

Emancipation of women is still a distant dream

Economic progress and a change in social attitudes can halt the degradation of women's status. Elimination of poverty and spread of education are the prima-facie needs of the hour. The fact is: as female literacy rises, birth rate drops, life span increases, and the status of women is enhanced.

MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

THE status of women in the country has not substantially changed for the better even after acceptance of the fact that empowering women, meaning redistributing power from men to women, can ensure more balanced development of the country. It must be stressed that gender inequality in accessing resources and opportunities negates the concept of human development and the spirit of democracy. The empowerment that would have given the vast majority of women the freedom of choice for self-development is, as yet, appallingly missing.

A World Bank report on women in this region suggests that poverty and deeply etched social attitudes have produced a kind of barrier for the country's female population. Notwithstanding the fact that women in the country constitute almost half of the total population in the country, hardly any major, meaningful effort has been taken to enable them to participate actively in the political, socio-cultural and economic life of the nation equally with men.

The condition of female health in the country is tell-tale evidence. Previous governments and political leaders promised to educate and enfranchise women but, after so many years, the misery that marked their life in most parts of the country is greater. The observance of "Women's Day" year in and out, meetings, seminars and symposia show that the governments' strong suit is romantic rhetoric, not reality.

The price of that failure is immense. The country is now inhibited by despair with an annual per capita income of \$370, in which women share only about 10 percent -- possibly the lowest in global perspective. Unemployment rate in the country, ballooning up to 50 percent, is possibly the highest in the South Asian region.

The two core issues, elimination of social injustice and economic exploitation of the girl child, can only be tackled through motivation, policy guidelines, and bold leadership exercised at the government level. Women seem to be discriminated against in the society in ever greater proportions. The genesis of discrimination and cruelty against women can be traced to the social apathy inherent in the male population of the sub-continent. Speaking about Bangladesh, though the Constitution provides for equality between sexes, with proper protection for women and children, the people are still governed by customs and rules that fail to give women their due.

The people are aware that the previous government's inaction and corruption exacted a terrible price. Against the backdrop of such a bleak scenario, which cripples the development of the country, women remain neglected. The biggest culprit is the dowry system, which makes a daughter a family burden and a son, who collects the dowry, an asset. In both the urban and the rural areas of the country, dowry is a social malady that makes the lives of newlywed girls or even housewives with years of family life extremely miserable.

Reports carried by the leading dailies in the recent past revealed that an internee doctor in Mitford Hospital was allegedly killed by her doctor husband when he did not get dowry from her father. In another incident, a student of the journalism in Dhaka university was beaten to death by her banker husband in the last week of September at the husband's Mirpur residence. The post mortem report revealed marks of torture on her body. All indications available suggested that she was beaten to death because she protested against the brutal behaviour of her husband.

Not only in the cities and towns but also in the villages terror has come stalking. And the weapon of fear is not only the gun now but a bottle of acid. A woman or a wife burnt by acid has made dowry deaths the most vicious of social crimes. It is an evil prevalent in the society these days, even in the remotest countryside, and despite efforts by some activists and women's rights organisations to eliminate this menace the number of victims has continued to rise.

A recent report in the *Prothom Alo* indicated that, weary of clinging to a destructive relationship with her addict husband, who used to torture her almost daily, a garments worker in Pahartali got a divorce in August. But the husband retaliated by throwing a bottle of acid over her face on September 6 last. With both her eyes burnt by acid, she is now stark blind, and is undergoing treatment in a hospital at Dhaka with the financial support of the Acid Survivors Foundation.

