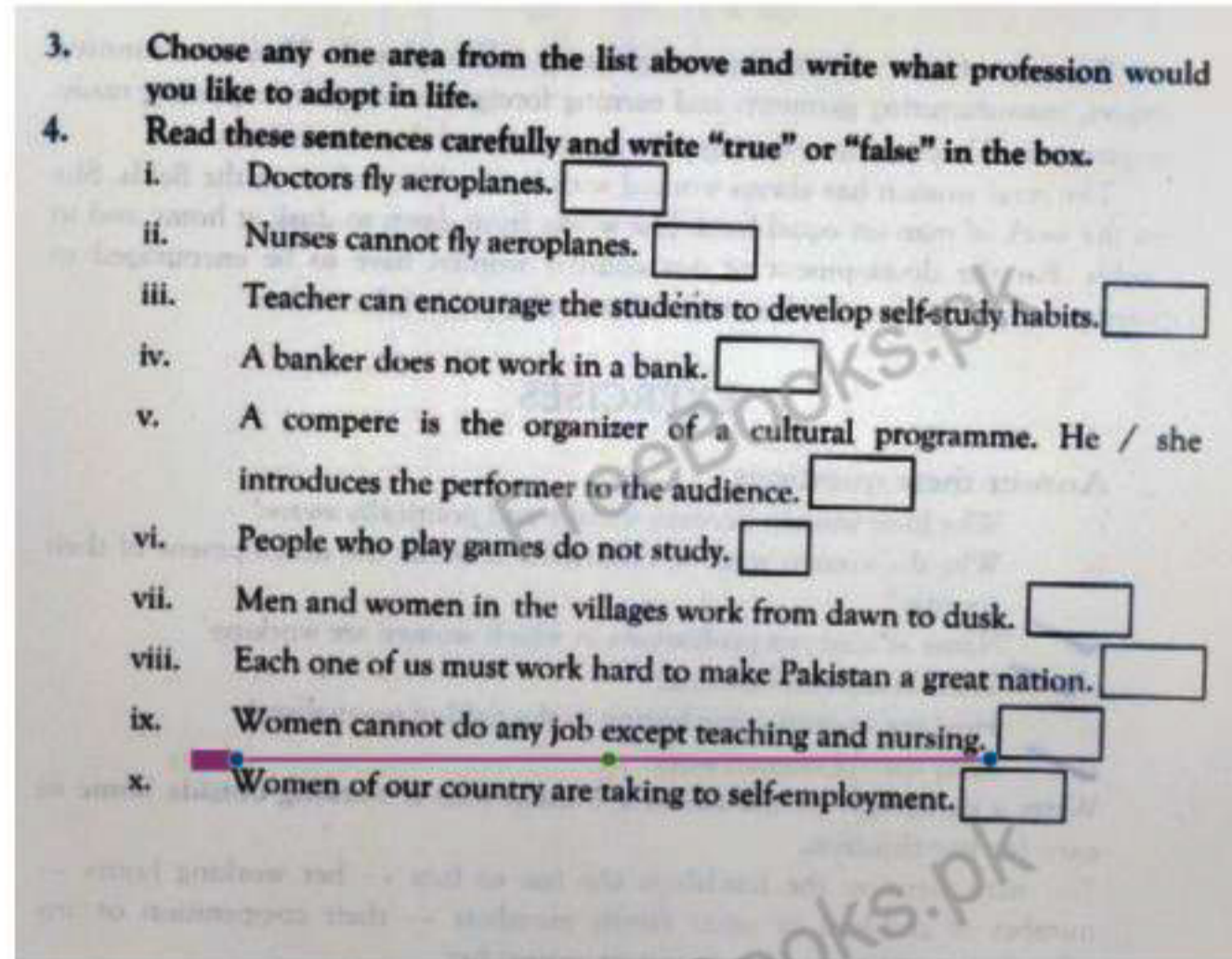


A page from a Malaysian textbook.



A page from a Pakistani textbook.



An illustration from a Bangladeshi textbook



A page from a Bangladeshi textbook.

