EDITOR'S NOTE

The dawn of a new Bangladesh is upon us, shaped by the unwavering spirit of its youth. The historic events of July 2024, when a generation rose to reclaim its future, have set in motion a transformation unlike any before. The fall of a dictatorship was not merely a change in governance—it was a testament to the power of young voices demanding accountability, justice, and a seat at the table. Today, that vision is unfolding in ways both profound and promising.

As the dust settles, the real work begins. Rebuilding a nation is not about slogans or fleeting optimism—it is about restoring trust, forging partnerships, and making bold, informed decisions. Nowhere is this more critical than in Bangladesh's global standing. Our freelancers, once thriving on international platforms, suffered an unprecedented blow when the July crisis severed digital connectivity. The challenge now is to rebuild those relationships, assure global clients of our reliability, and ensure that never again will our youth be cut off from the world they help shape.

But beyond recovery, there is reinvention. Young minds are no longer passive recipients of policy but active architects of change. With advisory roles in government, business, and education, they are pushing forward a development agenda that prioritises innovation, inclusivity, and sustainability. From AI-driven educational reforms to policy shifts in employment and entrepreneurship, the landscape is evolving to meet the aspirations of a generation that refuses to wait.

This anniversary issue captures the momentum of this transformation. It brings stories of resilience, ambition, and ingenuity—stories of young Bangladeshis leading initiatives that redefine what is possible. It is a tumultuous time, as all formative periods are, but it is also a hopeful one.

As we chronicle this journey, we do so with the belief that the future is not merely something to be inherited—it is to be built, with purpose and conviction. And in the hands of Bangladesh's youth, that future is already taking shape.

Mahfuz Anam
Editor & Publisher

ILLUSTRATION:
ZARIF FAIAZ

HOW THE JULY REVOLUTION reshaped Bangladesh's youth

PHOTO: ORCHID CHANGMA

MAISHA ISLAM MONAMEE

History has its moments—points of inflection where societies, seemingly stagnant and indifferent, erupt with untold energy. For Bangladesh, the July Revolution was one such moment, and an event that redefined the political history of Bangladesh. It was not just a political upheaval; it was a cultural awakening, a seismic shift that shook a seemingly apolitical generation into action. For years, we, the youth of Bangladesh, had been caricatured as indifferent to the political machinations of the country, our dreams seemingly limited to a singular escape—to leave. We were told to seek refuge in foreign lands, chasing opportunities in the West, and our departure was fueled by a belief that meaningful change was an impossibility within the borders of our homeland. The July Revolution turned this narrative on its head, igniting a spirit of resilience, hope, and ownership among a generation that had all but surrendered to cynicism.

The roots of the July Revolution trace back to early June 2024, when the Supreme Court invalidated a crucial 2018 circular that had redefined job quotas in the public sector. The Anti-discrimination Students Movement, a coalition of university students advocating for equity, inclusion, and meritocracy, responded swiftly. What began as peaceful protests for the reinstatement of a fair quota system soon snowballed into a nationwide uprising. The turning point came when the regime's security forces unleashed unspeakable violence against the protesters, resulting in mass killings. The bloodshed galvanised the nation. Thousands poured into the streets, fueled by anger, grief, and a yearning for justice. By the time the fascist regime fell in August, Bangladesh had witnessed its most significant political upheaval in decades. This entire movement was spearheaded by a group of young people. We led the movement, sacrificed our lives on the street and came back stronger than ever.

At the heart of the July revolution was a deep-seated disillusionment with the status quo. Years of political instability and inequality have fueled a growing sense of anger and frustration and we were just done with this system that deprives us of basic fundamental rights. One might as well say that July 2024 was the result of years of simmering discontent boiling over. The fascist AL regime, known for its suppression of dissent and centralisation of power, underestimated the movement's intensity. Within just a few weeks, the revolution, initially about specific reforms, had transformed into a complete reimagining of the nation's political landscape.

PHOTO: ORCHID CHANGMA

The roots of the July Revolution trace back to early June 2024, when the Supreme Court invalidated a crucial 2018 circular that had redefined job quotas in the public sector.

To understand the impact of the July Revolution, one must first confront the apathy that preceded it. For decades, politics in Bangladesh had been synonymous with corruption, nepotism, and a blatant disregard for the people's will. Politics was viewed as a swamp — murky, treacherous, and best avoided. So, we were silenced at our homes, educational institutions and social media. We were made to be afraid of these fascist forces who could not tolerate dissent. And we had examples to look back at what happens when things do not go their way. As a result of bearing witness to these systemic failures, we were forced to distance ourselves from the political arena. Eventually, we became the generation that was too consumed by social media trends, memes, and fleeting distractions to care about the state of their country.

But July changed this. And everything that happened next.

It would not be wrong to say that Gen-Z has a background of a very tumultuous relationship with politics and I do not blame us for this. You see, we have witnessed two national elections without being able to vote. We notice corruption at every step of the way. We have to deal with student politics in halls and campuses. We are tired of having things this way and hearing that they would not change. We are fed up with the idea that we either live with this or fly away in search of better opportunities. And this is precisely why an 'apolitical' group of young people all of a sudden became intertwined with state politics.

And this is solely because the discontent had been simmering. The erosion of democracy, rampant corruption, and unchecked authoritarianism were not lost on us. It just took the fire of the July Revolution to awaken us from our dormancy. We were called apolitical, but when politics knocked on our doors with batons and bullets, we answered with courage and conviction. This was not the work of seasoned activists; it was a movement led by students, first-time protesters, and young professionals who had never before set foot in the political arena. The overthrow of a government that had long been perceived as untouchable came as a shock, not just to the political establishment but to the very youth who had turned their backs on it.

What began as scattered protests over government job quotas quickly snowballed into a nationwide movement. I remember being irritated sitting in an hour-long jam due to 'just another Shahbagh protest'. Then, I remember going to Shahbagh on August 4 for the declaration of one-point demand. In the weeks between, something changed within me and all people my age. For the first time in forever, we believed that we could actually change something. This belief was contagious, just like courage, and the sudden outburst of patriotism was difficult to contain. I cannot recall the last time I felt it so strongly. So for the first time in decades, the youth were not mere spectators but active participants, our voices echoing in the streets, our demands inscribed as graffitis, and our resolve etched in history. For most of us, the revolution was a baptism of fire. We witnessed friends being dragged away by police or lost loved ones in the chaos. By the end of July, the movement felt extremely personal because it was not just about quota or jobs anymore. It became a one-shot opportunity to change the way things have always been.

It forced us to confront our own complicity in the nation's stagnation. For years, we had justified our apathy with claims of helplessness. Because what difference can one person make?. But July showed us that collective action, even if sparked by seemingly insignificant acts of defiance, could topple even the most entrenched systems. For most of us, the revolution was a mirror. It reflected the choices we had made — the times we had chosen silence over confrontation, cynicism over hope. It was humbling, even painful, to realise that apathy had been a luxury, one that could no longer be afforded. We were a generation waking up, not just to the failures of our leaders but to the failures within ourselves.

When I say we became politically active, I do not just mean picking sides. Over the past few months, we made an actual effort to learn and relearn parts of our history. We tried to understand the ideologies shaping our political landscapes and for the first time this subject matter became exciting because we were now free to discuss these things. For the first time, it felt like we were just spectators in our nation's story; we were authors. Each conversation, each act of protest, and each step forward was a line written in the narrative of a new Bangladesh.

I personally believe that the most profound impact of the July Revolution is the way it has reshaped dreams. For years, most of us dreamt of leaving the country. The July Revolution, however, instilled a sense of ownership—an understanding that the fate of Bangladesh rests not in the hands of political elites but in our own. Today, our dreams are different. We dream of reforming that system, of building a Bangladesh where future generations will not feel the need to leave. This shift is not just ideological but deeply emotional. It is a rejection of despair and an embrace of hope, a refusal to accept that our motherland is doomed to failure. It is a declaration that we are not just citizens but stakeholders, not just beneficiaries but builders.

The July Revolution was a wake-up call, not just for the political establishment but for the youth of Bangladesh. It proved that an apolitical generation is a myth, that beneath the veneer of indifference lies a wellspring of passion, resilience, and determination. It showed that the youth, when pushed to the brink, are not just capable of dreaming but of acting, not just of criticising but of creating. In the aftermath of the revolution, the youth are staying. And they are rebuilding. One crisis at a time.

Maisha Islam Monamee *is a student of Institute of Business Administration (IBA) at the University of Dhaka and a contributor at The Daily Star.*

PHOTO: ZARIF FAIAZ

BREAKING BOUNDARIES

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Leveraging the Bangladeshi diaspora

A generational opportunity for national development

Each diaspora segment has distinct needs and motivations, requiring unique outreach approaches. For instance, hosting large gatherings at biryani halls in Jackson Heights might attract individuals already connected to Bangladesh but disillusioned by past experiences, making them hesitant to re-engage. Their skill sets, while valuable, may not align with Bangladesh's current developmental needs. Conversely, Bangladeshi professionals in sectors like investment banking and technology possess critical skills, networks, and capital.

RAHAT AHMED

ILLUSTRATION: ZARIF FAIAZ

In the weeks following August 5, interest from non-resident Bangladeshis (NRBs) in the professional sector surged. Messages poured in: "Tell me how I can help; I'll move back," and "I don't need to make money—I'll work for free." Others sought ways to contribute remotely, balancing personal and professional commitments. Some, unable to return, asked how they could support Bangladesh from abroad. One thing is clear: we have a window of opportunity to harness the vast potential of the Bangladeshi diaspora to accelerate the nation's development and strengthen the bonds within this global community.

To engage effectively with the diaspora, we must first acknowledge that it is not a monolithic entity. Historically, outreach efforts have been narrow, focusing predominantly on immigrant enclaves in cities like London and New York. This approach overlooks professionals and young people who are often more eager to connect with their heritage. The lack of tailored engagement strategies has deepened divisions within diaspora groups, limiting the value they could have contributed to Bangladesh over the past decade.

Each diaspora segment has distinct needs and motivations, requiring unique outreach approaches. For instance, hosting large gatherings at biryani halls in Jackson Heights might attract individuals already connected to Bangladesh but disillusioned by past experiences, making them hesitant to re-engage. Their skill sets, while valuable, may not align with Bangladesh's current developmental needs. Conversely, Bangladeshi professionals in sectors like investment banking and technology possess critical skills, networks, and capital. However, they often lack the time, resources, or trusted channels to engage effectively.

Based on experience and data, the diaspora can be broadly categorised into six groups, each requiring distinct strategies. The first group consists of the older generation who emigrated before 1995. Their memories of Bangladesh are mixed at best, but they possess both capital and skills that could contribute significantly. They are predominantly based in the United Kingdom and the United States. The second group comprises working-class immigrants, many of whom emigrated through lottery visa programmes or similar channels. These individuals often believe that the opportunities they have abroad are better than anything they could have accessed in Bangladesh. Historically present in large numbers in the UK and US, they are now also found in smaller communities across countries like Italy. The third group includes Bangladeshi professionals who have emigrated in the past decade, benefitting from friendlier visa policies while maintaining strong ties to Bangladesh through family, friends, or education. They are particularly active in Canada, Australia, and to a lesser extent, the United States. The fourth and fifth groups consist of the children of the first two groups. Some of them, now in their late teens or early adulthood, are eager to reconnect with their cultural roots. Others have established themselves professionally in key sectors such as finance and technology, with a strong presence in the US, Canada, and the UK. Finally, the sixth group consists of migrant workers whose primary focus is to earn income for their families, often with the hope of returning home someday. They are predominantly based in the Middle East, as well as countries like Malaysia, Singapore, and Italy.

To date, engagement efforts have primarily focused on the first and second groups, largely because these communities have established organisations like the well-known Federation of Bangladeshi Associations in North America (FOBANA) in the US. The Bangladeshi government and related institutions have maintained strong ties with these organisations, making them easier to engage with. Meanwhile, migrant workers in the sixth group have distinct needs that require different approaches, such as streamlining and legitimising their employment processes.

While all six groups have valuable contributions to offer, this discussion focuses on the third, fourth, and fifth groups—Bangladeshi professionals and second-generation youth. They share key traits that can drive Bangladesh's development. Unlike older generations, they are free from the psychological remnants of colonialism. Growing up abroad, they view themselves as equals on the global stage, unbound by outdated deference to the West. Many have worked in leading firms like Google or Goldman Sachs, equipped with best practices and the potential to elevate Bangladesh's industries. Imagine the impact if NRBs from companies like Apple, Intel, or Nvidia collaborated to develop Bangladesh's hardware technology sector. Their influence extends beyond individual expertise; they have access to extensive global networks across various industries, enabling them to forge partnerships and identify opportunities that might otherwise be inaccessible. Additionally, they can bridge Bangladesh's historical reliance on development aid and low-quality capital by attracting high-quality global investments.

To unlock this potential, we must first recognise that the diaspora is diverse and requires tailored engagement strategies. Building meaningful, long-term relationships with each group involves offering clear, accessible pathways for contribution. Professionalism matters—high-calibre individuals are unlikely to respond to poorly designed emails or participate in events that lack polish and credibility. Good design and thoughtful branding signal progress and competence. We must also be discerning about which diaspora organisations receive official recognition. Not every group with a grand name deserves government endorsement. It's essential to assess their track records and contributions before involving senior officials in their activities. Moreover, we need to redefine the diaspora's value proposition. NRBs aren't inherently superior to local talent; the key difference often lies in access to resources and opportunities. Facilitating connections between NRBs and local professionals can help bridge this gap, fostering mutual growth and learning. Another critical step is to streamline the process for NRBs who wish to return to Bangladesh. This includes addressing practical concerns such as education options for their children, legal paperwork, and overall quality of life—factors that significantly influence relocation decisions.

Despite the clear benefits, several barriers have hindered effective diaspora engagement. One major obstacle is gatekeeping. Certain individuals within Bangladesh benefit from maintaining the status quo, fearing that the influx of highly qualified NRBs could challenge their positions. Ironically, this short-sightedness harms everyone, including the gatekeepers themselves, as it stifles progress in an increasingly competitive global landscape. Countries like Vietnam, Indonesia, and Pakistan are actively engaging their diaspora communities, even appointing them to senior government and corporate roles. Another barrier is limited access. Bangladesh lacks efficient mechanisms to identify and connect with its global talent pool. This is compounded by a historical lack of curiosity about whether experts in various fields exist within the diaspora. Even when such individuals are identified, there is often uncertainty about how to approach them respectfully and effectively. Policy gaps also play a role. Government entities like the Ministry of Foreign Affairs tend to focus on traditional diaspora groups, neglecting the unique needs and potential contributions of professionals who could attract foreign direct investment. Additionally, there's a storytelling deficit. Many diaspora Bangladeshis have limited knowledge of the country's current developments. Negative news often dominates, overshadowing positive stories that could inspire greater engagement.

If we address these challenges effectively, the rewards could be transformative. We could see a surge in foreign direct investment, reducing our dependence on development aid and remittances from migrant workers. Accessing high-quality global capital would open new avenues for economic growth. This, in turn, could lead to the creation of new industries. Whether in semiconductors, biotechnology, or other emerging sectors, combining capital with diaspora talent could catalyse innovation, generate jobs, and elevate Bangladesh's position in the global economy. A stronger national brand would also emerge. While neighbouring countries have successfully cultivated their global images, Bangladesh remains underrepresented. Leveraging the achievements of our diaspora could reshape international perceptions, moving beyond outdated stereotypes associated with garments or natural disasters. Most importantly, this process would foster a sense of unity. A shared identity strengthens the social fabric, creating networks of trust and support that transcend borders.

Bangladesh stands at a pivotal crossroads. The decisions we make in the coming years will shape the nation's trajectory for decades. Now is the time to mobilise our people and resources—at home and abroad—to build a brighter, more prosperous future.

Rahat Ahmed *is the co-founder of B/deshi, a global diaspora network connecting Bangladeshi professionals. He is also the Founder & Managing Partner of Anchorless Bangladesh, a New York-based investment firm bringing global capital to Bangladesh.*

- The Bangladeshi diaspora presents a significant opportunity for national development, with rising interest from NRBs to contribute both locally and remotely.
- The diaspora is diverse, requiring tailored engagement strategies to connect effectively with professionals, youth, and migrant workers.
- NRBs, especially professionals in sectors like tech and finance, can drive innovation, attract global investments, and elevate Bangladesh's industries.
- Barriers such as gatekeeping, policy gaps, and poor outreach have hindered diaspora engagement, limiting their potential contributions.
- Addressing these challenges can unlock transformative benefits, including increased foreign investment, new industries, and a stronger global image for Bangladesh.

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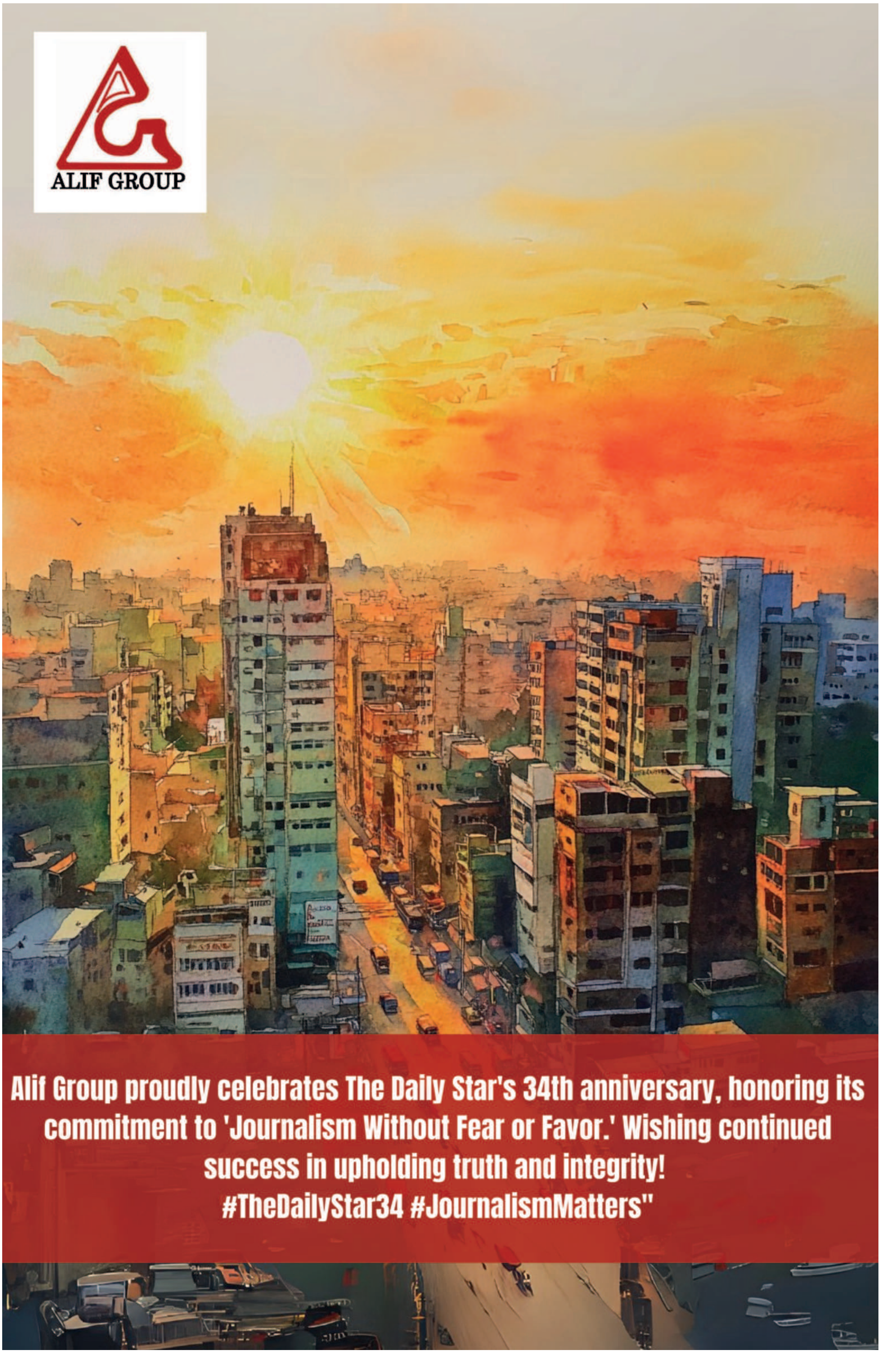

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UNLOCKING BANGLADESH'S POTENTIAL through digital connectivity

Addressing the digital divide requires a strategic approach focused on reducing the cost of smartphones, mobile data, and Wi-Fi, which have become fundamental public goods. Equally important is investing in rural connectivity by supporting the expansion of telecom networks and fostering greater industry competition among mobile network operators to improve service quality and affordability.

