

Thrust Sectors

Vision 2020: Education in Bangladesh

by Dr. Mahmudul Alam

A WELL-CONCERTED EFFORT in the realm of educational development of Bangladesh can serve multi-dimensional purposes. Plans and programmes in the education sector of the country leading up to 2020 can serve, as in any other developing country, different economic, social and political objectives of high significance. By the year 2020, we want to see a Bangladesh, which will be more work-oriented, free but disciplined and economically well off (people/families getting complete freedom from income-poverty). If we want to create a more socio-economically viable Bangladesh in a generation's time by investing in the education sector, this is the most propitious time when we mentally inaugurate a century/millennium with a clean slate. The famous Chinese adage by Anquan Chung can be quoted here to justify a generation-based educational plan and vision, which says "... when you sow a seed once/you reap a single harvest, when you teach the people, you will reap a 100 harvest".

Bangladesh as a country/society has opted for a liberal, tolerant (multi-party democratic) and economically viable polity. The cherished goal of our state is to attain a sustainable development through the endeavour as individuals and collective entities without fear, prejudice and social discrimination; absence of any discrimination based on socio-economic categories, religious and ideological beliefs, gender, ethnicity and similar other aspects. This consensus on the nature of Bangladesh State has crystallised over a period of about 100 years, with the creation of East Bengal (during the British rule), East Pakistan (during the Pakistani time) and Bangladesh. But the roots of this emerging consensus of a free and open society go back at least to another millennium. At different points in time in the history of our geographical territory, outsiders from central Asia, Arabia and other parts of the sub-continent had come, settled down and got indigenised.

Economic and social situations circa 2000

In the last quarter of the twentieth century a lot of socio-political and ecological constraints notwithstanding, the people of Bangladesh, especially the common men (e.g., peasants, workers, self-employed small and medium-size entrepreneurs) have proved to be highly resilient and dynamic. Per capita GDP has grown roughly at a rate of 1.5 per cent/annum and stands at around USD 270 (in 1999) and the head-count ratio of people below the absolute (income) poverty line has been slowly declining, the ratio stands at 46 per cent (the 1997-estimate). Modern mechanised irrigation-based agriculture covers around 42 per cent of the gross cropped area; roughly one-third of the GDP is generated in agriculture (both crop and non-crop activities combined). Therefore, a

more diversified economy, with larger shares of service, retail and wholesale trade and construction sectors, has taken shape in the last decades. The manufacturing sector has not performed up to one's satisfaction - its relative share remains stagnant at about 12 per cent of the country's GDP.

To increase the absorptive capacity of the economy a substantial amount of investment has taken place in physical infrastructures especially in roads and bridges; now almost any major growth-centre of the country can be accessed by road. However in the fields of electricity-generation and utilisation of natural gas, Bangladesh lags much behind due to systemic inefficiencies and corrupt practices. In general, political and bureaucratic corruptions bedevil the state-sponsored financial institutions. For the rural disadvantaged households, the country has developed a good number of micro-credit disbursing-institutions mainly NGOs such as BRAC, ASA and Proshika and regular banks e.g., Grameen Bank; and an overwhelming number of

quantitative indicators that the gross enrolment rate (GER) has gone up to 106 per cent (the BIDS estimate for 1998) and the drop-out rate has fallen from 60 per cent in the late 1980s to about 33 per cent in 1999. About 60,000 schools (of which about 33,000 belong to the non-State private/community category) enrol about 18 million children and a near gender-balance has been attained in primary

school enrolment. NGOs mentionably BRAC, Dhaka Ahsania Mission (DAM), CMES (Centre for Mass Education in Science), Proshika, GSS (Gono Shahajja Sangstha) under a liberal state-policy, have implemented innovative non-formal primary education programmes for the disadvantaged socio-economic groups and currently they enrol about two million children and adolescents. The big challenges

cent of the educational institutions in the sub-sector are owned and managed by the non-State private/community-based entities. Over the last two decades, a number of reforms have been implemented e.g., curricula-related (especially in the Science stream from 1997), tuition fee waiver for rural female students. The female stipend programs for the sub-sector started in the mid-1980s

ness/affordability to pay for secondary education) can be converted into school/institution-based expenditure/financing by simultaneously raising the user (tuition) fees and also improving the teaching-learning process. In the tertiary education sub-sector there are about 1000 institutions enrolling roughly 1.41 million pupil or about 10

per cent of the age-group (18 to 22 years) people. An overwhelming 94 per cent of those enrolled belong to the general stream; again there is a preponderance of humanities and social science within the stream. Most of the higher (tertiary)-level pupils are covered under the affiliating National University, the campus based public general and technical universities or the distance-mode BOU (Bangladesh Open University). Alongside, from early 90s about sixteen private universities have been functioning in the country; they charge much higher tuition fees (in the range of Tk. 60,000 to Tk. 90,000 per academic year) but more responsive to the evolving world of work. Major challenges for the sub-sector can be listed as follows:

- How to reduce/eliminate the political involvement of both the teachers and the students belonging to the public Universities? By hard negotiations and patient persuasion one should try to convince different stake-holders that some modifications in the

dard and other management indicators should be encouraged to expand by the State. One can think of extending State-financial support if these universities take more risky and lumpy investment-based projects in scientific and research-oriented faculties e.g., science, engineering and medicine.

