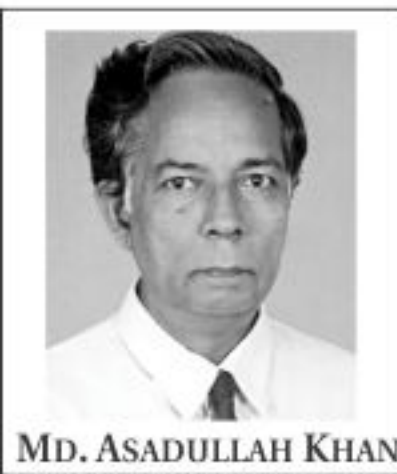


BITTER TRUTH

Break the racket in manpower export



Md. ASADULLAH KHAN

LURED by the promise of job offers, big money and better future thousands of Bangladeshis have fallen victim to unscrupulous brokers and fake manpower agents. Many of these migrant workers have perished while crossing the rough seas and horrid desert lands while others have seen their

dreams shattered by the cruel hand of fate. A report was published in a leading English daily on September 22 about the repatriation of 20 Bangladeshis who were lured to Tanzania for jobs in South Africa and abandoned at the Tanzanian border after their passports were snatched from them. They were arrested by the Tanzanian police and left to languish in jail for 11 months. This is a pathetic example of the vile modus operandi of some dishonest manpower agents in Bangladesh. Alongside the hardship of the workers, their pathetic state of living and deprivation of many aspirants have also come to public attention.

The ordeal of Jamal Hossain, who was stranded at the Tanzanian border because of the machinations and deceitful activities of a fake manpower agent who took Tk.6 lakh taka from him, is more than pathetic. In the past years, many people seeking jobs in Malaysia were cheated in the same manner, as evidenced by the fact that about 2 lakh 67 thousand workers were sent there illegally. One Liton of Ashulia and his cousin Hamid had to sell their ancestral land, their last resource, to pay Tk. 2 lakh each for a job in Malaysia. The payment only ensured their passage to Malaysia. As soon as they reached Kuala Lumpur, their ordeal began.

For the past one decade, some district towns and even remote villages have become busy recruiting centres for people seeking their fortune abroad. Every month hundreds of young men like Jamal Hossain,

Hamid and Liton -- all of them unemployed and mostly from low income families -- take foreign routes with dreams of finding better jobs and making big money. While some strike it rich, many end up in hellholes, only to get deported to their home country as paupers. And yet many others meet an even crueller fate, like the 11 Bangladeshis without valid travel documents who perished in the boat tragedy in 2005 off the coast of Morocco.

It is also the get-rich quick dream which fuels the vast network of manpower recruiting agents and brokers, many of them fake but emboldened to run this trafficking business because they reportedly enjoy the patronage of some law enforcers, passport and immigration personnel and airport staff, as pointed out by the members of the task force that visited Malaysia after a series of reports relating to harassment of Bangladeshi workers. The dirty game played by the fake manpower agents made the lives of the job seekers miserable after they landed in Malaysia. Some of them, in a bid to avoid arrest, spent months in the forested areas.

The investigation by the task force at that time identified 18 recruiting agents who were involved in this corruption racket in collusion with some members of Bangladesh Migrant Workers Association in Malaysia. The smuggling of illegal migrants is a thriving few hundred crore taka a year business. On an average, a few thousand youths are illegally sent to different countries every month through a well-knit network of shady recruiting agents who have links with local touts and

international syndicates.

Remittances sent by migrant workers account for a major chunk of the foreign currency reserves, boosting the economy and contributing to the development of the country. Yet the travails of the migrant workers are many, starting from the heavy burden of agency fees to fraud to poor working conditions to unfriendly environments that make their lives harder.

The big game of manpower export to Saudi Arabia, Middle East countries or Malaysia has been replete with instances of fraud, deceit and chicanery from the beginning. All the stories of harassment and hassle are

not known to people. Poor gullible people, mostly hailing from the countryside, trust these manpower agents and pay them the hefty fees they demand, believing all they say to be true. Sadly, once the payment is made the ordeal begins.

The heated debate and hectic lobbying initiated by Bangladesh Association of

International Recruiting Agencies (Baira), asking the government to hand over the Malaysian manpower export rights to them -- which the government acquired through the dynamic effort of the minister of expatriate welfare and employment -- has caused more concern than hope that sprang up the moment the aspirant younger population in the country learnt about the opening up of the door for jobs in Malaysia. Bangladesh can't allow this chance to slip by because of the demand raised by some unscrupulous members of the Baira. Baira can't deny the incidents of fraud and deceit resorted to time and again by a host of brokers that

devastated many families in the country.

