

## Is the quota for wards really necessary?

Any quota system must be reformed, streamlined across public universities

Five months after the July uprising that championed a society free of discrimination and inequality, it is unfortunate that many of our public universities still have different types of quotas for enrolment. Among these, the ward or dependent quota, which grants preferential admission to the children of university staff and teachers, has sparked significant debate and protests of late. While students in some of the universities have called for the abolition of this quota, many staff members and teachers have voiced their support for its continuation. The question is, should such quotas persist in our universities? Do they align with the spirit of the July uprising?

A *Prothom Alo* report has identified 11 types of quotas across eight major public universities, including Dhaka University, Jahangirnagar University (JU), Rajshahi University (RU), and Chittagong University. Among them, Bangladesh Agricultural University does not have a ward quota, while RU abolished it recently following protests. However, six other universities still retain this practice. Beyond the ward quota, other reserved categories include quotas for individuals with disabilities, children and grandchildren of freedom fighters, athletes, underprivileged ethnic minorities, non-indigenous people (Bangalees) living in hilly areas, foreign students, Dalits, tea workers, and students from BKSP (Bangladesh Krira Shikkha Protishtan). While many support the quota system for underprivileged communities, others argue that some categories, including the ward quota, are outdated and warrant abolition or rational reform.

The system at JU, in particular, has drawn criticism for its lack of fairness. It reserves seats for the children, spouses, and even siblings of teachers, officers, and staff. Admission seekers under this quota are only required to pass the admission test to secure a seat. Even though the JU administration has capped the number of admissions under this quota to four students per department, it still appears inequitable when general candidates must compete with thousands for a single seat. Other public universities also have more or less seats reserved for the dependents, which undermine the principle of meritocracy. Surprisingly, JU even had a “vice-chancellor’s quota,” allowing the admission of 20 students at the VC’s discretion—a practice recently abolished after student protests.

While the complete removal of the ward quota seems ideal in principle, we recognise the concerns of staff members advocating for its retention. University authorities, therefore, must navigate these conflicting demands through dialogue and consensus. Any decisions regarding quotas must be uniform across public universities and, above all, consistent with the ideals of equality and fairness championed during the July uprising.

We stand firmly with the protesting students and urge public universities to reform their quota systems. The admission process must be free from discrimination and designed to uphold merit and fairness. Only then can our higher education system reflect the values of an equitable society.

## A public cancer hospital in crisis

Prolonged equipment failure at NICRH is unacceptable

It is deeply concerning that the National Institute of Cancer Research and Hospital (NICRH)—the country’s premier public facility for cancer care—is failing to provide radiotherapy treatment due to prolonged equipment failure. For over 19 days, according to a report, all six radiotherapy machines at the hospital have been out of service, forcing cancer patients to delay their treatment at the risk of their conditions worsening or spreading.

NICRH is not just another healthcare facility; it is a lifeline for many patients, especially those from poor backgrounds, who rely on its subsidised services. For such a vital institution to go even a single day without functioning radiotherapy machines is thus unacceptable. That the current paralysis has dragged on for nearly three weeks only shows the gravity of the situation. In fact, the equipment failure has been a persistent problem for NICRH: one of the machines has been out of order for two years, and another for over a year. How has such a critical problem been allowed to continue unchecked for so long?

Reports of similar incidents paint a grim picture of recurring dysfunction at NICRH. Last year, *Prothom Alo* reported that all of the hospital’s radiotherapy machines had malfunctioned. At that time, even the X-ray machine was out of order for two weeks. These repeated breakdowns are symptomatic of a broader systemic failure in public healthcare, at the core of which lies a disturbing culture of indifference and irregularities. Instead of prioritising urgent repairs or replacing outdated equipment, hospital authorities have shown a complacent attitude, waiting for external interventions that rarely come in time.

For many cancer patients, seeking treatment at private clinics is not an option due to the exorbitant costs involved. They rely on NICRH for affordable care. When that care is delayed, they face harrowing choices—some borrow or exhaust their life savings to seek private treatment, while others are left with no option but to wait, risking their lives as cancer progresses.

We urge the health authorities to address this crisis immediately. The radiotherapy machines at NICRH must be repaired or replaced immediately, and measures must be taken to prevent such prolonged disruptions in the future. The possibility that certain vested quarters may be deliberately sabotaging these machines to drive patients towards private facilities must also be thoroughly investigated. The health directorate’s long standing failure to properly oversee public hospitals like NICRH also must be rectified.

