

What's stopping students with disabilities from pursuing education?



NAZNIN TITHI

MANY of us are probably not aware of the condition known in medical science as cerebral palsy, which affects a child's muscle tone, movement, and motor skills. It hinders the body's ability to move in a coordinated way and can affect other functions that involve motor skills and muscles. It is one of the 12 types of disabilities that were identified in the Persons with Disabilities Rights and Protection Act, 2013.

In February this year, 17-year-old AFM Mostofa Masud Priyo, who has this condition, sat for his SSC exams from Mohammadpur Government High School, and performed well in all subjects except for mathematics and "Bangladesh and Global Studies". He got 32 marks out of 100 in mathematics, and only 23 in Bangladesh and Global Studies. After his results were published, his father Mostafizur Rahman, a Supreme Court lawyer, filed a writ petition seeking reassessment of his son's answer scripts because, according to him, those were not assessed following any guidelines.

And on August 22, the High Court gave its verdict directing the authorities concerned to reassess Priyo's answer scripts with due care and publish his results within one month. The court also directed the government to formulate specific rules for assessment of answer scripts of students with disabilities in all public examinations.

While the Persons with Disabilities Rights and Protection Act, 2013 covers many aspects of the educational needs of students with



COURTESY: MOSTAFIZUR RAHMAN

AFM Mostofa Masud Priyo, who has cerebral palsy, faces an uncertain future due to the absence of specific guidelines for assessing the answer scripts of students with disabilities.

disabilities, unfortunately, it does not give any direction whatsoever as to how such students' answer scripts in exams—including the public examinations—should be assessed. Which is why this HC verdict is so important.

It is beyond our understanding what parents of these children go through when they enrol in mainstream schools and colleges. There exist many social and structural barriers which hamper their education. While talking to Mostafizur Rahman recently, I came to know about a father's constant struggle to have his child educated in a mainstream educational institution.

While the law formulated in 2013 states clearly that there should be proper educational materials and effective teaching

methods for students with disabilities in schools, colleges, and universities, in reality, there remains a big gap between what is written in the law and what the realities are on the ground. The methods used for the participation of these students in exams have not been designed as per the law. Therefore, when it comes to sitting for public exams, students with disabilities still face many difficulties, including in getting extra time or getting approval for a writing assistant. Needless to say, students with special needs should be given more time in exams compared to the regular students. The present provision of allocating 30 minutes' extra time is much less than what is needed.

When these students somehow manage to participate in the public exams, without

much support from the authorities, they still face uncertainties because of the way their answer scripts are checked. Without specific rules and guidelines for assessing their scripts, many of them experience an abrupt end to their journey towards higher education.

The absence of such rules is precisely why Priyo had to face uncertainties in getting his results right. In the subject Bangladesh and Global Studies, Priyo answered all the 18 questions, but were only given marks for eight of the answers. "Maybe the examiner did not give him marks in the remaining answers because he could not understand his handwriting," said Mostafizur Rahman, Priyo's father. "It is a fact that those with cerebral palsy cannot write very clearly because they do not have much control over their hands." Priyo also could not take help of a writing assistant because of his speech problems.

So, there should be a mechanism to identify the answer scripts of students with disabilities so that the examiners can check those with special attention. When the candidates of public exams register their names with the education boards, the respective school and college authorities can point out in the registration forms the specific conditions of these students. According to Mostafizur Rahman, the education ministry should also consider appointing special examiners who will check their answer scripts according to the type of their disability.

Besides, for students with disabilities, particularly those with visual disabilities, it is still a big challenge to study science because of the lack of proper educational materials and trained teachers. Conversely, our neighbouring country, India, is far ahead of us in terms of fulfilling the needs of the students who want to study science.

Rifat Pasha, who completed his Master's

in International Relations from Dhaka University, said that he was not allowed to study economics because of his visual disability. While studying at the university, he also had to face a shortage of reading materials in braille. Although visually impaired students can take writing assistants in public exams, or use braille, there are not many examiners who understand braille. Currently working in an NGO, Rifat believes that there should be separate question paper in the SSC, HSC and other public exams for those with special needs.

