

# Rabindranath, protest, and contested legacies



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On February 14, 2023, a group of students from Dhaka University's Institute of Fine Arts (Charukola) placed a statue of Rabindranath Tagore with his mouth taped shut, holding a copy of his Nobel-winning book *Gitanjali* with a nail driven through it, as a protest against censorship and the perceived decline of freedom of expression in Bangladesh. Two days later, it went missing. At first, it wasn't clear who had taken it. A banner appeared at the site reading: "Gum hoye gecchen Rabindranath (Rabindranath has been disappeared)," a pointed reference to cases of alleged state-sponsored disappearances in recent times.

Then, Dhaka University officials announced they had removed the statue because, in their view, it distorted Rabindranath's figure and was substandard as a work of art. They stated they were investigating who had placed it there in the first place. The next day, the head and body of the statue showed up desecrated and damaged in different parts of Suhrawardy Udyan, a nearby park. Some students glued the pieces back together and reinstalled it at its original location, accompanied by two signs: "*Tomar pujaar chhole tomay bhulei thaaki* (In pretence of prayer, we remain oblivious of you)," a line from one of his songs, and "*Digital nirapotta ain bail ebong shob dhoroner censorship bondho koro* (Scrap the Digital

Security Act and end all kinds of censorship)." Although a relatively minor event in the overall scheme of Bangladeshi politics, this display of Rabindranath's statue as protest art on the Dhaka University campus drew attention, I suggest, to the various tensions surrounding secular politics in Bangladesh.

Why was Rabindranath's distorted figure displayed as a protest in the first place, particularly when he and his works faced no direct threat, even from the state being accused of curtailing freedom of speech? Why did *Gitanjali* have a nail driven through it, at a time when it was generally understood among the literati as a seminal text representing Bangla literature?

Even before such questions could be fully articulated, the statue was "taken away"—almost like clockwork, seemingly demonstrating the very limits of political expression being protested. The removal raised yet another set of questions. Who decides what constitutes art? Did the display violate university rules regarding public installations? Why did the authorities apparently destroy it and dump it in Suhrawardy Udyan, instead of simply storing it somewhere? If it truly violated university rules, how was the repaired statue allowed to remain in place afterwards?

Even as one might critique the specific use of Rabindranath's statue as a symbol of protest, there is a grain of truth in the signboard that read,

"*Tomar pujaar chhole tomay bhulei thaaki*." As Dutta and Robinson, who authored the book *The Myriad-Minded Man*, noted, Rabindranath is intensely revered almost like a deity—his songs and plays are performed routinely at major events. But it remains unclear whether he has actually been accepted or even fully understood by the masses.

speaking to people in different parts of the country. I have found this admission of incomprehensibility to be quite common, astutely captured in one of my interlocutor's anecdotes: "Once we were playing Rabindra Sangeet on our cassette player during my sister's wedding preparations," he shared. "After a while, my mother said, 'Play some Bangla music'—that

freedom, inspired Bangalees of East Pakistan and contributed to demand self-determination. Even though Bangladesh came into existence well after Rabindranath's death, anyone familiar with Bangladesh and its culture knows how important his poems and songs are in celebrating our heritage.

There is a historical reason for

of national self-determination on public platforms, with songs like "*O Amar Desher Mati* (Oh, the soil of my country)," "*Badh Bhenge Dao* (Break down the walls)," and, of course, "*Amar Sonar Bangla* (My Golden Bengal)." These public performances reinforced the idea of a secular Bangalee nationalism deemed appropriate for Bangladesh. "Amar Sonar Bangla" became a powerful symbol during the independence struggle and was adopted as the national anthem of independent Bangladesh in 1971.

East Bengal was also a site of possibilities for Rabindranath. As Poulomi Saha writes, "Within Tagore's trenchant critique of nationalism, there appears a call to conceive of a *Swadesh*, a country of one's own, that is a practice of non-sovereign self-making; this locally rooted global form harks back to East Bengal as site of poetic, ideological, and material possibility. The site of Tagore's ancestral landholdings, rural East Bengal remains at the fore of Tagore's conception of home and the politics of its postcolonial possibility."

