

Needed: A revolution in technical education

However, there is no scope for complacency yet. If the industrial revolution dreamt above is to be materialised, there is no alternative to establishing more such institutions and admitting dropouts into those on a large scale. Once we can motivate our school dropouts to do this, and we have enough facilities for them, the nation can prosper. None can stop our progress. Then we can export skilled or at least semi-skilled manpower abroad; we need not send abroad a single person unskilled to be detained in the jungles of East Asia or in the deserts of the Middle East!

ABDUS SATTAR MOLLA

THERE is no doubt that proper education makes people wiser and more tolerant of diverse views. There are three subsystems of education in Bangladesh at the secondary and higher secondary stages. These are the general education subsystem, the vocational education subsystem and the madrasa education subsystem. The first and second subsystems are for all religious groups, but the third one is exclusively for the Muslims.

Some developed countries have integrated academic and vocational subjects up to pre-university level. But a such system requires schools that have industrial attachments and workshops of their own to impart technical and vocational education along with basic disciplines.

In Bangladesh, the general education subsystem is basically preparatory to higher education. The students are required to form a sound basis in this stage for their higher studies in future. Usually, the best students can take the opportunity of higher education, and they form the cream of those who can lead the nation through their professional and administrative capacities.

We cannot burden them with the vocational courses that would be less necessary for them. Besides, we don't have the resources to make every school capable of providing technical education.

Separate technical stream is the way

Some students dropout from the general education subsystem, and I dealt with this problem in an article published on November 19, 2007. There, I mentioned one of three main ways of addressing the problem of drawing the dropouts back into schools. The dropouts have almost unknowingly terminated their education in the general stream. They can, in no way, be absorbed in the employment market. So where does the solution lie? How can we use them effectively and in what activities? To be worthy citizens, surely, they must have some vocational, technical or professional training.

The students who cannot cope with general education for lack of merit or financial assistance, and dropout from the general stream, certainly have abilities and can learn some vocational skills in the technical and vocational institutes to make themselves capable earners of a livelihood.

Some students may also freely choose technical/vocational education just by qualifying for admission.

There is no logic for preparing a curriculum having vocational subjects in the general stream. If we try that, a separate vocational education subsystem becomes redundant. That is why devising a separate technical-vocational subsystem is the way out.

Most professional training in Bangladesh is meant for graduates and HSC, or at least SSC, certificate holders. Our polytechnic institutes want candidates to be educated at least up to Grade 8. Many of the youth force might not have this qualification. So, for the majority of dropouts, we need some more vocational training centers that can train people who have not studied up to the 6th grade.

In some Asian countries, technical education begins just after completion of primary Grade 6. So why cannot we do that? Many of the dropouts are engaged in technical jobs, like preparation of garments, carpentry, construction, nursery, poultry farming and pisciculture, with meager training, or even just with courage and enthusiasm. If we can arrange vocational training for them, we can bring about an industrial

revolution in the country and can also export skilled manpower! What institutional facilities do we have to train them?

Facilities for technical-vocational education

In the public sector of Bangladesh, there were only 20 polytechnic institutes for a long time! But thanks to the last government, 17 more polytechnic institutes were established by 2005. Besides, 23 more polytechnics have been built, but are yet to start operation.

Furthermore, there was also a flourishing trend in establishing private sector polytechnics (numbering 97). The number of government polytechnics established and being established, totaling 60, is encouraging. Now, it is time to see where these are located. I would like to suggest ensuring at least one polytechnic in each district.

However, of the total 37 functioning polytechnic institutes, only one is exclusively for girls. We have only one institute for glass and ceramics, one for graphic arts, and two for survey. We have 12 agricultural training institutes in the public sector and 47 in the private. Still, a huge proportion of our seasonal fruits and vegetables rot every year, and we don't train people in preserving those.

