The Daily Star
FOUNDER EDITOR: **LATE S. M. ALI**

A welcome move, but much remains undone

Separation of seven colleges from DU was long overdue

There is no easy way to characterise the crisis emanating from the re-affiliation of Dhaka-based seven colleges with Dhaka University, or the decision for their "respectful separation" on Monday. It has been a messy affair through and through—the de-affiliation is meant to resolve an issue that shouldn't have arisen in the first place, and it now potentially ushers in another period of uncertainty not unlike the chaotic buildup to this moment. So, while we welcome the long-overdue decision—following years of student protests and administrative struggles—we must also acknowledge that the road ahead is anything but simple.

But before addressing the future, we must ask why those in authority always see reason only after protests and such extreme measures. Why are critical educational decisions taken in haste and without proper considerations? That the re-affiliation with DU—which was in charge of the colleges before the National University (NU) took over the responsibility in 1992 and held it until 2017—was a flawed move was no secret. For eight years, college students have suffered as DU, already burdened with its own challenges, failed to handle the additional pressure. The result was increased session jams, delays in exam schedules, inconsistent grading, and growing frustration among students. What then took the authorities so long to separate them? The students' resistance to any affiliation with NU again is also understandable, as it would be a step backward rather than forward.

What should happen, then? The UGC is reportedly considering "various models" for a separate university or institution combining the seven colleges. Finding a solution that serves both students and the nation in the long run will not be easy, given the many complexities involved. Such an endeavour requires time, space, resources, and careful planning. Some of the colleges currently offer higher secondary education—will they be separated from the new university? Faculty members in these colleges are recruited under the BCS education cadre—will they continue under the existing structure, or will a new recruitment policy be developed? Moreover, while it has been decided that new college students from the 2025 session will no longer be under DU, it is unclear who will oversee their academic and administrative affairs. And what about certificates for the students graduating in the next few years? These are critical issues that cannot be resolved overnight.

It is likely that while the mistake of DU re-affiliation has been corrected, its consequences will continue to unfold for years. The authorities, therefore, must ensure that the transition is handled with utmost care and transparency. Rushed or poorly thought-out measures will only create new problems, perpetuating the cycle of discontent.

Passengers must not be held hostage

Rail workers should withdraw strike, return to negotiation table

Government workers undoubtedly have the right to express grievances just like any other professional group, but not at the expense of citizens who they are employed to serve. This message becomes pertinent after thousands of people have been left stranded at railway stations across the country following a strike by train drivers and support staff that began early Tuesday.

According to a report by this daily, the origins of this protest trace back to the Awami League regime. In November 2021, the finance ministry issued a gazette cancelling extra pay for train drivers, assistant drivers (locomasters, assistant locomasters), guards, and traveling ticket checkers for overtime work. Previously, they also received pension benefits based on their extra pay. The AL government backtracked from this decision in 2022 in the face of protests, but the gazette was not officially revoked. Moreover, rail workers recruited in these positions since 2022 were denied these benefits in their appointment letters. While the new recruits accepted these terms, they went on work abstention last December, demanding equal benefits.

In response, the finance ministry issued a circular on January 23 stating that new recruits' overtime pay could be 100 percent of their normal work hours but could not exceed their basic salary. However, the circular did not say anything about retirement benefits. Consequently, rail drivers and support staff have gone on strike, demanding the cancellation of the 2021 gazette and equal overtime and retirement benefits for all workers, regardless of their recruitment year.

We believe the government can, and should, promptly address this issue by evaluating the merit of workers' demands. It has a responsibility to ensure that government employees at any level are properly remunerated. That said, the employees also have a duty to serve people and leave room for negotiation—they cannot just hold citizens hostage with a nationwide strike. Unfortunately, in recent months, we have seen similar protests by various groups of government employees that raise questions about their sense of duty. Citizens, who just want to go about their daily lives, cannot seem to catch a break from this stream of protests often blocking roads, intersections, and even essential services like emergency medical care. We urge protesting rail workers to return to the negotiating table instead of weaponising public services.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Iraq, Iran, and North Korea called an "axis of evil"

On this day in 2002, US President George W Bush, delivering a State of the Union address, described Iraq, Iran, and North Korea as an "axis of evil" for their attempts to develop nuclear, chemical, or biological weaponry.

Rethinking the seven colleges conundrum

Dr Kazi ASM Nurul Huda
is associate professor of philosophy at the University of Dhaka. He can be reached at huda@du.ac.bd.

KAZI ASM NURUL HUDA

The recent clashes between Dhaka University (DU) students and those of the seven affiliated colleges reflect a crisis that is far more profound than administrative inefficiencies or infrastructural shortcomings. These clashes have become a recurring spectacle, underpinned by the students' sense of alienation and the systemic challenges that have plagued the reaffiliation of these colleges since its inception nearly eight years ago. The decision for a "respectful separation" from DU may seem like a solution to the immediate unrest, but it fails to address the underlying issues of identity, governance, and practicality at the core of this crisis.