REPRESENTATION AS IMPORTANT AS PARTICIPATION

Gender Stereotypes in Malaysian, Indonesian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi school textbooks

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AND
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Female education is widely believed to benefit society through both economic and non-economic channels. However, the gender gap in education has excessively focused (and bettered) on school enrolment, while ignoring what is happening within the schooling process.

In the last two decades, the Education for All (EFA) movement has had great success in bringing girls to school and closing the gender gap in enrolment. According to their latest report, the number of countries with 0.97-1.03 score in gender parity index at primary level has increased from 83 countries to 104 countries. The index for South Asian countries increased from 0.83 to 1.0 between 1999 and 2012 at the primary level. In contrast, gender bias in textbooks remains one of the “hardest to budge rocks in the road to gender equality in education” and is geographically more widespread than the gender gap in school enrolment. The UN Girls Education Initiatives (UNGEL) in their 10th anniversary report in 2010 mentioned gender stereotypes in textbooks as one of the five challenges towards gender equality in education. Yet, compared to other school-specific drivers of gender inequality, textbook content is frequently overlooked in the policy debate.

Around the world, students spend a majority of their classroom time (80-95 percent) on textbooks and teachers rely mostly on textbooks for delivering, organising and assigning homework. Research on classroom practices in developing countries shows that teachers barely challenge textbook stereotypes and instead reproduce them, thereby only propagating the problem while students passively receive what they are taught.

Textbooks, therefore, play a significant role in determining how students ought to perceive a particular event and develop attitudes towards particular groups, genders and other aspects of life. Textbook stereotypes is an almost invisible obstacle to equality in education and realising the full potential of girls. It affects girls' school performance, career choice and self-esteem. Yet, a UNESCO funded study shows that gender stereotypes are widespread in countries across the globe, whether they are ideologically progressive or conservative, economically developed or developing, geographically in the East or in the West.

For instance in America, MacCabee et al (2011), using children's books from the years 1901-2000 found that males are in the book titles twice as much as females, and are the central characters of the stories 1.6 times more than females. Textbooks in Syria were found to portray males engaging in a bustling world while conditioning females to stay in the background in servitude, often derogated and victimised. Likewise in Iran, female exclusion and misrepresentation is

common in textbooks.

On the other hand, textbook contents are rife with male chauvinism. Primary school textbooks were found to over-represent males in all categories, the most stereotyped of which was professional occupations in China. Likewise, our review of the secondary literatures from popular journal sites confirm similar gender stereotypes in textbooks used in Germany, Greece, Spain, Norway, Canada, France, Hong Kong, Japan, Australia, Turkey, Palestine, Nigeria and many other countries.

In South and South-East Asia, women face a multitude of social and economic problems. Apart from discrimination, a reason women do not do well in terms of labour market participation is that they lack human capital. Therefore, schooling matters significantly for the labour market performance of women. Conversely, patriarchal customs and social norms continue to affect gender roles through socialisation processes at school and at home. A gender-insensitive school curriculum may particularly undermine the important role of education in addressing the existing sources of gender inequality in society.

However, countries in the South and South-East differ notably in a number of socio-economic as well as women development indicators. But it has been shown that gender stereotypes in the textbook are ubiquitous irrespective of the region and this trend is rife in the textbooks in all countries. Now the question is: To what extent does the gender stereotype exist in the textbook and does it vary across countries in South and South-East Asia?

To answer these questions, we conducted a quantitative content analysis to examine the presence of gender stereotypes in school textbooks in four countries

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in South and South-East Asia—Malaysia, Indonesia, Pakistan and Bangladesh. These countries were chosen because they are at different stages of socio-economic development and vary significantly in terms of progress in female schooling despite their patriarchal social structure. The sample countries also have a predominantly Muslim population, so an analysis of these countries can shed additional light on the relatively higher gender inequality in Muslim countries in education and social indicators. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first comparative study on gender stereotypes in school textbooks of these four major Muslim countries.

Our primary study population of interest is secondary school English language textbooks used in the ninth grade in the academic year of 2015. We analysed a total of 713 pages based on the 21 identified categories to recognise gender exclusion and quality of representation. Our analysis confirms a pro-male bias in textbooks: the aggregate female share is 40.4 percent in textual and pictorial indicators combined. Still, systematic under representation of females is evident regardless of whether we look at the text or pictures. Moreover, female characters were mostly associated with traditional and low-wage occupations as well as more passive personality traits.

