

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

Buet's problem is not with politics, but BCL

Just like every other public university

The High Court's Monday ruling overturning Buet's ban on student politics—imposed after a group of Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) men murdered second-year student Abrar Fahad in 2019—is neither surprising nor shocking. It is only right as far as the idea of students being politically conscious or engaged is concerned. There is no question about the significance of this exercise in a country that has enormously benefited from it during some of the most turbulent periods of its history. The challenge, however, is to ensure that student politics is attuned to the needs and interests of general students, and does not become a tool of exploitation for other interest groups.

But if a theoretical underpinning is what we needed, this ban (or the lifting thereof) wouldn't have been necessary in the first place. The elephant in the room is Chhatra League or, rather, the version of student politics that it has come to exemplify over the last 15 years. During this time, what we know as "student politics" has been basically "student politics by Chhatra League"; so complete has been its control over our public universities that the two became one and the same. Its leaders and cadres have committed and/or gotten away with all sorts of crimes including ragging, violence, murder, extortion, seat trade, tender manipulation, illegal admission, etc.—thus sucking the air out of not just general students but other student bodies as well.

So, any sense that Chhatra League, denied for over four years and finally reinstated through the court order, could be tempted to export the full gamut of its terror to Buet is not totally unjustified. However, the organisation's leadership has pledged to depart from that tradition and bring in a version of student politics that will be "modern, time-befitting, diverse, creative and based on knowledge and logic". We don't know what this means. Students, already having dread-filled premonitions, don't know what it means. Does even the BCL know, or believe in, it? The past is an unreliable indicator of what may transpire in the future.

Against this backdrop, the responsibility to resist the disruptive influences of BCL falls squarely on the Buet administration. The obligation that the administration has in terms of following the court order—with the VC citing contempt of court risks—does not extend to the BCL or its benefactors. It must be able to ensure that no one, however powerful or politically connected, can disturb its academic environment. At the same time, since this is a specialised institution with a long history of cultivating brilliant students, the administration should consider students' demand for appropriately raising their concerns about politics at the court.

We must adopt alternatives to plastic

Funding, guidance necessary for eco-friendly products

It is always refreshing to see small businesses and entrepreneurs finding ways to combat the biggest problems facing our society. According to a report by this daily, one such business initiative in Tangail has been producing single-use utensils from the sheaths of dried areca nut leaves. The inspiration for this endeavour came from Tamil Nadu. Just as in Bangladesh, single-use plastic and polystyrene items are banned in this Indian state, but unlike us, it has been able to convert to the alternative of leaf-based utensils.

In Bangladesh, the use of plastic products (especially of the disposable kind) seems only to be rising as consumerism intensifies. Even the High Court's 2020 directive to ban single-use plastic products in coastal areas as well as in hotels, motels, and restaurants across the country has fallen on deaf ears. Meanwhile, microplastics are infiltrating our bodies, burning of plastic waste is making our air toxic, and our rivers and canals are being choked by tons of polythene bags that are disposed there. Despite their devastating impacts, the authorities continue to be negligent in enforcing relevant directives to stop this culture, which is really worrisome.

In the aforementioned report, the young entrepreneur lamented that no one from the government or private sector has come forward to help expand his business. Isn't this exactly the kind of initiatives that we should be investing in to reduce the effects of pollution? Only a few days ago, the government allocated Tk 100 crore for the jute cellulose Sonali Bag project of scientist Mubarak Ahmed Khan. While this is admirable, the eco-friendly product would perhaps have already reached consumers if the project had been taken up by expert manufacturers, who could have helped the scientist turn it into a fully-fledged business.

Funding for small businesses producing eco-friendly products is crucial. Many of these endeavours also require the guidance of established private organisations so as to maximise their reach and impact. This will in turn encourage more businesses to see the overall benefits of producing environment-friendly products. So, we urge the government to take this matter seriously.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Incentive for online shopping

Eid-ul-Fitr, one of the major festivals in this country, is just days away. Naturally, people have started shopping for the occasion. However, like every year, this surge in shopping has resulted in unbearable traffic congestion and overcrowded shopping centres. This can be reduced if we move a significant part of this activity online, like many other countries which are shifting towards online marketplaces. However, doing so will require a more organised online marketplace, regulations to ensure quality of service and protection from fraudulence, and ease of online trading. The authorities should look into this.

