Neoliberal education, student rebellion, and institutional stability

BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

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The call for the removal of a private university's vice-chancellor and reconstitution of its board of trustees, following a probationary disciplinary action taken against two students for drawing graffiti on campus, has scratched the surface of the deep-seated wound of our neoliberal education system. The students used an "anti-fascist" banner to express their opposition to the university's actions, which they believed aligned with the previous government's ideology. The presence of sympathisers, or members of the fallen government, on the board made the students interpret the punishment as a politically motivated gesture. They demanded the VC, who ordered the punishment according to the university's code of conduct, be removed.

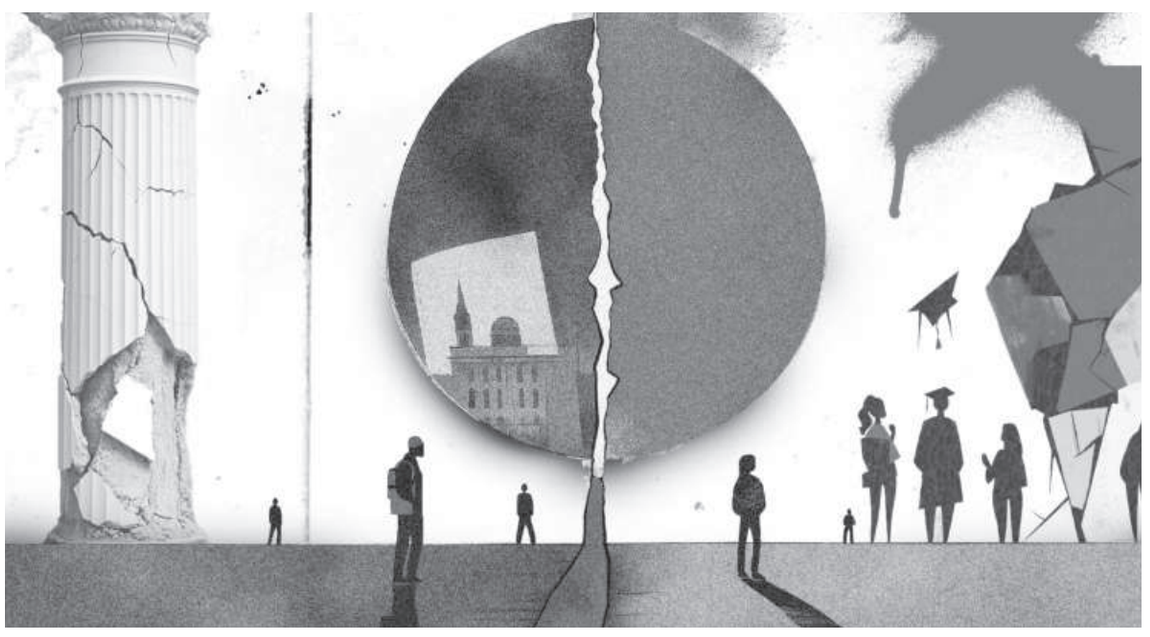
However, following an appeal by some conscientious faculty members, the university authority rescinded the punishment. That did not stop a section of students under the banner of the "anti-fascist" group from targeting the top management, forwarding a five-point demand and making their protests visible through a fresh flurry of abusive graffiti. When senior officials and faculty members, on behalf of the VC, tried to engage in peaceful dialogue with the protesters, they were restricted from leaving the campus until midnight, with the main entrance blocked.

The captivity of faculty members prompted general students to hold a counter-rally and conduct independent online polls, showing that the majority of the student population supported the continuance of the current leadership. A member of the "anti-fascist" group reacted by adopting a fast-unto-death programme. An emissary from Adviser Nahid Islam arrived at the scene to draft a five-point agreement: i) constitution of a probe body by the University Grants Commission (UGC) or the education ministry and the abstention of the VC from holding regular office until the submission of the fact-finding report; ii) general amnesty for all protesters; iii) delinking any potential political connections with the fascist regime by faculty and staff members; iv) removal of abusive graffiti by the protesters; and v) a note of apology to diffuse the tension.

