

The eternal flame of Ekushey

May it enlighten our way, always

AS we observe the historic occasion when some valiant souls laid down their lives to establish the right of our mother tongue on this day in 1952—the like of which has never been witnessed in history—let us pay our deepest respects to those who made the sacrifices, and recall why the memory of this reverberates even today. What happened on that fateful day in February is not an inert fact, nor mere stuff of legend. It's not even just a symbol of people's linguistic freedom anymore. Because of the circumstances in which it took place and the extraordinary series of events that it set off in the ensuing decades, in Bangladesh and elsewhere, Ekushey shines like a beacon of hope in the midst of darkness, and shows us how to fight against injustices and oppression. Ekushey is proof that when enough people believe in a cause, and unite and persevere in their efforts to make it happen, it happens, eventually.

Which is why it is important that we keep the flame of Ekushey burning, for us today and for posterity. That said, we cannot ignore the fact that the right to mother tongue and all other associated objectives of the Ekushey movement couldn't still be established in the way envisaged by the founders of the movement. For one, Bangla couldn't be established in all spheres of public life; moreover, even though there has been some progress in terms of the rights of linguistic minorities, a lot remains to be done. It is up to the state to ensure that all Bangla and non-Bangla speakers are accorded the same opportunities to use their mother tongue and grow as a people. As well as this, Ekushey also encourages us to strive to establish a society based on freedom, equality and rule of law—without which the right to mother tongue is meaningless.

Remove barriers to foreign investment

Improve corporate governance, manpower skills

ANALYSTS at a seminar titled "Lack of corporate governance is the biggest barrier in Bangladesh for Japanese investors", on February 19, stated that poor corporate governance and lack of quality manpower were the two major impediments holding back foreign direct investment (FDI) in Bangladesh. The seminar was organised by International Finance Corporation (IFC) and it brought together various stakeholders to discuss the barriers facing Japanese investors in Bangladesh.

Indeed, the number of Japanese foreign investors has jumped ten times to 269 in the past decade. But the issue of corporate governance that has everything to do with bringing about transparency in the books of accounts in local firms is a major hurdle. Because there is the problem of cooking numbers to make companies' financial situation look rosier than it actually is, investors are overly cautious about investing in local firms. This is a major issue for foreign companies and one that can only be addressed by Bangladeshi authorities.

The issue of quality manpower of course is something that needs to be addressed through short-, medium- and long-term policy interventions. The need for skills development is only now being seriously considered as a major impediment at the policy level and vocational training and higher education need to be aligned with the needs of foreign investing companies. Bangladesh can only become a major hub for FDI when it can boast quality manpower, not before. We need to revisit our education system and see what steps can be taken so that those who graduate from the schooling system are enabled with analytical skills—an essential prerequisite for all skilled manpower. Similarly, vocational training must be revamped to serve the needs of industry. Merely establishing special economic zones will not guarantee FDI unless we remove these bottlenecks.

Changing the way we think about poverty and development



NAHELA NOWSHIN

“Development” and “poverty” are two good examples. Ask anyone what these words mean to them and the answer you'll hear will most likely be very simplistic—for example, development being equated to high GDP growth. I got a similar answer when I asked a friend what his definition of “poverty” was. He said: “Being so poor that they cannot afford basic amenities.”

These definitions are not completely wrong but they are certainly reductionist. While we may think we “understand” what these words—which are now commonplace in our academic and political discourse—mean, very few of us actually do. The definition of both development and poverty has significantly evolved over time as respected economists like Amartya Sen, who were astute enough to see through the earlier parochial views of these concepts, have continued to broaden our understanding of what they entail.

But we seem to be suffering from tunnel vision and our interpretation of these concepts remains one-dimensional. Development is much more than higher GDP growth, and being unable to afford basic amenities is only part of what poverty means. Things like political rights, freedom of speech and social opportunities are essential elements that we unfortunately tend to ignore when we talk about development or poverty.

The World Bank, in a recent report, revealed a startling finding. The international organisation found that of the world's 736 million extreme poor in 2015, half that population, that is 368 million people, lived in just five countries: India, Nigeria, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, and Bangladesh. Three percent of the extreme poor population globally were found to be in Bangladesh, i.e. 16.2 million people in the country have a daily income of less than USD 1.90.