With such incidents coming to public attention in both the countries, Malaysia stopped recruiting workers from Bangladesh. The crisis created since 1996 continued until now when Malaysia agreed to recruit 5 lakh workers on government to government basis. With the 5 lakh workers who will join the 7 lakh workers already working there, Malaysia would be the second largest manpower market for Bangladesh after Saudi Arabia. It is true that the government can't remain in business for all time to come, but it can't deviate from the state arrangement and agreement signed between the two governments. It will set a guideline, a policy framework in respect of migration cost to be followed by Baira or other recruiting agencies in future.

With investment climate in the country shrinking fast, population increasing and job opportunities eroding, all sections of the populace believe that the economic future of the country at present is inextricably linked to the manpower that remains idle for years without any redeeming future. Baira's demand has aroused fear and uncertainty among the aspirant workers willing to avail the long sought for chance for job opportunities in Malaysia. More importantly, aspirant workers have every reason to be happy because workers will be selected on district quota basis this time and they can avail the chance of going abroad at a reasonable cost of Tk.40,000 per worker, at the highest. The government can't be pressured into accepting Baira's demand that aims at enriching a handful of the 1,200 recruiting agencies along with some fraudsters, to the utter disregard of the welfare, living and job opportunities of the vast masses now without jobs and languishing in poverty.

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Redefining the role of universities

HAFIZ G. A. SIDDIQI

TRADITIONALLY, a university is perceived as an institution that imparts higher education to produce all kinds of highly skilled manpower the society needs for its overall development. It undertakes research to create knowledge for national and global benefit. The universities and societies are interdependent. They help each other develop. In the final analysis a university is an institution of higher learning. However, this characterisation does not encompass all the roles a university plays.

There was a time when roles of the universities were limited, elitist and exclusively for men. Oxford and Cambridge admitted women several centuries after they were established. The establishment of the oldest universities was church based. However, the intellectual discourses at the universities revealed a need for qualitative change in their role. By early 19th century, the modern universities dropped their elitist attire and started getting inclusive, admitting both men and women from all strata of society.

The modern universities paved the way for rapid social and cultural changes, becoming more secular and democratic. The changes gradually transformed the universities into cultural institutions that mold young minds. Andre Beteille says: "University education became socially significant because, as open and secular institutions, the universities served as examples and models of a new kind of social existence. The universities provided fertile breeding grounds for a new ideal of social life." This makes a university a social organisation. It deeply interacts with the society and provides "public services" outside the classrooms for the benefit of the society.

With secular and democratic policy of enrolment, universities have come close to common people. Professors no longer philosophise sitting in ivory towers. Universities create social capital through networking among scholars/academics and through collaborations with business houses. Since education is a globalised service, such networking extends globally. In the process, this leads to social changes, making the universities agents of change.

A university is also an economic enterprise. There is a mix of for-profit and not-for-profit universities. As

incubators of new ideas, universities serve as economic engines. In advanced countries research is undertaken to invent new technologies or processes to produce new products, patents or processes to serve the society better at lower cost. Many research activities tend to become business. Comprehensive universities maintain large "incubators"-- workshops, industrial laboratories -- where experiments are undertaken jointly with business houses to invent new products and processes. Commercialisation of the related patents, processes and products attracts new investment and creates new employment.

Unfortunately, business houses in Bangladesh do not support private universities in joint research by establishing "incubators" primarily because such a culture does not exist. The universities should try to win the confidence of large business houses by commercialising viable patents. Business houses should support the

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Private universities manifest economic roles much more strongly. For example, in Bangladesh, all the private universities are market and tuition driven. They operate on business principles. For their sustainability, all of them generate huge surpluses, although most of them claim to be not-for profit. These universities have made investments worth billions of taka. They employ a large number of teachers, administrative staff and other employees.

Besides, they spend huge amount of money in large procurements. All these economic activities have multiplier effects and certainly contribute to GDP. The ROI in the private education sector is perhaps highest among the legally run businesses in Bangladesh. The private universities pay and cause to pay to the government a huge amount as income tax.

All these make universities powerful economic enterprises. The education industry is one of the three largest industries in the world.

Universities play all these roles for the benefit of the society. Unfortunately, these roles generate some unintended negative impact. Higher education system, as long as it operates within capitalistic framework, tends to increase social inequality. The ultimate goal of development is to decrease/eliminate social inequality/injustice. But the modern university education so far has failed to reduce/eliminate inequality. Unless adequate interventions are made effective, prestigious expensive universities will tend to continue to widen the economic and social gap between the rich and poor.

The latter group, even if they are meritorious, cannot study at good universities because they are financially disadvantaged. It is, however, true that scholarships are granted to enable the poor students to obtain degrees from good universities. But experience indicates that the scholarships/financial assistance the universities in aggregate provide are far less than what is needed to enable all the meritorious poor students to pursue and complete their studies.

Consequently, most of the poor students are unable to go for higher study at good universities, and are deprived of the opportunity to climb up socially and economically. Therefore, mostly richer people get better education and succeed in getting better jobs with higher pay.