The "owning" of Rabindranath during Bangladesh's independence struggle relied on these historical connections. It might not be far-fetched to suggest that the political elite felt they were realising the possibilities that Rabindranath could only imagine. His birth anniversary offers an occasion to consider the degree to which this "site of possibilities" has lived up to its progressive potential.

Critical in this examination is not whether the people of Bangladesh have followed his writings to the letter, but rather whether his spirit of breaking free from dogma and strict rules, albeit often in quiet ways, has served as an inspiration in the continuous fight for a democratic Bangladesh.



FILE VISUAL: MAISHA SYEDA

While his works are certainly popular, he is often deemed equally incomprehensible, in no small part because of the formal, stylised, or perceived "difficult" Bangla that characterises much of Rabindranath's prose and poetry. Dutta and Robinson's words ring true again: "He is found everywhere in Bengali life—and yet he is lost." As part of a research project on Rabindra-practice in Bangladesh, I have been

is how different *Rabindrik* Bangla can seem from colloquial Bangla." Nevertheless, Rabindranath remains a significant figure in Bangladesh. A Bangalee polymath and Nobel Prize-winning poet, Rabindranath played a crucial role in shaping the nationalist movement in the anti-British struggle and in Bangladesh during the 1950s and 1960s. His poems and songs, filled with themes of love, spirituality, and

this. Rabindra Sangeet—songs of Rabindranath—symbolised resistance in erstwhile East Pakistan when the Pakistani military government banned its performance in the 1960s. The ban turned Rabindra Sangeet, and Rabindranath himself, into subversive symbols. At the height of the nationalist movement, Rabindra Sangeet, along with the works of other poets like Nazrul, became a popular expression

## The silent emergency: Politicisation of our healthcare sector



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SYED ABDUL HAMID

After the July uprising, Bangladesh now stands at the threshold of a new era. It has ignited dreams of a new Bangladesh in the public consciousness—a Bangladesh where progress, justice, and inclusivity will be ensured in every sector. In the context of this transformation, the healthcare sector and the role of health professionals demand renewed scrutiny. A fundamental question arises repeatedly: Are the doctors, entrusted with the critical responsibility of saving lives, able to uphold the dignity, ethics, and humanistic values of their profession? Or has the growing influence of politics become an invisible barrier to fulfilling this responsibility?

The medical profession is not merely a job or a source of income. It is a radiant symbol of humanity. To a doctor, a patient's life is the most valuable asset. Their duty extends beyond curing diseases to becoming beacons of trust, empathy, and hope. Organisations established to protect the dignity of this profession and the rights of doctors were meant to ensure professional welfare. However, regrettably, these organisations have fallen prey to political influence, deviating from their original objectives. Many medical organisations are directly or indirectly linked to some political party. Their activities are no longer focused on safeguarding doctors' interests but have become tools for political parties to expand influence and maintain dominance.

This political influence profoundly impacts every level of a doctor's professional life. Postings, promotions, and transfers—which should be determined based on a doctor's merit, experience, and professional competence—are now contingent on political interference. A doctor's career advancement depends more on political loyalty than on qualifications.

Bangladesh's medical community is among the most talented and respected segments of society. Their knowledge, skills, and dedication form the backbone of the healthcare sector. They become rays of hope in society's most critical moments. However, political divisions and partisan conflicts have deprived many qualified doctors of leadership opportunities. This division not only affects their professional lives but also weakens their social standing. Governance in the healthcare sector is being disrupted, and public trust in doctors is steadily declining. The erosion of a doctor's image is not just a personal loss, it has become a political

liability for the associated political parties.

