

A day of unparalleled significance

Let 1971 continue to guide our path as a nation

Today marks the 54th anniversary of our nation's independence. Every year, we commemorate this day with solemn reflection and deep gratitude for the enormous sacrifices of our valiant freedom fighters. This year holds special significance, however, coming as it does in the wake of another historic moment: the overthrow of an autocratic regime through a student-led mass uprising. These occasions—over half a century apart—demonstrate the continuity of people's unwavering resolve against oppression and injustice.

While this is reassuring, in recent months, we have seen some misguided efforts to compare these two events as if they were equal in nature or importance. Equally worryingly, amendments proposed by the Constitution Reform Commission also appeared to equate the two as if they belonged on the same pedestal. All this is quite unfortunate. There is no denying the importance of the 2024 uprising, but it cannot be compared to our independence struggle as doing so risks reducing its unparalleled significance to just another political struggle. The fact is, the Liberation War is much more than that. It is the singular most defining moment of our existence, a fully fledged war fought against an external oppressor—Pakistan—after decades of economic, political and cultural subjugation. The sacrifices made during those nine months, culminating in the birth of Bangladesh on December 16, 1971, reshaped the destiny of an entire people.

On the other hand, the 2024 uprising was a movement to reclaim our political space and fundamental rights—but not a war of liberation. While we take immense pride in people's resistance against Sheikh Hasina's authoritarian rule, we must not blur the lines here and allow historical distortions to serve political narratives. Equally importantly, the constitution must not be changed in ways that permit such distortions. The Liberation War remains unique and sacred—it should never be trivialised or repurposed to suit contemporary interests.

Instead, what we should focus on is building the nation anew, in line with citizens' aspirations for a society free of discrimination and inequality, just as we sought to do after 1971. While efforts are currently underway to initiate reforms through the collaboration of political parties and the interim government, citizens too must engage in the collective effort of nation-building with a clear understanding of our history and a commitment to democratic values. Just as the sacrifices of 1971 laid the foundation of an independent country, the recent uprising has created an opportunity to turn it into a just and equitable one. Let us not squander this opportunity.

Implement holistic policies for trade

Assess failure to fully utilise zero-duty trade benefits from China

Bangladesh's failure to fully utilise the zero-duty trade benefits it enjoys from China is quite disappointing. Despite gaining this duty holiday in 2020, we have not been able to increase our exports to China compared to our imports from the country of 1.4 billion people. Initially, duty-free access to Chinese markets was offered to 8,547 Bangladeshi products; later, 100 percent duty-free access was given to all products from Bangladesh. Yet, during the July–December period of the current fiscal year, Bangladesh only exported \$0.46 billion worth of goods to China while importing \$8.89 billion worth of goods. In the last six fiscal years, trade differences with China, in fact, went up.

In the past, we received zero-tariff benefits from India. There too, we failed to take full advantage of the benefit, and our trade imbalance with the country remained high. Both these instances point to our lack of productivity, failure to increase industrial capacity, and inability to attract investment in our export-oriented businesses (other than ready-made garments). Interestingly, Bangladesh's main export to China is garments, even though China itself is the world's largest apparel exporter. According to a report in this daily, Bangladesh does not have much scope to increase apparel exports to China beyond what is currently being done. This shows a lack of vision regarding product diversification, and the fact that we have been stuck in RMG for so long.

Experts told this daily that we should have pursued Chinese investments in products such as man-made fibre, leather, leather goods, solar panels, semiconductors, and microchips, which could be exported back to China. However, our policies often lack comprehensive implementation plans. Moreover, corruption and negligence often derail implementation. Inconsistent policies, high energy prices, and lack of political stability also drive away foreign investors.

As Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus is set to visit China, we must assess our performance in taking comprehensive steps to increase our export basket and attract Chinese investment. US President Donald Trump's trade war against several countries, including China, has opened some doors of opportunity for Bangladesh. Chinese investors are showing interest, and we must hit the iron while it's hot. We cannot let this opportunity slip because of our internal problems, low productivity, and lack of political consensus needed for urgent reforms that can support a trade-conducive and investment-friendly environment.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY



Mike Tyson sent to prison

On this day in 1992, heavyweight boxing champion Mike Tyson was sentenced to six years in prison following a rape conviction in Indianapolis, Indiana.

EDITORIAL

Why we need competitive salaries in academia



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KAMRUL HASSAN MAMUN

A recent report by The New Indian Express highlighted that the Indraprastha Institute of Information Technology, Delhi (IIIT-Delhi) has raised its PhD fellowship to 60,000 rupees per month, which amounts to over Tk 83,000, making it the highest PhD fellowship in India. Previously set at 50,000 rupees, this increase is a testament to India's commitment to fostering research and innovation. Additionally, PhD students at IIIT-Delhi also receive a studio apartment as part of their benefits package, further improving their standard of living.