We have 64 public sector technical schools and colleges (TSCs), which were called vocational training institutes before. Besides, we have only six government textile institutes, 28 specialised public sector textile vocational centers, and 13 technical training centers. There are 38 nursing training institutes, but they are under the professional training institute category and SSC certificate is required

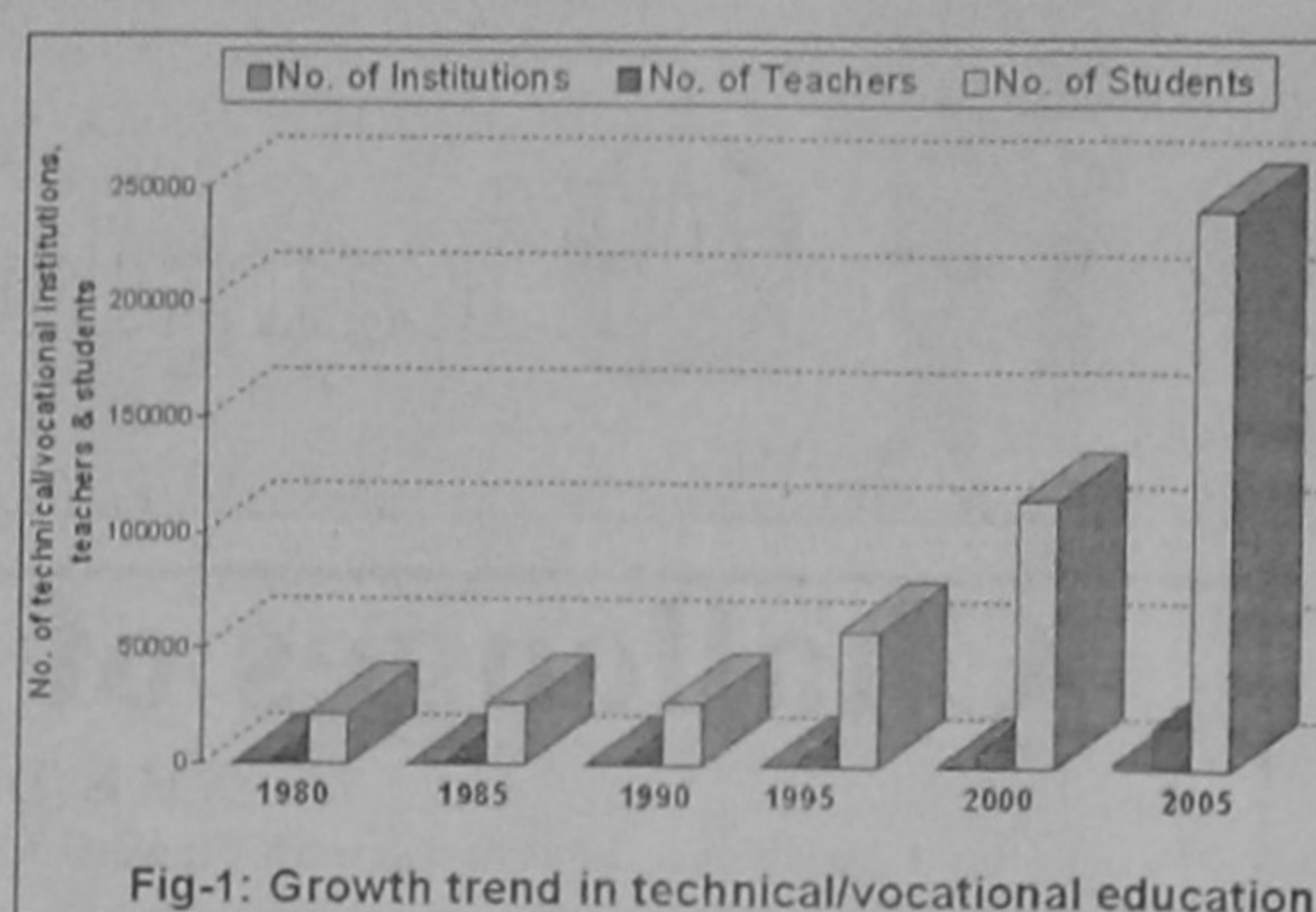


Fig-1: Growth trend in technical/vocational education

to enter into these institutions. We have a number of private textile institutes, but very few of the garment workers are trained there. They are trained while doing the job!