The impact of this political influence is not confined to doctors. It casts a dark shadow over the entire healthcare sector. The public now perceives doctors as politically influenced rather than patient-centric. This crisis of trust is particularly alarming because access to quality healthcare is already a significant challenge for ordinary Bangladeshis. Limited healthcare infrastructure in rural areas, shortages of doctors and nurses, and high treatment costs have already made healthcare access difficult. The erosion of trust in doctors amidst these challenges is creating an even greater crisis for the healthcare sector.

Furthermore, the lack of merit-based leadership is hindering innovation and reform in the healthcare sector. Bangladesh's population is growing, and with it, the demand for healthcare services is increasing. However, political influence has made long-term planning and effective policy implementation nearly impossible. Various political parties, such as the BNP, have proposed ambitious healthcare reforms. The BNP's 31-point plan is one such example. But a fundamental prerequisite for implementing these proposals is establishing an accountable, professional, and politically neutral healthcare system. Without meeting this condition, these plans will remain mere paper promises.

What is the way out of this crisis? The medical community must embark on a path of self-assessment. Their organisations may be politically aware, but their primary loyalty must lie with the profession's ethics, independence, and interests. This requires fostering a culture of constructive dialogue. Doctors should engage in open discussions to identify their challenges and seek solutions. It must be remembered that the people of this country do not favour doctors engaging in politics, as evidenced by a recent survey by Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS). Through such dialogue, the medical community can restore public trust in the profession.

One possible solution could be nurturing a new generation of leadership—leadership free from political influence and committed to professionalism and humanity. Such leadership could usher in a new era in the healthcare sector, a system where patient care is the highest priority. By breaking free from political influence, doctors can reclaim their

true role as healers and advocates for well-being.

The depoliticisation of the medical profession is not only significant within the profession. It holds national importance. A healthcare system free from political influence can become a cornerstone of national good governance. It would demonstrate that Bangladesh is capable of building institutions dedicated to public service rather than

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serving political elites. For doctors, this is a historic opportunity to redefine their legacy. They are not pawns in a political game but can be torchbearers of a healthier, just, and prosperous future.

As Bangladesh moves forward through its new reality, the medical profession stands at a crossroads. This is not a time for stagnation. What is needed now is self-assessment, constructive dialogue, and bold action. The dream of a new Bangladesh built on justice, accountability, and humanity depends on this renaissance in the medical profession. The responsibility to turn this dream into reality now rests in the hands of the medical community.

However, the question remains: What should the state do in this regard? Articles 15 and 18 of the constitution recognise healthcare as a fundamental right. Thus, if political influence or partisan involvement in the healthcare sector goes against the public interest, it amounts to a failure to fulfil the state's constitutional obligations.

In this context, the government, in collaboration with the BMDC, could conduct an online poll to ascertain whether doctors support or oppose engaging in partisan politics. We firmly believe that, except for a handful of doctors seeking or enjoying privileges, the majority wish to break free from the cycle of partisan politics.

However, the state's primary responsibility is to prevent the infiltration of partisan politics into the medical profession through strict enforcement of the law. According to the Government Servants Ordinance of

1979, government and semi-government employees are legally prohibited from participating in partisan politics. This provision applies equally to the healthcare sector, and the state must take a firm stance to enforce it. In particular, those actively involved in partisan politics should be barred from participating in Bangladesh Medical Association (BMA) elections or securing appointments in government or government-funded healthcare institutions—a moral and legal duty of the state.

Additionally, the state must undertake a

coordinated, cross-party initiative where all political parties agree on a common policy to keep the healthcare and public health sectors free from partisan politics. To this end, the state's top leadership, particularly the chief adviser or relevant policymakers, must engage in discussions with political parties to formulate a realistic reform agenda. Ensuring sustainable reforms in the healthcare sector in the public interest requires political neutrality, professional transparency, and good governance, underpinned by resolute state-led action.

