

How education spending reveals a government’s true priorities



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The truest measure of a government’s sincerity is not found in its slogans or manifestos, but in how much importance it places on education. And the clearest, most objective indicator of that commitment is the budget allocated to the education sector. Numbers don’t lie—they tell us where priorities truly lie. Let’s consider the track record of the previous government. In FY2018, they allocated an annual budget equivalent to 2.2 percent of the GDP to education. A gradual decrease followed: in FY 2021, the education budget allocation was equivalent to 2.09 percent of GDP; 2.08 percent for FY2022; 1.83 percent in FY2023; 1.76 percent in FY2024; and finally, a historic low of just 1.69 percent in FY2025. Let that sink in: a steady, deliberate decrease in education spending over the years.

But the story doesn’t end with shrinking budgets. In reality, the actual investment in meaningful education was even lower than what the budget figures claimed. To make matters worse, the leadership of the education ministry was entrusted to corrupt figures. University leadership, too, was shaped not by merit but by blind loyalty. Vice-chancellors (VCs) and pro-VCs were chosen for their political subservience and academic mediocrity, not for their vision or scholarship. So, let’s ask ourselves a simple but serious question: can a government that systematically devalues education claim to be patriotic?

One of the more theatrical attempts by the former government to appear reform-minded was the rollout of a new national curriculum, which they claimed was inspired

by models from Finland and Japan. But here’s the hard truth: no curriculum, no matter how well-designed, can succeed without quality teachers. Even Finland’s world-renowned system would collapse if implemented with Bangladesh’s current salary structure, training, and social value of primary and secondary school teachers. A curriculum isn’t magic; it’s just a framework. What brings it to life are the people who teach it.

At the university level, physics is physics, whether you are at Harvard, MIT, Dhaka University or Rajshahi University. But the outcomes vary drastically. Why? Because of the teachers. If you swapped Harvard’s physics faculty with that of DU, Harvard would begin to falter, and DU would soar. That’s the transformative power of inspired educators. The real priority, therefore, should have been to recruit, train, and retain excellent teachers, to elevate the profession and make it desirable to the nation’s best minds. Instead, the new curriculum added confusion, anxiety, and disappointment to an already stressed system. And in many ways, this educational frustration played a quiet but significant role in the downfall of the previous regime.

I still hold hope in the current government. But that hope now hangs by a thread, and it depends entirely on the next national budget. If the interim administration allocates a budget that’s equivalent to at least 4.5 percent of our GDP, my confidence will remain. If they dare to go further—to five percent or beyond—it will be a historic moment for Bangladesh, and a sign that we finally have a government that understands the foundation of nation-



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building. But if they repeat the Awami League government’s mistakes and hover around two percent, my optimism will vanish. Because the truth is, the root of nearly every crisis in this country—corruption, inequality, intolerance, weak institutions—can be traced back to one thing: a broken education system. To build a developed nation, we need enlightened minds. And the only scalable way to produce enlightened minds is to invest in educational institutions. When you hire truly exceptional teachers, you don’t need an elaborate curriculum; their thinking, speaking, and behaviour become the curriculum.

Now, a pressing question: what if the government listens? What if we suddenly double the education budget? How should that money be spent? First, we must face an uncomfortable truth: Bangladesh does not have a single university that qualifies as a real research university. What we currently call universities are, in reality, teaching colleges. A genuine research university has multiple postdoctoral researchers in each department, both local and international. Globally, it’s

not uncommon for departments in top institutions to have 50 or more post-docs. The same cannot be said for Bangladesh. To change that, we must offer international-standard fellowships. That means at least Tk 100,000 per month for post-docs, and at least Tk 80,000 per month for PhD students. Without that, we simply won’t attract top talent.

Of course, if PhD students and post-docs are paid well, their supervisors—our faculty members—must also be compensated fairly. At a minimum, salaries should be aligned with those in India or Pakistan. The same logic applies to teachers at primary, secondary, and college levels. Only then will we see our best minds return from abroad and choose teaching not as a last resort, but as a calling. This is not a utopian demand. We are not asking for salaries matching those of the West. We are simply asking to consider and compare with our South Asian neighbours.