In villages marriage was considered a very sanctified bond, united in the worst or best of times, in sickness or in health through the vicissitudes of fortune. But dowry-related deaths and torture have shattered the bond of peaceful and happy relationship. Stories of some depraved husbands trying to kill their wives who protested against their extra-marital affairs, or for their failure to get dowry money from their parents, are filling the pages of newspapers with sickening

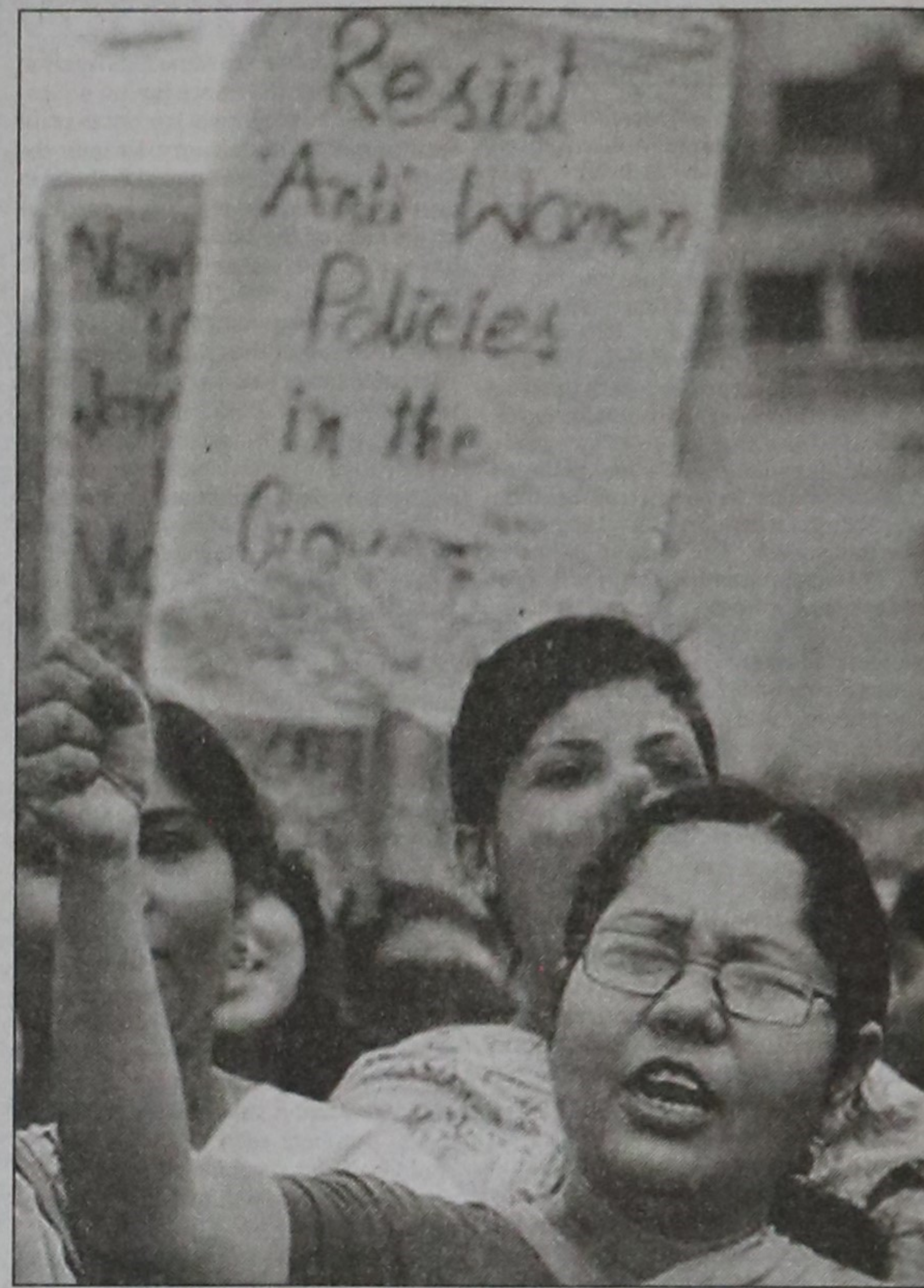
regularity.

