

# Our education in the next 50 years

The future of Bangladesh's education sector relies on technology, demography, and climate change



MANZOOR AHMED

It has been a season of reviewing and reminiscing about the past 50 years since independence and projecting into the future with expectation and hope. Two prominent think tanks—

Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS) and the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD)—have held multi-session conferences with dozens of papers and speakers on progress and challenges in different areas of national development. Neither has included a specific session on education, though the critical role of education, skills and capacity came up tangentially in many of the discussions.

It would be fair to say that in the last 50 years, schools and classrooms have grown in size and number, but they have not changed that much in character; the same basic pattern of teacher-student interaction has continued. We can be certain that in the next 50 years, the combined impact on education of digital technology, demography and climate change will be more radical.

The International Commission on Futures of Education, appointed by Unesco in 2019, has just released its report "Reimagining Our Futures Together: A Social Contract for Education." Significantly, "futures," in plural, is emphasised, because it cannot be one fixed scenario for all and everywhere. This one follows two past seminal commission reports: "Learning to Be: The World of Education Today and Tomorrow" (1972), and "Learning: The Treasures Within" (1996).

The latest commission, headed by Sahle-Work Zewde, the first woman president of Ethiopia and a former diplomat, was tasked to probe the challenges and point the way towards imagining and shaping the diverse futures that humanity faces at the present juncture of history.

According to the report, "We face a dual challenge of making good on the unfulfilled promise to ensure the right to quality education for every child, youth and adult and fully realising the transformational potential of education as a route for sustainable collective futures." The report pleads that "...[a] new social contract must be grounded in human rights and based on principles of non-discrimination, social justice, respect for life, human dignity and cultural diversity."

The futures report—as well as other international and national discourse on education—suggest that three paramount influences have emerged which must be given attention in imagining the future of education that we want for Bangladesh. These

are digital technology, climate change and demography.

Digital technology is discussed mostly as a means of making learning materials and devices available to students and teachers. But it has become much more—a way of generating, constructing, reaching, and sorting knowledge and information for use in our lives. There are profound implications of this for learning content and objectives, pedagogy and the work of teachers.

Learning the logic and practice of coding and programming need to start at an early age with young children. At the primary level, digital literacy consisting of basic skills in programming and algorithms have to be added to familiar alpha-numeric literacy as the young learners' package of foundational skills. Experiments have demonstrated that children are capable of learning and using intuitively the digital logic, which adults often find difficult to navigate. The implications of digital communication for knowledge generation and use have to be reflected in the curriculum from a very early stage.

Learning to learn, accessing the sources of knowledge and information, and selecting and assessing knowledge for their use in solving problems and seeking answers have to be given priority. This is in sharp contrast to the present concentration on storing facts and information in memory, following the so-called banking model of education. This model also influences—or distorts—what happens in a classroom and how students' learning is assessed. Another aspect of the banking model is the neglect of social and emotional learning, and developing moral and ethical values, skills and practice.

Specific actions have to be taken on lifelong learning. We must recognise that the notion of preparation for work and life ending in the first quarter of life is no longer

valid. Lifelong learning is not a novel idea, but it has become indispensable in the age of rapid change in technology, market, nature of work, and production and consumption patterns. Flexible, diverse and demand-driven learning has become critical in technical and vocational education and training (TVET), professional development, tertiary education, and needs-based learning for youth and adults.

at global and national levels. How the consequences for knowledge, skills, attitudes and values figure in educational content, pedagogic practices and learning outcomes has to be worked out. One likely scenario would be increased emphasis on co-curricular activities in the form of student and school projects to study, investigate and carry out creative coping and protection activities in the community.

number will increase at least tenfold from the current level of around one million teachers.

The demographic dividend window arising from the youthful population of Bangladesh will close in two decades—about the time Bangladesh expects to cross over the threshold of a developed country. The education system by then should display the characteristics of an advanced system in respect of quality, equity and inclusion. Quality secondary education has to become universal even earlier.

We must reckon with the governance, management and financing of the change that will happen in education. The growth and change envisaged imply that education will be a much larger part of the services sector of the economy, and a larger component of GDP and the employment structure. The sector will account for a quarter to one-third of GDP. Its size and complexity will require it to be decentralised, so that it is planned and managed at the local level in a responsive manner with substantial authority and responsibility vested in individual institutions. The financing of education will depend on national public budgets increased three to four times from the current level as a GDP ratio. National allocations have to be complemented by subnational local government budgets, household contributions and other non-state contributions.

Management and financing of state and non-state activities in education have to be carried out within a regulatory framework that will support the national objectives on quality, inclusion and equity in education.

