

Pension worries must be resolved

Teachers’ strike shows the importance of dialogue and clarity

In a concerning development, Bangladesh’s public universities have come to a grinding halt. Classrooms are locked, exams are postponed, and administrative work has stalled, as teachers of 35 public universities have gone on an indefinite strike demanding their exemption from the new Prottoy Universal Pension Scheme. Teachers argue that the new scheme—which will be applicable for recruits joining on or after July 1 in any autonomous, self-governing, nationalised, statutory, or such organisations and their subordinate institutions—is discriminatory, offering significantly lower benefits compared to the existing system for government employees. The government, on the other hand, defends Prottoy as a step towards a uniform and sustainable pension system for all public sector employees. They claim the scheme, in the long run, will offer higher monthly payouts than the existing plan.

While currently no money is deducted from teachers’ salary, under Prottoy, 10 percent of the monthly basic salary of an employee, up to Tk 5,000, will be deducted for the pension fund, and the organisation will contribute a matching amount to the fund. Meanwhile, there will be no one-time gratuity for the retiring employee, but instead a significantly higher monthly installment will be payable to the retired individual for their lifetime. In case of death, however, dependents can claim the pension for 15 years from when the installment starts, rather than for a lifetime as per the current scheme. And there will no longer be a five percent annual increment on the pension amount.

While there can be no denying the budgetary burden of pension payments, and the need for a modernised, universal and sustainable pension system, the question raised by the academics remains—if the system is so good, why have bureaucrats, judiciary and military personnel been exempted from it? While the government says they will institute a similar scheme for bureaucrats, there are anxieties among teachers—not without reason—about possible discrimination in benefits in the absence of any clarity on the matter. Why not make the details of the upcoming scheme for bureaucrats, Shebok, public as well? Why institute such a top-down approach to implementation without, at the very least, engaging academics and other Prottoy pensioners in a meaningful dialogue?

The Bangladesh University Teachers Samity Federation has been organising various programmes since the new scheme’s announcement on March 13, including half-day work abstention on June 4, and work abstention for three consecutive days last week. We are at a loss to understand why, during this time, no attempt was made to engage the aggrieved parties in a consultation. Whatever the merits or demerits of Prottoy may be, it is obvious that a consensus cannot be reached without constructive and transparent discussions among the relevant stakeholders as well as an impartial assessment of the benefits of such a scheme.

Having said that, we cannot condone an indefinite strike on education. For the sake of the students, we need to find a solution fast, which requires open dialogue and compromise, not egoistic tussles. The government needs to address the concerns of discrimination and provide a transparent review of the scheme’s calculations. Moving forward, we also need to initiate a broader discussion about how “universal” the scheme really is, including for those outside the purview of public institutions.

Feasibility studies a must for BR projects

Bangladesh Railway needs to stop wasting public money

That Bangladesh Railway (BR) has been a loss-incurring entity for almost a decade is not news. Yet, it is difficult not to get flabbergasted by BR projects that not only squandered public money during the implementation phase, but continues to be a burden for taxpayers. The lone passenger train operating on the Rajshahi-Rajbari-Gopalganj route, which railway authorities extended to bring Tungipara, the birthplace of the father of the nation, under the railway network is one such example.

According to a report in this daily, the government approved this project in 2010 to revive a 75-kilometre old, inoperative line from Kalukhali of Rajbari to Bhatipara Ghat of Gopalganj and build a 32 kilometre line from Kashiani to Gopalganj to connect Tungipara. The project was completed in 2018, five years behind schedule and with a huge cost overrun. Till date, it has failed to generate enough return on investment because only one train runs on the Tk 2,011 crore line.

Additionally, there was no monitoring or quality checks of the material used by the contractors, essentially making the line risky. Now four stations and several staff quarters built along the route remain unused and are falling into decay. A top railway official attributed the underutilisation to the shortage of manpower, locomotives and carriages, but failed to acknowledge the issue of low traffic demand on that route.

