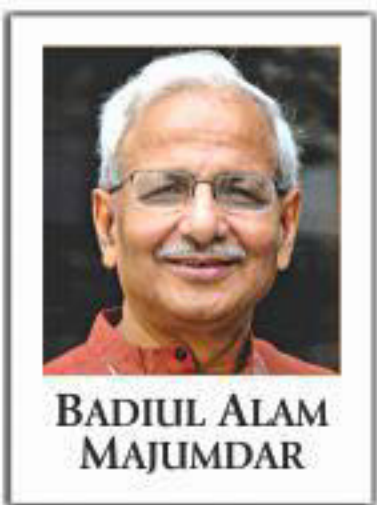


# The ball is in the PM's court



**M**ARKED by many questions, controversies and some degree of violence, the 11th parliamentary election took place on December 30. According to the Election Commission, the overall turnout was 80 percent, while it was less than 46 percent in the six constituencies where EVM was used. Six constituencies had the highest turnout rate of 99 percent.

The Grand Alliance had a "grand" victory in the election, winning 291 of the 299 constituencies where elections were held. By contrast, the opposition Jatiya Oikyafront alliance won only 8 seats. Given Bangladesh's political reality, such a devastating loss for Oikyafront is unusual, and creates serious questions in the minds of many observers about the quality of the election.

Many in the media, including social media, published reports of irregularities during the election. Questions were raised about the unusually high turnout in constituencies where paper ballots were used. Foreign media and some of our important development partners also raised the issue of irregularities. We feel that the Election Commission has the responsibility to investigate the allegations. If the investigation finds evidence to support those allegations, the EC may take appropriate action, including cancellation [Nur Hossain vs Nazrul Islam, 5BLC(AD)(2000)].

The Grand Alliance's grand victory and the Oikyafront's decisive loss in the polls could lead to serious consequences for the nation unless both the alliances seriously assess the



**Can Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina deliver the change necessary for the transformation of Bangladesh's politics during her record fourth term in office?**

unusual results and their consequences, and take appropriate actions. The consequences are likely to be dire unless both coalitions seriously engage in dialogue and reach an agreement to create opportunities for future transfer of state power on the basis of the will of the people. The ruling party has, through a controversial election, climbed on the proverbial tiger's back, and may be unwilling or perhaps even unable to disembark. The result will be the denial of voting rights of the people. So, we hope our leaders will show the courage and wisdom needed to negotiate a political dialogue.

To avoid a potential crisis, the prime

minister, who has achieved the unprecedented feat of becoming head of government for the fourth time, will have to provide leadership to usher in many extraordinary changes. In fact, there is a historic opportunity before her to create a pathway for a democratic future for Bangladesh, which will enable us to celebrate a prosperous, peaceful and truly democratic Bangladesh on the golden anniversary of our nation in 2021. This will also make the celebration of the 100th birthday anniversary of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 2020 a more inclusive event, involving people of all shades of opinion.

On December 31, in a meeting with a group of election observers, PM Sheikh Hasina expressed her commitment to be a prime minister for all citizens. It may be recalled that, exactly ten years ago, on December 31, 2009, after her party's landslide victory in the 9th parliamentary election, she made a similar declaration in a press briefing that her government would be that of all citizens and would not misuse power. She specifically declared: "We do not believe in vengeance and retaliation. We want to give up the politics of confrontation. We want to gift the nation a new political culture... We do not want to judge the opposition by the number alone... We have achieved the victory, so we want to be forgiving. We ask everyone to forget the differences and work together for the people. In parliamentary democracy, the opposition is a partner in governing the state. We will show respect to the opposition for making positive criticism, their advice and their role for making the parliament effective." (Prothom Alo, January 1, 2009)

Even though a conducive environment may not have prevailed, and it was not possible to transform our political culture ten years ago, the time has now come for such a transformation, especially in view of the fact that Sheikh Hasina, as the daughter of Bangabandhu, is now concerned about her legacy—how she would like history to view her. Given this, she must provide the leadership necessary to create qualitative changes in our politics. The ball is in her court. In the changing political circumstances, such an initiative is likely to elicit a positive response from her political rivals as well.

