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OFF CAMPUS

Can we break free from THE BRAIN DRAIN CYCLE?

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Fahim Tahsan, a student at Oklahoma State University, has always dreamed of contributing to his homeland, imagining a future where his skills could help build a better Bangladesh. However, the reality he encountered was far from his expectations.

"Despite having a degree with good results and relevant experiences, I was unable to get a well-paid job. Entry-level positions were only paying an average of Tk 25,000," Fahim recalls. "If Bangladesh had offered sufficient opportunities and a better work-life balance, I might have considered staying back," Fahim reflects.

Similarly, Jasper Shaon, Assistant Manager at China Northeast Electric Power Engineering & Services Co. Ltd. (NEPCS), decided to move abroad with his family in search of a better life. "In Bangladesh, engineers have to work long hours with little work-life balance. It would have taken several years of experience to earn a stable salary. Having only one income source wasn't enough, and it would have been difficult to support our family, so we made the decision to shift."

Thousands of students and skilled professionals across Bangladesh face similar dilemmas, forced to choose between staying in their homeland with little prospect for advancement or seeking alternatives abroad. The systemic challenges they encounter are indicative of deeper issues within Bangladesh's socio-economic condition.

According to the latest UNESCO figures, 52,799 Bangladeshi students pursued higher education overseas in 2023. The departure of skilled professionals in fields like business, engineering, and information technology has created a void in the domestic labour market, leading to decreased productivity, reduced innovation, and slower economic growth. The loss of these individuals not only hampers the immediate economic prospects of the country but also stifles its long-term potential for development.

The reasons for this ever-growing set of challenges are complex.

On one hand, there are the push factors – limited job opportunities, low salaries, poor infrastructure, political instability, and a lack of educational and research facilities. These factors make it difficult for even the most talented individuals to actualise their potential

in Bangladesh. The frustration of hitting these barriers repeatedly can lead to a sense of disillusionment, prompting many to seek opportunities elsewhere.

On the other hand, the pull factors abroad, such as higher salaries, better education, advanced career prospects, and a higher standard of living present are all great incentives. Society often views moving abroad as a mark of success, further influencing young people to seek opportunities elsewhere.

Tousif Rahman, a specialist at the Netherlands Organisation for Applied Scientific Research (TNO), emphasises the systemic issues that contribute to brain drain, "The government should hire a specialised team of experts to improve the system's efficiency. Fair compensation is essential to attract top talent. The engineering and transport sectors require a comprehensive overhaul. From tendering to project management, we need to implement a functional system. A team of skilled engineers and technologists is essential to achieve this, which would also help attract top talent."

Tousif's analysis points to the need for structural changes in how Bangladesh manages its key industries. Without sufficient changes, retaining or attracting skilled professionals will remain a distant goal.

The impact of brain drain on Bangladesh's development is profound. A 2020 study by Transparency International Bangladesh revealed that at least 250,000 foreign workers are employed in Bangladesh to address the shortage of skilled professionals. This reliance on foreign labour not only drains resources but also holds back the growth of home-grown talent. The country's economic development is thus stunted, as it continues to lose its brightest minds to more developed nations while depending on external expertise to fill the gaps.

However, remittances sent home by Bangladeshis working abroad have contributed to economic stability and poverty reduction. According to the Bangladesh Bank, remittance inflow stood at USD 23.91 billion in FY24, rising by 10.66 percent compared to the year prior.

This uprising in remittance highlights the substantial economic impact of the diaspora, but it also shows the fact that Bangladesh's economic success is, in part, built on the shoulders of those who have left.

Is it possible to turn brain drain into brain gain?

The recent rise in support from Bangladeshis studying and working abroad suggests it might be. Many are now considering returning home to contribute to the country's development.

Taosif Ahsan, a PhD student of Physics at MIT, shares his aspirations: "I want to return to Bangladesh and start the first-ever nuclear start-up in Bangladesh."

Similarly, Israt Jahan, currently pursuing a PhD in Infectious Disease Research at Mahidol University, Thailand, states, "I believe that if there is any opportunity where my academic and professional experience can be of use to the country, I will seize it. I just need a situation where I can live healthily with my family."

These sentiments reflect a growing desire among the diaspora to return and contribute, provided the right conditions are in place. Moving forward, to attract talent back to Bangladesh, the government and private sector must work together to create a conducive environment.

Maliha Yasmin*, a Data Analyst at a US-based financial institution, suggests creating platforms for Bangladeshi experts to contribute to policy-making. She says, "There should be an opportunity for Bangladeshi experts to propose opinions or suggestions to government policies. For example, a platform to submit suggestions, or a poll where experts can agree or disagree on a policy, or suggest changes."

The government can also implement policies that incentivise skilled professionals to return. Offering tax breaks for investors, providing funding for research and development for academics, and establishing partnerships with foreign universities for knowledge exchange, are just a few strategies that could make a difference. By encouraging innovation and creating ways for career growth within the country, Bangladesh can offer its citizens compelling reasons to stay and build their futures at home.

Bangladesh's journey towards reversing brain drain will require patience, persistence, and commitment from all stakeholders. Only then can we hope to break free from this vicious cycle.

**Name has been changed upon request for privacy*

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