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Allowing private universities to offer PhD programmes can help curb the brain drain by allowing homegrown PhDs to flourish.

## P for Private, P for PhD



**BLOWIN' IN THE WIND**

**Dr Shamsad Mortuza**  
 is professor of English at Dhaka University.

**SHAMSAD MORTUZA**

The University Grants Commission (UGC) has finally decided to empower private universities for PhD supervision and conferment. The decision, according to a report in this daily, came after “much debate and discussion.” The Association of Private Universities of Bangladesh (APUB) has long demanded that institutions that have met certain criteria be allowed to offer PhD degrees. Only 56 public universities (according to the UGC), regardless of their research infrastructure or teaching strength, are eligible for this privilege.

Private universities began their journey in the 1990s, primarily as undergraduate teaching institutions, following the US model of four-year baccalaureate degrees. Soon, the universities felt the demand for graduate programmes in a country that perceives master's education as an automatic continuation of an undergraduate degree and a terminal degree. In phases, private universities began to apply for master's degrees for selected academic programmes. The fact that private universities are demanding approval for doctoral degrees is a sign of maturity. Then again, the reluctance to give that opportunity to a higher education sector that is operating within the law of the land is a sign that there is still public scepticism about the ability, accountability, and transparency of the private system.

As someone who has worked in both sectors, I find the proposed move not only timely, but also promising for our country's academic and professional landscape. It will harness the wealth of experience of retired public university professors and academics returning from abroad. At present, after retiring from a public university, a professor can no longer be the primary supervisor of a PhD candidate, irrespective of their international exposure, invaluable expertise, and professional networks. Many of them become full-time faculty members in the private sector. These seasoned faculty members can provide research students with exceptional mentorship, diverse perspectives, and cutting-edge knowledge that can enrich the academic environment in the country. Furthermore, the flexibility of private universities can encourage these experts to continue contributing to academia without the constraints of the public system.

However, it is essential to recognise that not all of the 100-plus private universities have the necessary infrastructure to become research-intensive institutions. Especially in the STEM sector, researchers often need access to labs and government

resources. Private university researchers often lack access to some UGC funding provisions, including overseas conferences and research grants. Government policies also guide foreign donors and agencies, who prefer to collaborate with public institutions. Most private universities have not been able to establish a research culture due to systemic constraints.

The planned decision mentions that the UGC would consider the research strength and reputation of a private university before giving it the final nod. In this regard, I think a two-tier system similar to the Carnegie Classification in the US can be useful. This model would distinguish between basic teaching universities and advanced research universities, ensuring that only those with adequate facilities and resources undertake the rigorous demands of PhD programmes.

The benefits of this decision are manifold. First, it can help curb the brain drain by allowing homegrown PhDs to flourish. Many scholars who would have pursued their doctoral studies abroad can now conduct their research while staying close to their families. Moreover, research students can continue their teaching roles, similar to the teaching assistantship (TA) or research assistantship (RA) they would have held abroad, thereby gaining valuable experience and contributing to the educational ecosystem. Universities can consider reducing their teaching load in order to facilitate their research, which will ultimately help the institutions' ranking and accreditation bids.

Furthermore, this move can lead to significant economic benefits. By pursuing their PhDs locally, students can save significant amounts of foreign currency that they would otherwise spend on overseas education. The prospect of attracting foreign students to our PhD programmes is another advantage. By establishing high-quality PhD programmes, we can attract international students, enhance our global academic reputation, and foster cross-cultural academic exchanges. The competition for a PhD provision will encourage the local institutions to improve their international network and institutional infrastructure.

Until now, the top 10 private universities have focused on hiring faculty members with foreign degrees for understandable reasons. These include international exposure, quality of education and research, networking opportunities, and a global perspective. They can also enhance the institution's reputation by signalling commitment to excellence and international collaboration. However, the requirement for a local degree may deter some of our local scholars from choosing

the difficult path of TOEFL/IELTS, GRE/GMAT, statement of purpose, and Taship/RAship while applying overseas.

As the custodian of both the public and private systems, UGC must ensure academic rigours as well as support local talent, creating a dynamic and enriching academic environment that benefits students, researchers, and the institution as a whole. Not everyone can afford to go abroad. Even if they do, the return on investment (ROI) for a PhD abroad has to be appealing. Suppose a PhD in an OECD country requires an investment of \$30,000-\$150,000 over three to seven years. We cannot expect a graduate earning a monthly salary of less than Tk 1 lakh to realise their investment. This practical reason accounts for a significant portion of the brain drain. Our neighbours in India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka have therefore created a robust homegrown PhD system. They did so by making a PhD a prerequisite for becoming a university lecturer. The decision to permit the private system will produce enough research graduates to make such a system viable.