Different non-formal education project on adult education and adolescent education under DNFE (Directorate of Non-formal Education), underwritten by bilateral and multilateral grants/soft loans should be more thoroughly evaluated. Literacy drives under TLM (Total Literacy Movement) need to be critically assessed; there is a danger that the good intentions of our patriotic civil servants/district administrations may be misutilised by the populist politicians. In the technical-vocational type education (at the secondary level), more definitive research studies need to be commissioned to know why more private initiatives are not forthcoming in founding such institutions in spite of the declared State-policy favouring private enterprise.

Promising picture leading up to 2020

In 2020 under an optimistic scenario of GDP growth of seven to eight per cent per annum, Bangladesh should transform herself to a Medium-Income level LDC with per capita income of around US\$ 650. The share of manufacturing and service sector will rise further. In the terminal year, if the present declining rate of population-growth continues the total population will stand around 170 million. The quantitative basis created by the expansion of primary educational enrolment in the 1990s, can be consolidated by improving the quality/achievement aspects of it. Simultaneously, more systematic allocation of both public and private resources should raise the quality of secondary education. From now on up to 2020 the secondary education sub-sector should play the most critical role. To take up different semi-skilled jobs in the expanding manufacturing and service sectors (e.g., IT industries, transport) we would need good-quality secondary educated-graduates. Also, the better qualified secondary graduates (educated up to grade XII) should supply the universities with more motivated and better-prepared pupil.

The tertiary education level should become selective only for those who will be meritorious (if some of them will be found poor, should be supported by the State or private scholarships, and/or who could afford it). For the working population, white or blue-collared, some form of (distance mode) continuing education (e.g., through BOU) should be available. That means by 2020, it is not unrealistic to envision a Bangladesh where an interactive relationship between education and work would keep on growing from strength to strength. The author is a senior research fellow, BIDS

The primary education sub-sector performed so well in terms of quantitative indicators that the gross enrolment rate (GER) has gone up to 106 per cent (the BIDS estimate for 1998) and the drop-out rate has fallen from 60 per cent in the late 1980s to about 33 per cent in 1999. About 60,000 schools (of which about 33,000 belong to the non-State private/community category) enrol about 18 million children and a near gender-balance has been attained in primary school enrolment.



A rural primary classroom quietly in progress.



Parents crowding an urban school for admission of their wards

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(public) university acts are necessary. The State-funded tertiary level institutions are highly under-financed. Similar to the secondary sub-sector, on the one hand tuition fees should be gradually raised to a realistic level (as reflected in the market for private universities) and the quality of education has to be raised by furnishing better physical facilities, library, instructional materials and higher financial compensation for the teacher. Private universities which have created goodwill in terms of educational stan-

