

Reclaiming our foundational values in education

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On the 50th year of its birth, Bangladesh has crossed the bar to join the ranks of developing countries. It aims to be a developed country in two decades. It has earned well-deserved plaudits for progress made. To reach the destination now calls for a reclaiming of the four foundational ideals that emerged from the liberation struggle and which are enshrined in the constitution. The education system has to play a central role in this effort.

On the track to becoming a developed country In February 2021, the UN Committee for Development Policy (CDP) decided in its triennial review that Bangladesh met all three eligibility criteria (per capita income, human assets, and economic fragility) for graduation from the list of the Least Developed Countries (LDC) to the ranks of developing countries. It has been there since 1975.

This is a step towards achieving the Sustainable Development

about staggering child poverty further aggravated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

"Economic growth rates rose steadily, and for the four years before the current pandemic, Bangladesh's economy soared by 7 to 8 percent per year... faster than China's," Kristof wrote. "Life expectancy in Bangladesh is 72 years. That's longer than in quite a few places in the United States... What was Bangladesh's secret? It was education and girls."

Bangladesh educated and empowered its girls, and the educated women then became pillars of the economy. "Educated women also filled the ranks of nonprofits like Grameen and BRAC, another highly regarded development organization. They got children vaccinated. They promoted toilets. They taught villagers how to read. They explained contraception. They discouraged child marriage," Kristof wrote.

In short, Bangladesh invested in its poor, targeting the most marginalised and least productive, because that yielded the highest returns. The same

Rahman on May 30, 1974.

However, changes in the political scenario in 1975 change halted any follow up on the Qudrat-e-Khuda Commission Report. At least eight education commissions and committees appointed to produce recommendations for reforms in the following three decades had one common feature—no serious effort was made to implement the recommendations comprehensively for any of them.

The 2010 Education Policy

The 2010 National Education Policy (NEP 2010) prepared under the joint leadership of Professor Kabir Chowdhury and Dr Qazi Kholiqzaman Ahmad was approved by the parliament in December that year. Its remit was to provide a framework for the role of education in the nation's development in light of the 1974 report and subsequent recommendations.

With the hindsight of over a decade, we can say that NEP 2010 strayed from

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unified curriculum and common standards for all children in primary and secondary education. And school education divided under the jurisdiction of two ministries has been of no help.

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Pledges to decentralise education governance have not been acted upon. Article 59 of the Constitution, which requires public services and development planning and implementation including education to be vested to the direction of local elected representatives, continues to be flouted. The laws to facilitate this process have not been enacted by the parliament. New thinking about teachers' professionalism, status, role, and means of attracting the brightest into the profession are yet to become a national agenda. Tertiary education, both public and private, remains chaotic; and expansion is given priority over enforcing quality standards.

Returning to basic principles In the 50th year of independence, education endeavours have to be rededicated to the four fundamental principles of the constitution—"high ideals of nationalism, socialism, democracy and secularism", and to fulfilling the "fundamental aim of the State to realise through the democratic process a socialist society, free from exploitation, a society in which the rule of law, fundamental human rights and freedom, equality and justice, political, economic and social, will be secured for all citizens" (The Constitution, Preamble).

The practical manifestation in the education system of these principles needs to be evident in educational outcomes—improvements in skills, capabilities, and values of the learners so that they can confront the massive challenges of building a democratic and prosperous society where rights and dignity of all prevail. They need to be able to both protect the planet and the needs of the people. A permanent education commission of distinguished and dedicated people, empowered by law, may show the way to navigate the arduous road ahead.

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PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

Goals by 2030, becoming a higher middle-income country by 2031, and becoming a developed country by 2041, noted Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina while commending the CPD recommendations ("Becoming A Developing Nation: Bangladesh Reaches A Milestone" *The Daily Star*, February 28, 2021).

The five decades of Bangladesh can hardly be described as smooth sailing. Rebuilding a war-ravaged country was seen by many as an impossible task. Henry Kissinger, the US Secretary of State and a hard liner opponent of Bangladesh's liberation, notoriously came up with the epithet of the "bottomless basket." Economic and political turmoil and natural disasters dogged the early years of the new nation.