SHAHIR CHOWDHURY

In the 21st century, the notion of infrastructure has evolved beyond roads, bridges, and railways. The new lifeline for progress is digital infrastructure—specifically, access to affordable and reliable internet. Yet, in Bangladesh, the internet remains treated as a luxury rather than a fundamental utility. This mindset is not only outdated but also a significant impediment to our collective growth. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the education sector, where education technology (edtech) has the potential to bridge gaps that traditional methods have failed to address. But without accessible mobile data and widespread Wi-Fi, that potential will remain untapped.

THE CASE FOR DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE IN EDUCATION

Imagine a remote village where trained teachers are scarce or non-existent. In such places, edtech is already proving to be a game-changer, allowing students to access the best teachers and resources through video streaming—both live and recorded. Platforms powered by the internet can deliver high-quality lessons to millions of students at a fraction of the cost of building physical schools or training qualified teachers. Yet, this possibility hinges on one critical factor: digital connectivity.

Shikho's own experience underscores this reality. With 2.5 million registered users across all 64 districts of Bangladesh, including remote villages and islands, the demand for edtech is undeniable. However, we observe that registered users in rural areas engage far less with our platform compared to their urban counterparts. The primary barrier? Internet pricing.

Rural students frequently tell us, "MB shesh", a phrase reflecting how they measure internet usage in megabytes due to high costs. This mindset highlights the friction in access that prevents them from leveraging digital tools effectively. A shift to GB usage as the standard would be transformative—not just for edtech but for all digital services. It would mark a significant step toward bridging the rural-urban digital divide and empowering underserved communities.

LEARNING FROM INDIA: THE JIO EFFECT

India offers a compelling case study of the transformative power of affordable internet. In 2016, Reliance Jio disrupted the market by offering drastically cheaper mobile data and free voice calls.

The results were staggering. Data usage skyrocketed, and India became one of the world's largest consumers of mobile data, with average usage increasing from 430 MB per month in 2015 to 11 GB per month by December 2019, according to Nokia's Mobile Broadband Index 2020. This surge in data consumption was accompanied by a rapid expansion of internet penetration, as affordable data brought millions of rural Indians online for the first time. The impact extended beyond connectivity; EdTech platforms flourished as companies offering online learning services scaled exponentially, reaching students across both urban and rural areas.

This explosion in connectivity didn't just benefit students. It catalysed behavioral and psychological shifts as people began to integrate digital services into their daily lives. From streaming educational content to accessing government services, the internet became a vital tool for empowerment.

Bangladesh can replicate this success. But it requires bold policy decisions and a collaborative effort between the government, NGOs, and the private sector. The friction in the current system—high costs, poor access, and weak infrastructure—must be addressed.

ILLUSTRATION: ZARIF FAIAZ

- Bangladesh's digital infrastructure, essential for progress, remains underdeveloped, limiting access to affordable, reliable internet, especially in education.
- High costs, poor connectivity, and outdated policies create barriers to digital adoption, widening the rural-urban digital divide.
- India's digital transformation through affordable internet offers a model Bangladesh could replicate with bold policy reforms and investments.
- Collaborative efforts from the government, NGOs, and private sector are crucial to reduce internet costs, improve infrastructure, and expand EdTech access.
- Without urgent action to prioritise digital connectivity, Bangladesh risks falling behind in global education, economic opportunities, and technological innovation.

THE FRICTION IN BANGLADESH'S SYSTEM

Bangladesh faces significant challenges in mobile internet adoption, particularly in rural areas. According to the GSMA's 'The State of Mobile Internet Connectivity 2024' report, only 26% of rural residents own smartphones, compared to 41% in urban areas. This disparity contributes to lower mobile internet usage, with 27% in rural regions versus 43% in urban centers.

Affordability remains a critical barrier. The GSMA report highlights that the cost of devices and data plans disproportionately affects underserved populations, limiting their access to mobile internet services. These challenges are compounded by high taxation on mobile services. The supplementary duty on mobile data has increased from 3% in FY16 to 23% in 2024, making internet access less affordable for the general population.

Another significant friction to smartphone adoption is their price. Instead of making smartphones more affordable, recent government policies have increased taxation on locally produced and assembled devices.

A 2% VAT was introduced for fully locally produced handsets, where previously no such tax existed. For devices manufactured with at least two locally made components, the VAT has increased from 3% to 5%. Additionally, handsets assembled domestically using all imported components now face a 7.5% VAT, up from the previous rate of 5%.

These policy changes have raised the cost of devices, creating additional barriers for low-income families in rural areas who are already struggling with high mobile data costs. Addressing these issues requires a multifaceted approach, including reducing taxes on mobile services, improving the affordability of devices and data plans, and implementing policies that incentivise local production and lower consumer prices.

THE ROLE OF NGOS, GOVERNMENTS, AND MULTILATERAL INSTITUTIONS

NGOs, donor agencies, and governments have long been involved in improving education in Bangladesh, but much of their focus remains on analog solutions—building schools, distributing textbooks, and training teachers. While these initiatives are valuable, they fail to address the root cause of educational inequality in the digital age: the lack of internet access.

Instead of continuing to invest in fragmented programs, these stakeholders should work toward a unified, strategic agenda aimed at removing the digital divide. Multilateral and bilateral institutions like the World Bank and Asian Development Bank (ADB), alongside NGOs and governments, have the resources to drive systemic change. The focus should not be on subsidies alone but on pooling resources to lower the cost of essential digital infrastructure.

Addressing the digital divide requires a strategic approach focused on reducing the cost of smartphones, mobile data, and Wi-Fi, which have become fundamental public goods. Equally important is investing in rural connectivity by supporting the expansion of telecom networks and fostering greater industry competition among mobile network operators to improve service quality and affordability. In addition, creating strategic partnerships between governments, telecom companies, and development agencies can play a crucial role in reducing infrastructure costs, ultimately making internet access more affordable for underserved communities.

By shifting away from analog interventions and prioritising digital solutions, these efforts can ensure that underserved populations gain access to tools that empower them in education, healthcare, and economic opportunities. Instead of building more analog systems, the goal should be to provide universal digital access and integrate those without connectivity into the digital economy.

Such a collaborative approach can create sustainable, scalable solutions that benefit all stakeholders and ensure that no one is left behind in the journey toward a connected Bangladesh. It would also allow private companies like Shikho, which are providing meaningful digital services that can be considered public goods, to broaden their impact.

EMPOWERING ALL STAKEHOLDERS IN EDUCATION

Education technology, like the services Shikho has built, is not just about empowering students—it's a comprehensive solution designed to bridge the demand-supply mismatch in Bangladesh's education system. With only 1.69% of GDP allocated to education, the sector faces chronic resource constraints: too many students, too few teachers, and limited infrastructure. EdTech can address these challenges by providing scalable solutions that benefit all education stakeholders—students, parents, and teachers alike.

For students, EdTech offers access to high-quality resources and teaching, even in resource-constrained environments. But its potential goes far beyond the classroom. Schools can integrate EdTech to power their operations, and teachers can leverage it for training and professional development. Parents, too, can use EdTech to access tools and information that help them support their children's learning journey.

Despite these benefits, many parents and teachers perceive EdTech as unfamiliar or even alien. While students have begun to embrace digital tools, their parents often remain hesitant, and school teachers may not feel comfortable integrating EdTech into their daily routines. This gap is not a lack of interest but a lack of familiarity and accessibility. Digital literacy can only be built through consistent usage, and this requires making internet and digital tools affordable and accessible.

To catalyse this adoption, cost barriers must be reduced. Subsidising mobile data and devices for parents and teachers is a crucial first step. By enabling these stakeholders to engage with digital tools in their everyday lives, we can foster a culture of digital fluency that benefits the entire education ecosystem. When parents and teachers begin to see the tangible benefits of EdTech, their increased usage will drive broader adoption and transform how education is delivered and experienced across Bangladesh.

A CALL FOR FORWARD THINKING

Bangladesh's current approach to infrastructure is deeply rooted in the past. We prioritise physical highways while neglecting the digital highways that will drive future growth. This mindset must change.

The world is already moving beyond basic internet services to AI-driven innovations, from personalised learning platforms to automated healthcare solutions. If Bangladesh fails to lay the groundwork now, it risks being left behind—not just in education, but in the global race for economic opportunities.

Without affordable and reliable internet, millions of students will remain locked out of the digital education system's future. Yet, the impact extends far beyond classrooms. Entire communities risk being isolated from the opportunities available to the rest of the world. In today's interconnected age, this is the worst form of economic discrimination. The internet is not just a tool; it is the gateway to empowerment, providing access to information, services, and markets on a global scale.

Ensuring universal access to affordable internet is not just about fairness; it's about unlocking human potential and providing every individual with the ability to participate in a rapidly digitising world. Without bold, immediate action, the dream of a tech-driven, equitable economy will remain just that—a dream.

Shahir Chowdhury *is a CFA charterholder with over a decade of experience working in financial services in London. He is the founder and CEO of Shikho, an edtech company dedicated to democratising access to education across Bangladesh.*

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The role of social media in youth political activism

Gen Z prefers social media for political activism because they demand a more fast-paced, on-the-ground approach when it comes to covering politics. Whether it is a small local issue or a larger national crisis, social media has empowered young activists to assemble quickly and with greater efficiency.

MEHRAB JAMEE

It's no secret that the majority now consumes news on social media. From short bits and clips to in-depth deep dives and podcasts, the role of social media in news consumption and circulation cannot be overlooked. The case for political news is not different either. When we think of heated political conversation, we might think of shouting matches around tea stalls, but in reality, much of the discourse now happens on social media. Be it ideological narratives, fact-laden posts, or just traditional media talk shows and news breakdowns, the youth tend to consume media online. And with the speed at which content is being churned out, traditional media just can't keep up.

In fact, Gen Z prefers social media for political activism because they demand a more fast-paced, on-the-ground approach when it comes to covering politics. Whether it is a small local issue or a larger national crisis, social media has empowered young activists to assemble quickly and with greater efficiency. Adoption of social media as a platform for raising your voice against any discrimination is therefore widespread. It becomes clearer if we look back to the days before social media when news had to be accessed through physical mediums. Some protests received news coverage, while others didn't.

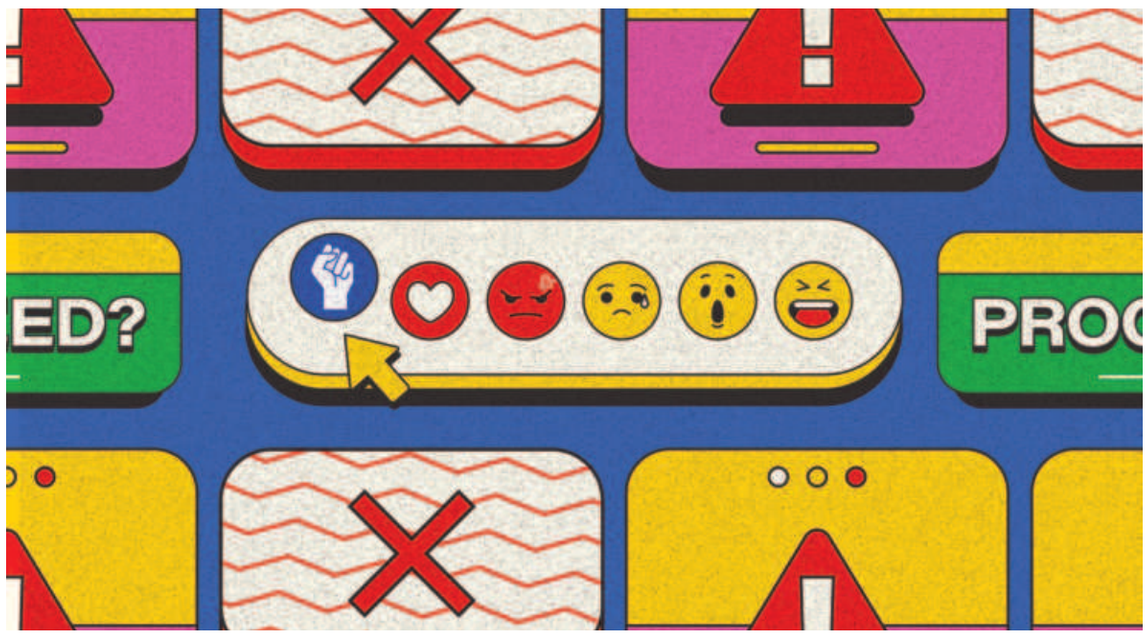

ILLUSTRATION: ZARIF FAIAZ

ILLUSTRATION: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

With social media in hand, this conundrum has changed. Movements like the Shahbagh protests of 2013, the quota protests in 2018, the Road Safety Movement in 2018, and of course, the 2024 quota protests, which led to a full-scale uprising are some movements, just in our country, that come to mind. All of these gained traction on social media as small movements and eventually accumulated public support, in large part because of online activists and bloggers.

One such online activist is Zakaria Tasrik, a student of Robotics and Mechatronics Engineering at Dhaka University. When asked about why young people overwhelmingly turned to social media during the July protests he said, "In my opinion, social media played the role of pushing people into the movement. On the other hand, a lot of traditional media channels propagated disinformation, which made people rely on social media even more. I remember the parallel attacks on Dhaka University (DU) and Jahangirnagar University (JU). I came across clips of tear shells being shot at students in front of TSC on Facebook, the day after Abu Sayed died. I took that video and decided to post it on Facebook. Within an hour it got around 10,000 reacts and a million views. Short videos like these, from multiple sources, fuelled the protests. Videos of students being attacked, as much as they traumatised people, prompted them to join the protests."

Ashfi Islam, an intermediate student at the capital's Willes Little Flower School and College is one such youngster who joined the protest. On the role of social media as a force for political activism he said, "We received information mostly from social media. Kids my age aren't used to traditional media formats. We're also online a lot. Even my friends who were conservative about posting political news on their timelines were sharing posts about the atrocities that were unfolding. It felt like the youth were united in these posts. There was no way of ignoring our wave anymore. When everyone began sharing the same videos of police brutality and political suppression, the point was driven home. It inspired me on a personal level to come out on the streets."

Social media – compared to conventional media – is doing a better job of captivating, convincing, and mobilising protesters. Mujahidul Islam, a final-year medical student opines, "A big reason for using social media as a platform for any protest is the option of anonymity. In contrast, making an appearance on mainstream media carries a level of risk in our country. Even if it doesn't lead to harassment from law enforcement agencies, you might face harassment at your workplace or educational institution. Speaking on such platforms has less possibility of repercussions while at the same time conveying support for a cause you believe in. The compound effect of a critical mass of people speaking on an issue is also real. People might see their peers posting online and be compelled to post themselves. This is eventually communicated to our power structures or traditional media outlets, and the point is conveyed as intended."

Elaborating on the same issue Nomayer Nehal, a student and resident of Khulna

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The role of social media in youth political activism

"Our local papers, however, actively covered our protests. Social media-based news outlets on Facebook also contributed a lot. These local online pages were covering the protests, keeping protesters like us informed on where the police were or about the hotspots where most arrests were happening."

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said, "Social media sites were showing what the students had to say at a time when, I feel like, traditional media outlets couldn't give us this platform."

The coverage of protests, especially if it takes place in a regional city, doesn't always make it into the national conversation. Discussing the role of social media in covering regional protests Nehal said, "The coverage of protests by the national media was minimal during the July Revolution in divisional cities like Khulna. We didn't see journalists from major media outlets on the ground while protesting here in Khulna. Our local papers, however, actively covered our protests. Social media-based news outlets on Facebook also contributed a lot. These local online pages were covering the protests, keeping protesters like us informed on where the police were or about the hotspots where most arrests were happening. They were going live during the massive clashes between the police and protesters on August 2 here. Even my parents came out looking for me after seeing the clashes on Facebook."

Yet there is a need to reach conventional media houses. Social media is a great tool for online activism and arranging flash protests, but conventional media has to step in to put real pressure on any power structure. Nonetheless, individuals on social media have been doing much of the heavy lifting in drawing the attention of national and international media to persisting issues, even in the face of suppression.

PHOTO: ZARIF FAIAZ

PHOTO: ZARIF FAIAZ

Young people developing an interest in politics, activism, and state-building is a positive outcome.

"The collective attempt to reach the international media was a big step. Most Facebook-based activists urged people to turn to X to gain attention from international media outlets. They were successful as Al Jazeera had three interviews with the former ministers regarding the situation in the country. Throughout that period, the narrative that the ruling party was pushing was weak in social media. They also had to shut down the whole internet at one point. This move simply shows the impact social media had on the government," said Zakaria.

If you try to catch lightning in a bottle, chances are you're going to get zapped a few times in the process. Using social media for political activism and similar to catching lightning in a bottle because when it works, it can be the best medium. Offering a diversity of political views on an open platform where everyone can have a voice and a collective narrative emerges without any censorship. But it equally has the opportunity to spread violence, hate speech, and mobilise groups preaching distorted narratives of the truth. Even in terms of political literacy, it runs a real risk of trapping you in an echo chamber of similar views, reinforcing a singular narrative and reducing one's ability of critical thinking and tolerance to opposing views.

