



People come to Dhaka from all parts of the country hoping to find a better life, but most of them find an uncaring, brutal city.

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

Dhaka’s ugly, ruthless side



NO STRINGS ATTACHED

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AASHA MEHREEN AMIN

It was a piece of news in late July that tugged at the heart and left a nagging unease long after the first read. Jewel Mia, a day labourer, and his wife Nasrin, a domestic worker, had hanged themselves from the ceiling fan of their tin-shed room in Rampura, Dhaka. They were 28 and 22, respectively – in other words, “in the prime of their youth.” Eight months ago, they had lost their first child. Nasrin had given birth to a stillborn baby despite the couple raising Tk 63,000 for the delivery in a private hospital in Kishoreganj. According to the news report, relatives said it was both the tragedy and the financial hardship that led them to take such an extreme decision.

They had a Tk 30,000 loan on their heads as well as Tk 3,500 unpaid rent for their one-room tin-shed home, not to mention daily expenses like food. Jewel’s job as a day labourer was irregular, and Nasrin could not go to work for the last few days as she had a fever. From the couple’s point of view, the future, clouded by their child’s death and riddled with unpaid bills and loans, looked so bleak that death seemed the only escape.

The story would resonate with many young couples starting out in this ruthless city, where what you earn is nowhere near what you spend, just for the bare minimum. It is a bizarre scenario where the cost of food, housing, and healthcare – basic needs for any human – keep soaring while incomes stay relatively the same.

On the day I read the news of Jewel Mia and Nasrin, 14 people had died of dengue in 24 hours. Diseases spread easily in a city that has 23,234 people inhabiting each square kilometre. For the working class, getting tested for a fever and flu-like symptoms hardly warrants a costly

visit to the doctor or huge fees for tests. But sometimes they get sicker and cannot afford not to go to work, so they are forced to seek healthcare. Yet, where will they go? The public hospitals are overcrowded and, for many, too far to drag the sick to. So they go to nearby private clinics and doctors’ chambers where a long list of expensive tests and medicine are prescribed. Thus, a huge chunk of their income just disappears into the doctors’ chambers, diagnostic centres and pharmacies. If hospitalisation and surgery are required, the costs are bound to soar to impossible heights. So, they sell assets or jewellery, and if they don’t have that, borrowing is the only answer. For others, even a serious illness may have to be waited out with practically no treatment apart from over-the-counter pills. Sometimes they live, sometimes they die: being fatalistic helps to justify perishing without any medical attention.

Perhaps this painful story struck a chord with me because of Minara, a highly efficient home worker. Two weeks ago, her husband and seven-year-old son had fallen sick and tested positive for dengue. There was no government hospital near her house, and the far-away ones would have turned them away, being overwhelmed with patients. The tests, cost of saline drips, and doctors’ fees reached well over Minara’s means and she could only cover them with help from her employers. But even then, she had to buy food on credit; the bill had already reached Tk 6,000, weeks before her next paycheck. I was shocked to know she and her family had been having just *daal*, potatoes, and rice for all the time her husband had been sick, as he could not drive the rickshaw and earn money for

daily groceries. I thought of how anxious those days must have been for her and her husband, agonising over how they would make ends meet in the following days. I wondered what would have happened if her husband and son hadn’t had follow-up tests done, or received treatment. What if her husband or her son had not survived? What desperate thoughts would have engulfed her?

I know I should not have such morbid thoughts, but I cannot help feeling defeated, realising that I don’t know even a fraction of the struggles that Minara and her husband face on a daily basis.

What I do know is that there is something obscenely absurd that Minara has to pay the same amount for tests that I do when I am sick. A recent study by the World Bank has found that out-of-pocket spending in Bangladesh accounts for 73.9 percent of health expenditure – the highest in South Asia. In the absence of a universal health insurance scheme, people in Minara’s income bracket just cannot afford proper healthcare, no matter how serious the illness. Essential surgeries, medication, and other forms of treatment are postponed or abandoned because of a lack of funds. Otherwise, borrowing from loan sharks who charge high interest rates is the only answer. There are no statistics on the informal debt burden of the poor – not just in the cities but in the villages too. Often, another loan is taken to pay off the first loan, and so the burden just gets bigger and bigger and the debtor becomes poorer and poorer.

People come to Dhaka from all parts of the country with the belief that they will earn enough to survive and feed their families. But soon enough, they become trapped in the vicious cycle of working and spending every penny on just living costs. For the majority of its residents, Dhaka is the most expensive city where even a shabby tin-shed room like Jewel and Nasrin’s costs Tk 3,500 a month. Dhaka is also an uncaring, brutal city where no one really cares if a young couple decides to hang themselves from the ceiling fan when they feel they have no way out.

DYSFUNCTIONAL COLONIAL ADMINISTRATION IN ACADEMIA

A call for leadership training



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SYED SAAD ANDALEEB

A recent report on the private banking sector in Bangladesh was replete with examples of strategic thinking, leadership, being in sync with the times (digital transformation, internet banking, digital transaction tools, etc), superior service, cost reduction, sustainability and environmental considerations, and customer inclusiveness using nano-deposits. Emphasis on capacity building of employees “for a better tomorrow,” welcoming international best practices, tuning services to customer needs, ensuring best-quality corporate governance (still a questionable quest), product innovation, streamlining operational efficiency, incentivising creativity, and a holistic view of banking (not just profits) are all remarkable developments in the sector promising larger societal impact (employment, economic growth, environment preservation, and so on).

Are the above innovations and management initiatives in the banking sector – many transferable to other areas – even remotely visible in the higher education sector? Sadly, the colonial imprint here is so stark, one wonders whether system lethargy, serving parochial interests (that often turn into raging turf battles), can ever be overcome and replaced by a vibrant and visionary educational edifice, powering development across the nation.

