the planet, is still reeling from the major earthquakes that took place on February 6. One of the earthquakes was the strongest in Turkey since 1939. In light of these events, we must question how much of the disaster was due to natural reasons and how much was influenced by humans, and consider what steps we must take now to recover from the disaster.

The total death toll in the two countries is close to 44,000 (as of 5 pm Bangladesh time, February 17), and millions are in desperate need of humanitarian assistance, with many survivors left homeless in near-freezing winter weather. In a welcome step, Turkey said it would demolish buildings that were severely damaged by the earthquake and launch a massive reconstruction operation. The Turkish government, even after admitting their own flaws, has encouraged people to return home “in order to start getting back to normal.” But it is easier said than done. The quake was so devastating because the Turkish government failed to act intently to enforce its building codes.

Experts say well-built structures should have been able to largely withstand the earthquakes despite their intensity. However, the Turkish government provided periodic “construction amnesties,” which are basically legal exemptions for the payment of a fee for structures built without the required safety certificates. These have been passed since the 1960s (with the latest in 2018). A geologist earlier this year said that passing such amnesties in a country located in an earthquake-prone zone amounts to a “crime.” This also sends a message to our own government about our own lack of earthquake preparedness. Scientists estimate that a seven-magnitude earthquake may kill up to 300,000 people in Dhaka alone. Many buildings in this city and other major cities, including Chattogram, were not built in accordance with the building code. Have we taken the appropriate precautions to mitigate the risk?

Another concerning issue that needs global attention is the relief that Syrians need. According to the United Nations, four million people needed assistance even before the earthquakes in those areas. Relief efforts have been impeded by a civil conflict that has fractured the country and divided regional and global powers. Despite the fact that a single border crossing from Turkey to Syria remained open following the earthquakes, the UN did not send supplies for several days due to “logistical challenges.” This is most unfortunate.

The global community must do better in serving the needs of the earthquake-struck people of Syria. If politics can be put aside, the reconstruction of this region is possible. We hope that the world will come together to serve these people in need, instead of pursuing their own agendas.

Poritosh Sarkar's Orwellian Experience

Berth in solitary confinement for alleged Facebook post



ON THE SHORES OF (IN)JUSTICE

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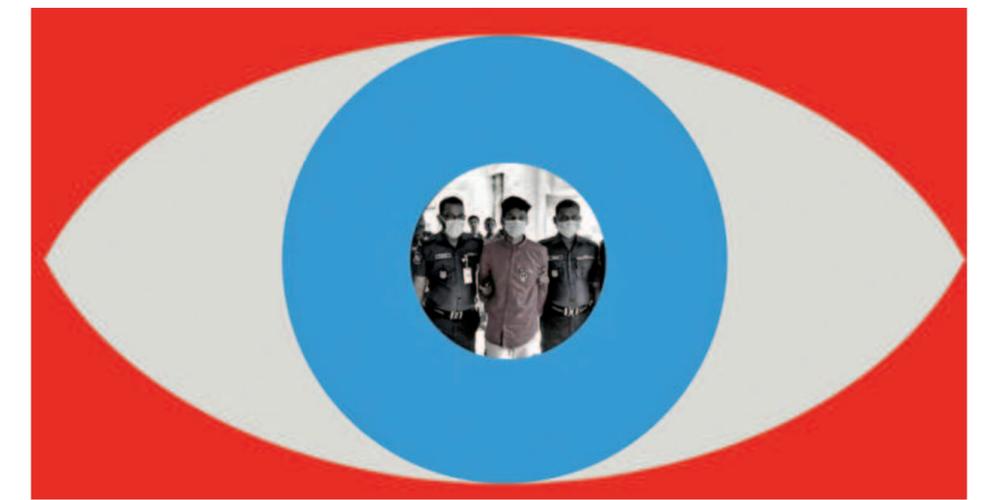
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The draconian Digital Security Act (DSA) has claimed its latest victim. On February 8, the Rangpur Cyber Tribunal sentenced Poritosh Sarkar, a Hindu teenager, to five years in jail for “hurting religious sentiments.” Poritosh was sentenced under Section 31(l) of the DSA. The section criminalises publication and posting of any material that “creates enmity, hatred or hostility among different classes or communities of the society, or destroys communal harmony.”

Poritosh was the first person to be convicted for the communal frenzy that led to the razing of 60 Hindu homes in Rangpur's Pirganj upazila on October 17, 2021. Most of the other accused in the case secured bail, while others are on the run. It appears Poritosh, a 10th grader at the time of the incident, belonging to an economically disadvantaged fishing family, is paying the price for an act that he firmly maintains he did not commit. Until the day of the verdict, no evidence was furnished to back up the state's claim that it was Poritosh who posted the message as his phone was destroyed beyond repair and the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) was unable to conduct forensic tests on it.

While Poritosh's sentencing raises concerns regarding the likely misapplication of the DSA, his treatment during detention has exposed the inhumane and brutal conditions that an accused may be subjected to under Bangladesh's criminal justice system. On February 5, speaking to *The Daily Star* at the Rangpur court premises, Poritosh informed that he had been kept in solitary confinement for eight whole months. The jail authorities claimed that the measure had been taken for Poritosh's own safety as the people who had set fire to the village were also in the same prison and were likely to harm him.

One may accept such flimsy reasoning in good faith; however, one is appalled by what Poritosh had further revealed, “I was not allowed to step out of my jail cell for eight months, not for a single day. There were no windows – just a vent at the top of the cell, which



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was blocked. I had no way of knowing if it was day or night from inside the cell. I counted the days by the meals being given to me.”

