

NATIONAL EDUCATION DAY

‘Commercialisation of education will only increase inequality in society’

Mujahidul Islam Selim, president of the Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB), talks to Naznin Tithi of The Daily Star about the spirit of the 1962 education movement, the current state of our education system, and how commercialising it helps create further inequality in society.

How would you evaluate the 1962 movement that the Education Day commemorates? The education movement of 1962 was an unprecedented event in the political history of this nation. The movement had been waged by the students of then East Pakistan for a pro-people education policy and to establish ordinary people’s right to education. At the same time, it was our first attempt to revolt against the then Pakistani military ruler Ayub Khan. Inequality in education has always been an issue in our society. While the British imperialists followed a colonial policy to educate our people, in the Pakistan period, the Pakistani rulers continued to follow those policies and made new repressive policies to dominate and oppress the people of East Pakistan.

The British Indian policymakers planned to educate the Indians in a way that they would remain Indians physically but ideologically they would be like the British. To that end, they formulated a policy to educate only a section of the people to perpetuate their colonial rule in India. Pakistani rulers followed that same policy.

In 1962, the Ayub government published the Sharif Commission’s report in which instead of ensuring education for all as a basic right, there was a clear attempt to commercialise education and make it accessible only to a section of people. It was specifically mentioned in the report that education should be considered a commercial activity, meaning that only those with money would have access to education while the door would be closed to the poor and low-income people. This also meant that the state would not take any responsibility for educating the common people.

In the Sharif Commission’s report, it had been mentioned that “Urdu should be made the language of the people of Pakistan”, “English should be made compulsory from class VI”, “Education should not be available

at a cheaper rate”, “there is reason to see investment in industry and education at par”, etc. The commission’s recommendation that the two years’ degree course should be upgraded to three years was also against the interest of the students and they took to the street to protest this move. For the poor farmers’ children, it was difficult to study even a two-year course, and lingering the course length by one year meant that many would have to quit education. Thus, students from all levels joined the movement to press home their demands.

During that time, another movement was building up in favour of democracy. After martial law was promulgated in 1958 and Ayub became the self-appointed president of Pakistan and chief martial law administrator, he came up with his own constitution. A document named “basic principles” was publicised by the government in which the democratic rights of the people of East Pakistan were trampled upon.

During that time, the leaders of Awami League and the Communist Party (then operating in hiding) secretly held a number of meetings to end the suffocating environment prevailing in East Pakistan. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Comrade Moni Singh, Khoka Roy were present there. Tofazzal Hossain Manik Mia, the editor of *Ittefaq*, helped arrange these meetings. The topics of discussion included demand for democracy, release of political prisoners, independence of the judiciary, etc. A decision was taken from these meetings that the national leaders would call upon the Chhatra League and Chhatra Union to wage a movement together to push these demands. In one of the meetings, Bangabandhu told other leaders to take note of the demand for the independence of East Pakistan.

The 1962 education movement was simultaneously a movement for ending discrimination in education as well as for



Mujahidul Islam Selim. PHOTO: SK ENAMUL HAQ

establishing people’s democratic rights, as both issues came to the forefront when students protested the education report of the Sharif Commission.

Three students—Mostafa, Babul and Wajjuallah—were killed when police opened fire at the students’ demonstrations.

How would you compare the education system of the pre-Liberation period with the system that we have now? How far have we progressed in ensuring quality education for all?

Although the movement for a pro-people education policy started in 1962, it continued throughout the years till our independence in 1971. Around 1964, there was another round of student movement to reform the education policy. And after the mass uprising of 1969, the Nur Khan Education Commission was formed and it presented another education report. However, it was just a new version of the last two education commissions’ reports during Ayub Khan’s regime and was outright rejected by the students.

I was a freedom fighter and participated in

the battle to liberate Dhaka. On December 17, I along with my whole battalion entered Dhaka and within 20 days Bangladesh Chhatra Union held a meeting. I was then the general secretary of Chhatra Union’s central committee. In that meeting, we decided that we would make a draft education policy for the newly independent country. Accordingly, we formed our own education commission which published its report within two months. We distributed the report among the public.

When the Qudrat-i-Khuda Education Commission was formed, we from Bangladesh Chhatra Union presented our recommendations to the commission. Many of our recommendations were reflected in the commission’s report.

To get back to your question, let me say that during Ayub Khan’s rule, we used to say that free thinking and equal education for all were not possible in a subjugated country, and that democracy and independence are needed for making education accessible to all. Sadly, after almost 50 years of our independence, we could not yet ensure equality and equal access to education for all.

One of the key features of the Sharif Commission’s report was that it considered education as a commercial product that could be accessed only by those with money. How would you assess the current situation?