The nation learnt with trepidation about the Kalapara gang-rape of a school girl of class seven in the last week of September. The victim, it was learnt, was abducted and gang-raped by 10 BCL activists. What was most shocking was that there was a covert attempt to suppress the criminal action of the BCL cadres by holding a farcical arbitration by the mentors of the criminal gangs and extracting a forced declaration from the victim that she was not raped.

Now the question that arises is, why were the alleged perpetrators awarded punishment of a fine of Tk.10,000 each if they had not committed the crime? Secondly, all indications suggested that the story of the gang-rape incident was neither false nor malicious. Fully aware of the fact that rape is not a crime to be settled by village arbitration, and with no legal authority to deal with such matters, why did these village locals try to hush up the crime of such enormous magnitude? Appallingly, the whole episode involving the role of the rapists, their mentors and the law-enforcing agency has raised eyebrows.

As one analyses the trend, one is led to think that the increase in violence is because the consciousness of the women folk has changed. She is better educated, doesn't take the patibara concept at face value and stands up against ill-treatment. Women who have clung to destructive and abusive relationships for years are now standing up to say no. And this is happening, perhaps more so, with successful and independent career women. Their husbands' families want more from their working wives as well as affluent parents.

Survey conducted by the World Bank and NGOs reveal that economic progress and a change in social attitudes can halt the degradation of women's status. Elimination of poverty and spread of education are the prima-facie needs of the hour. The fact is: as female literacy rises, birth rate drops, life span increases,



Pro-women policies key to overall social well being.

and the status of women is enhanced. This calls for empowering women and allowing them fundamental powers. There is no denying the fact that improvement in the situation of women is viewed as a means to higher-level goals such as

enhancing the well-being of the children, educating them properly and providing them proper nutritional facilities.

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No go from regional solution

The American commander's assessment can be a talking point between New Delhi and Islamabad. When both agree that the Taliban are the biggest menace, they can surely find a common strategy for joint action. They can adopt different ways, economic or military, but they should have one policy to tackle Taliban.

KULDIP NAYAR

NEW Delhi should realize that the road to Beijing goes through Islamabad. This is what a Pakistan foreign minister told me many years ago. There is some truth to this, even today. Likewise, Islamabad should know by now that its route to Kabul lies through New Delhi. This doesn't suggest that India is helping Afghanistan in its armed struggle against the Taliban and their supporters in Pakistan.

It means that New Delhi can wield influence over Kabul. The hospital it built at Kabul and the roads and power transmission lines it laid there, despite the killings of Indian engineers and workers, have earned the Manmohan Singh government the trust of an average Afghan who sees in India a friend. This goodwill can benefit Islamabad if it can have even a

workable relationship with New Delhi.

Another attack on India's embassy at Kabul last week is nothing new from the point of view of the Taliban who regard India as their enemy and economic development as an anti-war measure. But the role of the ISI in such attacks is difficult to comprehend. Indian Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao stopped short of naming Pakistan during her visit to Kabul soon after the attack on the Indian embassy. Since a similar attack in 2008 turned out to be "scripted" at Rawalpindi -- America gave details collected through satellites -- the suspicion on Islamabad is natural. The Afghan ambassador to the US has even named Pakistan.

This may or may not be true. But an average Indian believes that it must be the handiwork of the ISI. It is the same old mistrust between the two countries that clouds their judgment. Yet, both have

known to their cost that the Taliban consider them their enemy. The attack on the Army headquarters at Rawalpindi earlier in the week reconfirms the fact that when it comes to causing harm, the Taliban make no distinction between Islamic Pakistan and secular India.

Why have not New Delhi and Islamabad sat together to plan a common strategy? Kashmir does not have to be sorted out before solving other problems. The situation in Afghanistan is too serious to brook any further delay. Every gain that the Taliban make in Pakistan is at the expense of India's security. But certain irritations need to be removed. Islamabad should give up the idea of having Afghanistan as their area of strategic depth. Kabul lives under the fear that Islamabad is out to belittle or destroy it. Just as the stability of Pakistan is essential for the stability of India, Afghanistan's viability is necessary for Pakistan's viability. Essentially, the fight against the Taliban is the fight for a free world.

