

Pedagogy and power: Teacher-student relationships in our universities



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"The classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy," Gloria Watkins (more widely known as "bell hooks") used to say. In discussions of politics, power, class, and authority, the classroom can indeed be such a space. In fact, higher education is incomplete if students' and even teachers' deeply held convictions are not challenged, or if members of the academy are not forced to intellectually engage with alternative worldviews. Besides this intellectual discomfort, interactions in and outside the classroom can be sources of visceral and affective unease, rendering academia a space of emotional vulnerability, anguish, and powerlessness, particularly for the students.

The alleged suicide of Munira Mahzabin Mimo, a student of the Department of Theatre and Performance Studies at the University of Dhaka, brings to the fore critical questions on the latter. Sudip Chakraborty, an associate professor in the same department, has been arrested after a case of abetment of suicide was filed by Munira's father. Following the arrest, the department has relieved Chakraborty of all academic duties, including teaching and participation in exam committees. The case remains pending.

I do not wish to comment on the specifics of the case or on the culpability, if any, of the accused, who is also my senior colleague. Munira's family and Chakraborty are both entitled to due process as well as a fair and impartial trial, leading to judgment based on evidence rather than prejudice or pressure. I would rather discuss a system that continues to fail, one that neither prevents harm with any predictability nor reliably redresses it, and that lacks an appropriate code of conduct governing interactions within and beyond the classroom.

Complaints of sexual harassment and abuse of power against faculty members

and fellow students at universities are more common than we may assume because, as harsh as it may sound, we have grown apathetic to violence, so much so that anything other than deaths, or deaths by suicide, seems rather benign to us. This piece is not to be read as some claim of moral high ground, because I, too, am somewhat complicit as part of the system myself.

At the University of Dhaka, complaints against teachers and fellow students are generally handled ad hoc at the department level and may also be referred to the central authority (the committee on sexual harassment, for instance) if needed. The "need" for referral by and large inhabits a grey area, and in many cases, students feel discouraged to take their claims further due to uncertainty and lack of clarity about the process and about what to expect. Notably, there is still no written policy categorically defining sexual harassment or laying down a process of redressal.

In this context, the university follows the guidelines formulated by the High Court Division in a writ petition filed in 2009 by the Bangladesh National Women Lawyers' Association. Nonetheless, my experience as a student advisor shows how the lack of a clearly written policy, specifically tailored to the university, grossly fails survivors, adds to their quandary and agony, and in many cases, undermines due process, at times bringing in disproportionate punishment. More importantly, our university does not have a written code of conduct to guide relationships between university staff (including teachers) and students.

In most higher education institutions in the West, policies on sexual harassment are categorical, clearly defining the terms to identify and establish claims and elaborating the specific processes to pursue if and when such incidents occur. Similarly, there are written policies to guide and regulate

relationships between members of the staff and students. Notably, since 2020, there has been a growing overlapping consensus among universities in the United Kingdom on banning or prohibiting intimate staff-student relationships. From around 2010-2015, leading universities in the US began categorically banning intimate relationships between students and staff.

These changes were introduced in response to the longstanding failure to adequately address sexual harassment and abuse cases at these universities. However, these prohibitions still operate, as critics say, largely within a risk-management or adult-control framework, as opposed to an equal rights paradigm. Nonetheless, some form of progress is better than chasing perfection or continuing with no code at all.

became pronounced later as a radical feminist claim. It is not even about consent, as feminist scholars eventually noted, but rather about equal rights in pedagogical contexts. Intimate relationships, even if consensual, between faculty members and students often reinforce the latter's unequal status, knowledge asymmetry, and pervasive lack of power in higher education settings. Even when there is no physical violence, abuse, or harassment, such relationships can lead to acute emotional vulnerability for the students involved.

University policies in the West now aim to categorically define prohibited forms of relationships and describe what such prohibition entails. For instance, as per the policy in force at the University of Oxford: "Intimate relationship" includes sexual or

and a student transgress the boundaries of professional conduct, or may be reasonably perceived to do so."