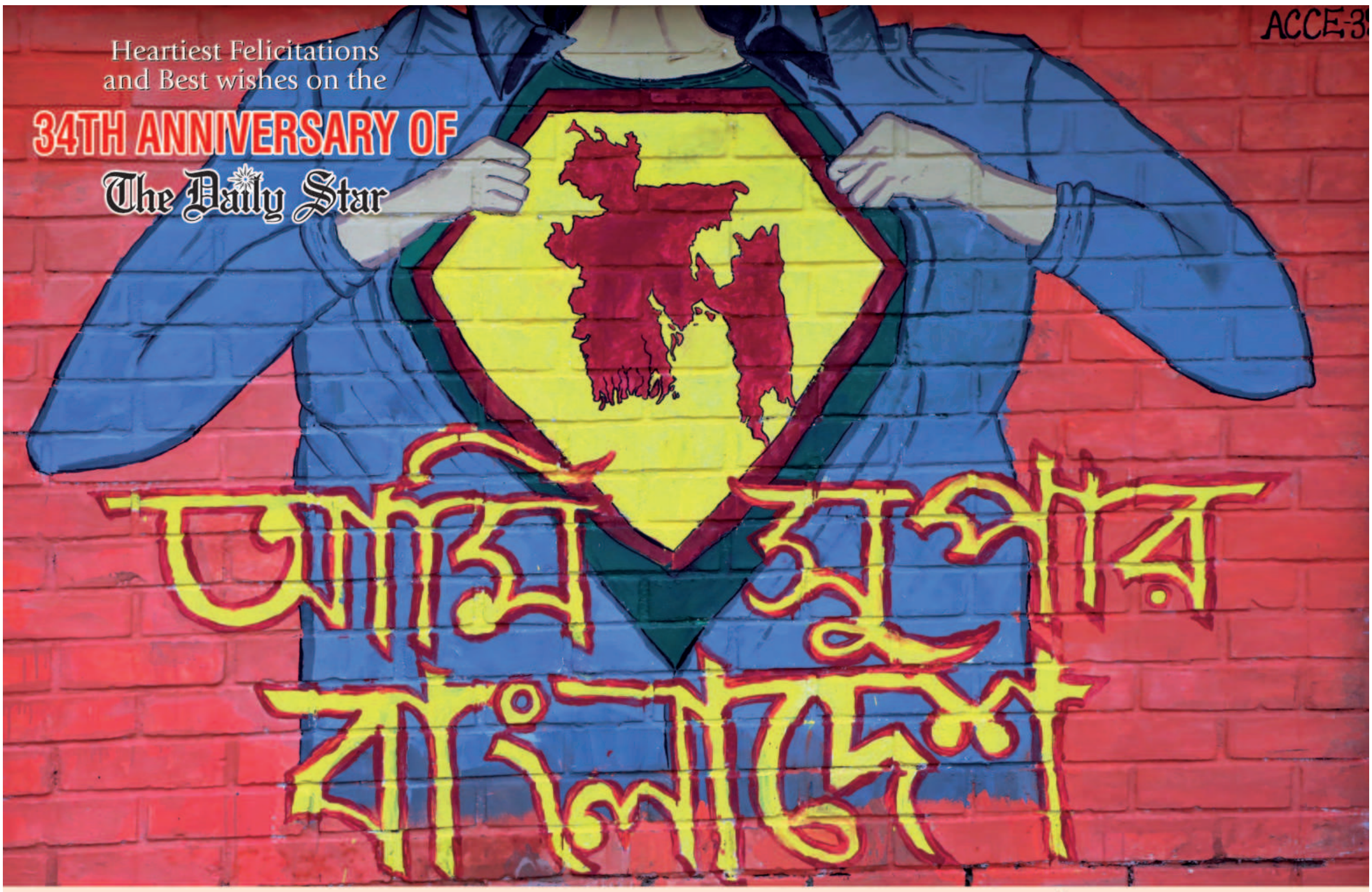
"Obviously, the downside is the lack of fact-checking on social media platforms. The algorithms often promote content with hate speech. Organised propaganda is also more effective on social media. People living inside these propaganda bubbles rarely get the chance to verify the news that they're getting. It divides entire communities and is often used to create an 'us versus them' narrative," said Mujahid.

This doesn't mean, however, that social media cannot be used for political literacy. But a sceptical view must be maintained to fact-check sources and to ensure that your feed is not becoming an echo chamber.

On the role of social media in the political literacy of our youth, Ahmed Abdul Mukit, a final-year student of Political Science at Dhaka University said, "Social media news outlets are winning out on the young demographic as these outlets tailor the news to our preferences. They chop the news into palatable pieces and visually appealing thumbnails which are easier to share from personal accounts. The spread of information is supercharged in this way. When it comes to political literacy, even conscious young people are choosing platforms like YouTube or podcasts, and maybe they're fact-checking the sources themselves. It's more convenient and a lot faster this way. The flipside is obviously accountability. Often self-serving, sponsored, or malicious content is presented in front of hundreds of thousands of people packaged as authentic news. Traditional media outlets crosscheck themselves and each other on a regular basis because they might lose credibility over this."

Young people developing an interest in politics, activism, and state-building is a positive outcome. The contribution of social media in energising the youth of this nation cannot be understated. It has united the country on a wide variety of issues. It is our hope that Gen Z can harness the benefits of social media and not give in to its potential for communal violence, misinformation, and propaganda.

Mehrab Jamee *is an activist at Sandhani and a 5th-year medical student at Mugda Medical College.*



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Tackling economic disparities: A journey towards Bangladesh 2.0

ILLUSTRATION: **EHSANUR RAZA RONNY**

MD SHIYAN SADIK *and*
SAKIF AL EHSAN KHAN

- Bangladesh's economic disparities stem from historical exploitation and systemic inequalities.
- The 2024 July Uprising showcased youth-led demands for inclusive economic reforms.
- 'Bangladesh 2.0' envisions a progressive, equitable, and resilient nation beyond GDP growth.
- Challenges include institutional resistance, corruption, lack of expertise, and global economic pressures.
- Achieving equity requires reforms, youth empowerment, and strong public-private partnerships.

Economic disparity has been a recurring theme in the history of Bangladesh, shaping its past, influencing its present, and challenging its aspirations for the future. From tales of tyranny to the struggle for independence, the narrative of inequality has been a constant companion in the nation's journey. As Bangladesh sets its sights on a new era, dubbed 'Bangladesh 2.0', the call for reducing economic disparity is louder than ever, driven largely by the youth who spearheaded the July Uprising of 2024.

The seeds of economic inequality were sown long before Bangladesh's independence. Stories of exploitative practices during the Mughal and Maratha periods, though now largely anecdotal, are still shared as cautionary tales. The British colonial era institutionalised these disparities, with resources from Bengal diverted to serve imperial interests. This period witnessed devastating famines and systemic impoverishment, cementing a legacy of economic deprivation.

The partition of British India in 1947 did little to address these inequities. Under Pakistan's rule, East Bengal (later East Pakistan) found itself further marginalised. The economic policies of the central government were heavily skewed in favour of West Pakistan, leading to pronounced regional disparities. Despite constituting the majority of the population, East Pakistan received only a fraction of the resources and investments. This imbalance fuelled discontent, ultimately culminating in the Liberation War of 1971.

When Bangladesh emerged as an independent nation, there was widespread hope that the new state would rectify these injustices. Yet, despite notable achievements in poverty reduction, literacy, and health, economic inequality has persisted and, in some cases, widened. The gap between the wealthy elite and the majority population remains stark, with rural areas and marginalised communities often left behind.

Fast forward to 2024, when the July Uprising highlighted the simmering frustrations of a generation grappling with these enduring disparities. The youth, armed with modern technology and inspired by global movements, led the charge for systemic change. Their demands extended beyond political reforms, calling for an economy that is inclusive and equitable. The recently published 'White Paper' added momentum to this movement by exposing the extent of economic discrepancies. The report revealed alarming disparities in income distribution, access to quality education and healthcare, and employment opportunities. It also pointed to systemic issues such as corruption, lack of transparency, and the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few.

The concept of 'Bangladesh 2.0' embodies a vision of a nation that is progressive, inclusive, and resilient. Central to this vision is the reduction of economic disparity, a goal that resonates deeply with the youth who played a pivotal

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Tackling economic disparities: A journey towards Bangladesh 2.0

The journey towards 'Bangladesh 2.0' is a collective endeavour that requires the participation of all stakeholders. While the youth have ignited the spark, sustaining the momentum demands collaboration, innovation, and a steadfast commitment to justice and equity.

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role in the uprising. Their aspirations reflect a desire for equitable growth that moves beyond GDP as the sole indicator of progress, shifting the focus to inclusive growth that benefits all segments of society. They envision an economy that creates jobs that are not only abundant but also dignified, offering fair wages and benefits while empowering women and marginalised groups. Addressing disparities in education and healthcare is crucial to ensuring that every citizen has the opportunity to reach their full potential. Moreover, reducing the urban-rural divide through strategic investments in infrastructure, industries, and services in underdeveloped regions is fundamental to this vision.

While the vision is inspiring, the road to achieving it is fraught with challenges. Economic disparity is a complex issue rooted in historical, structural, and systemic factors, and addressing it requires a multifaceted approach and a commitment to long-term reforms. One of the key obstacles is the lack of expertise. While the youth have been instrumental in driving change, they often lack the technical knowledge needed to address complex economic issues. Bridging this gap requires investment in education and training, as well as collaboration with experienced professionals who can provide guidance and mentorship. Institutional resistance poses another significant challenge. Established systems and vested interests often resist change to protect the status quo. Overcoming this inertia requires strong political will, transparency, and accountability at all levels of governance. Additionally, Bangladesh's vulnerability to global economic fluctuations adds another layer of complexity. As a developing nation, it faces external pressures that can undermine economic stability. Building resilience through diversification and sustainable practices is crucial to mitigate these risks. Corruption remains a pervasive issue, undermining efforts to promote equity and fairness. Tackling corruption at all levels is essential to ensure that resources are allocated efficiently and that economic opportunities are accessible to all.

To realise the vision of 'Bangladesh 2.0', a comprehensive strategy is needed. This strategy should encompass policy reforms that promote equitable growth, including progressive taxation, land reforms, and targeted subsidies for the underprivileged. Investing in education and vocational training is vital to equip the youth with the skills necessary for a modern economy. Technological innovation must also be harnessed to improve access to services, enhance transparency, and drive economic growth. Public-private partnerships can play a crucial role in addressing disparities and fostering innovation by encouraging collaboration between the government, private sector, and civil society. Engaging local communities in decision-making processes ensures that policies are inclusive and responsive to the diverse needs of the population. Furthermore, establishing robust mechanisms to monitor progress and hold stakeholders accountable is essential to maintain momentum and ensure that reforms translate into tangible improvements.

The concept of 'Bangladesh 2.0' embodies a vision of a nation that is progressive, inclusive, and resilient. Central to this vision is the reduction of economic disparity.

IMAGE: MD MARUF HASSAN/GETTY IMAGES

The youth, who have been at the forefront of the July Uprising, hold the key to transforming Bangladesh. Their energy, creativity, and determination can drive the nation towards a more equitable future. However, their potential must be nurtured through mentorship, education, and opportunities for meaningful engagement in policy making and implementation. Programs that encourage youth-led initiatives, such as social enterprises, community development projects, and innovation hubs, can serve as powerful platforms for change. Additionally, fostering a culture of civic responsibility and critical thinking will empower young people to tackle challenges with confidence and resilience.

The journey towards 'Bangladesh 2.0' is a collective endeavour that requires the participation of all stakeholders. While the youth have ignited the spark, sustaining the momentum demands collaboration, innovation, and a steadfast commitment to justice and equity. Economic disparity may be deeply entrenched in Bangladesh's history, but it does not have to define its future. By addressing the root causes of inequality and building a more inclusive economy, Bangladesh can pave the way for a brighter and more prosperous tomorrow. The vision of 'Bangladesh 2.0' is within reach—but only if we rise to the challenge together.

MD Shiyan Sadik *is a Lecturer at the Department of Environmental Science and Management at North South University.*

Sakif Al Ehsan Khan *is a former Policy Fellow at the South Asian Institute of Policy and Governance at North South University.*

Barriers to youth participation in politics and ways to overcome them

Engaging in politics in Bangladesh often comes with risks, including harassment, threats, and even violence. Student politics which was once a breeding ground for future leaders, has increasingly become associated with campus violence.

MD. ZAHIDUR RABBI

The youth have long been a driving force behind Bangladeshi political movements. From the language movement of 1952, liberation war of 1971, anti-authoritarian movement of 1990 which toppled the dictator Hussain Muhammad Ershad, and the recent July revolution of 2024 led to the fall of the dictator Sheikh Hasina, student-led mass movement, they have repeatedly proven their ability to stand up for justice, democracy, and change.

Despite their historical contributions, young people today—as they have always in this country—face significant barriers to political engagement. As Bangladesh enters a new political era in 2024, the need for active youth participation has never been more critical.

WHY YOUTH SHOULD STEP UP IN POLITICS

The fall of the Awami League regime in 2024 has left a leadership vacuum in the political sphere, producing the urgent need for fresh and capable leaders. The youth, particularly Generation Z, are uniquely positioned to fill this gap. They have been at the forefront of the mass movement against autocratic governance, demonstrating their awareness of the country's political realities and their capacity to mobilise for change.

Nafiz Basher Alif, a 3rd-year student from the department of Public Administration at University of Dhaka, was critically injured on July 17, 2024, in his own campus. With a crutch by his side to walk, Nafiz said, "At this point, I want youth to step up in politics in Bangladesh. For the last 16 years, the last regime pushed dirty political narratives and propaganda towards the youth, and for that none of the youths felt an active disinterest in politics. But after the fall of the Awami regime, there is a lack of potential and good leaders who can take the responsibility of serving this country."

- Despite a rich history of political activism, Bangladeshi youth face barriers like political violence, corruption, and systemic exclusion.
- Cultural stigma, lack of civic education, and hierarchical party structures discourage young people from active political participation.
- The dominance of senior leaders and the influence of money in politics limit opportunities for merit-based youth involvement.
- Overcoming these barriers requires political reforms, transparency, and platforms for youth dialogue and leadership.
- Empowering youth through civic education, economic stability, and inclusive policies is key to shaping Bangladesh's democratic future.

ILLUSTRATION: ZARIF FAIAZ

With the fall of the Awami league regime, an interim government led by Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus was formed. The interim government's main agenda is to make critical reforms in all sectors and make policy changes to ensure a corruption-free society, and fair elections. However, many political parties have been constantly asking for upcoming national election dates in recent times. With a tentative election time frame announced, youth participation is now more vital than ever.

Tousif Tanzim Ahmed, an activist who was active in organising the youth during the July revolution said, "It is a long winter, but every winter brings opportunities for the summer. Many have been waiting for this chance, but it is not for them, yet they want to make it theirs. It is by promise for the future generations. And I can see the interim is working on its way to pave the political roadmap for Gen Z and millennials, and not for the crazy, and 'winner takes it all' parties who make it look like it was only their blood to begin with."

KEY BARRIERS TO YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN POLITICS

Cultural perceptions play a significant role in reinforcing these barriers in youth participation. Many families in Bangladesh discourage their children from pursuing political careers, viewing it as a risky or dishonourable path.

Engaging in politics in Bangladesh often comes with risks, including harassment, threats, and even violence. Student politics which was once a breeding ground for future leaders, has increasingly become associated with campus violence. This negative image discourages many talented and socially conscious youth from engaging with political organisations, fearing for their personal safety and reputational damage.

Shah Md. Shamrir Al-Af, a lecturer from the Department of International Relations at Bangladesh University of Professionals (BUP) said, "One of the most significant challenges is the pervasive political polarisation and archaic hierarchy that dominate the Bangladeshi political landscape, which often sideline fresh and youthful perspectives, stifle innovative ideas, and eventually discourage participation. Moreover, over the last two decades, the state of student politics has severely deteriorated from its once illustrious past, now mired with charges of corruption, violence, sexual assaults, and murder."

Shamrir added, "There is also a deep-seated lack of trust in political institutions, seen as corrupt, unresponsive, and either a collaborator to the previous regime or an equivalent, but not a better alternative, which further fuels political apathy among the youth."

Political parties in Bangladesh have long been dominated by senior leaders, many of whom prioritise loyalty over merit when selecting candidates or distributing responsibilities. This hierarchy creates a significant barrier for young individuals seeking to enter politics on the basis of fresh ideas or meritocratic credentials. Without established connections or influential backers, aspiring youth find it exceedingly difficult to secure meaningful roles within political organisations.

"Gen Z and many millennials who participated in the movement were thought to be among these anti-political or at best apolitical groups. Nonetheless, these were the same youths who brought down a totalitarian regime, fed up with a

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Barriers to youth participation in politics and ways to overcome them

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suffocating political situation. However, the lackluster performance of the interim government, despite the overwhelming support at its inception, the actions of a few other political parties are once again pushing many of these youths towards 'hating' politics," said Shamrir.

Corruption and the pervasive influence of money in politics further complicate the picture. The escalating costs associated with running for office or even participating in party activities often deter young individuals, particularly those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. In these cases, politics becomes an exclusive domain for those with access to wealth and resources, leaving the majority of honest youth on the periphery.

"As a matter of fact, sadly, the saying 'leaving Bangladesh is the biggest dream' has become popular among the disillusioned youth, highlighting the vast gap between their aspirations and the interest of the political parties and the reality of our socio-economic state," said Shamrir.

The education system also does little to prepare young people for active citizenship. Despite progress in expanding access to education, the curriculum often lacks emphasis on civic education, critical thinking, and leadership skills. This absence deprives young people of the knowledge and confidence needed to navigate the political landscape.

The government must prioritise job creation, particularly in emerging sectors, and invest in upskilling programs to equip young people for the modern workforce. Addressing unemployment will reduce emigration and inspire more civic participation.

PHOTO: ZARIF FAIAZ

THE CORRECT WAY FORWARD IN POLITICS: INCLUSION

Politics is inherently related with every aspect of life. As the youths are the torchbearers of the future generation, their voice and concerns need to be addressed politically to make proper policies and ensure that those policies have a realistic feasibility. In order to make conscious political arguments and practice, the youth need to develop historical and political knowledge to navigate themselves in this path. Current affairs, their implications and analysis are also a must.

Regarding this matter, the 30-year-old activist Tousif added, "Deshi youths are inherently apolitical and they want to know only through reading social media news. Only way to overcome this is please stop scrolling for news and read legit newspapers, make it your lifestyle."

The youth's skepticism towards political parties stems from broken promises and systemic issues. Nepotism, corruption, and abuse of power have eroded trust. To regain the trust of young people, political parties must prioritise accountability and transparency.

Emphasising the importance of political parties reforming their approach, Shamrir said, "Overcoming these barriers will be a laborious endeavor. Ensuring transparency and accountability in the operations and decision-making processes of major political parties should be the first step. Parties should welcome the voices of the youth. Platforms for dialogue, where youth can express their concerns and see their input reflected in policy, are vital. Parties must also focus on youth-centric policies directly tackling issues like education, job creation, and digital rights to demonstrate their commitment to the youth's future."

Comprehensive political education is essential for empowering young people. Civic education should be integrated into school curriculum, with workshops, debates, and mentorship programs that teach democratic principles. Political parties and activists can use social media to foster dialogue, disseminate credible information, and mobilise support.

Economic stability is a prerequisite for political engagement. The government must prioritise job creation, particularly in emerging sectors, and invest in upskilling programs to equip young people for the modern workforce. Addressing unemployment will reduce emigration and inspire more civic participation.

The role of youth in the July revolution and its aftermath demonstrates their eagerness and capability to shape the country's political future. However, this potential can only become a reality if political parties and institutions actively engage with and respond to the aspirations of the younger generation.

By addressing systemic challenges and creating avenues for meaningful participation, Bangladesh can harness the energy and vision of its younger generation. The stakes are high, but the potential is unparalleled—like the Cuban phrase "Patria o Muerte". "Homeland or Death".

Md. Zahidur Rabbi *is a journalist at The Daily Star.*

Digital classrooms: Transforming education for marginalised communities

PHOTO: JAAGO FOUNDATION

KORVI RAKSHAND

In an increasingly interconnected world, education remains the most powerful tool to break the cycle of poverty and inequality. However, for marginalised communities, access to quality education often remains a distant dream. The advent of digital classrooms is rapidly altering this landscape, bridging the gap between privilege and disadvantage. At the Jaago Foundation, we have witnessed firsthand how technology can transform lives, offering opportunities to those who might otherwise be left behind.

Since its inception in 2007, Jaago Foundation has been committed to providing quality education to underprivileged children in Bangladesh. Recognising the limitations posed by geography, socio-economic barriers, and a shortage of qualified teachers in remote areas, we launched our Digital School Program in 2011. This initiative was born out of necessity, driven by the belief that every child, regardless of their background, deserves access to quality education. Our digital classrooms connect trained educators from urban centres with students in remote, underserved communities using video conferencing technology and interactive digital tools. This approach not only addresses the scarcity of qualified teachers in rural areas but also ensures that students receive a consistent, high-quality education aligned with national standards.