### কর্ণকুলী গ্যাস ডিস্ট্রিবিউশন কোম্পানী লিমিটেড

(পেট্রোবাংলার একটি কোম্পানী)

প্রধান কার্যালয়, ১৩৭/এ, সিডিএ এডিনিটি, বোলপহর, চট্টগ্রাম।

সূত্র: ২৮.১৪.০০০০.০০০.২২২.০২.০০০১.২৪.৪৯

তারিখ: ০৭/০৪/২০২৪

#### প্যানেল আইনজীবী তালিকাভুক্তি বিজ্ঞপ্তি

কর্ণকুলী গ্যাস ডিস্ট্রিবিউশন কোম্পানী লিমিটেড (কেজিডিসিএল) এর পক্ষে ঢাকা এবং চট্টগ্রামস্থ বিভিন্ন আদালতে মামলা/বিহারসি-তে আরবিট্রেশন পরিচালনা, লিগ্যাল নোটিশ অবকা লিগ্যাল নোটিশের অবকা প্রদানসহ কোম্পানী প্রেরিত নথিপত্র/দেয়কপত্র পরীক্ষা-নিরীক্ষাপূর্বক লিগ্যাল কোর্ট/আইনগত মতামত প্রদানের নিমিত্ত ঢাকা এলাকার জন্য ১০(দশ) জন প্যানেল আইনজীবী এবং চট্টগ্রাম এলাকার জন্য ১২(বার) জন প্যানেল আইনজীবী ০২(তিনি) কবর যোগ্যদের জন্য তালিকাভুক্ত করা হবে। প্যানেল আইনজীবী তালিকাভুক্তির নিমিত্ত আইনজীবীদের নিম্নলিখিত শর্তে নিম্নবর্ণিত শর্তে দরখাস্ত জমা করা যাবে:

#### শর্তাবলী

- ০১। ঢাকা এলাকার আইনজীবীদের ক্ষেত্রে ন্যূনতম ০৫(পাঁচ) কবর হাইকোর্ট বিভাগের অভিজ্ঞতাসহ দেওয়ানী ও অন্যান্য আদালতে মামলা পরিচালনাসহ বিভিন্ন আইনগত কাজে ১০(দশ) কবরসহ অভিজ্ঞতাসম্পন্ন হতে হবে। অন্যদিকে এলএল.এম/বার-এট্ট-এ ডিগ্রিধারীসহ উচ্চ আদালতে মামলা পরিচালনায় অভিজ্ঞ প্রার্থীদের অগ্রাধিকার দেয়া হবে। চট্টগ্রাম এলাকার আইনজীবীদের ক্ষেত্রে দেওয়ানি, সৌজদারি ও শ্রম আদালতে মামলা পরিচালনাসহ বিভিন্ন আইনগত কাজে ন্যূনতম ১০(দশ) কবরসহ অভিজ্ঞতা সম্পন্ন হতে হবে।
- ০২। আবেদনকারী আইনজীবীকে গ্যাস আইন, প্রশাসিক ট্রাইব্যুনাল/সার্ভিস ম্যাটর, দেওয়ানি, সৌজদারি ও শ্রম আইন, কোম্পানী আইন, বাণিজ্যিক আইন, চুক্তি আইন, সরকারি/পেট্রোবাংলা এবং এর অধীনস্থ কোম্পানীর সার্ভিস রুলস, ভূমি আইন, সরকারি পাতনা আদায় সংক্রান্ত সকল আইন, শেয়ার ও সিকিউরিটিজসহ অন্যান্য আইনী বিষয়ে এককভাবে মতামত প্রদান এবং উচ্চ আদালত/নিম্ন আদালতে মামলা পরিচালনায় অভিজ্ঞ হতে হবে।
- ০৩। প্যানেল আইনজীবীগণ পেট্রোবাংলা/কোম্পানির অনুমোদিত সিডিউল অফ রোট অনুযায়ী ফি প্রাপ্য হবেন। তবে, কোন নির্ধারিত ফি/বেতন প্রদান করা হবে না। সিডিউল অফ রোট-এর কপি কোম্পানীর লিগ্যাল অ্যাফেয়ার্স ডিপার্টমেন্টে, চট্টগ্রাম এবং ঢাকা সিডিউল অফিস, পেট্রোবাংলা, পেট্রোসেন্টার (১৪ তলা), ও কাগজের বাজার বা/এ, ঢাকা হতে সংগ্রহ করা যাবে।
- ০৪। প্রার্থীদের বাংলাদেশের নাগরিক এবং সু-স্বাস্থ্যের অধিকারী হতে হবে। প্রার্থীদের বয়স বিজ্ঞপ্তি প্রকাশের তারিখে ৬৫ কবরসহের অধিক হতে পারবে না।
- ০৫। আবেদনকারী আইনজীবীগণ অন্য প্রতিষ্ঠানে প্যানেল আইনজীবী হিসেবে নিযুক্ত থাকলে প্রতিষ্ঠানের ঠিকানাসহ বিজ্ঞপ্তি উল্লেখ করতে হবে। কেজিডিসিএল-এর প্যানেল আইনজীবী হিসেবে নিয়োজিত থাকাকালে কেজিডিসিএল-এর স্বার্থ বিরোধী কোন প্রতিষ্ঠান/ব্যক্তির আইনজীবী হিসেবে কাজ করা যাবে না।
- ০৬। প্যানেল আইনজীবীগণের মোসাদ ০৩ (তিনি) কবর এবং উচ্চ পদের সম্মতি সাপেক্ষে তা নয়ান করা যাবে। তবে, পদত্যাগ/অব্যাহতির ক্ষেত্রে যে কোনো পক্ষের ৩০(ত্রিশ) দিনের নোটিশ প্রদানপূর্বক তা কার্যকর হবে।
- ০৭। অগ্রাধিকার প্রাপ্য আবেদন প্রার্থীর নাম, পিতার নাম, মাতার নাম/স্বামীর নাম, স্বামী, বর্তমান ও ফেরার ঠিকানা উল্লেখক্রমে আবেদনকারীর জাতীয় পরিচয়পত্র (এনআইডি), শিক্ষাপত্র যোগ্যতা ও অভিজ্ঞতার সনদপত্রের সত্যায়িত কপি এবং পাসপোর্ট সাইজের ০২ (দুই) কপি সদ্য তোলা ছবি আবেদনপত্রের সাথে সংযুক্ত করে এ বিজ্ঞপ্তি প্রকাশের ১৫ (পনের) দিনের মধ্যে কোম্পানি সচিব, কর্ণকুলী গ্যাস ডিস্ট্রিবিউশন কোম্পানী লিমিটেড (কেজিডিসিএল), প্রধান কার্যালয়, ১৩৭/এ, সিডিএ এডিনিটি, বোলপহর, চট্টগ্রাম এর বরাবরে অবশ্যই পৌঁছাতে হবে। আবেদনপত্রের এবং নামের উপর "ঢাকা/চট্টগ্রাম এলাকার জন্য প্যানেল আইনজীবী পদের জন্য আবেদনপত্র" কথাগুলো লিখা থাকতে হবে।
- ০৮। কর্ণকুলী গ্যাস ডিস্ট্রিবিউশন কোম্পানী লিমিটেড (কেজিডিসিএল) কোন কার্যে দণ্ডনীয় ব্যক্তিকে যেকোনো আবেদনপত্র অথবা সকল আবেদনপত্র গ্রহণ/ব্যক্তি করার অধিকার সংরক্ষণ করে। তালিকাভুক্তির বিষয়ে কোম্পানির সিদ্ধান্তই চূড়ান্ত বলে গণ্য হবে।

*(Signature)*  
০৭-০৪-২৫  
কোম্পানি সচিব

কর্ণকুলী গ্যাস ডিস্ট্রিবিউশন কোম্পানী লিমিটেড

GD-1107