To reverse the trend of brain drain, we must create an ecosystem for meaningful, world class research. That means building

new institutes, upgrading university infrastructure, and hiring outstanding researchers. It also means freeing critical institutions from the shackles of bureaucracy. The University Grants Commission (UGC) should be made an independent body. Similarly, organisations like the Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission (BAEC) and the Bangladesh Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (BCSIR) must be liberated from ministerial control. Their researchers should receive competitive pay and benefits.

Let me illustrate how our system treats talent. A scientist from the BAEC recently won a Fulbright scholarship, one of the most prestigious academic awards in the world. And yet, the higher authorities denied him leave to pursue it. Meanwhile, bureaucrats routinely travel abroad on public money, for conferences, training, or “exposure visits” of questionable value. Many even go for higher education on government funding, with full leave granted. But a scientist with a Fulbright? Denied. This hypocrisy reveals a deeper rot. Merit is punished, mediocrity rewarded. Talented individuals aren’t nurtured, they are pushed away. Promising young lecturers are blocked from going abroad for PhDs unless they complete two years of service. As a result, many drift into university politics, get trapped in networks of convenience and compromise, and never rise to their potential.

Education reform is not a luxury. It is not something we can “get to later.” It is the first and most urgent step towards building a better Bangladesh. And at the heart of that reform must be respect for knowledge, for teachers, and the pursuit of truth. Allocate at least 4.5 percent of GDP to education in the upcoming budget. If you dare to go further to five percent or more we will know: we have, at long last, a government with vision. If not, the people will judge you by the same metrics we used to judge your predecessors. Because in the end, budgets are moral documents. They reveal what a government truly values. And history will remember those who chose to invest in minds, not monuments.

You have made me endless...



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MILIA ALI

When Pochishe Baishakh (Baishakh 25), Rabindranath Tagore’s birthday, comes, I feel a deep urge to acknowledge his all-pervading spiritual presence in my life. However, it’s difficult to express in words my feelings for someone who has been the nucleus of my core beliefs since childhood. There is one way to chronicle the progression of my relationship with Rabindranath Tagore—through his songs, a terrain I can traverse with some degree of ease and familiarity. This column, therefore, is not an essay on Tagore’s literary contributions or a critique of his impact on the Bangalee psyche. I concede with humility that there are numerous scholars and authors who are better equipped to write a critical analysis of his writings. Hence, this is an intimate narrative, tracing the evolution of my persona through Tagore’s songs.

My first awareness of “self” occurred while I was listening to Tagore singer Suchitra Mitra sing, “*Kothao amar hariye jawar nei mana monay monay, mele dilem gaaner surer aye daana monay monay*” (“There is no bar to losing myself in an imaginary world. I can soar on the wings of a song in my mind”). I was perhaps five years old, but the experience of being drawn into a world where I could spread the wings of imagination and travel to a fairy tale land must have been surreal. My Uncle Jamil Choudhury, who took me to this musical “festival,” often reminisced about the little girl who sat through the entire rendition with starry-eyed amazement and hummed the song for the next few days. Thus began