In cases where there is a pre-existing close relationship or one developed afterwards, the member of staff remains obligated to declare it to the appropriate authority (usually the head of a department or faculty). The Oxford policy also provides the caveat that it is "impossible to cover every potential situation which might involve (or be perceived to involve) transgression of the boundaries of professional conduct." Accordingly, it notes that any relationship "which involves (or is perceived to involve)" characteristics such as any form of dependence (whether emotional, practical, financial or otherwise) from either party and/or favouritism towards any student will always transgress the boundaries of professional conduct and must be declared. If in doubt, the policy notes, "the best course is to declare a relationship, or any interaction with a student that is of concern, so that appropriate measures (to protect both the student and the member of staff) can be considered by the authority."

Some policies also prohibit teaching staff from communicating with students outside of office hours or meeting them outside the university without declaring it to the appropriate authority.

In Bangladesh, in the absence of any written policies whatsoever, staff-student relationships are largely left to intuition, discretion, and instinct. At times, there are seemingly minor complaints of favouritism and hostility. In the worst cases, this may enable more serious dynamics of manipulation, harassment, and abuse.

We often approach crises in isolation, blinded by privilege and disabled by myopia, without understanding or appreciating the overarching system and power structure within which the so-called isolated incidents occur. Ad hoc fixes are ad hoc after all, and there is no alternative to predictable remedies when it comes to coexisting as a community and navigating potential contestation. While awaiting credible investigation and answers in Munira's case, we must also pause and look inward to interrogate the continuum of power and privilege we navigate, and address the reprehensibly consequential lack of written policies to govern our conduct and relationships with our students, as well as among the students themselves, as members of the academic community.



VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

Indeed, for a long time, universities in the West by and large only discouraged, or deemed "inappropriate," intimate relationships between staff and students. Putting a complete ban on such relationships used to be frowned upon by both libertarians and some sections of feminists. Libertarians worried that a complete ban would curtail liberty, and some feminists would argue that such a ban would be read as condescending, disregard women students' agency in particular, and infantilise them. The view that relationships between teachers and students preclude consent due to a power imbalance

romantic relationships, marriage or life partnerships, regardless of gender, gender identity or sexual orientation, including a brief relationship and one-off occurrences, and whether they are conducted in person and/or online and/or via electronic or any other form of communication." The policy further regulates "close relationship" between staff and students, the definition of which excludes intimate relationships and refers to "a relationship where the nature, content, emotional involvement and/or frequency of interactions and/or communications between a staff member

West Bengal polls: The dubious logic of 'logical discrepancy'



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ASHFAQUE SWAPAN

Today, the penny drops.

After a rambunctious and bitter electoral campaign followed by elections in two phases in West Bengal, vote counting begins today. By the end of the day, we will likely learn the verdict of our (mostly) Bengali neighbours across the border.

This assembly election has been marked by heavy-handed machinations of India's election commission. Here's an example of the Kafkaesque bureaucratic nightmare it is getting people into: according to reports, a number of poll officers (a significant number of them Muslim), while themselves barred from voting, are obliged to conduct the polls. This paradox reminds me of a situation I found myself in as a US graduate student decades ago. On the question of state residency, I was informed that for tax purposes I was considered in-state (I had to cough up the tax on my meager earnings), but for tuition purposes I was out-of-state (I had to cough up the extra out-of-state fees).

But let's not digress. The Election Commission faces legitimate, serious questions, but it is mitigated considerably by the fact that at the end of the day, West Bengal elections were held relatively peacefully, a huge achievement given the state's torrid record.

India's Election Commission has a storied reputation to defend. Its first chief, Sukumar Sen, was a stern, no-nonsense ICS officer who built the entire system from scratch, no mean achievement. India's first Lok Sabha elections were considered a huge success, and today's system rests largely on Sen's creation. Who can forget the delightfully cantankerous,

straight-shooting, and fiercely independent curmudgeon, T.N. Seshan, India's election chief in the 1990s, who brooked no nonsense from political heavyweights?

Today's Election Commission, it is fair to say, has lost a bit of its sheen. Its attempt to prune the voter rolls through a process called Special Intensive Review (SIR) makes sense,

The fearsome scrum that followed is heartbreaking. Desperate people, including the old and infirm, went from pillar to post with all their documents to have their names back in the voter rolls. The courts provided some relief by setting a deadline and ruling that anybody who got his or her name back in the voter roll by that deadline would be able to vote. But this was too little, too late.

but what has raised the hackles of a huge number of voters is the way it has gone about it in West Bengal.

