

# Schooling the deprived children: "One size" cannot fit all

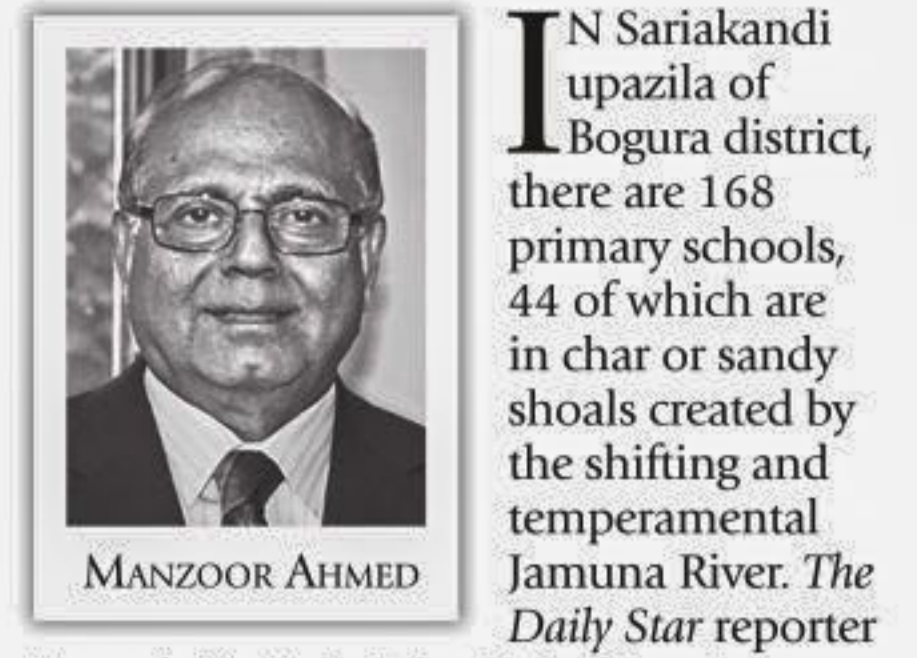
## Save the 'Dream Seekers' from the 'Dream Sellers'

Identify the criminal gang involved in trafficking

There surely is a strong pull factor that draws many young and educated people, the so-called 'Dream Seekers' to look for fortune abroad. Many are willing to take unforeseen risks and pay huge sums of money in the hope of greener pasture abroad. Unfortunately, most of them are eventually discarded by the agents that get them to the midpoint of their journeys, only to be held captive by another group and released after huge sums are paid by their family in Bangladesh as extortion money, as revealed in the case of Al Amin, a victim, whose account was carried by this newspaper yesterday. This is the experience of most of those that seek employment abroad but fall victim to unscrupulous traffickers. In the case of Al Amin, the travel agency owner seems to have disappeared closing down his office. The travails of jobs seekers and their ultimate fate is very well documented. But regrettably, the outflow continues. Unfortunately, the administration has not been able to employ the proper mechanism to stem the tendency.

There are several points at issue that must be addressed seriously and immediately. Firstly, how do so many Bangladeshis manage to leave the country; it is evident that they travelled with fake documents. Secondly, there is a criminal cabal that exploit the job seekers and procure the so-called employment documents. One cannot discard the fact that some in the immigration department are a part of this gang. Thirdly, how is the extortion money paid to someone as far away as Libya?

We suggest a thorough investigation into this be launched immediately to identify and apprehend the criminal gang. Secondly, there should a vigorous awareness campaign in all media platforms to warn prospective job seekers abroad of the dangers of the trap of this gang. Thirdly, the causes that generate the push factors should be addressed.



MANZOOR AHMED

In Sariakandi upazila of Bogura district, there are 168 primary schools, 44 of which are in char or sandy shoals created by the shifting and temperamental Jamuna River. The Daily Star reporter Mostafa Shabuj visited 16 of the char schools recently.

A heart-rending description of the poor state of schooling for the char children shows that the government primary school system is not working for them ("Char children getting poor schooling," Mostafa Shabuj, *The Daily Star*, 13 May 2019). What can be done? Are there alternatives?

There are 170 teachers, out of 223 posts, in the 44 char schools for 6,739 students on the school rolls. It was found that 24 out of the 51 teachers working in the 16 char schools visited by the reporter lived in Bogura town, some 30-40 kms away. Most of them cannot reach school on time and are in a hurry to leave after 3:00 pm, though the school hours are 9 am to 4:30 pm, according to Sariakandi Upazila Education Officer Rafiqul Alam.

The teachers, majority of whom are women, said they had no option. The char has no living accommodation for them and their families. The children of many go to school at secondary and college level, in Bogura. The teachers come to school by public bus, which do not run at the right hours for the school day; some take small boats from the bus stop to the school.

The school buildings are dilapidated; there are no toilets or wash blocks in 10 of the 16 schools visited. Shafiqul Islam, headmaster of Adbaria Government Primary School, said, "We hold classes in a broken tin-roof house, sometimes under the open sky." Zui Akter, headteacher of Chandanbaisha Government Primary School, said, "Between 1995 and 2015, we shifted our school five times due to river bank erosion."