As mentioned before, the Persons with Disabilities Rights and Protection Act, 2013 identifies 12 types of disabilities: physical disability, autism spectrum disorder, visual disability, intellectual disability, hearing disability, speech disability, multiple disability, cerebral palsy, down syndrome, deaf-blindness, mental illness leading to disability, etc. The Act was formulated to ensure equitable development for all. If this commitment has to be materialised, the particular needs of all these types of people have to be addressed. Around 3.2 million young people in Bangladesh have some form of disability. Facilities conducive to their needs should be created at all levels of mainstream education so that they can study and pursue their dreams without hindrance.

As I write this column, Priyo and his father are still waiting for the reassessment of his answer scripts, which should not take more than a month. There are many more students like Priyo whose fate hangs in the balance in the absence of a proper policy and a lack of enforcement of the existing legislation.

Naznin Tithi is a member of the editorial team at *The Daily Star*.

YIDAN PRIZE 2019

Recognising an innovative education model

MANZOOR AHMED

THE Yidan Prize 2019 (for education) is the latest of many global awards and recognitions earned by Sir Fazle Hasan Abed, the founder of Brac, for his lifelong contribution to education and development in Bangladesh and 10 other countries, from Afghanistan to Uganda. It is the most prestigious and the largest in value, sometimes described as the Education Nobel Prize. The announcement was made on September 19, in Hong Kong, by Koichiro Matsuura, former Unesco Director-General and the chair of the judging committee for the prize.

The Yidan Prize was established by Chinese philanthropist Charles Chen Yidan, co-owner of Tencent, the Chinese IT company that is one of the largest in the world. Chen set up a 2.5 billion HKD endowment in 2016 from which two prizes, one for education research and one for education development, have been awarded each year since 2017.

The present value of each prize is USD 3.9 million (around Tk 33 crore), half of which is given as a cash prize and the other half as a project fund. The research awardee for 2019 is Professor Usha Goswami of Cambridge University, who got the prize for her pioneering work on neuroscience to understand and prevent young children's language development problems such as dyslexia.

The mission of the Yidan Prize

is to create a better world through education. Charles Chen Yidan believes that by honouring researchers and practitioners who have demonstrated outstanding achievements, the prize will help their work to have a long-lasting global impact.

The judging committee, chaired by Dr Matsuura, consisted of two independent and international judging panels. The panel for research is headed by Andreas Schleicher, chief of education at OECD, while Dorothy Gordon, a distinguished educationist from Ghana, headed the development panel.

The Play Lab project developed and implemented by Brac Institute of Educational Development attracted the attention of the judges. Play is children's work. It boosts cognitive and socio-emotional development of young children. Memory and language skills are improved and children are better able to learn and manage their own behaviour.

"The team at Brac, led by its founder Sir Fazle Hasan Abed, has taken these scientific findings and implemented an innovative approach that builds on Brac's decades of experience in empowering the poor through implementation of community-led innovation in education," said Ms Gordon in the award citation.

"This project revolutionises how marginalised children learn," as Gordon put it. Young women drawn from the community, often from Brac's adolescent girls' empowerment clubs, are trained in play-based learning.



Brac Founder Sir Fazle Hasan Abed, who received this year's Yidan Prize for Education.

They work with groups of 30 children for three hours a day, five days a week. Parents and other community members help in various ways—making toys from local materials and helping decorate the physical space designed to encourage play. Each play lab is supported by a committee of community members.

There are now 1,800 Play Labs in three countries: Bangladesh, Tanzania and Uganda. There are also the Humanitarian Play Labs adapted to the needs of displaced children in the Rohingya camps in Chattogram, Bangladesh.

As Ms Gordon pointed out, the most remarkable feature of these play lab projects is that they show how the

poorest children can have access to quality and affordable early childhood education. "The emerging evidence on the importance of play on learning has tremendous implications for children globally," remarked Ms Gordon.

