

নেহরীন খান স্মৃতি বক্তৃতা
ও
সম্মাননা অনুষ্ঠান ২০২৪



২৭ নভেম্বর ২০২৪, বুধবার, সকাল ১১:০০ মিনিট
মঞ্জুর এলাহী অডিটোরিয়াম
ইস্ট ওয়েস্ট ইউনিভার্সিটি, ঢাকা-১২১২

ট্রাস্ট দলিল

নেহরীন খান স্মৃতি তহবিল, ইস্ট ওয়েস্ট ইউনিভার্সিটি
প্রতিষ্ঠাকাল : ৩০ জানুয়ারী ২০১৭

নেহরীন খান স্মৃতি তহবিলের উদ্দেশ্য :

প্রতি বছর প্রতিষ্ঠিত বুদ্ধিজীবীদের নিয়ে গঠিত একটি নির্বাচনী কমিটির মাধ্যমে একজন সাহিত্যিককে তার অবদানের স্বীকৃতির জন্য নির্বাচন করে সম্মাননা প্রদান করা হবে এবং তাকে নেহরীন খান স্মৃতি বক্তৃতা দেয়ার জন্য আমন্ত্রণ জানানো হবে। তার বক্তৃতা ছাপানো হবে এবং সভাগুলো বিতরণ করা হবে। নির্বাচিত সাহিত্যিককে কমপক্ষে ১,০০,০০০/- (এক লক্ষ) টাকা ও একটি ট্রেস্ট প্রদান করা হবে।

ট্রাস্টি বোর্ড, নেহরীন খান স্মৃতি তহবিল :

০১.	এয়ার কমোডর ইসফাক ইলাহী চৌধুরী (অবঃ) কোষাধ্যক্ষ, ইস্ট ওয়েস্ট ইউনিভার্সিটি, ঢাকা।	সভাপতি
০২.	জনাব কবির উদ্দিন খান দাতা কর্তৃক মনোনীত।	সদস্য
০৩.	ড. ফারজানা আক্তার অধ্যাপক, ইংরেজী বিভাগ ও ডীন, ফ্যাকাল্টি অব লিবারেল আর্টস এন্ড স্যোশাল সায়েন্সেস, ইস্ট ওয়েস্ট ইউনিভার্সিটি, ঢাকা।	সদস্য
০৪.	জনাব মোঃ জাহাঙ্গীর আলম খান চীফ, মানব সম্পদ ও লজিস্টিকস্ বিভাগ, ইস্ট ওয়েস্ট ইউনিভার্সিটি, ঢাকা।	সদস্য সচিব

নেহরীন খান স্মৃতি বক্তৃতার সম্মানিত বক্তা নির্বাচনী কমিটি :

০১.	ড. ফকরুল আলম অবসরপ্রাপ্ত অধ্যাপক, ইংরেজী বিভাগ, ঢাকা বিশ্ববিদ্যালয়, ঢাকা ও সাবেক উপ-উপাচার্য, ইস্ট ওয়েস্ট ইউনিভার্সিটি, ঢাকা।	সভাপতি
০২.	জনাব কবির উদ্দিন খান দাতা কর্তৃক মনোনীত।	সদস্য
০৩.	ড. ভীষ্মদেব চৌধুরী অধ্যাপক, বাংলা বিভাগ, ঢাকা বিশ্ববিদ্যালয়, ঢাকা।	সদস্য
০৪.	জনাব মোঃ সাজ্জাদ শরীফ নির্বাহী সম্পাদক, দৈনিক প্রথম আলো।	সদস্য
০৫.	অধ্যাপক ড. ফওজিয়া মান্নান চেয়ারপার্সন, সমাজ বিজ্ঞান বিভাগ ইস্ট ওয়েস্ট ইউনিভার্সিটি, ঢাকা।	সদস্য
০৬.	এয়ার কমোডর ইসফাক ইলাহী চৌধুরী (অবঃ) কোষাধ্যক্ষ, ইস্ট ওয়েস্ট ইউনিভার্সিটি, ঢাকা।	সদস্য

এক নজরে নেহরীন খান স্মৃতি বক্তৃতা ও সম্মাননা অনুষ্ঠান :

ক্রমিক নং	সম্মানিত বক্তা	বিষয়	তারিখ
০১.	ড. এ. এফ. সিরাজুল ইসলাম চৌধুরী এমিরেটাস অধ্যাপক, ইংরেজী বিভাগ ঢাকা বিশ্ববিদ্যালয়, ঢাকা।	মানা এবং না-মানার প্রশ্ন	১২ জুলাই ২০১৭
০২.	ড. সৈয়দ মঞ্জুরুল ইসলাম ভূতপূর্ব অধ্যাপক, ইংরেজী বিভাগ ঢাকা বিশ্ববিদ্যালয়, ঢাকা।	সাহিত্য ও সমাজে নিম্নবর্ণীয়তা : বৃন্তের ভেতরে জীবন	৪ ডিসেম্বর ২০১৮
০৩.	ড. ফকরুল আলম অবসরপ্রাপ্ত অধ্যাপক, ইংরেজী বিভাগ ঢাকা বিশ্ববিদ্যালয়, ঢাকা।	THE IDEA OF A UNIVERSITY IN OUR TIME	২৫ জুলাই ২০১৯
০৪.	সেলিনা হোসেন একুশে ও স্বাধীনতা পদকপ্রাপ্ত কথা সাহিত্যিক ও সভাপতি, বাংলা একাডেমি।	সাহিত্যের ভুবনে লেখকের পথচলা	২৬ জুলাই ২০২২
০৫.	অধ্যাপক ড. দীপেশ চক্রবর্তী লরেন্স এ. কিম্পটন ডিস্টিংগুইশড সার্ভিস প্রফেসর, ইতিহাস বিভাগ দি ইউনিভার্সিটি অব শিকাগো, মার্কিন যুক্তরাষ্ট্র	THE PLANETARY AGE IN HUMAN HISTORY	৫ মার্চ ২০২৩
০৬.	অধ্যাপক রেহমান সোবহান সভাপতি, সেন্টার ফর পলিসি ডায়ালগ (সিপিডি)	CONSTRUCTING A MORE JUST SOCIETY IN BANGLADESH	২৭ নভেম্বর ২০২৪

Nahreen Khan Memorial Bursary, East West University তহবিল :

নেহরীন খান স্মৃতি তহবিল, ইস্ট ওয়েস্ট ইউনিভার্সিটির উদ্যোগে নেহরীন খান এর প্রিয় শিক্ষা প্রতিষ্ঠান ইস্ট ওয়েস্ট ইউনিভার্সিটির ইংরেজী বিভাগের এক বা একাধিক শিক্ষার্থীকে বৃত্তি প্রদানের জন্য ২৭ আগস্ট ২০১৯ তারিখে Nahreen Khan Memorial Bursary, EWU নামক তহবিল গঠন করা হয়। উক্ত তহবিলে অনুদান প্রদানকারীদের তালিকা নিম্নরূপ :