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Growing rural-urban education divide is hurting our future

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MOHAMMAD TAREQUE and TASFIA TASNEEM AHMED

Education is the cornerstone upon which a nation's prosperity and progress are built. We can work on health, infrastructure and finance, but if we do not improve a country's human capital through education, no other initiatives will succeed. In the 2023 Secondary School Certificate (SSC) examination of 2023, 48 schools witnessed a zero percent pass rate. Of them, most schools are situated in rural areas. Even the zilla schools, which are well-reputed for their quality of education, are losing their glory day by day. Rural or non-urban students are no less geniuses, so what is impeding them to shine?

The Bangladesh Education Fact Sheets 2020 shows that the majority of children who do not acquire skills live in rural areas, with 81 percent of them not acquiring numeracy skills and 82 percent not acquiring reading skills. According to the report, children from rural areas make up 80 percent of dropouts and 74 percent of repeaters. Furthermore, 80 percent of children who do not complete primary or secondary education live in rural areas, exceeding the national average of the rural population.

The situation is bleak for tertiary education as well. Several tracer studies of graduates from universities, colleges, and polytechnics revealed that 66 percent of university students hail from metropolitan, urban and semi-urban areas, and only 34 percent belong to rural areas. As almost 70 percent of our schooling population comes from rural areas, this data clearly shows that most of the rural-origin students are not reaching university. The road to job-relevant technical and higher education remains mostly unreached to rural students. In a nutshell, the precious lives of rural students are fading in a barren desert of disparity.

The rural-urban education divide can perpetuate inequality and hinder the overall development of a country or region. Economic inequality is unavoidable in the early days of development, but this divide is negative to development. According to Bangladesh Education Statistics 2022, more than 76 percent of educational institutions are situated in rural areas. Therefore, if we do not ensure the quality of rural students and institutions, the dream to achieve holistic educational quality and inclusive development will remain unfulfilled.

Digging into the gap

To understand the drivers behind the

disparity in education, the issue of teacher quality must be considered first. High-quality teachers are essential for providing quality education to students, as research confirms. However, the shortage of qualified and trained teachers is a national problem. Where the percentage of total trained teachers is 100 percent in Bhutan, Philippines and Thailand, 97 percent in Nepal, 95 percent in Myanmar and 89 percent in India, it is only 74 percent in Bangladesh. Again, the quality is questionable. This situation is more complicated in rural areas. Attracting and retaining skilled educators in rural locations is difficult, affecting the quality of education.

The system of bringing educational institutions under MPO (monthly pay

where there is no enrolment at all. This development serves absolutely no purpose. We need to stop counting schools as an indicator of development and shift our focus towards ensuring high-quality education.

Unsupervised use of digital media and technology is harming rural students severely. It affects urban students nonetheless, but the ability and awareness of urban parents to supervise offsets the detrimental effects of poor use of technology, which is not the case for rural students. Due to this alarming situation, many students are distracted from their studies.

Girls are doing well, but early marriage is causing a high rate of dropout. In Bangladesh, 59 percent of women have been married before

curriculum.

The socioeconomic conditions in rural areas deepen this divide. It is difficult to focus on studies when you do not have food for the next meal at home. Poverty also impedes cognitive function. A feeling of uncertainty and anxiety stems from poverty, which does not let children from poor families thrive. Consequently, many students drop out of school in rural areas. Those who do not drop out are also affected. Many are involved in child labour. According to Bangladesh Education Fact Sheets 2020, the rates of child labour are higher in rural areas but fall below the national average in urban areas. Even if students are at school or not involved in child labour, they suffer due to a lack of access to



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order) is becoming a curse in disguise in many cases. It is burying the quest for excellence in rural or local schools that drove them to improve their performances. Many rural schools also suffer from teacher absenteeism. The politicisation of school committees and the absence of local ownership are worsening the situation. As a result, village factionalism has cropped up and school management has weakened, marring the quality of the academic environment.

Like many other sectors, we have made development an infrastructure game in the education sector. We are counting the number of primary schools. Nevertheless, we have to keep in mind that it is not about infrastructure or number of teachers or students. It is quality that matters. There are schools in many places

of the age of 18. Rural areas have a high prevalence of child marriage, which is linked to adverse outcomes including maternal and child mortality. It often leads to early childbearing, which negatively affects girls' education, as they are more likely to drop out of school. These girls have high potential and could make a great contribution to the workforce. But they are getting lost in the abyss, far from the light of education.

