

Bring those who ordered the excessive use of force to account



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The student protesters’ demand for the reform of the existing quota system in government job recruitment is logical, in my opinion. Quota is a temporary special arrangement, which can be enforced in hopes of achieving equality. Our constitution says the same; the preamble mentions creating equal opportunities.

In the preamble as well as Article 8, it is stated that the goal of our state is to create a just economic and social system. In articles 28 and 29, there is a mandate for the state that allows it to take special initiatives in this regard. Article 28 (4) says that for the advancement of women, children and the backward sections of society, the state can take special initiatives. And Article 29 (3) says that for any appointments in the service of the republic or a republic office, there can be reservations for the backward sections. So there is a constitutional mandate that quotas can be created to achieve equality.

Now the question is, how will the quota be used, and for whom? The quota reform seekers have raised this concern: through

I think quotas should be determined because we need quotas in order to ensure progress towards equality for those who are historically disadvantaged in our society. And that includes certain communities including Indigenous people, people with disabilities, etc—people who have been held back because of their cast, ethnicity or other characteristics.

which process the quota system is being implemented, and whom it is serving. Are the existing quotas helping us achieve equality, as per the constitutional mandate, or are they the doing the opposite, creating a situation where some groups are getting advantages over others, further creating discrimination? This is why the protesters have labelled themselves as the Students’ Movement against Discrimination.

In the verdict we received from the Appellate Division today (yesterday), the



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FILE PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

court suggested five percent quota for freedom fighters, one percent for differently abled population and the third gender, and one percent for the Indigenous people. The women’s quota was not mentioned. I see today’s verdict as a suggestion, because how the quotas will be determined is entirely to be decided by the executive branch, as only it has the power to do so according to the constitution. The court also observed that the government can change or reform the quota system as it deems necessary. The court also mentioned a circular to be issued in this

should be based on evidence. There’s already a lot of decisions from our courts and from other courts in the region and indeed elsewhere, that when you make quotas, they can’t create further discrimination as a result. These principles have to be borne in mind when the quotas are determined. I think it’s important that all these issues should be taken into account when the government does make a decision regarding quotas, that they should be aimed at serving equality for those who are disadvantaged. And this has to

system is fair and representative, and that it doesn’t unfairly advantage any particular group. They want the quotas to not be imposed in a way that the majority of the aspirants for positions in government offices are blocked out from that opportunity.

What we have seen in the past week in terms of the excessive use of force against peaceful protesters, I think that is unconscionable. We are hearing reports even today that there are firings going on. It is essential that this violence stops. It is critical that there should

directly on the protesters and others, but also those who ordered the firing to be brought to account. The last two days we had a curfew, and we have been told that there is a shoot-at-sight order. What was the order in place before the curfew was imposed? Under whose authority did those shootings happen that led to more than a 100 deaths, as far as we know, or maybe more? How did this take place and how do we hold these people to account? I think this is the most urging question before us now.

An independent Bangladesh is enough for me



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TAMANNA KHAN

I am a grandchild of a freedom fighter. My Nana did not fight the Pakistan Army in the battlefield, but as a railway official in 1971, he used train coaches to transport arms and ammunition to freedom fighters. When the Pakistani authorities learnt of his actions, Nana had to spend months as a fugitive, which took a toll on him both mentally and physically. His contribution was recognised by the Bangladesh government. He got promoted after the war, and also received a plot in Dhaka. Though he did not live long enough to build a house there and reside in it, his children, grandchildren and great grandchildren are reaping the benefits of that reward: a place to call our nanabari/dadabari. But, in my opinion, the biggest reward that my cousins and I and our children received, thanks to my Nana and thousand others like him, was Bangladesh—a independent nation, where, I believe, we enjoy much more privilege than our parents did growing up in East Pakistan.