But the most important step for India and Pakistan is a joint, concerted action against the Taliban. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has said at a press conference at Mumbai: "If we work together to deal with this menace (terrorism), a larger good can come out of it." Patronization of terrorists by Pakistan, he has said, "has done a great harm to South

Asia." Pakistan's Interior Minister Rehman Malik's allegation that India was trying to export terrorism does not help the situation. When Manmohan Singh characterises it as "a false accusation," that should set doubts in Pakistan at rest. Manmohan Singh has seldom personally rubbished a statement. The release of Hafiz Saeed may further delay the composite dialogue.

The real problem is General Stanley A. McChrystal's assessment. He is America's new commander of operations in Afghanistan. He has said that India was "exacerbating regional tensions" and encouraging "Pakistan's countermeasures" by increasing political and economic influence in Afghanistan. At the same time, he has said, Indian activities "largely benefit the Afghan people." The economic measures that New Delhi has undertaken in Afghanistan are bound to endear India in the eyes of the Afghans. Otherwise, the latter has been at loggerheads with Pakistan for ages.

The American commander's assessment can be a talking point between New Delhi and Islamabad. When both agree that the Taliban are the biggest menace, they can surely find a common strategy for joint action. They can adopt different ways, economic or military, but they should have one policy to tackle Taliban.

Pakistan's reluctance to move troops

from the Indian border to Afghanistan is understandable. Islamabad is making the same point that New Delhi was making when it was in the midst of a war with China in 1962. Pakistan has argued that while it is concentrating its full attention on fighting the Taliban, India should not in any way be disturbing it on the border.

In 1962, both US President Kennedy and British Prime Minister Macmillan told General Ayub, the then Pakistan leader, not to take such steps as would in any way distract New Delhi's attention from fighting against China. Jawaharlal Nehru's fear was that Ayub would march into Kashmir once India was to withdraw its forces from the border with Pakistan. General P.N. Thapar, Chief of the Army Staff, was urgently asking for the government's permission to move the troops from the Pakistan border to the theatre of war in Assam.

Washington and London talked to Islamabad and assured New Delhi on Pakistan's behalf that it would not attack India. Only then did India withdraw one division from the Pakistan border. Krishna Menon, then India's Defence Minister, was opposed to the move. He considered Pakistan their no. 1 enemy, not China. Still, Thapar withdrew the troops after getting Nehru's permission.

The fact that Ayub did not open the second front, although it was an oppor-

tune moment for him to do so, proved that he was withholding his hands. Still, Ayub used the opportunity to give China the northern areas of Kashmir, then under Pakistan's occupation. He wanted to establish closer relations with Beijing. Islamabad has followed that policy strictly.

President Asif Zardari, like Nehru, has conveyed more or less the same fears in similar words to President Barack Obama and other visiting senior US officials. He has asked them to give him a guarantee that New Delhi would do nothing if Pakistan were to withdraw troops from the border with India. Islamabad is far from satisfied by mere statements that there is no question of India attacking Pakistan. Still, with all the assurances given by America, Islamabad has withdrawn only a brigade and has kept intact all the forces on the border with India.

Whatever the situation and from wherever one starts, one finds loads of mistrust. The inevitable conclusion is that there is no alternative to rapprochement between India and Pakistan. President Obama once talked about a regional solution to Afghanistan and other problems between the countries. There is still no go from it.

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Implementing Education Policy 2009: Some suggestions

ZEB A. SERAJ

Pre-school and primary level

Pre-school and primary education should be based on a mixture of learning and fun. Learning of the alphabets and numbers by heart has to be implemented but can be made fun by devising games around them. In addition, concept of cleanliness, truthfulness, pride in being Bangladeshi should also be introduced. For example, making children play games based on the alphabet and on numbers: games based on the practical use of numbers, such as buying things from stores, cooking small vs. large amounts; getting the price right for commodities their families might sell, e.g. price of 1 kg of rice; or numbers describing their height, relating height to good eating practices; using alphabets to spell, give identity to a face; alphabet words describing emotions, etc.

