

Ban on notebooks must not be a paper promise

Govt must take new act as a stepping stone to wider reforms

WE'RE glad to know that the country's first education act is no longer a distant reality as a draft, based on inputs from the Cabinet Division, has been finalised by the education ministry. It will be sent to the division next week and hopefully approved sooner than later. The draft law, notably, issues a ban on printing, publishing and marketing notebooks and guidebooks, but allows publishing "supplementary books and education aid books" upon securing permission. It also forbids teachers from giving private tuition to students of their own institution. Schools, however, can arrange additional classes for weaker students subject to the written consent of parents.

Experts have, justifiably, lauded the new direction of the law – moving away from legitimising the culture of "coaching" and private tuition. If properly implemented, it will improve the quality of classroom education and drastically reduce out-of-pocket expenditure on education. But a few potential issues remain, not so much in the letter of the law as in the spirit in which it may be taken. For example, the approval of additional classes for weaker students opens up a quagmire: Will students be forced to attend them? Will this be a new model of business replacing the coaching culture? While students do need additional help recovering from the learning loss suffered during school closures, this should be done in a way that doesn't nullify the objective of the act, and the government must financially help schools, especially non-MPO schools, incur extra costs.

Also, care should be taken so that no one takes advantage of the often thin line between guidebooks and supplementary reading materials. But perhaps the biggest concern about the act, like any other act in Bangladesh, to be frank, is its implementation once passed into law. The fact that the draft has been on the drawing board for over 11 years paints a disturbing picture of our priorities as a nation. It would be a travesty if we fail to properly implement it after going through all that trouble and the excruciatingly long wait.

That said, the act is just one of the many changes we need after two years of the pandemic during which many students dropped out of school, many turned child brides or child labourers, and many fell behind in terms of basic literary and numeracy. We drastically need a recovery and remedial plan for the education sector. We also need the proposed budget to reflect the need for recovery through improved allocations. Therefore, the authorities – including the two ministries and three divisions in the sector – must take the new act as a stepping stone to the wider reforms needed for education to get back on its track.

Bangladesh railway needs serious fixing

Chronic problems stopping it from getting expected results

IT is generally believed that the potential of Bangladesh Railway to become a major revenue earner for the country has never been properly exploited by those who run this important service sector. Some decades-old problems continue to plague it at a time when railways in developed countries have become synonymous with superior customer service and punctuality. The sector needs dedicated planners and operators with a modern vision to improve the quality of service and to make it profitable.

According to a report by this daily, railway officials have identified a number of chronic problems bedevilling the sector. To begin with, the current 3,093-kilometre rail track being mostly single line, the authorities cannot increase the number of locomotives and compartments. They need double lines to reduce travel time. Furthermore, with most bridges under the rail network having outlived their natural life span, trains cannot pick up speed there nor carry extra load for fear of accidents. Therefore, new bridges should be built replacing the old ones. Also, only 124 stations under the BR, out of the total 359, operate with a modern signalling system, while the rest depend on the old system. A modern signalling system is vital to ensure safety and punctuality.

There is no denying that a modern railway system must have, under its wings, a number of workshops with state-of-the-art equipment to undertake repair works on a regular basis, especially after an accident to put the engines in operation without losing time. But the railway lacks such workshops.

The BR is also in need of major renovation and modernisation to stay in the race. Projects taken up by the BR in this connection must be given the highest priority by relevant officials. In reality, however, projects often get delayed for no plausible reasons. We are told that most projects aimed at improving its infrastructure and rolling stocks get delayed for several reasons, such as delays in getting project approval, land acquisition, appointment of consultants, lack of coordination among relevant agencies, and delay in accessing funds from foreign lenders. A sliver of hope, experts say, is that Padma Bridge will open up opportunities for the BR to earn revenue in the coming days.

But all those problems that persist today threaten to nullify any progress achieved. The relevant authorities, therefore, should urgently undertake the measures and reforms needed for the unimpeded operation and modernisation of Bangladesh Railway, so that it can turn into a profit-making and passenger-friendly service sector.

Why I'm a fan of Ananta Jalil



Aasha Mehreen Amin is joint editor at The Daily Star.