A major change in the education system with growth in size is inevitable. Will it be haphazard, with many negative consequences and wastes, or guided, planned and designed to optimise intended results? A beginning has to be made in this respect. An education sector plan is a means of carrying out planned change in the system. Some work has been done on a sector plan by an expert team in 2019-20, with the involvement of the education authorities. The Eighth Five-Year Plan has also been adopted. These provide the elements of a medium-term plan to begin the journey. The Unesco futures report urges forging a social contract, so that society buys into the future. Establishing a statutory permanent national commission on education, recommended by the National Education Policy 2010, can be the instrument for helping create the national compact. The fundamental state principles of democracy, socialism, nationalism and secularism written into the constitution can be the pillars of the social compact. The ball is in the court of the national policymakers.

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ILLUSTRATION: BIPOB CHAKROBORTY

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All of these transformative changes in educational content, methods and objectives demand commensurate new thinking about teachers and teaching—about how they are recruited, professionally prepared, rewarded, and their performance appraised. Ways have to be found to attract and hold on to the best and the brightest in the teaching profession.

Climate change poses an existential threat—especially for Bangladesh. Its education and learning implications have not received the attention needed at the decision and policy-making levels. A quarter of the population is likely to be climate refugees in the next two to three decades, with serious adverse consequences for their life and livelihood. But no one will escape vulnerability. The nature of production, consumption and lifestyle have to change through change in behaviour and values by individuals and families—regardless of adaptation and mitigation measures taken

Demographic changes will have multifaceted effects on the education system. In the next five decades, Bangladesh's population will stabilise at around 250 million. The number of students including institutional adult learners will be about 100 million, assuming that the pattern of work and leisure and technological change will prompt more of the population to be engaged longer in education. The number of educational institutions will multiply—rising to at least a million from the current 200,000—with many more early childhood care and education centres, and diverse youth and adult learning and training facilities. Organised and planned self-learning with or without certification will be common. The education workforce will comprise teachers as well as ICT facilitators, guidance counsellors, psychologists, nurses, co-curricular activity organisers, facilities supervisors, school administration personnel and others. Their

# Hummus with a deep 'h': The many faces of colonisation



LEE-ANNE GERMANOS

As we near the end of 2021, I look back at the attack on the West Bank city of Gaza that took place in May this year, and how it shifted the way the world perceives the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. As normalised as conflicts and Israeli

airstrikes may be to the Palestinian people, for the first time since the establishment of the state of Israel, the rest of the world witnessed the reality and extent of the disproportionate deaths and destruction Palestinians suffered in the name of Israeli self-defence. This "a-woke-ning" can be attributed to the social media coverage of the conflict, which exposed the decades-long biased mainstream media narrative on the issue.

One of the more disturbing features of the events of 2021, however, is not the obvious death and destruction, but rather the subtle yet deliberate attempt by Israel to appropriate Palestinian/Arabic culture and cuisine. The most blatant of them was the recent "Visit Israel" experience arranged by the Israeli government for the contestants of the Miss Universe pageant. The beauty queens posed in *thaubs*, traditional Palestinian Bedouin clothing, while making traditional Palestinian cuisine—*warra' areesh/warra' enab*—as part of living "a day in the life of a Bedouin," as

the Israeli government passed it off as part of the country's cultural experience.

What may surprise many is the extent to which the Palestinian/Arabic cuisine and culture have already been misappropriated. For example, what is now termed "Middle Eastern" cuisine in countries like South Africa, is understood to include—and even mean—Israeli cuisine. Popular dishes and foods such as *falafel*, *hummus* (often mispronounced), *labneh* and *za'atar* are now passed off either as Israeli, or the more neutral "Middle Eastern" food. The irony, of course, is that Israel doesn't even consider itself to be a Middle East country. The "Jerusalem" dishes referenced in South African restaurants—by famous Israeli chefs—come from Palestinian or Arab-Israeli households and restaurants in Jerusalem. After 73 years of occupation, and given that 40 percent of the population in Jerusalem currently remains Palestinian or Arab-Israeli, one would have thought this fact to be obvious to the rest of the world—especially given that most Jewish Israelis were Eastern European emigrants who brought with them a cuisine foreign to the Middle East. The only Jews to have had exposure to Middle Eastern cuisine pre-1948 would be the *Mizrahis* (Arab Jews).