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

### Haiti Earthquake

On this day in 2010, a magnitude 7.0 earthquake devastated Haiti, especially Port au Prince, killing more than 200,000 people and leaving more than 1,000,000 homeless.



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It is not the best of times—it is the worst of times! Recently, the value-added tax (VAT) and supplementary duty (SD) have been increased on nearly one hundred products and services. The list of such products and services ranges from sweets to clothes, from restaurants to motorcycle imports, from mobile phones to internet, and the tax and duty hikes range from 15 percent to 100 percent. And this has been done by a presidential ordinance, in the middle of the current financial year, ahead of the next national budget in June. Most importantly, the tax hikes have taken place at a time when the country has been experiencing persistent double-digit inflation, with its economic growth being less than two percent. All these beg three fundamental questions. First, what prompted the decision to increase VAT and SD on more than 90 products and services? Second, would such tax increases not make the persistently high inflation even worse and the current low economic growth of the country more depressed? And finally, were there no other options and alternatives to reduce the budget deficits of the country?

First, it is well-known that the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has put pressure on Bangladesh to increase taxes, in order to meet conditionalities set by the organisation. Under the existing credit programme of \$4.7 billion, Bangladesh is supposed to increase its tax/GDP ratio by another 0.2 percent in FY2025-26. It means that in absolute terms, the country has to mobilise Tk12000 crore in additional taxes. Such conditionalities by the IMF are not anything new. In the decade of 1980s, under its Structural Adjustment Facility (SAF) and the Enhanced Structural Adjustment Facility (ESAF), the international lender has imposed various conditionalities upon the developing countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America. As a result, budgets were balanced by unbalancing the lives of the people. In 1980s, in the process of financial sector reforms, the IMF imposed a set of conditionalities on Bangladesh as well.

Second, concerns are being raised

in many quarters as to whether the tax increases on nearly 100 commodities and services would exacerbate the current level of high inflation, resulting in further increases in prices. Government officials confidently maintain that this would not happen. They have put forward two arguments. First, the goods and services that are subject to tax hikes are not part of the



FILE ILLUSTRATION: SADATUDDIN AHMED AMIL

Consumer Price Index (CPI) basket. So, the increased taxes on those products and services will not impact the CPI and consequently, inflation will not be raised. This is, in fact, a mechanical argument, devoid of realities. For instance, people from all walks of life buy clothes—the richer section may buy clothes worth Tk 50,000 and the common people may buy clothes worth Tk 5,000—but the increase in VAT on clothes from 7.5 to 15 percent will increase the economic burden of common people, whether it is reflected in the CPI or not. Similarly, people buy sweets for various social functions and events. With a VAT increase again from 7.5 to 15 percent, it will pinch the pockets of people on the streets. Irrespective of whether such increases are captured in the mathematical equation of inflation, they will reduce the purchasing power of the consumers and increase the economic woes of the people.

Along with the effects on the

consumers, the tax hikes are expected to have negative impacts on the businesses. Already various businesses, particularly small businesses, have expressed their dissatisfaction regarding the proposed tax increases. Small businesses and informal sector enterprises use mobile phones a lot for their business activities. The tax increases on mobile phones and the internet will not only impact individual consumers but also affect business adversely. In the past, the VAT was set at 15 percent, which later on was reduced to 7.5 percent. As a result, the VAT revenue was enhanced. This leads to the question: since the demand for goods and services, such as mobile phones and the internet, is elastic, will the doubling of VAT result in the desired goal of increased revenue? If the tax hikes do not lead

It is expected that the prices of a series of products and services will go up further, the purchasing power of common people will be reduced and the business community will be adversely affected.

We all want the revenue income of the government to increase. But are the indirect taxes the most effective means to achieve that objective? Everyone is of the opinion that the direct tax base of Bangladesh must be expanded. The tax/GDP ratio in Bangladesh is only about eight percent, while in neighbouring countries like India, it is 12 percent and in Nepal, it is 17 percent. Our tax/GDP ratio is way below the average tax-to-GDP ratio in the Asia and the Pacific region, which is 19 percent and that of the developing world, which is 25 percent. So, Bangladesh must increase its tax/GDP ratio and that must be done through increasing the coverage and the amount of direct taxes. About 68 percent of people in the country do not pay income tax. These people must be brought under the income tax net.