The impact of digital classrooms on marginalised communities is profound. In regions where traditional schools are few and far between, digital platforms eliminate the barriers of distance and infrastructure. Students who once walked miles to attend makeshift classrooms now access lessons from the safety and comfort of local learning centres equipped with basic digital infrastructure. The flexibility offered by digital education also allows for personalised learning, enabling students to progress at their own pace—a critical factor for those who may need to balance education with work or family responsibilities.

Beyond accessibility, digital classrooms foster inclusivity. For children with disabilities, traditional classrooms often lack the resources and infrastructure needed to support their learning effectively. Digital education, however, offers adaptable tools and technologies—such as screen readers, captioning, and customised learning software—that cater to diverse needs, making education truly inclusive. Moreover, digital classrooms can help break down gender barriers in education. In conservative communities where girls face cultural restrictions on attending school, online learning offers a discreet, flexible alternative, empowering them to pursue their education without compromising cultural norms.

Globally, several initiatives mirror the successes and challenges we've encountered. In India, the government's "Diksha" platform provides e-learning content tailored to different state curricula, supporting millions of students and teachers. The platform includes interactive lessons, assessments, and resources accessible even on low-bandwidth networks, making it particularly effective in rural areas. In Kenya, the 'BRCK' initiative has introduced rugged, solar-powered tablets in rural schools, ensuring that children in off-grid areas remain connected to the wider world of knowledge. Similarly, in Australia, community-wide Wi-Fi projects in remote Aboriginal communities have transformed not just education but also healthcare and economic opportunities, showcasing the ripple effect of digital connectivity.

However, the success of digital classrooms hinges on more than just technology. Effective teacher training is paramount. At Jaago, we invest heavily in equipping our educators with the skills needed to navigate digital platforms and create engaging, interactive lessons. Teachers are trained not only in the technical aspects of e-learning but also in new pedagogical approaches that foster

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Digital classrooms: Transforming education for marginalised communities

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critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration—skills essential for the 21st-century learner. We've found that continuous professional development, combined with peer support networks, significantly enhances the effectiveness of digital teaching, ensuring that educators feel confident and supported in their roles.

Another critical factor is community engagement. Introducing digital education in marginalised areas often requires overcoming cultural and social barriers. In many cases, families are unfamiliar with or even sceptical of technology's role in education. To address this, we work closely with local leaders, parents, and students to build trust and demonstrate the tangible benefits of digital learning. This community-centric approach has been instrumental in increasing enrolment rates and reducing dropout rates in our digital schools. We've also initiated parent engagement programmes, where parents are introduced to the digital tools their children use, fostering a supportive learning environment at home.

Yet, despite these successes, challenges persist. The digital divide remains a significant hurdle, particularly in regions with unreliable internet connectivity and limited access to devices. The Covid-19 pandemic exposed and exacerbated these disparities worldwide, highlighting the urgent need for comprehensive digital infrastructure. In Bangladesh, while urban areas quickly adapted to online learning during lockdowns, many rural students were left behind due to a lack of connectivity and digital literacy. Even when devices are available, issues like power outages, lack of technical support, and limited digital skills among students and teachers can hinder the learning process.

PHOTO: JAAGO FOUNDATION

The future of education lies in its ability to adapt and evolve. Digital classrooms are not a panacea, but they represent a powerful tool in the fight against educational inequality. By embracing technology, we can create more inclusive.

Addressing these challenges requires robust policy interventions. Governments must prioritise investments in digital infrastructure, particularly in rural and remote areas. Public-private partnerships can play a crucial role in expanding internet access and providing affordable devices to students. Moreover, integrating digital literacy into school curricula from an early age will ensure that students are not just passive consumers of technology but active, informed participants in the digital economy. Policymakers should also consider establishing digital education hubs in underserved areas—community centres equipped with reliable internet, devices, and trained facilitators—ensuring that even the most disadvantaged students have a place to learn.

Sustainability is another key consideration. Our experience has shown that leveraging renewable energy sources, such as solar power, can make digital classrooms viable even in off-grid communities. This not only reduces operational costs but also aligns with global efforts to combat climate change. Our pilot projects using solar-powered digital classrooms have demonstrated that sustainable solutions are not just environmentally responsible but also economically feasible. Additionally, adopting eco-friendly practices in digital education—such as promoting e-books over printed materials and using energy-efficient devices—can contribute to broader sustainability goals.

Furthermore, the role of data and analytics in enhancing digital education cannot be understated. Digital platforms offer the ability to track student progress in real-time, providing educators with valuable insights into learning patterns, strengths, and areas needing improvement. This data-driven approach allows for targeted interventions, personalised learning plans, and continuous improvement of teaching methodologies.

The future of education lies in its ability to adapt and evolve. Digital classrooms are not a panacea, but they represent a powerful tool in the fight against educational inequality. By embracing technology, we can create more inclusive, resilient education systems that reach every child, no matter where they are. Our own journey is a testament to this transformative potential. From a single classroom in Dhaka to a network of digital schools across Bangladesh, we have seen how technology can turn aspirations into achievements.

As we look to the future, it is clear that the digital revolution in education must be driven by a commitment to equity and inclusion. Policymakers, educators, and communities must work together to ensure that no child is left behind in the digital age. The lessons we've learned at Jaago, coupled with best practices from around the world, offer a roadmap for harnessing the full potential of digital classrooms. By investing in infrastructure, training, and community engagement, we can create an educational landscape where every child has the opportunity to learn, grow, and thrive. This is not just about technology; it's about unlocking human potential and building a more just, equitable world for future generations.

Korvi Rakshand *is the founder of* Jaago *Foundation, a non-profit organisation that empowers underprivileged individuals and communities in Bangladesh through education, youth development, women's empowerment, climate change, governance, and poverty alleviation.*

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PHOTO: ORCHID CHANGMA

Influence of the July uprising on youth activism

A third-year student majoring in health economics at DU, Hema Chakma paints a picture of Bangladesh that is rooted in inclusivity. When speaking about the influence of the July uprising in youth activism, she says, "You and I are society. What society will become depends on what kind of people we are. We must strive to build a society where everyone has the freedom to express themselves, to practice their language, culture, and religion without fear."

AZRA HUMAYRA

There's no denying that July altered the political reality of Bangladesh. The uprising toppled a deeply entrenched despot and unleashed a wave of change that felt as sudden as it was transformative. At the heart of this seismic shift stood the students, their July uprising an evidence of courage and conviction. It is only fitting that these young architects of revolution find themselves shaped by the effects of what is now called the July Revolution. Youth activism in Bangladesh is no stranger to change. From the 1952 Language Movement to the 1971 Liberation War and the 2018 Road Safety Protests, students have often been at the forefront of social change. Yet, before 2024, political apathy among young people seemed to prevail, weighed down by disillusionment and fear of repression.

However, students from diverse political ideologies set aside differences to form alliances like "Students Against Discrimination". The collaboration of traditionally opposed groups—leftists and right-wingers—was unprecedented, upholding a common goal: the dismantling of fascism. This unity set a blueprint for future movements, proving that political divisions could be overcome for a greater cause. After the uprising, youth activism found a new place. The terrain of youth activism saw a significant transformation in the months that followed the uprising. Students began engaging in grassroots movements addressing institutional reforms, empowerment of marginalised groups, gender equality, etc. Public universities saw renewed energy in student unions, while private university students demanded inclusion in national decision-making.

In the quiet fishing community of Mathbaria, Pirojpur, Rubel Mia, a determined young man with a vision, founded the Hate Khori Foundation in 2018. His mission was as straightforward as it was profound: to offer quality education to the children of local fishermen, many of whom had long been denied such opportunities due to financial hardship. When asked about how the July uprising influenced his organisation's goals, Rubel Mia talks about how the unity of the organisation has been bolstered by the July uprising, a moment witnessed by all, reinforcing the belief that far greater achievements can be realised through shared endeavour.

He states, "The July uprising gives us the message that there is no substitute for unity to change or make something successful. It is a great example of how much can be achieved through the collective efforts of everyone. The power or method that has worked behind the goal of my organisation, or the facilitation of social change, is the unity, dedication, and hard work of the members of my organisation."

PHOTO: ORCHID CHANGMA

For him, youth activism and the July uprising are integrally linked, and the combined impact of the two can bring forth significant positive change. Rubel Mia expresses his hopeful desire for his organisation and Bangladesh. He hopes that this momentum will lead to a more harmonious and developed country. Alongside these social and political transformations, the power of unity and collective effort has been underscored, with the uprising serving as a reminder of the change that can be achieved when people come together.

Nuzia Hasin Rasha, President of the Dhaka University (DU) unit of the Revolutionary Student Unity, upon being asked what she thinks of as real change, says, "Real change, as learnt from the lessons of the July mass uprising, involves more than just overthrowing an oppressive regime. It requires addressing the root causes of exploitation, institutionalising democratic governance, and ensuring active participation from all sections of society." She emphasises that true democracy flourishes when every segment of society has a voice and agency in decision-making. This calls for participatory mechanisms that empower students, workers, and marginalised communities, ensuring that governance reflects the collective will.

Youth activism in the Revolutionary Student Unity is committed to building a society anchored in democratic principles and social justice, free from the chains of oppression. Inspired by the fervour of the July uprising, it champions grassroots movements, weaving together the voices of students, workers, and marginalised communities into a unified call for change.

Nuzia speaks about the conviction that true transformation springs from mass participation—through student unions, workers' councils, and community assemblies that embody democratic values in practice. With a focus on political education, the organisation works to illuminate structural inequities, foster cross-group solidarity, and resist the creeping tide of authoritarianism.

A third-year student majoring in health economics at DU, Hema Chakma paints a picture of Bangladesh that is rooted in inclusivity. When speaking about the influence of the July uprising in youth activism, she says, "You and I are society. What society will become depends on what kind of people we are. We must strive to build a society where everyone has the freedom to express themselves, to practice their language, culture, and religion without fear. A society where a Santali person can sing their song just as freely as Rahim's son can. A society where we have the courage to call truth by its name, ensuring that the next generation inherits an environment where this courage is nurtured."

She finds it encouraging that the current wave of seminars, study circles, and roundtable discussions are being organised by various groups. She believes this post-July period is like "a snake shedding its skin"—a time to leave behind old notions and wait for a new dawn, to dream of democracy once more, and to take steps forward again. The similarity between this revolutionary spirit and organisational goals lies in the shared dream of transforming society, a vision that once seemed impossible. She says, "This uprising has united us in building an inclusive society, has taught us the importance of individual activism, and, most importantly, has helped us

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PHOTO: ZARIF FAIAZ

PHOTO: ORCHID CHANGMA

Influence of the July uprising on youth activism

The July uprising has left an indelible mark on youth activism in Bangladesh, rekindling a spirit of collective resistance.

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nurture the belief that change will come."

Volunteering in a non-profit, non-political, and secular voluntary organisation whose primary objective is to promote quality education among underprivileged children, Mashiat Mustaq says firmly, "The uprising has not changed any of our goals and methods for providing quality education to underprivileged children of Bangladesh." Still, she reflects on Hema Chakma's observation: "People are much more vocal now. We have a long way to go to understand how it will serve us." The shifting energy hints at new possibilities for grassroots education efforts in a changing society.

The July uprising has left an indelible mark on youth activism in Bangladesh, rekindling a spirit of collective resistance and reimagining the possibilities of grassroots movements. It has shown that unity, even among diverse political ideologies, can dismantle entrenched systems of oppression. Yet, as the initial fervour wanes, the enduring challenge lies in translating revolutionary energy into sustainable change. Institutional reform, inclusivity, and the empowerment of marginalised voices demand a persistence that outlasts the moment of revolt.

The true test of this generation's activism is whether it can withstand the disillusionments that inevitably accompany the slow grind of systemic change. The July uprising gave the youth of Bangladesh a blueprint for collective action, but the path forward requires balancing idealism with the realities of governance and reform. If they succeed, the uprising will not merely be remembered as a moment of disruption but as the seed of a more inclusive and democratic society.

Azra Humayra *is a student of Mass Communication and Journalism at the University of Dhaka.*

ILLUSTRATION:
ZARIF FAIAZ

FROM BRAIN DRAIN TO BRAIN GAIN:

Revitalising Bangladesh through diaspora and national engagement

AMREEN BASHIR

- Bangladesh is at a pivotal moment to reverse brain drain by leveraging the skills, networks, and experiences of its global diaspora.
- The return of diaspora members can drive economic growth, foster innovation, and address key societal challenges in sectors like education, health, and technology.
- Collaborative models from countries like Ireland, South Korea, and Vietnam highlight the transformative impact of diaspora engagement through strategic programs and incentives.
- Effective reintegration requires supportive policies, including targeted grants, tax incentives, and partnerships between diaspora professionals and national talent.
- By uniting the diaspora with local experts, Bangladesh can transform systemic challenges into opportunities, fostering sustainable development and national progress.

"Even if they call me away, my heart will always remain in my motherland," echoes Kazi Nazrul Islam. The voice of Bangladesh's most revered poet resonates across generations, capturing the deep-rooted sentiments of the diaspora who yearn to return and contribute to their homeland. Bangladesh, the world's eighth-most populous country, boasts a rich cultural heritage and a resilient history.

Now, fifty-three years post-independence, Bangladesh stands at a pivotal crossroads, poised to reverse the historical trend of brain drain that has been driven by the pursuit of higher education, superior healthcare, enhanced career prospects, and improved living conditions. With the nation experiencing robust economic growth and expanding its international influence, the call to reverse the brain drain grows louder.

As such, the power of the diaspora's return signifies an opportunity to make a profound impact and find personal fulfilment by applying global experiences to foster development in our motherland.

ECONOMIC POTENTIAL AND THE POWER OF THE DIASPORA'S RETURN

Bangladesh's economy, with an average annual GDP growth rate of over 6% for the past decade, has evolved from a primarily agrarian base to a centre for manufacturing and services. Celebrated for the dynamic talent and entrepreneurial spirit of its nationals, the country also prides itself on primary industries like the Ready-Made Garments (RMG) sector. Recently, the burgeoning startup ecosystem has emerged as a testament to the nation's economic potential. Supported by both homegrown and returning talent, these enterprises are at the forefront of this economic transformation.

Beyond economic successes, the return of the diaspora has a transformative impact on Bangladesh's social and developmental sectors. This reverse brain drain strengthens various facets of national progress, including education, mental health, and cultural representation. By uniting diaspora expertise with that of national experts, we can address pressing social and developmental needs. With each diaspora member who returns or chooses to engage from afar, Bangladesh gains momentum toward its vision of resilience and self-sustained growth.

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

Many expats will agree with the claim that returning to Bangladesh comes with its own set of challenges. Diaspora members often express concerns over quality of life issues that differ significantly from those in more developed countries. These include, but are not limited to, traffic congestion, environmental pollution, and varying standards of living. Additionally, concerns about safety and the integrity of the justice system, where inefficiencies and corruption may prevail, pose significant apprehensions.

However, these challenges also present opportunities for impactful contributions. By addressing these pervasive quality-of-life issues, returnees and national experts can drive progress and foster innovation, ultimately enhancing daily living conditions and paving the way for broader societal benefits. This narrative is not unique to Bangladesh; many nations have successfully overcome similar challenges through targeted policy shifts and supportive programs designed for their returning diaspora to work with national talent.

FOSTERING COLLABORATIVE SOLUTIONS THROUGH NATIONAL AND DIASPORA EXPERTISE

The combined expertise of national and diaspora talent has driven innovation in countries like Ireland and South Korea, demonstrating how returning diaspora can effectively fuel technological and economic growth. In Bangladesh, similar collaborations can address key challenges in urban planning, public health, and education reform, bringing in new perspectives and advanced skills.

ILLUSTRATION:
ZARIF FAIAZ

Ireland's 'Global Irish' strategy revitalised its economy by encouraging knowledge exchange and reintegration. Programs like the Irish Knowledge Transfer Partnership linked diaspora professionals with local businesses, fostering advancements in technology and management. South Korea's 'Brain Return 500' program attracted skilled professionals by offering financial incentives, research funding, and housing support, strengthening sectors like IT and manufacturing. These strategies anchored South Korea as a high-tech leader.

Emulating such models, Bangladesh could maximise national growth by developing programs that connect diaspora and national experts to work on scalable solutions. Together, they can create a robust ecosystem that drives economic and social advancement.

ENHANCING REINTEGRATION WITH ROBUST POLICY SUPPORT

Effective reintegration of diaspora in the Philippines and Vietnam shows the impact of strategic policies that incentivise returnees to invest in their home economies. The Philippines' 'Balik Scientist' program offers returning scientists tax incentives, funding, and research grants, making it easier for them to contribute to local innovation. Special Economic Zones (SEZs) further attract returning Filipino professionals, supporting new enterprises with tax breaks and simplified business processes.

Likewise, Vietnam's 'Vietnam Innovation Network' has encouraged Vietnamese professionals to invest in the country's development by offering grants and subsidies, especially for startups in the tech sector. This initiative has spurred a thriving entrepreneurial scene and bolstered the country's digital transformation.

Bangladesh could adopt similar policies, like SEZs and targeted grants for diaspora-led startups, to attract global citizens to return. Such programs would facilitate productive partnerships with national experts, ensuring that Bangladesh benefits from the talent and experience of its diaspora for sustainable national growth.

A CALL TO ACTION FOR A COLLECTIVE FUTURE

As Kazi Nazrul Islam evoked, our hearts forever remain tied to our motherland. Inspired by nations that have harnessed diaspora expertise for national development and motivated by the personal stories of returnees, Bangladesh stands on the cusp of a significant transformation.

It is imperative for more diaspora to reconnect with their roots whether by returning, investing, or engaging from afar. Contributing to Bangladesh's future doesn't necessarily require relocating; it can also mean forging stronger ties with national organisations, lending expertise to nurture various ecosystems, collaborating with different sectors to stimulate growth, and promoting Bangladesh's potential and accomplishments on the global stage. By integrating diaspora knowledge and resources with national talent, Bangladesh can transform systemic challenges into substantial opportunities, weaving a narrative that honours our rich heritage and ensures a thriving future for all.

For those among us who have the opportunity to return, doing so can make a transformative impact. By relocating to Bangladesh, you bring not only your skills and knowledge but also your global networks and resources that can significantly enhance the local infrastructure and educational systems. Your return serves as a beacon of innovation and confidence, inspiring both national and global Bangladeshis to engage more deeply with our homeland's development. The physical presence of diaspora members in Bangladesh fuels a powerful exchange of ideas and cultures, strengthening the bonds between global and national communities and contributing to a more vibrant society.

Whether near or far, our hearts beat in unison with the rhythms of Bangladesh. Each one of us carries a piece of our homeland within us, a token of its culture, its challenges, and its undying spirit of resilience. As we stand at this pivotal moment in our country's history, let us unite in our efforts to cultivate a prosperous future. Together, through the synergy of returned diaspora and national talent, we can transform our shared dreams into reality, ensuring that the story of Bangladesh continues to be one of triumph and enduring prosperity.

Amreen Bashir *is a policy specialist working at the intersection of technology, mental health, education, and policy, driving innovation at the nexus of sustainable development and global collaboration.*

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ILLUSTRATION: **ABIR HOSSAIN**

We want NRBs to come back. But then what?

WAZIHA AZIZ

Reverse brain drain, a highly idealised concept, has been making waves on social media recently. The idea of returning from overseas as a highly skilled individual to contribute to the betterment of the country has always enticed the patriot in us all. Since the fall of the former autocratic regime and the subsequent renewed discourse on reforming the country, this concept has gained an even bigger spotlight.