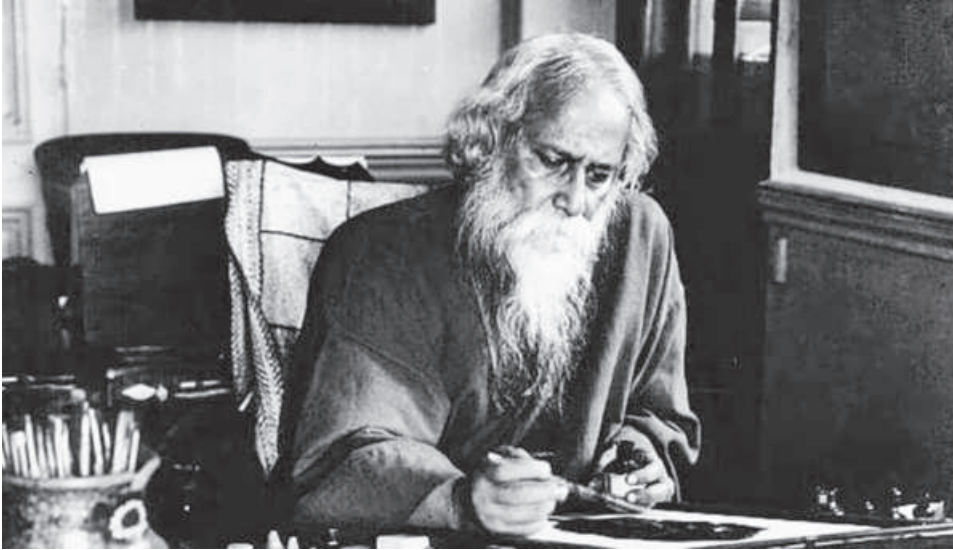


PHOTO: ARCHIVE

Tagore’s empathetic understanding of the intricacies of the human mind made his love songs exceptionally sensual and sensitive.

my “Rabindra Sangeet” journey, culminating in a larger expedition of self-discovery and introspection.

Once the voyage began, every experience took me one more step towards the awakening of the senses through the poet’s lyrics and melody. I marvelled at the “accident,” which had plunged me into an orbit—the orbit of life which is a divine gift. Observing the world through Tagore’s music and poetry, I felt a

through the ecstasy of love, I experienced it in Tagore’s lyrics and music. In her book *Rabindranath Tagore: A biography*, Krishna Kripalini writes, “If I were asked what was his (Tagore) most dominant quality which might explain all the varied aspects of his personality and genius, I should say that he was first and last and above all else a lover.” Tagore’s empathetic understanding of the intricacies of the human mind made his love

songs exceptionally sensual and sensitive. Added to this was his deep connection with nature. The relationship between nature and man is so masterfully woven in his lyrics that one can feel the monsoon rain or the south wind emote with the same intensity as the human lover.

My Tagorean experience reached its pinnacle in 1971. Turbulent tides of change swept through our country in the late 60s. It impacted the lives of Bangalees in a major way, leading to the creation of a free Bangladesh. Tagore’s literary works were an integral part of this patriotic movement. I developed a natural love for Bangla music early in life when I started to take lessons in Rabindra Sangeet in the music school, Chhayanaout, where I was initiated into the fascinating world of Tagore’s songs. Like many of my generation, my pride in Bangalee culture and heritage was rooted in Tagore’s writings.

When I crossed the border from Bangladesh to India in June 1971, to participate in the Liberation War, unwittingly, I had stepped into a very important crossroad of history and was destined to be a part of a momentous era. I joined a group of Bangladeshi musicians. We walked through the refugee camps of displaced Bangladeshis, singing “Amar Sonar Bangla” to keep the spirit of a free Bangladesh alive for the unfortunate thousands who were demoralised. Part of our mission was also to create awareness about our independence struggle for a “Golden Bengal” among the people of India through a musical narrative.

The forced exile was yet another step towards getting to know the real “Robi Thakur.” It took me to his ashram Santiniketan where I met my music gurus—legends Kanika Banerjee and Nilima Sen—and other notable Tagore personalities like Debabrata Biswas. I was but a novice trying to make a modest entry into the Rabindra Sangeet world. What I discovered was that, in the monastic environ of Tagore’s ashram, egos had been shed. Hence, an insignificant young girl from a country with only a name,

but no territory, was readily accepted into the affectionate fold of his disciples!

Life’s voyage took me to other lands and other cultures. However, every time I felt lonely and desolate, I was reconnected to my roots through Tagore. Whether it was teaching “*Ami chini go chini tomare, ogo bideshini*” (“I know you, Oh, maiden of a distant land”) to street children in Yerevan, Armenia, or organising his birthday celebrations in Bucharest, Romania, Tagore provided me with the opportunity to showcase the cultural treasures of my native land and helped me bond with strangers in most unique ways.

