

State enterprises must answer for losses

Projected fivefold rise in losses demands proper response

We are alarmed to learn of a projection that state-owned enterprises could end up counting nearly a fivefold increase in losses in FY2024-25 compared to the previous year, as their expenses are likely to far exceed their earnings. This is according to a monitoring cell of the Finance Division that conducted a budgetary analysis of 50 enterprises across seven sectors. Their total loss for FY2025 could be Tk 28,047.97 crore—up from the Tk 5,989.87 crore loss incurred in FY2024—indicating a deeply concerning trend.

The projection, made by a government body no less, is yet another indictment of the widespread corruption and mismanagement besieging government institutions, including state-owned enterprises. Not too long ago, we had a similar indictment when the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General (OCAG) revealed massive financial irregularities in many of these institutions. Their spiralling losses, despite many enjoying monopolistic advantages as service providers, raise questions not only about how they would have fared in a competitive market environment, but also regarding the government's austerity measures, which should have stemmed the tide of rising expenses in them. Evidently, things are as bad as depicted in media reports, and they are now set to get worse.

This is not to say that all government enterprises are underperforming. In fact, according to the monitoring cell, most are making a profit. But the overall picture is marred by the staggering losses of 13 of the enterprises—projected to be Tk 36,144.93 crore in total—significantly eating away at the achievements of the rest. Some of them are well-known for their serial underperformance. Top among them is the Bangladesh Power Development Board (BPDB), contributing the largest anticipated loss with Tk 18,103.60 crore, thereby justifying the prediction of two Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) experts, made in a column published in this daily last year, that it was turning into a “white elephant.” Another familiar contributor of losses is the Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation (BPC), where the level of irregularities is so massive that it even stunned a parliamentary committee.

We, therefore, demand a thorough review of why these 13 entities are floundering. We can no longer ignore their persistent losses, or that of other state institutions regularly flagged for irregularities. Any intervention must aim to rid them not only of corruption, but also the cycle of poor planning and inefficiencies that have long gone unpunished. The present economic crisis will be harder to overcome with these albatrosses hung around our neck.

Will the ‘big fish’ finally be caught?

Identify those who supplied and bought the leaked PSC exam questions

For years, we have urged the authorities to investigate the issue of PSC question paper leaks seriously beyond just perfunctory arrests of a few culprits. Thirty incidents of question paper leaks and a decade later, our law enforcement agencies seem to be finally conducting a thorough investigation to find all those involved at various stages of the process. According to the Criminal Investigation Department (CID), the syndicate of Bangladesh Public Service Commission (PSC) officials and employees was involved in leaking questions of at least 30 recruitment tests. The investigators have also listed the names of at least 24 officials currently working in different government departments, including the cadre service, who were involved in the racket, based on confessions of those arrested. The CID has hinted of involvement of some “big fish.”

We are glad that these names are finally coming out, but given the way the investigations into question paper leaks have played out over the last decade, we have every reason to worry that those in the highest echelons of power will eventually get away. The CID has made arrests on multiple occasions before; how is it that they failed to unearth the major ring that has apparently been in operation since 2002? How did transactions worth crores of taka in the banks of syndicate members go unnoticed for so long? A few of those arrested now have been found to be involved in similar leaks before; why were they allowed to get away with not even a slap on their wrists? It's worth asking if law enforcement members themselves were previously involved in coverups in light of the impunity enjoyed by the perpetrators so far. Law enforcement agencies must rise to the occasion to unmask the masterminds and their collaborators, no matter their identity.

It is also time we made public the names of those who got the jobs in much sought-after government positions by buying leaked question papers. How can we expect them to serve the country over their own greed if their entry into the profession is marked by such dishonesty? Corruption is now so ingrained into our system that perhaps we no longer even know or care to know the difference between right and wrong. But to stop this country from falling into a deeper abyss, we must do more than arrest a few individuals—we need to weed out the corrupt at every stage of government service.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY



Theresa May becomes second woman PM of UK

On this day in 2016, Theresa May, then leader of the Conservative Party, became the second woman prime minister of the United Kingdom, replacing David Cameron, who resigned after the country voted to leave the European Union (EU).

Why are highly educated people choosing blue-collar jobs abroad?