Seventy percent of the tax that we give to the government is indirect tax. People irrespective of their income have to give this indirect tax at the same rate. Why do we give this money to the state? We give that because in exchange for that tax, we are entitled to certain services to be provided by the state. It is written in our constitution that it is the responsibility of the state to provide all citizens with food, shelter, treatment and education. We were making some progress in education after independence but now everything has changed.

Now it is being said that a university should generate its own income. The question is, how

will the universities do that? By increasing tuition fees? If a university has to generate its income through increasing the tuition fees, the direct effect of this would be that only the affluent section of society will get the scope for education while those with limited means will be left behind. The economic inequality in society will then directly affect the opportunities to get education.

The direct result of commercialisation of education has been manifested in many of the events of recent times. We have seen how university teachers have resorted to plagiarism in writing their doctoral thesis, or how educational certificates can be bought now with money.

How do you suggest our public universities should be run if they do not generate their own income?

We have always been saying that one-third of our national budget must be allocated for health, education and social welfare. There is no alternative to increasing the budgetary allocation if we want to ensure equality in education. While research should be one of the most important things our universities should be doing, research is almost non-existent in these institutions. The public universities’ budget for research is negligible, and whatever the budget may be, that also mostly remains unutilised. How will our universities generate new knowledge if there is no scope for research?

What should be done to remove inequality in education?

Our vision should be to reestablish the principles of 1971 through a social revolution. There is no shortcut. The Pakistani army and their local collaborators killed our intellectuals prior to our victory to cripple the nation. While a nation can be crippled through killing its greatest souls, it is also possible to cripple it through making its education system distorted, corrupt, communal and commercial.

Beyond the question of choice, motherhood, and burqa

NAFISA TANJEEM

JHARNA Akter overheard journalists talking about how the photo of a burqa-clad mother playing cricket with her son will shake the world. It did indeed. We see hundreds of news reports and op-eds, thousands of social media posts, and perhaps millions of comments on these posts. What seems interesting in the whole discourse is our conservative, secular-liberal, as well as progressive fascination about a piece of cloth and our tendency to focus overwhelmingly on the question of choice and motherhood. Some of the secular-liberal-nationalist critiques we are noticing argue that the photo misrepresents the “true” Bangladeshi/Bengali cultural and nationalist values, mimics religious fundamentalist trends in Afghanistan or Pakistan, and signifies Muslim women’s loss of voice to patriarchal conservative practices. Some are emphasising that participation in sports does not necessarily mean that Muslim women have to give up purdah, and some are seeing this photo as a disrespectful gesture towards the institution of purdah. Some are highlighting the value of motherly love and the importance of women’s choice to wear or not to wear burqa. Feminist scholars have explained how this photo challenges our perceived construction of gendered performances of Bangladeshi Muslim women, how burqa became (or did not become) a part of the Bengali culture, and how religion alone cannot explain this historical transformation (BBC Bangla, September 13, 2020).

I think what the whole discussion would benefit from is to move away from the tendency to singularly focus on the question of women’s choice or motherhood or a piece of cloth, to think holistically, and to examine this photo’s concurrent relationship with various intersecting systems and institutions such as patriarchy, capitalism, religion, media, and so on. The photo is an embodiment of contradictions that do not conform to our commonsensical expectations from Bangladeshi Muslim women. Therefore, we



Eleven-year-old Yamin Ahmed Sinan plays cricket with his mother, Jharna Akter, in the practice nets at Paltan Maidan on September 11, 2020. The photo went on to attract a lot of attention and debate after it was published.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED/THE DAILY STAR

need to go beyond a singular analytical focus on “choice” or “motherhood” or a binary “oppression vs. empowerment” framing, and examine the complex and contradicting roles of Muslim women in our society as symbolised by this photo.

One of the things this photo brings forward is the gendered politics of space—how space shapes gendered performances—and the response of a sexist society towards these performances. In an interview, Jharna Akter mentioned that she often plays cricket and other games with her son, nephews, and nieces in front of her Shewrapara home. The very act she performs on a day-to-day basis in a private/semi-private sphere was read as a spectacular performance when she decided to repeat it in the public space of Paltan Maidan. Even her fourth-grade student son knew

that repeating these day-to-day interactions in a public space would mean something different in a society shaped by sexist norms and practices. Yamin Ahmed Sinan asked his mother to play with him because no one was around in the field at that time. He asked, “You play so nicely with me in our courtyard, but why are you saying you won’t bat now?” Why and how does our society teach a male child that his mother can play with him only when no one is around? What does it mean when a madrasa student questions the spatial divide and gendered norms?

Also, what does it mean when Akter and Sinan started playing with the assumption that no one was watching them only to realise that they got surrounded by a crowd and that journalists were capturing their photos without asking for their consent (BD Syl TV, September

12, 2020)? Akter first requested them not to take pictures, but then she rethought her stance and gave permission because she was wearing a burqa and following the purdah norms (GangChil, September 13, 2020). Wearing a burqa made her comfortable enough to consent to be photographed and to give interviews to journalists from print and electronic media, thereby offering a tremendous amount of exposure and circulation of her story. This complicates the secular-liberal assumption that burqa’s sole role is hiding women and obstructing their mobility.

