

No direction in education



AMJOL HOJRIKNEWS

Some leaders may have visionary ideas, but these ideas fail to focus on the basic needs of the long overlooked masses. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the realm of education. Schools along the length and breadth of the country have failed to cater to the needs of our children.

MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

WITH the government committing Tk.634 crore in establishing 1,500 new primary schools to fulfill their electoral pledge of eradicating illiteracy from the country by 2014, as reported in some vernacular dailies on April 16, there is a glimmer of hope that primary education might get a boost this time.

The report further says that the government will launch pre-primary course in about 36,672 government primary schools with appointment of one extra teacher in each school. It has been stressed that through this the deficiencies in primary education will be met.

Unquestionably, this program manifests the high priority that this government has attached to primary education, which serves as the building block for a wider literacy base and pursuit of higher education. According to a survey made by the primary and mass education cell of the government, there are no schools in about 16,142 villages out of 68,000 villages in the country.

Some schools set up through private initiative have ceased to function because of fund crunch, lack of infrastructural facilities and dearth of qualified teachers. For any government to succeed, there must be policy initiatives to integrate social justice with economic development, and this calls for a thrust on literacy and education as an integral part of this policy.

With 50 percent of the students admitted to class 1 dropping out before completing class five, as revealed in a survey made public by NCTB at the beginning of this year, it will be a big challenge for the government to implement its election pledge of achieving cent percent literacy by 2014.

It was further learnt that out of 44 lakh students admitted to class one every year, only 22 lakh actually completed the primary level. No doubt poverty of the parents is the prime cause

of such heavy dropout, but experts also feel that the government must also take effective measures to meet the challenges coming from shortage of trained teachers, ramshackle educational institutions in rural areas, availability of textbooks, and accountability of the educational institutions.

Of course, regular attendance of children and teachers, disruption of school functioning and unevenness of quality of schools persist. The findings of some NGOs associated with the task of building a base for primary education in the rural areas paint a grim picture of poor learning achievements of in-school children -- nearly 50 percent cannot read, write, or do basic arithmetic in spite of spending four/five years in school.

Other than this there are about 12 lakh children out of school at present, and this number will continue to swell in the years to come unless remedial measures are taken up on priority basis. Most ominously, drug dealers, it appears, are bewitching the unsuspecting kids wandering aimlessly in the streets of the villages and towns. Lured by quick money that these godfathers offer for peddling drugs, these kids have themselves turned to addiction. Our failure to put these innocent and gullible kids into schools will spell disaster for the country.

These challenges have to be met. Surely, no benefit would be available if the schools exist only in name. Obviously, the focus is turning to quality. Paradoxically, the pace of improvement in areas requiring administrative decision making is much faster than in the area of quality of education, which depends on the quality of human capital and interaction.

Unless academic support systems are challenged and held responsible for improving quality along with autonomy to function, we will not make serious progress. Government schools are now "poor schools for the poor." This lack of conviction is at the root of the problem of quality. It has to be changed, not by lecturing but by demonstration of large-scale success.

Improvement in quality is not possible without planning, beginning with setting clear goals as to what is to be achieved. Experts opine that children should acquire the basics of reading, writing and numeracy skills by class two, which can be built upon later to include higher levels of comprehension and analysis, using not just textbook knowledge but also the child's environment.

Textbooks are the only books that most Bangladeshi children see. Libraries are rare or inaccessible and museums are virtually non-existent. Children's literature in Bangla is not growing. Our schools should have programs for sports and athletics. We should encourage the learning of arts, given our rich artistic tradition. Our children should know about the problems of agriculture from their elders rather than from textbooks at school.

Schools, colleges and the entire education system today work in isolation from the community. Some fifty years ago, a teacher was the most knowledgeable person in a village. Today, not only is the teacher not the most knowledgeable person but knowledge is growing enormously outside the stagnant education system in every sphere of life through global exchange.

If our schools, including the colleges and universities have to undertake a quantum jump in quality, local authors, farmers, artisans, athletes and artists should become an integral part of the education process. Opening up of education by inviting the community into schools to enrich the learning process is needed.

Education at the primary stage is swamped in a crisis; dilapidated schools, demotivated teachers, irresponsible management, and powerless parents; a vicious cycle where hopelessness breeds further hopelessness. The problems are lack of resources and declining quality.

The reason for the poor quality of schooling is the physical infrastructure, which is woefully inadequate. If all the children were in school, as they are meant to be, school buildings that are mostly ramshackle houses would burst at the seams. In some villages there is no infrastructure worth the name.