Student attendance in the 16 schools visited averaged 60 percent. In the 2018 Primary Education Completion Exams, Bogura sadar upazila had a pass rate of 99.46 percent, with 38 percent scoring GPA-5. The 44 char schools had a pass rate of 65 percent and the GPA-5 scorers were below 5 percent.

The snapshot of Sariakandi char schools represent the larger picture of at least 10 million char people in Bangladesh with about a million children of primary school age. Another 20 million people



The snapshot of Sariakandi char schools represent the larger picture of at least 10 million char people in Bangladesh with about a million children of primary school age. PHOTO: MOSTAFA SHABUJ

are estimated to be in difficult ecological conditions, such as coastal areas, low-land haor areas, tea plantations and hills with scattered habitations. Primary education of some two million of their children besides the million char children is in jeopardy.

The public education system does not offer a solution for the children deprived of their basic education. The government system by its nature cannot be flexible and creative enough to respond to the specific circumstances of the disadvantaged children.

The denial of the right to education of the deprived children is not a new phenomenon. Flexible and innovative approaches were pioneered by BRAC in the 1990s and extended to serve at one time up to three million children who were not participating in the regular primary schools, especially girls and the children from poor households.

Non-formal primary education (NFPE), as it came to be known, was adopted by other larger and smaller NGOs in the country, which boosted primary education access significantly. Its hallmarks were flexibility and adaptation to the specific conditions of the children.

Single teacher small school, a school room rented from the community and refurbished (rather than having a permanent building), multi-grade

classes, high school completers from the community recruited as teachers, and attractive learning materials and teachers' manuals were NFPE's special features and the key to its success.

Teachers supported by strong and regular supervision and monitoring, intensive short training and continuous refresher for teachers, and close contact with parents helped to assure quality.

Independent assessment of NFPE showed that over 90 percent of the students, who had never enrolled in formal primary school or dropped out early, completed primary education and performed as well or better as the formal school students.

The successful NFPE model was supported by donor funding with the NGOs held accountable for results. With the adoption of the subsector primary education programme of the government (PEDP3 since 2011 and currently PEDP4) almost all external assistance for primary education was channelled through the government and the financing for the NGOs' NFPE approach dried up.

Mention may be made of the Aloghar project of Caritas Bangladesh which has offered primary education to over 158,000 vulnerable children of *adivasi* and cultural minority communities in the remote and inaccessible areas. This project supported

by European Union donation is now at the point of being terminated for lack of funding, though the needs remain ("One Thousand Education Centres for the Hardest to Reach Children," Caritas Bangladesh, February 2019).

PEDP3 and PEDP4 did not provide for supporting NFPE through NGOs, which could serve the disadvantaged children described above. A small window called Second Chance Primary Education was added at the later stage of PEDP3. But it was stymied by restrictions, especially by government procurement procedures, which restricted the required flexibility and prevented the well-established NGOs with proven track-records from participating in it in a substantial way. Selection of the right NGOs and effective monitoring also suffered from government procedures and inefficiencies.

The "one size" solution that the government primary education system offers cannot be the answer for the deprived children. Their education right can be ensured with the schooling opportunity they deserve if a genuine partnership can be forged between the education authorities and the NGOs, who have demonstrated their capacity for and commitment to creative solutions.

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## US war drums over Iran

Regime change is a rank bad idea

We can't help but say that the whole situation in the Middle East resulting from the US-Iran standoff has been precipitated by a series of actions initiated by the US beginning with the US sanctions on Iran. The latest move by the US to position a carrier group in the Gulf, and deployment of F-22 bombers in the region, gives one the impression that it is the US which is trying to provoke a reaction from Iran.

Unfortunately, the main US motivation is regime change in Iran, a common psyche that pervades the mind of the two major policy shapers for President Trump, Pompeo and Bolton. The sabotaging of several tanker in the Gulf this week is being blamed on Iran. These are all reminiscent of the situation immediately predating the invasion of Iraq. Plan to dispatch some 120,000 US troops to the region if Iran retaliates against US forces is an ominous indication.

Is the region not unsettled enough as it is? US ratcheting up tensions do not help matters. Iraq is still in turmoil, Syria is in a shambles, Libya's politico-military situation is still in a flux and Yemen is a case of unmitigated humanitarian disaster. The nuclear deal in 2015, reached between Iran and the Western Powers that took five years in the making has been scrapped by President Trump. None of the other countries in the deal think that Iran is in breach of the agreement and wants to keep the deal. The allegation against Iran is that it is arming belligerents who are deemed to be terrorist organisations by the US. But the reality is that armed groups in the region have been supported by western powers too and singling out Iran as the main perpetrator of regional instability falls flat. Does US have the moral high ground to call upon Iran to act like a normal country?

Regime change in the Middle East has had a disastrous effect on the world geopolitical order. We have only to look at Iraq, Syria and Libya to see what turmoil it has brought to those nations and beyond. There is still time to move away from brinkmanship and allow statesmanship to frame policy. It is also time for the UN Security Council to step in to diffuse the situation.