It is imperative that more TSCs patronised by the government under a national plan be established. Every Upazila should logically have at least one such TSC (i.e., the number should increase from 64 to over 400) that can train the school dropouts in some local trades and techniques, including processing of vegetables and fruits.

These colleges can have a variety of vocational courses, mostly of 1-2 year duration. I would suggest establishing a vocational school at the union level, which is the nearest local government structure for the general people. Here, some courses may even be of only six months duration!

There is worrisome information. We have only one technical teachers' training college (having only 15 trainers), and also a single vocational teachers' training insti-

tute (that has surprisingly only 6 trainers). Obviously, technical and vocational teachers need training to impart effective training to the students. Thus, more institutes for training the teachers need to be established so that they can cope with the increasing trend of establishing polytechnics and TSCs. Such training centers for trainers may be located in the divisional headquarters; everything need not be in Dhaka!

Encouraging vocational education

The polytechnic institutes don't have enough seats to admit all the students who try for admission. About 18,000 students study in the 37 polytechnic institutes, but the existing TSCs don't get adequate number of students. Only slightly over 8,000 undergo training in 64 such public institutions. The general people, including the school dropouts, don't recognise these as worthy educational institutions. Why they neglect these vocational institutes is a very big question.

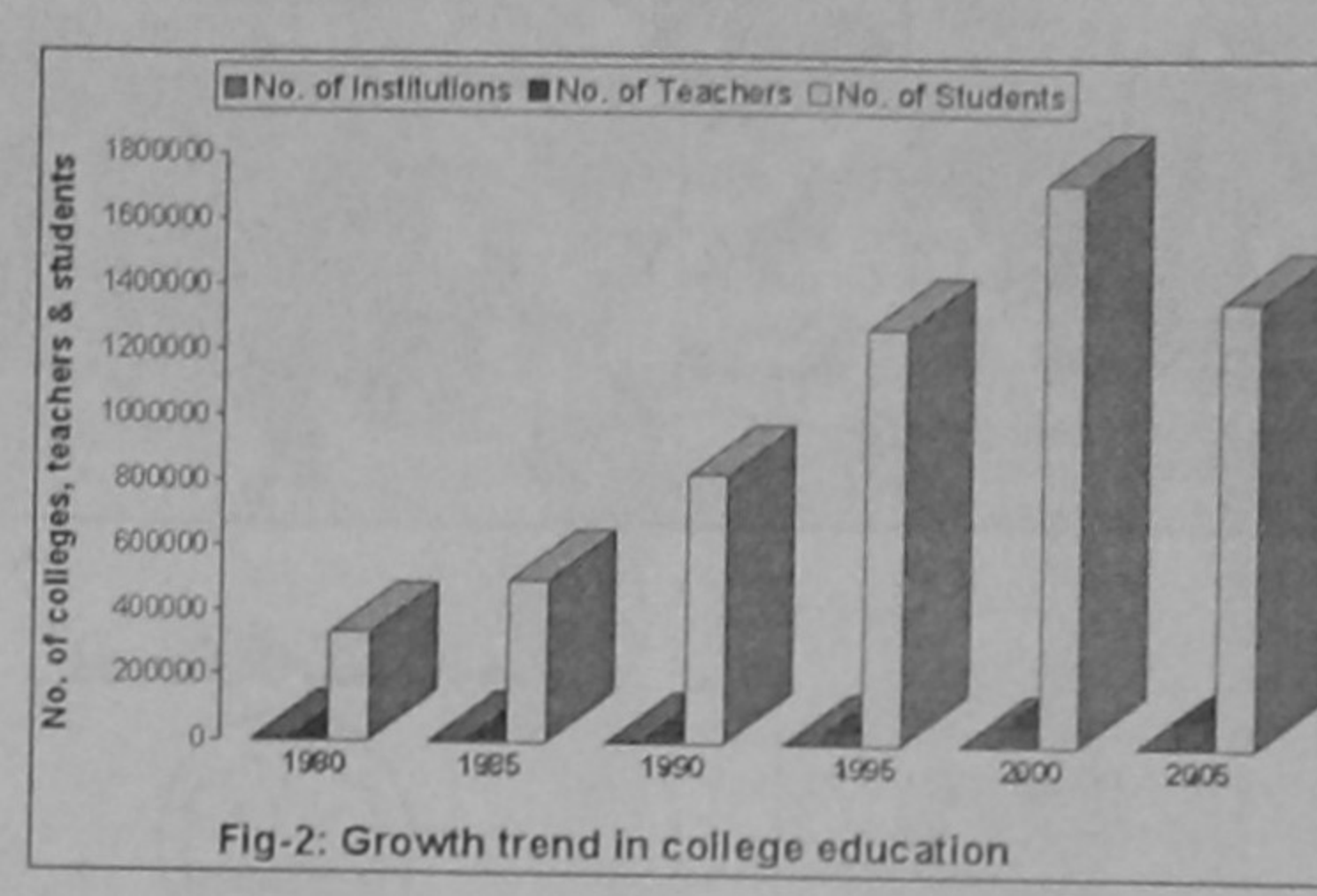


Fig-2: Growth trend in college education

Maybe because general schools are everywhere and the people easily recognise those. Since the TSCs are still small in number, the guardians don't recognise them, and the less meritorious students also aspire to have admission in general schools for higher education. They don't care for entering a technical/vocational institute!

Nevertheless, when they are no more in the general school system, they have to be encouraged to learn some skills so that they can earn a livelihood at home or abroad. If we have more such institutions (at the union level, as I suggest) in the vicinity of schools that failed to keep them in, then they will realise that these technical schools are for them, and are giving technical-vocational training can really help them to be worthy citizens.

An amazing trend

The number of students in government polytechnics and TSCs is still not encouraging, but the total number in the technical stream (including the private institutions) is amazing! The total number just

doubled in 2005 (241336; see Fig-1) from 2000 (115655), while the number of students in colleges decreased sharply in 2005 (1.3 million) from the 2000 (1.7 m) mark (see Fig-2 in colleges that are equivalent to polytechnics). So, our education is transforming into a people-oriented technical one from the long-standing rather aristocratic general one.

