

THE ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE PROJECT

Counselling: An urgent need for university students

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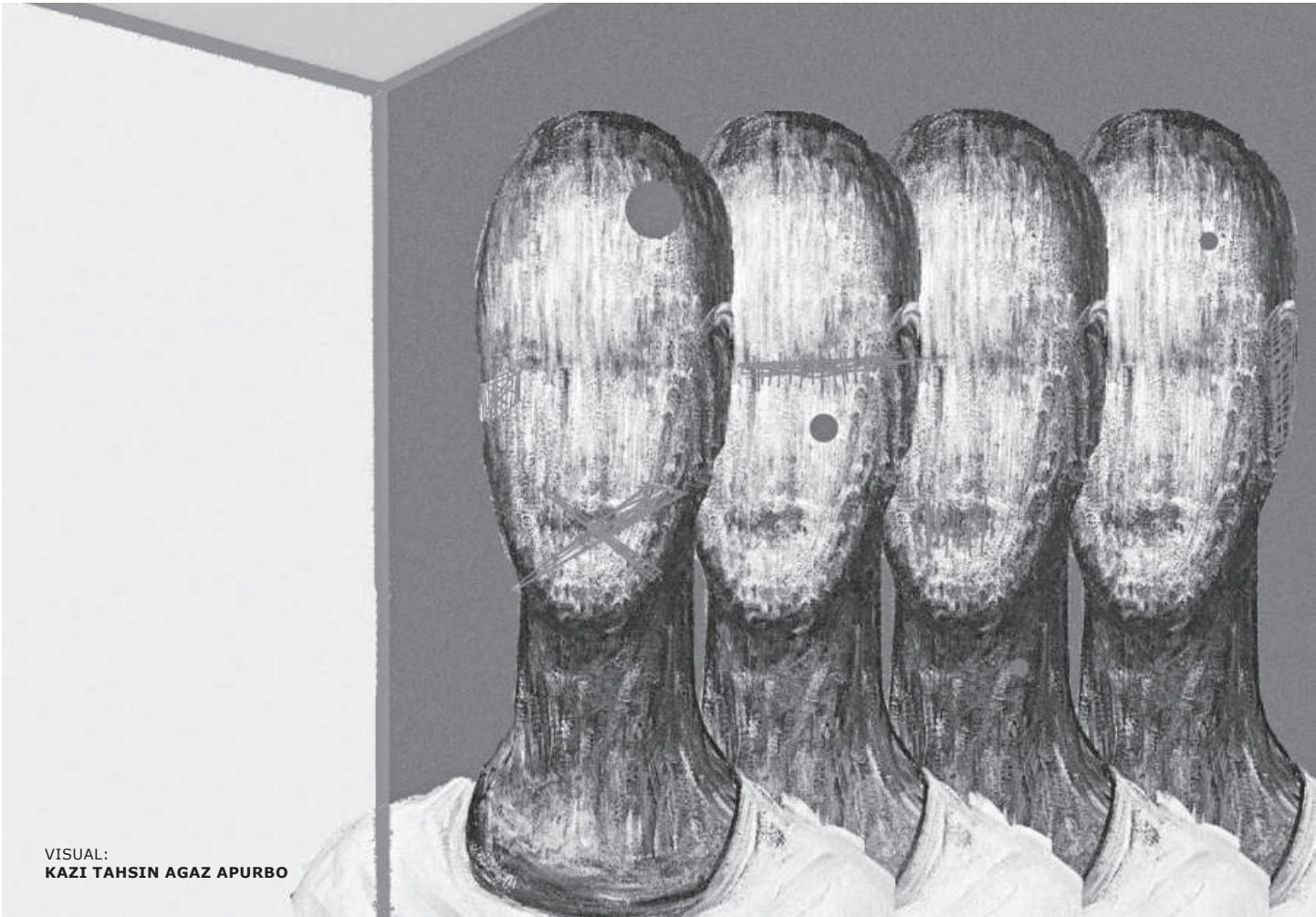
**SYED SAAD ANDALEEB and
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Open discussion on mental health is largely ignored in Bangladesh primarily because of the stigma surrounding it. Most people still view mental illness as a taboo; those who are suffering are asked to simply “get over it” or told “it’s all in their head.” As a result, the burden of mental health continues to increase in the country.

As per the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), suicides are on an alarming rise and clearly represents a sign of deteriorating mental health. To focus on this growing crisis in academia, a nationwide study was conducted on students from higher educational institutions – both public and private. Three-fourth of the students were found to be suffering from varying degrees of depression. Using a globally validated scale (Beck’s Inventory – BDI III), 21 percent were found to have severe depression. Another 25 percent were suffering from moderate to severe depression, while 26 percent were showing symptoms of mild to moderate depression.

Students reported their daily struggle with issues such as interpersonal relationships and financial concerns. A majority of the students also seem anxious and uncertain regarding the future and added responsibilities of adulthood. “I don’t think I am prepared for the world of increased responsibilities,” one student wrote. Other students were struggling to find the right purpose in life.

