

Selected extracts from September's issue of Forum

You Are What You Study

AHMED A. AZAD

THE newly elected government's manifesto includes the realisation of Vision 2021 and the technology to implement it (Digital Bangladesh), envisages Bangladesh as a middle-income technology-savvy country by 2021. Although this is a much needed change in paradigm shift, it will require sustained effort and a long-term plan involving strategic investment in education and technology. For this to happen, there has to be unwavering commitment by the present and successive governments to elevate the present levels of higher education and scientific proficiency to contemporary international standards.

There is a positive correlation between the levels of scientific proficiency and economic development of a country and that is why the developed countries of the West are also the most scientifically and technologically advanced. Wealth alone does not guarantee a knowledge-based technology-driven economy; in the absence of an

indigenous pool of scientists and technicians, the oil-rich countries of the Middle East have to depend on imported equipment, technology and expertise.

Scientific proficiency, in turn, is critically dependent on the quality of higher education and scientific capacity. It is no coincidence that the best research universities in the world are located in the most advanced countries. Bangladesh is not only a scientifically-deficient LDC but it also has very little natural resources that can be traded for cash. Thus, if Bangladesh seriously aspires to the status of a middle income country, it needs to drastically improve the quality of its higher education and scientific proficiency through rapid capacity building in the academic and Science and Technology (S&T) sectors and effective collaboration between academia, government and the private sector.

Recently some newspapers in Dhaka reported that Dhaka University, the premier seat of higher learning, was ranked at number 4922 in the world. While the relevance and usefulness of such rankings for an LDC is

questionable, this does point to the pitiable state of higher education in Bangladesh. We thus need to urgently focus on certain core areas such as commitment to scholarship and research, laboratory and workshop facilities, development and utilisation of intellectual property (patents) and technology transfer to local industry.

It goes without saying that a very strong primary and secondary education system is the foundation for an internationally competitive higher education system. Developing such a system and making it accessible to all is perhaps the most important and difficult task facing the Government of Bangladesh (GoB). Fortunately, the present government seems to have realised the importance of this issue since the Ministry of Education has been given the highest allocation in the recent budget, an additional State Minister has been appointed specifically to overhaul the primary education sector and secondary education is being modernised with special emphasis on science and technology. However, this alone will not automatically result in an internationally competitive

higher education system relevant to our needs.

While access to higher education is a fundamental right of every citizen there is a need to seriously assess whether every student who passes HSC needs to be provided a place in tertiary education since many students would be better-off in vocational training centres which offer courses in specific trade-related subjects. The pressure for admission has led to a mushrooming growth of public and private universities, the majority of which are woefully inadequate in terms of both academic excellence and physical infrastructure.

For the full version of this article please read this month's Forum, available free with The Daily Star on September 7.

Ahmed A. Azad has been appointed by TWAS (The Academy of Science of the Developing World) as a TWAS Research Professor in Bangladesh. He previously held the positions of Director of Research and Professor of Medical Biotechnology, University of Cape Town (South Africa); Chief Research Scientist, CSIRO (Australia); Member, Council of Scientific Advisors, International Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology (ICGEB, Trieste); and Director, Board of the Medical Research Council of South Africa.



Back to the Drawing Board

ABDUS SATTAR MOLLA

EDUCATION in Bangladesh is beset with many problems such as divisiveness, high drop-out rates, deteriorating teaching standards, lack of opportunity for higher education, low pay for teachers, dependence on coaching centers, commercialization of educational institutions, politicisation of both students and faculty and so on. Some of these problems stem from our system of structuring, some from financial constraints while others are caused by political polarization and administrative inefficiency and neglect. While the Ministry of Education has undertaken the task of reforming the entire educational system, my focus is on a single problem the structural weaknesses in our education system.

For many years, we had been following a system wherein a student was exposed to 16 years of formal education comprising of (a) primary education (PE) -4/5 years; (b) secondary education (SE)-8/7 years and; (c) higher/tertiary education- 4 years comprising of either (i) 3(Bachelor Honors) +1(Masters) or (ii) 2(Bachelor Pass Course) +2(Masters). A decade back, the Bachelor portion (both Honors and Pass Course) was increased by one year resulting in a total education span of 17 years. PE, which was of 4 years duration up to 1952, was increased to 5 years the following year and has been so ever since.

In 1974, the "Qudrat-i-Khuda Education Commission Report", in line with the UNESCO requirement of 14 years universal schooling, recom-

mended that PE be extended up to the 8th grade. It is indeed unfortunate that, even after 35 years, we have not been able to even partially implement this recommendation. No public examination is conducted on completion of PE and thus there is no way of ensuring the accountability of the primary school teachers for the quality of education imparted during this stage. It is no wonder that teaching standards in primary schools are abysmally low and even middle-class families try to send their children to other types of schools, especially kindergartens. The onus of developing a solid foundation is, thus, shifted to the secondary school teachers who often have to start from scratch.

