



Education for economic emancipation of Bangladesh

OMAR HAIDER CHOWDHURY

BANGLADESH is celebrating the 31st anniversary of her Victory Day this year. However, the initial euphoria after independence over the years has been replaced with frustration due to lack of expected progress towards economic emancipation. We have gradually come to realize that the struggle for economic progress is going to be no less, if not more, arduous than the struggle for political independence which took us around a quarter of a century to achieve. The task at hand is truly gigantic. Bangladesh, with a per capita income of USD 363 in 1999/2000 and a population of 123.1 million in 2001, is one of the largest and poorest countries of the world. The poor account for about half of this huge population. Eradication of poverty in all its manifestations, therefore, is the supreme task of all the people, the governments, and the policy planners. Indeed, the eradication of poverty has remained one of the primary objectives of all development efforts according to all official documents of the country since its independence.

Poverty, despite the continuous growth in average incomes and consumption in the world during the last several decades, have led to a search for strategies with the sole purpose of eradicating poverty within the shortest possible time. A broad global consensus on goals for poverty alleviation and social development has emerged in the successive major UN-sponsored conferences of the 1990s. The most notable among these are the 1990 World

Summit for Children held in New York, the 1992 conference on Environment and Development in Rio, the 1995 World Summit on Social Development in Copenhagen, the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) and lastly the World Summit on Sustainable Development held this year in Johannesburg. As a result, there are now a set of commonly agreed goals, often called the Millennium Development Goals (MDG), which include (a) reducing poverty by one-half the proportion of people in extreme poverty by 2015, (b) achieving universal primary education by 2015, (c) eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary schools by 2005 etc. These goals have also been endorsed and adopted in the strategies of multilateral and bilateral donors. According to a report the World Bank has promised to provide Bangladesh USD 150-200 million this fiscal if the poverty reduction strategy paper (PRSP) for the country is completed in time. Hence, it appears that the pre-condition even for providing resources for financing anti-poverty programmes is to have a credible poverty alleviation strategy in place. It should, however, be pointed out that having adequate resources is only a necessary condition but by no means sufficient, to actually reduce the incidence of poverty appreciably within a reasonably short period of time.

Rising productivity, the amount that each worker produces, has been the force behind economic growth and rising per capita income throughout history. Only an expanding economy may translate into better jobs, higher wages and a

Our struggle for political liberation took place at the national level but the fight for economic emancipation will take place at a global level in the increasingly competitive global market. We will be a formidable player to achieve our goal if within the next 30 years we can turn our huge unskilled labour power into a highly skilled work force by imparting quality education that would be relevant to compete for the job market at the international level by producing high tech commodities at competitive prices that can match international standards. Accordingly, investment in the education sector as a whole will have to rise substantially during this period.

higher standard of living for all. What enables people to become more productive? People need healthy minds and healthy bodies, knowledge and skills, among other things, to become more productive. The poor in Bangladesh generally own little productive asset. They are also easy prey to hunger, malnutrition and diseases and die younger than others. They thus have a shorter life span, which is also less productive than that of others due to lack of education, skill and health. One of the major routes for poverty eradication is therefore imparting education, knowledge and skills to the poor.

A cross country comparison among seven least to most developed countries of the world indicates that as the economy moves higher the contribution of industrial sector increases so also the deployment of industrial workforce increases proportionately. Agriculture workforce productivity among seven least to most developed countries of the world shows that the per capita contribution of Bangladesh agriculture is the lowest. There might be a number of reasons for the low level productivity or performance competence of the work force. Poor quality of education and

training for the job they were occupying would probably be one of the major reasons.

Studies on employment pattern of employed work force consistently show that as the economy moves higher the need for mid-level technicians increases. This finding indicates the type and level of human resources a country needs for accelerated economic and social development. The information communication technology (ICT) is a fast growing new technological area which is almost entirely knowledge based. The challenge of the 21st century for Bangladesh is to bring about structural change in the economy from primarily producing labour intensive low-tech commodities and services into labour intensive high-tech sophisticated goods and services in newly emerging sectors requiring highly skilled work force. Such a significant change in the composition of national output is possible only if appropriate type of quality education at various levels of education can be imparted to the relevant age groups of people so that they are equipped with the necessary skills to produce the sophisticated goods and services for increasingly globalized market at competitive prices at the interna-

tional level.