Since the issue is under investigation, I am not naming the university or the individuals concerned. The stakes here significantly exceed those of a single private institution. If we fail to address the problem, it could lead to a chain reaction destabilising Bangladesh's higher education sector. The adviser's timely intervention signals the importance that the interim government has invested in this issue.

It is undeniable that private university students were instrumental in the July uprising, making significant sacrifices and losing hundreds of their peers in the process. However, their contributions were largely ignored when the interim government was formed. Their frustrations are, therefore, deep and valid. They want to see changes in their respective institutions, reflecting their revolutionary passion. But it is also important to distinguish the inherent differences between the public and private systems.

The Private University Act, 1992, revised in 2010, paved way for private universities to accommodate the growing demand for higher education. Over the last 32 years, more than 100 universities have received permission from the UGC to offer degrees at both undergraduate and graduate levels. In 2022, more than 3.41 lakh students were studying at 106 private universities, taught by 16,508 teachers, according to the 49th UGC Annual Report. These universities are non-profit entities run with tuition fees and endowments from philanthropic and business entities. Meanwhile, taxpayers fully subsidise state-run universities. For instance, in 2022, the state paid, on average, Tk 218,558 for each Dhaka University student, Tk 466,000 for each student at Bangladesh Agricultural University, Tk 314,478 for each student at Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET), and Tk 144,609 for each student at Chittagong University. One can calculate the amount the state spends on each student who graduates with a four-year degree.



VISUAL: **SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR**

Private universities, in contrast, pursue neoliberal education that prioritises market-driven policies, privatisation, and the commodification of learning. Whether we like it or not, this framework treats education as a product and students as consumers. These institutions have emerged as vital alternatives to overburdened public universities, offering flexible schedules, modern facilities, and diverse academic programmes.

We need to acknowledge that private universities have filled the educational gap through a paid service. They have created opportunities for thousands of students who would have otherwise been forced to seek higher studies abroad. The quality and well-being of these universities need professional supervision and monitoring. It takes decades for an institution to grow and earn a reputation, but only a series of disruptions to tarnish it. Such disruptions often originate from individuals who have personal agendas or lack a clear understanding of the larger picture.

The above-mentioned student rebellion at a private university serves as a prime example. The intertwining of educational institutions with their trustees' political allegiances creates challenges, particularly during periods of political change. Students choose universities for the academic or institutional reputation. People who run the institutions may come from different cultural backgrounds and ideological orientations. In an open market, students and guardians are free to align their political interests with the trustee board members. However, for an institution to be more sustainable, personal ideologies of the board should not impact the institution's activities. Still, if someone believes the institution needs changes, they should voice their concerns at the central level. Monitoring agencies such as the UGC or education ministry should make necessary policy reforms to protect the institution from such individuals. The structure of private universities is different from that of public ones. The stakeholders must recognise the nature of the institutions in which they are participating.

Political affiliations may be held by philanthropic individuals and business houses that typically establish these private universities. These ties have been both a strength and a liability. On the one hand, politically connected trustees can secure resources and navigate bureaucratic hurdles; on the other, such affiliations make institutions vulnerable to regime changes, often targeted by rival factions. Educational institutions are complex systems designed to function independently of their leaders' personal affiliations. While holding individuals accountable for misconduct is essential, targeting them in ways that undermine the institution can have far-reaching consequences.

Destabilising educational institutions in the name of reform poses significant risks to students, faculty, and other stakeholders. For students, prolonged protests and administrative paralysis can lead to academic disruptions, delays in graduation, and increased financial and psychological stress. Faculty members may face uncertainty regarding their positions, while parents and other stakeholders may lose confidence in the institution's ability to deliver quality education.

Destabilisation, on a broader scale, erodes the credibility of private universities, which are already viewed with scepticism by some segments of society. The erosion of trust can have cascading effects, deterring prospective students and investors and compromising the long-term sustainability of these institutions.