Bangladesh was under Pakistani rule for more than two decades. I don’t know how much change my parents witnessed during that time, but in my lifetime, in independent Bangladesh, two decades meant a huge transformation. I will give a tiny example. My earliest memory of travelling to our village in the Narsingdi district in the 80s was crossing a river on a ferry and parking our car at the house of a local influential politician. We had to walk the rest of way to my dadabari on an earthen road. By 2000, there was no need for a ferry to cross the river anymore, and our car could drive right up to the gate of our village home. The serene landscape of green rice fields one could see after crossing the Shitalakkhya Bridge all the way to our village also disappeared gradually, being replaced by numerous factories and mills.



VISUAL: MANAN MORSEHD

In the 80s, poor young men and women from our village would come to Dhaka looking for employment opportunities often as domestic help or for other low-skilled jobs. That changed at the turn of the century, so much so that it became difficult to find even agriculture labourers in our village anymore. That happened largely because of the factories that grew on the outskirts of Dhaka.

Some may argue that the change Bangladesh experienced can also be attributed

my cousins attain good education and subsequently get jobs, which may not pay enough to buy a goat worth Tk 15 lakh, but help us get by and put food on our plates at least three times a day. None of us hold a government job. Whether we were talented enough to even try for a government job is a different question. Most of us never actually took the BCS exams or the recruitment tests in Bangladesh Railway. I don’t think getting a government job was ever our dream—not

While I never had to use any preferential treatment as a freedom fighter’s grandchild, today I feel if I had to, I would have felt ashamed to use it especially after so many deaths surrounding this issue. Like I said, my Nana’s contribution to the Liberation War has given me a country to call home. A 45-year-old like me in Palestine does not have that privilege. How well I use this gift depends on my own capability. For my descendants, the last thing I want is preferential treatment for their ancestors’ legacy.

mine, at least. Growing up in the 80s and 90s, we were attracted to private jobs because the remuneration was way better than any government job. The only government job that sounded “cool” was that in foreign service and our relatives who worked in that government wing scored the highest marks in their public examinations throughout. Mind you that was a different era and only one or two persons could stand first in the public examinations among thousands of students in the entire country. So foreign service remained an unattainable dream, which was not even worth trying for.

One reason why my cousins and I were able to live a more or less privileged life in independent Bangladesh is our parents’ hard work. They, too, had an advantage over others. They were educated, and were able to cultivate that privilege so they never needed to rely on any quota system to get jobs. In fact, three of my four uncles worked in the private sector, and my eldest uncle who worked in a government bank had secured the job before 1971. It can be argued that, unlike my uncles, descendants of many freedom fighters might never have had the privilege of a good education to start with. Mere recognition would not have helped improve their situation. Whatever little the state offered them to make their situation better right after liberation was much-needed. In fact, the state could have done more. The political instability the country went through in the mid-70s and 80s denied many freedom fighters and their heirs their rights to access those state benefits. But did things not change in the 90s? Were the children and grandchildren of freedom fighters not able to use the preferential system in the 90s when the Awami League was in power? That should have helped many, who were deprived before, to

change their fate by securing government jobs.

The point I am trying to make is, people have had five decades in independent Bangladesh to make their lives better. During that time, at least two generations must have grown into adulthood, and despite all the corruption and crimes in the country, their lives must have been impacted to some positive extent by the country’s economic development. If that did not happen, then it is a total governance failure. It is the failure of all the governments Bangladesh has had that the country’s progress only touched a privileged few, created opportunities only for a handful, so much so that many want to rely on preferential treatment rather than on their own merit to attain some kind of job stability in their lives. It is also a failure of our policymakers and industrialists that they could not create enough employment opportunities in the private sector in 53 years so that young people, like their Western counterparts, would aspire for jobs in private enterprises or want to be entrepreneurs themselves.

While I never had to use any preferential treatment as a freedom fighter’s grandchild, today I feel if I had to, I would have felt ashamed to use it especially after so many deaths surrounding this issue. Like I said, my Nana’s contribution to the Liberation War has given me a country to call home. A 45-year-old like me in Palestine does not have that privilege. How well I use this gift depends on my own capability. For my descendants, the last thing I want is preferential treatment for their ancestors’ legacy. They should undoubtedly be proud of and thankful for their ancestors’ achievement, but also should have the dignity to make their own names on their own merit.