However, there is no scope for complacency yet. If the industrial revolution dreamt above is to be materialised, there is no alternative to establishing more such institutions and admitting dropouts into those on a large scale. Once we can motivate our school dropouts to do this, and we have enough facilities for them, the nation can prosper. None can stop our progress. Then we can export skilled or at least semi-skilled manpower abroad; we need not send abroad a single person unskilled to be detained in the jungles of East Asia or in the deserts of the Middle East!

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Gender bias in national identity (ID) card

It may be important to have the statistics of marital status of the population, but partner's name is not at all important enough to be mentioned in the ID card (the ID card of a married man doesn't show his wife's name). Taking all these into consideration, father's name instead of husband's name should be mentioned in the national ID card and in the voter list, mother's name need to be incorporated as well. Moreover, the government of Bangladesh needs to give more emphasis on biological identification than on the social one in national ID card, as part of voter registration process.

SHAMIMA NASREEN

BANGLADESH is going to have gender biased national identity (ID) cards. The Election Commission started voter registration across the country in November as part of its full-scale preparation of the voters' roll and national identity card.

The format of national ID card of Bangladesh shows inclusion of the name of her husband for a married woman, instead of her father's. A married man can use his father's name but a

height, eyes etc.). The format of the national ID card of Bangladesh shows that social identification is more important than biological identification.

People who are ineligible now as voters will have to wait for an indefinite time to get the national ID card, as the responsibility of preparing national ID cards for them does not lie with the Election Commission. In this regard, if a separated woman delays registering she may have to wait for a long time to get her national ID, but if she

shows his father's name.

In marriage contracts in Bangladesh, Pakistan, India and Sri Lanka, obedience is not codified; the law does not state that the husband is head of the household. In these countries, the laws do not codify any requirement that the wife has to take husband's name or have his permission for work or travel (Knowing Our Rights: Women, Family, Laws and Customs in the Muslim, By International Solidarity Network Staff, Zubaan, 2003, p. 161).

Likewise, Bangladesh national ID card shows the name of the husband for a married woman, instead of her father's name. Moreover, the format of voter list shows the name of the father only, but not the mother's. These are the gender biased government provisions.

