

## Shifting poverty map a wake-up call

### Greater efforts needed to level up poorer regions

That economic and climate vulnerabilities are inextricably linked has once again been underscored by the latest Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) survey, which ranked Barishal as the poorest division in the country. For long, that spot had been reserved for Rangpur, which was—and still is, to a large extent—synonymous with crippling poverty mostly due to seasonal famines or *Monga*. However, according to a report based on BBS Poverty Map 2022, things have turned around for Rangpur, where the poverty rate dropped from 47.23 percent in 2016 to 25 percent in 2022. In contrast, Barishal's poverty rate slightly increased from 26.49 percent to 26.6 percent.

The shifting poverty map reflects the changing reality of our policy and geographical landscapes. Rangpur's relative improvement, according to an expert at the BBS event, has been partly driven by the efforts of the government and NGOs in addressing seasonal food insecurity. On the contrary, Barishal's relative deterioration underscores the growing impact of climate change on coastal regions. The division, once known as a food basket, is now struggling with climate vulnerability and its resultant effects, including rising salinity and declining agricultural yields. As a result, many are losing their traditional livelihoods and slipping further into poverty.

Another factor contributing to the shift is how wealth and opportunities are being distributed. For example, districts like Noakhali, which now has the lowest poverty rate at 6.1 percent, provide a stark contrast to districts like Madaripur, where poverty stands at 54.4 percent—nearly three times the national average of 18.7 percent. Such disparities could only have emerged due to inequitable distribution of development projects and economic opportunities. This highlights the need for a more balanced approach to resource allocation, infrastructure development, and economic diversification. Poorer regions also need targeted investments in education, healthcare, and industry to achieve parity with more developed areas.

That said, we cannot ignore the role likely played by Bangladesh's flawed data governance in shaping or redrawing poverty maps. One can rightly question how Rangpur's poverty rate could have declined so dramatically in just seven years between 2016 and 2022. As it is now abundantly clear, the state data ecosystem was severely compromised during Sheikh Hasina's rule, which often presented flawed and overly optimistic economic indicators, including poverty rates, GDP growth figures, etc. Since data guides policy efforts, flawed statistics likely distorted decision-making, denying crucial interventions to regions that needed them most.

The newly unveiled poverty map seems more grounded in reality and, as such, should serve as a wake-up call for all involved. As one of the poorest and most climate-vulnerable countries, Bangladesh's policymakers must ensure that climate resilience is embedded in poverty alleviation strategies. Similarly, there must be greater efforts to bridge wealth and opportunity gaps among regions to insulate poorer divisions and districts from harsher economic shocks and climate-induced hardships.

## Economy needs greater attention

### Govt lacking urgency and focus in crisis response

The bleak economic outlook for Bangladesh, as recently highlighted by the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), is concerning. In a paper titled "Navigating Expectations in Turbulent Times," the think tank revealed that the interim government's economic measures have yet to bring substantive improvements in people's lives and to support businesses. Despite reform initiatives across various sectors, including the economy, any noticeable recovery or dynamism remains absent.

As many have pointed out, Bangladesh has a real opportunity to implement substantive changes in its taxation system during this transition period. Over the years, the country's development activities have become increasingly dependent on debt due to its low tax-GDP ratio. To address this, Bangladesh must increase direct taxes and curb tax evasion. However, instead of prioritising these measures, the interim government has disappointingly adhered to an outdated approach by raising VAT—a regressive policy that disproportionately affects low-income groups. This move also contradicts the pro-people spirit of the historic July uprising.

Investment, or lack thereof, is another major concern highlighted by the CPD. While the presence of an elected government can positively influence investment, the interim administration has failed to significantly improve other critical factors that drive investment. As a result, a conducive environment has yet to be established, which is alarming. To attract investment, the government must urgently implement measures, such as setting up a one-stop service for businesses and developing adequate infrastructure. Engaging with relevant stakeholders to address bottlenecks in business operations is also essential.

Inflation is another pressing issue that the government has struggled to tackle. Despite repeated calls for stronger monitoring to prevent hoarding and market distortions, little progress has been made in that regard. Given the hardships faced by ordinary people due to sustained inflationary pressures, addressing this issue should have been a top priority.

The CPD has rightly emphasised that political and economic reforms must progress hand in hand, requiring a degree of political consensus. Achieving this will undoubtedly be challenging. Additionally, it must be acknowledged that the ousted Awami League government inflicted significant damage on the economy, which may take years to repair. However, the fact remains that the interim government has underperformed in addressing economic challenges and badly lacked the urgency and focus necessary to tackle these issues. It is high time it recognised the desperate need for an economic turnaround and took decisive action to deliver it.