ক্রমিক নং	অনুদান প্রদানকারীর নাম	পরিমাণ (টাকা)
০১	ড. ফকরুল আলম অবসরপ্রাপ্ত অধ্যাপক, ইংরেজী বিভাগ, ঢাকা বিশ্ববিদ্যালয়, ঢাকা ও সাবেক উপ-উপাচার্য, ইস্ট ওয়েস্ট ইউনিভার্সিটি, ঢাকা ও নেহরীন খান- এর শিক্ষক।	১,০০,০০০/-
০২	ড. আকবর আলি খান সাবেক মন্ত্রিপরিষদ সচিব, গণপ্রজাতন্ত্রী বাংলাদেশ সরকার ও নেহরীন খান- এর বাবা।	১,০০,০০০/-
০৩	সৈয়দ মঞ্জুর এলাহী সভাপতি, বোর্ড অব ট্রাস্টিজ, ইস্ট ওয়েস্ট ইউনিভার্সিটি, ঢাকা ও চেয়ারম্যান, এ্যাপেল গ্রুপ।	১,০০,০০০/-
০৪	অধ্যাপক ড. দীপেশ চক্রবর্তী লরেন্স এ. কিম্পটন ডিস্টিংগুইশড সার্ভিস প্রফেসর ইতিহাস বিভাগ, দি ইউনিভার্সিটি অব শিকাগো, মার্কিন যুক্তরাষ্ট্র।	১,০০,০০০/-

নেহরীন খান স্মৃতি বক্তৃতা ও সম্মাননা অনুষ্ঠান ২০২৪

SUBJECT : CONSTRUCTING A MORE JUST SOCIETY IN BANGLADESH



সকাল ১১:০০ মিনিট	:	অতিথিদের আসন গ্রহণ
সকাল ১১:০৫ মিনিট	:	স্বাগত বক্তব্য ও সম্মানিত বক্তার পরিচিতি ড. ফকরুল আলম অবসরপ্রাপ্ত অধ্যাপক, ইংরেজী বিভাগ, ঢাকা বিশ্ববিদ্যালয়, ঢাকা সভাপতি, বঙ্গা নির্বাচনী কমিটি নেহরীন খান স্মৃতি বক্তৃতা ও সম্মাননা অনুষ্ঠান সাবেক উপ-উপাচার্য, ইস্ট ওয়েস্ট ইউনিভার্সিটি, ঢাকা
সকাল ১১:১৫ মিনিট	:	সম্মানিত অতিথির বক্তব্য অধ্যাপক শামস্ রহমান উপাচার্য, ইস্ট ওয়েস্ট ইউনিভার্সিটি, ঢাকা
সকাল ১১:২৫ মিনিট	:	মূল প্রবন্ধ উপস্থাপন অধ্যাপক রেহমান সোবহান সভাপতি, সেন্টার ফর পলিসি ডায়ালগ (সিপিডি)
দুপুর ১২:০৫ মিনিট	:	সমাপনী বক্তব্য অধ্যাপক ড. মোহাম্মদ ফরাসউদ্দিন মুখ্য উপদেষ্টা ও প্রতিষ্ঠাতা উপাচার্য, ইস্ট ওয়েস্ট ইউনিভার্সিটি, ঢাকা
দুপুর ১২:২০ মিনিট	:	সম্মাননা প্রদান
দুপুর ১২:২৫ মিনিট	:	ধন্যবাদ জ্ঞাপন এয়ার কমান্ডার ইসফাক ইলাহী চৌধুরী (অবঃ) কোষাধ্যক্ষ, ইস্ট ওয়েস্ট ইউনিভার্সিটি, ঢাকা ও সভাপতি, ট্রাস্টি বোর্ড, নেহরীন খান মেমোরিয়াল ফান্ড
দুপুর ১২:৩০ মিনিট	:	আপ্যায়ন

নেহরীন খান পরিচিতি



নেহরীন খান

(১৯৭৭-২০১৬)

গণপ্রজাতন্ত্রী বাংলাদেশ সরকারের সাবেক মন্ত্রিপরিষদ সচিব ড. আকবর আলি খান ও হামীম খানের একমাত্র সন্তান নেহরীন খান ১৯৭৭ খ্রিস্টাব্দের ১২ জুলাই তারিখে কানাডার কিংস্টন শহরের জেনারেল হাসপাতালে জন্ম গ্রহণ করেন। উল্লেখ্য, ঐ সময়ে তার পিতা কিংস্টনের কুইন্স বিশ্ববিদ্যালয়ে পিএইচডি ডিগ্রীর জন্য পড়াশোনা করেছিলেন।

শিক্ষা জীবন :

নেহরীন খান ১৯৭৯ সালে মা-বাবার সাথে দেশে ফিরে আসেন। ১৯৮০ সালে তিনি কাকরাইলে উইলস লিটল ফ্লাওয়ার স্কুলে ভর্তি হন। কিন্তু স্কুল তার মোটেও ভালো লাগত না। ক্লাসরুমে যাওয়ার পরেই তিনি তার মায়ের জন্য কান্নাকাটি শুরু করে দিতেন। ১৯৮১ সালে তাকে ধানমন্ডির সানবীমস স্কুলে ভর্তি করা হয়। তার মা সেসময় সানবীমস স্কুলে অঙ্কের শিক্ষক হিসেবে যোগ দেন। মা স্কুলে থাকার ফলে সানবীমসে সে আর কান্নাকাটি করত না। ১৯৮৭ সালে তার বাবা মার্কিন যুক্তরাষ্ট্রের ওয়াশিংটনে বাংলাদেশ দূতাবাসে ইকোনমিক মিনিস্টার পদে বদলি হন। নেহরীন মন্টগোমারি কাউন্টিতে বেভারলি ফার্মস স্কুলে প্রাথমিক শিক্ষা লাভ করেন। এরপর পোটোম্যাকের হার্বার্ট হুভার নিম্নমাধ্যমিক বিদ্যালয়ে আরও দুই বছর লেখাপড়া করেন। ১৯৯১ সালে তিনি ঢাকায় ফিরে আসেন। ঢাকায় ফিরে 'ও' লেভেল এবং 'এ' লেভেল পরীক্ষা সম্পন্ন করেন। এসব পরীক্ষার ফল ভালো হয়নি। কিন্তু তার মায়ের ধারণা ছিল যে তার মেয়ে তার মতোই মেধাবী। সুতরাং সে একজন বিজ্ঞানী হবে এবং খুব সহজেই বিজ্ঞান বিষয়ে সে 'ও' লেভেল এবং 'এ' লেভেল পাস করবে। কিন্তু তার মা একটি বড় ভুল করেছিলেন। নেহরীনের বিজ্ঞান বিষয়ে আগ্রহ ছিল না। সে গল্প শুনতে পছন্দ করত। ইতিহাস পড়ায় তার আগ্রহ ছিল। সাহিত্যের বদলে বিজ্ঞান চাপিয়ে দেওয়াটাকে সে সহজভাবে মেনে নিতে পারেনি। তবু সে তার মায়ের দাবী পূরণ করার চেষ্টা করত। ছোটবেলায় তার হাতের লেখা ছিল খারাপ। তার হাতের লেখাকে ভালো করার জন্য সে যখন লিখত তখন তার মা তার পাশে বসে থাকত এবং লেখা খারাপ হলে তার আঙুলে আঘাত করতেন। সে কান্নাকাটি করত। প্রায় বছরখানেক কান্নাকাটি করার পর সে তার হাতের লেখা পরিবর্তন করতে সক্ষম হয়। মা ধরে নেন যে নেহরীন হাতের লেখা পরিবর্তনের মতো বিজ্ঞানশিক্ষাতেও সাফল্য অর্জন করতে পারবে। কিন্তু সেটি কোনমতেই সম্ভব হয়নি। তার পিতা তাকে জোর করে বিজ্ঞান পড়ানোর বিরোধী ছিলেন। এমনকি তিনি তাকে ইংরেজী মিডিয়ামে পড়াতে চাননি। তিনি চেয়েছিলেন সে বাংলা মিডিয়ামে ভিকারুননিসা নূন স্কুলে দেশের অন্য ছেলেমেয়েদের মতো লেখাপড়া করুক। কিন্তু তার মা এতে মোটেও রাজী ছিলেন না। কারণ তিনি বিশ্বাস করতেন, বাংলা মিডিয়ামের মান নিচু। হয়তো তার মায়ের বক্তব্য সঠিক কিন্তু এতে নেহরীনের একটি বড় লোকসান হয়ে যায়। বাংলা মিডিয়ামে পড়লে তার অনেক বন্ধু হতো