In fact, inclusion of the name of the husband is not at all important in the national ID card because marital status may change. A woman's husband may die; she can have divorce in future; or she can remarry after divorce or after her husband's death. So, this means that if any such incident happens, then the women need to apply for an immediate change in the ID card, but men in similar condition don't need to change anything. They can update the information about their marital status in the registration form later, unlike a widowed or divorced woman.

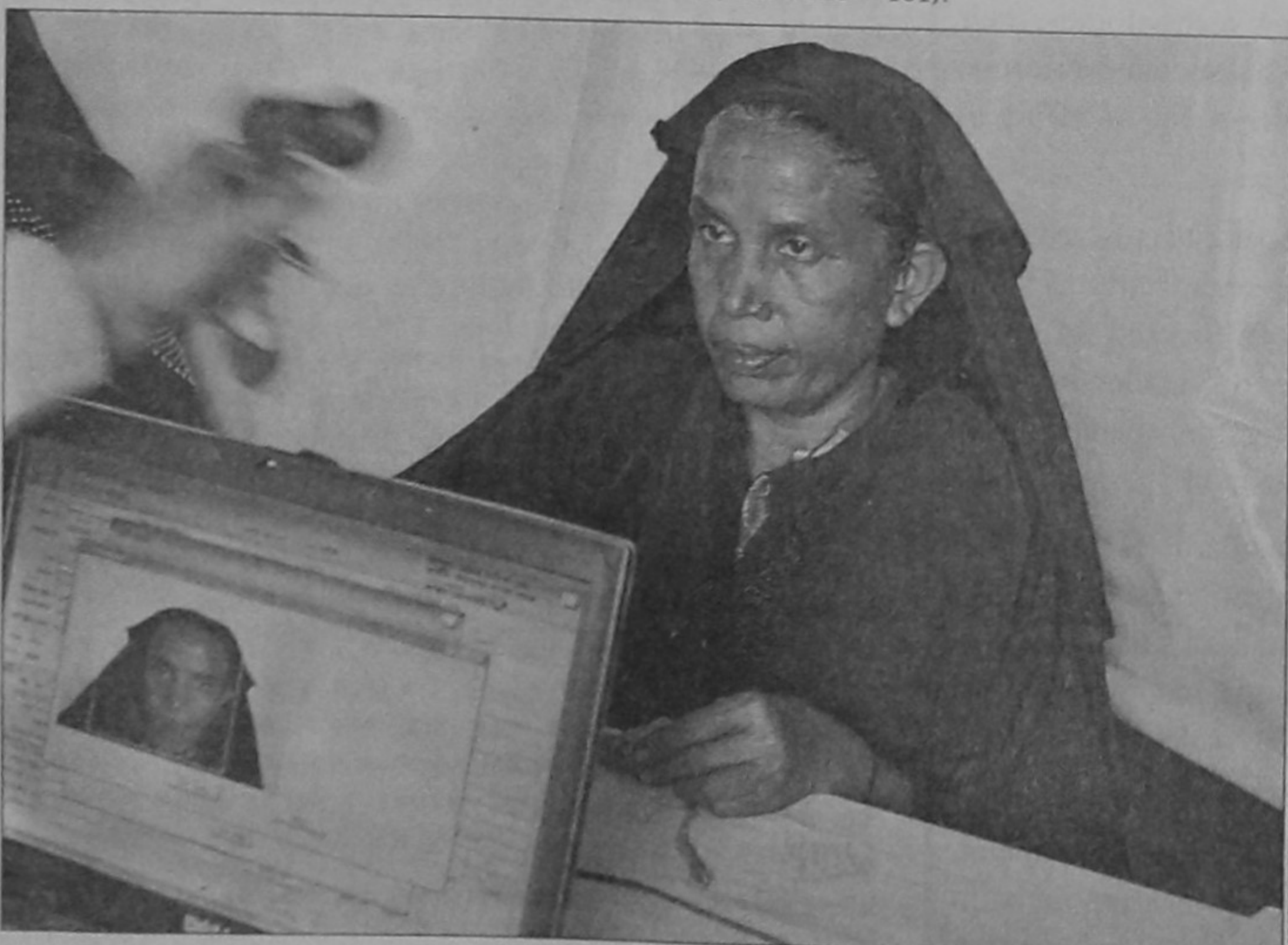
Other than psychological strain, the woman may be deprived of public service until she receives her renewed card, because the Election Commission (EC) has asked the government to make a law for mandatory usage of national identity (NID) cards to get access to services and facilities in 22 fields.