Recently, as I was sitting in my home in Virginia, US on a rainy afternoon and humming strands of Rabindra Sangeet, I felt nostalgic about my childhood friends, the monsoons of Bengal, the afternoon tea sessions and idle chit-chats with family, and even the clamour of loud conversations and honking cars in Dhaka. But above all, I missed my music which is no longer in the centre stage of my life, primarily because I am in a setting where Tagore is not part of the mainstream. The thought filled me with a sense of sadness, because “the song that I came to sing remains unsung to this day...”

However, whenever I feel desolate, I am consoled by the lyrics of one of Tagore’s Baul numbers, “*Amar praner manush ache prane tai heri tai sokol khane*” (“The man of my heart, dwells in my heart, which is why I see him everywhere”).

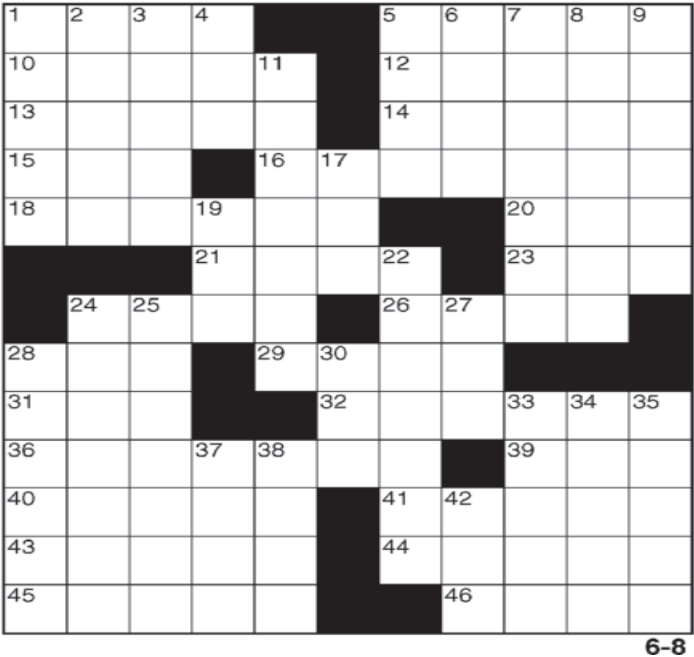
I realise how aptly the words express my deep relationship with the poet. Of course, Tagore is and always will be deep within me. Each time I feel that I have lost him, he makes his presence felt by filling up the empty receptacle of my heart with the elixir of life.

Thank you, Gurudev, for making the finite journey of my life an infinite experience!

Note: Translations have been collected from various sources. Some liberties have been taken by the author in paraphrasing Tagore’s lyrics.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS
1 Pleat
5 Work byproduct
10 Distant
12 Bamboo eater
13 Sorceress of myth
14 Inert gas
15 Cain’s mother
16 Hamlet’s home
18 Broncos’ home
20 “Golly!”
21 Persia, today
23 Go astray
24 Showed up
26 Says further
28 Periodical, for short
29 Malek of “Bohemian Rhapsody”
31 Keats work
32 Casual pants
36 Crown repairer
39 Old hand
40 Finished
41 Love, to Luigi
43 Deli fixture
44 Canyon’s cousin
45 Scientist
Nikola
46 Looked over
DOWN
1 Confronted
2 Green hue
3 Sophia of “Two Women”
4 Bashful pal
5 Reach across
6 Cordial
7 Set to wed
8 Fans
9 Oil carrier
11 Tennis great
Roger
17 Important time
19 Energy
22 Convention ID
24 Marching beat
25 Programs
27 Racket
28 Unassuming
30 Online pop-ups
33 Creamy color
34 Join together
35 Spirited horse
37 Be a squealer
38 Concept
42 Homer’s bartending pal



YESTERDAY’S ANSWERS



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