On the academic front, dissatisfaction with their academic programmes and faculty members as well as increased academic pressure were also reported. Many worried about their employment, being stuck in a programme lacking decent job prospects. While the fear of unemployment is common for students nearing graduation, students in



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their early years reported their transition to university life as intimidating or exhausting and “often contradictory to what I expected.” A number of students stated that the academic programme or career they were pursuing did not fit their personal interests or passion, but they had little choice in the matter.

The Covid pandemic exacerbated their situation. The limited scope for social interactions and on-campus activities was a frustrating experience for most students, leading to a life of loneliness and silent

suffering. Besides, the possibility of delayed graduation and increased unemployment prospects only added to their woes.

While depression takes a serious toll on students, the one aspect that needs our immediate attention is students’ suicidal inclinations, a condition said to be the second leading cause of death among the youth around the world, as per World Health Organization (WHO) reports. And major depression is often the factor behind suicidal attempts.

As per our study, at least 32 percent of the students reported that they had had suicidal thoughts at some point in their lives. But there’s more to be concerned about: 29 students (or about five percent) stated that they would have killed themselves if they could.

This leads us to suggest the importance of mental health counselling and having honest conversations with students about what they are experiencing.

Discussing mental health with family and near ones is not easy, especially in this part of

the world where mental illness is still viewed disparagingly. There are plenty of people who see mental illness and depression as an individual’s lacking; some probably even reject its existence – a primary reason why many feel discouraged to talk openly about their suffering and to seek help.

According to our study, 65 percent of the students felt a constant need to be able to discuss their mental health situation with someone. This is where educational institutions can play an important role. Establishing a counselling centre in the university and ensuring easy access is a desperate need of the hour. Some of the universities offer counselling sessions; however, one may argue about their functionality. A majority of the students who reported the need to have a healthy discussion regarding their mental health, in spite of being aware of these opportunities available in their respective campuses, stayed away from taking help. A trust gap was evident.

The way universities address students’ mental health needs serious attention. Professional counselling should be made available round the clock, and the staff and faculty members should be educated on this issue. Open classroom discussions also need to be considered to break the stigma, to make the students stay connected to each other, and help out their peers when needed, leading to the students’ overall well-being.

Mental health is vitally important but grossly ignored in the university space. The kind of indifference and apathy with which it is treated is appalling and poses a great threat to the future of our students. Thanks to social media, we learn about students’ mental health struggles, but surely this is not enough. The youth, our university students, are our future. Failure to recognise their mental health needs will diminish and even suffocate much of their potential. The sooner we realise this, the better. The sooner we act on it, even better.

This op-ed, the last of a four-part series, is the result of faculty-student collaboration designed to impact higher education in Bangladesh.

PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

India’s democracy in detention



The sentencing of Rahul Gandhi, the leader of the opposition Indian National Congress, to two years in prison, and his disqualification as a lawmaker in the Lok Sabha (the lower house), has sent shockwaves through India’s political system. Beyond reverberating through both houses of parliament, the episode has opened a new and sorry chapter in India’s political history, and cast serious doubt on the future of its democracy.

Gandhi was targeted over comments he made during a 2019 campaign speech in the southern Indian state of Karnataka. After discussing India’s economic travails, Gandhi named six “thieves” who had contributed to them: Nirav Modi, Mehul Choksi, Vijay Mallya, Lalit Modi, Anil Ambani, and Prime Minister Narendra Modi. “One small question,” Gandhi quipped, “how are the names of all these thieves ‘Modi, Modi, Modi’? Nirav Modi, Lalit Modi, Narendra Modi, and if you search a little more, many more Modis will emerge.”

It is obvious that Gandhi was calling out specific individuals for allegedly looting India’s economy, before delivering an offhand observation that three of them happen to share a surname. You might say that there was no need for Gandhi to comment on their name at all. But politicians, including many from the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), have said far worse in election speeches about all sorts of groups – from rival politicians to minorities – with no criminal case brought against them.

To claim, as BJP lawmaker Purnesh Modi did, that Gandhi’s quip defamed the entire “Modi community” as thieves is, at best, a stretch. And to rule, as a court in Surat in the western state of Gujarat did, that it constitutes criminal defamation meriting the maximum possible punishment is worse than suspicious.

The story gets murkier. The judge who first heard the complaint in 2019 mused aloud that it did not seem to have much substance. Rather than risk having his case dismissed, Purnesh Modi rushed off to the High Court to secure a stay of his own petition. Then, two years later, Gandhi made a speech in parliament (largely expunged from the records) accusing the prime minister of crony capitalism, and Modi scurried back to the High Court to get his stay lifted.

How convenient that the judge in Surat was replaced just before Modi’s arrival, and the new judge was willing not only to revive the case, but also to deliver a guilty verdict in under three weeks. And how convenient that the two-year sentence the judge imposed is the minimum required to disqualify a lawmaker from parliament for an

additional six years.

The BJP was all too eager to implement the verdict: within 24 hours, the Lok Sabha Secretariat declared that Gandhi was no longer an MP, and on the next working day, he received a letter instructing him to vacate his government bungalow. But Congress politicians smell a rat, with many suggesting that the verdict resulted not from due process but from a deliberate decision, taken at the highest levels, to silence him until well after the next general election.