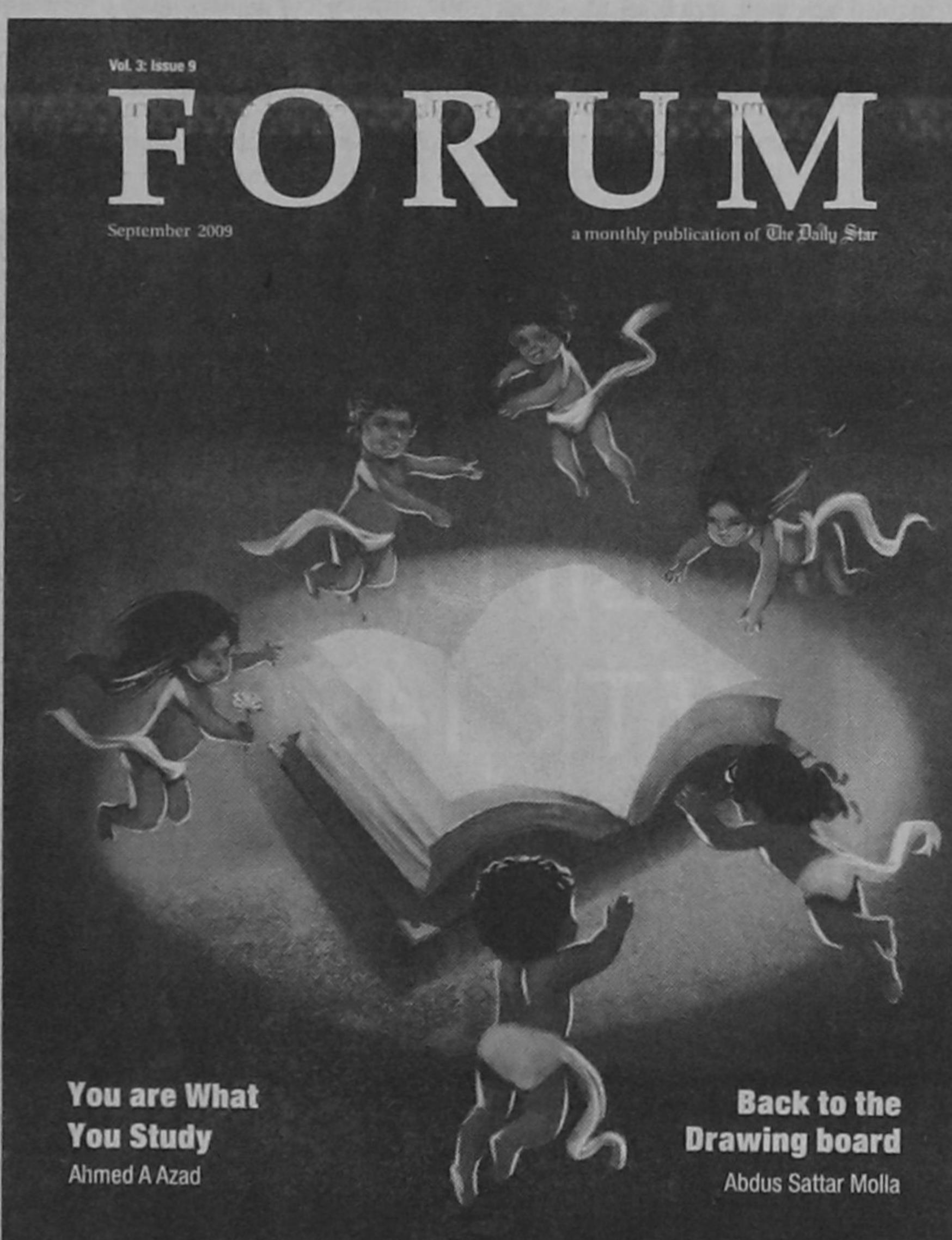
The 12-year period (comprising of 5-year PE and 7-year SE) has three distinct streams: the first and largest follows the national curriculum leading to the SSC and HSC examinations and most of the schools in this stream employ Bangla as the medium of instruction; next are the Madrasas which emphasize more on Islamic religious education; and thirdly, we have the English medium schools which follow the British or American curriculum. Such segregation has not only divided our society but is also a violation of Article 17 of our constitution which guarantees uniform education for all.

Many eminent educators of the country agree that the present 8-year duration of general education is not enough. Students need to learn something of everything for a few more years so that they can develop a more comprehensive base to cope with any field in future life. An attempt was made during 2004-2005 to integrate

the three main 'groups' (Science, Humanities and Commerce) up to the secondary stage but it failed.

For the full version of this article please read this month's Forum, available free with The Daily Star on September 7.

Abdus Sattar Molla is a PhD candidate, NIE (under NTU), Singapore.