Indeed, having highly educated and skilled professionals return to the country can provide us access to an abundance of manpower. In these particularly trying times, successfully reversing brain drain would be a noteworthy achievement for Bangladesh. However, it is no small feat. It would require rigorously revising and reforming a number of policies and systems we have in place. In fact, the reality of returning is quite the mixed bag, and begs the question – is Bangladesh truly ready to accommodate these expatriates?

ILLUSTRATION: **ZARIF FAIAZ**

The factors influencing people to return to the country vary depending on individual priorities. While some people choose to return due to personal or familial ties, others may prioritise serving the country. Nerissa Nashin, an entrepreneur and certified makeup artist (MUA) returned to the country upon graduating from Swarthmore College, Pennsylvania out of similar patriotic sentiments.

"I always wanted to have an impact on my own people, and the market here was more appropriate for it. Whereas, if I stayed back in the US, I'd have an easier life, but it wouldn't be as meaningful for me," she said. She has returned to devote her career to combating colourism in the country's beauty industry. When asked about her reasoning she stated, "It had to do with a lot of experiences that I had growing up. But it was a combination of feeling passionate and thinking that this is the next logical step because the Bangladeshi market is ready for this, and nobody is really addressing it."

Meanwhile, Golam Morshed Jr Shan, a young barrister, returned from the UK upon completing his degree as he prioritised being with his family and building a career in Bangladesh. He said, "I knew if I had stayed longer there, I would have had a more routine and healthier lifestyle. But I preferred staying with my family and building a career in Bangladesh."

While their objectives may vary, many of the people who return come across similar obstacles, regardless of their field of work. Starting from securing suitable jobs to coping with unfamiliar salary structures and work environments, expatriates often have a hard time navigating and readjusting to Bangladesh both personally and professionally. For instance, despite their high qualifications, they often struggle when looking for jobs in Bangladesh.

"I've seen many friends of mine struggle to find suitable jobs for months. They have to settle for ones that don't fit their profile at all," said Laila Tasmia, a development professional who previously studied and worked in Europe. She went on to identify this issue as a result of systemic problems in the workforce, such as poor recruitment systems and prejudice among recruiters against specific countries of study as well as personal shortcomings of a candidate.

The factors influencing people to return to the country vary depending on individual priorities. While some people choose to return due to personal or familial ties, others may prioritise serving the country.

Even if they do manage to secure a job, few sectors are equipped to offer salaries on par with those of developed nations. While this issue is universally experienced, it adds a level of difficulty for people who are used to higher pay abroad.

"My friends in the UK and Canada get paid enough for personal expenses, rent, groceries, etc. On the other hand, many people I know in this field who are recent graduates and currently employed in Bangladesh earn an amount that can barely cover their personal expenses let alone larger ones such as rent and groceries," said Golam Morshed.

Although everyone navigates the same challenging readjustment process, affluence adds a degree of ease that people would not have otherwise. Having a financial safety net can allow people to take better risks in their careers and be more comfortable waiting for the most suitable career option. However, this is not the case for the vast majority in Bangladesh, including those who attain higher education or career experience abroad. Reflecting on her time working in Labour Migration, Laila Tasmia observed how class affects one's ability to readjust in the country. She said, "It is much easier to come back to the country if you are financially solvent. The upper class have a much easier time coming back and working due to their safety net, whereas the same cannot be said for middle- and lower-income households."

Business owners and entrepreneurs face similar challenges, which dissuade a number of people from returning to the country to start their businesses. Problems related to a lack of adequate government policies and funds and increased taxation – amongst other factors – have created an unsupportive environment that does not appeal to entrepreneurs who consider returning to the country.

Looking back on the initial stages of building her businesses in Bangladesh, Nerissa Nashin said, "I found that our systems are not equipped to support small businesses. It is very hard to navigate the legal frameworks, which are very flawed."

However, despite the challenges, people do choose to return. To some, remaining abroad poses greater challenges than returning. Laila Tasmia stated, "Staying back in Europe would have its own setbacks. In fact, both options have a unique set of problems. It's about which struggles you choose."

Nevertheless, it is evident that the process of rehabilitating these expatriates in Bangladesh has plenty of room for improvement. Persisting issues in the recruitment processes, salary structures, and work environments are more than enough for many of them to hesitate in their decision to return. Without adequate reforms, the number of people coming back to the country will decrease with time, depriving us of an abundance of human resources. Immediate action should be taken in order to encourage these individuals to return to the country and turn this idealised sensation of reverse brain drain into an attainable reality.

Waziha Aziz *is a contributor for The Daily Star.*

- Reverse brain drain phenomenon in Bangladesh holds potential but faces significant challenges, including systemic issues in recruitment, salary structures, and work environments.
- Returnees often struggle to find suitable jobs that match their qualifications, with limited sectors offering competitive salaries compared to developed nations.
- Financial security plays a key role in easing the readjustment process, making it harder for individuals from middle- and lower-income backgrounds to return.
- Entrepreneurs face barriers such as inadequate government support, complex legal frameworks, and high taxation, discouraging business ventures in Bangladesh.
- To make reverse brain drain a reality, Bangladesh needs urgent reforms in workforce policies, entrepreneurial support, and socio-economic structures to attract and retain talent.

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STATE OF FREELANCERS IN BANGLADESH
Challenges, ways forward

PHOTO: ORCHID CHANGMA

MD. ZAHIDUR RABBI

- Bangladesh's freelancing sector has grown rapidly but faces challenges like unreliable infrastructure and political instability.
- The July 2024 internet blackout severely impacted freelancers, exposing their vulnerability to external disruptions.
- Structural issues, including poor internet connectivity, high platform fees, and a lack of advanced digital skills, hinder growth.
- Solutions include improving digital infrastructure, diversifying client bases, and investing in education and skill development.
- Building local platforms, reducing reliance on global marketplaces, and government support are key to securing the sector's future.

In Bangladesh, a thriving freelance economy has emerged as a critical source of income for thousands of young professionals. Over the past decade, the country has earned global recognition as a hub for skilled freelancers offering services ranging from graphic design to software development. Yet, this emerging sector faces a unsecure future due to a combination of systemic challenges and recent disruptions such as the internet blackout that followed the political upheaval in July 2024.

Freelancers in Bangladesh stand at the crossroads of opportunity and uncertainty. While the digital economy promises flexibility and global outreach, freelancers are grappling with the dual challenges of unreliable infrastructure and a fragile political landscape. Their stories highlight the need for urgent reforms and strategic investments to secure the future of freelancing in the country.

Bangladesh's freelancing boom is no accident. According to the Oxford Internet Institute, the country ranks among the top global suppliers of online labour. Many other organisations have praised the freelancers of Bangladesh in various rankings. Platforms like Fiverr, and Upwork are swarming with Bangladeshi freelancers offering affordable and high-quality services. The sector's appeal lies in its accessibility—armed with a well-built pc and internet connection, individuals can participate in the global economy without the need for costly infrastructure.

This growth has created opportunities for people from diverse backgrounds. Some freelancers even earn incomes far exceeding local job opportunities, demonstrating the transformative potential of the digital economy in a developing country.

FREELANCING IN CRISIS DUE TO THE JULY 2024 INTERNET BLACKOUT

The promise of freelancing was abruptly shaken in July 2024, when political unrest culminated in a nationwide internet blackout. For five days, freelancers found themselves cut off from clients, deadlines, and income—their livelihoods effectively suspended.

For Sudiptta Apu, a freelancer based in Khulna, the blackout was catastrophic. "I had eight ongoing projects worth over $1,000 that were suddenly put on hold. I lost one client entirely and received bad reviews from another, which lowered my profile visibility on Fiverr," he lamented. This was no isolated case; thousands of freelancers faced similar losses, with many struggling to recover months later. Apu's income, previously over BDT 1 lakh monthly, has since dwindled to BDT 70,000-80,000.

Fiverr attempted to cushion the blow by placing Bangladeshi freelancers in 'vacation mode' to prevent penalties for missed deadlines. However, this temporary fix was insufficient. Freelancers like Shaikh Abdulla saw their accounts banned due to unresolved disputes with clients. "I regret relying solely on marketplaces like Fiverr. Losing my account forced me to reconsider freelancing altogether," he shared. Abdulla is now working for a local company, highlighting the uncertainty of freelancing in an unstable environment.

STRUCTURAL CHALLENGES FACING FREELANCERS

While the blackout showed the vulnerability of freelancers to external shocks, it also highlighted deeper structural issues. Unreliable and costly internet connections, power outages, and the lack of robust digital infrastructure have long plagued Bangladesh's freelance community.

In addition to infrastructure woes, freelancers face steep platform fees that eat into their earnings. Fiverr and Upwork take commissions ranging from 10% to 20%, which can be crippling for professionals working on tight margins. As Sumayah Islam, a Shopify developer, said, "Finding clients outside traditional marketplaces is every freelancer's dream because it eliminates these fees. However, doing so requires skills and networks that many lack."

LESSONS FROM THE JULY REVOLUTION AND BEYOND

The July revolution, which brought down the autocratic regime, marked a turning point for Bangladesh. For freelancers, it was both a wake-up call and a source of renewed hope.

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State of freelancers in Bangladesh: Challenges, ways forward

PHOTO: ORCHID CHANGMA

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The new interim government under Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus has vowed to prioritise infrastructure development, including stable internet and electricity.

These commitments are vital for freelancers who view reliable connectivity as a basic right rather than a luxury.

The crisis also brought forth the importance of diversification. Freelancers who acquired clients outside the traditional marketplaces were better positioned to weather the storm. Despite losing some clients during the blackout, these freelancers recovered much quickly due to their professional relationships.

THE WAY FORWARD IS BUILDING RESILIENCE IN THE FREELANCE SECTOR

To ensure the sustainability of Bangladesh's freelancing economy, systemic changes are essential. Stable internet and electricity are non-negotiable. The government's plan to create an entry point with regulatory guidelines for foreign satellite internet providers like Starlink to obtain an operational licence in Bangladesh is a beacon of hope for many firms who outsource from Bangladesh.

Education and training must also be prioritised. While platforms like Fiverr offer global opportunities, freelancers need skills to navigate client relationships, negotiate terms, and diversify their income streams.

In a study titled 'Identifying Skill Gaps in IT Freelancing to Create Employment and Increase Remittances' published by the National Skill Development Authority (NSDA) in October 2024, it was found that most freelancers in Bangladesh are young, urban males with less than three years of experience. While they excel in areas like graphic design, they lag behind competitors in programming, cybersecurity, and other high-value skills.

This skills gap has contributed to Bangladesh's drop to 29th place in the CEO Magazine ranking of top freelancing countries, highlighting the urgent need for advanced skills.

Instead of receiving training on just data entry, graphic designing, and digital marketing the freelancers need to develop other skills like artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning (ML), cybersecurity, programming, and 3-D modeling to make a dent in the marketplaces. Public and private sector initiatives could include workshops, mentorship programmes, and access to international networks. However, these initiatives must address the skill gap between training curriculum and market demands.

Furthermore, reducing dependency on international marketplaces is critical. Building local platforms or co-operatives could empower freelancers to retain a greater share of their earnings. Government incentives for such initiatives could catalyse their development, creating a more equitable ecosystem.

A SECTOR PREPARED FOR REVIVAL

Despite the challenges, freelancing remains a beacon of hope for many Bangladeshis. It offers a pathway to financial independence and global engagement, even for those in remote areas. The road to recovery after the July 2024 blackout will be long, but the resilience of Bangladesh's freelancers is undeniable.

The new era of 'Bangladesh 2.0' brings with it the promise of progress. As the country rebuilds, the freelancing sector must be at the forefront of these efforts. By addressing infrastructural deficiencies and fostering a supportive environment, Bangladesh can ensure that its freelancers not only survive but thrive in the global digital economy.

__Md. Zahidur Rabbi__ is a journalist at The Daily Star.

BRIDGING THE GAP

The struggle to modernise teacher training in Bangladesh

ILLUSTRATION: NATASHA JAHAN

ALLIN MOHANA BISWAS

- Bangladesh's teacher training remains rooted in outdated methods, with limited integration of educational technology compared to countries like Finland, Singapore, and India.
- Challenges include inadequate digital infrastructure, lack of pre-service pedagogical training, and minimal access to online resources, especially in rural areas.
- Systemic issues such as poor curriculum updates, limited professional development opportunities, and the outdated National Education Policy of 2010 hinder progress.
- Teachers face barriers like insufficient ICT training, lack of digital literacy, and disparities between urban and rural education environments.
- Prioritising teacher training reforms, integrating edtech, and updating education policies are crucial to improving the quality of education and meeting global standards.

In the digital age, educational technology (edtech) is revolutionising teacher training worldwide. Countries like Finland, Singapore, and India have embraced edtech to significantly enhance teacher development. For instance, Finland's ThingLink platform creates immersive simulations that allow educators to practice classroom scenarios and refine their pedagogical skills. India's "SWAYAM" platform provides free online courses focused on pedagogy and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) skills, empowering teachers to improve their methods. Meanwhile, Singapore integrates AI-driven learning tools to deliver personalised feedback, enabling teachers to better meet students' needs. However, Bangladesh lags behind in adopting such innovative approaches to teacher training.

Bangladesh's teacher training system is evolving, but it remains rooted in traditional methods. According to Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics (BANBEIS), the number of teacher training institutes has grown from 129 in 2000 to 209 in 2022, spread across the country's eight divisions. Despite this growth, the training curriculum itself has largely remained unchanged for decades.

Sayeda Rumina Masud, a teacher at Dinajpur Primary Model School explained, "Teacher training is done after getting the job and it takes one and a half years to complete. There is no pre-service pedagogical training. It follows the same traditional methods that it did 15 years ago."

"While the content is created online, most sessions rely on conventional lectures and books," she added.

Globally, tools like learning management systems, artificial intelligence and virtual reality are transforming teacher training. In Bangladesh, initiatives like Muktopaath and a2i's digital content repository provide some online resources. Muktopaath offers online courses for teachers on pedagogy and classroom management. Teachers also have access to interactive multimedia tools, video tutorials, and self-paced courses. However, when asked about the prospects of using digital tools, Sayeda Rumina shared, "Currently, no online tools are used for teacher training. While it might be possible in the future, I am sceptical given the current pace of progress. We do engage in curriculum development online, but that is all."

Despite the increase in training centres, many rural teachers face challenges. Indrojit Biswas, a former secondary school teacher from Jessore noted, "Teacher training is provided properly, but it is not implemented at the school level. Teachers attend training for monetary benefits, not for genuine enhancement of skills."

He also pointed out, "Subjects like ICT are taught in a mixed method within teacher training institutes. However, the overall teacher training process still largely relies on traditional in-person teaching methods."

Virtual simulations and augmented reality, used in countries like Finland, are yet to gain traction in Bangladesh. While platforms like Google Classroom and Zoom were utilised during the pandemic, rural areas at the grassroots levels continue to face challenges due to limited internet access and digital literacy.

Tumpa Rokho, a teacher at Rajshahi Mission Girls High School, emphasised these disparities saying, "Teacher training has yet to embrace digital methods. Occasionally, we use basic tools like Microsoft PowerPoint to create slides, but teaching is still predominantly done with books and whiteboards in schools." She acknowledged having internet access due to her location in the city but expressed concerns about rural schools. "Teachers in rural areas might not have the same access to the internet. If edtech is introduced for teacher training, there could be significant challenges in its implementation," she added. Currently, she does not use any other digital tools in her teaching practice.

Rumina further highlighted the decentralised structure of teacher training, "One noteworthy aspect is that teacher training is not centralised to Dhaka, as there are teacher training institutions available in different parts of the country.

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Bridging the gap: The struggle to modernise teacher training in Bangladesh

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The Upazila Resource Centres in every city are where teachers can get subject-wise training, and even training related to changes in the curriculum."

However, she also emphasised the need for systemic reforms for integrating technology into teacher training. "Teacher training is given in person through the training institutes. There needs to be changes in the whole process of teacher training. It needs to be restructured."

Suman Chakma, a teacher at Gulshan Model High School, shared his perspective on integrating technology into teacher training. "I received training at a training institute in Dhaka, where we used a computer lab to learn how to teach ICT-related subjects. However, regular online training sessions are not part of the process, which limits the scope of digital integration in teacher training," he explained.

Suman highlighted the proactive steps he has taken for professional growth saying, "For my professional development and curriculum design, I sometimes rely on platforms like Coursera and EdX to gain advanced skills and stay up to date with global educational practices. These platforms provide valuable resources that help me improve my teaching methods and adapt to the evolving needs of students."

He believes there is untapped potential in edtech, "There is enormous potential to improve teacher training methods and develop edtech platforms that can make the training process more accessible, effective, and aligned with modern educational requirements. By integrating technology into teacher training, we can ensure that educators are better equipped to handle the challenges of today's classrooms."

The primary challenge in adopting edtech for teacher training in Bangladesh is the apparent disparity in infrastructure and digital literacy. While urban teachers increasingly embrace digital tools, rural educators lag due to inadequate internet facilities and a lack of familiarity with edtech.

The outdated National Education Policy of 2010 contributes significantly to the current shortcomings in Bangladesh's education system. Firstly, the policy failed to place adequate emphasis on the quality of teacher training, which is essential for ensuring effective teaching and learning. Additionally, the policy offered insufficient focus on inclusive education, failing to address the diverse needs of students from various backgrounds. There is also a notable lack of a clear strategy for integrating technology into classrooms or teacher training, which limits the potential for modernising education.

PHOTO: ORCHID CHANGMA

PHOTO: ORCHID CHANGMA

The limited opportunities provided to teachers for professional development at the higher secondary level, exacerbated by the scarcity of specialised teacher training colleges, have left educators underprepared to teach students effectively. To address these issues, it is crucial to focus on updating the education policy to prioritise both teacher training and the integration of technology, ensuring that teachers are equipped with the necessary skills and resources to deliver quality education in the digital age.

The government, with the support of various organisations, is actively working towards establishing educational reforms and updating policies to address current challenges. Numerous edtech startups like 10 Minute School and Shikho are leveraging technology to enhance education and close the digital divide. However, one area that remains largely overlooked is teacher training. While there is considerable potential for improvement, teacher training has not received the attention it deserves in these reform efforts. It is time that teacher training is prioritised and integrated into the broader educational reform agenda, ensuring that educators are adequately equipped to meet the evolving demands of the classroom.

As Bangladesh works on various reforms to drive progress, investing in educational reforms, especially in teacher training, should be of the highest priority. The quality of education is deeply tied to the quality of teachers. Without a highly skilled and well-trained teaching workforce, the standard of education will stagnate. Achieving the fourth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG), which aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all, cannot be realised without equipping teachers with the necessary tools, knowledge, and pedagogical skills.

***Allin Mohana Biswas** is a contributor for The Daily Star.*

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HSC	In 2024, Total of 3107 students participated in the exam. The pass rate was 100% and 2011 students achieved GPA-5. A total of 1963 students got GPA-5 from the science group. Achieved 10th and 7th place in the merit list of Dhaka Board in 2009 and 2014.
SSC	In 2024, Total of 1750 students participated in the SSC examination. The pass rate was 100% and 1298 students achieved GPA-5. In 2009, 2013 and 2014 achieved 5th, 10th and 4th place in the Dhaka Board merit list. According to the data, Milestone College is ranked first among the educational institutions in Dhaka city based on 100% pass rate in 2020.
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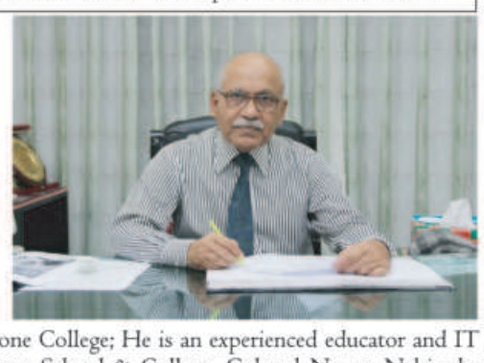

(From left) Mohammad Ziaul Alam, Principal of Milestone College; He is an experienced educator and IT expert. Colonel Nurun Nabi (retd.), Adviser of Milestone School & College. Colonel Nurun Nabi- the name of a successful person in the education sector of Bangladesh. During his career, he served as the principal of Jhenidah and Faujdarhat Cadet College. Colonel Nurun Nabi was the founding principal of RAJUK Uttara Model College and Milestone School and College.