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

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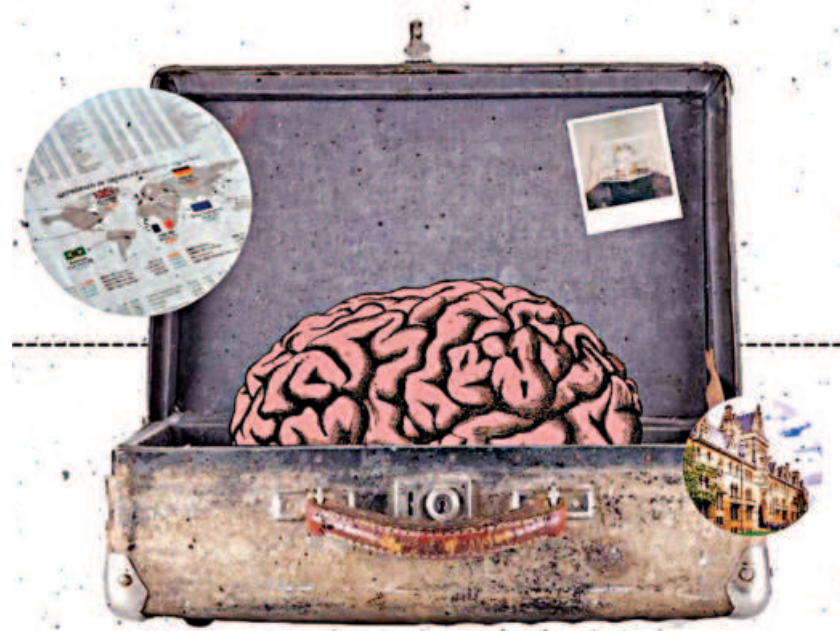
SHAMSAD MORTUZA

According to the records of a government-initiated overseas recruitment app, Ami Probashi, 50,000 registered applicants for blue-collar jobs such as labourers, drivers, and cleaners hold graduate and postgraduate degrees. More than three-fourths of the 2,477 PhD holders have also listed menial jobs as their options to leave the country. This trend is not just a statistical oddity, but a clear sign of deep-seated issues within our local job market and the broader socioeconomic context. The interest in low-skilled jobs in conventional migrant destinations (e.g., the Middle East, Malaysia, Europe, and North America) demands closer scrutiny.

It is common for expatriates to engage in odd jobs while they are studying or use them as a toehold for better alternatives. However, accepting (read: expecting) jobs that fall short of their academic qualifications and expertise, especially in such large quantities, is concerning. Think of the social cost. In an ideal situation, when highly educated individuals leave their home country to take up low-skilled jobs abroad, that country loses out on the potential contributions they could make to different professional fields.

These individuals, from an opportunity cost perspective, forgo the possibility of securing high-paying, high-status jobs that align with their qualifications. Instead, they are more focused on their immediate need for improved living conditions and economic stability by choosing menial jobs. The opportunity cost is not just personal; it is national. This brain drain stunts the country's growth and exacerbates the lack of qualified experts in critical industries. One might counter-argue that in a country with high unemployment, at least these individuals would become “remittance warriors” and foray into our national development.

As the world gets flat, Thomas



FILE VISUAL: ZARIF FAIAZ

Friedman argues, the draw from a better economy is natural. According to him, globalisation has levelled the playing field and given everyone everywhere equal opportunities. Friedman has been proven wrong. The migration of highly educated individuals from poorer countries to take on low-skilled jobs in wealthier countries highlights the persistent inequalities and barriers that exist. It reveals that the world is far from flat. Just as the caste system once maintained social hierarchy, the rich world still relies on the poor to perform their “dirty” jobs. A software designer receives a higher royalty for their innovation compared to workers in a manufacturing plant.

Seeing our PhD holders choose menial jobs over research and innovation highlights a flaw in our educational policy. Why can't we engage our graduates with the highest achievements in a productive manner and employ them in the upper echelon?

Does it mean our degrees don't matter, at least in many OECD countries?

The more scandals we stir up, the more questionable the reputation of our degrees will become. If a premier institution admits a high-profile candidate for a PhD because of his professional influence and grants him a degree based on a 90-page report, it's inevitable that questions will arise.

security nets, and ensuring the quality and relevance of higher education. And this is precisely why public university teachers are boycotting the Prottoy scheme under the universal pension system. You cannot expect a university teacher with the best possible academic credentials to start a career with a Tk 22,000 basic salary and then have Tk 5,000 taka from their salary deducted for a future pension scheme. Even a private sector driver with a Class 8 certificate earns more than a university teacher today.

Social security has become non-existent. The lack of safety nets became obvious during the pandemic. Most of us struggle to live hand-to-mouth. We do not have any mechanism to cope with emergencies. In contrast, wealthier countries often provide robust social security systems, making them attractive destinations for migrants seeking a more secure and predictable life. The colleague I mentioned was pleased that his professional sacrifice could ensure better schooling and healthcare for his family members. At least he was making an honest living. He did not pay millions to question leakers or corrupt bosses in order to get a job. He did not become a civil servant thinking of his job as a milking machine that would churn his initial investments into “*mast bhari* cheese.”

Other contributing factors that cause people to opt for lesser options abroad include frustrations over opportunities and appreciation, the desire to join family members abroad, or the desire to escape political and social instability at home. A country that treats a film extra or a below-par player with more importance than a scientist, innovator or researcher is likely to lose its talents for sure. Whatever the motivation, the broader implication is clear: our current system is failing to harness the potential of our educated workforce.