However, there are some potential risks. Our local researchers' lack of overseas exposure and limited access to cutting-edge resources and technologies could impede the quality of their research output. A robust research culture is needed. The creation of a network of PhD degree-granting entities, similar to the M25 Consortium in the UK, can facilitate resource-sharing and collaborative research. The UGC can develop a monitoring system to guarantee the quality of local research.

The commercial interests of some private universities present another significant challenge. There is fear that some dodgy ones might start selling certificates. Unfortunately, many public universities are equally guilty. The demand for PhD is created by many officials, civil and military bureaucrats, and other non-academics who pursue PhDs to decorate their CVs or for their post-retirement career prospects. This can be checked by tightening the supervision and examination. Dhaka University has made it mandatory for international examiners to provide external oversight and uphold rigorous academic standards. At the initial stage, the UGC can provide a co-supervisor from a public or international university to help the private university ease into the system during the pilot stage. The UGC's role in this transition will be pivotal. By approving the basic structure and curriculum of PhD programmes, it can ensure consistency and quality across institutions. This regulatory oversight is crucial to maintaining high academic standards and fostering an environment conducive to advanced research.

Granting private universities the authority to supervise PhD candidates and confer doctoral degrees is a progressive step that holds immense potential for our academic landscape. With appropriate regulatory frameworks and a focus on quality, this decision can transform doctoral education in Bangladesh, retaining talent, fostering innovation, and enhancing our global academic standing.

## COW RUNNING AMOK IN A MARKET

# It's not a 'moo' point

OF MAGIC & MADNESS



**Badiuzzaman Bay**  
 is assistant editor at The Daily Star.  
 He can be reached at badiuzzaman.bd@gmail.com.

**BADIUZZAMAN BAY**

Every year, Eid-ul-Azha brings with it viral pictures or videos of human-cattle interactions that amuse some and bemuse others, but overall help to build anticipation for the more solemn occasion of cattle sacrifice. This year is no different. A video clip currently trending online features a runaway cow that—let's say for now—decided to go shopping. The clip begins with what appears to be an overturned auto-rickshaw in front of a shopping mall in Dhaka. The cow, visibly agitated, with its handlers trying to hold onto its reins, leaves them behind to chase a few onlookers before making a dash for the mall entrance. It gallops up the stairs. Once in, it runs past a row of shops, slips into one in the far corner,

in Bangladesh as people continue to encroach upon their habitats and animals, in turn, increasingly find themselves in human-dominated areas, leading to such bizarre encounters. The cows—rounded up for human consumption, but often treated most inhumanely—thus serve as a metaphor for all the caged, abused, poached or displaced animals out there. Seen from their perspective, the story of animals invading human spaces (like shopping malls) is equally a story of humans invading natural spaces (like hills and forests). We only see one side of the story because it helps us sleep at night, secure in our own sense of self-worth.

But to call what's happening on the other side

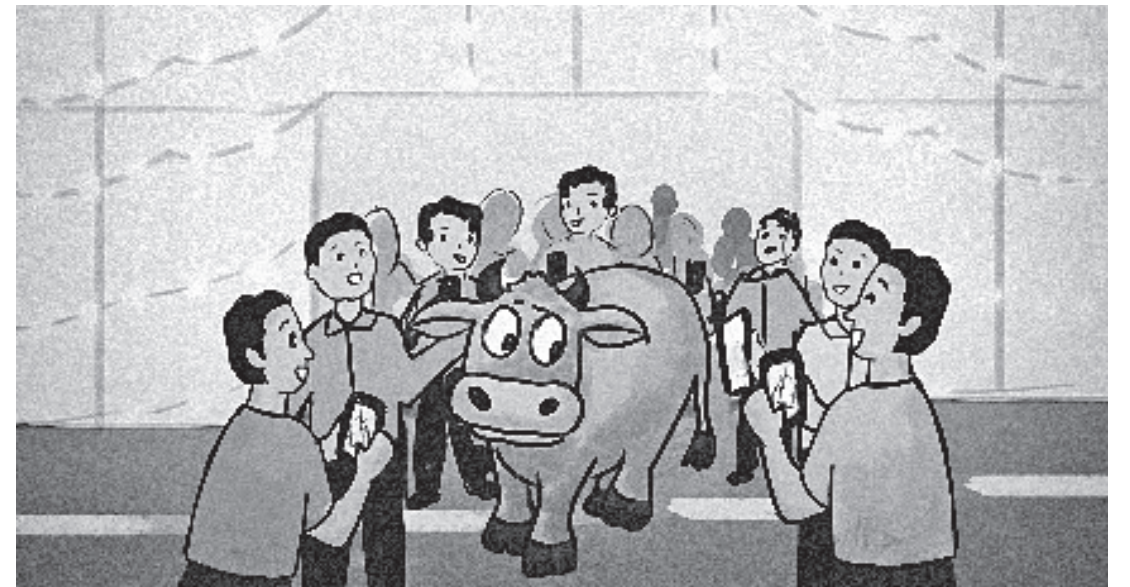


ILLUSTRATION: SHAIKH SULTANA JAHAN BADHON

and briefly hides there, much to the bewilderment of the crowd.