কিন্তু ইংরেজী মিডিয়ামে পড়তে গিয়ে সে তার প্রজন্মের ছাত্র ছাত্রীদের থেকে বিচ্ছিন্ন হয়ে পড়ে। শেষ পর্যন্ত যখন প্রমাণিত হলো যে নেহরীনের পক্ষে বিজ্ঞান পড়া সম্ভব নয়, তখন তাকে নবপ্রতিষ্ঠিত বেসরকারী বিশ্ববিদ্যালয় ইস্ট ওয়েস্ট ইউনিভার্সিটির ইংরেজী বিভাগে ভর্তি করা হয়। ইংরেজী সাহিত্যে স্নাতক ডিগ্রী অর্জনের শেষ পর্যায়ে নেহরীন খানের বাবা বিশ্বব্যাপকে বিকল্প নির্বাহী পরিচালক পদে মনোনীত হন। সে বাবার সঙ্গে আবার মার্কিন যুক্তরাষ্ট্রে গিয়ে ওয়াশিংটনে আমেরিকান বিশ্ববিদ্যালয়ে (The American University at Washington D.C) ভর্তি হয় এবং ২০০৫ সালে ওই বিশ্ববিদ্যালয় থেকে ইংরেজী সাহিত্যে বিএ ডিগ্রী অর্জন করে। এরপর সে দেশে ফিরে আসে এবং পুনরায় ইস্ট ওয়েস্ট ইউনিভার্সিটিতে ভর্তি হয়ে সেখান থেকে ইংরেজী সাহিত্যে এম.এ ডিগ্রী অর্জন করে।

কর্মজীবন :

নেহরীন খান ২০০৭ সালে প্রেসিডেন্সী বিশ্ববিদ্যালয়ে ইংরেজী সাহিত্যের প্রভাষক হিসেবে যোগদান করেন। এক সেমিস্টার পড়ানোর পর তিনি ইউনিভার্সিটি অব ডেভেলপমেন্ট অল্টারনেটিভ (ইউডা) তে প্রভাষক হিসেবে যোগদান করেন এবং কিছুদিন পর সহকারী অধ্যাপক হিসেবে পদোন্নতি লাভ করেন। ২০১৬ সনে তার মৃত্যুর আগ পর্যন্ত তিনি ওই বিশ্ববিদ্যালয়েই অধ্যাপনার সাথে যুক্ত ছিলেন। তিনি ভিক্টোরিয়ান সাহিত্য, রোমান্টিক সাহিত্য ও শেক্সপিরিয়ান সাহিত্য পড়াতেন।

জীবনের ছোট গতি :

ড. আকবর আলি খান ও হামীম খানের একমাত্র সন্তান তার আত্মজীবনের খসড়াতে লিখেছেন, 'My parents also doted on me but now as I remember my childhood I think I was being protected as well as spoilt. I had no friends at that age. My friends were my grandparents, my father and my mother.' বয়স বাড়লে সে তার নিজের পরিবারেই নিজের বয়সী বন্ধুদের খুঁজে পায়। তার বন্ধু ছিল তার মা হামীম খানের খালাতো বোন লিনেটের মেয়ে ফারাহ। হামীম খানের মামা মাহমুদ হাসান (যিনি অগ্রণী ব্যাংকের এজিএম ছিলেন)। তার দুই মেয়ে টুইংকেল ও টিনা এবং হামীম খানের মেজ মামা শামসুল আলম (যিনি ছিলেন চট্টগ্রামের চা ব্যবসায়ী) এর মেয়ে নীলা ছিল তার ঘনিষ্ঠ বন্ধু। এ ছাড়া প্রতি বছর তার বাবার ছোট ভাই জসীম এক মাসের জন্য ছুটিতে তার দুই মেয়ে জারা ও জেবাকে নিয়ে ঢাকায় বেড়াতে আসত। তাছাড়া ঢাকায় ছিল তার বাবার ছোট ভাই কবীরের বড় মেয়ে তিথি। তারা একসঙ্গে খেলত। তবে পরিবারের বাইরে নেহরীনের কোন বন্ধু বান্ধব ছিল না।

সারা জীবনই নেহরীন তার মা ও বাবাকে তার সবচেয়ে বড় বন্ধু বলে মনে করত। মার্কিন যুক্তরাষ্ট্রে থাকাকালীন তার বাবা প্রতিদিন তাকে সকালে স্কুলে ও বিশ্ববিদ্যালয়ে নিয়ে যেতেন এবং রাতে ক্লাস থাকলে মেয়েকে নিয়ে বাড়ী ফিরতেন। একবার ওয়াশিংটনে গুপ্ত ঘাতকের প্রকোপ দেখা দেয়। ওই সময়ে নেহরীনের পিতা সব সময় তাকে বিশ্ববিদ্যালয়ে নিয়ে যেতেন এবং নিয়ে আসতেন। একবার তারা যখন বাসায় ফিরছিলেন, তখন পুলিশ তাদের সামনে দিয়ে ঘাতকের গাড়ী তাড়িয়ে নিয়ে যায়। নেহরীন তার বাবার সাহচর্য খুবই পছন্দ করত। যেদিন তিনি মারা যান, সেদিন সকালে তিনি তার পিতার কপালে হাত দিয়ে আশির্বাদ করছিলেন। তার পিতা তাকে জিজ্ঞেস করেছিলেন কি হয়েছে মা? তিনি জবাবে বলেছিলেন যে তার পিতা সজাগ আছে কিনা সেটা দেখছেন। তার মৃত্যুর পর তার পিতার মনে হয় সে তার বাবার কাছ থেকে বিদায় নিয়ে গেছে।

বিশ্বাস :

নেহরীনের বিশ্বাস ছিল, তার মা তাকে যে কোন বিপদ বা অকল্যাণ থেকে রক্ষা করবেন। ছোটবেলায় তাকে একটি গল্প শোনানো হতো, গল্পটি ছিল এ রকম- একটি হাতির বাচ্চাকে দুষ্ট লোকেরা চুরি করে। নেহরীন এ গল্প বিশ্বাস করতে অস্বীকার করে। সঙ্গে সঙ্গে সে প্রশ্ন করে, 'হাতির মা কী করল?' তার বিশ্বাস ছিল যে হাতির বাচ্চার মা-বাবা নিশ্চয়ই তাকে রক্ষা করবে। এ ধারণাটি অবশ্যই ভুল ছিল। নেহরীন তার জীবন দিয়ে শিখে গেল বাবা-মা সব সময় তার সন্তানকে রক্ষা করতে পারে না।

