

PROFESSOR REHMAN SOBHAN
CHAIRMAN, CENTRE FOR POLICY DIALOGUE



East West University deserves commendation for the remarkable progress it has registered in a short period of time in its growth, broadening of its disciplinary canvas and improving the quality of its degree. It should sustain this progress towards attaining international standards by further expanding its disciplinary scope to include the full range of degree courses needed to provide a holistic education which covers the full universe of human knowledge. It should further keep in mind that higher education is not just about knowledge but about equipping its students to become responsible citizens. It should strive to both enhance academic excellence amongst its students as well as ensuring that they remain aware of the pressing socio-economic problems facing the country. It is the responsibility of our universities, both public and private, to not just train a professional elite but the citizens of tomorrow, imbued with a sense of justice and a commitment to sustain a democratic society.

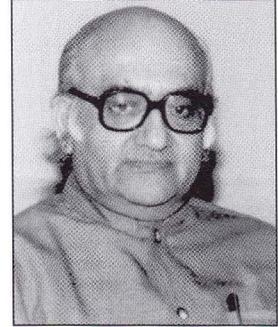
A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading 'Rehman Sobhan'.

Professor Rehman Sobhan



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**Educating Citizens for Sustaining a Democratic Society**

Close to six years ago I was invited to give a convocation address by the Independent University of Bangladesh. On that occasion I had focused on the importance of restoring excellence to public higher education. I had pointed out that our public universities fill a gap which our growing number of private universities were not in a position to fill. In the time that has lapsed the number of private universities and its student population has increased. Given the deteriorating conditions in our public universities it occasions little surprise that more and more of those who can afford it are opting for private universities which have emerged as an important growth industry in our service sector. However, increasing numbers of young people who are graduating from our secondary schools are seeking higher education but only a fraction of these aspirants can afford to attend private universities. As a result, the intake into our public institutions of higher education has also significantly expanded. Our public institutions, therefore, still remain an indispensable part of our educational system.

The public universities still retain scholars of enormous dedication and high professional esteem. The bulk of the student population aspire to nothing more than a good education. Unfortunately, the quality of learning in our public institutions, at various levels, continues to depreciate. There are many reasons for this but an important factor owes to the hazard that the campus in these institutions remains hostage to a small yet politically powerful minority who are hostile to the very ethos of higher learning. We are, thus, witness to university teachers being murdered on campus with fellow teachers and student leaders being instrumental in the commission of such unthinkable crimes. The growing partisanisation of our public campuses, over the life of successive regimes, has promoted the debasement of our educational institutions. This tendency has devalued the importance of scholarship as the route to advancement and elevated political loyalty into the prevailing dynamic of upward mobility. As we have recently observed, to even challenge this process is to put your life at risk. In such a system, the quality of education has become the principal casualty in our public institutions with the added hazard to personal security and the perpetual risk of delays in completing a degree.

The future of a whole generation is now being put at risk which may have omenous consequences for the nation. Since public higher education remains the main source of recruitment into the public service, if we cannot reverse this systemic decay we may be inflicting irreversible damage to the institutions of governance and the eventual sustainability of our development performance. As a result, in a fast globalizing world, where knowledge is becoming the most valuable source of capital, our capacity to remain internationally competitive is being compromised.

It is the paramount responsibility not just of the government of the day, which is represented here by the President who is the Chancellor of our public universities and the Minister of Education but all the political parties, all parents, all members of civil society and this includes all of you assembled here today, to make a supreme collective effort to reverse this tragic situation in the institutions to which we owe so much and which were once the pride and joy of generations of Bangladeshis. Institutions such as Dhaka University are part of the history of Bangladesh and were the cradle of our educated elite. All the distinguished personalities assembled on this dias today

owe an incalculable debt to our public universities for making us what we are today. We owe it to ourselves as much as to Bangladesh to pledge ourselves to redeem this debt.

You may well ask why am I addressing this public appeal to the graduating class of a private university where courses are always completed on time and examinations are held as scheduled. To the best of my knowledge, private university campuses are spared terrorism, indiscipline and the parochialism which has debilitated our once famous public institutions of learning. However, as I have observed today and 6 years ago, Bangladesh cannot do without its public institutions and will in the foreseeable future continue to depend on them to accommodate the majority of students seeking higher education. The graduates of our public universities will continue to influence the quality of governance in Bangladesh for many years to come. Our state of governance will, in turn, affect the quality of your lives and the effectiveness of the private institutions where many of you will seek employment. The regeneration of our public institutions is therefore no less your concern than it is for their own students. You may keep in mind that the person who may represent you tomorrow in Parliament, the bureaucrat from whom you will seek redress for some problem, the SP who will be responsible for the security of your neighbourhood, even the doctor who may one day have to save your life, are all likely to be graduates of a public university.