The extent of stereotypes found in the textbooks, however, varies across countries. Overall, the proportion of female to male characters (text and pictures combined) is balanced in Malaysia and Indonesia (44.4 percent and 44.1 percent respectively) while this share is only 24.4 percent and 37.3 percent in Pakistani and Bangladeshi textbooks respectively. The Pakistani textbook consistently ranks below their Malaysian, Indonesian, and Bangladeshi counterparts in almost all gender indicators.

THE QUOTA CONUNDRUM

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Last Sunday (March 25, 2018), university students all over the country brought out a unique procession. Putting all their educational certificates around their necks, they took to the streets with mops and brooms. As the procession moved forward, the students started sweeping the streets. Hundreds of thousands of university and college students brought out this unique, peaceful demonstration all over the country demanding reformation of the government's current quota system in public service recruitment, where 56 percent of the candidates are recruited on a quota-based system: not one based on merit. Md Yamin Molla, Joint Convener of Shadharon Chhatra Odhikar Sangrakshan Parishad (Committee to Protect Rights of All Students) says: “It is a part of our cleaning campaign on the occasion of Independence Day. However, it also has a symbolic implication.”

One of his fellow protesters, Nur Muhammad, who completed graduation and post-graduation from the University of Dhaka explains the symbolic meaning: “Due to discriminatory quota system, qualified graduates cannot avail government jobs. We have to wait year upon year for a job only to be ultimately refused as we do not have the privilege of the quota. At the point, our educational credentials are rendered useless. We took to the streets with brooms and mops to convey the message that if the existing quota system is not reformed immediately, we shall be forced to take lesser jobs which do not require higher education degrees.”

College and university students of Bangladesh have been demonstrating for a reform of the quota system for more than a decade. Recently, the students' movement reached new heights when some protesters were arrested and the police foiled their demonstration near Shikha Bhaban by shelling the students with tear gas canisters on March 14, 2018. On the same day, students all over the country staged continued demonstrations by blocking the national highways, demanding the release of their comrades. On March 15 all of their comrades were released as a result of the intense protests.

However, the students' five-point demands to reform the quota system fell upon deaf years. Their demands include: reduction of quota down to 10 percent from 56 percent; recruitment of candidates on the basis of merit if eligible candidates with quota privilege cannot be found; no more special recruitment exam for the candidates eligible for quota; uniform age limit for all in government jobs and prevention of all forms of discrimination in the recruitment process which has been enshrined in Clauses 1 and 2 of Article 29 of Bangladesh's constitution.

To their dismay, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina announced on March 21, 2018 that the quota system for the



Protest at Chittagong University on March 25 against the existing quota system in government service.

PHOTO: STAR FILE

children and grandchildren of freedom fighters, who enjoy more than half of all the reservations (30 percent of 56 percent), will not be changed. However, she also said: “The existing quota system might be relaxed to that extent that if anyone cannot be found to fill the quota then steps can be taken to fill those vacant positions with other brilliant students.”