# Why the seven colleges want out of Dhaka University



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

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I was on deputation when the seven colleges were annexed to my parent institution. After completing a stint at a private university, I returned to Dhaka University and was soon assigned the additional duty of chairing the MA in English Committee for the seven colleges. My responsibilities remained largely fixed: inviting and moderating questions, selecting examiners, sending a DU representative to the oral examination, and compiling and publishing results. All examiners were from the respective colleges. I convened meetings and learnt that there were no meeting allowances. As the committee chair, it was up to me to entertain our guest colleagues.

During moderation, it was apparent that both internal and external examiners were setting basic questions with little variation. There was not much to moderate, as those were probably the only topics taught in class—raising the difficulty level would cause public furor.

Without knowing what had actually been taught in class, we refrained from being too creative with the question pattern. After the written exam, I went to conduct an oral examination at one of the colleges. While four or five students out of 100 were really good, most had no clue. "Sir, if we fail them, it will be difficult to leave the compound with your car intact." "But how will they know they've failed?" "They will know." "So what do you suggest?" "I can guarantee you they will fail in their written exams. There is no point in failing them in viva." I succumbed to such logic and signed my bill.

I recalled that in the 2018-19 session, only one student out of 100 in the English department at Kabi Nazrul Government College, and two out of 98 at Government Shaheed Suhrawardy College, passed the exams. The pass percentage in other departments stood at 21 percent.

One student said only a quarter of the syllabus was taught by their teachers, leading to this fiasco. Why don't the teachers take classes? Most of them, recruited through BCS examinations, have to deal with higher secondary, BA (pass and honours), and MA students. Their workload is insane. According to college websites, Dhaka College has 220 teachers for 25,000 students; Government Titumir College has 225 for 35,000; Kabi Nazrul Government College has 110 for 21,000; and Government Bangla College has 155 for 13,000. No public information is available on the number of teachers at the two female colleges. I reckon that across these seven colleges, there



Students of Government Titumir College stage a hunger strike in front of the college gate demanding the university status for their institution on January 30, 2025.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

is approximately one teacher for every 130-plus students. The prescribed ratio followed by most top public and private universities is 1:15. Only Eden Mohila College mentions having an academic journal.

It is no wonder that the students of these colleges—Government Titumir College, Dhaka College, Eden Mohila College, Begum Badrunnesa Government Girls' College, Government Bangla College, Kabi Nazrul Government College, and Government Shaheed Suhrawardy College—are disenchanted with their over-hyped affiliation with Dhaka University since 2017. In the last seven-plus years, we have failed to bring in any substantial changes to these institutions. Administrative delays, session backlogs, exam postponements, and result disasters have led to the students to demand a university of their own. Their protests turned violent, and last Monday, DU's top administration met the college principals and agreed to sever ties. Now, the University Grants Commission (UGC) is considering a new public university named "July 36 University" for these colleges.

Critics are cynical about such cosmetic changes. They feel that turning the colleges into a university in name only, without substantial infrastructural and administrative improvements, could lead to quality concerns. Degrees might not be recognised if the new university

Dhaka University in 1921. We hear the UGC was in the process of formulating potential options for these colleges. The abrupt decision to break away from DU surprised both the education adviser and the concerned UGC member alike. Both reminded DU that such an annulment cannot be decided in an impromptu meeting with college principals. The academic council needed to discuss the matter before the syndicate ratified it.

The press release issued by DU was a public pleasing declaration that repeated the historical procedural mistake. When, in 2017, the then DU vice-chancellor agreed to take on the challenge of upgrading these seven National University colleges, it was not discussed at the academic council. And the government gazette notification was endorsed by the syndicate without input from stakeholders. Thus, the DU fraternity was not given the chance to register the fact that they lacked the capacity to handle 200,000 extra students without additional logistics and incentives.

Engagement remained half-hearted—some departments enjoyed the script-checking and newfound authority, while others maintained a casual link. Only four rooms and 50 staff members were allocated by DU for these tasks. In the process, the students suffered, resentment grew, and successive changes in DU VC-

colleges were treated like foster kids, with their certificates emphasising their affiliation status—reminding employers of their second-class status.

Now, these colleges are fighting for their dignity. Titumir College has been particularly vocal, with students staging protests and hunger strikes demanding university status. Their actions reflect a strong desire for autonomy and better academic conditions. They believe an independent university would allow them to tailor curricula to better suit their needs.

