

BITTER TRUTH

Revitalising primary education



Md. ASADULLAH KHAN

If a country wants social and economic development, it will have to break away from its orthodox and backward mould, and there must be policy initiatives to integrate social justice with economic development. This calls for a thrust in literacy as an integral part of this policy. But as it stands today in Bangladesh, there is only petty party feuds and money making to the utter disregard of human resource development. Literacy is the most crucial factor in achieving the MDG. While we brag about our education system making a leap forward, we are unable to discern if it is functioning properly.

Since independence, primary education has been treated with neglect and tokenism. Some leaders may have visionary ideas, but those 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 have failed to cater to the needs of our children. According to a Unicef report (2005-10), literacy rate in Bangladesh is about 56% against net enrolment rate of 89%. Apart from politically sponsored programmes, education appears to have become a low priority, where only 2.3% of the GDP goes to education.

Even if the governments had thought about the importance of primary education, their ventures lacked initiative and commitment and had almost fallen through because of financial constraint as well as corruption in the utilisation of the funds allocated. With about half the total population steeped in illiteracy, as the education minister mentioned in a write-up in the *Prothom Alo* (September 17), the effort to eradicate illiteracy by 2014, as stipulated in the electoral pledge of this government, can hardly be achieved. According to a survey made by the primary and mass education cell of the government in 2010, there are no

schools in about 16,142 villages out of 68,000 villages in the country.

With 50% of the students admitted to Class I dropping out just before completing Class 5, as revealed by NCTB in 2010, it will be a big challenge for the government to implement its programme of achieving cent per cent literacy in the foreseeable future without

improvement in infrastructure, strict adherence to merit in teacher recruitment and accountability of the teachers. Government and NGO efforts to advance adult literacy programmes did not succeed because a very insignificant number of people participating in such programmes only learnt to write their names, and the drives made no effort to enhance either their perception capability or skill.

Analysing the slow progress of primary education one is led to believe that poverty of the parents is the prime cause of such massive dropout. Experts feel that government must take effective measures to meet the challenges coming from shortage of trained teachers, ramshackle educational institutions in rural areas, non-availability of text books and writing materials, provision of mid-day meals in poor rural areas and,

foremost of all, accountability of the educational institutions.

Irregular attendance of children and teachers, disruption of school functioning, and differences in quality of schools persist. The findings of some NGOs associated with the task of building a sound base for primary education in rural areas paint a grim picture of

poor learning achievements of in-school children -- nearly 50% can't read or write or do basic arithmetic in spite of spending four to five years in school.

These challenges have to be met. Surely no benefit could be reaped 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."

As far as the government is concerned, it is statistics about the spread of literacy that count. But if education is a means to transform lives, then sub-standard education is of little use. In the mad rush for high literacy rate, we have lost sight of the quality of education. The need of the hour is to strengthen our traditional system of education by imposing responsibilities, concurrently with rise in the

salaries of bright and committed teachers recruited through fair selection process.

Improvement in quality is not possible without planning, beginning with clear goals as to what is to be achieved. Experts opine that children should learn the basics of reading, writing and numeracy 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. There have been serious lapses in the whole management process as well as teaching method, aggravated mostly through recruitment of incompetent teachers.

The reason for the poor quality of schooling and poor attendance is the physical infrastructure, which is woefully inadequate. In most schools in the villages, classes are held under a tree during dry season, and they remain closed during the rainy season. In most villages, many of the buildings have leaky roofs, making it difficult to hold classes during rains. A report with photograph of the students published in a Bangla daily in the recent past indicated that children in non-government primary schools in Lalmonirhat and Shimulia (Manikganj) are attending classes in the open with their books and writing materials placed on bricks. Some of them even brought sacks to be used as floor mat for sitting.

With ruling party high-ups influencing teacher appointment in most of the private schools in the country and taking their share from the development fund, the managing committee including the headmaster can hardly enforce the policy guidelines and criteria in the appointment of teachers. Sadly true, people entering the teaching department through hefty kickbacks or personal relations with the ruling party elites hardly feel interested in teaching. They are more interested in finding a way to recover the money. The result: teachers don't teach and students don't learn.

The writer is a columnist of *The Daily Star*. E-mail: aukhandk@gmail.com



SHAFIQ ISLAM/DRINK NEWS

If education is a means to transform lives, then sub-standard education is of little use. In the mad rush for high literacy rate, we have lost sight of the quality of education.