This is a prime example of why thinking about development simply in terms of GDP per capita is misleading. Because the fact that Bangladesh, one of the fastest growing economies in the world, accounts for such a huge chunk of the global extreme poor population almost sounds like a paradox—except it's not. When you look at “development” from the perspective of non-monetary aspects such as access to quality education and healthcare, electricity, quality food, clean water and sanitation, and political and other basic freedoms—all of which are essential to avail economic opportunities and for the realisation of human potential—the coexistence of

GDP growth and extreme poverty doesn't seem much like a contradiction. What it does point to, however, is that the conditions necessary for human development of millions of people are sorely missing. It also indicates that there is stark disparity in the distribution of wealth given rising income inequality amidst tremendous growth, and the need to revamp the current development model that is clearly not benefiting everyone.

Which means that our fixation with 7-plus GDP growth rates stems from a very narrow outlook of development. Similarly, it is flawed to think about poverty from the standpoint of income alone, which is what we tend to do; tackling poverty requires more than just raising income levels.

The progress we have made in poverty reduction, food security, access to

of schooling is tempting. But average figures don't always tell the whole story.

For example, the Bangladesh Power Development Board in July last year said that around 90 percent of people in the country now have access to electricity—a great achievement by all means—but this hardly tells us anything about access to electricity in rural areas where more than 25 percent of the population still rely on fuelwood and kerosene for energy. Similarly, the fact that we have achieved near universal net primary enrollment with around 98 percent primary-school-aged children enrolled in school doesn't reveal much about the quality of education which disproportionately affects children from poverty-stricken families. A USAID-funded study by Save the Children last spring found that 44 percent of students who complete the first grade cannot read their first word

Beyond changing our outlook towards poverty and development, there is no alternative to increasing investment in education and health—which has shrunk as a share of our national budget and is now among the lowest in South Asia. And while social safety net programmes—a hallmark of the Bangladesh government's strategy to alleviate poverty—have led to increased school enrolment and attendance, especially among girls in secondary schools, employment generation, provision of food during crisis, etc., studies have shown that poor targeting, inefficiency and leakage lead to these programmes never reaching many of the non-poor. In 2010, for instance, only a third of eligible beneficiaries participated in at least one social safety programme, and of those, 60 percent were non-poor. The involvement of some 20 ministries



Tackling poverty requires more than just raising income levels.

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education and healthcare, etc, in the decades since independence is nothing short of remarkable. But it is equally important to acknowledge the fact that we have a long way to go before we can effectively tackle multidimensional poverty which means taking into account education, health and living standards. One of the problems is that we get too bogged down in easy-to-understand “average figures” which only give us a general picture—essentially masking the harsh realities that many in far-flung places across the country are living in. High average figures relating to “GDP per capita” and “overall access to electricity and education” may sound appealing, but they don't shed light on striking urban-rural disparities. The likeness for “average figures” is understandable; the urge to know where one stands with respect to the “average” income or years

and 27 percent of third grade students are unable to read with comprehension. Performance in basic English, math and Bangla has been found to be especially weak among poor students. Another example of the problem with an overreliance on average numbers comes to light when you compare per-capita income and income share amongst the population. Whereas our per-capita income rose to USD 1,751 in 2017-18 from USD 1,610 in 2016-17, the income share of the poorest five percent fell from 0.78 percent (in 2010) to 0.23 percent (in 2016) of overall income with the richest five percent's share going up to 27.89 percent from 24.61 percent during the same time period (BBS). So while the “average” individual income may paint a rosy picture, concentration of income at the top tells a different story.

means that there is duplication between programme objectives and beneficiaries. While there is no denying that social safety net programmes have transformed countless lives, we need to do a better job of reaching more of the extreme poor who are currently left out.

But even achieving all of the above won't be enough if we fail to address the weaknesses of our public institutions which are paralysed because of extreme politicisation and a lack of transparency and accountability. Even if the poor somehow successfully escape the vicious trap of poverty, we can hardly expect them to go up the ladder of social mobility without a fair marketplace where meritocracy—and not political affiliation or “connections”—is valued.

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PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

Should America ever apologise?



RUTI TEITEL

EARLIER this month, academics at the American University in Cairo declared no confidence in the institution's president, following his decision to grant US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo an uncontested platform for a partisan foreign-policy speech last month. Pompeo used the occasion to decry former President Barack Obama's own pronouncements from the same stage a decade earlier, and to issue an implicit endorsement of the Middle East's reigning autocrats.

Pompeo's primary line of attack against Obama's famous Cairo speech, “A New Beginning,” is that it included a public admission of the United States' past missteps in the region. Unlike the Trump administration, Obama and his advisers believed that there is much to be gained by acknowledging difficult political truths, even when doing so points to a radical change in course.