We have repeatedly called attention to irregularities, inefficiency and poor performance of the railway authorities in implementing viable and profitable projects, and ensuring proper maintenance of its physical assets and infrastructure. But no one has ever been held accountable for BR’s continuous wastage of public funds. Around the world, railway, a mode of transport with a low carbon footprint, is witnessing a comeback. If we want to follow on that track, we must ensure pragmatic and judicious leadership at the BR.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Egyptian president removed

On this day in 2013, following massive demonstrations against his rule, Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi was removed from office by a military action.



Unbridled corruption and a minister’s reckless comment

A CLOSER LOOK

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As one of the fastest growing economies in Asia, Bangladesh is currently the 35th largest economy in the world (as of 2022) and aspires to clinch the 25th spot by 2035—earning the apt label of “the emerging Asian Tiger.” Grand ambitions, grander dreams and the grandest rhetoric by our politicians and policymakers make the country look all set to conquer the future.

Unfortunately, the reality is, Bangladesh is mired in multiple economic and sociopolitical challenges that would make achieving these ambitious targets considerably difficult. With a persistent high inflation (9.89 percent in May 2024), rising poverty and people’s shrinking purchasing power, uncontrollable foreign exchange volatility that we are having to cushion with foreign loans, non-performing loans (NPLs) reaching an all-time high of Tk 182,295 crore, and the economy struggling to grow with the IMF repeatedly slashing growth projections, our economic hurdles ahead look overwhelming.

However, the single biggest factor that creates the major roadblock to our growth aspirations is the unbridled corruption that has permeated every layer of every organ of the governance system, crippling the nation and creating a hollow at the heart of our economy. A study titled, “The state of the business environment in Bangladesh,” conducted by the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) and World Economic Forum (WEF), identified corruption as the most problematic factor in doing business in Bangladesh in 2023, with 67.6 percent of respondents pointing to high levels of corruption. In the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) 2023 by Transparency International, Bangladesh secured the 10th lowest score at 24 out of 100. In South Asia, Bangladesh holds the second lowest position, just above Afghanistan. This is the lowest score for the country since 2012.

Recent reports on former law enforcement officials and revenue collectors being nose deep in various forms of corruption and criminal activities, including land grabbing and insider trading, as well as a sitting MP being involved in smuggling, which got him killed in a foreign country, are disturbing and portrays a picture of a

society that is rotting from the inside.

But what is more alarming is the specious—almost defensive—narratives by the powers that be that have emerged following these revelations. The Bangladesh Police Service Association (BPSA), for instance, has come down heavily on the media in the aftermath of the investigative reports into the misdeeds and corruption of former and current police high-ups, terming these reports



VISUAL: SHAIKH SULTANA JAHAN BADHON

as “partial,” “ill-motivated,” and “exaggerated”—a smear campaign—and warning them to refrain from publishing such reports going forward. Meanwhile, a high-profile minister of the current regime has also made a bizarre comment about the latest wave of corruption revelations.

While the BPSA statement is reckless and paints a picture of a public institution that is trying to cover up the criminal activities of its members, rather than taking a rectification approach, the comment by the minister comes off as blatantly apologetic for the corrupt and corruption as a practice.

all manner of people according to law, without fear of favour, affection or ill-will.” While it is a positive sign that the minister has accepted that corruption is pervasive among his own political network and within his own ministry, one cannot help but ask: what has he done so far to prevent the spread of corruption among those he knows are corrupt, and how many have been held accountable for their actions?

The second point was perhaps a jab at the opposition parties who are blaming the disintegration of the integrity of the governance apparatus, resulting in rampant corruption among bureaucrats. However, just

not only their own morals, but also the moral authority of the government. No wonder we have reached a point where bureaucrats and politicians alike are engaged in heavy corruption, plundering the hard-earned money of the people, with almost no consequences.