She also noted that there is a common thread between this year's laureates: both Sir Fazle and Prof. Usha Goswami are concerned about the early years of education. Ms Gordon expressed the hope that there would be exchanges and cross-fertilisation of ideas between the two, building a synergy through their association with the Yidan prize. The past Yidan laureates for education development are Vicky Colbert from Colombia, founder of Escuela Nueva (New

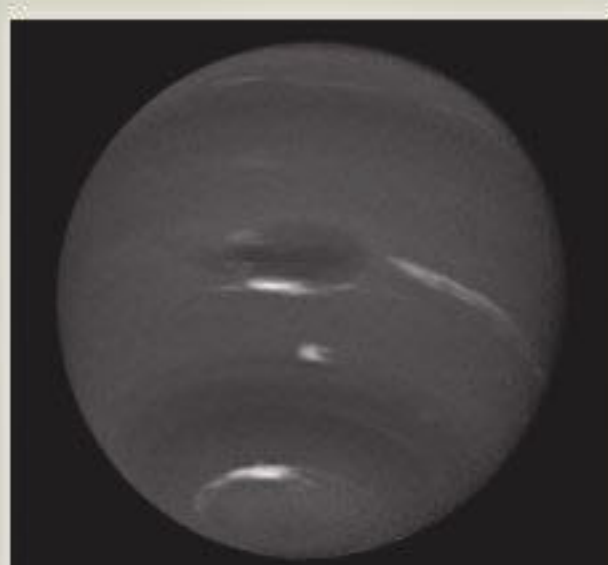
School), and Prof. Anant Aggarwal of Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), founder of edX, which offered online courses and certification through open source. The research awardees were Carol Dweck of Stanford University and Larry Hedges of Northwestern University in USA. Each made unique contribution to extend the reach of quality education. For example, Ms Colbert was recognised for innovation in classroom activities and learning materials to let children progress at their own learning pace. Prof Dweck took the seemingly simple concept of "growth mindset"—that children succeed in learning if they have the belief and confidence that they can succeed—and devised through her experimentation ways of infusing growth motivation among children.

"Early childhood is a critical time to provide learning opportunities to children to ensure optimal development," said Sir Fazle in his reaction to the prestigious award. "I hope the world's leaders will realise the potential of this play-based education model, which helps put a child on a track to develop and fulfil one's potential in life."

The founder of Brac envisions that the generous Yidan Prize would allow Brac to expand its activities. "We plan to use the funds for two purposes: strengthening our current basic education programme, and establishing new Play Labs," he added.

Dr Manzoor Ahmed is Professor Emeritus at Brac University.

ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY



September 23, 1846
NEPTUNE OBSERVED

On this day in 1846, astronomer Johann Gottfried Galle became the first person ever to observe the planet Neptune, the existence of which had been mathematically predicted by Urbain-Jean-Joseph Le Verrier and John Couch Adams.

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BEETLE BAILEY

by Mort Walker

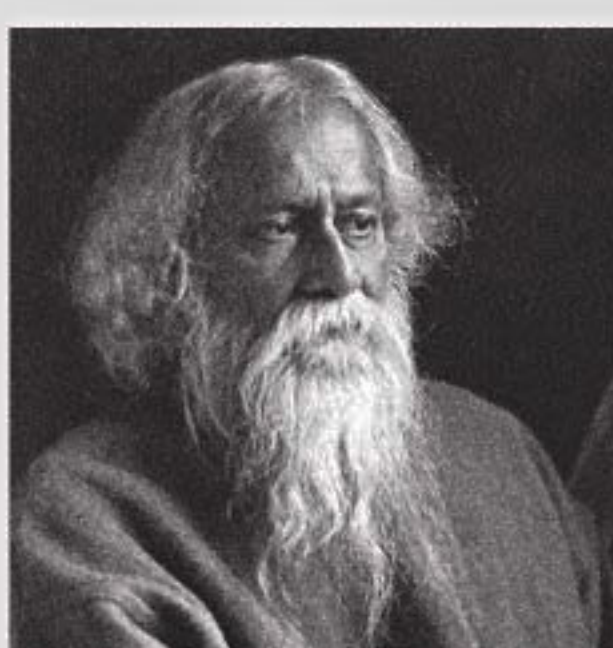


BABY BLUES

by Kirkman & Scott



QUOTABLE Quote



RABINDRANATH TAGORE
(1861-1941)

Bengali poet, musician and artist

(The highest education is that which does not merely give us information but makes our life in harmony with all existence.)