We noticed a strong call to move away from the burqa debate and focus on the innocence and purity of the mother-son relationship in both liberal and progressive circles, which—I would argue—risks depoliticising the representation of motherhood in this photo. Akter got married after finishing HSC and gave up her dream of being a recognised athlete. Still, she chose to send her elder daughter to an engineering school, thereby challenging conventional norms and career paths for women. She sends her son to a madrasa, which shouldn’t make us automatically presume her complicity to conservative values as we don’t precisely know the historical-political-cultural context of this decision. She dreams of sending her son to BKSP and training him as a cricketer so he can come out of the madrasa life (GangChil, September 13, 2020). She lives in Shewrapara and her son goes to a madrasa in Arambagh in the morning. Then she takes her son to the Kobi Nazrul Cricket Academy for practicing cricket in the afternoon (Bangla Tribune, September 12, 2020). An interpretation of the photo as a pure, innocent depiction of a depoliticised “motherly love” subsumes the way this photo also depicts Akter’s disproportionate amount of unpaid care work for her son and perhaps for other family members. The image is an emblem of Bengali Muslim women’s compliance with as well as subversion of gendered, classed, and religious expectations in creative and complicated ways.

Also, let’s not ignore that it’s the participation of a mother-son duo in the multibillion-dollar masculinist-capitalist-corporatised industry of cricket that makes the photo even more palatable to our nationalist liberal self. The aspiration of a mother and her son to climb up the social ladder by playing cricket and becoming a superstar like Shakib Al Hasan makes us “forgive” her presumed submissiveness to conservative values and celebrate her image as a hallmark of pure motherly love. Akter herself was an athlete in the 1980s and 1990s; she used to compete in shot put, long jump, javelin throw, 200- and 400-meter races, and other track and field events. Her aspiration shifted from being a national-level athlete to be the mother of an internationally recognised cricketer, signifying how the neoliberal globalisation has created a powerful cricket-industrial complex, taking attention, aspirations and resources away from traditional sports that do not generate financial capital. Our geographical and cultural proximity to India—a global cricket superpower which constitutes 90 percent of the one billion cricket fans around the world (*The Economic Times*, June 27, 2018), where the Indian Premier League is a USD 5.3 billion industry (CNBC, August 1, 2018), and where cricket accounts for almost 85 percent of the Indian sports economy (exchange4media.com, May 21, 2020)—along with our historical cricketing connections with other South Asian countries, add a twisted flavour in the photo. Would this photo have gained the same level of attention if Akter was playing badminton or *kanamachhi* with her son?

It’s the dissident feminist act of a conservative-looking mother who defies gendered norms and claims her authority over a public space through her participation in a capitalist dream, which makes this photo unique and subject to incredible public scrutiny.

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ON THIS DAY
IN HISTORY



SEPTEMBER 17, 1978
Camp David Accords concluded

The Camp David Accords, negotiated by US President Jimmy Carter, were completed this day in 1978, leading to a peace treaty between Egypt and Israel and a broader framework for pursuing peace in the Middle East.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Ignored the limit

5 Copied

9 Long look

10 Passover feast

12 Hatch on the Hill

13 Binding need

14 Scanner target

16 Even score

17 Summer on the Seine

18 North Carolina native

20 “Alien” director Scott

22 Throws in

23 Famed fur tycoon

25 Prayer ender

28 Stand against

32 Almost kaput

34 Teachers’ org.

35 Border

36 Toddler’s safety item

38 Keats, for one

40 Ouzo flavor

41 Reason

42 Henry VIII’s house

43 Small amphibian

44 Actor Richard

DOWN

1 Flat gray clouds

2 Just missed a birdie

3 Rocker Clapton

4 Signifies

5 Fall flower

6 Chapel seat

7 Fixed copy

8 Said no to

9 Very serious

11 Staggers

15 Florida race site

19 Plucked instrument

21 Singer k.d.

24 Run

25 Big ‘dos

26 Horse with no wins

27 Royal fur

29 New York tribe

30 Fall, for one

31 Diner patron

33 Duo quadrupled

37 Tight-fitting


39 Compass dir.

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YESTERDAY’S ANSWERS

T	A	G	S	C	R	E	E
A	C	R	I	D	H	E	L
S	C	E	N	E	A	N	V
K	E	G	C	A	S	T	I
S	P	O	K	A	N	E	S
T	R	E	N	D	S	C	O
Y	E	T	M	O	O		
S	C	A	N	R	O	A	S
T	A	B	D	E	S	K	T
E	B	B	T	I	D	E	R
A	L	O	H	A	Y	A	L
M	E	T	E	R	S	A	L
S	T	A	Y		H	O	S

BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER



BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