So what is the point? Why the cultural misappropriation? In addition to the unlawful dispossession of Palestinian land in the 1940s to date—an illegal occupation of land in terms of international law—and the practice of the international crime of

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apartheid, Israel has sought to wipe out all traces of a Palestinian presence in its country. Regardless of whether or not Zionists are willing to recognise the existence of a Palestinian state prior to 1948, the simple fact is that the Palestinian population in the state of Israel dropped by 88% from 1947 to 1948. Their land was then seized by the Israeli government through a racially discriminatory law, which is still in force today. Still, the map of the state of Israel continues to expand from what it was in the UN partition plan in 1947, through illegal settlements that encroach on the diminished Palestinian territories as set out in the Oslo Accords, signed 47 years later. This project of expansion is facilitated by Israel's Law of Return, which provides Israeli

citizenship and land to the 30,000 Jews who immigrate to Israel annually. Palestinian villages that once lay within the borders of the state of Israel are given Hebrew names to replace their once Arabic equivalent, and, if not occupied by Jewish Israeli settlers, are turned into forests, courtesy of the Jewish National Fund.

Life in the slowly diminishing Occupied Palestinian Territories mirrors that in South Africa pre-1994. In fact, two former Israeli ambassadors to South Africa have admitted to their government's system of occupation being modelled on South Africa's system of oppression. Like Bantustans, the Occupied Palestinian Territories are disjointed and isolated pieces of scattered land. Israel, like Apartheid South Africa, supports a system of "separate development," essentially resulting in Palestinian movement in the Occupied Territories being regulated by a "Berlin" wall, check points, and a *dompas* system—which, in the Israeli context, are permits arbitrarily issued by the Israeli government allowing Palestinians to leave their own territories. Separate roads and queues at check points, detention without trial, arbitrary raids, forced evictions, and home demolitions are all reminiscent of South Africa's dark past. As was the case in Apartheid South Africa, oppression is justified by the need to protect the oppressor against the imminent threat of the oppressed. Opposition is immediately labelled anti-Semitic—communist in South Africa's case—

and terrorist-loving. If nothing else, the African National Congress' armed struggle and wing, uMkhonto we Sizwe, taught us that one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter.

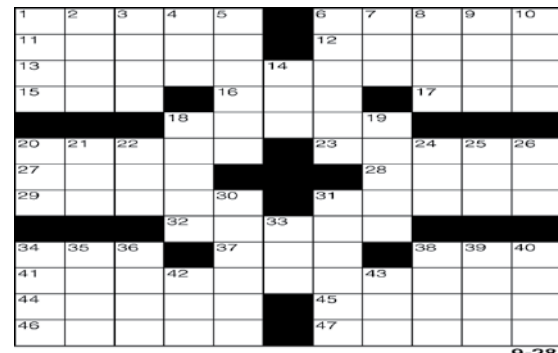
Unlike South Africa, however, instead of looking to shame the oppressed out of their culture and heritage, Israel has sought to appropriate them whilst simultaneously removing traces of their original owners. In addition to the "Visit Israel" mockery, the passing off of Middle Eastern food and the whitewashing of Palestinian history in a Jewish state that has not existed long enough to kill off living memories of that history, I recently witnessed the appropriation of a *Zaffe*, a traditional Levantine Arabic wedding troop, at a Jewish Israeli wedding in South Africa, where neither the wedding party nor the guests understood the significance of it.

If the world is not yet prepared to mete out the same response to Israel as it once did to South Africa, bearing in mind that the South African Apartheid system and the state of Israel were both established in the same year (1948), then at the very least, it should not be complicit in the erasure of the Palestinian identity through the misappropriation of their culture and cuisine. So call it what it is: Hummus with a deep "h" (the Palestinian way).

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## CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Food in shells
  - 6 Divides
  - 11 Outfit
  - 12 Boise's state
  - 13 Pondering
  - 15 Light touch
  - 16 Brief drop
  - 17 Retina setting
  - 18 Spells
  - 20 Fall flower
  - 23 Spanish boys
  - 27 "Star Wars" princess
  - 28 Enthusiasm
  - 29 Bring to bear
  - 31 trifling
  - 32 Brass band members
  - 34 Droop
  - 37 Place down
- DOWN**
- 1 Office helper
  - 2 Blue hue
  - 3 Group of believers
  - 4 Squeak stopper
  - 5 Web spinner
  - 6 Messy room
  - 7 Hoopla
  - 8 Dance party
  - 9 Those people
  - 10 Ticked off
  - 14 Veto
  - 18 Body pump
  - 19 Tag numbers
  - 20 Tavern drink
  - 21 Kinsey topic
  - 22 Even score
  - 24 Volleyball need
  - 25 Cereal bit
  - 26 Cunning
  - 30 Dutch blooms
  - 31 Salary disparity
  - 33 Prohibit
  - 34 Petty fight
  - 35 Car
  - 36 Secluded valley
  - 38 Divisible by two
  - 39 Ocean bird
  - 40 Pretentious
  - 42 Big galoot
  - 43 Bullring cheer



## YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS



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