Action necessary: Government needs to invite detailed curriculum based on above concepts and not only make plans to publish these in sufficient numbers but also to train teachers in these concepts. It should be mentioned here that although fun-books are available in English, these not only need to be in Bangla but based on the livelihoods and practical living in Bangladesh. Mina and Raju series is a good example, but the curriculum needs to be more extensive. Alternatively, exist-

ing teachers can be asked to provide their own curriculum based on these ideas. Prizes to be announced for existing teachers who come up with interesting ideas for said curriculum.

Secondary level

Continuation of the theme of learning as fun; making children practice problem-oriented approaches, based on their own lives, the lives of luminaries and lives of ordinary Bangladeshis who made a mark in our lives, or even lives of personalities from their own local community. There should be courses on community living, self-help, social responsibility, responsibilities as an individual to the society and to the country. Also the concept of the world itself as a laboratory, in addition to the concept of a room with equipment.

For example, in History class, children can be asked to write dramas based on the historical events, historical personalities. Best write-ups can be enacted; in literature class, students can be asked to interview local personalities and produce write-ups on the interviews. Children can be assigned the task of getting the best interview published in a local newspaper. Science classes should be built around practical examples in daily lives. Physics class can include practicals simply of the task of transporting increasingly heavy weights when going uphill. Or the concept of increasing weights and faster fall

due to gravity. Dropping an empty box or filled box down a flight from the height of 2nd or 3rd floor.

For Biology classes, encouraging children to look for and identify diversity in the species of plants and animals growing around them. Asking children to make a population consensus in their own villages. Or correlating number of children with economic status. Asking children to make their own conclusions. Or how child marriages shorten the generation time, resulting in an ever-increasing population, etc. For geography and environment it may be concepts of renewable energy. Conservation of forests. The role of the mangrove forests in the Sundarbans. Lives of fishermen and farmers. Food preservation, including fish. The children can make attempts to preserve their own fish, e.g. by using the sun, using vinegar, or boiling, etc.

Action necessary: Many books are available in English on interesting projects for children. However these need to be adapted to the situations in the country or fresh ideas sought for making curriculum.

Higher secondary and university level

Curriculum should be more job-oriented, and relevant institutions or industries linked with appropriate departments, so that students and their skills required to

work in the job market can evolve together at least in the final year or Masters level. Presentation techniques and analytical skills should be honed to perfection. Management skills and professionalism should be taught with relevance to each discipline. In the first and second years, social responsibilities should be made a part of the curriculum. Creating awareness that we are less than human if we do not contribute towards the greater good of those around us could possibly be the key to the success of participation of every individual.

At the college and university level, social work should be made a compulsory part of the curriculum with a system for credits. This will ensure that our children enter into the working society as socially-aware individuals. The government should also ensure that any student after graduation, who is fortunate enough to get a job, should serve the country for at least two years before going for higher studies or a job abroad. And indeed when they do go abroad, a system for sending a small part of their earning in community projects in their own home towns could be arranged. Community clubs can be encouraged for various causes important for the country. The power of a group of individuals working for a good cause will not only rejuvenate our young adults but also teach them management and leadership skills, in addition to making them responsible citizens.



To be groomed as responsible citizens.

Adult education: Encouraging the poorest and most excluded in village communities to do their own analysis and come up with their own solution is a remarkable innovation for educating common folk. This concept, called 'Reflect' based on the philosophy of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire with the methodology of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) has been introduced in Bangladesh through Action Aid, but has to be made

widespread throughout the Bangladesh.

Action necessary: Publication of existing success stories and materials produced for wider dissemination and training of facilitators of the process. This could be made part of the social responsibility curriculum of college and university students described above.

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