At the core of this problem lies an unresolved duality that extends beyond student grievances—the conflicting dynamics within the teacher class. DU faculty operate within an academic hierarchy rooted in institutional autonomy and governance, while teachers of the seven colleges closely identify with their status as BCS cadres, tied to the rigid hierarchical structure of the civil service. This divide creates a mental chasm between the two groups, as BCS teachers, despite their roles as educators, often prioritise bureaucratic prestige over academic engagement. The inflexible nature of this divide has exacerbated tensions and rendered collaboration within the affiliation increasingly untenable, potentially contributing to recurring student clashes. Addressing this fundamental divide should have been central to any long-term solution, yet it has been persistently overlooked.

For the students of the seven colleges, the situation is equally complex. The core issue extends beyond administrative inefficiencies, infrastructural inadequacies, or grading and financial grievances; it lies in their deep sense of alienation and lack of belonging. The affiliation of these colleges with DU was, from the outset, a move fraught with contradictions. On paper, the colleges were placed under DU's umbrella, but in practice, they were left in a liminal state—no longer part of the National University (NU), yet never fully accepted as DU students. This sense of exclusion is evident in the students' repeated demands to have the word "Affiliated" removed from their certificates, allowing them to identify fully as students of Dhaka University.

This identity crisis is not merely symbolic; it carries profound emotional and psychological consequences. For eight years, these students have lived as "stateless" learners. They are not recognised as DU students by society or DU students themselves, and even their academic guardians have reportedly questioned their legitimacy with remarks like, "Who are you?" Such words are not just momentary slights; they symbolise years of denial and alienation. The students had entered this affiliation hoping for a "superior" identity, but instead, they found themselves in a void, stripped of both their former NU identity and the full prestige of DU.

Students of seven colleges block Science Lab intersection in Dhaka on January 26. PHOTO: **PRABIR DAS**

The root of the seven-college crisis lies in the flawed decision to affiliate these colleges with DU without a clear vision for integration, a decision that may have stemmed from a "personal rivalry" between two former Vice-Chancellors of DU and NU. This arrangement created an impossible situation: students were promised the prestige of DU but were denied its substance. Their resistance to any move of reaffiliation with NU is, therefore, understandable. Returning to NU would feel like a step backward—a painful admission of failure and a loss of even the limited identity they have managed to forge under DU.

Yet, the alternatives are equally fraught. Establishing a standalone university for the seven colleges may appear to be a solution, but it comes with significant educational and environmental risks. It would set a dangerous precedent by triggering a domino effect of similar demands from other old, large colleges across the country, ultimately destabilising the higher education system. Bangladesh already struggles to maintain quality in its existing universities—not even DU, its flagship institution, meets international standards. Expanding the number of universities without improving quality would only dilute resources further, multiply existing problems, and create new administrative challenges. As a missed opportunity, the previous government, while focusing on establishing new universities in all districts for reasons that remain invisible yet understandably ill, could have instead prioritised transforming these old, large colleges into universities. This would have been a more logical step than setting up new institutions in areas where these historic colleges already exist.

This missed opportunity ties into a broader issue of urban planning. Dhaka, already overwhelmed by overpopulation, traffic congestion, and crumbling infrastructure, cannot accommodate another large university. The conversation about addressing the seven-college crisis must also consider the city's long-term sustainability. Decentralisation—relocating major institutions such as Dhaka University, BUET, BGB headquarters, readymade garments factories, and even the cantonment to the city's periphery—is essential to make Dhaka functional and liveable. Adding another institution of the size and scale of the seven colleges would only worsen the already critical strain on the city's infrastructure and liveability.

Continuing the affiliation with DU, albeit with significant reforms, appears to be the most viable option. These reforms could include establishing a separate administrative structure for the seven colleges under DU, such as appointing a dedicated pro-vice chancellor and an administrative body exclusively responsible for managing the colleges, potentially located in a separate facility. To ensure clarity and efficiency, DU's core departmental faculty should be fully relieved of any responsibilities related to the seven colleges, allowing them to focus more effectively on their own students and research. Teachers for the colleges could be appointed directly through DU rather than the BCS system, empowering them to function as academic leaders on par with DU faculty. Additionally, during an initial transition period, existing college teachers from across the country could be offered the opportunity to opt out of their civil servant roles and join this new system, provided they meet criteria set by an independent committee overseeing the reform of the colleges.

Another practical step towards improving the system would be to reduce the number of students admitted to these colleges. This approach would help alleviate the burden of managing an excessively large student body while simultaneously enabling the colleges to provide better education to those who remain.