Logically, the secondary and post-secondary institutions are required to cater the needs of education of technicians that is the mid-level and skilled workers. Various studies indicate that there is a close relationship between the demographic features of a country, the stage of economic development and the appropriate type and level of education to be emphasized for bringing about the desired economic development and social change in a country during a particular period of time. The East Asian countries rapidly increased investment in human resource development when they were experiencing demographic transition from high dependency ratio (combined old and young population as a share of total population), i.e., societal dependency ratio to low dependency ratio in order to reap the benefit of highly skilled workforce when its size reached the peak. Indeed, South Korea increased secondary enrollment from 34 per cent to 84 per cent between 1970 and 1990 while tripling the expenditure per secondary pupil. Improvement in the quality of human resources in the East Asian countries played an important role in bringing about

spectacular success in economic development and reduction in poverty.

According to an estimate social dependency ratio in Bangladesh will decline from a high of 1.07 in 1980 to its lowest ratio of 0.49 in 2030. Hence, taking lesson from the experiences of the East Asian countries would suggest that Bangladesh should also increase its expenditure on education on per student basis during this period to improve the access and quality of education to its citizens. However, interrelationship between different levels of education indicate that ensuring universal access to quality basic education is a pre-condition for improving the quality of the overall education system of a country, more so for Bangladesh, because the performance of primary education sector is dismal in Bangladesh.

Review of the education system of Bangladesh show that it experienced impressive quantitative expansion in the primary and secondary education sub-sectors. Immediately after winning the war of liberation peoples expectations from the government were very high. They expected the government to take the responsibilities of providing all the services that have public good characteristics such as health, education etc. The government at that time responded by nationalizing the primary education system in 1973. It continued its nationalization policy on an adhoc and selective manner in the secondary education system as well without any definite guidelines for such nationalization. Moreover, the number of schools, teachers and students in primary and secondary levels both in the public and private sector increased in response to demand and supply side incentives provided by subventions policies for teachers and students as well as donor pressures for private sector initiatives. Unplanned nationalization and other subventions policies resulted in accommodating the increasing population of various age groups in relevant education levels without taking into account the interactive relations amongst the different levels of education on the outcomes from these rising expenditures.

Low participation at the tertiary level and low completion rate at the primary and secondary level indicate a high level of wastage of resources in the overall education system of Bangladesh. The pass rate in the combined results of all the public examinations held in 2000 was about 41.6 per cent (SSC 41.1 per cent, HSC 39.6 per cent and at tertiary level 46 per cent) indicating a colossal system loss of around 58 per cent in the education sector of Bangladesh. Add to this the perfor-

mance of primary education. It is reported that 35 per cent of the enrolled students at primary level do not complete the full cycle and less than 2 per cent of the completers of primary education pass the relevant competency test. Thus a more realistic estimate of system loss in the education sector will be much higher because the weight of students at primary level is much larger than at any other level and failure to complete the full cycle and pass the competency test of education is also quite high. It needs to be realized that education is both a process and a system. The entrants of one stage is fed into the next and education get involved as providers of knowledge for the earlier stages. Hence, it is obvious that the frustration noted above vitiates the whole education system and mainly contributes to the colossal system loss in the education sector as a whole. Hence, top priority should be attached to improve the quality of basic education and make it accessible to all in Bangladesh so that the quality of education as a whole can improve from the prevailing dismal situation.