Let us not forget history

KHORSHED ALAM

It is commonly said that we do not learn from history. This is by and large true, but that does not mean that we should not remember history and recall where we had gone wrong. If we had taken lessons from history, perhaps we would not have repeated the mistakes of the past.

Awami League with its grand alliance and BNP with its four-party alliance were the two real contenders in the 2009 parliamentary elections. The people opted for AL. It was not merely an anti-incumbency sentiment of the people. It was much more than that. The verdict of the people clearly reflected their assessment of the performances of the immediate past government led by the BNP four-party alliance.

Let us go back to 1990 when, after a popular upsurge, the government of General H.M. Ershad had to step down and Chief Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed was installed as the acting president through a consensus of all political parties. He appointed some advisers to assist him in running the administration and holding the national election.

The election was held in early 1991 and BNP emerged victorious with AL being in the opposition. Transfer of power took some time since the Constitution had to be amended with the consent of all political parties in the parliament to transform the presidential form of government into a parliamentary form. Begum Khaleda Zia became the prime minister and the acting president handed over power to her formally in May or June of 1991. Mr. Saifur Rahman became the finance minister.

Under his stewardship economic management was quite satisfactory. But all the positive developments in the economic front were frustrated in the political arena and by the law and order situation. The opposition political parties took advantage of these weaknesses and mounted political agitations. The AL spearheaded the anti-government movement. There were frequent hartals, at times with long periods of work stoppages called "lagatar hartal."

The next election was due in 1996. AL did not expect a fair election under the aegis of BNP-led government, so they raised the demand for a formalised system of a caretaker government (CTG) for a period of three months for holding the national election. BNP opposed it and

went ahead and held the election in February, 1996, which AL boycotted. It was virtually a one-party election and popular movement got intensified. Eventually, BNP conceded and agreed to incorporate the provision of the CTG in the constitution. The opposition parties demanded its incorporation before Independence Day, 1996.

The Parliament sat through the night of March 25 and, at the dawn of March 26, incorporated the system of CTG in the Constitution. Begum Khaleda Zia soon thereafter handed over power to the last retired Chief Justice Habibur Rahman, as per the provision of the amended Constitution, to be the chief adviser. The lesson that an incumbent government has to read the pulse of the people in good time to avoid chaos and eventual capitulation was not learnt. Thus the system of CTG

We had hoped that the party going to power would not forget the history of mis-governance in order not to be dumped by the people five years later, and would keep the welfare of the people and the nation uppermost in their mind.

got embedded in the Constitution and Chief Justice Habibur Rahman was vested with the mandate of holding the national election of 1996.

Election was held in time and AL came out victorious. During AL's rule from 1996 to 2001 there were some positive developments. But there was perception of irregularities and corruption. Law and order situation also deteriorated. Thus ended the rule of AL in 2001.

BNP-Jamaat alliance ruled from 2001 to 2006, but its image was badly tarnished due to mis-governance. Young Turks had virtually taken over from the senior leadership, which got alienated from the mainstream of governance. Secondly, corruption was at its highest level from top to bottom. The country was rated as the most corrupt one for some consecutive years.

Going back to history, people did not forget the machinations of BNP-Jamaat alliance in trying to hold an election in January 2007 under Chief Justice K.M. Hasan by making him the last retired CJ through raising the retirement age of the justices from 65 to 67. An incorrect voters' list was prepared by the CEC Justice M.A. Aziz. The last nail in the coffin was put in by the president when he made himself the chief adviser. All political parties started demonstrations and rallies. Violence led to killings on the streets and virtual anarchy reigned. Thus came the emergency rule on January 11, 2007 and Fakhruddin Ahmed, a former governor of Bangladesh Bank, was appointed chief adviser.

All these happenings of the recent past should have been constantly borne in mind by AL, the party whom the people had voted to power with a massive mandate in 2008.

The campaign was spearheaded by the veteran retired civil servant H.T. Imam, who was made prime minister's adviser for public administration with the status of a minister. The commitments were all time-bound and subject to public scrutiny. The first test of the new government had been the formation of the cabinet with people of known efficiency and integrity. Secondly, the ongoing corruption cases should have been pursued vigorously and in a nonpartisan manner.