In most schools in the villages classes are held under a tree during dry season, and such schools remain closed during the rainy season. In most villages, if there are buildings, many of them have leaky roofs, making it difficult to hold classes during rains.

Bangladesh today faces gigantic problems on many fronts. Not so long ago, this country was thought to be among the areas with the greatest potential for progress in the Third World. But now, the spurt of chaotic violence, divisive politics, and hatred on party lines consume the whole country.

Some leaders may have visionary ideas, but these ideas fail to focus on the basic needs of the long overlooked masses. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the realm of education. Schools along the length and breadth of the country have failed to cater to the needs of our children.

Our best schools are those that use English as the medium of instruction. Most traditional vernacular schools in the country are, without exception, outdated and out of touch with modern methods of education. This is why even our politicians and bureaucrats who "believe passionately in Bengali nationalism" end up sending their children to English medium schools. Our findings have revealed that parents belonging to lower middle class and middle class families are seriously concerned with the bleak prospect of educating their children.

Reforming madrasa education and bringing it at par with the needs of new millennium is one of the election pledges of the government. Proponents of madrasa education must realise that religious education without a modern base would turn out graduates dependent on societal charities, with job opportunities restricted to mosques and madrasas only.

Most of the countryside is now a portrait of human misery because of our failure to invest in our children's future. The condition in which our women and children live beggars any description. This in a country in which many are still basking in the glow of their riches. But if education is a means to transform lives, then the substandard education that our children got in the earlier days was of little use.

Vision-2021, dedicated to the young voters by the AI, will remain unfulfilled if the potentials of our teeming millions of children are not fully exploited at the primary stage of their schooling. The task should start right now and without any delay.

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Culture in knowledge economy

Culture indeed was instrumental in the long struggle that culminated in the war of liberation in 1971. Since then, culture has always worked in favour of the nation by protecting it from evil forces, including the venom of fundamentalism. Culture, hopefully, will work in tandem with knowledge to turn Bangladesh to a middle-income country in less than twenty years.

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PRIME Minister Sheikh Hasina has on several occasions called upon the citizens of Bangladesh to create a knowledge-based economy for the overall progress and development of the country. Members of the civil society have also been using the term, hoping that in the near future poverty will be eliminated from the country because of the creation of this new economy.

A knowledge-based society is one in which knowledge plays an important role in shaping the more important institutions. In the contemporary world, because of the stunning growth of technology, including information and communication technology (ICT), access to and dissemination of knowledge have become much quicker than ever before in human history.

This has made it easier for the government, the corporate sector, the universities and other vital institutions to use and spread knowledge within the shortest possible time. International relations, world trade, humanistic and scientific research have received a much-needed shot in the arm because of this technological advancement.

In a least developed country like Bangladesh, the aspiration to build a knowledge-based society might take a few more decades, although the fact that our leaders are now trying to understand the concept is welcome indeed.

The ideas relating to this futuristic society (or economy) have been passed on from Europe, where members of the civil society have joined hands with politicians, corporate leaders, intellectuals and politicians to ensure that a knowledge-based economy would ensure the best living conditions.

The cultural policy of the European community, now in its third phase of implementation, that began in 2007 and will end in 2013, aims at the transformation of Europe into the most competitive economy of the world. The founding of the European Cultural Parliament (ECP) in 2002 envisages the recognition of cultural and aesthetic values as the essence of a new European society.

The inclusion of culture as a vital element of the knowledge-based economy in the European agenda can inspire us to speed up our own intentions of becoming a middle-income country within a decade or so. Culture is an absolutely important part of a knowledge-based economy as it has the strength to humanise, moderate, and sensitise interaction in every sphere of life.

Culture as such is not regarded as mere heritage or the creative arts, in its new sense as defined by the ECP; it becomes a very important constituent of human interaction that encompasses the arts and history, and goes beyond to lend a unique human touch to every action that goes on in society.

The embedding of culture in a knowledge-based economy can, therefore, ensure the reevaluation and transformation of activities within the important institutions of Bangladesh. This could result in eliminating corruption, high-handedness, procrastination and similar negative attributes that are detrimental to the progress of any society including ours.

At the same time, a knowledge-economy, embracing culture, could ensure better production and smoother distribution of goods and services within a society, and thereby energise the economy.

If humans have no qualms of conscience, education cannot stop them from indulging in activities that affect other human beings or the environment. Only with a clear conscience can they work in a manner befitting their true nature.

