

## Establishing knowledge-based Society

# Knowledge-based vs. achievement-oriented society

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**R**ECENTLY there are talks of building a knowledge-based society (KBS) in Bangladesh. This article discusses this issue from certain angles such as, what we mean by such a term KBS, what we really want and what role universities can play to accelerate the process.

Knowledge is defined as "information and understanding about a subject which a person has or which all people have." What is information? Information about some thing is actually the facts of all varieties relating to a subject. For example, let us take the case of ploughing land for cultivation.

Traditional knowledge was to use a wooden plough with a metallic pointed head to dig and turn the soil when dragged by a pair of cows attached with the yoke linked with the plough. This knowledge and practice of tilling the soil continued in Bangladesh for hundreds of years till the slow

introduction of power tillers and tractors in some places during the last two decades. Nowadays you will hardly see the traditional ploughing of land in the northern areas of Bangladesh. What has changed is the application of new technology (knowledge) instead of old technology.

Why farmers have shifted from the old to the new method of ploughing, the short answer is that the new method is more efficient (low cost per unit of tilling). Similar evidence of changing dimension of knowledge can be observed in many other spheres of human activities such as transport; buses and trucks in place of bullock and horse driven carts; power based irrigation equipment in place of old manual methods and the use of HYV seeds and chemical fertilisers to increase yield per unit. The benefit for this change in farming knowledge can be seen in trebling of grain production since 1972 while population has doubled during the same period. On the other hand the rate of

growth of population has been brought down from 3.5% to below 2%, again by the application of new knowledge of contraceptives and medical interventions. Therefore the statement, to have a knowledge based society, is misleading. At any point of time people are using available knowledge to perform certain functions better. What is intended from the desire to have knowledge based society is perhaps to increase the rate of change in the field of technology and use newer knowledge that people in other parts of the world is using, and to produce those newer technologies by the people.

If we take a stock of the technologies that are being used in the country from land and mobile phones to textile machineries, we will find that we produce may be not more than 10% of the new technologies. RMG, the largest industry in terms of employment and export earnings, perhaps do not add more than 25% value added even after 20 years of

rapid growth.

Sustainable growth requires that we gradually produce more and more of the equipment and other inputs within the country and reduce our dependence on import from other countries. Further, we are using millions of computers and mobile phone sets in Bangladesh. To get full advantage of these digital technologies in terms of increased employment and lowering costs we must start assembling them here soon and gradually move to manufacturing them completely in Bangladesh.

Why we are slow in moving in this direction is perhaps due to shortcomings in our education system that is not offering required skills (knowledge) in related fields, besides the political uncertainty. So far the education in IT sector has covered applications only and not production of them.

The second lacking in our transition to KBS is the minimal interconnection between our major production activities and our education system. Not

only that we do not provide knowledge to our students in schools and colleges about our major industries such as agriculture and RMG, our education system also has not seen the application of new knowledge in terms of more effective teaching-learning methods. The traditional mode of rote memorizing the contents of a subject is still prevalent, and some of the more useful knowledge supporting subjects such as English language and mathematics are not taught at required levels.

Completing education through rote memorizing is wasteful because after some time it is forgotten in most cases and the student may be left with some vague ideas. Instead, if a student did a critical analysis as to why and how and for what, that would increase the capacity of his brain to relate with future activities and new knowledge in the subject. This is the most serious defect in our education system all through its stream, from primary to university

levels. This has been recently pointed out by Prof. Yunus as our failings to think "out of the box". That requires critical thinking and creating a desire in students to search for alternatives and achieve highest levels of potentials.

We should not only strive to be a KBS because it is not sufficient to compete in the global economy. Our education system not only encourages rote memorising it also does not ask for putting maximum efforts to achieve the highest level attainable in a subject. We are still carrying the legacy of the British education system to offer limited education to few people to work mostly as clerks and support staff in administration. The awarding of classes, first, second and third, based on 60%, 45% and 33% marks obtained in public examinations gives an indication that candidates were not expected to achieve the highest levels after putting maximum efforts. This needs to be examined in view of the new knowledge available from the field of

psychology that found the "anchoring effect" in decision making by people (Kahneman, Tversky, HBS, Noble Prize winner in economics).