AASHA MEHREEN AMIN

I have to admit it, I am becoming a fan of Ananta Jalil. Not because of the explosive, dealening trailer of his latest movie, *Din: The Day* – a Bangladeshi-Iranian joint venture shot in Iran where AJ ("A Zay") the superhero is performing logic-defying stunts, shooting a hundred bad guys while keeping his makeup intact and sporadically sporting his long auburnish w-i-g – ahem, mane. Neither is it because of that distinctive diction we so love as he makes speeches, listing the accomplishments of Bangladesh including how it has hosted the Rohingya refugees (which, I am sure, is somehow relevant to the intricate plot involving Afghani terrorists, drug cartels and an extravaganza of guns that would put the staunchest supporter of the National Rifle Association of America to shame).

No, this time it's because of Ananta Jalil the human being.

When news of the devastating floods and human suffering started coming in, we were pleasantly surprised by a Facebook post from the much reviled and revered star. Ananta Jalil, of "Manchester" and "orenz zues" fame, without any cringe-worthy utterings, announced he would stand by the flood victims and help them as much as he could. He would donate money for relief from profits earned from his business and movies. Admittedly, one would have wished he hadn't mentioned that he would sacrifice one or two cows instead of the usual 12 and donate the money instead, but at least we know his heart is in the right place. According to news reports, he will be donating Tk 30 lakh for flood victims. What's more, he has urged the well-off to do the same.

In fact there are individuals, NGOs and private organisations (like Bidyanondo Foundation) taking the initiative to help. The biggest challenge is to actually reach the relief to the people in remote areas where the water is so choppy and the weather so volatile, even the armed forces are finding it difficult to navigate. Tour operators like Onirban Boat have turned their holiday cruise boats into rescue boats, picking up stranded people from the remote areas, taking them to shelters. A number of tourism agencies part of the e-Tourism Association of Bangladesh used their boats stationed in remote areas to rush to the stranded people, housing them, providing food and carrying relief items. They are trying to raise funds from members and other sources to continue their relief operations. A barrister, Syed

NO STRINGS ATTACHED

Sayedul Haque Suman, announced on his Facebook page that he has raised Tk 98 crore in just two days. Bangladeshi expatriates in the US are raising funds to arrange relief to be reached to the stranded.

These are heartwarming examples of spontaneous empathy and quick action. But they are still far from being

alive. What kind of Eid these people can expect to have is not something the majority of the rich have time to think about.

There is a disturbing obtuseness among the wealthy that makes them unmoved by the acute suffering of their compatriots who are lower down the social ladder. Perhaps the floods in



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adequate considering the widespread, prolonged nature of this catastrophe. An estimated 7,334,000 people have already been affected in Sunamganj, Sylhet, Moulvibazar, Netrokona, Kishoreganj, Habiganj, Brahmanbaria, and Mymensingh. This is an ongoing humanitarian disaster, the financial, social and health effects of which will continue for months on end. In the meantime, every second counts and people's lives are on the line. So, why isn't there a more enthusiastic response from the wealthier sections of society?

It brings us to the issue of a bubble culture – people inside the bubble are impervious to the suffering of others as long as they do not know them and definitely if those suffering are part of the "invisible masses." They will cry oceans with the tortured heroine and battered hero in their favourite drama serial but will feel nothing for the real life heroes and heroines battling for their very lives as the waters swallow up all their belongings, their homes, their crops, food, possessions, their cattle and, terrifyingly, sometimes even their loved ones. They will not know about the mother and her five children who have not eaten for two days, the farmer who has lost all the paddy he had kept to sell and feed his family in the coming months or the thousands of families who await a bleak future of destitution and endless borrowing from loan sharks just to stay

Sunamganj or Sylhet are not part of their newscast as much as the latest update on Amber Heard and Johnny Depp. Perhaps we need to revive the photo opportunities of the old days when anyone could get their few seconds of fame by handing a check to the PM's relief fund and be seen on BTB news while doing so. It is strange that people will spend huge amounts of money for the salvation of their soul or a confirmed seat in paradise but not for helping someone just for the sake of helping. Why is philanthropy so rare in Bangladesh, despite the rising number of millionaires?