অসমাপ্ত গবেষণাঃ

নেহরী খান তার স্বল্পস্থায়ী জীবনে তিনটি বিষয়ে গবেষণা করেছেন। প্রথম বিষয়টি হলো ইংরেজীতে যাকে বলে Home বাংলায় যাকে বলা যেতে পারে ঘর। নেহরী খান সারা জীবনই ঘর খুঁজে বেড়িয়েছে। জন্ম তার কানাডায়। প্রায় দেড় বছর বয়সে কানাডা থেকে বাংলাদেশে ফিরে আসে। আবার দশ বছর বয়সে চার বছরের জন্য পিতার তৎকালীন কর্মস্থল আমেরিকায় চলে যায়। চার বছর আমেরিকায় থাকার পর দেশে ফিরে এসে একটি বেসরকারী বিশ্ববিদ্যালয় থেকে ডিগ্রী শেষ করার আগে আবার ২০০২ সালে তিন বছরের জন্য পিতার কর্মস্থল আমেরিকাতে যায় এবং বছর তিনেক মার্কিন যুক্তরাষ্ট্রে থাকে। বাংলাদেশ, কানাডা এবং আমেরিকায় বারবার যাওয়া আসার ফলে তার অভিবাসী সাহিত্যের প্রতি আগ্রহ জন্মে। ভারতী মুখার্জী, জুম্পা লহিড়ী, মণিকা আলী প্রমুখ ছিল তার প্রিয় লেখক। অভিবাসীদের সন্তাসংকট বা ওফবহঃরঃ পত্রঃরঃ ছিল তার আমেরিকান বিশ্ববিদ্যালয় এবং ইস্ট ওয়েস্ট ইউনিভার্সিটির গবেষণার বিষয়। নেহরী খান লক্ষ্য করেন যে অভিবাসীদের মধ্যে ঘরে ফেরার একটি প্রচণ্ড ঝোঁক রয়েছে কিন্তু অর্থাভাবে তারা কম বয়সে দেশে ফিরতে পারে না। যখন তাদের অর্থাভাব দূর হয়, তখন তারা দেশে ফিরতে চায়; কিন্তু দেশে ফিরে দেখতে পায়, যে দেশ ছেড়ে তারা গিয়েছিল সে দেশ আর নেই। কালের বিবর্তনে সে দেশ হারিয়ে গেছে এবং এখন যে দেশ, সে দেশকে তারা চিনে না। এ প্রসঙ্গে তিনি লিখেছেন,

“The immigrants imagine that their old homes is like Keats’s Grecian Urn where nothing changes. The returning immigrants discover to their utter surprise that their dear and near ones have either passed away or changed. The new inhabitants in their homeland are unknown. The homeland that is vivid in their mind does not exist any longer.”

তার গবেষণার দ্বিতীয় বিষয় ছিল মোনালিসা। ১৯৯৮ সালে নেহরী খান তার পিতার সঙ্গে প্যারিস ল্যুভ জাদুঘরে লিওনার্দো দ্য ভিঞ্চির মোনালিসা ছবি দেখতে যায়। ছবিটি দেখার পর তিনি লিখেনঃ

“One thing that struck me as I looked on was how alive and real she looked. This picture portrays an actual woman of flesh and blood. She had lustrous almond shaped eyes with a watery sheen on them. She had quite visible eyebrows and eyelashes. It was so clear a picture that even the hair ends from her forehead could be seen. She looks so much alive that she seems to look back at the onlooker. Even the shadow of her nose was visible and the fleshy inside of her nostrils were visible. Her lips curved into a pleasing smile though her face wore a melancholy look. Leonardo da Vinci copied every little detail and every little line bring the portrait to life.”

মোনালিসাকে নিয়ে গবেষণা করতে করতে তিনি তার ঘরের মধ্যেই এক দোসর খুঁজে পান। এ দোসরের নাম লিপি। লিপি তার ফুফাতো বোন। সে কানে শুনত না এবং কথা বলতে পারত না। অথচ সে সুন্দরী ও চটপটে ছিল এবং জীবনকে ভালবাসত। তাকে বিয়ে দেওয়া হয়েছিল এবং তার একটি ছেলে ও একটি মেয়ে হয়েছিল। কিন্তু স্বামী, ছেলে মেয়ে কারোর সঙ্গেই তার পুরোপুরি সংযোগ প্রতিষ্ঠিত হয়নি। মোনালিসার সঙ্গে তুলনা করে সে লিখেছে :

“Mona Lisa has a smile like her but Mona Lisa does not say anything and she is just a painting. But my cousin is a real human being. Mona Lisa will always remain smiling and she can never change her expression but my cousin can because she is capable of all emotions and can express them all. I dreamt of

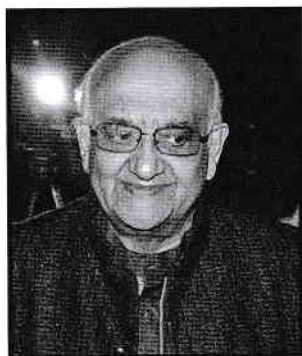
speaking to Mona Lisa because it is easy to do so but it is not all easy to dream of speaking to Lipi. I wanted to hear Mona Lisa's voice and I did in my dreams but I cannot hear my cousin speak. I would do anything to make her a full sentence.”

তার অসমাপ্ত নোটগুলো পর্যালোচনা করলে দেখা যায় সে মোনালিসা, লিপি ও হেলেন কেলারকে নিয়ে একটি গল্প লেখার চেষ্টা করছিল। তিন নায়িকা সম্বন্ধেই আলাদা আলাদাভাবে অনেক কিছুই লিখেছে। এগুলো একত্র করলে হয়তো একটি সুন্দর গল্প রচিত হতে পারত।

নেহরীনের তৃতীয় গবেষণার বিষয় ছিল ভারতে মহিলাদের অবস্থান। তিনি শুধু ভারতীয় মহিলাদের আর্থিক দুরবস্থা নিয়েই চিন্তিত ছিলেন না। তাদের সামাজিক দুরবস্থা নিয়েও তিনি অনেক বেশী চিন্তিত ছিলেন। এ জন্য প্রয়োজন মহিলাদের চেতনার সম্প্রসারণ। এ সম্পর্কে লেখার জন্য তিনি আরও পড়াশোনা করছিলেন। নেহরীন খান কোন গবেষণাই শেষ করে যেতে পারেননি। তবে তার লেখার জন্য যেসব নোট করেছিলেন, তা পড়লে বোঝা যায় তার অনেক সুন্দর লেখার সম্ভাবনা ছিল। এ লেখাগুলো পড়লে রবীন্দ্রনাথের উক্তি মনে পড়ে :

‘যে ফুল না ফুটিতে ঝরেছে ধরণীতে
যে নদী মরু পথে হারালো ধারা
জানি হে জানি তাও হয়নি হারা।’

Short Biography of Hon'ble Speaker



Professor Rehman Sobhan

Professor Rehman Sobhan has served as a Professor of Economics, Dhaka University, Member, Bangladesh Planning Commission, Director General, Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies, Visiting Fellow, Queen Elizabeth House, Oxford, Senior Fellow, Ash Institute of Democratic Governance, Harvard University, Founder and Executive Chairman, Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), Executive Director, South Asia Centre for Policy Studies (SACEPS) and is currently Chairman, CPD. In 1991 he served as a member of the first caretaker government headed by President Shahabuddin Ahmed. He has held a number of important professional positions which include President, Bangladesh Economic Association, Member, U.N. Committee for Development Planning, Member, Governing Council of the U.N. University, Tokyo, Member of the Executive Committee of the International Economic Association, Member of the Group of Eminent Persons appointed by the SAARC Heads of State to review the future of SAARC and Chairman of the Board of Grameen Bank.