Careful review of the education system of Bangladesh reveals that the context of education has changed profoundly in recent years but the content of education in Bangladesh have failed to take ready cognizance of this because our educational system is rigid and compartmentalized. Indeed analysis of the syllabus contents of the general secondary, higher secondary and madrasah dakhil and aleem courses show very clearly that these programs are neither intended nor designed in any way to produce graduates with employable skills. Rather force them to seek admission to next higher stage of education where in most cases there is no provision for admission and to produce graduates with unemployable skills. The education system has overtime become less and less relevant and it makes no effort with the limited resources to strive for the contextual excellence either. We argue that the strategy to achieve economic emancipation by removing poverty and attaining a respectable rate of economic development would be first to achieve universal primary education by 2010. In the next stage by 2030 we expect to experience a demographic transition from a high dependency ratio (combined old and young as a share of total population) to low dependency ratio of 0.49 by 2030. That is when the size of the total labour force will reach its peak in relation to total population and during the interim period the completers of primary education will be well qualified and prepared to enter secondary and tertiary levels of education. The challenge to the society thus is to provide them with the type, quality and level of education that will equip them with the level of skill matching those of the other developing and/or developed countries so that they can compete with them in the international market on the same footing. If that can be achieved then our huge labour force who are currently poor and illiterate can turn into our greatest asset in our fight for economic emancipation.

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as well as in-service training, maintenance, which contribute towards improving the quality of education. In the tertiary sector universities spend 72 per cent of their revenue budget for pay and allowances of teachers and staff. They could spend only 11 per cent in education related expenses, of that less than 2 per cent is allocated for research. In short, less than 5 per cent of revenue expenditure in primary and secondary sub-sectors and less than two per cent in the tertiary sector is spent for improvement of quality of education. Thus total resource available for the sector is low and its allocation between sub-sectors do not conform with the priorities set by the government. High share of recurrent expenditure indicate inefficient resource use. Further, expenditure pattern at the institutional level reveal that it is not conducive to improving the quality of education.

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A General of history and general history

We can only accept official history and that too for political reasons

AFSAN CHOWDHURY

IN 1978, when I had just joined the 1971 History project steered by Hasan Hafizur Rahman, I was told by a decorated war hero from the air force sector that we should not always tell the facts.

"People may not be able to handle all the facts. And that will destroy the very purpose of history. The role of history is to establish a standard for all to follow. Their eyes should be lifted by pride in what they hear. If their heads fall down reading your history, the nation will suffer."

What he was looking for was what he thought a nation-building tool and for that he felt truth should be hidden. It's for that same political purpose that many resort to lies. That is why perhaps our history has generated so many controversies. It's not that we care about facts but what we think to be history, a propaganda tool.

History writing has been reduced to the banal level of a political speech. This splendid gentleman who said the words with honesty, sincerity and a desire to build a nation makes a living in the air. But most of those who tread the ground to get their shillings also believe that history's main objective is to produce tools of nation-state construction. It's as much a problem of history as it's of the political construct within which that concept is being developed.

This gentleman who belonged to the Awami League camp was perhaps not worried that under Ziaur Rahman, a new history was going to get written. He was worried that embarrassing facts would be stated.

He was right of course. Are we ready to face our history? Last month in Delhi almost no one in Delhi could tell me where Gen. Aurora - who had accepted the surrender of Pakistani General Niazi on December 16 - lived. I tried a number of sources including the BBC Office but nobody needed him for a quote I realized. I got at least three different addresses which told me all the army PR office had a telephone which was permanently engaged. Finally out of desperation I called my friend Wasih at the Bangladesh Embassy. He abused me for five minutes and then asked someone and in another five minutes I had the address.

"You were barking up the wrong tree." I agreed. It was in Friends Colony, a plush part of Delhi. "Found your General." My friend Mitu Varma from whose office I was running up phone bills asked. "I have an address. I hope it's the right one." "Well, better tell your driver properly. You have a reputation of getting lost while going from the sitting room to the toilet."

There used to be a time when we would be told that history could be written only on the basis of documents. This arose out of the need to be sure of the facts and contents of the source material on which this is based. When I applied to do my M.Phil. in Dhaka University I had a tough time convincing the teachers that this was history and not Political Science. History stopped somewhere when the British left according to them. After that everything was politics. It's an interesting concept based more on notions of what history is than what

history was. It was also an effective way of ensuring that history was limited to the activities of those who could write, the obvious ruling class. The citizens don't have histories because they can't write. Their illiteracy meant they could not be part of history. We could be sure only of what the leaders and the kings and the bureaucrats said and so history writing was only about them. It was as much politics as it was history. In the end I was given the permission to do my degree after arguing a lot and I suppose making a long face of disappointment.