Accordingly, when Obama delivered his June 2009 speech, he took the bold step of admitting mutual misunderstandings between the West and the Arab and Muslim worlds. He acknowledged that Western colonialism “had denied rights and opportunities to many Muslims,” and that “modernity and globalisation” had “led many Muslims to view the West as hostile to the traditions of Islam.”

Touching on America's response to the attacks of September 11, 2001, Obama conceded that “fear and anger...in some cases...led us to act contrary to our traditions and our ideals.” But, most importantly, he argued that, “we must say openly to each other the things we hold in our hearts and that too often are said only

behind closed doors.” Only then could mutual trust, peace, democracy, and equality be achieved.

Pompeo's vulgar reenactment of Obama's appearance in Cairo reflected the foundational importance of the 2009 address. As it happens, Obama's address was followed 18 months later by the Arab Spring, which, despite its overarching failure, put more countries in the region—particularly Tunisia—on varying paths to democracy. Obama also issued an overture to Iran, setting the stage for unprecedented negotiations and an

Christianity.

Categorically rejecting Obama's call for a “new beginning”, Pompeo touted America as “a force for good” in the region. “The age of self-inflicted American shame is over,” he announced, “and so are the policies that produced so much needless suffering. Now comes the real new beginning.”

From its opening days, the Trump administration has expressed contempt for the idea that public confessions of American missteps can do anything but weaken the US. Hence, in his May 2018 commencement address at the US Naval Academy, President Donald Trump announced that, “We are not going to apologise for America. We are going to stand up for America....Because we know that a nation must have pride in its history to have confidence in its future.”

In fact, Trump's rejection of historical introspection and atonement is at odds with a longstanding American tradition of deriving strength from conciliatory leadership on the world stage. Since America's founding, its best foreign-policy moments have come when its leaders act pragmatically, demonstrating a capacity for self-reflection.

For example, after the Revolutionary War, America's first president, George Washington, pushed for reconciliation and a favourable peace settlement (a “new beginning”) with Great Britain. Rather than dwell on colonial grievances and past British transgressions, his primary concern was to ensure political stability and sound economic relations for both countries well into the future.

Similarly, as the American Civil War was nearing its end, President Abraham Lincoln focused not on punishing the Confederacy, but on formulating an inclusive policy to reunite the country in a “new birth of freedom.” More recently, President George HW Bush apologised and issued reparations, on behalf of the

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eventual agreement that would forestall a regional nuclear arms race.

Implicit in Pompeo's repudiation of Obama is the idea that American strength depends on never admitting any wrongdoing. Like many of the Trump administration's policy choices, Pompeo's act of political theatre seemed to have been geared toward reversing or erasing Obama's legacy. Whereas Obama opened his speech in Cairo with the Arabic greeting “Assalamu Alaykum”, Pompeo began his with references to the Bible and to his own commitment to evangelical

country, to Japanese-Americans who had been interned during World War II on the basis of their ethnicity. And that gesture was eventually followed by Obama's much-heralded speech in Hiroshima, where he reflected on America's use of atomic bombs against Japanese civilians (though he did not issue a formal apology).

Finally, since the 1990s, the US has been reckoning with the legacy of the Cold War. While President Bill Clinton apologised for the US's “dirty war” policies in Central America during the second half of the twentieth century, Obama acknowledged similar US actions in Cuba, Peru, and Argentina. These statements had uncertain political payoffs, but they demonstrated real political leadership, and presented America as an honest broker, despite its many imperfections.

As the recent faculty revolt at the American University in Cairo showed, the Trump administration risks finding itself on the wrong side of history. By repudiating past acts of American atonement, Pompeo was no doubt hoping to signal a break from Obama-era US foreign policy. But he was also abandoning a tradition of American global leadership that has long served as a source of national strength. As is typical with the Trump administration, its partisan chest-thumping backfired. Though Pompeo stood unchallenged in Cairo, the position he represents has become an increasingly lonely one on the world stage.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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How logical is the ban on coaching centres?

The education system in Bangladesh is such that the majority of students have to depend on coaching centres instead of classrooms. Over the last few years, coaching centres in the country have mushroomed.

Many are weighing in on the ban on coaching centres. While the dependence on coaching centres is indeed alarming, will banning these centres guarantee quality education in classrooms? I don't think so.

Bangladesh's education system suffers from other issues. For instance, the budget allocated to the education system is perhaps the lowest in South Asia. Furthermore, the teacher recruitment process is seriously flawed. The meagre salary of teachers is also a driving factor behind many teachers focusing on coaching centres. Even public university teachers have begun to spend a lot of time in private institutions.

Before banning coaching centres, the authorities should assess the various other factors that are driving demand for coaching centres. They should first take measures to improve the quality of overall education in classrooms.

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