Professor Sobhan was actively associated with the Bengali nationalist movement in the 1960s and the Bangladesh liberation struggle in 1971 where he was designated as Envoy Extraordinary in charge of economic affairs by the first Bangladesh government. He has been awarded the *Shadinata Purushker*, the nation's highest civilian award and was the first recipient of the Bangladesh Bank Purushkar for services to economics.

He has published a large number of books, research monographs and articles published in professional journals, relating to the political economy of development, public enterprise and privatization, foreign aid, petropolitics, agrarian reform, regional cooperation in South Asia, democracy and governance. His most recent works include, *Challenging the Injustice of Poverty: Agendas for Inclusive Development in South Asia* (2010), his memoir, *Untranquil Recollections: The Years of Fulfillment* (2015), both published by Sage, *From Two Economies to Two Nations: My Journey to Bangladesh* (2016), published by Daily Star Books, the second volume of his memoir *Untranquil Recollections: Nation Building in Post-Liberation Bangladesh* (2021) published by Sage, *Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman: Philosophy, Politics and Policies* (2023) co-authored with Rounaq Jahan, published by Prothoma and *Fifty Years of Bangladesh* (2024) co-edited with Rounaq Jahan, published by Routledge.

CONSTRUCTING A MORE JUST SOCIETY IN BANGLADESH

Professor Rehman Sobhan

In the wake of the historic regime change brought about on 5th August 2024 through a youth led mass mobilization the issue of *boishomo* has been widely projected as one of the inspirational forces behind the movement with its focus on political exclusion. The youth have translated the *boishomo* movement to mean the anti-discrimination movement. I have myself been fighting against *boishomo* through my writings over sixty years of my professional life. However, in my writings I have interpreted *boishomo* to mean inequality which I am advised, is the literal translation of the word from Bangla to English.

Discrimination remains an important component of inequality and has traditionally been used to focus on the social dimensions of inequality; it is applicable largely to discrimination against specific groups of people identified by gender, religion, ethnicity and sexuality. In the global discourse, such discrimination has attracted much more attention, particularly in the west, in comparison to the widening of income inequality and its political dimensions.

In my past work I have discussed the issue of discrimination against various social groups and its political ramifications but my research till now has more specifically focused on the socio-economic dimensions of inequality and its underlying political economy. All my works on inequality have been premised on the idea that inequality in all its forms is the product of injustice, both at the domestic [,] as well as [the] global level. Over the last 24 years, at least in Bangladesh, wherever there has been both discussion and research on inequality, few people, whether at the academic or the political level, have been inclined to explore the sources of inequality, or to address the injustice which underlies it. It is therefore hardly surprising that inequality has exacerbated at all levels and has emerged as a manifestation of a highly unjust social and political order.

My presentation today will therefore explore the nature of injustice as it represents itself through:

- the unjust nature of the market
- inequitable social opportunity
- an unjust political process
- the workings of an unjust state

In my conclusion I will present some thoughts on what can be done by a regime which is genuinely committed to constructing a more just society.

Market Injustice

Let us look at the market, not as we read about it in our textbooks but as it works in real life. Literature on market failures has evolved from the theories of imperfect competition but this has moved on to cover incomplete and even missing markets. I do not propose going down that road. As far as Bangladesh is concerned, we see markets as social rather

than economic institutions. It is these markets which perpetuate injustice because **they** themselves mostly remain unequal institutions in the way they operate. We recognise, in the Bangladesh context, that the operative issue is not whether market forces exist **but** who controls the market, who participates in it, and does so on what terms.

These imperfect markets derive from unequal access to the market in every area, stretching from information, to assets, to credit, to education and health care. For example, in our society we do not just have unequal access to information, we have illegitimate access to information built around the capacity of particular groups of people to use information as a private resource, usually feloniously acquired. Privileged knowledge of a public tender, of trading on the stock market, emerging shortages or even the residential phone number of a Minister's PA, is a potential market opportunity for some favoured person or the other.

The deprived classes in our society are victims of the market. If they are producers, they are also price-takers. They provide goods and services on inequitable terms, both at the national and the global level. Over the course of the twentieth century, the jute growers of Bangladesh have been victims of the market and have remained mired in poverty for generations. For these millions of jute growers, life has been lived on an escalator with their fortunes rising and falling with the vagaries of the global market. This experience has been perpetuated over the years so that market instability continues to plague the lives of small farmers.

We live in an era of hierarchical markets where, if we look at the vertical integration of markets, we will see the distribution of returns within this hierarchy of markets between the growers who produces a small crop of paddy and the final retail price of rice paid by a consumer. The possible presence of 'syndicates' may be further contributing to this widening of margins between the growers and consumers. But the source of the problem remains embedded in the unjust working of market forces.

If we look at a microcredit beneficiary who may buy a cow with her credit and produce a few litres of milk for sale in the local market, we may observe that she is compelled to sell the milk to a local milk trader who is part of a distribution chain within an inequitable market structure where the main returns are appropriated along the chain by the final agro-processing enterprise.

The main problem with the working of the market, thus, arises from the unequal terms on which the poor participate in the marketplace. They do so in an unequal market for knowledge. They participate in an unequal capital market. The failure to treat microcredit as part of a broader capital market and to treat microcredit as a side activity is a very critical element in the failure of the capital market. It was not the market which in fact gave the world microcredit; it was socially committed individuals, such as Muhammad Yunus and Fazle Hasan Abed who set up institutions to deliver microcredit to the poor as a gesture of social commitment towards improving their lives. No private banker was willing to risk their capital to service microcredit borrowers; nor are they institutionally willing to do so even today, after the creditworthiness of these borrowers had been established not just across Bangladesh but across the world. Bankers may today prefer providing credit to low-income households in the rural areas through agent banking but the risk taking is transferred to the agent.

We further need to take cognizance of unequal labour markets where accessing a job is itself a social privilege rather than an economic right. We need, here, to address the issue of interlinked markets where each of these different inequitable market structures reinforce each other to create a system of unjust governance and dependency within the prevailing social order. In such an inequitable system, some people can use their command over capital, over land or over access to official patronage, and in influencing contractual terms in the labour or commodity market. These elite class can use their market power in one market, say credit, to obtain sub-market priced labour in another market, or can use command over both markets to elicit unfree services in the political market place.

The most noticeable injustice within the labour market relates to the inequitable sharing of the value addition process. In any industry such as for example readymade garments (RMG), value is added through the contributions of both labour and owner/management. However, the returns are inequitably shared due to the superior bargaining power of the owners. In Bangladesh, workers have historically remained weak due to their incapacity for collective action. But our global success as a competitive exporter of RMG owes as much to the contribution of these workers as it does to the entrepreneurial skills of our owners. To deprive workers of a rightful share in the distributive process of the RMG sector is thus a serious injustice which demands correction by all those struggling to reduce *boishomo*.