A knowledge-based economy, with a cultural orientation for all individuals, will make it possible for Bangladesh to bridge the gap between its present economic condition and the middle-income status the country is aspiring for.

Humans, empowered with culture, are expected to act rationally and are unlikely to intentionally harm, or create problems for, others. In this case, people working in all sectors of our society could be expected to put in their best efforts, within their own domains of operation, keeping in mind the collective interest of society.

In such a situation, production will have increased manifold, and corruption will have diminished substantially, if not erased totally, over the next ten years. Also, tension between owners and workers will have decreased to an extent that would benefit both sides.

Similarly, government departments and agencies will have discharged their responsibilities more efficiently with the intention of working for the general people instead of becoming their masters.

A mix of knowledge and culture will help create a robust economy and produce people of conscience. This combination will help Bangladesh go a long way in mitigating many of her sufferings and realising the unfulfilled dreams of the millions of martyrs who sacrificed their lives for our independence.

Culture indeed was instrumental in the long struggle that culminated in the war of liberation in 1971. Since then, culture has always worked in favour of the nation by protecting it from evil forces, including the venom of fundamentalism. Culture, hopefully, will work in tandem with knowledge to turn Bangladesh to a middle-income country in less than twenty years.

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The MPO tug-of-war

The thrust of MPO is to ensure quality education but, as contemporary history bears out, its utilisation has been repeatedly undermined due to the need of elected leaders to fulfill their partisan needs.

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REcently, the cabinet decided to suspend the recently announced monthly pay order (MPO) list of non-government secondary and higher secondary educational institutions, which was prepared by the Ministry of Education, for three months.

It needs to be mentioned that most of the ministries have been faltering in executing their responsibilities with diligence and efficacy. In such a situation, the Ministry of Education is an exception because of the relative success that it has achieved in terms of timely and free distribution of textbooks, and digitalising course curriculum and books. Most pertinently, the secondary enrolment rate has gone up significantly since the AL-led government assumed office.

Taking a cue from this, one is compelled to inquire, why did the government decide to suspend the MPO list prepared by Dr. Nurul Islam Nahid, given the fact that he has been the least politically controversial figure to date?

First and foremost, as reported by the media, some ministers and state ministers expressed

serious resentment because institutions of their choice, in other words their vote banks, were not included in the list. They alleged that most of the institutions on the list were established during the preceding BNP-Jamaat coalition regime and institutions established during the last AL government were excluded.

The thrust of MPO is to ensure quality education but, as contemporary history bears out, its utilisation has been repeatedly undermined due to the need of elected leaders to fulfill their partisan needs.

The education minister, in his defense, informed the cabinet that the list had been prepared according to the relevant rules and on the basis of a performance index, which lays out the criteria for including educational institutions on the MPO list -- student numbers, numbers of students taking public examinations every year and the pass rate, and the dates of government approval for the institutions.

Many eminent experts have backed the education minister. According to the AL information and research secretary "he (Nahid) is a visionary minister, and all should cooperate with him." In the words of National Professor

Kabir Chowdhury, Chair of the National Education Policy Formulation Committee: "Under governments formed by political parties, there will always be political pressure, but the education minister and the ministry must rise above that with courage. And I believe Nahid has been doing that," he said.

No doubt education for all as a long-term vision is good, but without articulation, in a transparent manner, of the financial commitments vis-à-vis expenditure alongside institutional arrangements and reforms, the concept cannot be translated into reality.

Furthermore, the vision of a corruption-free, poverty-free and literate Bangladesh is very good, but it holds little value when our leaders are yet to plant the seeds for this mode of thinking to grow in their conscience. After all, visions without solid and fully committed plan of actions are similar to providing a blind man with a candle to help him cross a road!

According to this daily's online poll, 75 percent of the respondents (out of 300) opined that the PM's directive to suspend the recently announced MPO list was not justified. Education Adviser Dr. Alauddin Ahmed has now been entrusted with the responsibility of preparing a new MPO list and, surely, he will not repeat the "mistakes" that Dr. Nahid made.

To conclude, similar to Dr. Manmohan Singh who continues to face the wrath of his own Congressmen, Dr. Nahid has also been blamed



Nurul Islam Nahid: Under fire

for not understanding the "pulse of AL politics." India's current paradigm shift towards socio-economic models (right to food, right to work, etc) of developed countries can be attributed to Dr. Singh's ability to prioritise national interest over partisan needs. However, in terms of political legitimacy, Dr. Nahid may not be as fortunate as Dr. Singh.

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