The trend of highly educated individuals opting for blue-collar jobs abroad is a wake-up call for policymakers and stakeholders in the country. It underscores the urgent need for comprehensive reforms in our education system, labour market policies, and social security frameworks. We must create an environment where our brightest minds can thrive and contribute to the nation's development, rather than seeking solace in menial jobs abroad.

Let's end the ‘princessification’ of girls and ‘machofication’ of boys



Laila Khondkar is an international development worker.

LAILA KHONDKAR

A recent advertisement by an English medium school in Dhaka caught my attention: two boys are seen learning mathematics and robotics, while a girl is seen playing the violin. To me, it was a glaring example of gender stereotypes. After all, one might get the impression from the ad that music is for girls and mathematics and robotics are for boys only. Gender stereotypes are preconceived notions about the characteristics and roles of men and women in society. Those who subscribe to those notions believe, for instance, that men excel in engineering while teaching is better suited for women. However, the reality is that, given the right environment, both men and women can succeed in any profession.

A 2020 report on the impact of gender stereotypes during early childhood by the Fawcett Society of the UK, titled “Unlimited Potential,” analyses how gender stereotypes limit children's lives, diminish girls' self-esteem, create reading skill gaps among boys, and influence their future career choices. The study observed children aged 0-7 years, a crucial period when they begin to understand their place in the world.

Due to gender stereotypes, girls as young as six years old avoid subjects that require them to be “really, really, smart.” About 36 percent of girls aged 7-10 years believe that their appearance is their most important trait. This leads to body dissatisfaction and eating disorders. The pressure on boys

to be breadwinners and handle any situation with stoicism contributes to higher suicide rates among men. The findings of this report are relevant to most countries, including Bangladesh.

Significant research highlights that challenging these stereotypes in early childhood can be a powerful tool in reducing violence against women and girls. Yet, we have seen a troubling rise in gender-coded products targeting boys and girls. Pink for girls and blue for boys may seem harmless, but the underlying messages are not innocent. Children's dreams are shaped by what they read, see and hear, as well as the toys they play with. Media, including newspapers, television, movies and advertisements, often portray women as weak and dependent, focused on grooming and household chores, and performing caregiving roles. Men are depicted as strong, responsible, and professionally successful. In traditional fairy tales, girl characters are weak, in most cases “rescued” by princes.

A stark division is evident in the toys available to children. Girls are seldom given opportunities to play with science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) toys. Boys' toys rarely focus on nurturing or caring attributes, which reinforces a lack of emotional expressiveness. These experiences have lasting impacts, which limit children's future career paths and personal development.

Parents and guardians often assign different tasks to boys and

girls. The emphasis on raising girls as “princesses” and telling boys that “boys don't cry” is still prevalent in many families. Parents hold different expectations regarding what boys and girls can achieve. Research shows that parents' ideas about their children's abilities are formed as early as at the age of 11 months. Among other things, this affects children's play. For example, as

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girls get older, they participate less in sports; and as a result, their skills in it also decline.

Social norms about what girls and boys should or should not do influence parents and teachers, which in turn affects young people's decisions regarding studies and working lives. Traditional beliefs discourage girls from studying STEM subjects and pursuing related professions. Men face resistance if they want to choose professions that require caregiving. Men and women are not able to realise their potential when they feel obliged to conform with gender stereotypes, which is a loss for the entire society.

There should be government directives in Bangladesh to ensure that the media does not promote gender stereotypes, and there should

be initiatives to enhance teachers' skills to make them aware of the stereotypes and help them address them through teaching methods. Manufacturers and advertisers must avoid stereotyped schemes in product design and packaging. The messages coded in advertising through gendered imagery and themes must be critically examined and restructured.

The change has already begun. Books and films featuring female characters as brave and in leading roles are being produced, and there is a trend of rewriting old fairy tales. These new narratives present women as ambitious, confident, and engaged in leadership, acting as friends and comrades to men. We need many more such stories that challenge gender stereotypes.

Children are born with immense potential. Isn't it a tremendous waste of human capacity to confine them to limited roles? Parents and guardians must carefully choose books, toys, films, and other materials for children to avoid giving them anything that conveys the stereotypes. If parents equally share household and external responsibilities, children will follow and in the process develop positive notions about the roles of men and women. Teachers should also encourage boys and girls to believe in their abilities. Our goal should be to provide the entire range of experiences and options to all children. We must end the “princessification” of girls and the “machofication” of boys.

Boys and girls should have opportunities to study any subject and choose any profession to realise their dreams. To create this environment, the government, parents, teachers, social workers, writers, artists, media workers, all have to step up and carry out their responsibilities. The foundation for a society based on equality has to be built during childhood.