Once the law is made, none will be allowed access to the specified facilities or services, of which most are related to people's daily lives, unless they produce the NID cards or the government relaxes the related provisions. So, the mention of any temporary social status (marital) should not be emphasised and made compulsory in the national ID.

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Why not my father's name?

married woman cannot!

This format is not at all gender sensitive, rather it is gender biased. A married woman may want inclusion of her father's name in her national ID card, but the format of ID card doesn't support this as she is married. In many countries of the world, like United States and most of the western countries, people don't even need to use their parent's name in national ID card. They emphasise mainly on biological identification (e.g.

registers during the separation and then gets divorced, the ID card which she will be given will have the name of her ex-husband, which will be invalid by then.

So, when she needs to apply on her own for changing her marital status as part of the renewal of national ID card, she will have to put up with a sheer psychological strain. By contrast, a recently divorced man doesn't need to make this change as the national ID card

In Pakistan, on marrying, a woman has to have her national identity card revised to replace her father's/guardian's name with her husband's name. If she is applying for a passport and doesn't change the names, she can have a passport issued for only one year; the passport is extendable for a further four years provided she has her national identity card revised (Muhammad Tufail v Muhammad Hanif 1984 MLD 1489).

e-Procurement in Bangladesh

An e-procurement system ensures better resource utilisation by providing competition and equal opportunity for all qualified vendors. It dramatically reduces cycle time for processing of tenders and task completion, and can also standardise the procurement process across all government departments and agencies. It increases purchasing power by demand aggregation, and empowers the small and medium bidders because the entire content and bid submission is online.

ZIA HASSAN

THE current drive against systematic corruption, spearheaded by the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), has received wholehearted support from the general people. The media, civil society, TIB, and other organisations are working tirelessly to make corruption a difficult undertaking for the practitioners. However, all these efforts are not producing the expected result as the government machinery has tailored itself to absorb corruption through years of practice. It has been witnessed that, as pressure increased, the corrupt adapted new methods, and overt corruption is now taking place through covert means.

Public procurement through government contracts has always been the primary source of corruption. Some experts suggest that, in government procurement and work tender, only 15% of the money reaches its intended destination as 85% is siphoned away through systematic leakages.

The manual tendering based public procurement system presents many opportunities for manipulation by corrupt civil servants and tender "mafias." Killing of tender rivals and cinema style kidnapping and violence have always been part of the tendering process in our country. In some cases, cartels distribute the works within themselves and seek exorbitant price. Politicians and public employees also collaborate to award contracts to the payer of the highest bribe or to their favoured contractor. They also indulge in corruption by systematically leaking information and manipulating papers during the tender approval process.

An overall reform is required to address these issues. An e-procurement system based on a public-private partnership model can be the best way to restrain these malpractices, because it takes away the power of awarding contracts from corrupt civil servants and transfers it to a neutral software based system that allows transparency, competition and equal opportunity for all eligible vendors. The e-procurement system provides an internet-based interface where buyers and sellers

of all government procurements and contracts can participate in a fair and transparent manner.

In this model, all the government wings and agencies post their tenders in a web portal or website, which can be downloaded by all eligible vendors and other stakeholders from the internet. The suppliers can remain anonymous, and they can place their bids anytime from anywhere. Bids are evaluated automatically, based on parameters of capacity assessment and a predefined quality assurance plan. Based on this evaluation, the contract is offered to the most appropriate contractor electronically. The system ensures that there is no interaction between the public employees and the contractors during the whole process of bidding, the awarding of the contract, and in the post-bid stage.

