

The Dhaka school survives

by Farooque Chowdhury

SYMBOLISING the existing reality the Bailey Road-school in the capital city survives. The credit goes to the highest court of law of the land, the government officials standing by the school, a part of student activism, a part of the Dhaka media, the teachers and students of the school, and the guardians of the students, who came forward to save the educational institution.

Spanning for months the struggle to save the school at Bailey Road went through different phases. There were student activism on the streets and legal fight in courts of law. There were uncertainties for leadership of the school-students. All the students of the school come from low-income, poor families, the weakest part of the society. They had to face a stronger party, stuffed with money and rich with experience.

It was one of the rarest struggles to save a single educational institution in the history of Bangladesh student activism. On the opposite, it was the general picture of Bangladesh student activism, which always stood for widening scope for education in society, especially for the commoners. The history of Bangladesh student activism is mainly the history of struggle for education for the commoners, which, in essence, is part of democratic struggle. But instance for struggle to save a single educational institution is rare.

The struggle had to begin although the public face of the broader society always speaks for widening scope

for education. It's a reality with contradictory appearance. But, it's the reality.

The contradictory reality turns stark within student activism. No student organisation other than a single one came forward to join the struggle. Actually, it was a single student organisation that took the initiative to organise the struggle. It's difficult to know the reason, whether it was a pathy or competition for turf or the general condition of the Bangladesh student activism. A deeper search is needed to have a correct answer. However, this is the reality.

Student activism is a natural growth in the society. No provocation is required there. Guardians recently got mobilised to protest rises in tuition fee, etc in a number of schools in Dhaka and Chittagong. It was a new development. Similar example — guardians taking initiative on a student cause — is almost nil in the history of Bangladesh student activism since 1947. Number and the extent of student organisations' participation in the short-lived guardians' mobilisation are real questions. The reality is now known whatever the reason for this non- or less- or late-participation of student organisations is there.

A few more aspects related to the reality of student activism are also there, which are not being mentioned in this article. But a part of the reality emerges. Probably, student activists are studying the reality.

The survived school stands as a symbol of other parts of the broader socio-economic reality also. Sym-

bolically, there was a competition between an interest not related to the school and the school. In other words, it was a competition between transgression of public sphere and commoners' basic rights, or a push-by profit-seeking-interest to devour commoners' right to knowledge. The non-education interest was bent on widening its sphere while the school just tried to survive. Inner core of the school is the students from the weaker part of the society. How long shall they sustain? Can they? An honest position can provide the answer. Even, an honest position can carry forward the struggle for sustaining the regained position of the school, and provide answer to related questions. Is the position visible? Probably, it is visible to a lot, and not-visible to a few. But, the reality is full with sporadic initiatives, which ultimately produces nothing other than anarchy or strengthens an atmosphere with little- or no-space for people.

The atmosphere gets strengthened as pseudo-hero keeps on occupying own seat, exposed villain goes unquestioned, shadow sepy turns dignified in the name of democracy, political forces posing as non-political factor sweat their foreheads to install some other game of politics. A part of MSM — main stream media — shows the reality without the tiniest trace of dignity. These are part of a bigger game with a broader holy coalition, which upholds serious-looking faces without a single ray of dignity. It is also a part of the political reality, where commoners find no space and

voice while a group of innocent looking elites defines democracy with an ulterior design in their pocket.

It turns difficult for student activism to chart an appropriate path for carrying on its tasks as it is prevailed either by those interests or by the culture of the interests. Initiatives are taken; but sporadic, haphazard moves reach nowhere. The pattern serves prevailing interests as pent up sense of grievance is safely evaporated, as protesting young mind is burned out, as, in a planned way, energy is spent sporadically.

Hence, it is found (1) vital political questions go unanswered and unanswered even in the camp that claims to be pro-commoners, (2) essential issues related to life are not discussed and debated even by those claiming to be with the commoners, (3) an environment of superficial ideas is fanned up. Student activism fails to get out of this reality, and fails to join its constituency. These bolster the situation, and present a seemingly sterile reality. This is a part of political reality, where only hefty interests prevail. This is the rule until changed.

But, contrary position is also present. The struggle to save the school shows the contrary position: (1) standing for burning problem, (2) close connection to constituency, (3) ceaseless effort. The struggle for the school, thus, stands as a symbol of promise: progress is possible even within an environment overwhelmingly hostile to the commoners.

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