If we are to transform our political culture, Bangladesh Awami League and our PM will now have to come forward to practice a new

type of politics—one of secularism, pluralism and social cohesion, which are part of our founding principles. As part of this secularist politics, the PM will have to disband Jamaat-e-Islami, which opposed our war of liberation, and expeditiously complete the war crimes trial to heal a deep wound in our national life. This will also help us avoid playing with the non-secularist forces such as the Jamaat and Hefazat in the future.

The new politics will also have to be that of inclusiveness, of tolerance rather than annihilation. Although we were a nation firmly united against the Pakistanis, except for a small segment of misguided individuals, we have now become a nation seriously divided. This is likely to have disastrous consequences. The PM will have to provide the leadership to guide the nation away from this path and practice a new politics of tolerance and peaceful co-existence.

In fact, the PM will have to work toward reaching a grand compromise with her political rivals and initiate some much-needed reforms—the goal of which will be to "repair the state," as demanded by the children during the road safety movement. The achievements of such a repair must include expansion of people's basic rights, including guaranteeing their voting rights, zero tolerance for corruption, separating the government from the ruling party, and ensuring the effectiveness of our democratic institutions. Such changes will not only transform our political culture, but will also help institutionalise our democratic system. Our PM will need unparalleled tolerance, wisdom and courage for the transformation of our political culture. We wish her success!

Dr Badiul Alam Majumdar is Secretary, SHUJAN: Citizens for Good Governance.

# Getting out of the poverty trap through education



**S**TUDENTS of primary and secondary grades began the new year with sheer happiness on their faces after getting free new textbooks in their hands. The programme initiated by the government since 2010 is surely laudable and this year alone more than 4.26 crore students from Class-I to Class-IX are receiving over 35.21 crore copies of free textbooks. Surely, it's a moment of joy and celebration for them, but one cannot help but wonder whether the joy and happiness will remain once they graduate from primary, secondary and higher secondary schools. Will they have the right skills and ability to compete in the job market; will they be able to get out of poverty with the kind of education they are getting?

Bangladesh has certainly made remarkable progress in expanding primary education, especially when it comes to raising student enrolment and bringing gender parity. But in the recent past, a serious concern was raised that the quality and curriculum of our primary, secondary and higher secondary studies do not effectively serve the goals of human development and poverty eradication. There is a lack of adequate communication and collaboration between the government, academia and industry.

At present, the entire educational system is a victim of a corrupt mindset that is devoting all its energy on securing higher pass rates through an apparent policy of easy marking, while showing less concern with the actual learning outcomes. The discomfoting consequence of this is evident when we find that a substantial chunk of skilled jobs in our industries and other economic enterprises are occupied by professionals from neighbouring countries, with India alone claiming nearly USD 4 billion in remittances that flow out of Bangladesh.

This goes to show our inability to provide

the necessary educational and skill-enhancing resources to young people for them to prepare themselves for highly skilled jobs within the country. Industry insiders say that besides poor infrastructure, lack of land, acute shortage of power and gas for new industries, finding the right people and getting them to work productively are the biggest problems in Bangladesh today.

Poverty is a complex economic phenomenon. Although dealing with the causes of poverty in Bangladesh is complex, the country has nonetheless shown impressive improvements and resilience over the years. When the Awami League-led government took office in 2009, around 50 million citizens of the country were poor, of which 28.8 million were in the clutches of extreme poverty. Undoubtedly, poverty has reduced in the last 10 years but still the country has 30 million people living below the poverty line—of them, 10 million are extreme poor. The 2018 Awami League election manifesto titled "Bangladesh on March towards Prosperity"

*Mere access to free primary schooling for poor children is not sufficient to ensure that they will do well enough to be able to compete successfully in today's competitive market.*

said it would increase the GDP growth to 10 percent from 7.8 percent now in the next five years and will bring down the poverty rate to zero from about 22 percent now by 2041.

But one needs to understand that economic growth alone is not always enough to achieve



**At present, the education system is devoting all its energy into securing higher pass rates through an apparent policy of easy marking, while showing less concern for actual learning outcomes.**

higher levels of human development unless one invests in education, health and social protection. Bangladesh spends only 2 percent of its GDP on education whereas a country with an average income spends about 3.2 percent and high-income countries spend 6 percent on education. Currently there are 1,33,901 government primary schools, Ebtedayee madrasahs and kindergartens across the country. Of them, 7,764 schools had only three teachers; 721 had two and 79 were run by a single teacher. The minimum international standard for teacher-student ratio is 30:1 but in Bangladesh there is one teacher per around 50 students. An internal report of the Directorate of Primary Education (DPE) of 2015 states that around 70 percent of children are unable to read or write properly, or perform basic mathematical calculations even after five years at primary school and most of those who graduate from primary schools do not acquire the nationally

defined basic competence.