An irreparable blow was the assassination of the Father of the Nation on August 15, 1975 and soon afterwards, the killing of the four most prominent leaders of the country while they were confined in the central jail. The military rule that followed for the next 16 years put a halt to the nation's democratic development. The new rulers tried hard to disown the ideals and principles that had inspired the birth of the new nation; and a popular upheaval in 1990 dislodged the military rulers and restored democratic rule. But the lingering effects continue to cast their shadow on the political and economic development of the country.

Despite the setbacks, progress in economic growth and social indicators in recent decades has been widely recognised, as our graduation to developing country status testifies. In fact, in his report, "What Can Biden's Plan Do for Child Poverty: Look to Bangladesh" published on March 10, 2021, *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof drew on the example of Bangladesh while writing about what US President Joe Biden could do

could be true in America. Kristof concluded, "Bangladesh reminds us that investing in marginalized children isn't just about compassion, but about helping a nation soar." This international acclamation is reason for pride, but challenges remain ahead.

The first education commission of free Bangladesh

One of the earliest decisions of the government of independent Bangladesh was to set up an education commission headed by eminent scientist-educationalist Muhammad Qudrat-e-Khuda, which was tasked to make recommendations for building the education system of the new nation. In laying down the aims of education, the Commission said:

An education system is a tool for realizing the nation's hopes and aspirations and for building a new society... we have to ensure the reflection of the four fundamental principles of state at all levels of education. Adding to the four fundamental principles and other major principles of education, the aims and purposes of education in Bangladesh can be set forth as below:

1 Making education a tool for social transformation based on nationalism, socialism, democracy, secularism, patriotism and good citizenship, humanism and global citizenship, and moral values;

2 Applied learning for economic development, respect for manual work, and creating a skilled workforce;

3 Education to promote organisational and leadership qualities, creativity, research, social progress, and political and economic advancement (Translated from Commission Report, p 4).

The 36 chapters of the Commission report laid out the ways and means of achieving the goals. The report was formally handed to Prime Minister Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur

the Khuda Commission on several counts, opting for compromise on some basic points. Some of these compromises were consequences of the political shift and the lingering influence of the post-1975 political legacy, rather than responses to the changing contexts of educational needs.

An important proposal of the Khuda Commission was that all institutions including madrasas should follow a common unified curriculum up to grade eight. The aim was to take all children in all institutions, public and private, through a common educational experience, enable them all to acquire the same basic skills, and encourage children to develop shared values and a sense of solidarity as a nation. Beyond that stage, madrasas would serve as vocational education to meet the demands for services related to religious observances, maktab and family-based religious instruction of children, and for officiating in Muslim weddings and so on. It was not seen as a parallel education system from the pre-primary to tertiary levels.

As it turned out, the framers of NEP 2010 found themselves overwhelmed by the post-1975 ten-fold surge in government-supported Alia madrasas. A new category—qawmi madrasas—outside the scope of any government regulations had emerged and mushroomed in number. Over a third of secondary level students were in these madrasas, though these did not prepare young people for life and work in a modern society. The way to resolve this dilemma between faith-based education and a secular system could be to improve the outcomes of mainstream education and make it more attractive so that students and parents can make choices in favour of the mainstream. NEP 2010 ignored this dilemma and the problem has grown bigger since then, with more madrasas and more students enrolling in them,

while there has been little change in the quality of those institutions.

To take another example, the Khuda Commission foresaw Bangla as the medium of education at all levels. It also accorded a high priority to English as the window to the world of science, technology, and research. It saw secondary education as the stage for acquiring English proficiency to enable all students completing secondary education to become truly bilingual. However, populist decisions were taken by a military ruler in the 1980s to teach English from grade one although there were no English teachers in primary schools. This is still largely the case. NEP 2010 went along with this populist compromise. Today, more than half of the children completing primary education cannot read and write at a functional level even in Bangla, according to National Student Assessment results.

Compromises apart, why was a serious effort not made to implement the 2010 policy? As this writer has pointed out earlier ("Building on Bangabandhu's education vision", *The Daily Star*, March 11, 2021), a strong and visionary leader did not take the helm in the education sector. Major decision-making was left to officials who lacked commitment, capability, and public accountability. A permanent education commission as an oversight body for monitoring education reforms as proposed in the 2010 Education Policy has never been set up. There has been little progress on a

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