There is another important dimension to direct tax. In the past, revenues were mobilised through indirect taxes and duties on poor people, rather than income taxes on the rich. It goes without saying that through this process, the economic disparities in the society have been enhanced. Today, when Bangladesh is set to achieve an equitable society, it is essential to change this structure, which is unfriendly to common people. It should be kept in mind that while in a country like India, nearly 60 percent of tax revenue comes from direct taxes, in Bangladesh, nearly 65 percent of taxes come from taxes and duties on essential commodities, which are paid mainly by poorer people. Revenue income can also be increased through tackling tax evasion and improvements in the tax administration. Because of tax evasion in different sectors of the economy, the Bangladesh government loses tax revenues ranging from Tk 56,000 crore to Tk 300,000 crore. Such evasion can be stopped through the use of different information and communication technologies.

The tax increases on nearly 100 products and services will increase economic pressure on common people and reduce their purchasing power. There will be adverse impacts on the business community. In order to overcome these woes, it is essential to reform the tax structure and the tax collection systems. There are no alternative options to enhance economic growth and reduce disparities in our society.

## We must focus on improving early childhood education



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Bangladesh has made considerable progress in early childhood development (ECD) but various challenges remain, especially in rural and disadvantaged areas. It’s worth recalling that the authorities, through the National Children Policy 2011, set their sights on improving ECD programmes for children from birth to 8 years old. The aim is to lay a strong foundation for children’s cerebral, emotional, and social development while setting the stage for the nation’s socio-economic growth.

The Ministry of Women and Children Affairs and the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education are at the helm of these affairs. However, while pre-primary education (PPE) enrolment has improved, it continues to lag in rural and marginalised areas. Enrolment in pre-primary programmes in rural areas is drastically lower than urban centres like Dhaka, underscoring the disparity that impacts children’s readiness for primary school and their future learning outcomes.

Bangladesh’s ECD landscape is one of collective efforts. While the government plays a central role, organisations like UNICEF, Save the Children, and local NGOs provide technical support, funding, and on-the-ground services. These groups

often target the gaps in coverage, particularly in remote areas where access is limited. Despite these collaborative efforts, substantial gaps remain. For example, community-based early childhood centres, known as Shishu Bikash Kendra, are a crucial

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state initiative aimed at bringing education closer to home. However, their success depends heavily on active community involvement, which remains inconsistent due to resource limitations. In many cases, these centres operate without adequate infrastructure or teaching materials, hampering their ability to deliver meaningful educational outcomes.

Parents and communities are also essential to making ECD programmes work, but the backbone of these efforts

lies in the hands of teachers and caregivers, many of whom lack formal training and ongoing professional development. In rural areas, teachers are often underpaid, overworked, and under-supported. This not only affects the children directly but also undermines the long-term sustainability of ECD programmes.

While increasing enrolment is crucial, the quality of early childhood education is where we must focus. And currently, it leaves much to be desired. Most programmes lack standardised curricula and materials. Without proper training, teachers struggle to deliver a consistent standard of education, particularly in rural areas.

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The absence of adequate facilities and educational aids further compounds this problem, leaving children at a disadvantage compared to their urban peers.

Another significant challenge is the lack of coordination between stakeholders. Government ministries, international organisations, and NGOs often work in silos, leading to uneven service delivery. Some regions receive adequate support, while others are left behind. Adding to the problem

is the absence of a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation system, making it difficult to assess the impact of ECD programmes and allocate resources effectively. A unified strategy that aligns the efforts of all stakeholders is urgently needed to bridge these gaps.

The stakes couldn’t be higher. With 28.61 percent of its population under the age of 14, Bangladesh has a young and promising future. However, without urgent investment in early childhood education, this demographic dividend could turn into a missed opportunity. Studies have shown that quality early childhood education can reduce poverty, boost academic performance, and improve socio-economic mobility.

The first few years of life are particularly critical for brain development, with 90 percent of a child’s brain growth occurring by age 5. Evidence-based ECD programmes have the potential to set children, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, up for success from the very beginning. If Bangladesh wants to meet its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and achieve long-term development, the focus must shift to ensuring all children have access to quality early childhood education.

Therefore, the current gap in access and quality needs immediate attention. The government, along with its international partners, must act swiftly to ensure that every child has the opportunity to start their educational journey on the right foot. High-quality early childhood education isn’t just an investment in individual children; it’s an investment in the future of the nation.