Also there is a gap between the education provided in cities and the education provided in rural areas and as a result, in rural areas many parents are reluctant to send their children to schools because they consider education to be non-beneficial as neither the textbooks nor the curriculum is relevant to their life situation while hours spent at workplace generate income and support the family. Many studies also show that quality of the schools attended for the poor is so appalling that the parents often remove their children from what they correctly see as dead-end or "sink schools".

It has also been observed that the most common teaching methods at secondary classes in the country are lecturing and reading textbooks. And when it comes to interaction, teachers only ask closed "yes" or "no" questions to check whether the students have memorised the textbook information or

not. Most teachers feel uncomfortable in adopting innovative educational approaches as they fear that using other approaches may result in poor examination performances. As a result, though the pass rates in public examinations are getting higher, a huge number of students are failing to master the desired competencies due to a flawed teaching system.

Economists have, for a very long time, stressed that education has a significant role to play in poverty reduction in various ways. But faulty, divisive, discriminatory and contradictory education cannot produce good citizens, let alone take the country forward. Therefore, mere access to free primary schooling for poor children is not sufficient to ensure that they will do well enough to be able to compete successfully in today's competitive market. As such, serious attention needs to be given to the quality of mass primary schooling to enable them to break out of the cycle of poverty.

We need to focus on improving the quality of education, the kind of education related to our life and its struggles which make poor children acquire necessary life skills so that they grow up with a truly global outlook and meet all the needs of the jobs of today and tomorrow. What is needed is a strategy of three Es: education, employability and employment. But this doesn't mean we should discard the old disciplines of reading, math, science, history, etc. While mainstream education is crucial and essential, targeted programmes are very much needed, teaching appropriate vocational subjects with the objectives of job creation and poverty reduction can only be realised through applicable education which empowers the products of the education system with skills and competence to become self-employed, so that they can help themselves climb out of poverty.

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ON THIS DAY  
IN HISTORY



January 15, 2001  
WIKIPEDIA WAS LAUNCHED

Wikipedia, the largest and most popular general reference work on the Internet, was launched by Jimmy Wales and Larry Sanger

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

32 Diamond club

33 Book lover

35 Writer

P.D.

38 Sun-dried brick

41 Be real

42 Compare

43 Some messages

44 Spirited horse

DOWN

1 Fan cry

2 One or more

3 Starts recycling, say

4 Writer Ferber

5 Chemical mixture

6 Like some rugs

7 In the thick of

8 Maple flow

3 Common article

10 Corn unit

16 Set sail

17 Advantage

18 Stood up

20 Loses everything

21 Sports site

22 Train stop

24 Dray puller

25 Jeans feature

27 Beach footwear

31 Citrus garnishes

33 Take it easy

34 Fix text

35 Airport sight

36 Sack

37 Dance recording

39 Worker, e.g.

40 Complete

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1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22

23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40

41 42 43 44

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

P A P A W

A M I G A

N E V E R

E R O S

L I T

S C A M P E R S

A L D A

M A N

A M O E B A

J U N T A

O S C A R

R E E L

B R U T

A R I S E

N A V A L

M A N A G E

S A G

L E X

A U R A

S C A M M E R S

E L S

T I P

S I Z E

T O N O W

I N A N E

A S S A D

BEETLE BAILEY

by Mort Walker

WHY ARE YOU PRACTICING GOLF?

TO GET GOOD ENOUGH TO BEAT THE GENERAL

YOU LEFT THAT SHOT 12 FEET SHORT OF THE PIN

THAT'S GOOD ENOUGH!

BABY BLUES

by Kirkman & Scott

EXCUSE ME, I'M LOOKING FOR CRAYONS.

DIGITAL? 3D? TWISTABLES?

THE WAX KIND, WRAPPED IN PAPER.

WHERE CAN I FIND THOSE?

I THINK MY GRANDMA STILL HAS SOME.