Most of you will soon expect to move into the job market where you can hope to repay the investment made by your parents to see you through your student life. Whilst your disciplinary options tend to be narrowed by the compulsions of the market place, you have the satisfaction of knowing that you will be soon providing some value addition to the economy and compensation to your family. East-West University should indeed be commended for setting rising standards in the quality of their pedagogy and diversification of your courses so that its degree is today increasing in its value. I hope that this university will continue to enhance its disciplinary scope so that in the near future you will include both eminent historians and scholars of Bangla literature amongst your alumni. For institutions such as East-West University to aspire to attain the standards of internationally recognized private universities they will have to provide a holistic education which covers the full universe of human knowledge.

But higher education is not just about imparting knowledge. It is as much about equipping you to become responsible citizens. After all the problems faced by our system of public education originate in the wider crisis of governance which is undermining the sustainability of our democratic institutions. The confrontational nature of our political system which has paralysed our parliamentary system has also partisanised our educational system with fatal consequences. The emergence of terrorism in the abuse of religion has injected a further threat to the sustainability of a liberal democracy. We therefore have to seek solutions to the problems afflicting our educational system not just in our universities but in the entire system of governance and the practice of democracy. This crisis of governance afflicting our nation, is going to be your problem no less than it is for a student at Dhaka University. Sooner or later, you and your generation will have to confront this threat to the very assumptions around which Bangladesh was created.

My message to those of you who will be going into the world today to seek your fortunes and, to those who are expecting to do so in years to come, is to remind you that you cannot segregate yourself from the society around you. There is a sense, I suspect, amongst our private universities, that they have managed to create self-contained enclaves within our society, where they can exclusively educate their students to occupy selected nichés in our private sector which may continue to prosper within the turmoil of the society around them. In an environment of deteriorating governance there is a belief that by privatizing our consciousness and aspirations a small class of Bangladeshis can aspire to practice a form of social apartheid which effectively disconnects them from the world around them. This, I would suggest to you, is a dangerous misconception of our social reality. If the crisis of governance, which is the source of the cancer within our institutions of public education, continues to spread it will infect all segments of society. The viability of our private sector, the security of our elite residential enclaves, and all such areas of refuge will come under threat. After all, we live in a society where close to half our population live below the poverty line, more than half the students who sit for the SSC fail the examination



and our system of law enforcement has become so commoditised and partisanised as to be virtually dysfunctional. Such ingredients in our societal melting pot provide a toxic brew from which no one can expect to enjoy permanent immunity.

In such a social milieu I would appeal to all of you to reignite your sense of public consciousness. You must remember that you are not just the children of your parents, responsible only to your families but are also citizens of Bangladesh, a nation which was conceived through the protracted political struggles of an earlier generation which culminated in its birth through a bloody war of liberation. As members of an educated elite you must awaken to the responsibilities which go with the privilege of higher education. You do not have to become politicians in order to become politically conscious citizens in a democratic society. It is upto you to demand better governance or you will end up getting the governance you deserve if you abdicate your civic responsibility. As responsible members of civil society you must demand accountability from the state and public representatives. You are of voting age so you must use your vote judiciously and ensure its integrity at all cost. Above all, you must ensure that some of the value added by your skills acquired at East West University can be contributed to improving the lives of some of that half of your fellow citizens who live below the poverty line.

What can East West University as an institution of learning do to inculcate such a sense of civic consciousness into its students? I do not suggest that you politicize your campus and educate your student in the skills of armed warfare. But what you can do is to encourage your students to be much more aware of the pressing socio-economic, problems facing the country and the functioning of our institutions of democracy. Such a process of building civic and political awareness amongst your students should be made an integral feature of your curricula as indeed is the practice in the world reknowned private universities such as Harvard, Columbia or Yale. For example, students in Columbia University in New York work with schools in neighbouring Harlem, volunteer to clean up the parks next door to their campus, work in hospitals and public housing projects and perform other such acts of public service. In the same way, East-West University should explore how your students can expand their education beyond the class room and be directly exposed to the social realities around them. This may include their involvement, as part of their course requirements, in some form of public service through association with some civil society or human rights organizations, through a process of mandatory internship. East-West University may itself, organize its own volunteer programmes for its students. Such public service involvements could include:

- Working with election monitoring bodies and voter education programmes during the forthcoming elections for the Jatyo Sangshad.
- Working with organizations such as the Bangladesh Paribesh Andalon for protecting the environment.
- Working with Bisho Sahitya Kendro for promoting the reading habit across the country.
- Working with NGO's involved in non-formal education, adult literacy or health education programmes.
- Working with neighbourhood groups to ensure that the garbage is properly collected and your para is kept pollution free.
- Working with neighbourhood groups for maintenance of law and order in your para.

Many more such opportunities for public service can be identified which will enhance the sense of civic responsibility of the students of this university. This will educate them to enter the working world as socially responsible citizens inculcated with a sense of mission. If democracy in Bangladesh is to be recaptured from the growing tyranny of money, mastaans and terrorism, if our governance is to be made more accountable, then ordinary citizens and particularly those with a level of education such as available to this graduating class, will have to become more conscious of your rights and responsibilities and more engaged in the functioning of our democratic institutions. It is the responsibility of our universities, both public and private, to not just train a professional elite but the citizens of tomorrow, imbued with a sense of justice and tolerance, which is essential to sustaining a democratic society.

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