I must admit that I, like most people commenting on the video, was amused initially. After all, the short video is full of chaotic potential, with a side dish of humour served with a fitting music. Although sacrificial cows breaking loose on their way from *haats* or lunging at perceived attackers is not an uncommon sight, it still prompts an amused reaction during every Eid-ul-Azha. Netizens, as always, had some funny ideas about why the runaway cow behaved the way it did in front of a shopping mall. Stuff of another *Gabhi Brittanto*, one quipped.

**While we share and laugh at these viral videos of 'cute chaos' caused by cows on our streets, they also bring to light a stark reality: the fast-vanishing space for animals in Bangladesh as people continue to encroach upon their habitats and animals, in turn, increasingly find themselves in human-dominated areas, leading to such bizarre encounters.**

Interestingly, the *gabhi* (cow) in question seemed to calm down a bit toward the end, inside the shop, where it found a caring pair of hands stroking its head. Its earlier behaviour can be attributed to fear or irritation. The way sacrificial cattle are often hauled off to their eventual destinations, hemmed in by all sorts of people and vehicles, each louder than the other, can be overwhelming for the shackled animals. The poor cow probably had a similar experience, and its instinctive response was to try to flee to a safer location, away from the chaos, confusion, and beatings.

But there are bigger things at work here. While we share and laugh at these viral videos of “cute chaos” caused by cows on our streets, they also bring to light a stark reality: the fast-vanishing space for animals

a “human animal conflict” would be like, for lack of a better example, calling what's happening in Gaza an “Israel-Palestine war”—so one-sided has this so-called conflict been. From Cox's Bazar to the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) to Sylhet to Gazipur to Mymensingh to the Sundarbans, our invasion of the natural spaces has been relentless and merciless. And the animals have only been reacting to it so far, and reacting rather unconvincingly.

It is no wonder, then, that the rate of deforestation in Bangladesh, according to an article by this daily, has been almost double the global average. In Cox's Bazar, for example, forests are rapidly disappearing, replaced by various projects and settlements. Often, these forests or forestlands, which serve as the natural habitats of numerous animals including critically endangered species, are being ravaged by government agencies themselves—the very institutions that are supposed to protect them—for development or commercial purposes.

The saga of CHT districts is equally depressing. Every other month, you come across reports of how the region, with its rolling hills and rich forests, is being degraded or stripped bare to make way for various infrastructure and commercial projects without any environmental consideration. This rampant development is literally a death sentence for the natural habitats of wildlife. Also at risk is the integrity of Indigenous communities who have lived in harmony with nature for centuries. Other forest and hilly areas in the country that historically served as natural habitats for animals are more or less going through the same ordeals. When a natural space is degraded like this, it is not just the species that face the risks of displacement. Its ecological balance, too, is disrupted.

Animals are not safe from uncontrolled human expansion in cities and other urban landscapes either, as parks and open spaces are being consumed by concrete structures. The occasional sighting of a monkey, bird or squirrel is a painful reminder of their shrinking habitats. Even the abject negligence with which animals living closer to humans, like street dogs and cats, are treated speaks of the ever-widening gap between the human and animal populations.

So, yes, when a cow wanders into a shopping mall where you think it has no business to be, it is not a moot or—as Joey from the TV show *Friends* would call it—“moo” point. It is the point: a clear, decisive statement on the need to end human cruelties and excesses in relation to our animal neighbours.

## CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**  
 1 Bring together  
 6 Istanbul natives  
 11 Network points  
 12 “Looks — everything”  
 13 Campaign leader  
 15 Immigrant's subj.  
 16 Solo of “Star Wars”  
 17 Kickoff aid  
 18 Sweet course  
 20 Star pitcher  
 21 Had supper  
 22 Thin board

- 23 Wise saying  
 26 Grating sounds  
 27 Swear  
 28 Actor Affleck  
 29 Gym unit  
 30 Determined  
 34 Dedicated verse  
 35 Ill. neighbor  
 36 Actor Mahershala  
 37 False friend  
 40 Top story  
 41 Fragment  
 42 Lab work  
 43 Civil wrongs

- DOWN**  
 1 Hungry, probably  
 2 Like Thor and Odin  
 3 Pop stars  
 4 Wallet bill  
 5 Art lover  
 6 Jeer at  
 7 Coffee dispenser  
 8 Tourists' cars  
 9 Patella  
 10 City ways  
 14 Quite uncommon  
 19 Hangs low  
 22 Beach cove

- 23 Circus sta  
 24 Time of delivery, perhaps  
 25 Facets  
 26 Adjust to new conditions  
 28 Crooked  
 30 Brake shapes  
 31 Cavalry weapon  
 32 Put in office  
 33 Grows weary  
 38 Young fox  
 39 Life story, for short



## YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS



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