Inequitable social opportunity

To address inequitable access to social opportunities we need to focus on the institutions of human development. There are, of course, other very important social structures which remain fundamentally inequitable [,] but these deserve independent address outside this paper. In the area of human development, we will focus on injustice in the education and health care system. If we look at Bangladesh's educational system, it is profoundly unjust and perpetuates injustice. Here, I think, there is a very serious limitation in the current agendas of human development. We tend to see human development as the broadening of opportunities through the expansion of education and through improved budgetary allocations to this sector. The metric of achievement that we put on the table is the level of literacy realised in a particular society and enrollment of school age children in schools.

In Bangladesh our educational budget share has remained low even by South Asian standards. As a result, even if our access to education has quantitatively increased the quality, particularly of public education, has remained low. Since public education is largely accessed by lower income households, their opportunities for remunerative engagement in the economy remains limited. As a result, we are witnessing a progressive polarisation in the benefits of education due to the superior quality of education available to children of better off families. In such a context, I see the educational system today as a source of discrimination against the less privileged and the perpetuator of social injustice.

Due to the indifferent quality of public education the elites of Bangladesh rarely send their children to state primary schools set up through the expansion in the educational budgets. The more affluent classes send their children to private schools which are now being further differentiated from public schools through the tendency of the elite to send their children to private English medium schools. Parents from the higher brackets of the elite are increasingly sending their children abroad. This means that we are now creating two societies polarised by education, and this is having a profound impact on the life opportunities which are available to different echelons of Bangladesh society.

While we take comfort in attaining [having attained] universal literacy and universal primary education, our societies are going to be [increasingly] run by the graduates of the private schools and those who return with their foreign degrees, not by those who have emerged through an expanded system of government primary and secondary schools. Similarly, we have evidence of significant gender disparities in the education system. Whilst the significant expansion in the enrollment of girls in the school system is a most promising development, their access to professional and technical education is less evident and is likely to perpetuate gender stereo-typing in their participation in the labour market.

If we look at the healthcare system, here again we observe a polarisation of healthcare where the growth of high-quality private care coexists with the expansion of public health budgets. This private healthcare system is again serving to build a dual society with an elite who have opted out of public healthcare to seek their care in the private sector and if they are affluent enough, to seek it abroad. This differentiated health care system not only impacts on levels of security and insecurity, it also influences life chances amongst households, and it perpetuates the notion of two societies within one country.

Political Injustice

The promotion of democracy is today universally recognised as an absolute value. For many, including the US State Department, democracy is basically seen as the right to vote and hopefully to exercise that right without anyone holding a gun at your head. In Bangladesh over the last decade even this right has been unjustly abrogated by the ruling party abusing the law and compromising the integrity of electoral institutions to hold elections which were not free, fair or competitive.

Electoral democracy, even in the period where it commanded some credibility due to the constitutional provision of being supervised by a non-partisan Caretaker Government (CTG) suffered from many flaws. In practice it had increasingly become a rich man's game. Over the years we witnessed the escalation of the role of money in politics, the emergence of politics as an instrument for business, and business as a source of entry into politics. It is no accident that around three fourths of the elected representatives of Bangladesh in the outgoing parliament reported business as their primary or secondary occupation. This number could rise to close to 100% if we investigate those MPs with other professions but who moved on to engage in business once they entered parliament. Successive parliaments have degenerated into a chamber of commerce for 'crony' capitalists where the pursuit of business interests, unconcerned with any issue of conflict of interest, have used their power to advance their business fortunes.

What passed for an opposition in the three previous parliaments served largely as an appendage of the ruling party. In such a universe the primary function of parliament to hold the government of the day accountable for their acts of omission and commission was largely abdicated. This nexus between politics and business was not limited just to the Jatiyo Shangshad but was extended down to the institutions of local government by ruling party office holders who used their positions to monopolise business opportunities available through public expenditures. Within such a political order, lower income groups remained excluded so that our primary institutions of governance, our representative institutions, remained undemocratic and highly discriminatory for the majority of the population who could never afford to contest elections.

In this exclusionary environment we witnessed the progressive criminalisation of Bangladesh's politics. Dependency on criminal services had become an important ingredient in politics where money was invested to buy the services of criminals to help a candidate get elected to various levels of representative institutions. Wealth and crime happily coexisted. Criminals recognised the value of their instrumental role in pushing people into elective office and have sought to enter our representative institutions themselves.

The state has thus emerged as the patron of crime because one could only be a criminal and a successful one if you stayed out of jail. This required protection by and from the forces of law and order. That is why it is so important for criminals to be associated with the political process and even to be involved in it. The loan defaulters of Bangladesh could thus seek the cover of parliament to ensure that no one was going to hold them to account for their default. Candidates with defaulted loans were, by law, not permitted to contest elections but every finance minister relaxed this provision before an election so that the Parliament and other elective bodies came to be populated with defaulters who resisted any attempt by Parliament to address the default crisis.

Agendas of decentralisation were themselves could never move forward because those who were expected to legislate decentralisation were themselves inimical to surrendering the necessary power and patronage which goes with this process. Neither bureaucrats nor national parliamentarians were at all supportive of decentralization. MPs who had no role to play in parliament ended up becoming the *Zamindars* of their constituencies which overlapped with the upazila, to monopolise the public patronage system. This frequently put ruling party MPs into contestation with Upazila Chairman from their own party, leading to bitter conflicts which periodically ended in violence.

State Injustice

The functioning of the state, manifested through its various institutions of governance, has both created and perpetuated injustice across all walks of society. How the state spends and collects revenues remains an important source of injustice and reflects its political preferences and societal biases. For example, the allocative choices of the state ultimately determined what happens to the agendas of poverty alleviation and human development. Unfortunately, after all these years, we have no macroeconomic policy regime to underwrite these agendas of poverty alleviation, which, thus, remain basically micro-exercises. As a result, we had a state, whose allocative decisions tended to be

inspired by the influence of powerful pressure groups. In Bangladesh these groups included business elites, public employees, the military and the holders of public debt, foreign and local. The principal claims on the Bangladesh state's budgetary priorities originated under the heads of wages and salaries to public employees, the defence budget and payment of interest on internal and external debt[s]. If the state expended three-quarters of its budget on just a few heads in order to accommodate specific constituencies, where were we going to generate domestic resources for the poor?

Business elites exercised their power to extract tax concessions, subsidies and other preferences from the state. Such forms of budgetary intervention by the state were never clearly registered in the national budget nor were the distributive implications of these implicit or explicit public resource transfers to the privileged business sector ever put on record.

In such a constrained allocative regime we need to address the notion of the captured state which succeeded the paternal state of the 1960s and 1970s. The state, in recent times, has become a captive of crony capitalists, of the special interest groups and of institutionalised collectives of state employees.

We also must talk of the collusive state, which has mutated into a conspiracy of politicians, bureaucrats and the armed forces to dominate the state for private gain. We, thus, need to view the state as a privatised state, motivated by commercial greed. We must eventually view the state as a delegitimised state which had lost faith in itself, just as people had lost faith in the state.

The Bretton Woods Institutions have contributed to this process of delegitimation and have, in the process, left Bangladesh with a state without a mission and a vision, exposed to a process of de-accumulation in its capacity to discharge its responsibilities as a state. We see a state faced with a withering away of its institutions and erosion in its accountability.