However, the financial support for researchers in India does not stop there. They are also provided 150,000 rupees for international lab visits, enabling researchers to

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gain global exposure and collaborate with leading experts. Furthermore, a professional development allowance (PDA) of 250,000 rupees is allocated for attending prestigious conferences and workshops, ensuring that scholars can present their work on global platforms. To further enhance research capabilities, a research contingency grant is provided to cover essential research expenses, along with a one-time laptop grant to equip researchers with the necessary tools for advanced study. Additionally, newly recruited faculty members in reputed Indian



Bangladesh cannot keep its brightest minds to remain in the country with such low salaries.

FILE VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

institutes such as IITs, the Indian Institute of Science (IISc), and the Indian Institute of Education and Research receive a research startup fund ranging from 25 lakh to 30 lakh rupees, equivalent to approximately Tk 35–40 lakh.

In stark contrast, how much do PhD students in Bangladesh receive? Most universities and the University Grants Commission (UGC) offer only Tk 15,000–25,000 per month. Even the highest PhD fellowship in the country, offered by the Noakhali Science and Technology University (NSTU) very recently, offers Tk 40,000—only half of what our neighbouring country provides to its PhD students. Meanwhile, a lecturer at a Bangladeshi university earns around Tk 35,000, and an associate professor makes approximately Tk 80,000 per month. This means that a PhD student in India now earns more than an experienced university faculty member in Bangladesh.

Bangladesh offering PhD students a mere Tk 15,000–25,000 per month raises fundamental questions about the broader academic salary structure. The current salary framework fails to recognise the academic qualifications and contributions of university faculty, leading to frustration and dissatisfaction of the community.

A salary of Tk 20,000–50,000 is

more than a Bangladeshi professor, even before adjusting for purchasing power.

How can Bangladesh expect its brightest minds to remain in the country under such conditions? Low salaries may force faculty members to take up multiple part-time jobs, which inevitably affects their ability to focus on research and teaching. Many faculty members from Dhaka University (DU) and other prestigious institutions teach part-time at private universities or engage in consultancy work to supplement their income. No one willingly endures Dhaka's traffic and additional workload unless they have no other choice.

Moreover, inadequate salaries create an environment where unethical practices can take root. Another alarming issue is the complete absence of postdoctoral research programmes in Bangladeshi universities. No institution, including DU, has a structured system for postdoctoral fellowships. This is unimaginable in today's academic world. Without such opportunities, universities cannot attract high-calibre researchers from abroad, nor can they retain homegrown talent. Competitive fellowships are essential for building a strong research ecosystem, which naturally requires an increase in faculty salaries as well.

Investing in higher education is investing in the future, and without competitive salaries, the country's academic institutions will struggle to maintain their relevance on the global stage.

If Bangladesh is serious about fostering high-quality research and world-class PhD programmes, it must provide competitive fellowships that attract both local and international scholars. PhD fellowships should be set at a minimum of Tk 70,000–80,000 per month to allow research students to dedicate themselves fully to academic excellence. In line with this, postdoctoral fellows should receive at least Tk 100,000, while an assistant professor with a PhD should earn no less than Tk 120,000. Furthermore, a full professor should not be paid less than Tk 300,000, as many private universities already offer salaries in this range. The disparity between public and private university salaries is unjustified and must be eliminated immediately.

Bangladesh needs a separate, well-structured salary scale for university teachers. Without this, the country will continue to experience brain drain, a decline in research quality, and stagnation in higher education. Recognising and addressing this issue is crucial not just for the future of academia but for the nation's overall progress in an increasingly knowledge-driven world.

The case for reverse brain drain is of significance for Bangladesh. Recently, top academics are returning to their countries as part of the global trend of reverse brain drain. Several top Indian scientists have left prestigious positions abroad to join leading Indian institutions. This is a sign that countries are making real progress by offering competitive research environments that attract their own intellectual diaspora.

Now, imagine if a Bangladeshi scholar from Princeton University decided to return to the country. The likely outcome? His research career would be doomed. He might not even secure a position, and if he did, he would receive minimal research funding, making it impossible to sustain high-level research or mentor PhD and postdoctoral fellows. This tragic reality highlights the urgency of reforming Bangladesh's research ecosystem and salary structures.

If Bangladesh is truly committed to progress, it must act now by prioritising higher education, increasing research funding, and ensuring that academia remains a viable career path for its best and brightest minds.