An e-procurement system ensures better resource utilisation by providing competition and equal opportunity for all qualified vendors. It dramatically reduces cycle time for processing of tenders and task completion, and can also standardise the procurement process across all government departments and agencies. It increases purchasing power by demand aggregation, and empowers the small and medium bidders because the entire content and bid submission is online. A centralised registration of suppliers can be an integral part of the system, where rogue suppliers can be identified and quality of service and post-bid contract evaluation can be ensured. Ultimately, it brings transparency in the procurement process and drastically reduces corruption in public procurement.

Faced by the problems of manual tendering systems, many governments around the world have resorted to the e-procurement system. The experience of the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh is probably most relevant for us. In the year 2000, the state of Andhra Pradesh identified e-procurement as the core e-governance project. The legal framework came from the Indian IT Act 2000. After implementation of the project, only 11 tenders took place in 2003, which raised doubts about the success of the project. But, with strong political will and drive, the portal became a massive success and, in

2007, it handled 16084 contracts worth Rupee 27143 cores, which is around 70% of the states total public expense. The portal is saving around Rupee 2700 crore of the Andhra Pradesh government due to competitive bidding by suppliers.

Currently, 57 municipalities, 4 universities, and 8 government departments, including roads and highways, irrigation, public health, tribal welfare and local government, carry out all their transactions through the portal. The automated workflow has shortened the tender lead time from 180 days to 36 days. It has completely eliminated cartels and syndicates and reduced the cost of doing business for the contractors.

After its successful implementation, other state governments and the Indian central government have adopted the e-procurement model. The initiative has received the UN Public Service Award 2007 and Harvard University's Ash Institute Award. The project has been identified as the best model for developing countries by the World Bank.

The Indian railway has also been successful in implementing an e-procurement system. 13 units of the Indian railway now procure goods and services worth Rupee 9000 crore through the web-based procurement system. The project was implemented in four stages after a successful pilot scheme. The total implementation cost only Rupee 8 crore, including Rupee 5 crore for hardware.

If we look at other countries, we will see that S. Korea runs a very successful e-procurement system. At present, 93% of all government contracts are carried out through e-procurement. Last year, 18 million businesses participated in 120,000 biddings, amounting to contracts worth \$ 25 billion. It saved annual transaction costs of around \$ 4.5 billion.

S. Korea received the UN Public Service Award in 2003, and the model was described as the best model for transparency enhancement by OECD in 2004. Currently, Pakistan and Vietnam are collaborating with the Korean government to implement the e-procurement model.

Various ministries of Japan have different e-procurement portals.

Ireland's centralised e-tender portal integrates all public sector procurement opportunities in one place, as opposed to having separate sites.

Mexico has also developed Compranet, an online system for government contracting that contains bidding instructions, forms and support services. GateTrade by Denmark and GeBiz Singapore are also other successful examples of e-procurement by the government. As a matter of fact, almost all the governments in the western hemisphere and Latin America have installed e-procurement at different levels.

However, the mere fact that tendering is done online does not guarantee the success of an e-procurement initiative, as seen in the case of the Indian state of Madhya Pradesh. The state spent millions of dollars, but the project could not be implemented due to barriers of management and technological failures.

From the successful implementation of the project in the state of Andhra Pradesh, key lessons have been identified in a World Bank report. "The support of political leadership, and the formation of a high-powered steering committee and a project implementation committee, with a mandate to take decisions on all issues, were important factors for successful implementation of the e-procurement project." The report noted that a single mode of bid submission throughout the e-procurement platform, participative design process, enormous efforts in change management, full-time help desk, and strong security features contributed to the overall success of the e-procurement platform in Andhra Pradesh.

Setting up an e-procurement site is not a difficult technological task, rather, the huge scale of the project and the massive change management are the most difficult challenges. But if we learn from the experience of other countries and adopt a phase-wise implementation plan, these challenges can always be met.

For a long time, successive governments had been talking about e-governance, without identifying core applications that would serve the people and bring transparency in the corruption plagued government enterprises. The time is now just right to shed the rhetoric and adopt core e-governance applications like e-procurement, which can significantly increase our national productivity by eliminating corruption in public procurement.

Zia Hassan is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.