However, establishing a new university requires significant investment. Is it possible for universities to have pre-university higher secondary programmes? What will happen to the teachers with transferable jobs? If their status is upgraded to university teachers, other civil servants might revolt. Does passing a single civil service exam qualify them for university teaching—especially when most lack research and pedagogy training? What will happen to incoming students who will not have an accredited programme due to this severance?

The issue is complex. Common sense demands that students rely on the model proposals being prepared by the UGC. The interim government has also hinted at budgetary constraints. This issue needs thorough discussion at the academic council. A postmortem of past failure can offer future solutions.

# The scale of the universe and our place in it

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To truly understand our place in the universe, we must first comprehend the concept of scale. It is only through understanding the relative sizes of the entities around us that we can appreciate the grandeur of existence and the humility it demands. Consider this: compared to the universe, we are minuscule, far smaller than even the tiniest microscopic objects—such as atoms, bacteria, or viruses—are to us. The ratio of a human's size to the universe's size is approximately  $1/10^{24}$ , while the ratio of an atom's size to a human's size is  $1/10^{10}$ . This stark comparison provides a glimpse into how infinitesimal we truly are in the cosmic context.

The vastness of the universe is almost incomprehensible. Scientists estimate its diameter to be 93 billion light-years. For perspective, the distance between Earth and the Sun is about 147 million kilometres, which translates to roughly 1.58/100,000 light-years. Against this infinite expanse, the Earth is but a speck of dust, and humans are smaller still. Now imagine the scale of the being or force that created this

immense cosmos. How minute must our individual existence appear from that vantage point?

This realisation is not meant to diminish our significance, but rather to inspire awe and perspective. Many religious traditions highlight the creator's infinite forgiveness, perhaps because, on a cosmic scale, our petty grievances, conflicts and selfish actions seem trivial. Instead of focusing on such trivialities, we should strive for collective well-being and meaningful contributions to the greater good. Our actions, viewed collectively, shape the world we live in, and this collective behaviour matters far more than individual missteps.

To understand the power of scale, consider this analogy: for someone with only 100 units of currency, even one unit is immensely valuable. For someone with 100 billion units, however, even 100 units are negligible. This principle applies universally: the larger the scale we consider, the smaller individual contributions or actions seem. Similarly, to understand the universe's vastness, we must expand

our perspective, learning to see beyond our immediate surroundings.

An everyday example of scale can be found in a seemingly empty container. Although it appears vacant, it contains countless air molecules. These molecules, invisible to the naked eye, collide with the container's walls at random speeds. The average force per unit area of these collisions creates what we call pressure. Similarly, room temperature represents the average kinetic energy of these molecules. No one molecule's specific behaviour matters; it is the collective behaviour that defines the observable phenomenon. This mirrors humanity's progress—it is the cumulative contributions of countless individuals that propel society forward.

The analogy of collective behaviour extends to nation-building. A country's well-being depends on the average behaviour of its citizens. In a society as small as ours when viewed against the universe, the prevalence of corruption, theft, and violence seems tragically unnecessary. What purpose does such behaviour serve in the grand scheme of things?

Take Bangladesh as an example. If we want to build a prosperous nation, collective good behaviour is essential. Our well-being as a society depends on our ability to act with integrity, kindness, and unity. The contributions of the majority determine whether we

thrive or falter.

As humans, our sense of belonging is inherently tied to scale. If you were to travel to another planet and were asked where you are from, your answer would be "Earth." On Earth, you might identify yourself by your country, such as "Bangladesh." Within Bangladesh, you'd narrow it down to your district, town, or even neighbourhood. Our sense of kinship expands or contracts depending on the scale of the context. Beyond Earth, all humans feel like family. Within a country, fellow citizens are our kin. And so, our sense of connection grows narrower as the scope shrinks.

Understanding scale clarifies our responsibilities as humans. It teaches us to be generous, humble, and open-minded. This is why writers and thinkers urge us to visit the sea, climb mountains, or gaze at the horizon—such experiences remind us of our smallness and inspire a broader perspective. They help us grow in empathy and understanding, encouraging us to think collectively rather than selfishly.

To truly grasp our place in the universe is to embrace humility and the drive for collective good. In the grand design of the cosmos, our greatest contribution lies in fostering unity, acting with integrity, and striving for the betterment of all. Let the vastness of the universe inspire us to rise above trivial conflicts and embrace a more generous, meaningful existence.