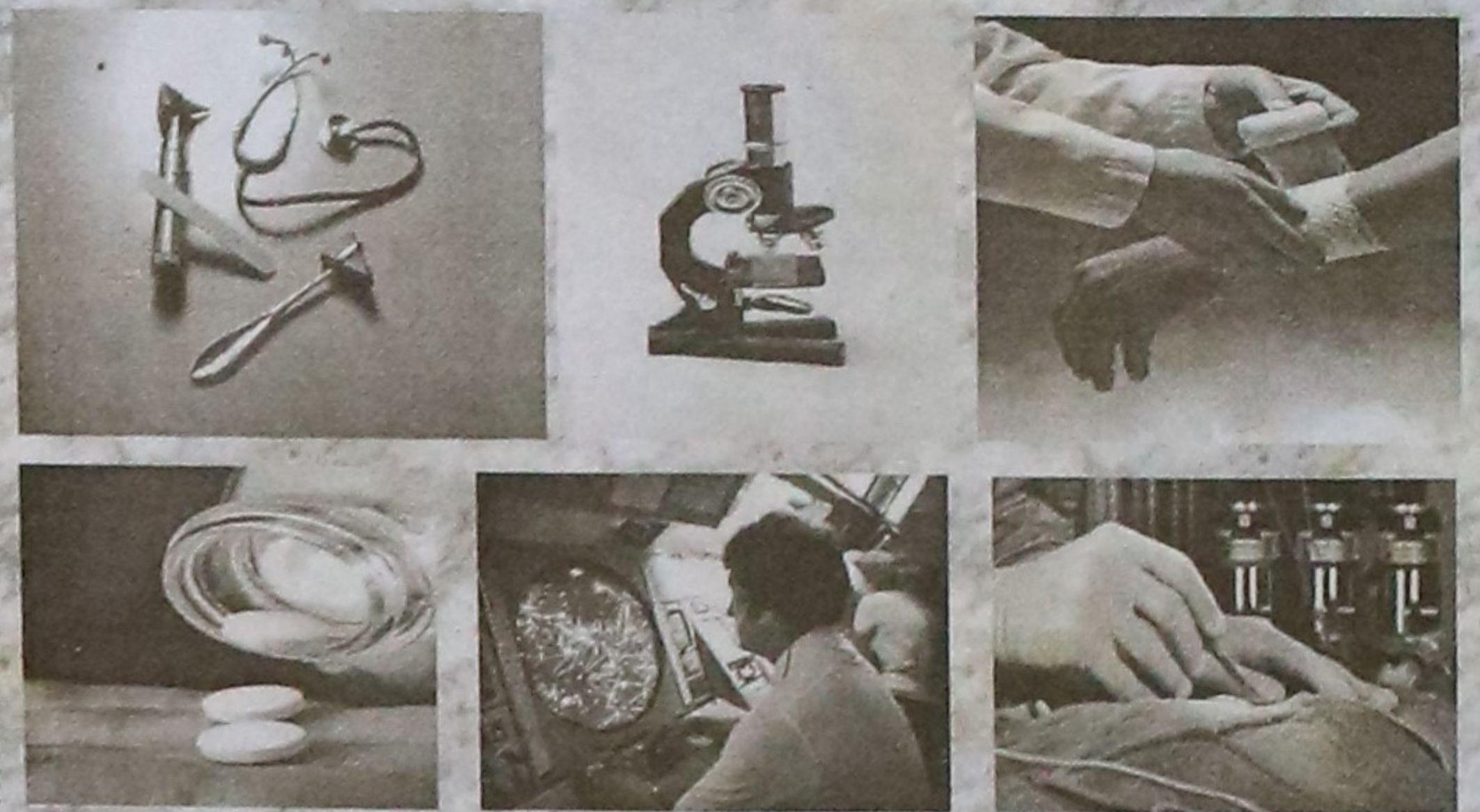
Investment Scheme for Doctors

Islami Bank Bangladesh Limited has introduced "Investment Scheme for Doctors" to help unemployed qualified doctors to go for self-employment and to provide latest medical equipment to specialist doctors for modern medicare facilities throughout the country.

Under this Scheme investment facilities are provided in District & Thana towns for establishment of chambers, clinics, pharmacies and procurement of medical equipment, even motorcycle.

Assists newly passed unemployed medical graduates to establish clinics by way of formation of groups by 5 doctors.

Experienced and established physicians may procure latest and modern medical equipment and thus to improve the standard and techniques of medical services and Specialists and Consultant physicians may procure specialised medical equipment for extending improved treatment to the people.



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in the sub-sector are as follows:

- How to enrol the children/adolescents from the poorest households (e.g., day-labourers, blacksmiths etc.) in both rural and urban areas, who have been by-passed.
- How to make the teaching-learning process (i.e., the pedagogical process) more effective. At the moment, pupils do not learn much up to grade II; their learning curve suddenly picks up after grade III. The low marginal learning rates in the earlier grades are due to highly inadequate contact hours (around 560-600 hours/year), rampant teacher's absenteeism and lackadaisical teacher-administration/management by the centralised Directorate of Primary Education (DPE).
- How to involve the community e.g., SMC (School Management Committee), PTA (Parent Teachers Association) and in future the local government bodies e.g., Upazilla and Zilla Parishads in managing and financing the primary education sub-sector. Some sort of user-fee should be charged gradually from those (e.g., middle and rich farmers in the rural areas) who can afford it and the country should reduce/eliminate the dependence on donors both multilateral and bilateral.

In the secondary education sub-sector (grades VI to XII), there are about 20,000 institutions (15,000 in the mainstream general category, 153 in the technical-vocational type and above 5800 in the Islamic stream) which enrol around 8.5 million pupils; an overwhelming 78 per cent is covered by the mainstream institutions and another 21 per cent is represented by the Islamic stream. Roughly 49 per cent of the age-group population are served by the secondary educational institutions. More than 97 per

and now covering all the rural thanas have produced salutary short-term outcomes e.g., high enrolment and retention rates, better results in the public exams and longer-run effects e.g., raising female-age at marriage, lowering fertility rates, increased socio-political and economic consciousness/participation of the women. The challenges faced by the sub-sector can be enumerated as below:

- The quality of secondary education has to be improved significantly. Both the faulty teaching-learning process practiced in general and the corruptions (e.g., widespread copying, prior disclosure of exams-questions by the officials) centering around the public exams (i.e., SSC and HSC) reflect the quality aspects of secondary education. More educated (say people with Master degrees in Science than B.A/B.Com etc.) better trained (with B. Ed/M. Ed degree) and motivated teachers should be recruited on the one hand and salary/financial compensation should be raised by 100 to 150 percent for these more qualified (potential) teachers on the other. In no way the intended curricula on Maths and Science at the school level can be implemented by the existing less qualified teachers.
- The sub-sector is highly under-financed. In terms of both current budget-items e.g., teachers/staff salary, consumables or development budget items e.g., Science Lab. related, instructional materials, and so on the non-State secondary educational institutions receive one of the lowest per pupil allocation (around US\$ 15 to 19) in the world. Inefficient private (family-based) cost incurred mainly in terms of private coaching (which is a reflection of private willing-

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