Above all, we see a lawless state, where the law has now become a resource to be commandeered by the rich to oppress the weak, with law and order serving basically as a commodity to be marketed like any other. As a result, in Bangladesh, you buy the degree of protection or immunisation that you are willing to pay for.

Unless these realities of power, as they impinge on the working of our institutions which govern politics and development, are considered, grandiose statements about macro-economic reforms or poverty alleviation or improved governance are likely to remain rhetorical exercises. Neither our donors nor our policymakers, nor indeed most of our academics, have attempted to explore the injustices inherent in our institutions which have driven the growth of economic inequality and social discrimination in Bangladesh. Nor have we attempted to take account of the political forces which sustain and are sustained by these institutions. Unless we open the debate on how to build more just institutions, our policy and reform agendas will remain a largely therapeutic process rather than part of a serious commitment to eradicate the twin scourges of inequality and unjust governance.

What can be done to challenge injustice

Prof. Muhammad Yunus, the head of the Interim government (IG), has invested his life's work in ending poverty and placing it in a museum. He has now, in his latest work, *A World of Three Zeros*, also taken on the challenge of reducing inequality. We would therefore expect that some positive ideas may emerge from the 12 Commissions and the Committee to produce a White Paper on the economy to come up with some positive ideas to address *boishomo* both as to its discriminatory aspects as also in relation to inequality of both income and opportunity.

In my own case I have been attempting to address the sources of poverty and injustice through my work over the last 24 years. The *shesh kobita* of my professional life has been presented in my book on *Challenging the Injustice of Poverty: Agendas for Inclusive Development in South Asia*, published over a decade ago. Sadly, I cannot claim to have excited too many of my academic colleagues, policy makers or political leaders in Bangladesh to seriously apply themselves to discuss the structural sources of poverty and inequality or explore paths to a more just society. I therefore attempt to briefly present some of my thoughts on constructing such a society. These ideas are more comprehensively discussed in my above work. My suggestions are presented under two heads:

- Promoting governance injustice
- Challenging structural injustice

Challenging governance injustice

In the first part of my paper, I have addressed various aspects of injustice associated with the malgovernance of the state. This relates to the erosion of democratic institutions and state capture by an unelected regime supported by a class of crony capitalists. Hopefully the IG has made it its primary mission to prepare an agenda of reforms which will address the legacy of malgovernance inherited by it. If we review the various Commissions set up by the IG we will get a clearer idea of the areas identified for urgent reform. These cover the constitution, judiciary, administration, police, the electoral process, corruption and the economy.

In these areas the substantive problems originating in the undemocratic and unaccountable nature of the state are likely to have increased scope for *boishomo* indicating growing discrimination. This could relate to opportunities for freely and fairly contesting elections, access to a fair, rather than a politically influenced judicial process, protection of the law enforcement agencies without reference to political instructions from above, and expectation of career advancement in the administration based on merit rather than partisan identity.

In such a reformed system contestation in elections could be fully inclusive and its outcome would be based on the genuine preference of voters. Prosecution for corruption would be initiated on a non-discriminatory basis, irrespective of whether a person was holding high office or was being singled out for punishment on account of their political preferences. Through a process of constitutional reform political power and authority would hopefully be deconcentrated. Parliament would perform its constitutionally

mandated responsibility of holding the state accountable and the organization of political parties would be democratized. In the economic sphere reforms, which institutionalize the management of the economy, enhance the competitive process, and allocate resources more democratically and justly, may be expected to strengthen the efficiency and fairness of the development process.

All such expectations from the reform process, if even partially realized, may be expected to contribute to building a less discriminatory social order. However, no reform commission has been explicitly targeted to address *boishomo* which abridges opportunities for less privileged social groups such as religious and ethnic minorities to participate in society on more equitable terms. The concerns of one of the most discriminated groups, women, has been invested in a special commission which appears to have been set up as an afterthought and has begun its work well after the other commissions. How far this Commission will have the time, resources and competence to correct a social order which has discriminated against women from time immemorial remains to be seen.

In the final analysis much will depend on who may actually be made responsible for implementing the reforms initiated by the IG. To implement such a highly ambitious agenda would demand that the IG continue in the office for a sufficient length of time, perhaps 4 or 5 years. Given the IG's commitment to hand over power to an elected government within a reasonable period, perhaps 18 months or two years, the scope for implementing most of the reforms will be challenging. Even those reforms which are initiated by the CTG will need to be sustained through the buy in of whichever party is elected to office. This places the principal responsibility of both formally enacting and sincerely implementing reforms which may impact significantly on *boishomo* on whichever political party assumes office. The commitment and capacity of such a party will have to be assessed in relation to its social and political support and its past record, if it has previously held office.

Challenging Structural Injustice

It is not clear how far any of the Reform Commissions will be engaged in substantively addressing *boishomo*, defined as inequality in the social and economic sphere. Nor is it clear to me if the Commissions have discussed the sources of *boishomo* in all its forms, which originates in structural injustice. Such forms of injustice have been more deeply rooted in the system than governance injustice and remain the source of political, social and economic injustice. I have attempted to summarily discuss the nature of structural injustice in my presentation and accordingly offer some ideas on how our policy makers, whether the IG or a prospective elected regime, may initiate a process of structural reforms which may have a durable impact on *boishomo*. These ideas, extracted from my work on *Challenging the Injustice of Poverty*, are discussed below:

Widening opportunities for owning productive assets by the poor

What differentiates wealthy elites from the poor masses is their monopolisation of income generating wealth. To change the fortunes of the deprived it is essential to enhance their ownership over productive assets. Once upon a time we favoured agrarian

reforms as a distributive mechanism to empower tenant[s] and small farmers to own land. In Bangladesh possibilities of agrarian reform are still available but fragmentation of the land has made such distributive reforms less relevant today. I have suggested that an Agrarian Reforms Commission be set up to explore such possibilities for reform. What, however, can be immediately addressed, even by the IG, is the reclamation of *khas* land which has been mostly illegally occupied by politically privileged elites in the rural areas and even in some urban areas. Such recovered lands can be redistributed to landless farmer[s] who can be supported by credit, technical advice and marketing services to improve their productivity and retained earnings. Land recovered in the urban areas can be used for providing housing for *bustee* dwellers.

Reforming the land administration system is another area for immediate action by the IG. Such reforms have been underway since the Ershad administration, but progress has been unimpressive. Decisive action by the IG to complete the digitisation of land records, reduce corruption, establish coordination and accountability, could bring justice to millions of landholders, particularly the less privileged.

Promoting worker ownership

Over the last three months we have witnessed periodic unrest across the RMG sector. This is not new and has been ongoing over several decades. RMG workers have been constantly complaining about their unfair share in the value added by their labours. Within our unjust social order this contestation and its disruptive outcomes may persist unless it is urgently addressed through ensuring a more just relationship between workers and their employers.

Given the substantial contribution of the workers to the viability of Bangladesh's RMG industry, it would be both just and efficient to graduate workers from adversaries engaged in a class war with employers into prospective stakeholders in the future growth of the industry. Such a transformation in the role of workers in the industry could be realised by providing them with opportunities to become partners in the industry. These partnerships could be forged through offer of an equity stake to RMG workers in the enterprises where they work. The workers would thereby identify themselves with the future growth and profitability of the enterprises where they work. This would not only motivate owner-workers to work more intensively but would also encourage them to constantly explore opportunities on the shop floor to improve their productivity as well as the quality of the final products produced by the enterprises.