To address these challenges, it is imperative to focus on constructive and policy-driven reforms. Students play a crucial role as change agents, but their activism should focus on systemic improvements instead of individual retribution. Key areas for reform include transparent governance, inclusive policymaking, and/or national education policy reforms. And this can be attained through constructive engagement and public discourse.

JAMES WEBB SPACE TELESCOPE

The eye in the sky that changed our view of the universe

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QUAMRUL HAIDER

Three years ago on Christmas Day, the James Webb Space Telescope (JWST), the largest and most powerful telescope humans have ever launched into space, had its thrilling debut. Since then, the telescope has revolutionised our view of the cosmos beyond measure. Most importantly, it probed the farthest depths to find the very first stars and galaxies formed in the primordial universe, as well as answered many fundamental questions about how the universe has been changing with time since the Big Bang that occurred 13.8 billion years ago.

The list of discoveries by JWST is long. Nevertheless, listed below are some of the groundbreaking discoveries made by the telescope in 2024 that are reshaping our knowledge of cosmology, and allowing us to see with great clarity the dim boundary of the universe.

Earliest galaxies that ever existed: The JWST has spotted five galaxies dating to 200 million years after the Big Bang. Located 13.6 billion light-years away, they are likely some of the first to have formed in the ancient universe. These galaxies will challenge existing theories of galaxy formation while offering distinctive assessments of the evolution of gas, stars, and black holes during the early stages of the universe.

Big black holes: Two galaxies and their supermassive central black holes, each weighing nearly 50 million times the mass of the Sun, were caught by JWST in a "merging dance" when the universe was only 740 million years old. Astronomers are trying to figure out what astrophysical processes could explain how these beasts got so big so early.

Sleeping monster of the early universe: A massive black hole in the early universe that appears to be "napping" after stuffing itself with too much food has been discovered by JWST. Analogous to a bear hibernating after feasting on salmon, this "sleeping monster" seems to have overeaten the gas and dust from the collapsed remnants of dead stars and entered a dormant state in its host galaxy. With a mass 400 million times that of our Sun, this giant ranks among the largest ever black holes observed during the cosmic dawn, just 800 million years after the Big Bang. It continues to consume, albeit at an extremely reduced rate—approximately 100 times less than its maximum capacity—rendering it virtually inactive.

From dead galaxies to mysterious red dots: A trio of gigantic "red monster" galaxies in the newly born universe have recently been spotted by JWST. These colossal galaxies, each possessing a mass equivalent to 100 billion times that of the Sun, are over 12.8 billion years old. This means the stars in these galaxies coalesced at an incredibly fast rate—so fast that they are challenging the existing models of how stars and galaxies first formed.

Einstein's "Zig-Zag" phenomenon: It is a rare cosmic event that occurs when light from one object is duplicated six times due to the warping of space-time caused by two massive galaxies. The JWST has confirmed the phenomenon in a distant quasar, a luminous galactic core powered by a supermassive black hole. This discovery could resolve a critical issue in cosmology, namely, the enigma of dark energy which drives the accelerated expansion of the universe.

Hubble tension is real: An unresolved controversy in cosmology is the so-called "Hubble tension." It is the discrepancy between the value of the Hubble constant, ascertained through the measurement of distances to distant celestial bodies, and the value obtained from the afterglow of the Big Bang. The constant serves as an essential parameter for comprehending the universe's evolution, its age, and its ultimate destiny. Now, JWST has confirmed that the tension is indeed real, rather than a miscalculation or a problem with equipment, furthering the case that something else—not measurement errors—is influencing the rate of expansion.

Serpens Nebula: For the first time, a nebula that astronomers have long hoped to image directly has been captured by JWST. Situated 1,300 light-years from Earth, it is the Serpens Nebula, a young, star-forming region. Its discovery provides information into the basics of how stars are born. Serpens is only about two million years old, which is very young in cosmic terms.