- **Special facilities:** There is separate hostel and transport facility for boys and girls students. Classes for boys and girls and Bangla Medium and English Version are held in separate buildings.
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- The college is run by MNRS Trust. In addition to the main campus in Uttara, there is a permanent campus of Milestone School and College located on 25 bighas of land in Diabari, Uttara (just 100 yards away from Metro Rail Uttara North Station). The vast campus with a large field for sports and overall security is conducting educational activities with 800 residential students.
- **Co-curricular Activities**: Milestone College has clubs based on various subjects including debate, science, quiz, English, recitation, music, cricket, football, handball, photography. There are branches of BNCC, Scouts and Girls Guides. The unique aspect of co-curricular activities held at Milestone College is the month-long sports competition held at the end of the academic year so that students get the opportunity to develop their latent along with their mental and physical development.
- Milestone School & College has no branch or campus out of Dhaka city except Gazipur.

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The role of higher education institutions in attracting global talent

- Bangladesh's brain drain is fueled by poor-quality higher education, outdated curricula, limited research opportunities, and inadequate infrastructure in universities.
- Systemic issues like political interference, rote learning methods, lack of qualified faculty, and minimal access to international resources hinder academic growth.
- Students pursue education abroad due to high costs of private universities, limited subject diversity, and better research facilities in foreign institutions.
- Reforms should focus on updating curricula, improving research funding, fostering industry-academia links, and enhancing career counseling and job placement services.
- Government collaboration with educational institutions, policy-makers, and global experts is essential to create a competitive, innovation-driven higher education environment.

ADRITA ZAIMA ISLAM

Bangladesh's struggle with brain drain is not new. According to data collected from 175 countries between 2007 and 2024, the 'Human Flight and Brain Drain Index' indicates that Bangladesh has the 37th highest propensity for brain drain. The reasons behind this high loss of human capital are multi-faceted and range from broad issues like political volatility and socioeconomic instability to infrastructural failings like unfriendly job markets and limited scope of career advancement. However, more often than not, talented young students are eager to leave the country, usually as early as after attaining their high school diploma, largely because of the deplorable conditions of higher educational institutions in Bangladesh.

PHOTO: ORCHID CHANGMA

While the number of universities in the country has steadily increased to over 150 in the past two decades, the same cannot be said about the quality of education. The University Grants Commission (UGC) is the body responsible for overseeing all tertiary educational institutions in Bangladesh. Even though the UGC is responsible for ensuring quality standards are being maintained across these institutions, its success is nearly abysmal. Dil Afroze Begum, an ex-member of the UGC, attests, "I tried for eight years to advise universities for their betterment, all to no avail."

On the systemic failings of the educational sector, Bahreen Khan, Assistant Professor at the Department of Law at Southeast University, says, "Students are frustrated with the entire system. They feel that due to internal politics, they are deprived of what they deserve from their university. Bangladeshi universities employ a backdated teaching system where teachers place excessive emphasis on memorisation. The teacher-to-student ratio in most classes is imbalanced. Teaching Assistants and Research Assistants are not available in many universities."

The summation of these problems means that the students do not end up receiving an education of a quality comparable to many foreign universities. The educational atmosphere lacks the practical training that is often necessary for skill translation into professional settings. The lacklustre facilities and resources are not helpful in the provision of quality education either. Muhammad Ihsan-Ul-Kabir, Lecturer at the Institute of Health Economics at the University of Dhaka, laments, "Quality education requires quality input like qualified teachers and multimedia classrooms. However, most of our university classrooms are not multimedia-supported. We don't even have access to international journals, which is a must so we can share the latest knowledge with students. These issues are massive detriments to tertiary education and a huge reason behind the ongoing brain drain epidemic."

While the number of universities in the country has steadily increased to over 150 in the past two decades, the same cannot be said about the quality of education.

The number of subjects offered by private universities is pitiable, with many not providing degrees in pure subjects like physics and chemistry. It is a massive constraint for students who might not want to pursue subjects that are traditionally offered. For passionate individuals who want to build a career in niche fields like automobile engineering, quantum physics, or molecular microbiology, there are no opportunities within the country. They are pushed to apply for undergraduate and graduate degrees abroad as that becomes their only path to pursuing their dreams.

The substandard research opportunities in the country contribute significantly to the poor performance of Bangladeshi universities in global rankings. "In addition to the problems surrounding the dearth of job opportunities in the public sector and the unreliability of job security in the private sector, the educational infrastructure in Bangladesh is also a driver for the problem of brain drain. It would not be an exaggeration to say that there is no research infrastructure in this country. The government fails to provide sufficient funding for laboratory development and private universities are not too keen to invest either. There is little scope to teach research or laboratory work to eager students," says Dil Afroze Begum who was also a Professor of Chemical Engineering at the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET) in the past.

Usually, there are two kinds of master's degrees offered—a research-based master's and a course-based master's. In Bangladesh, the educational environment is not conducive to doing a research-based master's. Through a course-based master's, there is an avenue for completing a thesis work. However, the research work done for the thesis is not extensive, and certainly not enough to prepare students for pursuing a PhD.

There is the added fact that PhD offerings in Bangladesh are few and far between. As of now, only 56 public universities in the country are allowed to offer PhD programmes. While the UGC said that they will allow private institutions

CONTINUED ON PAGE 29

METROPOLITAN CHAMBER OF COMMERCE AND INDUSTRY, DHAKA:
ONE HUNDRED AND TWENTY ONE YEARS OF SERVICE

ONE HUNDRED AND TWENTY ONE YEARS is not a very long span of time in history. Indeed, history abounds with instances of institutions which survived and flourished for longer periods. Yet, a trade organization which could weather many vicissitudes for as long a period as 121 years has learned many lessons that can be of significance not only to the trade and industry but to a wider public. Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Dhaka is fortunate to be such an organization.

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The role of higher education institutions in attracting global talent

ILLUSTRATION: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

FROM PAGE 28

to start offering PhDs, no progress has been made on that front. Moreover, given the country's poor research environment, the quality of the pre-existing research programmes is not ideal. Not to mention, there are no post-doctorate programmes in the country at all. Students who want to pursue PhDs, post-doctorates, and subsequent careers in academia are left with no choice but to turn to foreign countries to fulfil their educational aspirations.

Moreover, students may feel that there is a gap in terms of the quality of education they are receiving and the exorbitant fees they are paying for their degree. Due to the limited number of seats available as compared to the number of students vying for those seats, the competition for public university education is cutthroat, to put it lightly. One of the reasons why students want to attend public institutions rather than private ones is due to the high cost of a private university degree. According to the government's 2022 Household Income and Expenditure Survey, the average household income in Bangladesh is BDT 32,422 per month. Thus, paying 10 to 20 lakhs for a degree seems outlandish to many. Many talented students might feel that it is more worth it to find fully-funded degree opportunities abroad, rather than squandering the money on a local degree that is likely to be sub-par.

As the failings of the tertiary education environment are a major driving force behind brain drain, it is a logical progression to suggest that solving these issues can be massively beneficial to reversing the tide of brain drain. Amina Khatun, Assistant Professor of Mass Communication and Journalism at the University of Dhaka, opines, "By addressing the problematic areas, our public and private universities could enhance the academic landscape and enable graduates to remain in the country."

She continues, "Firstly, universities have to ensure quality education with updated curricula that align more closely with international standards. Educators have to begin emphasising critical thinking and problem-solving over rote memorisation."

Due to the limited number of seats available as compared to the number of students vying for those seats, the competition for public university education is cutthroat, to put it lightly.

A more practical approach to education will not only enrich educational experiences for students, it will also prepare them for employment. The dearth of job opportunities and unlikelihood of job security contribute significantly to brain drain. Thus, proper career counselling services within these universities that can provide students with comprehensive guidance about their post-graduation life will undoubtedly be helpful. Students can become more informed about the possible career options they have and envision a fulfilling professional life in Bangladesh, forgoing the decision to move abroad for better job prospects.

Additionally, by developing connections with local companies and employers, universities can aid students in two critical ways—providing them with internship opportunities to gain hands-on knowledge of the field they are interested in and creating pathways for them in terms of job placements and networking. It is also necessary to consult alumni, field experts, and employers when setting a curriculum to ensure that it can translate into desirable outcomes for graduates.

Hiring more educators, particularly educators who are highly knowledgeable about the field they are teaching is a necessity. Students don't require someone who simply tells them what is already written in the textbooks; they require mentorship and encouragement. A problem that many people have with Bangladeshi universities is the hostile or unfriendly attitude of many of the educators employed. That, coupled with problems caused by political interference, deters students from attending these institutions. Authority figures must take it upon themselves to ensure the quality of hire as well as proper behaviour from their faculty through equity committees, student council bodies, etc.

Bahreen Khan further says, "As the financial burden can be a barrier for many, an increase in scholarship access from private universities can mean that many talented students may take up local opportunities rather than pursue scholarships abroad."

Increasing research opportunities will be more difficult, but it is a task that must be tackled if we want to keep our strongest academic minds. There are no alternatives to investments in research. The government and individual institutions must take the initiative to develop research laboratories, acquire proper equipment, borrow foreign-born qualified educators, or send their own faculty members abroad for appropriate training so that proper research facilities can be provided and PhDs can be awarded on a greater scale. Amina Khatun says, "University authorities may take the initiative with several national and international organisations to collaborate in research programmes. This could help retain graduates passionate about pursuing academic careers locally."

As long as the research environment in the country does not improve, academics won't have an incentive to stay here. Besides, ensuring comparable pay, sufficient funding, an atmosphere conducive to cutting-edge research, and properly tenured positions can go a long way towards not only retaining students but also attracting highly skilled expat academics back into the country.

Investments in innovative, digital teaching methods, learning materials, and more diverse programmes of study are crucial, too, if we hope to stop talented individuals passionate about niche subjects from leaving. Tarnima Warda Andalib, Assistant Professor at BRAC Business School, opines, "Universities need to act like academic institutions and not like corporate organisations. Knowledge should be available everywhere with plenty of subjects and up-to-date syllabi and facilities."

However, the burden is not on these educational institutions alone. Bangladesh's tertiary education sector needs a complete makeover if it ever wants to stop the brain drain. That scale of remodelling has to start from a policy level. The government has to collaborate with policy-makers, intellectuals, academics, industry experts, and students to redesign higher educational institutions in Bangladesh so that they can stop the flight of human capital.

Adrita Zaima Islam *is an intern for Campus, Rising Stars, and Star Youth, The Daily Star.*

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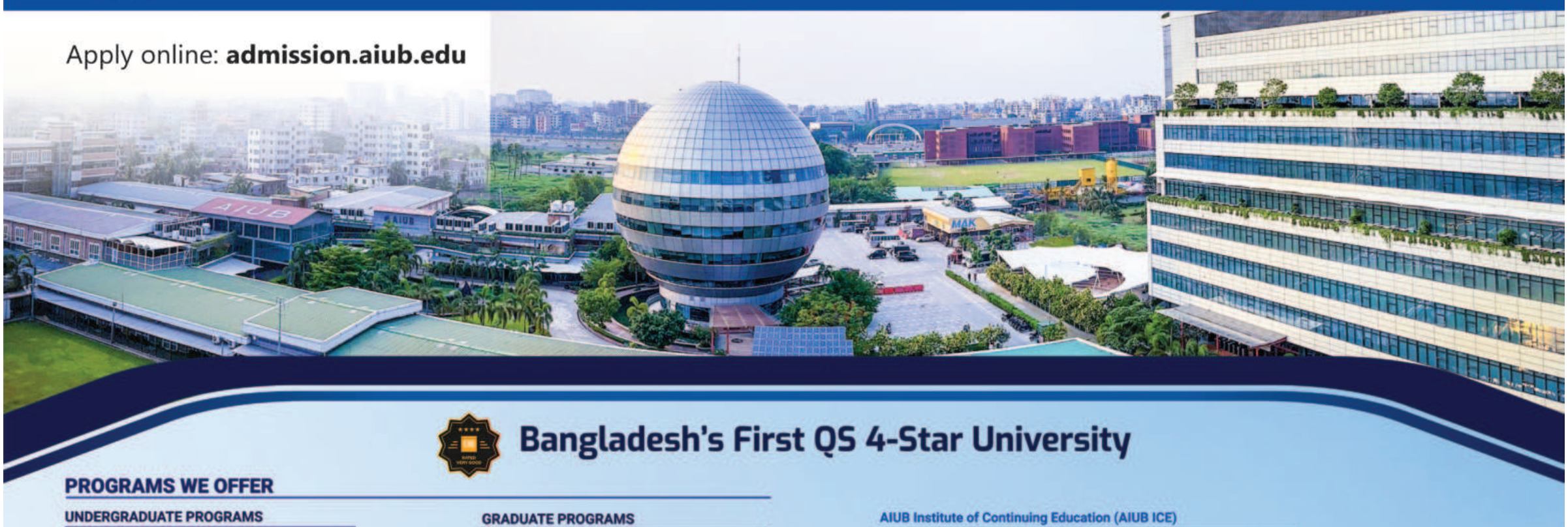

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EDUCATION REFORMS

Aligning curriculum with future job markets

PHOTO: **ORCHID CHANGMA**

- Bangladesh's education system prioritises memorisation over critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving, leading to a growing skills gap.
- The curriculum fails to align with future job market demands, lacking focus on digital literacy, analytical thinking, and emerging technologies like AI.
- High unemployment rates among graduates highlight the mismatch between academic qualifications and job market requirements.
- Reforms should focus on integrating STEM, soft skills, digital literacy, practical learning opportunities, and industry-academia partnerships.
- Effective teacher training, innovative teaching methods, and student feedback mechanisms are crucial for implementing sustainable education reforms.

AHMAD TOUSIF JAMI

It is often considered cliche to say "Education is the backbone of a nation", but it cannot be far from an important truth for Bangladesh. With a constant decrease of quality of education that is toppled with corrupted events such as questions leaks in national-scale exams, the education sector is in dire straits and needs priority reformation.

This reform cannot be accrue in a vacuum. Especially at a time when the country is aiming to prepare towards more developed prospects, the education needs to match with the job market of the future. That is to say, the education curriculum and its delivery both needs to align with the future demands, and needs to update from its old system.

WHAT DOES THE CURRENT CURRICULUM PRIORITISE?

Memorisation of a wide array of subjects is the modality of the current national curriculum education system at all levels – school, college, university, madrasa, and so on. It rarely, in reality, teaches important skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and creative skills that are increasingly essential in the 21st century. Although the "creative writing" modality was adopted in 2008, in reality, the system has been mostly rewarding memorisation as well. Most teachers are not trained enough to teach students on writing creatively, and most students also just write from memorisation because that is the default expectation. More often than not, teachers also skim while scoring or evaluating answer scripts, and in that effort prioritises lengthy answers or often presentable handwriting, which has no correlation with teaching standards.

It also prioritises creating polymaths, that is someone with knowledge about a range of issues. For example, a student of class eight in the national curriculum is expected to study Bangla (literature, grammar, additional reading), English, Mathematics (General and Higher), Arts and Crafts, Information and Career Technology, Career Education, Physics, Chemistry, Biology, Bangladesh and Global Studies, Physical Education, and so on. While at face it may seem to be making a student who is capable of many things with diverse skills, ultimately most students end up just memorising content for grade, as opposed to being able to study more on the subject they are passionate about.

THE SKILLS GAP

According to the 'Future of Jobs Report 2025' by the World Economic Forum (WEF), the accelerated adoption of digital tools, remote work solutions, and advanced technologies such as machine learning and generative AI are going to change the skills outlook in the future job market globally. Currently, the education curriculum in Bangladesh is far from prioritising these skills. There is no chapter for example in the Information and Communication Technology textbook that covers updated usage of generative AI, for instance.

As per the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), in 2023, the overall number of unemployed tertiary graduates, including university, college and madrasa graduates, stood at 9.06 lakh, up from 7.99 lakh a year ago.

The WEF report also lists ten core skills that are the most important going forward towards employability, which are analytical thinking; resilience, flexibility and agility; leadership and social influence; creative thinking; motivation and self-awareness; technological literacy; empathy and active listening; curiosity and lifelong learning; service orientation and customer service; and talent management. As such, our education system needs to prioritise these skills for future job employability.

CURRENT SITUATION OF THE JOB MARKET

As per the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), in 2023, the overall number of unemployed tertiary graduates, including university, college and madrasa graduates, stood at 9.06 lakh, up from 7.99 lakh a year ago. This is a staggering number of unemployment, and it is one that clearly has a trend of growing only.

A study by the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS) shows that 28.24% of graduates from National University-affiliated colleges are unemployed. The study also shows that rural students and women were disproportionately affected.

As per the World Bank, the percentage of unemployed tertiary-educated youth within the total unemployed population in Bangladesh increased to 27.8% in 2022 from 9.7% in 2013. This shows a mismatch of skills and qualification, that is leading to unemployment.

Moreover, as of April 2024, the ICT Division of the Bangladesh government estimates that there are 650,000 freelancers in Bangladesh. This shows there is a growing demand of the freelancer market as well, which would also require the curriculum to be in line with both global standards and global demands.

REIMAGINING THE CURRICULUM

To bridge these skill gaps listed above, we need a fundamental rethinking of our education curriculum. We must move beyond traditional subject boundaries and embrace interdisciplinary approaches that foster critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving.

The first step would be integrating Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields as crucial drivers of innovation and economic growth. We need to strengthen STEM education at all levels, with a focus on hands-on learning, project-based activities, and real-world applications. This should include promoting coding and computational thinking from an early age. In specific, as the core skills indicate, there needs to be analytical ability incorporated here. This may look like, in the ICT textbook, to include exercises about generative AI prompts, to write codes that can create Large Language Models, and so on.

Currently there is a traditional boundary of perception that only studying STEM can lead to analytical skills or technical skills. This mindset also needs to be challenged in the reimagination of the curriculum. More often than not, students of arts or business studies can be just as well capable analytically. Business students need creative ability for entrepreneurial ideas, arts students explore new ways of expressing their art in modern alignment and so on, all of which requires strong analytical capacity.

There needs to be a distinct focus on developing 21st-century skills. Beyond technical skills, we must also cultivate essential soft skills such as communication, collaboration, adaptability, and leadership. These skills are crucial for success in the modern workplace, where teamwork, communication, and the ability to adapt to change are highly valued.

The second step would be promoting digital literacy. Currently, even in the school-level career guidance book, there is no proper financial teaching of the basic required knowledge. In an increasingly digital world, digital literacy is no longer optional but essential.

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Education reforms: Aligning curriculum with future job markets

PHOTO: ORCHID CHANGMA

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We need to equip students with the skills to navigate the digital landscape, use technology effectively, and critically evaluate online information. This includes teaching online safety, and responsible technology use.

Thirdly, there should be scope for practicing skills in educational institutions. For instance, there may be writing training centres in schools and universities, or public speaking platforms, that count towards final academic grading. Currently, grading is only contingent on academic performance and class performance, with minimal scope of encouragement for extracurricular activities that helps build skills for future job employability.

In this process, the system should aim to instill a love of learning in students and provide them with the tools and resources to continue learning beyond formal education. This includes promoting online learning platforms, vocational training programs, and continuing education opportunities.

