

Brain pool: How large and of what quality?

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TO take a nation forward requires numerous factors to work in unison. Fundamental to this process, however, is the quality of its people -- its brain pool. When the brain pool is undeveloped, underdeveloped, or depleted (brain drain) it sets serious constraints on how far a nation can go and how quickly.

Harbison depicts the matter of the brain pool rather eloquently. According to him: "Human resources constitute the ultimate basis for wealth of nations.

Capital and natural resources are passive factors of production; human beings are the active agents who accumulate capital, exploit natural resources, build social, economic and political organisations, and carry forward national development."

Only when the brain pool -- skills, talents, energies, and knowledge -- is effectively developed and harnessed does a nation attain the capacity and credibility to become a "star" in its own right.

The importance of the brain pool is amply evident from a campaign directed at the underprivileged in an advanced industrialised county entitled, "A Mind is a Terrible Thing to Waste." Such thinking reflects how much the particular country values its people. It is important, therefore, to reflect on the capacity of "our" brain pool and contemplate ways of nurturing it.

At a recent conference on Bangladesh at Harvard, sadly, there was talk about the "silent exclusion" that pervades

Bangladesh's education system: students go through school; yet they cannot demonstrate the most basic learning skills. And of every 100 students entering the education system, only 15 to 20 complete their 10-year educational programme. What happens to the 80-85% that drop out at some point, how they fend for themselves, and where they end up ultimately need answers because of their serious economic, political, and social consequences.

Then there are the disabled, an estimated 10% of the population, many of whom are not "mentally incapacitated." With sharp minds but very little access to proper education, can the system allow these minds to be wasted and relegated to obscurity?

Additionally, in the 1990s, China's gross enrollment ratio (GER) [in tertiary education] -- the percent of university age population enrolled in post-secondary education -- was at par with Bangladesh at 5%. By 2006 it rose to 23% (compared to 58% in Japan, 59% in the UK, and 82% in the United States).

For Bangladesh, the GER in 2007, according to a Unesco database, was 8% for males and 4% for females. Simply put, of all "university-age" males and females in Bangladesh, only 8% of males and 4% of females are "enrolled" in higher educa-

tion. What are they learning? And where have the rest gone? Why has the nation failed to nurture, empower and harness those who melted away?

The matter of learner competency was also discussed at the conference. From the "top-10" schools in the country, 70% of the students demonstrated the required competencies, while only 2% did so from the general education stream. The fact that 98% of the students from the plethora of schools in the country "complete" some form of schooling but do not

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demonstrate basic learning competencies is yet another indication of the number of minds that this nation continues to waste frivolously. And to think that this has been continuing for the past forty years and more! Should there not be national outrage, given these statistics, instead of the widespread apathy that appears to prevail?

Similar apathy has not evaded the higher education institutions in the country either. The recent spate of violence and turmoil across JNU, SUST, BUET, Jagannath University, etc., is a case in point. One wonders why these higher

seats of learning continue to axe themselves, while similar institutions in other countries keep forging ahead, without interruption, while constantly innovating and introducing new programmes and methods of learning to equip themselves for generations to come.

For Bangladesh, with a significant educational budget, a complex bureaucracy to oversee education, numerous international agencies funneling money into a bevy of new educational programmes, and a stream of international "experts"

providing advice, is this it? More pointedly, is this how we will continue to develop and equip the country's brain pool? From a comprehensive perspective, in this most vital of sectors, the failure has been quite abject despite the grand celebrations that occasionally tout its accomplishments.

To understand this incomprehensible state of affairs, first and foremost it is important to determine who gains by allowing such mindless squandering of human potential? Are they internal to the nation, people who are able to extend and strengthen their grip and domination by breeding illiteracy and incapacitating the people to serve their arcane purposes? Or do they represent external forces that either want to eliminate competition by nipping human development in the bud

or ensure a steady supply of low-quality labour to be hired away to perform tasks they shirk from? The motives and barriers that stand against developing Bangladesh's brain pool must be clearly understood.

Thus, it is vital for this nation to undertake a brain pool project. Pertinent questions to guide the project include: How large really is our country's brain pool? What is its quality/capability? What should be the distinct flavor and positioning of this pool? How will it primarily meet the needs of Bangladesh?

Importantly, it must have a distinctly indigenous flavour but with a global orientation. Such a pool must be developed with a clear vision, energetic mission, measurable goals, defined targets and clear levels of responsibilities.