In a classic study on the subject the researchers asked participants to estimate the percentage of African countries in the UN. Before answering the question they had to spin a wheel with numbers ranging from zero to 100 and indicate whether that number was higher or lower than the percentage of African countries in the UN. The wheel was rigged to stop at either 10 or 65. This was not known to the participants. On average participants with a 10 on the wheel gave an estimate of 25 per cent; those who got 65 estimated 45%. The conclusion was that they had taken their cue from the exercise of spinning the wheel although the numbers on the wheel were irrelevant. Peoples' thoughts and decision making seems to hover around certain benchmarks.

Many of us can recollect how we used that 60% as bench-

# Terrorism, ideology and the law

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**I**DEOLOGY and terrorism as we understand it now go hand in hand. In the 1960s one saw highly motivated groups holding radical views against the establishment. Such groups used violence as a means to make their point.

Terrorist groups have exploited the vulnerability of the civilian underbelly of the State. Bangladesh has been no exception. Liberals and under-informed people have ventured to portray the phenomenon of terrorism as an impulse against repression. Such indulgence or covert sympathy has allowed terrorists to cloak their activities in a garb of "revolution" or "Jehad".

Those who are of the view that terrorism needs a legal remedy have to understand the driving factors behind the terrorist act. It has to be appreciated that definitions of terrorism cannot be value neutral. This is so because the United States establishment, the supposed leader of the free world has often teamed up with undemocratic governments and groups.

One would like to ask if terrorism could really be divorced from ideology. The US position that no ideology justifies violence would appear to be contradictory and self-defeating. One would find evidence of absolute conviction that American values are universal values and hence attack on American supremacy is an attack on society at large.

The American understanding of terrorism would be 'anything that stands in the way of American interests'. Said differently, at the core of the US definition of terrorism is a highly motivated understanding of what is just and what is unjust. The emphasis on the act is an effort to support that notion with the so-called objectivity.

The fact that terrorist act disrupts processes of reconciliation has to be recognized because by doing so the society can acknowledge the fact that beyond the physical damage terrorists cause crises and undermine faith in democratic institutions, thus provoking the authority to react in a tough manner.

Quite often there is a marked political colour to acts of terrorism. The fact is that despite the claims that it defines terrorism by the act, the reality is that the United States has not been able to de-link its own version of national interest from its definition of terrorism.

The American insistence on a precise and quantifiable definition of terrorism is in fact a non-starter. As far as implementation is concerned, the US definition of trans-national terrorism has been crafted to merge with US interests abroad.

In Bangladesh we need to have an anti-terrorism law but it would be advisable to link it to a really transparent system of implementation. In the law there could be a clause for the establishment of a national centre for counter-terrorism headed by a

coordinator appointed by the head of the State.

Such coordinator as proposed above may chair the inter-agency working group on counter-terrorism. In other words, the coordinator could be the nodal point for all efforts against terrorism, domestic and international.

For ensuring autonomy and freedom of operation, the above centre can be subjected to an annual scrutiny by a permanent standing committee of parliament with representation from all political parties. The centre should include people with experience in conflict situations and legal experts for examining charges of misuse of special powers by law enforcement personnel. The centre should also arbitrate on disputes over the application of the law to ensure that the criminal law process is not subverted. Last but not the least, the centre should publish annual reports on the threat perception arising out of terrorist activity.

The principal motivation behind a national centre for counter-terrorism is to de-link the government's anti-terrorism agenda from that of any one political party. The inclusion of the country's entire political spectrum in the anti-terrorist campaign is perhaps the desirable way to end the air of recrimination that has often characterized the executive-judiciary relationship over the issue of special powers.

We have to remember that existence of power is one thing while the justification for its exercise is another



matter. In Bangladesh we have the distressing distinction of having a large proportion of arrests not ending in conviction. Therefore, there

is a cause for worry. Let us not forget that the political executive is quite often unabashed when it comes to pushing its own agenda.

There has to a political consensus on how to deal with the problem of terrorism. Our response has to be home-grown. Let us not confound a

malaise that has already taken a heavy toll of lives.

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