With a hierarchical and centralised system, and with decision-making concentrated in the hands of a select few, serving their own selfish interests, the “colonised” underlings and their experience-based thinking are routinely disregarded with detrimental consequences already evident in intellectual, social and moral decay permeating the various sectors. Such administrative systems also limit the flow of information and communication to maintain control, preserve the hierarchy, and ignore – even silence – imaginative voices to maintain the status quo.

In contrast, modern management systems are decentralised, empowering individuals and teams at various levels to achieve goals creatively while being more adaptive and responsive to changing circumstances and challenges. Such systems foster efficient and equitable governance, organisational development, participatory decision-making, and sustainable development, all directed at the welfare of various stakeholders.

Modern management systems also encourage transparency, open communication, and free flow of information while seeking to engage with stakeholders, including employees, customers and the public, to gather feedback and make informed decisions.

But modernisation efforts in higher education are passionately resisted. Consequently, it continues to remain indolent and unresponsive to changing times, operating in silos, lacking in transparency and accountability, and resisting innovative ideas and best practices to bring positive change. It also serves as a home for faculty and administration who, once employed, have lifetime job security despite their continuing lacklustre performance in developing the universities as knowledge centres where discovery, dissemination, and use of knowledge ought to advance knowledge frontiers in a collaborative spirit.

Most university teachers are not certified to teach; many universities are not accredited; teaching-learning is tethered sadly to lectures and rote learning where students engage in little analysis, synthesis or application; research contributions even by Asian standards are pathetic; people are placed in positions without requisite qualifications or credentials to lead their departments, faculties or the institutions (HoDs, deans, VC/PVC) and without being subject to performance assessment; and boards (and government functionaries for public universities) rule with impunity and little accountability. Sadly, the system continues to churn out graduates of poor quality who need to

undergo serious pre-service and in-service training to be able to serve other sectors competently. Even the regulatory bodies and the implementing ministry go scot-free without any serious assessment of whether and what impact they have really made!

So, where do we go from here? It is indeed possible to start at any of several different points, sequentially or simultaneously, to fulfil a deeper educational mission. One such point is the need to train academic leaders, especially on institutional efficacy. From a systems perspective, many administrators of the higher bodies responsible for taking the larger education agenda forward (UGC, education ministry, etc) are also ill-trained, some even ill-motivated.

Training is essential to developing competent and effective administrators to manage the diverse and complex responsibilities



ILLUSTRATION: EHSANUR RAZA RONNY

of running educational institutions. Adopting a vision and mission to align stakeholders, they must strive to benefit not just students, but also the larger stakeholder community. Because universities are embedded in society, the gifted administrator must find purpose and fuel passion within the university to ultimately serve society and its knowledge needs.

Seven modules of administrative training are essential to introduce the much-needed and refreshing change in academia.

Understanding the academic environment: Administrative training should provide a comprehensive understanding of the intricate academic environment. They must also be skilled at identifying and interacting with various stakeholders and the unique challenges that academic institutions face.

Academic policy and governance Administrators must be well-versed in academic policies and governance structures. Understanding accreditation requirements, curriculum development, and faculty retention and dismissal procedures is crucial for leading effectively.

Strategic planning and institutional development

Administrators must be trained to develop a university’s mission, values, and strategic goals and be able to align their efforts and adapt to a rapidly changing educational landscape.

Leadership and decision-making skills

Effective administrators must possess strong leadership skills. Training should focus on leadership styles, conflict resolution, and ethical decision-making. The effective administrator must also

lead by example, promoting a positive institutional culture, and serving as creative problem solvers.

Financial management and budgeting

Academic institutions are often tight on budgets that require adept financial management skills. Training should cover budgeting, resource allocation, and planning to ensure financial sustainability.

Human resources and personnel management

Administrators deal with a diverse workforce, including faculty, staff, and support personnel. They must be well-versed in recruitment practices, professional development, performance evaluation, motivating the staff, and allocating rewards and recognition. Nurturing an environment of collaboration with team building skills is also vital.

Data infrastructure and institutional research

Administrators need to be data-informed decision-makers. Training should equip them with skills in data (internal and external) analysis, and organisational assessment methods to measure and improve institutional effectiveness. Familiarity with and leading institutional research programmes is also crucial.

Other critical areas of training

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

question

7 Fire proof

1 Antlered animal

31 Plant

8 Scan, as data

6 Old poets

32 Writer Beattie

9 Coercion

11 Add on

33 Squelch

10 Used up

12 Deplete

35 Orlando team

16 Minotaur's slayer

13 Precipitous

38 Furious

20 Apart from

14 Be generous

39 City on the

21 Great Leap

15 Box office buy

40 Frisco player

Forward leader

17 Cub's cave

41 Home run, in slang

24 Writer Brown

18 Outback runner

42 Swiss watch parts

25 Liszt work

19 Lab worker

26 Improvise

27 Sevilla setting

22 Gym unit

28 Blackout thief

29 They have titles

23 Houston team

DOWN

1 Great painter

2 Punctual

3 Half a pint

4 Look for

5 With child

6 Tour carrier

30 Full range

34 Lake near Buffalo

36 Drink cubes

37 Compact, e.g.

24 Dance music

25 River of song

27 "Xanadu" band

30 Elevator operator's

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8-20

WEDNESDAY'S ANSWERS

R A T O N B U B B A

E D U C E U S U R Y

F O R T S T H R E E

N E T S E N D S

A B U T E C R U S E

R E P E C L I P S E

L A T T E E N T E R

O T H E L L O H E R

E A S E P E N S

H A H S G E A R

E P E E S A D O B E

R I A T A T R A I T

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