Could Starlink solve the connectivity challenges in Bangladesh?



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SABBIR AHMAD

Recently, I went on a business trip to Cox's Bazar, where I had to attend several meetings virtually. Unfortunately, I could not complete any of those meetings due to weak internet connectivity there. A few months earlier, I was visiting the Sundarbans area where I wanted to connect with friends and family, but there was no connection. In Bangladesh, while urban regions enjoy relatively good internet and mobile network coverage, vast parts of the country, especially in rural, hilly and coastal areas, struggle with limited or no connectivity, with some places still relying on 2G networks only. The prohibitive cost and complexity of building mobile phone towers and other infrastructure in sparsely populated regions make it difficult to improve coverage in these areas. According to the preliminary report of the Population and Housing Census 2022, approximately 6.5 crore people aged 18 and above in Bangladesh do not have internet access. This indicates a significant digital divide in the country.

To address the connectivity issue, the efforts to bring Non-Geostationary Satellite Orbit (NGSO) networks, such as Starlink, in Bangladesh is a bold step by the government. Starlink, the satellite internet service developed

by SpaceX, is becoming increasingly popular across the globe for providing connectivity, especially in remote or underserved regions where traditional ground-based networks are not available. Starlink, with its constellation of low Earth orbit (LEO) satellites, can provide internet connectivity directly to users in these areas without relying on ground-based infrastructure. It is kind of a plug and play kit that includes a dish (user terminal) and a router. The dish connects to the Starlink satellites while the router connects to the dish and provides wi-fi in a home, community facility or business.

In regions with hilly or mountainous terrain, laying cables is difficult and expensive, as transporting construction equipment to remote sites can be challenging. Meanwhile, coastal regions and low-lying areas are vulnerable to flooding, and underground cables there need frequent maintenance and repair. In such areas, Starlink can provide a cost-effective satellite backhaul, ensuring that mobile networks stay connected. Through satellite backhaul, mobile operators can expand their network reach and provide better services in remote areas. Starlink can partner with telecom operators in Bangladesh to provide satellite backhaul for mobile towers.

We remember what happened when Cyclone Remal struck Bangladesh's southern coastal regions in May 2024. The cyclone's impact was particularly severe on the nation's telecommunications infrastructure. As the storm approached, power outages became widespread, with the Bangladesh Power Development Board (BPDB) reducing electricity generation by more than half to prevent accidents during the cyclone. This led to at least 10,000 mobile towers, or base transceiver stations (BTS), to go out of service. Millions of people were affected by this disruption in mobile and internet services. The widespread loss of connectivity severely hampered communication and coordination efforts during the disaster response. Relief operations faced challenges in reaching the affected communities, and people struggled to contact emergency services or inform relatives of their safety.

This situation underscored the vulnerability of essential communication infrastructure to natural disasters and highlighted the need for more resilient systems to ensure continuous connectivity during emergencies. In such circumstances, Starlink could play a critical role in mitigating communication disruptions as it doesn't rely on ground-based infrastructure and could continue to provide internet access even if local mobile towers or fibre connections were down. Starlink terminals can be quickly set up and deployed in emergency response zones as they are portable and can be activated with minimal effort.

The Internet of Things (IoT) is rapidly gaining importance in Bangladesh, with applications in agriculture, healthcare, and smart

city development. However, the coverage of IoT networks largely depends on the existing 3G and 4G mobile infrastructure, which remains limited in rural and remote regions. Expanding IoT applications requires better connectivity, especially outside urban areas. Mobile phone networks and NGSOs can work together to offer reliable connectivity for IoT devices in Bangladesh. While mobile networks are ideal for dense, urban environments, Starlink can provide connectivity for IoT devices in remote or rural areas.

However, Starlink networks face several technical challenges that include latency and handover. More importantly, the cost of Starlink service is a significant barrier for widespread adoption in countries like Bangladesh, where economic challenges persist for many people. A Starlink kit costs around \$549 to \$599. The cost for the monthly internet service varies based on location and specific plan, but generally it ranges between \$110 and \$120 per month. This is much higher than local data and broadband costs.

The government needs to be proactive in eliminating this cost barrier. A business model is required to reduce the cost of initial setup and monthly subscription fee of Starlink services. One possible solution is to offer monthly rental of devices with long-term contracts. The government can also establish community-based models, where people can pool their resources to share a single Starlink connection. In some cases, businesses may subsidise the cost of Starlink internet to provide connectivity in underserved areas. This could enable affordable internet access where other solutions are economically unfeasible.