Gandhi has, of course, filed an appeal, and if the court should grant him a stay of conviction, even the disqualification will have to be reversed. In that case, he could return to the fray, on the streets and in parliament, with his image burnished as the stalwart the government tried to silence. Buoyed by public sympathy and enjoying the enthusiastic support of an energised Congress, Gandhi could prove a much bigger thorn in the BJP’s side than he was just a few weeks ago.

Already, the judgment has galvanised India’s opposition. Regional parties that traditionally oppose Congress in their states – including the Aam Aadmi Party in Delhi, the All India Trinamool Congress in West Bengal, Samajwadi in Uttar Pradesh, Bharat Rashtra Samithi in Telangana, and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) in Kerala – have expressed support for Gandhi. They seem to have realised that they, too, could find themselves being picked off by a vengeful government. As the adage goes, “United we stand; divided we fall.”

A more united opposition would be bad news for the BJP, which holds 60 percent of seats in parliament, but won just 37 percent of the vote in the 2019 elections. If a majority of the 35 other parties in parliament decided to work together, rather than divide the vote, the BJP would find it much harder to win a majority in 2024.

Some cynics suggest that none of this scares the BJP, because it is playing its own elaborate game to push Gandhi to the forefront of the opposition for the next election. A “Modi versus Gandhi” race, the logic goes, is one the BJP is sure it can win. But building up a major rival is an extremely high-risk strategy, which a party that is comfortably ahead in the polls – as the BJP currently is – is unlikely to pursue. The Gandhi debacle looks, instead, like a political own goal.

But the stakes are far higher than one man, one party, or even one election. As we wait for the curtain to open on the next act in this political drama, Indians should be asking themselves whether democracy benefits when the principal leader of the main opposition party is jailed and denied a voice in parliament for anything less than truly criminal malfeasance? The answer for many – even those who do not like Gandhi or support Congress – is that it does not.

Safeguarding democracy requires ensuring a level playing field for all. What happens to Gandhi, thus, has important implications for India’s future. One can only hope that Indians’ commitment to representative government will prevail.

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Date: 11/04/2023

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e-Tenders are hereby invited in the National e-GP Portal (<http://www.eprocure.gov.bd>) for the Procurement of the Goods stated as below:

Sl. No.	Package No.	Name of Works	Tender ID No.	Method of Tender	Closing date & time
1	NBIDGPS-1/ G1.0059	Supplying of Furniture at 07 Nos. GPS of Sylhet District (Beanibazar 1 Nos. GPS /Golapgonj 1 Nos GPS / Jakigonj 3 Nos GPS / Kanaighat 2 Nos GPS) under NBIDGPS-1 Project.	784889	OTM	26.04.2023 14:00
2	NBIDGPS-1/ G1.0060	Supplying of Furniture at 14 Nos. GPS of Sylhet District (Biswanath 4 Nos. GPS/ DakshinSurma 8 Nos. GPS/ Fenchugonj 2 Nos. GPS) under NBIDGPS-1 Project.	789556	OTM	26.04.2023 14.00
3	NBIDGPS-1/ G1.0061	Supplying of Furniture at 07 Nos. GPS of JaintapurUpazila of Sylhet District under NBIDGPS-1 Project.	789750	OTM	26.04.2023 14.00
4	NBIDGPS-1/ G1.0062	Supplying of Furniture at 07 Nos. GPS of Sylhet District (Gowainghat 1 Nos. / SylhetSadar 6 Nos GPS) under NBIDGPS-1 Project.	789369	OTM	26.04.2023 14.00
5	NBIDGPS-1/ G1.0384	Supplying of Furniture at 19 Nos. GPS of Sylhet District (Sylhet Sadar 4 Nos. / Jaintapur 9 Nos/ Companigonj 3 nos/ Goainghat 3 nos GPS) under NBIDGPS-1 Project.	793752	OTM	26.04.2023 14.00
6	NBIDGPS-1/ G1.0385	Supplying of Furniture at 18 Nos. GPS of Sylhet District (Dakshin Surma 3 Nos. / Golapgonj 2 Nos/ Bianibazar 13 nos GPS) under NBIDGPS-1 Project.	793753	OTM	26.04.2023 14.00
7	NBIDGPS-1/ G1.0386	Supplying of Furniture at 16 Nos. GPS of Sylhet District (Balagonj 2 Nos. / Osmaninagar 5 Nos/ Bishawnath 9 nos GPS) under NBIDGPS-1 Project.	793755	OTM	26.04.2023 14.00
8	NBIDGPS-1/ G1.0387	Supplying of Furniture at 16 Nos. GPS of Sylhet District (Fenchugonj 4 Nos. / Kanaighat 12 Nos GPS) under NBIDGPS-1 Project.	793756	OTM	26.04.2023 14.00
9	NBIDGPS-1/ G1.0388	Supplying of Furniture at 12 Nos. GPS of Sylhet District (Jakigonj 12 Nos. GPS) under NBIDGPS-1 Project.	793754	OTM	26.04.2023 14.00

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The Tender Notice will be available on the website: www.dpe.gov.bd, www.dpe.sylhet.gov.bd

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