The brain pool project must be a national endeavour, owned and driven by the Bangladesh citizenry and coordinated by a pool of experts with roots in Bangladesh. All political parties must agree to a "hands off" policy on this vital project if they practice what they preach about building a vibrant nation. Surely a lot of things must change -- structurally, drastically and quickly! Otherwise, the toxic waste products of the education system will stunt the nation's growth. And if the squandering of the nation's minds continues, the unconscionable callousness of those who are responsible must be exposed.

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Building participatory inclusive governance

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POOR governance is one of the principle causes of extreme poverty. In Bangladesh, the majority of the nation's decision-making power rests in the hands of a minority of elites. There is generally not much scope for the more vulnerable groups in society to participate in the process. If the government wants to increase equity, it needs to address dimensions of exclusion and develop spaces for participation which allow extremely poor people to demand their rights and hold government to account.

Participatory inclusive governance aims to reduce poverty by increasing citizens' influence in decision-making. The approach can contribute to more equitable access to services and resources for extremely poor households. When people are equipped with knowledge of their entitlements and are empowered to engage with state mechanisms, they are better positioned to secure their rights and pursue their interests.

The structural causes of poverty can be addressed by improving dialogue between Union Parishads (UP), local actors and communities. By working together and combining their efforts, these actors can protect the most vulnerable in society and help them build their assets and resilience. Government programmes and resources should be targeted at the poorest and UPs need to enable community collective action, to ensure that this happens. For example, the government has promised to distribute khas lands to the poorest, for cultivation and livelihood generation. However, in reality this land often doesn't reach the poorest, who are illiterate and often unable to fill in the application forms. Collective action with poor communities leads to a more equitable distribution of public resources and builds community solidarity.

The UP has a critical role in securing inclusive development outcomes for marginalised people. Changing the mindset of UP councils and building capacity is crucial in order for them to develop their own strategies for poverty eradication. The UP councils need to become more open to the participation of citizens in decision-making, including initiating participatory planning and budgeting, and the inclusion of extremely poor citizens in the targeting of UP resources.

Participation and negotiation have led to new issues being raised and new channels being used to access decision-makers. This empowers both the UP council to fulfil its roles and responsibilities as well as the extremely poor people to become active citizens. For example, giving the poor influence over targeting of government resources, such as safety net cards, has been shown to improve allocation and reduce leakages and corruption. In the past, UP members often allocated these cards according to their own interests or exchanged them for bribes.

An international NGO is successfully implementing

the participatory inclusive governance approach in its Social and Economic Transformation of the Ultra-Poor (SETU) project. The project is part of an organisation under a partnership between the governments of Bangladesh and UK, which aims to graduate 1 million households out of extreme poverty in Bangladesh. The SETU project alone is working with almost 20,000 households.

The northwest is an area characterised by a lack of economic development, a reliance on a backward agrarian economy, and a high incidence of landlessness. Here, SETU identifies the poorest paras to work with and then facilitates social, economic and political empowerment within the community. Natural Leader Organisations (NLOs) are developed at the union level, led by community members ("natural leaders") who can represent the voice of poorer households, essentially acting as a pressure group on the UPs.

Processes of empowerment are facilitated through community-led social analysis. Community collective action, such as sanitation promotion, has built solidarity and increased the confidence and social status of the poorest members, especially those recognised as natural leaders.

SETU has worked with UPs to change their mindset by strengthening their understanding, their planning and budgeting and their ability to engage citizens. The UP councils were encouraged to implement their own poverty reduction strategies, which have focused on government safety net programmes, employment opportunities, livelihoods and education.

In 2010, SETU facilitated "open budget sharing" sessions in all working unions, creating a participatory space for the extreme poor to publically question the UPs on their budget allocations. As a result, the UPs allocated part of the budget (2.6% in the respective unions) specifically for the extreme poor for the first time. In 2011, this budget increased by about 38%.

This shift in political culture, reflected in increased tax revenues, suggests that citizens in those areas trust the UPs to spend their money accountably. UPs have also been reluctant to collect tax in the past when political relations were based on informal practices such as vote purchasing. This change reflects a move towards democratisation and improved relations between the UP and citizens.

Participatory inclusive governance is based on the idea that improving governance will reduce poverty and highlights the importance of empowerment. Building the necessary capabilities to develop locally responsive social protection and livelihood strategies is essential. This approach addresses social disparities and ensures accountability in service delivery.