Going Digital

SWAPAN KUMAR GAYEN

DIGITAL Bangladesh" and "Vision 2021" are catch phrases in Bangladesh these days. The buzzwords are no longer confined to the lexicon of information and communication technol-

ogy (ICT) enthusiasts, but have entered the vocabulary of the educated section of the population. In its election manifesto leading up to the Ninth Parliamentary Elections in 2008, the Awami League (AL) coalition envisioned a Digital Bangladesh by 2021. The alliance led by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) countered with a promise of an even earlier delivery. ICT activists in the country may find this competition to own the issue heartening, as it may be a realization among the politicians that digitisation is synonymous with being modern and forward-looking, and that investment in ICT is important for national development.

The creation, dissemination, exchange and application of knowledge play an increasingly important role in the economic development of the "knowledge-based society" that the world is embarking upon. It is imperative that Bangladesh positions herself well to avail that rising tide to become a member of the group known as the "emerging economies." The pursuit of a digital Bangladesh by 2021, the golden anniversary of the nation's independence, will be a coveted endeavor.

Questions need to be asked though: What is the scope of Digital Bangladesh? What are its mission and goals? Is there a roadmap to achieve the desired end? Activists and enthusiasts who like to go beyond rhetoric and look for concrete plans of action are raising these questions from different pulpits and platforms. Answers to these questions are yet to be articulated, and as one waits for those to take shape, expectations build, demands grow, and interest groups come up

with their own interpretations and agendas. While the scope of Digital Bangladesh is likely to evolve, being shaped by the economic, political, social and cultural realities, there will be some common threads that reasonable people can agree upon. Digital Bangladesh will entail applications of ICT to enhance efficiency of operation, administration, management, and governance.

The process of transforming Bangladesh to a "digital" country will be complex. Many administrative, strategic, management-related, and even socio-economic issues have to be addressed and resolved along the way.

Two core issues are manpower development and democratisation. A competent workforce with the requisite technical expertise, as well as communication and managerial skills, will be necessary, not only in the big cities but throughout the country including rural areas. This in turn will require supreme emphasis on education in general, and strengthening of the science, technology, engineering, mathematics, communication and management education, in particular. In order for a "Digital Bangladesh" to be meaningful for all her citizens, the benefits of digitisation should reach the disadvantaged everywhere in the country, and not be limited to an elite few. Anything less will have the undesirable effect of widening the "digital divide" and accentuating the disparities between the privileged and the underprivileged.

For the full version of this article please read this month's Forum, available free with The Daily Star on September 7.

Swapan Kumar Gayen, Professor, City University of New York, USA.

Miskins, Misfits and Mothers

FARAH MEHREEN AHMAD

BORSHA* did not know she had no right to fall in love. In fact, she did not even know, she had no right to be. She was one of the many floating prostitutes of a mazaar area, who existed, but not really. She was a fool who made the mistake of falling in love, an imbecile who forgot she was not a human-being, and tricked herself into believing the promises her customer-turned-lover made of marrying her.

She was a dweller of a mazaar, the place where hundreds of people flock on a weekly basis to conduct wish-fulfilling rituals. And apparently they work. So why wouldn't her wishes come true when she lived amidst all that magic?

She forgot magic wasn't for her either.

So her eyes were pulled out, and she was killed by her lover in the Shaheed Minar area. An unfit awakening for fitness freaks who workout there early in the morning and discovered her dead body dangling from a tree.

She needed to exist to cater to our needs, but she had no right to exist. Her story is the perfect example of filth permeating through what we would like to believe is our holy and untainted society. Not the filth we accuse her of diffusing, but the filth we

create and conveniently shove under the rug. Borsha lived her life to hone our selfishness, and died at the hands of our nonchalant cowardice.

Group work is usually a part of any

orientation process as it has proven to be an effective ice-breaking and team-building technique. That is probably why most of the women I spoke to

when I went to a mazaar area mentioned that when they landed there for lack of places to go seek refuge in, or were tricked and brought there, gang rape and blade cuts were an integral part of their induction process. Some of them, like Meena,* also made the colossal mistake of ignoring her mother's advice and took a candy-pill from a stranger. She and many like her then found themselves in a brothel upon regaining consciousness. Some fled brothels and upon being rejected by their homes, came to the city to find work and ended up in mazaars as homeless, floating sex slaves.

"Slaves" may seem like an exaggerated way of labelling them because as commercial sex workers, they do in theory, get paid. But given how invisible our society has rendered them, when a customer refuses to pay for a service, there really is no agency or

organization that will fight on their behalf to get them their remuneration. And it's not as if their customers just don't pay and leave, they are often subjected to unbelievable amounts of violence for asking for their dues.

The state of the floating sex workers -- battered, beaten, and banished -- brings to question our sense of community. That we live in a community and are responsible for each other only seems to be realized when we want to quench our thirst for butting into other people's businesses. But when it comes to fighting, to protecting, there is no one.

(*real stories with altered names)

For the full version of this article please read this month's Forum, available free with The Daily Star on September 7.

Farah Mehreen Ahmad works for BRAC and is also a member of Drishtipat Writers' Collective.