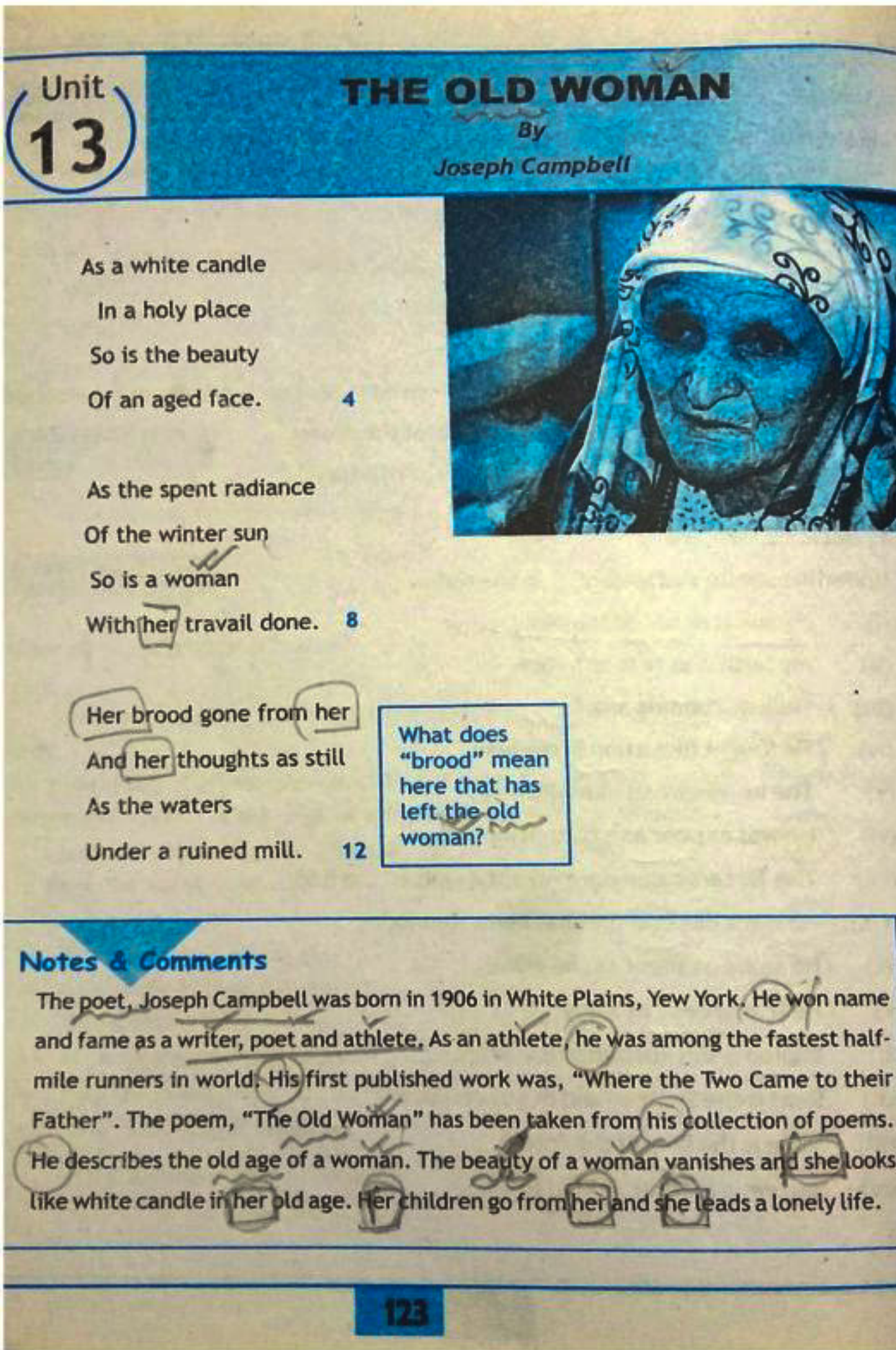
The PM's remark clearly indicates that the Bangladesh government is not going to reduce the current 56 percent quota in the public service recruitment. According to this system, if Bangladesh Government's Public Service Commission (PSC) recruits 100 officers through a recruitment exam, 44 of them will be recruited on the basis of merit, 30 will be recruited from the applicants who are children or grandchildren of freedom fighters, 10 female candidates will be recruited due to 10 percent female quota, 10 candidates will be recruited from under-developed districts (district quota), five will be recruited from indigenous candidates and one disabled candidate will be recruited thanks to only one percent disabled quota.

However, if the vacant positions cannot be filled with candidates eligible for quota, the reserved positions will remain vacant and special exams can be arranged only for these candidates to fill in the positions. However, this

system of prioritising quota over merit has been criticised by many, even by current and former bureaucrats, as the Bangladesh government is the first and foremost victim of this bizarre recruitment system.

Former adviser and renowned civil servant Akbar Ali Khan says: “Due to preserving huge number of job positions only for candidates with quota privilege, every year a large number of positions in different government offices remain vacant, which severely affects efficiency of the services. On the other hand qualified, meritorious candidates remain unemployed and the Bangladesh government is losing its potential human resources.”