# MIGRANT-BOAT CAPSIZE IN THE MEDITERRANEAN Can we stop such tragedies from recurring?

SYEDA ROZANA RASHID

A boat carrying migrants from Libya to Italy sunk in the Mediterranean on May 10, 2019, leaving 37 Bangladeshis dead. In a similar incident this year, 90 migrants died in February, some of whom were Bangladeshis. In fact, the term "Bangladesh" appears frequently in the register of European Border and Coastal Security Agency (Frontex) for undocumented migrants. In UNHCR's account, Bangladesh ranks fourth among the most common nationalities of sea arrivals in Europe as of March 2019. Though Bangladesh has no record of its irregular migrants, the number (if one was to guess) could be more than 100,000 a year.

The question that may puzzle some is: why are so many Bangladeshis gambling their lives to find a better future in developed countries, while the country is neither devastated by war, nor can be called extreme poor—rather is expected to attain middle-income status by 2021.

We all know that the answer partially lies in the growing frustration of people over staying in the country due to

limited employment opportunities. This corresponds with national data that shows Bangladesh's unemployment rate increasing in the last years. Most irregular migrants, as evident, belong to the 18-20 age group—when individuals want to start a career with a dignified job. The successful migration stories of their friends and relatives may motivate these youths to migrate to Europe and other western countries.

Nevertheless, western countries have now strengthened their immigration and entry control more than at any other time in the past. Immigration to the west is selectively open only for educated, skilled and professionals who have no record of terrorist involvement. It is not surprising then, why uneducated and unskilled youths would resort to irregular means to find a foothold on western land. I came across many migrants who expressed that they believed it to be worth taking the risk of following irregular pathways, than to remain unemployed for an unforeseen period of time. The cases of failure, deportation, detention and death hardly had any effect on their enthusiasm.

Human smuggling and trafficking are other factors that exacerbate the problem

of irregular migration manifold. Human smuggling has become a profitable business since 2010 when people from war-torn Middle Eastern countries started using irregular channels for crossing borders without necessary documents. Bangladeshis have turned into regular clients of human smugglers since 2015.

In other cases, unscrupulous agents and organised criminal groups also lure would-be migrants in Bangladesh and those who work in the Gulf, with attractive jobs and settlement opportunities in the west. I also found migrants who had lost all their savings abroad to intermediaries (dalals) who promised to get them to Italy and Greece. Migration, which was once considered as a "risk minimising" strategy, has now become a risky venture—especially since dangerous and irregular avenues have commonly started to be used by Bangladeshis.

This is indeed a shocking scenario. And we cannot just keep our eyes closed to it. While Bangladesh cannot do much about the structural forces that create division of labour and selective entry of people to different labour markets, it should adopt policies and strategies on

a priority basis to prevent young people from taking such perilous journeys. The magnitude of the problem itself implies that awareness campaigns against unsafe migration are not enough to diminish their euphoria about migrating to western lands. Therefore, greater national campaigns should be designed along with community-level interventions. Bangladeshi embassies in the Gulf should run special awareness programmes and drives to protect its workers abroad from being victims of fraud and trafficking.

The country should also declare a war against traffickers and human smugglers. Exemplary punishment should be meted out for committing such crimes through speedy trials as that would help stop migration through irregular pathways. Also, diplomatic efforts should be geared up to instigate bilateral and regional collaboration with a view to destroying the networks of transnational organised trafficking gangs. Return and reintegration of irregular migrants is another critical issue which demands attention. The European Union has already funded a four-year project for sustainable reintegration of deported migrants from Europe which need to be replicated for sustained results.

The country stands on the shoulders of migrants, who sent USD 15.54 billion last year as remittances contributing 7.24 percent of GDP. Yet, as a lower middle-income country, Bangladesh can scarcely survive on the remittances of its "unskilled" migrant workers in the foreseeable future.

Developing skills among young people who are in high demand in the international job market is a viable solution for their dignified employment at home and abroad. Migration cannot be an alternative to creating job opportunities in Bangladesh, yet orderly and safe migration should be ensured for those who wish to make a livelihood abroad. Failure to take effective and immediate steps for the prevention of irregular migration would not only cause recurrent loss of lives in the Mediterranean and elsewhere, but would also severely hinder Bangladesh's journey towards becoming a middle-income country in the near future.



In UNHCR's account, Bangladesh ranks fourth among the most common nationalities of sea arrivals in Europe as of March 2019. PHOTO: AFP

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Need for student counselling centres in schools

After family, school plays the most important role in the process of a child's socialisation. After receiving basic education in primary schools, when students enter secondary schools in their adolescent years, they go through many physical and mental changes. During this period, controlling emotions become a big issue for them.

Many are drawn towards drug use and get involved in petty crimes while others face serious depression. Studies and examinations alone cannot help them get over these. So I think every school should have a student counselling centre where students can go talk about their problems with psychologists and counsellors. This could help them immensely.

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