Friend's Colony had an East and a West. As we went around and saw the confident upper class housing of Delhi which automatically makes one reflect on how upstart Gulshan and Banani looks by comparison, we couldn't locate the house. My assistant/fixer Matthew was marvelous. With a wife working for a gora news agency, he was comfortable and after a few hard years had been living in a Sadar Jung Enclave flat.

"You don't come here much?" He thought I was challenging his personal ability to locate anyone or any place. "This is the wealthy part of Delhi. Visiting BBC correspondents visit politicians mostly." "So politicians aren't rich in India?" "No, but they don't stay in Friend's colony." We both laughed as we went around in the late afternoon looking for the General.

When we were working for the History project in 1978-84, we were full of love for the land and all that but we also had managed to gather a large collection of documents which allowed many glimpses into pasts we didn't know existed. Much of these came from secret files and it was obvious rather soon that what we often knew to be facts were not always so. This would apply to all kinds of situations.

I had then passed my M.Phil exams rather well and had been given a transfer to my Ph.D. waiving my M.Phil. I was very happy and looked forward to my degree.

It was around this time that for some reason I was at the Press Club, a place I rarely visit. I met N.M. Harun of Holiday. Harun bhai chatted with me and said at some point, "History of this region can't be written because it's full of conspiracies."

I was very crestfallen. So what were we going to achieve then? That meeting has influenced me and my world of learning profoundly. It has at least helped me get off the steed of a colonial approach towards historiography and enter into my own search. Not research perhaps but certainly search for history elsewhere. I was honest enough not to pursue a degree in a process I no longer believed in.

It was in Friends East that the address was. It was a four-storied building and a lot of security guards at the gate. I gave my identity, showed my cards and so on. Matthew's presence and the car with the right stickers helped me inside. I walked to the third floor flat.

I had called him earlier to the number Wasih gave me. I had given the usual journalists spiel but he had agreed to talk without much ado. "You can come anytime after five. I am a retired person. I

don't go anywhere." The door opened to the elegant sitting room where the General sat in a corner sofa. He had a walking stick in his hand. On the wall was a huge blown up photograph of the most famous moment of the General's life.

That man inside was welcoming me. You could say that this was my small moment of personal history.

The knowledge that the politician and the bureaucrat or the military leaders don't always tell the truth is now an established fact of life but if one looks at our own history, we search for the voice of the leaders or the people whose words get written to construct our history. The unwritten deeds don't exist it seems. The act of heroism unless "mentioned in the dispatches" become invisible. It has to be recorded to exist and our almost child like faith in the written word points to the faith in the official. You are official therefore you exist. Otherwise you do not.

The majority of the people who formed the platform on which the war of 1971 was fought consisted of people who weren't official. Hence they don't exist. But if one sees the concern of people who are concerned about history, one sees only a bid to look for 'documents'. Only documents make history, only the sanctity of the written word allows events to pass into the corridors of history.

He was frail and calculated that he had reached the mid-eighties. His skin was almost transparent and he looked distant from the mighty General at Ramna in December 1971. Yet so enormously dignified.

"What is most difficult when you have retired is that you don't have too much time and not enough to do." He had been a member of the Rajya Sabha and Akali Dal but had become disillusioned with politics.

After the interview was over he got up with difficulty and leaned heavily on his stick as he saw me off at the door. I protested.

"No, no, I should walk. First one knee goes and then another also gets affected. I need to walk to keep them mobile. We said good-bye and shook hands.

I don't know if the grip was as firm as it was in 1971. I had not shaken his hands before. I am glad I met him only in his winter years.

As I waited for my transport to arrive, the General's man came down and chatted to me. He was the major domo of the house. The General is not the same since his wife died. Almost a decade back. His children have all gone to live in the States. And only one daughter stays with him. He is not well."

Upstairs the general waited in his room for his unwell daughter to return from the hospital as I waited for Matthew to return and pick me up as the street lights came on one after another.

There are so many histories and we have only learnt to look for a single strand and claim that it's the only one, one cloistered in documents about people who rule and order others around.