Precise age of our solar system: Over 3,000 new stars are created every second in the visible universe, which is approximately 95 billion light-years in diameter. Astronomers describe the rotating "pancake" of heated gas and dust encircling these stars as the protoplanetary disc, where planets form. Before the James Webb Space Telescope swung into action, little was known about the precise mechanisms that create stars and planetary systems. Today, thanks to JWST, astronomers have some of the most in-depth information on the forces that form protoplanetary discs, providing insights into the possible appearance of our solar system 4.6 billion years ago.

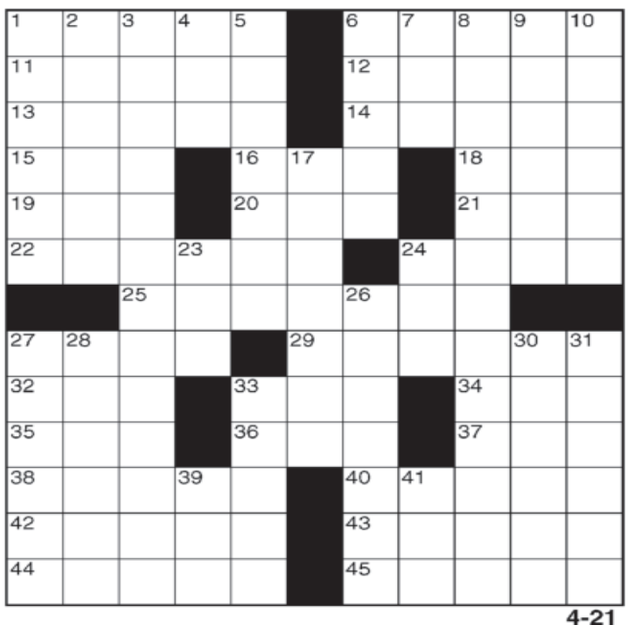
Life beyond Earth: Telltale signs of life—methane and carbon dioxide—have been detected by JWST in the hydrogen-rich atmosphere of an exoplanet dubbed K2-18b, orbiting in the habitable zone of the red dwarf K2-18. With a size roughly 2.6 times the radius of Earth, making it about half the size of Neptune, it is located 124 light-years away from Earth. These initial observations also provided a hint of the presence of a molecule called dimethyl sulphide, which on Earth is only produced by phytoplankton, a flora of freely floating, often minute organisms that live in aquatic environments. Like land vegetation, phytoplankton uses sunlight and carbon dioxide to produce oxygen and carbohydrates. This finding may change how we look for extraterrestrial life and provide a new perspective into the mysterious sub-Neptune class of exoplanets.

So what's next for the James Webb Space Telescope? The cosmos has perpetually captivated humankind with its mysterious allure and the secrets it conceals regarding our beginnings. To date, the telescope has successfully unravelled many secrets by pushing the boundaries of astronomy and cosmology closer to the beginning of time. It has also uncovered many shortcomings of our current models of the universe. While we are refining our models to account for the shortcomings, we are, at the same time, excited about the unknowns that are hiding in the vast expanse of the cosmos. Suffice it to say that JWST will soon expose the unknowns before us.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS
1 Pottery piece
6 Dentist's directive
11 State game
12 Western spread
13 Devoured
14 Spare
15 "That's gross!"
16 Really impress
18 That fellow
19 Make a bow in
20 Wee bit
21 Aussie runner
22 "The Scarlet Letter" name
24 Pharaoh symbols
25 Freud's home
27 Idiotic
29 Carpentry tool
32 Genesis name
33 Bashful pal
34 Historic time
35 Director's cry
36 Historic time
37 Birdie beater
38 Suspect's story
40 Stop
42 Debussy work
43 Brat's opposite
44 Squalid
45 Slender

DOWN
1 Gumshoe
2 Sub
3 Nevertheless
4 Numbered rd.
5 Gives
6 Set loose
7 Not strict
8 In agreement
9 Pinch pennies
10 Gumshoe
17 Disney's Pumbaa, e.g.
23 Rickety boat
24 Target
26 Indy auto
27 Model stickers
28 Throat danglers
30 Made blank
31 Almost never
33 Supermarket section
39 Sleep site
41 Hydrocarbon suffix



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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

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