There is something ignoble about a class of people which spends obscene amounts of money on jewellery, watches, cars, and expensive holidays in Europe but have hardly any money to spare for charity just to be good human beings. Ananta Jalil has stated what rich people are supposed to do with their money – share it with the needy, helpless, and distressed. The privileged in society should listen to his appeal and stand by their brothers and sisters whose lives have been turned upside down by this disaster. If we can't help them directly, we can always give our money to groups and organisations involved in rescue and relief. Sometimes we just need to be reminded of the obvious, as Ananta Jalil philosophically stated in his Facebook video: You can't take your wealth to the grave.

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Our education system needs to change

Abu Afsarul Haider is an entrepreneur.

ABU AFSARUL HAIDER

IN Bangladesh, although primary education is free and the government provides the textbooks, more than 4.3 million children aged 6-15 years are not in school and around 42 million people – about 26 percent of the population – are still illiterate. Moreover, while our school enrolment rate is still high, the dropout rate is even higher. Data from the Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics show that, in 2020, the dropout rate was 17.2 percent at the primary level, 35.76 percent at the secondary level, and 21.16 percent at the higher secondary level. Most of these dropouts happen in rural areas. Because the quality of schools and standard of teaching there are poor, many parents feel reluctant to send their children to schools. They find the current education system to be of little use in practical life as neither textbooks nor the curriculum is relevant to their situation or match the requirements of the present job market.

In the past few years, numerous experiments have been carried out in the name of modernising and updating our primary, secondary, and higher secondary education. Yet, the existing education curriculum is not aligned with industry needs. While schools/colleges across the globe are focusing more on soft skills such as team-building, problem-solving, critical thinking, communication, negotiation, decision-making, etc., our education system is still stuck in the past.

Research suggests that our garments, real estate, telecommunication, information and technology sectors are facing severe shortage of skilled manpower. As a result, foreign workers are being hired. There is no specific data on outbound remittances, but industry insiders say that foreign nationals working in Bangladesh remit about USD 6 billion altogether every year to their countries.

Bangladesh has a vision to become a developed nation by 2041 and to achieve that, we need skilled workers. But our education budget doesn't reflect the urgency of developing human resources. Our current expenditure on education is the lowest among South Asian countries. The country spends around 2 percent of its GDP on education, whereas India spends 4.6 percent, Afghanistan and Maldives 4.1 percent, Nepal 5.2 percent, and Bhutan spends 6.6 percent of their respective GDPs on education. Despite demands from experts to increase the allocation to between four to six percent of GDP, again we saw poor allocation for education in the national budget for

today and tomorrow.

The government has recently been putting more emphasis on setting up technical schools and colleges in different upazilas. Undoubtedly, vocational training could be an important element for future development, and in reducing unemployment, inequality, and poverty. But our policymakers need to realise that if someone's basic education is weak, vocational training will hardly be of use to them. It is therefore necessary to redesign our primary, secondary, and higher secondary education. Pre-vocational education, information and communication technology (ICT) based education must be considered a priority area for inclusion and development from the secondary level (Class 9) to the higher secondary level (Class 12), to provide a foundation of basic skills and knowledge that will help students acquire technical skills, learn how to apply their knowledge, and use creativity in their work. Also, we should keep in mind that merely setting up technical schools and colleges is not enough. We need to ensure they have skilled teachers, lab facilities, safe and supportive learning environments and, more importantly, offer the most up-to-date technical, professional, and job-oriented courses for young graduates.

Some people in our country tend to see our large population as an asset. There is no denying the fact that the population of a country is the greatest social capital it can have. But as the saying goes, "People without education are like weapons without bullets." Research shows that, at present, about two-thirds of our total population is of working age, which means the country is going through a "demographic window of opportunity." To reap the benefits of this opportunity, our young people need to be trained properly so they can contribute to the development of the nation. Otherwise, Bangladesh may find it very difficult to achieve higher economic growth.



It is important for Bangladesh to focus on improving the quality of its education – the kind of education that will help individuals acquire the knowledge and skills to meet all the needs of the jobs of today and tomorrow.

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FY2022-23. The Unesco recommends spending six percent of GDP on the education sector. Bangladesh ranked 112th out of 138 countries in the Global Knowledge Index 2020. It has scored 35.9 – again the lowest among South Asian countries.

We all know that education is a major driving force of development in any modern society, and that the quality of workers is the central determining factor of economic progress. Therefore, it is important for Bangladesh to focus on improving the quality of its education – the kind of education that will help individuals acquire the knowledge and skills to meet all the needs of the jobs of