STRENGTHENING TEACHER TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

Teachers are the backbone of any education system. To implement these curricular reforms effectively, we need to invest in high-quality teacher training and professional development. Teachers need to be equipped with the knowledge, skills, and pedagogical approaches to deliver a 21st-century education.

Teachers need to be equipped with the knowledge, skills, and pedagogical approaches to deliver a 21st-century education.

The first step needs to be providing training on new technologies. Teachers need to be proficient in using technology in the classroom and integrating it into their teaching practices. This includes training on digital tools, online learning platforms, and educational software.

The second step would be promoting innovative teaching methods, and we need to move away from traditional lecture-based teaching and embrace more interactive and engaging approaches. This includes training on project-based learning, collaborative learning, and inquiry-based learning.

The second step is that industry-academia partnership needs to increase as well. This would help make education more in line with what the industries are looking for, or needs, to be more accurate. Collaboration between educational institutions and the private sector can help ensure that curricula are relevant to the needs of industry and that students are equipped with the skills that employers are looking for. This includes internships, apprenticeships, and joint research projects.

The third step is that students' feedback needs to be incorporated in the performance review of teachers. Although some private universities have this system in name, and recently some public universities are following suit; this needs to be a standard default practice. This would help make teachers be more accountable to their duties, and they would strive for development as well so that they can get better student feedback.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

A reimagination of the Bangladeshi education system is a priority at this point. While many reforms are being debated and undertaken, there should be no doubt that education needs to be a priority sector. In that line, there should also be no doubt that these priority factors should be in sync with global demands and standards as well.

But for that to become a reality, concerted efforts are essential from policymakers, educators, and the private sector to implement these reforms effectively and ensure that everyone has access to quality education. Because only with a reformed education sector can we imagine a Bangladesh that will be reformed for all.

As the number of unemployed graduates keeps on increasing, the time for action is now. We cannot afford to delay these critical reforms any longer, as the more the number of unemployed grows, the harder these efforts become.

Ahmad Tousif Jami *is an international debater instructor and a policy researcher. He is also an in-house contributor at the Tech & Startup department of The Daily Star.*

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Can the youth revive democracy IN BANGLADESH?

AZRA HUMAYRA, SUMAIYA RASHID, BIPRA PRASUN DAS *and* ZABIN TAZRIN NASHITA

The youth, as key drivers of inclusivity, are critically examining the current state of democracy in our country. For them, it is less a triumph than a test—a moment of possibility, shadowed by the weight of history.

PHOTO: ORCHID CHANGMA

RESTORING DEMOCRACY AND PEOPLE'S FAITH IN THE GOVERNMENT

Interviews with students and observations from social media highlight diverse perspectives on the state of democracy. While some voiced concerns about uncertainty and challenges ahead, many shared a sense of hope and confidence in the potential for positive change.

Some people think that the interim government can successfully win back the public's faith in the system. Nabila Rakib, majoring in electronics and communication engineering at Khulna University of Engineering and Technology (KUET), says, "As a student and a young citizen of Bangladesh, I believe the interim government has a unique opportunity to restore faith in the democratic process. This is a chance to set a positive example by prioritising inclusivity and fairness. This generation looks forward to a government that prioritises the nation over individual political agendas, ensuring that democracy works for everyone, not just a select few."

"An inclusive and democratic nation is not possible without the elimination of every type of discrimination regarding ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic classes," states Rakibul Mobin, a former student of the Department of Economics at Dhaka University. The call for an inclusive nation grows louder in Rakibul's words—a vision where every citizen feels seen, heard, and meaningfully included in the democratic process. It's an aspiration not just for representation, but for a deeper, more equitable participation in shaping the country's future.

Nabila points out that the strengthening of law enforcement and the swift, decisive addressing of the rising crime rate must be prioritised by the state. She emphasises that these efforts should be grounded in inclusivity, ensuring that all communities feel protected and represented, especially during this period of escalating instability. She also strongly believes that all citizens are entitled to equal protection of law, not just the powerful class.

Rakibul talks about eliminating class discrimination to ensure inclusivity. He says, "The system of oppressing the working class and marginalised people needs to be stopped with proper regulations and institutions. A country cannot have a fully functional democracy with so much poverty, inequality, and class discrimination."

The fates of the working class have long remained static, untouched by the revolving doors of political power. Yet, with the arrival of the interim government, there exists a rare opening—a chance to rewrite the narratives of the marginalised and finally address the inequities that have endured across administrations.

For the youth, democracy is not merely about elections—it's about dismantling systemic barriers, amplifying marginalised voices, and ensuring fairness transcends rhetoric. The task ahead is monumental: restoring faith in governance by building a nation where inclusivity is not an aspiration but a lived reality. As the country grapples with its past and uncertain present, this moment could define not just a government's legacy but the trajectory of a nation striving for equity, justice, and hope.

DEMOCRATIC INCLUSIVITY AND GENDER MINORITIES

A commonly understood definition of a democratic nation is one where the power of governance is vested in the people. In reality, democracy goes beyond the election of government, but rather, it is a system of governance that is for the people, by the people. Democracy can't be chalked down to the rule of the majority, a truly democratic nation would include and create a safe space for minorities and marginalised groups. Gender minorities are one of the most cornered communities, and in order to materialise the inclusive society the youth dreams of, their voices must be heeded.

An inclusive government is necessary in order to ensure the rights and safety of everyone in the country, which was a sentiment echoed by the public during its formation. Advisers representing the interests of minorities and marginalised groups were deemed to be of great

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Can the youth revive democracy in Bangladesh?

"When two elephants fight, it is the grass that gets trampled. For over two decades, our political landscape has been the battleground for two powerful political dynasties. Both of these parties, in their respective terms, have backslid democracy through rampant corruption."

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importance, as true democratic inclusivity cannot be achieved without it. This is where we can pose the question if reality is on its way to reflecting this ideal.

There are four female advisers in the interim government led by Dr Yunus. Rizwana Hasan in the adviser for the Ministry of Environment, Forest, and Climate Change as well as the Ministry of Water Resources, Nurjahan Begum is the adviser for the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Farida Akhter is the adviser for the Ministry of Fisheries and Livestock, and Sharmeen Murshid is the adviser for the Ministry of Social Welfare. All other members of the 21 member government are male, with no representation of anyone from the third gender or any gender minorities.

Anusha Ahmed*, a student of Dhaka University, voices her opinion on the representation of gender minorities in achieving inclusivity, "When the interim government was announced, people were selected from specific fields and were assigned their respective ministries. However, just as I'd really like to see female personnel advocating for equal rights from here on out, there needs to be someone representing the transgender community to improve the grievances they face."

However, she also mentions that rather than representation, taking action is more important in achieving the goal of inclusivity. "I find it more troubling that incidents of gender violence get shoved under the rug. While it may be argued that the country is fragile right now and gender equality doesn't necessarily come first in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, at the very least it should be attended to. Because when we talk about reform and inclusivity, the entire system needs to undergo it."

Maria Gomes, a graduate of Computer Science from BRAC University, believes that for gender minorities, acknowledgement is the first step in the realisation of true democracy. "Gender minority groups contribute just as much to society and you can't realise true democracy without acknowledging that. Inclusion of these groups will provide perspectives that cisgendered people and men will tend to overlook. Thus, effective awareness campaigns must be launched in order to shed light on the struggles and success stories of members belonging to gender minorities, and not just in urban bubbles where it's easy to gain acceptance. Once awareness is reached, only then can the stage be set for discussions and ways to implement inclusive action."

THE DEBATE OVER ETHNIC MINORITY REPRESENTATION

Bangladesh's pursuit of democracy hinges not just on elections and governance but on embracing inclusivity for all communities. In regions like the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), long-standing conflicts highlight the need for deeper acknowledgment of indigenous rights, culture, and identity. Without addressing the grievances of marginalised groups, democracy remains incomplete, limited to majoritarian representation rather than fostering harmony and equity.

Despite the appointment of Supradip Chakma as the sole representative of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, in the interim government, concerns persist that his presence may be more symbolic than substantive. "While he served as Chittagong Hill Tracts Development Board chairman, the indigenous people saw little to no development under his watch. Despite his background in diplomacy, he has never raised his voice against the oppression, murder, and rape occurring in the CHT. After taking his oath in the interim government, he expressed his intent to boost CHT tourism. However, this raises concerns, as previous tourist developments like Sajek and Nilachol led to the displacement of indigenous communities without adequate compensation. Supradip Chakma has remained silent on these matters. His focus on tourism, while ignoring basic necessities like access to water and healthcare in remote areas, indicates that he does not accurately represent the needs and concerns of the indigenous community," said a young person from the Marma community, who wished to remain anonymous.

"Just because there is representation in the interim government, doesn't mean our voice is being heard. Our voice isn't being listened to until the government fulfills the demands that the Indigenous people of CHT have been demanding for a long time," said Bijoyan Tanchangya, a student at the University of Dhaka.

Aricia Chakma, a student at North South University, fully agreed. "True support for the indigenous people of the Chittagong Hill Tracts goes beyond token appointments. It involves real action, such as allowing the people of the Chittagong Hill Tracts to be governed by representatives within their community and fully implementing the Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord.

Prottoy Chakma*, a young student at the University of Chittagong, says it is important to include Indigenous communities of the Chittagong Hill Tracts into decision making processes, "We, the indigenous communities of the CHT, have long been marginalised and our voices often go unheard in national decision-making processes. The government must take meaningful steps to implement the 1997 Peace Accord fully, ensuring that our land rights are protected, and our autonomy is respected. The government must also address the long-standing issues of discrimination, lack of representation, and inadequate access to essential services such as education, healthcare, and infrastructure. Development projects should be carried out in consultation with indigenous communities, ensuring that they do not lead to displacement or environmental degradation. Our culture, traditions, and way of life must be preserved and promoted, not eroded in the name of progress."

Indigenous people of the Chittagong Hill Tracts expect the same things they have always asked every government that has come to power: Full implementation of the Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord and 1900 Regulation, solving regional political instability, Equitable adjudication of land disputes, along with legal acknowledgment of indigenous identities, providing access to quality education and healthcare tailored to their specific contexts, and ensure their representation in decision-making processes at all levels of government. Moreover, it's also essential to address the socio-economic disparities that Indigenous communities face, promoting inclusive development that respects their traditions and way of life.

They seek justice, equality, and the opportunity to contribute fully to the nation's growth while maintaining their cultural heritage.

PHOTO: ORCHID CHANGMA

Bangladesh's pursuit of democracy hinges not just on elections and governance but on embracing inclusivity for all communities.

PROMISES AND PROTECTION: A CRITICAL MOMENT FOR RELIGIOUS MINORITY RIGHTS

Dr Muhammad Yunus has repeatedly reassured that the interim government prioritises protecting religious minority rights. Yet religious minorities are still faced with concerns about whether their voices are truly being heard. The wave of violence against minority homes and places of worship, in the past few months and the subsequent attempt at politicising and benefitting from these acts of violence by various factions of national and international societies has left deep scars, and promises alone seem insufficient to quell their fears.

Priti Saha*, a young Hindu student, believes that more can be done to ensure the safety and freedom of the Hindu community. "Are there adequate reparations and compensations being made, and have those who have orchestrated attacks on Hindu temples, residences, and families brought to justice?"

She also emphasised that rural Hindus have always been especially vulnerable and that whoever holds power is expected to ensure their safety and improve their lives, providing equal access to opportunities. "The interim government was established to address the country's current challenges before an election. A key priority should be uplifting rural Hindu communities by ensuring their safety, access to education, and protection from discrimination. This would be a significant step toward fostering communal harmony in Bangladeshi society."

Arko Bhowmick*, another young Hindu person, aspires to live in a Bangladesh where the preparations for Durga Puja wouldn't be marred by the news of Durga idols and temples being vandalised. "This has happened every year, and it is as if everyone has become desensitised to it. There is a pressing need to ensure that we can celebrate all our religious ceremonies, festivities, and rituals freely and fearlessly."

Simon Srijon, a young Christian individual, said that he and other people from the Christian community are optimistic about the interim government, but are uncertain about the future. "While I feel that our voices are being heard, and the interim government led by Dr Muhammad Yunus will do its best to preserve and protect the interests of Christian and other minority communities, we are concerned whether this will continue when an elected government is in place."

"As Bangladeshi citizens, we all have the right to practice our religion freely and without fear. We're still not there yet, and it will take a conscious effort from all parties involved, especially the government. It has to ensure that no particular religion can establish ascendancy over others." said Joy Gomes*, another young Christian student who studies at a reputed public university in Bangladesh.

TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY: A TEST FOR THE INTERIM GOVERNMENT

"When two elephants fight, it is the grass that gets trampled. For over two decades, our political landscape has been the battleground for two powerful political dynasties. Both of these parties, in their respective terms, have backslid democracy through rampant corruption. They have exploited the system by fostering a gross culture of nepotism. So, it is certainly refreshing for the general public to see new, able, and educated people taking the helm," says Kabid Shiam, a student at the Department of Media, Communications, and Journalism at North South University.

Transparency and accountability have two key purposes. For starters, it makes the government more accessible to the people it serves. A transparent government enables citizens to engage in the democratic process and stay informed about government budgets, spending, and projects. Second, transparency is an effective tool against corruption. "I hope this interim government can hold transparency and accountability establishing a true democracy, as the last two administrations had real problems in doing so. Trust is essential in building a prosperous nation," says Kabid.

When government processes are transparent, corruption is less likely to grow, and when a government is accountable, it listens to its citizens and uses their comments to create and enhance its policies and services. Bangladesh has a 24 out of 100 rating on Transparency International's 2023 Corruption Perceptions Index, placing it 149th out of 180 countries. This reflects a high amount of perceived corruption. With this interim government in place, the students have high expectations for the corruption rate to fall and democracy to rise.

Zayan Zaman, majoring in computer science and engineering at the Independent University Bangladesh, expresses, "For the first time in a long time, if not ever, we have a set of leaders who are committed to putting the nation before politics, reform before personal gain, and the welfare of the people above all else. This government bears the immense responsibility of not only rebuilding the nation but also restoring the people's faith in the system. This can only be achieved if the government is fully transparent about its decisions and arrangements; otherwise, questions and doubts about its competency are likely to arise."

Critiques have already started coming in, beginning with the appointment of student coordinators as advisors. This sparked debate when, a day after the oath ceremony, people discovered their educational backgrounds to be insufficient and unrelated to their assigned positions—just one of many issues that are talked about. Such concerns reflect a greater need for transparency and meritocracy in governance, which are essential components of any democratic country.

However, the pace of their work has not kept up with the citizens' enthusiasm. While it is too soon to judge the workings of this interim government, given the line-up of advisors, every neutral citizen ultimately hopes for its success. Zayan further states, "Achieving such a feat requires building trust through actions, checks and balances, and a steadfast commitment to prioritising the needs of the citizens over corruption and personal interests."

Some names have been changed at the request of the interviewees.

Azra Humayra *is a student of Mass Communication and Journalism at the University of Dhaka.*

Zabin Tazrin Nashita *is an engineering student at the Islamic University of Technology.*

Sumaiya Rashid *is a student at the University of North Texas.*

Bipra Prasun Das *is a student at North South University.*

PHOTO: ORCHID CHANGMA

The Bangladesh edtech market: WHERE IS IT GOING?

PHOTO: ORCHID CHANGMA

AAQIB HASIB

Edtech (education technology) has come a long way since its inception. In Bangladesh, the landscape has continued to evolve, with more and more players entering the market with every passing year.

Globally, the trend is on a whole other level, with reliable sources like Statista, a data company specialising in market and consumer statistics, estimating the global edtech industry to be worth US $254.8 billion in 2021, with it predicted to reach US $605.4 billion by 2027. Similarly, the New York-based HolonIQ, a global impact intelligence platform for innovative edtech companies, predicts the global edtech industry to be worth at least US $10 trillion by 2030, driven in part by the population growth in emerging countries in Asia and Africa.

HolonIQ, in 2022, also valued India's BYJU's as the number one edtech platform globally at US $22 billion. The two other companies in the top three were from China that year.

The Asian edtech market has been thriving for some time now and one major reason seems to be their population. With India and China being two of the most populated countries in the world, it has allowed edtech companies there to leverage this population for their own bottom lines.

As such, this makes a great case for why the edtech industry in Bangladesh has a lot of prospect and promise going forward.

If we are to observe the Bangladeshi edtech market, the major players that immediately emerge are 10 Minute School (10MS), Shikho, Interactive Cares, and EduHive, to name a few.

Out of them, the definite top two are 10MS and Shikho, who have in large part dominated the market in terms of bringing in users and raising capital. Interestingly, both 10MS and Shikho are primarily focused on the K-12 — from Kindergarten to grade 12 — segment. While both have also introduced courses beyond this segment, it still continues to serve as their bread and butter.

The strategy is a solid one, as a 2014 report from the Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics showed that one-third of total education expenditures of households in Bangladesh is spent on coaching centers and house tutors. Since then, numerous edtech companies have popped up and tried to become an alternative to traditional coaching centres and home tutors.

As a result of the two most dominant edtech players having a stronghold on this segment in the market, newer players are devising other strategies to capture a portion of the edtech market in Bangladesh.

Keeron is one such new player to the market, having started their operations in mid-2023. Sitting down with Arafat Hossain, Head of Marketing at Keeron,

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Bangladesh currently has over 300+ edtech companies. The boom happened during the Covid-19 period, when people were unable to physically attend school or universities. Additionally, there is this 'coaching culture' in our country, where people go to school, but also to coachings and many feel that when they are not going to coaching, they are not actually learning. As a result, edtech boomed during the pandemic.

PHOTO: ORCHID CHANGMA

The Bangladesh edtech market: Where is it going?

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the first question I asked him was how they were differentiating themselves from 10MS and Shikho.

"Keeron differentiates itself by focusing on community based learning from the top 1% of the industries. Though it offers recorded courses, throughout the year it keeps communicating with its learners in the form of workshops and career summits. And its live courses are designed to serve the benefits of community learning," he explained.

Asked what kind of growth Keeron is experiencing as a result of their strategies, Hossain said, "Keeron is on a strong growth trajectory, having seen increasing user engagement and partnerships with universities. The company has expanded its user base by focusing on high-quality, interactive content and an intuitive learning experience. In the next five years, Keeron aims to become a leading edtech platform in Bangladesh, serving over 10 million active users. The goal is to become a one-stop solution for learners, educators, and institutions, facilitating an integrated ecosystem."

The transition from HSC and O-level to university and beyond often can be a challenge for many, particularly in terms of soft skills. Platforms like Keeron can help those students bridge that gap, whether it be academically during their university years or professionally when they are working full-time jobs.

Speaking about the boom of edtech and its current state in Bangladesh, Azmine Adel Al Aziz, an expert from the edtech arena, said, "Bangladesh currently has over 300+ edtech companies. The boom happened during the Covid-19 period, when people were unable to physically attend school or universities. Additionally, there is this 'coaching culture' in our country, where people go to school, but also to coachings and many feel that when they are not going to coaching, they are not actually learning. As a result, edtech boomed during the pandemic. However, after things returned to normal, consumer habits also shifted back to the status quo. The growth journey for edtech began to decline, as it seems people in Bangladesh still prefer an offline class to an online one."

Indeed the edtech industry flourished while numerous others declined during the Covid-19 pandemic.

In fact, in 2022 alone, Bangladeshi edtech startups raised around US $6 million in funding, a milestone at that time. However, there has been a slight shift in the investment landscape.

According to Azmine, venture capitalists and investors have slightly changed what they look for when funding such startups.