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Responsible futures matter for realising Asian Century

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THE massive development in information and communications technology together with economic reforms in the developing nations over the last two decades have made responsible futures research more urgent. The new opportunities for responsible futures research in Asia are wide. Almost all developing nations of Asia have been achieving high to moderate growth over the last two decades, thanks to economic globalisation and information revolution, which have created more opportunities for trade in these nations. It is time to identify new areas of research with a view to addressing Asia's development challenges of the 21st century, and deliver constructive policy directions in order to sustain growth momentum under difficult and uncertain conditions.

The 19th century was regarded as British century, the 20th was an American century, and the 21st is called the Asian century. The debate on this subject goes back to 1985 when the US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations discussed this at length. The Australian government established a committee in 2011, led by a former treasury secretary, to produce a white paper on Asian century in 2012.

However, the front-runner in studying this phenomenon is the Asian Development Bank (ADB), which published a report called "Asia 2050: Realising the Asian Century" in June 2011. The ADB arranged launching of the report in Singapore, New Delhi and New York during the last half of 2011.

ADB emphasised that Asia's rise this century would be led by seven countries -- China, India, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Malaysia and Thailand. In 2010, these seven economies had a total population of 3.1 billion (78% of Asia) and a GDP of \$14.2 trillion. But by 2050, they will account for 45% of the global GDP. Thus, under the Asian century scenario, Asia's GDP would rise to more than \$170 trillion and account for 51% of the global output, compared to the only 27% at present.

On the basis of Purchasing Power Parity (PPP), GDP per capita in Asia would also rise to almost \$46,000, compared to the global average of \$36,600. Global economic activity would shift towards Asia and contribute to half of global trade and investment. About 3 billion more Asians would enjoy a prosperous standard of living comparable with the present day Europeans (ADB 2011).

Indeed, if realised, this is going to be a massive change for Asia. This is not the first time that such an optimistic view has been expressed about Asia. The World Bank, in its East Asia Miracle, was very optimistic about the newly industrialised East Asian nations in early 1990s. In 2002, an ADB study revisited the East Asia Miracle and comes to a conclusion that "the future is not going to be a replay of the past" (Quibria 2002).

Before all these drama taking place in Asian stage, a Swedish development economist and a Nobel laureate in economics in 1974 (he subsequently surrendered

the award), wrote a bestseller called Asian Drama: An Inquiry into the Poverty of Nations in 1968. In the 1970s and '80s, it was a must-read book for the students of development worldwide. Professor Gunnar Myrdal, a Swede, was also instrumental in providing policy alternatives to Scandinavian nations to adopt social welfare-led growth model for sustainable development. As a result, these nations have been enjoying a long "growth with equity era" over the last three decades.

What did Myrdal have in mind for Asia? He was very pessimistic indeed and emphasised that Asia was plagued by overpopulation, corrupt regimes, and poverty; and the countries risked being failed nations (Myrdal 1968). This was painful for Asian leaders. However, if one goes back to pre-1968 Asia, was Myrdal wrong? Asia, indeed, remains as overpopulated, has some corrupt regimes and, of course, suffers from hunger and poverty in the early part of the 21st century. Unlike Myrdal's time, Asia is undergoing an information technology revolution and has been in two financial crises in the last 10 years. It also has the added burden of global warming and climate change.

To prove Myrdal wrong, it is important that Asia keeps growing sustainably. In doing so, the nations would need new policy initiatives under changed conditions. Moreover, global warming induced extreme weather conditions are a major burden. As a result, policy interventions in new areas are needed with a view to bringing innovative and effective reforms in the present hostile global environment, financially and environmentally.

First, it is important to identify the responsible policy issues such as transition; climate change adaptation and mitigation; population and social safety net; natural resources, and so on. Second, it is important to investigate future policy reforms that matter to a nation:

- Productive sustainability in agriculture and food security for all;
- Public revenue and infrastructure, including public health and sanitation;
- Population, migration and intra-country movement of people;
- Decentralisation and devolution of administration; and
- Of course, sustainable momentum in growth. Three billion Asians achieving present day European living conditions in 2050 is likely to be realised, if the European styled institutions for society, economics, and politics (trust and tolerance) can be established in the next 40 years. There is, however, an urgent need to fix a few problems, particularly in taxation (revenue generation) and infrastructure building (public spending) -- including public health and rural sanitation facilities.

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