As a result, inequality between those who succeed in obtaining degrees from good universities and those who cannot tends to widen. It is a systemic flaw that perpetuates social injustice and defeats the development goals. This creates a dilemma: high quality higher education is necessary but the system enforces social discrimination and works as a deterrent to national development based on equity unless its negative impact is neutralised by appropriate policy.

The policy implication is that higher education should be considered as public good, and the state must ensure that no meritorious students are denied access to higher education at a good university only because they are financially disadvantaged. Policy makers must recognise that perpetuating inequality and injustice is not the goal of higher education; therefore they must revisit the higher education policies.

Financing: Challenge for quality education

MOHAMMED NORUL ALAM RAJU and M. MIZANUR RAHMAN

INCREASING population demands increasing attention and investment for education in a country. It is good to see that we have developed a lot in terms of enrolment in primary education but it is also true that now is the time to see to what extent the students in the government primary schools are getting quality education and to what extent they are getting access to, and opportunity for, higher education and job market.

Day by day, our educational sector is being engulfed by some affliction we all see but none of us can do anything about. If we just see the degradation of Dhaka University in world ranking, it will give a picture of where our education sector is going. We studied in government schools, colleges and universities but do we really want to see our children going to government educational institutions? There are of course a number of reasons behind this situation and problem in education financing is one.

For the 2012-2013 financial year, the finance minister proposed an allocation of Tk. 21,408 crore for the education sector. In the proposed budget, primary and mass education ministry will receive Tk. 9,825 crore and the education ministry will receive Tk. 11,583 crore. The percentage of allocation for education and information technology sector was decreased and is 11% (excluding subsidies, pension and interest) of the total budgetary allocation. For the 2010-2011 financial year, however, it was 11.8%. In his budget speech, Muhith said the government was determined to enhance the quality of primary education and implement the Education Policy in phases.

Investment in education is globally recognised as an investment on future development through enrichment of human capital, and is a proven means of promoting proactive intervention that exercises social development to a desired height. As a third world country, Bangladesh has always given priority to education throughout its development path. Along with constitutional obligation, the country is committed to ensure education for all children. Such efforts are also reflected in its policy and planning documents (five years plan, perspective plan) and its active responses towards international commitments such as Education for All (EFA) and Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). In their election manifestos, both the ruling and opposition political parties pledge to put the highest priority on education. As a result of such multifaceted efforts, literacy rate, which was 37.2% in 1990, had moved up to 58.4% in 2009, and net enrollment in primary education increased to 94.9% in 2010 from 60.5% in 1990 (GoB, 2012).

During the last two decades, allocation for the education sector lingered between 12% and 15%,

however, which is far from the Unesco prescribed level of 20%, or 6% of GDP. On the other hand, this rate is significantly less than many of the African countries. Over the last decade public spending on education in Africa has increased by more than 6% each year (Unesco, 2011). In Burundi and Mozambique, education spending rose by an average of 12% annually over the last decade. Out of the 26 countries with comprehensive data, only one -- the Central African Republic -- reduced education spending since 2000 and overall, sub-Saharan Africa spends 5% of its gross domestic product on education, which is second only to North America and Europe at 5.3%.

Among the south Asian countries Bangladesh's position is still third (2.4%) from the lowest while Sri Lanka and Pakistan remains the poorest spenders on education in the region. India is spending around 4% of their GDP for education. Nepal is fairly better placed with a 3.4% while the positive side is that Maldives has been maintaining a healthy 7.5% and remains South Asia's best country for education allocation, followed by Bhutan 5.2%.

Education is still one of the higher recipient sectors in the national budget. In 2012-13, education sector (MOPME & MOE) received 11.2% of total

budget allocation. But the fact is that 68% of this total allocation was proposed for non-development expenditure, of which major portion was allocated for salaries and allowances for the teachers while the rest covered logistics and maintenance; only a mere 0.5% was provisioned for teaching and capacity building activities.

This meagre provision affects setting of a clear aim in education. The teachers' community was expecting to have a bigger budget for capacity building purposes as innovative systems have been adopted recently. No teachers' manual has been developed and disseminated to the teachers yet, although two years passed after adoption of the new systems.

Whenever we look at the education sector we see politicisation, nepotism and corruption, and it may seem irrelevant to many of the readers to talk about education financing when major educational institutions of the country are in serious crisis. Of course, it is now essential for the stakeholders to keep sound environment in these institutions. We need to retain a congenial environment where all the students will find it safe to stay, study and plan for future development of the country.

With all the ill-governance prevailing everywhere, many readers may find education financing irrelevant. We agree with them and agree that establishing good governance in the education sector is a precondition; then comes ensuring proper education financing to prepare this huge population as human resources who will definitely contribute to the development of the country.

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