Strengthening the capacity of the poor to compete in the marketplace

The weakness of the poor, within the marketplace, whether as farmers, home-based or small scale entrepreneurs or as wage labourers in all areas of economic endeavor, originates in their individualization and isolation. We thus need to invest in the small holders/artisans, workers with the capacity to develop the financial and organizational strength needed to sell their products and services, at a time and in a market, which offers them the best terms, rather than sell their produce and services out of distress or the need to subsist.

To address the isolation of these more vulnerable groups we need to develop institutions which aggregate small holders and service providers for purposes of collective action, in the form of marketing cooperatives or corporate bodies. Such collective entities of the vulnerable classes could thereby enhance their competitiveness through availing themselves of many of the advantages derived from the externalities available to large scale enterprises. Such institutions would need to be imaginatively conceived and calibrated to meet the special needs and concerns of its hitherto disempowered members, inexperienced in their exposure to the upper tiers of a market economy.

Across South Asia, including in Bangladesh, social institutions such as cooperatives, civil society organisations (CSO) and NGOs, as well as some public institutions, are already providing marketing services to the poor, for particular commodities, and in particular markets. These institutions are helping small scale producers to add value to their labours by moving upmarket through linkages with agro-processing enterprises owned by them or through contractual ties for marketing their produce to corporate agro-processors or retailers. We may note here, the pioneering role of Amul Dairy Cooperative in India, which empowered millions of small-scale livestock farmers to become owners of one of the largest agro-processing conglomerates in India, and to collectively share in the value addition to their primary product of milk.

Such collective endeavours by our small farmers remain largely absent in Bangladesh, in contrast to the rapid spread of the agro-processing industry, largely based on unequal contractual relations with the corporate sector. The only exception being Milk Vita Cooperative. It is accordingly suggested that opportunities be provided for small scale producers across Bangladesh, through financial support and professional guidance, to offer them opportunities to evolve into equity stakeholders in the upstream corporate enterprises which add value to their produce or labour. More effort also needs to be invested in developing co-operatives of small producers, on the lines of Milk Vita, but to run more professionally and keep insulated from political intervention.

On similar lines Bangladesh's principal source of external earnings, its disempowered migrant workers, now held captive in the thrall of exploitative manpower agents, can be empowered through aggregating them into corporate service-exporting enterprises. Such collectives of migrant workers could also be encouraged to aggregate some of their remittances, as members of a dedicated Mutual Fund, which can [could] be incentivized to acquire a stake in listed corporate enterprises located in the upper tiers of the market. Such collectives of migrants could eventually evolve into setting up their own larger scale enterprises.

Enhancing public investments in human development

The priority for the education sector over the next decade should be to substantially enhance public investment, to at least 5% of GDP as recommended by the Education Commission set up in 2010, for the purpose of upgrading the quality and governance of public education. Such public institutions need to provide education, serving low-income groups, to a level where they do not feel disadvantaged, compared to the more expensively educated members of society, including in the private sector. Such a goal carries formidable implications as to costs and governance. Strong measures will need to

be taken to eliminate corruption in the teacher recruitment process in public schools and the partisanisation which has infected both recruitment and advancement in our institutions of higher education.

Such interventions remain interim measures. The goal of a genuinely democratized education system in Bangladesh must be the construction of a common school system built upon making high quality education of a uniform standard available to all. Such an objective, within our highly inequitable educational system, serving an unequal society again remains a distant dream.

In the health sector, the relatively low investment and poor quality of governance has been highlighted in our national response to the Covid crisis. Massive investments in public health care, backed by a system of accountable, corruption free governance, is immediately needed to provide quality health care without dependence on ruinous out-of-pocket expenditures. Such a system must be underwritten by a programme of universal health insurance built around a partnership between the government and the private sector.

Institutions of the Poor

Collective action by the poor

Central to any agenda for constructing a more just society is the need to empower the poor through making better use of their demographic and electoral majority across Bangladesh. Bangladesh's poor survive as disempowered individuals with no institutional persona. The primary task of building institutions for the poor should be to enable them to rediscover their collective identities. The forging of such a collective identity does not, however, develop out of abstract notions of identity but is likely to emerge out of a process of collective action. Such collective action tends to be constructed around particular social actions or through shared participation in pursuit of economic gain. Here, if the poor are to be mobilized for collective action, special institutions [for them] of the poor may need to be constructed. One such institutional arrangement is discussed below:

Corporations of the Poor

It is suggested that the long-term sustainability of our NGOs, as financially autonomous institutions of civil society, lies in their reinvention as corporations of the poor. The future of the larger NGOs such as BRAC lies in its ability to use its institutional capacity, which has extended into rural communities across Bangladesh, thereby giving them direct access to vast numbers of the poor, to use this reach to link our poor to the market. This can be done through transforming NGOs into corporations of the poor, where their micro-beneficiaries are transformed into the owners of a corporate NGO. Through such a measure, the individual weakness of the poor could be aggregated into the legally recognized power of the many. Initially only a small number of NGOs in Bangladesh would have the organizational capacity and resources to evolve into nationally competitive corporate bodies. However, some smaller NGOs can also evolve into medium scale corporate entities.

This suggested reconfiguration of the NGO's would also make them accountable to their myriad owners. Such an institutional transformation could lay to rest the critique of NGOs that they are accountable only to their external donors and perpetuate the patron-client system which they were designed to challenge. An NGO owned by and accountable to five million members or even 5000 members could emerge as a socially powerful organization at the national or local level with no less social legitimacy than a representative institution.

The political economy of empowerment

The entire process of building a collective identity for the poor through specially constructed institutions, derives from the need for the poor to claim a place in Bangladesh society which is more commensurate with their numbers. The poor remain disempowered because they are isolated. Bring them together and they emerge as a major force in the economy, in society and eventually in the political arena. Incorporating the poor, around opportunities for collective economic benefit, may invest them with a sustainable sense of solidarity which may not have been possible through more episodic participation in various class actions. However, in the final analysis, it is only when the poor are sitting in the representative institutions of the state, in local elective bodies as well as in the Jatyo Sangshad, that they will be able to ensure that their special concerns will be mainstreamed within the policymaking process.

The political leadership needs to recognize that the majority of the voting population belongs to this underprivileged class. They accordingly need to reach out to this class by empowering them to assume important position in party organizations and nominating them in larger numbers to contest for seats not just in local elections but also to the Jatiyo Sangshad.

The move to realize a structurally more just society remains a longer-term project, but such a goal may be brought forward if our political leadership sincerely commit themselves to realizing a vision for a non-discriminatory and more egalitarian, that is to say, a socially just society. Such a prospect may appear to be part of my romantic imagination. But who would have dreamt that we would today have a government headed by Prof. Yunus and would be talking about reforms to achieve *boishomo* free society and the state.



East West University

Progoti Foundation for Education and Development
Permanent Sanad Holder

A/2, Jahurul Islam Avenue, Jahurul Islam City, Aftabnagar
Dhaka-1212, Bangladesh

Tel: 09666775577, 9858161

E-mail: admissions@ewubd.edu

URL: <https://www.ewubd.edu>