The minister owes the people an explanation of his remarks and an apology at the very least. And the ruling regime should focus less on talking and more on actions, to create a conducive environment that truly eliminates corruption from our governance system and supports our growth aspirations.

Ensure equity for girls in education

EDUCATING EDUCATION

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The movie *An Education* is the story of a young ordinary girl who goes through life with her parents’ aspirations becoming her own. Her parents expect her to attend the University of Oxford and she is groomed accordingly. Along the way she meets a man who soon becomes, to her parents, a prospective husband for their daughter. Surprised by her parents’ shift in focus from Oxford to marriage, she asks, “Why go through all those years of studying, all those years paying for an education, when she could have just dressed up and attended parties, and dances, in her efforts to land a marriage.” Many women in real life too deserve the answer to this question.

In many countries around the world, girls are not given access to the same educational opportunities as boys. So, activists and researchers call for increased investments in girls’ education. Bangladesh has been no exception to this—we’ve achieved some milestones, mostly in terms of statistics. We’ve done well, but the question remains whether we’ve done enough.

We’ve battled against the problem of early marriage and perhaps eliminated dowry to some extent. But has there been any change in our

collective mentality towards girls’ education and their aspirations? No, not really—at least not inclusively. Yes, there was a time when girls hardly got to finish their HSC exams, but now many girls “get to” go to universities. The “get to” part remains the problem, since girls’ education still, in many cases, remains dependent on the family’s decision, and not the girls’ own. It may be difficult to agree with this if one only considers women from middle-income and higher-income families. There are many inspiring and empowered women in Dhaka and among these trailblazing women, it’s rare and difficult to find a woman from a lower socio-economic background or a woman who lives in a remote village of Bangladesh. There is a huge divide here, which becomes visible when we open our eyes to the whole picture and not only to selective parts of it.

To this day, it’s not surprising to hear of a girl suddenly having to drop out of college or university because it’s time to “marry her off.” It comes down to two things really—marriage as a substitute to education and, of course, the deeply entrenched patriarchy in our society. This is why objectifying women is still somewhat of a norm around us, and why women are always

the ones mostly judged by their looks.

The marriage market in Bangladesh is a breeding ground for objectification of women. How a woman looks, how she walks—these are often given the same importance, sometimes even more, as how educated a woman is. Sadly, this is more of a norm than an exception and so, existing narratives are not devoid of such objectification.

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These problematic narratives spill over to the lives of girls everywhere and how a girl sees herself growing up. Women needing make-up, women wearing high-heels, the expensive jewellery women wear—are these by choice? Maybe so, but can it be denied that these practices have patriarchal roots too? Does it matter? Arguably, yes.

You see, these societal “norms” shape the image of women in the society both in the eyes of men and women, and influence the education women are “allowed” to have. If it were the case that most of these girls who

are married off get to continue their education after marriage, then that would have been a better consequence than them having to give up their education. But we don’t know whether this is mostly the case, and even if it is, the lack of the freedom of choice for women remains.

Then there’s the fact that it’s often forgotten that women are humans, not superwomen. Having to juggle all the responsibilities just because they’re women is, undoubtedly, unfair. In reality, there will always be some things women do better than men, and vice versa. The point is that the attitude towards what constitutes women’s responsibilities needs to change. This is where education has a strong role to play in breaking the stereotypes born from patriarchy.

To fight patriarchy, we need to educate our boys as much as we need to educate our girls. First, we need to fight for equity in choice. If a woman chooses to not have a career, that is her success and society should see it that way too because success lies in the happiness that comes from choosing one’s own path.

A good education matters. Only with a proper education does an educated human-being, girl or boy, become an asset to the society. I don’t have to be a feminist to argue for girls’ right to education. I just have to be a human who believes education to be a right. When we view education as not just a means to earning a living but having a wider purpose, as Rabindranath says, of awakening the mind and soul—it’s easier to understand why everyone, every girl and boy, has a right to the magic of awakening their souls.