The extent of mental harm Poritosh endured is further revealed when he said, “Not a single person spoke to me during those days. I tried talking to the guards, but they would not respond.” For the first several months, he was given some books by the authorities, but even that was stopped. He said the desperate situation had driven him to consider dying by suicide. The extent of ill treatment and denial of his fundamental rights is further reinforced by the fact that his lawyers were unable to contact him when he was incarcerated.

The most egregious breach of law in Poritosh's case was when he was placed in solitary confinement. Poritosh was a detainee, not a convict, and there is no scope under Bangladesh's criminal code to place a detainee in solitary confinement. Furthermore, Section 74 of the Penal Code says that “when the imprisonment awarded shall exceed three months, the solitary confinement shall not exceed seven days in one month of the whole imprisonment awarded.”

to communicate at any time with an officer of the prison, and every prisoner so confined in a cell for more than 24 hours, whether as a punishment or otherwise, shall be visited at least once a day by the Medical Officer or Medical Subordinate.”

The harsh treatment that Poritosh was subjected to raises several important questions. Firstly, why did the accused have to be in jail when those arrested for arson and communal violence were granted bail, including the muezzin of the village mosque who made calls for people to gather, and Saikat Mandal and Ujjal Hossain who were instrumental in triggering the rumour? Secondly, if the jail authority's justification for keeping Poritosh safe is taken at face value, was solitary confinement (reserved for hardened criminals) the only choice? Could he not be sent to some other facility? Thirdly, Doesn't the claim that the detainee was likely to be harmed within the jail compound also expose their failure to ensure the prisoners' safety?

Fourthly, under what grounds was the accused denied access to his counsel, a right guaranteed under the constitution of the republic? And

Clearly, the state has a case to answer on all of the counts above. It is unfortunate that after nearly 52 years of independence, such blatant acts of state crime under the rubric of DSA committed against a teenager belonging to a minority community don't merit any discussion in the national parliament, nor are they condemned by the otherwise vocal champions of the spirit of Liberation War and the guardians of national conscience. The silence of the minority faith-based groups and the human rights and child rights organisations is also baffling, and so is the ineptness of the progressive liberals who occasionally care to issue statements or embark on fact-finding missions on matters of their priority.

Defending rights entail taking principled position against all forms of violations. Our collective failure to stand up for Poritosh Sarkar makes us culpable for the grave wrongs done to him.

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Future of the university, university of the future



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Driven by technological advancement and globalisation, higher education is undergoing significant transformation in the 21st century. This transformation rightly affects the traditional university system and the possibility of a new type of university that is better-suited for meeting the demands and challenges of the future. There are various elements, such as technology integration, pedagogical innovation, changing student demographics, and societal demands for education, that factor into this discussion. As the traditional approach to education becomes outdated, universities must adapt and innovate to meet the evolving needs of students and society.

Predictions range from the extinction of universities as we know them to a bright future for these institutions, with modifications to meet the demands of the modern era. The discussions and ideas around this topic are often forward-looking, striving to imagine and create a more innovative, effective, and accessible university system that prepares students for the future.

According to Clayton Christensen, a Harvard Business School professor, the traditional university model is facing a significant threat from online

education. He predicts that most college students will opt for online learning in the future, leading to the downfall of traditional universities. This is due to the fact that online education offers a more flexible and cost-effective option for students.

However, others see a different future for universities. Economist and futurist Thomas Frey sees universities as centres of innovation and creativity that will continue to thrive. He predicts that in the future, universities will focus more on experiential learning, offering hands-on experiences and opportunities for students to solve real-world problems. This shift will allow universities to stay relevant and provide students with the skills they need to succeed in the rapidly changing job market.

According to the author and futurist Richard Watson, the University of the Future will also focus on interdisciplinary education and research. He believes universities will cross traditional disciplinary boundaries to address complex global challenges, such as climate change and social inequality. This approach will require a new type of education, integrating knowledge from multiple fields.

The shift to digital education is one of the biggest changes that may impact the future of universities. With the rise of online learning and the increasing availability of educational resources, students will be able to access knowledge and skills from anywhere in the world. This will change how students learn and require universities to adapt their pedagogical approach to take full

Innovations such as blended learning, which combines traditional classroom instruction with online learning, and virtual and augmented reality technologies will play a significant role in the university of the future. These technologies will provide students with a more immersive and interactive learning experience and help bridge the gap between theory and practice.

advantage of digital technologies.

Another challenge facing universities is the changing role of the workforce in an increasingly automated society. As technology advances, many jobs that once required human touch will be replaced by machines. This will require universities to focus on developing the skills and knowledge that will help students succeed in future jobs.

To prepare for these changes, universities must be proactive in their approach to innovation. This will require a shift away from traditional ways of thinking, and a willingness to embrace new ideas and approaches. John Dewey, a renowned philosopher of education, once said, “Education is not preparation for life; education is life itself.” This sentiment underscores the importance of universities in fostering the lifelong learning skills essential for success in an ever-changing world.

Innovations such as blended learning, which combines traditional classroom instruction with online learning, and virtual and augmented reality technologies will play a significant role in the university of the future. These technologies will provide students with a more immersive and interactive learning experience and help bridge the gap between theory and practice.

By embracing technology, focusing on the skills and knowledge that will be most valuable in the future, and being proactive in their approach to innovation, universities can ensure their relevance in the years to come. Still, the future of the university and the university of the future is uncertain, but higher education must adapt to the changing needs of students and society.

It is clear that many factors, including technological advances, will shape the future of higher education and workforce needs. By embracing innovation and focusing on the skills and knowledge that will be most valuable in the coming days, universities can ensure their relevance and help to prepare students for success in an ever-changing world.