"There are two schools of thought when it comes to funding. Pre-Covid funding was mainly backed by large venture capitalist firms. At that time, the startup model primarily focused on observing growth. So, during that time, there was massive growth in the global edtech industry at that time. In recent years, the viewpoint of investors has changed. They now look at profitability alongside growth. Most edtech startups are not profitable as of yet, even though I have heard a few are earning a profit, which is great. However, venture capitalists do not have the same positive mindset in recent years when it comes to investing in edtech companies, which normally have immense growth but little profitability. They are still investing of course, but not at the same levels they were pre-Covid," Azmine explained.

Hossain, however, shared a different side of the story in terms of raising capital for Keeron.

"The post-Covid era has brought some challenges for edtech companies, including increased competition and shifts in investor priorities. Keeron has been able to secure funding through its strong growth metrics and ability to adapt to changing market conditions. Investors are now more discerning, often focusing on profitability and long-term sustainability rather than rapid scaling. However, Keeron's focus on providing high-quality, scalable solutions with tangible impact in education has helped it stand out and secure the necessary funding. Keeron believes that investor interest in edtech remains strong, especially for platforms offering unique value propositions and demonstrating clear ROI for both users and investors," he said.

While venture capitalists and investors in edtech have become somewhat stringent with their wallets, additional issues like the collapse of the Indian edtech bubble may have turned some people away from investing in this particular industry.

Azmine opined, "When investors saw the Indian edtech bubble, which includes the biggest edtech company in the world Byju's, explode, they obviously might have been demotivated. However, while Bangladesh needs to be cautious about such a bubble happening here, the edtech market still has a lot of potential. As internet penetration increases throughout the country, the overall customer base for edtech companies will increase. Currently, only a small portion of the entire population is leveraging edtech as a resource. So, in the future, it will hold even more promise for investors."

In a similar vein, Keeron's Hossain also shared an optimistic view for the edtech industry in Bangladesh going forward.

"The edtech market remains a promising sector for investors, albeit with more cautious funding strategies post-pandemic. While the rapid growth of online learning platforms during the Covid-19 era has slowed, the market is still expanding, especially in emerging markets like Bangladesh. Investors are now more focused on companies that provide differentiated value and have clear paths to monetisation, rather than those chasing hyper-growth at any cost. The demand for high-quality, accessible education solutions continues to rise, driven by increasing internet penetration, government support for digital education, and a growing desire for lifelong learning. As a result, edtech is still seen as a viable, long-term investment, provided companies focus on sustainability and scalability," said Hossain.

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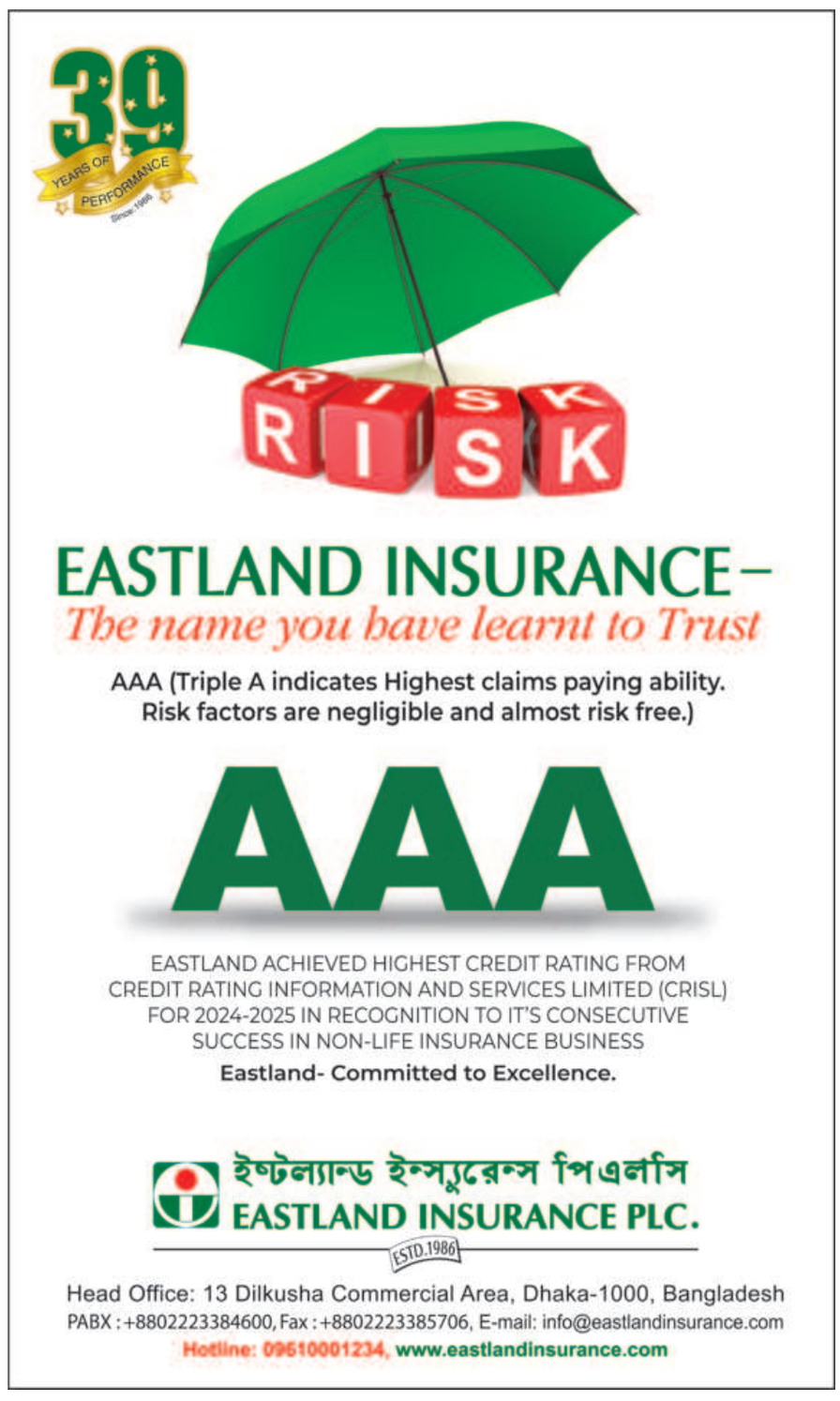

A comparative analysis of countries that reversed brain drain

Brain drain is not a new issue. Countries like India and China have been victims of its malicious consequences for ages now. However, there has been a recent global trend of many countries successfully implementing incentive-based policies and introducing key infrastructural changes that have led to the number of talented youth leaving those countries to be reduced.

ADRITA ZAIMA ISLAM

According to a report published in 2023, the number of Bangladeshi students leaving the country every year tripled from 16,609 in 2008 to about 49,151 in 2022. This astounding increase is a testament to the glaring issue of rising brain drain in our country, a problem that needs immediate attention if we hope to curb its devastating impacts to any degree. Students are the lifeblood of a nation; without talented youth, there is no scope for a country to progress or prosper. If the number of students leaving the country continues to rise at this alarming rate, there will soon be a vacuum of qualified individuals willing to take up the professions that form the backbone of our nation.

Brain drain is not a new issue. Countries like India and China have been victims of its malicious consequences for ages now. However, there has been a recent global trend of many countries successfully implementing incentive-based policies and introducing key infrastructural changes that have led to the number of talented youth leaving those countries to be reduced.

India, for example, has attacked the problem from a few different angles. By creating Research Parks at Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), they are strengthening the academic and research environment in the country, creating avenues for students who wish to enter these fields post-graduation. The National Education Policy 2020, additionally, stated that it would allow top foreign institutions to set up branches in India, so students can receive a quality, international education without having to leave the country.

Through initiatives like the Ramalingaswami Re-entry Fellowship and Ramanujan Fellowship, India is encouraging scientists and engineers who left the country to repatriate, attracting them with laudable salaries, opportunities to pursue research in Indian institutions, and grants from internal and external sources. Moreover, the Government of India launched a programme called Startup India in 2016 to persuade entrepreneurial youth to stay back. By introducing several tax benefits, funding support, collaboration opportunities between industry and academia, as well as guidance programmes, this initiative has made the business atmosphere in India conducive to the creation of start-ups.

These steps have been successful in reversing brain drain to at least a certain degree. Driven by India's strong tech ecosystem as well as the score of opportunities being created, more and more students, and IIT graduates in particular, are choosing to stay in the country.

ILLUSTRATION: ZARIF FAIAZ

China, similarly, has launched a multi-pronged strategy in the form of talent recruitment programmes. With initiatives like the Thousand Talents Plan, the Young Thousand Talents Plan, and the National Science Fund for Distinguished Young Scholars, it has been trying to attract Chinese scientists living overseas back with grant opportunities, distinguished titles, significant reimbursement, and housing benefits. Thus, not only are they trying to reverse the brain drain that has already taken place, but China is also attempting to benefit from the research skills these professionals picked up during their time as tenured faculty in renowned global institutions.

In addition, the Ten Thousand Talent Plan aims to support individuals whom the Chinese Government recognises for their potential to catalyse innovation and development. Domestically as well, China's investments into scientific fields in educational institutions, its rapid economic prosperity, the generation of academic and research opportunities, and the push for technological growth through the creation of innovation parks have made it a desirable location for talented youth and professionals.

Singapore's efforts towards fostering high-quality education and research opportunities through institutions like the National University of Singapore and Nanyang Technological University as well as collaboration with world-renowned, foreign universities have largely contributed to the retention of high-achieving students. By providing educational funding for both domestic and international degrees through the Public Service Commission Scholarships to individuals willing to work in Singapore's public service, the country is strengthening its public sphere while enticing students to stay back. Similarly to India and China, Singapore has also put forth incentives and programmes for the repatriation of citizens back into the country.

A major reason behind the brain drain in Singapore is the exorbitantly high cost of living in the country compared to the pay many professionals receive. To address this, Singapore's architecture body recently launched an initiative to ensure fair, comparable pay, which has created a push in other job fields for the same.

For Ireland, mass emigration and the loss of talented individuals occurred due to the Irish economy's deplorable conditions in the past. Through numerous economic mechanisms, it has managed to turn around its financial situation and transform itself into an attractive location for multinational companies, thus creating job opportunities for graduates. Moreover, in 1995, Ireland introduced a Free Fees Initiative, which allows all Irish citizens to pursue undergraduate degrees free of cost. This has not only been instrumental in encouraging students to stay in the country, it has also caused college enrollment in the country to increase exponentially.

South Korea, too, faced a brain drain as a result of its economic struggles in the 1960s. However, the development of the science and technological sectors and significant investment into research and development led to an economic boom. This, in turn, led to the opening up of job markets, particularly in high-paying, technological fields, which incentivise people to stay. The creation of political stability and appeal to expatriates' love for their country has also been conducive to this goal.

A comparison of these countries reveals some common elements that have contributed to their successful reversal of brain drain. The build-up of research and development sectors, financial investments into developing the educational landscape, offering incentives to highly qualified expatriates to return to the country, economic enhancement, and an increase in the availability of career opportunities and advancements have been crucial in their fight against the loss of talented youth. If Bangladesh hopes to follow in the footsteps of these countries, it has to not only employ its policy-makers to create similar, cohesive strategies, it also has to ensure that its public servants are capable of bringing about the infrastructural changes that are necessary for those strategies to be implemented.

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How to build a conducive environment for INNOVATION AND RESEARCH

Lack of funding and resources creates a host of different issues. Starting from limited exposure to research to sometimes spending your entire undergraduate years without ever dabbling in it, the grim reality is that our nation still has a long way to go before ensuring an environment where researchers can thrive.

RAIAN ABEDIN

In Bangladesh, academia is often one of the most overlooked aspects that has the potential to greatly contribute to the country's sustainable development. With the rise in the conversation of the causes of 'brain drain', it stands as a critically important point to talk about research and innovation alongside the many limitations to creating innovative new changes that hold us back. Moving forward, in order to create an environment conducive to these fields, it is crucial to address the many problems and the many ways we can tackle them.

Where does this problem start? Conducting research in Bangladesh is something students are usually exposed to in their undergraduate years, where many have the opportunity to work on a capstone 'thesis' project—conducting research on a particular project in their specific field of interest. The issue with this, however, is multidimensional. One of the biggest problems here is how many hurdles stand in front of you while you're attempting to carry out research work at an undergraduate level. Funding is a consistent issue, often resulting in university students not being able to spend enough time being exposed to the world of research. And while a master's degree or a PhD is available, what they offer can often seem lacklustre or insufficient. The biggest reason here is, of course, a lack of funding.

Mahir Amer, a student completing his Master's of Biological Sciences at the University of Edinburgh, raises this point, stating, "Anyone majoring in chemistry or the biological sciences will know that the reagents and chemicals we use on a daily basis are costly. The equipment we use also costs quite a lot. As a developing nation, the cold hard truth is that we can't invest as much into Research and Development as other countries." He further added, "The reason I chose the University of Edinburgh is because they have enough funding and resources to carry out cutting-edge research. They also hold lab meetings, section meetings, seminars, and a host of other activities on a frequent basis—which is something not often seen in our country."

This lack of funding and resources creates a host of different issues. Starting from limited exposure to research to sometimes spending your entire undergraduate years without ever dabbling in it, the grim reality is that our nation still has a long way to go before ensuring an environment where researchers can thrive. There is no singular solution to this, but it is important to recognise that government-backed funding—and even funding from external sources—will be crucial going forward. A greater emphasis must, thus, be placed on the necessity of it in our Research and Development sector.

Muhammad Ihsan-Ul-Karim, a Lecturer at the Institute of Health Economics at the University of Dhaka, suggests possible solutions, "Research infrastructure needs to be developed as required. For this, the government can provide conditional scholarship opportunities for students to obtain research-related skills from abroad, the condition being that they return to the country afterwards. Most importantly, salary structure with those having foreign PhD or equivalent degrees needs to be restructured, so that remuneration is comparable to that of our neighbouring countries at least. Otherwise, we're looking at more and more researchers leaving the country, leading to brain drain."

One tangential point to all of this is the need for university courses to promote scientific thinking alongside the learning of mere facts and knowledge. Ahnaf Yeanat Tazwar, a third-year student at North South University, says, "If a proactive approach was adopted where the coursework also delves into how a particular topic was discovered, the thought process behind it, what alternative ways could this problem be approached in, and its significance in our society, then we could pave the road for students to think more 'scientifically'."

Another aspect here is that while research can sometimes be expensive, that is frequently not the only thing holding us back. It is extremely crucial to understand that for research to thrive, the collaboration between individual researchers as well as amongst researchers and those who work in policy-making fields is of utmost importance.

Dr Ishrat Jabeen, Associate Professor at the Department of Biochemistry and Microbiology at North South University, says, "There is a need for direct involvement of scientists and innovators in properly addressing and framing their problems in order to receive proper support and to eventually aid in the formation of legitimate policies. This in turn will ensure a diversity of research perspectives and allow the presence of a broader discussion with citizens and stakeholders."

The lack of broad-scale discussions among researchers is, thus, one big hurdle that makes research more inaccessible than it needs to be. This problem, however, is often exacerbated by an absence of a collaborative spirit in a professional environment. Mahir Amer says, "I didn't know professional jealousy could get in the way of things this much until I tried to conduct research back home. I reckon most researchers keep hush-hush because they're afraid of getting stabbed in the back. However, this creates a very dry environment where researchers rarely host lab meetings, seminars, or even share ideas with others. As a result, undergraduate students are not properly exposed to the research work their faculty members are doing."

Dr Ishrat Jabeen raises a similar point,

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- Bangladesh's research and innovation sector faces critical challenges, including lack of funding, limited infrastructure, and insufficient exposure for students.
- The absence of collaboration, professional jealousy, and inadequate research culture hinder knowledge-sharing and stifle academic growth.
- Policy gaps, undervaluing of impactful research, and motivation driven by career promotions rather than knowledge creation weaken research output.
- Solutions include government-backed funding, improved researcher training, industry-academia partnerships, and integrating scientific thinking into curricula.
- Building a collaborative, well-funded, and intellectually driven environment is essential for fostering sustainable research and innovation in Bangladesh.

How to build a conducive environment for innovation and research

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stating, "Apart from funding, the other aspects that hold us back are a lack of expertise, training, and a lack of research collaboration without personal incentives. Furthermore, underrepresentation in political institutions often gives people a feeling of inefficacy. At a policy level, our demands should be reasonably expected to be heard. The fact that it is not is a problem."

The policy aspect of this problem is not very easily defined. In order to understand it and, in turn, find solutions, it is necessary to dig a little deeper into the myriad problems that surround this field at a more administrative level. According to Dr Mahbubul H Siddiqee, Associate Professor of Microbiology at BRAC University, the problems are far more deeply rooted than just funding. Systemically, the reason research in Bangladesh rarely tends to have an impact at a policy level has to do with the motivations our researchers have.

Dr Mahbubul, who is also the Chair of the BRAC University Institutional Review Board, further elaborates, "One of the biggest issues with our research sector is the hypothetical carrot that we are chasing. What is our motivation for conducting research? The unfortunate reality is that the amount of time and effort it takes to carry out a research project in this country is far too harsh for the minuscule reward and respect that is obtained as a result of it. Thus, university faculty members in many places only focus on publishing papers—because that allows them to get a promotion. Many of these papers, unfortunately, are not really creating new knowledge or helping anyone. Our criteria for judging research, thus, shouldn't be counting the number of papers published, but seeing the number of patents they have established. Only then will research work be valued by all fronts."

One further problem that seems to be looming over researchers is the unfortunate yet very apparent skill gap among the scientists working today. Dr Mahbubul highlights this, stating that, "We need to establish more facilities to train our researchers, both young and new, to bring them all to the same level. I have seen many high-level scientists having no clue how to operate new tools and, on the flip side, fresh researchers simply do not have enough exposure or skills required for research. Both of these must be addressed at an institutional level."

If research is merely motivated by instantaneous profit, then attempting long-term changes will pose a big challenge. The bottom line here is that the problems are at our very foundations, and responding to them requires laying the groundwork for the future. Be it in humanities or STEM-related fields, these problems are nearly ubiquitous.

PHOTO: ORCHID CHANGMA

The solution, then, is to establish further scopes of training and skill development. Unfortunately, most of the problems presented are very interlinked, and the system can only be improved once tackled holistically. If research is merely motivated by instantaneous profit, then attempting long-term changes will pose a big challenge. The bottom line here is that the problems are at our very foundations, and responding to them requires laying the groundwork for the future. Be it in humanities or STEM-related fields, these problems are nearly ubiquitous.

Sumaiya Tasnim, a Lecturer of the Department of English at BRAC University, says, "Bangladesh is hyper-focused on building a space that fosters profitability instead of intellectuality. Some aspects of research in the humanities remain unrecognised to the masses because there is a digression in the discourse surrounding rights, particularly regarding gender, women, and the working class. Of course, training and workshops are helpful, but what would be even better is having students and academics work with scholars to learn methods of researching and bringing new ideas to the humanities department."

Dr Salekul Islam, Professor at the Department of Computer Science and Engineering at United International University, shares some closing thoughts on the matter, highlighting the need for collaboration to create integrated systems for research work to be valued. "Combining research work with industrial needs is a way to tackle the issue of lack of funding, but that too needs to be done carefully and by analysing the needs of both academia and industry. Partnerships of different kinds will also help researchers grow."

The bottom line is clear: to move forward, it is imperative that innovators and researchers work to create a collaborative environment where scientific and analytical thinking is promoted. The culture of research must, thus, be built from the ground up in order to instill the necessity of it for generations to come. As a community, the pursuit and accessibility of knowledge should be nurtured in order to ensure that supervisors, as well as research officers, are both equipped with the tools required to carry out potentially groundbreaking research that will aid in the development of knowledge and tools useful for both the country and the world at large.

Raian Abedin *is a poet, a contributor for The Daily Star, and a final-year student at North South University.*

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