Bangladesh economy: Some suggested public policy measures

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Financial intermediation for private sector development: Resolution of the weaknesses of financial intermediation will have to be targeted for the enhancement of private investment in general and manufacturing investment in particular. The persistent loan default situation has resulted in high cost of borrowing and has inhibited private investment. Debt recovery with strict enforcement of law, insulation of the banking system from political influence, greater monitoring by the central bank, and reform of the public sector financial institutions will have to be overriding agenda for private sector development in the coming days. Innovative financial institutions outside of the traditional banking system will be required to cater to the needs of venture capital, and collateral free finance targeted towards small and medium enterprises.

High priority for energy and infrastructure development: The opening up of the energy and infrastructure sector for private investment - both private and foreign - has facilitated inflow of considerable foreign investment into these sectors. Further progress in these areas will require restructuring and reform of the relevant parastatal

bodies such as Power Development Board, Dhaka Electric Supply Authority, Bangladesh Telegraph and Telephone Board, Chittagong Port Authority, BIMAN etc to provide more room and efficient support to the private sector, and creating complementary infrastructure facilities such as generation, transmission and distribution of power, optic fiber gateway for telecommunications and information technology. A critical area of action in the next decade will have to be the improvement in the physical facilities and management of the country's ports, to facilitate the growth of trade and industry. A master plan should be designed for transforming Bangladeshi ports into regional hubs. Concrete steps need to be taken towards this by developing inland container freight stations at strategic industrial and commercial locations to enable multi-modal handling of containers. Meanwhile, private investment in competitive services should be encouraged vigorously. In this respect the decision to allow establishment of private EPZ should be implemented expeditiously.

Attracting FDI for accelerating development: Bangladesh has one of the most liberal investment regime in the region, but lagged way behind other developing countries in Asia in attracting FDI. There is urgent need for projecting a positive image of the country to prospective foreign investors highlighting measures undertaken for strengthening the legal framework, lowering transaction costs and improving investment climate.

Seeking global integration through enhanced competitiveness: Removing procedural and institutional bottlenecks that increase transaction costs, improving standards and quality control, and raising productivity and efficiency at plant level through improved working conditions, skill upgradation, adoption of improved technology and better terms of employment will have to important basis for augmenting competitiveness. Effective and informed participation in multilateral negotiations on trade including issues of better market access, finance, technology transfer etc will have to be sought through human and institutional capacity building.

Proper pacing of trade policy reform: Rapid trade liberalization carried out by Bangladesh does not seem to have contributed to broad-based growth of export industries. The impact on domestic market oriented industries seems to have been mixed. An important shortcoming of Bangladesh's approach to

trade liberalization has been the failure to announce in advance the timetable of planned changes in the trade policy. The other major limitation of the past trade liberalization measure in Bangladesh is that it has not been accompanied by complementary reforms in other areas to facilitate adequate supply response to the liberalization measures. Future trade liberalization measures, therefore, should correct for these two limitations. Planned changes in trade policy should be announced well in advance, and adequate steps should be taken to relax various supply-side bottlenecks. Past trade liberalization measures also failed to curtail illegal imports from India, which displace many domestic products. Until trade infrastructures are improved and transmission of remittance through hundi channel is drastically controlled, trade liberalization alone is unlikely to reduce the spate of illegal border trade.

Competitive exchange rate policy: Bangladesh has been following a "managed but flexible" exchange rate policy aimed at keeping the real effective exchange rate unchanged or depreciate it marginally. While this has been generally supportive of export growth policy, faster devaluation of the currencies of export competing countries has

eroded the competitiveness of some of her exports and contributed to increased inflow of illegal imports. Restoring and retaining the balance in bilateral exchange rate with export competing countries will, therefore, have to be an important element of Bangladesh's exchange rate policy.

Promoting effective governance: Last but not the least, effective and good governance remains the overarching issue in any stride towards accelerated development. The pre-condition for this will be ensuring a fair and stable institutional, legal and regulatory framework for the public sector, private sector, and civil society while maintaining independence of executive, legislative and judiciary. Setting up of National Human Rights Commission, the Office of the Ombudsman, and strengthening the role of the Parliament and the Parliamentary Committees will constitute important steps towards that direction. Decentralization through transfer or devolution of authority and financial resources will be necessary for securing effective local governance. For promoting the voice and the participation of the civil society, the role of mass media will have to be enhanced at the same time.

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