We had hoped that the party going to power would not forget the history of mis-governance in order not to be dumped by the people five years later, and would keep the welfare of the people and the nation uppermost in their mind. We now see how the government started on the wrong foot by inducting absolutely new and raw hands keeping the veterans outside. The net outcome has been poor governance.

The latest share market scam, Destiny Group's siphoning off of people's money, Padma Bridge scandal and finally Hall-Mark's looting of a colossal amount of depositors' money are eloquent examples of poor governance. But we do not see any determined action to stem the rot and bring the offenders to book.

So, we wish that the government wakes up at the fag end of its tenure. Some tinkering only by inducting a few new faces and reshuffling the cabinet do not seem to us to be adequate. Some heads should have rolled.

The writer is a former Governor of Bangladesh Bank.

Social Business: Vehicle for achieving self-sufficiency

JAHANGIR ALAM SARKER

The success of social and economic developments in Bangladesh depends on social business. The majority of the 160 million people in Bangladesh are poor. Social and economic reforms must begin with the poor, and that's why social business plays a crucial role in the overall economic growth in Bangladesh.

Non-governmental organisations (NGO) are critical in reforming education, environment, employment and other areas. A significant portion of foreign development fund goes to these NGOs. They must remain active and engaged. Gopal Sengupta writes: "Despite the success of NGOs in improving access to justice for women and the poor, the question remains when and how the government will assume responsibility for perpetuating such reforms on both the national and the local level." Although the author is critical of the microcredit programme in Bangladesh, he is right on target about government's responsibility in moving forward with the progress that the NGOs have contributed so far.

In Bangladesh, the GDP has consistently remained over 5% during the last few years. This should have been higher, but corruption and poverty continue to inhibit the growth. For every one step forward, we have fallen back two steps. Corruption has put a big dent on distribution of foreign development funds. So the poor continue to suffer.

We need to become self-sufficient and self-reliant on our own resources. We have seen some evidence of this. Bangladesh has become less reliant on foreign resources over the last 10 years. A consistent GDP and the rising middle class are testament to the maturity of growth. But to sustain these achievements, we must strategically invest in development of the democratic institutions that would propel Bangladesh to a path of continuous prosperity and long-term self-sufficiency.

According to M.G. Quibria, foreign aid in Bangladesh needs to be evaluated against selectivity and need. There is a policy conundrum in this approach. Need-based aid generally ends up in poorly managed economy and risk mismanagement of aid. On the other hand, selective aid tends to ignore other needy countries. Therefore, a balance must be achieved. He says: "Assessments of both donors and recipients

suggest that Bangladesh achieved mixed results in aid effectiveness, although the country's performance in utilising aid seemed to have improved significantly in recent years. The mixed success of Bangladesh can be traced to shared failures on the part of both the government and donors."

Bangladesh cannot become complacent. It must continue to invest in social development issues. Risks must be taken to adopt social business initiatives. Being risk averse is not an option. Democratic institutions must be reformed and aligned with social business model. In order to become self-reliant and achieve self-sufficiency sound domestic policies must be undertaken. The influence of foreign politics must be contained. Kirit Parikh, a noted economist, underscored the influence of foreign politics: "Policies of national governments depend also on the policies of other governments. Policies of other governments get reflected in the world market prices. World market prices are in turn transmitted to the domestic markets to varying degrees depending on the policies of the national government. Even when a government insulates domestic prices from the world market prices, the poor cannot escape the influence of the world markets."

Political environment in Bangladesh remains precarious. It inhibits growth and exacerbates social and economic chaos. But as resilient as Bangladeshis are against political, social, and economic turmoil, they are becoming united, particularly the younger generation, to reform and rebuild the country through social and technological networks and concrete actions. Government is also taking actions to alleviate corruption and implement achievable policies. The growth of social business is a clear sign of change in Bangladesh. We cannot turn back.

The goals are clear for the people. They want jobs, food, education, and a stable society. These are all very attainable goals and are within reach. We have the manpower and we have tools like social business and microcredit. With government support and an undeterred commitment to building a stable democracy, a lot can be achieved to provide long-term prosperity and happiness to all of us.

The writer is lawyer and human right's activist; He is the author of *Social Business & Muhammad Yunus*. E-mail: advsagar29@gmail.com