Some 91 lakh names were initially deleted following a Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls, according to data released by the EC. The SIR is a process to verify voter lists by removing ineligible, duplicate, or questionable entries. Later, using a murky algorithm, about 27 lakh voters have been

knocked off the voter rolls by a special procedure known as "logical discrepancy." Logical discrepancy, a broad category for inconsistent voter data, is criticised because it relies on subjective judgment rather than clear cut proof. Some of these cases are under adjudication.

However, plenty of anecdotal evidence show people had been wrongly removed from voter lists. A husband and children were voters, the wife was not. Somebody serving in the army for years was struck off. Kin of celebrities like Netaji Subhas Bose or Nandalal Basu were informed they could not vote. What made the situation precarious was that this was happening so soon before the elections that even if the court adjudicated in a person's favour; the relief for the voter would come too late and the lofty pledge of making sure every vote would be counted would prove to be hollow.

The fearsome scrum that followed is heartbreaking. Desperate people, including the old and infirm, went from pillar to post with all their documents to have their names back in the voter rolls. The courts provided some relief by setting a deadline and ruling that anybody who got his or her name back in the voter roll by that deadline would be able to vote. But this was too little, too late. Out of the 27 lakh voters, barely a few thousand cases were adjudicated. And, here is the most remarkable part. Of the few thousand cases that were adjudicated, over 95 percent won back their right to vote.

This casts a heavy doubt on the entire process of logical discrepancy. If most of the cases that reached the appellate stage could be restored, how reliable were the original decisions that rendered these voters ineligible? And what does it say of an electoral verdict where millions of voters are effectively disenfranchised? Can it be enough to change the verdict?

Of course, there is the question of whether there is any discernible pattern in the way people have been struck off the voter rolls. Here's where the Election Commission's actions border on the sinister. The

voter data it has provided is not in machine-readable Excel sheets, where number-crunchers can get to work to see if any particular group has been targeted. It has been given out as "I am not making this up" PDF lists. Which means names have to be manually entered to make any sense of the data. The EC excuse, that this is done to maintain the security of the data, is patently absurd.

The state polls will determine whether firebrand Trinamool leader and West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee will win a fourth term, or the opposition Bharatiya Janata Party will finally be able to topple Trinamool. BJP has pulled out all the stops. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, several BJP chief ministers have been making the rounds, and

BJP's Machiavellian mastermind and central Home Minister Amit Shah has stationed itself in West Bengal. As is the BJP's wont, its campaign is leavened with a heavy dollop of Muslim-baiting. BJP leader Shuvendu Adhikari likes to say there are about a crore Bangladeshi Muslims and Rohingyas in West Bengal. That's a lot of people. Where on earth are they? Why would they go to West Bengal, whose own people are leaving in droves to work as migrant workers in states as far as Kerala?

For all the huffing and puffing, the EC exercise, for all the turmoil it has caused and all the genuine suffering of millions of people of West Bengal, has failed to identify a single *ghuspetiya*, Modi's favoured epithet for (phantom) Bangladeshi Muslim migrant.

The Trinamool, to be sure, has its own handicaps. Allegations of extortion, large-scale corruption, and political shenanigans of all sorts bedevil the party but it has two solid strongholds in disadvantaged women through its Lakshmir Bhandar stipends, and Muslims who seem to depend on Didi to keep the big bad BJP wolf away. Ironically for the BJP, the whole SIR exercise might well turn out to be a Pyrrhic exercise. The anger it generated among multitudes of genuine voters who had to go through the indignity of their legitimacy being questioned has thrust this issue to the very top, undercutting the anti-incumbency sentiment.

Will Mamata Banerjee have the last laugh after all? We will know by the end of the day.

Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh
Office of the Principal
Rajshahi Medical College

Memo No. 59.14.8100.028.59.008.26-1505 Date: 03-05-2026

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Tender ID	Description	Tender/proposal publication date	Tender/proposal closing & opening date
1269011	Procurement for outsourcing manpower supply of Rajshahi Medical College for the FY: 2025-2026.	04-May-2026	17-May-2026

This is online tender where only e-Tender will be accepted in the National e-GP Portal and no offline/hard copies will be accepted. To submit e-Tender, registration in the e-GP System Portal (<https://www.eprocure.gov.bd>) is required. The fees for downloading the e-Tender documents from the National e-GP System Portal have to be deposited online through any e-GP registered bank's branches. Further information and guidelines are available in the National e-GP System Portal and from e-GP help desk (helpdesk@eprocure.gov.bd).

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