In fact, data provided by the officials of the Ministry of Public Administration (MPA) support his statement. According to the MPA, the PSC could not recruit 366 cadre officers in the positions which were reserved for candidates with quota privilege after the 36th Bangladesh Civil Service Exam (BCS). However, this time, PSC recommended filling those vacant positions with the qualifiers of 37th BCS exam—first with the candidates having quota privilege and if not possible, then on the basis of merit. However, this recommendation is applicable only for the 37th BCS exam. In previous years, the vacant positions used to remain vacant.



A page from a Pakistani textbook.

quantity, is dependent on the selection of province-, grade- and subject-specific textbooks as well as the range and type of categories used.

Referring to the predominant nature of male ascendancy in textbooks around the world, sociologist R Blumbergsaid, “If aliens beamed onto Earth and read our school textbooks, they wouldn't have a clue about what women contribute to our society.” In contrast, the pace of reform is 'snail-like' and greater gender equality in education is often ignored in policy debates compared to other school-specific inputs. In our study, we found a high degree of gender stereotypes in the form of 'exclusion' and 'misrepresentation' in all the sample textbooks of four Asian Muslim countries.

Gender bias in textbooks is a global concern for educators today and it is evident in both countries that achieved gender parity in access to schooling (e.g. Bangladesh, India) as well as those who are yet to catch up (e.g. Pakistan, Afghanistan, Nigeria etc.). That indicates that the global reform agenda for gender equality in education has overlooked the issue of bias in the schooling process, even in countries that have succeeded in mobilising political support in favor of women's development (e.g. Malaysia). In this regard, the Global Monitoring Report 2015 rightly stressed the need to revise textbook content and restore gender balance as well as encourage children to question gender stereotypes in society.

Therefore, the reform for gender equality in education needs to go hand in hand with within-school reforms as well as reforms outside school gender relations (in the family, workplace and in socio-political spheres). One-dimensional reform—either in the schooling process or outside—in the long run will fail to ensure gender equality in education and also empowerment of women through education.

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For instance, 338 positions were vacant after the 35th BCS exam, 773 positions remained vacant after the 31st BCS exam, 784 positions were vacant after the 30th BCS exam, 792 after the 29th and 813 positions were vacant after the 28th BCS exam.

PSC organised the 32nd BCS exam only for candidates with quota privilege. However, due to a severe lack of qualified candidates among eligible candidates, PSC had to leave 1125 positions vacant. According to MPA, there are around 300,000 vacant positions at present in the public service sector. Many of these positions could not be filled due to the current discriminatory quota system.

Akbar Ali Khan and Kazi Rakib Uddin Ahmad (former civil servant and later appointed as Chief Election Commissioner) conducted a research study on the existing quota system in Bangladesh Civil Service in March 2008. In their report, they recommended a reduction in the quota to 20 percent. The report can still be found in the PSC office. However, the recommendation was never realised.

According to Akbar Ali Khan, the report stated that in 1977 almost all members of the then Pay and Service Commission expressed their opposition to enforcing any type of quota for recruiting government officers.

“Only one member, M M Zaman, spoke in favour of the quotas. However, he said that from 1987 the quota system needed to be diminished within 10 years through gradual decrease every year,” Khan says.

Even according to Zaman's recommendation, there should have been no provision of quota in government service after 1997. However, the government did not take any step to implement the recommendations made in the report.

Former Chairman of the PSC Dr Sadat Hossain says: “The quota is a special provision for under-privileged populations, and it's an exception. It can't be more than the merit provision. The system also needs to be time-bound. That means the government must clearly declare the expiry year of a quota provision. Special provisions can't continue after their necessity expires.”

In a situation where there are thousands of job positions vacant in the government service, which could not be filled due to the existing quota system, the Bangladesh government's stubborn refusal to reform the system according to the students' demands is quite surprising, not to mention self-defeating.

Bangladesh is a country of three million unemployed youth, 47 percent of whom are university graduates. In this reality, reforming the existing quota system has become a national claim. To ensure a brilliant and skilled workforce the government should take acceptable and rational steps to reform the quota system so that the underprivileged section of the population can be uplifted without compromising with the aspirations of a meritocracy.

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