The rapid changes and experiments in school curricula pose another set of problems. Many sincere teachers developed teaching materials through their experience and hard work, which are now obsolete. Given the base quality difference, rural teachers will face more problems. They need extensive support and continuous training to get accustomed to the new

educational resources.

Despite the hope that the new curriculum, being practical-oriented and creative, will have a positive effect, there remains a possibility that it could exacerbate the existing divide. The curriculum's demand for educational materials and supplies may exceed the financial capabilities of numerous impoverished rural families, potentially leading to increased dropout rates or academic challenges among students.

In this situation, it is imperative that proper solutions be devised to reduce the rural-urban education inequality. Policymakers, educators, community leaders, and stakeholders need to collaborate earnestly in implementing solutions that bridge this gap and pave the way for a more inclusive future for generations to come.

Pathways to homes for street children



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Homeless children in Bangladesh often face starvation, violence, social isolation, drug abuse, and poor health. A first-hand survey on street children conducted by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), in collaboration with Unicef in 2022, found that over 34 lakh homeless children were without parental care. The study also found that 13.7 percent of street children in Bangladesh use drugs. Keeping children in the family before they become homeless is a critical element in preventing child homelessness. Providing institutional care is the next logical step; however, it is more expensive and does not provide some of the benefits that can be found in family settings.

We need to build a robust child welfare system to provide a range of services—from housing and healthcare to education—for at-risk and unsheltered children. A hotline number or an online reporting system must be put up and an agency should be there to receive and investigate public reporting of child abuse or neglect. Children often become victims of their own parents when they suffer from beatings, torture, and verbal and mental abuse. The

authorities must receive reports of any child facing hunger, abuse or violence. In Bangladesh, the women and children affairs ministry is most equipped to handle these reports and take swift actions to provide necessary services before the child is separated from the family.

Public sector employees must also be trained to conduct child protective investigation for non-emergency matters, such as the child's need for food, housing, education, etc., while law enforcement handles urgent issues such as crimes against the child. The efforts must be focused on facilitating children's stay with parents or a close relative to facilitate natural support, and the government must provide education and resources for the child to stay with the family. For vulnerable children, the authorities must take responsibility and parental rights should be terminated for abusive parents through proper court proceedings.

We must build a comprehensive dependency court system as the legal tool to oversee the child's overall needs and well-being. Two key personnel, guardian ad litem and attorney ad litem, are essential to

ensure the child's best interest in civil and legal matters. While the guardian ad litem should oversee the best interest of the child, the attorney ad litem will provide legal representation to protect those interests. The child must be involved in the decision-making process unless he or she is incapable of doing so.

Local child-placing or adoption agencies must be established to provide adoptive and post-adoptive services. Non-profit and community-based organisations have proven to work best for a child under care. They can arrange a range of adoption services such as safe homes, shelters, food, education, protection against violence, and even vocational training to assist the child to live independently when they become legal adults.

Stringent laws should be passed to prevent sexual exploitation and forced labour. The government must provide financial and technical assistance to the family willing to adopt a child as appropriate.

We must re-engineer our existing institutions to provide out-of-home foster care. For this, the government can collaborate with community-based adoption organisations that have the right skills and resources to provide necessary services to the children when their families or relatives cannot provide care. The US has numerous child-placing agencies to provide various adoption services for dependent children and youths across the nation. The foster care coordination provided by these agencies often continues till the age of 23, depending on the individual state,

upon meeting local criteria. These agencies show remarkable efficiency in providing physical, behavioural, and mental health services, as well as education and job training to prepare children to live independently. The agencies simultaneously coordinate with parents or relatives to facilitate reunions.

Bangladesh's juvenile justice system should be enhanced to deliver rehabilitative services for youths involved with crimes. Comprehensive rehabilitation programmes should be there to help children restart their lives in their community when released from prison. Most adolescents end up in jail due to behavioural, mental health or drug issues. The juvenile justice system must prioritise inmates' behavioural and mental health, addiction treatment, and provision of life-sustaining resources to help them rebuild their lives and reduce recidivism once they are out of incarceration.

Lastly, we must establish comprehensive social and financial programmes to eradicate child poverty. Children living in poverty often face violence, neglect and abandonment. The government must create a data-driven holistic demographic research system to prioritise underlying conditions that affect child health and well-being.

Every child deserves to achieve permanency. Authorities in Bangladesh must investigate child homelessness from a systematic lens and build a comprehensive data-driven welfare system to provide shelters and homes for street children.