Even with these modifications, however, the identity crisis would remain unresolved. While these reforms might mitigate some conflicts, they could create new challenges, particularly in how these students and faculty integrate into DU's broader ecosystem. This suggests that continuing the affiliation with DU, though the best of the three options discussed so far—returning to NU, creating a standalone university, or staying with DU—may ultimately fail for the very reasons that have prompted us to consider alternatives in the first place.

In light of this, a radical yet innovatively transformative alternative worth considering, if all else fails, is to repurpose the seven colleges as exclusive higher secondary institutions, vocational education hubs, or a combination of both. Removing bachelor's and master's programmes could allow these institutions to focus on producing quality higher secondary graduates who could later contribute to the university student pool across the country while also ceasing to be a massive source of unskilled graduates. Additionally, vocational education could address the country's reliance on remittances and the pressing need for a skilled workforce.

The seven-college crisis underscores the need to balance governance with emotional and academic identity. The students of these colleges deserve recognition and dignity, not perpetual marginalisation. Policymakers must look beyond temporary fixes and confront the systemic flaws that have made such crises inevitable.

Building a knowledge-based society

The right to question and respect for the law are essential preconditions

Dr Sayeed Ahmed
is a consulting engineer and the CEO of Bayside Analytix, a technology-focused strategy and management consulting organisation.

SAYEED AHMED

Our office boy returned from holidays with a bandaged nose. It was an armed robbery, a near-fatal blow from a chopper. "Did you hit them back?" I asked, expecting a thrilling story of retaliation. His answer, however, was unexpected: "No, no. That would be against the law. They can break the law, but not us." This came from someone whose formal education ended in primary school. It got etched on my mind.

His words resonated with a profound truth: a knowledge-based society is not just about academic degrees or technological advancements. It's about a deep-rooted understanding of civic responsibility, respect for the rule of law, and a commitment to peaceful resolutions. It's about recognising that true progress lies in upholding ethical values, even in adversity.

But how do we build this society? It starts with a fundamental shift in our culture—a culture where questioning is not seen as defiance but as every citizen's basic right and responsibility. Margaret Atwood, novelist, poet, and literary critic, wrote, "A word after a word after a word is power." And what is a question but a series of words carefully arranged to seek truth, challenge assumptions, and spark dialogue?

Imagine a Bangladesh where questioning is encouraged from a young age, where children are taught to challenge assumptions, seek evidence, and form informed opinions. Imagine classrooms buzzing with debate, not rote memorisation, where teachers encourage curiosity and critical thinking.

Imagine a society where citizens hold their leaders accountable by asking tough questions, demanding transparency, and refusing to accept empty promises. Imagine public forums where diverse voices engage in respectful dialogue, seeking solutions to complex problems through reasoned analysis and evidence-based arguments.

This culture of inquiry is not a privilege; it's the bedrock of a healthy democracy. It's how we fight misinformation, combat corruption, and ensure that those in power serve the people's best interests.

But how often do we truly embrace this responsibility? Do we question the information that floods our social media feeds or passively consume and share without critical evaluation? How can we become more discerning information consumers, differentiating between facts, opinions, and falsehoods? Can we cultivate a healthy scepticism that drives us to seek evidence and consider multiple perspectives before forming conclusions?

Imagine a Bangladesh where questioning is encouraged from a young age, where children are taught to challenge assumptions, seek evidence, and form informed opinions. Imagine classrooms buzzing with debate, not rote memorisation, where teachers encourage curiosity and critical thinking.

And what about our attitude towards those who question us? Do we welcome their inquiries, recognising that questions can lead to deeper understanding and better solutions? Or do we react defensively, dismissing those who challenge our assumptions or dare to disagree? Can we foster an environment where curiosity is celebrated, and diverse perspectives are valued?

This inquisitive spirit should extend to all aspects of our society, including how we evaluate public projects and initiatives. When the government proposes a new infrastructure project, a grand development scheme, or a policy shift, do we accept it at face value? Or do we delve deeper, asking critical questions about its feasibility, long-term sustainability, and potential impact on our communities and environment? Do we demand transparency in how public funds are utilised and hold our leaders accountable for the decisions they make on our behalf?

Building a knowledge-based society requires us to understand our roles and responsibilities within the larger framework of our nation. Do public servants appreciate their obligation to transparency and accountability? Do elected officials recognise their duty to serve the public interest? And do we, citizens, hold them accountable for fulfilling these obligations? Can we create a society where everyone understands their role in upholding the values of a knowledge-based society?

By embracing the power of questions, we can embark on a journey towards a Bangladesh where knowledge guides our path and reason illuminates our future. Rabindranath Tagore eloquently expressed this in his poem in 1910: "Where the mind is without fear, the head is held high; Where knowledge is free..." His words are still relevant after over a century.

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