



Quality education serves the interests of students, but also the interests of society. FILE PHOTO: STAR

SHIKKHAR SHAMAJIK DAYITTO

A novel approach to sustainable quality education

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Bangladesh has achieved remarkable progress in educational “quantity,” but there are widespread concerns among parents and society in general about the quality of education, particularly in the rural areas. Quality education is a requirement for “Smart Bangladesh,” and it will be an irremediable loss if the country fails to educate its young generation in order to reap the benefits of a demographic dividend that will slip away in the 2030s.

An extensive project that this author carried out in 50 schools across the country under an NGO over the last 12 years demonstrated that significant advancements in quality education are possible even within the current constraints and limitations. The project achieved remarkable success in these schools in areas such as English language skills, maths Olympiad, ICT, debate, sports, and cultural programmes. The use of learning-centred methods in classroom teaching and participation in different co-curricular activities allowed students to enhance their learning and develop skills in critical thinking, problem-solving, teamwork, and leadership, as well as in strengthening character. The results showed that the schools can deliver quality education if they are provided with guidance, logistics, and some level of material and non-material support.

Unfortunately, once the external source of intervention – our NGO – was removed, the fruits of success dissipated. Our expectation that success would generate momentum in the community to team up with the school for continued quality was not met. The community applauded the initial success, but failed to support the school in continuing its pursuit of quality education. In the absence of encouragement and support from the community, the school gradually reverted to its usual mode of operation. Other successful projects met a similar fate and saw a regression back to a culture of dependence on external bodies. Sustainability of the successful approach remained elusive.

That is when the idea of *Shikkhar Shamajik Dayitto* (SSD) – the social responsibility of education – to foster active involvement of all stakeholders in the foundation of quality education programmes – took shape.

The idea is based in a society-wide consensus that quality education is a common good – a right not only for children, but for every member of the community. While children have the right to a good education, they also have the responsibility

to work for it. Teachers have the responsibility to impart quality education, but they have the right to ask for the needed resources. Parents have the right to expect quality education for their children, but they also have the responsibility to provide the needed opportunities to their children and to support the school's efforts to provide quality education. Community members, community leaders, and public representatives have the right to expect schools to deliver quality education, but they need to support the schools in doing so.

Quality education serves the interests of students, but also the interests of society. It is therefore a personal as well as a social responsibility of students to work hard to achieve quality education. Parents, for their part, need to support their children, thus serving their own interests as well as the interests of the community. Providing good teaching enhances

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the prestige of teachers, but it is also their personal and social responsibility. A good school enhances the prestige and social standing of the community and its leaders, and so they have a responsibility to ensure that the school has the resources to deliver quality education.

The convergence of the rights, responsibilities, and interests of all stakeholders creates a win-win situation for all and is the cornerstone for internalising the SSD concept.

The resulting commitment is expressed in an action plan (which may be expressed in the form of a *shamajik ongikar*, or a social contract), specifying the roles and responsibilities of the school and the community, respectively, with a clear mechanism for successful implementation. A small group including school management committee members, teachers, parents, and community representatives may be formed with the task of ensuring that all commitments and responsibilities specified in the *shamajik ongikar* are executed effectively.

In the broad spectrum of education, government support is certainly a must-have, but such

support alone cannot meet all requirements. Experience in many countries including our own shows that a school performs its task much better when parents and the community engage with it.

In the SSD approach, the community takes up the role of providing additionally needed resources for quality education. Quality is accomplished through the combined efforts of the school (students, teachers, and school management committee members) and the community. If success is achieved, the cooperative relationship can continue and sustainability becomes a natural part of the outcome. The SSD entity (such as an NGO) provides needed training, logistics, and evaluation, as well as recalibration of the SSD exercise based on evaluation.

This author started two pilot projects being executed by two NGOs to implement quality education programmes using the SSD approach. It is expected that more NGOs will be motivated to adopt the SSD concept that promises continuation of the quality programme in a self-reliant manner by the community and the school, even after a project is completed.

The work plan developed for SSD integrates the concept with the quality education programme developed and refined by this author. However, the SSD concept can also be integrated with any quality education programme of any organisation. What they need is concurrence on partnership and the design of the programmes to harmonise their goals with their capabilities.

For an NGO operating with an education project, the introduction of the SSD concept entails little additional costs. The NGO typically seeks to create awareness in the immediate community, in addition to the direct beneficiaries of the project. The SSD concept aims to accelerate the awareness campaign by augmenting it with a social contract and creating the possibility of self-reliant continuation by the beneficiaries.

The concept being so versatile deserves national attention. A national awareness campaign to spread it from the upazila level to the district, divisional, and national levels may be undertaken. An organisation (e.g. the “SSD Foundation”) may be formed to support its implementation in education projects by different organisations.

An attempt to achieve quality education in about 25,000 schools across Bangladesh with a massive injection of resources by the government would take time and create inefficiencies. Working with the SSD concept with the available resources, each community can take care of its own schools while making the task more focused, efficient, and achievable. As a result, the country as a whole would take a major leap forward in achieving quality education in a shorter period of time and in a more efficient manner.

What is the fracas on the Barishal uni question paper really about?



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SHUPROVA TASNEEM

“You may have my body, but you will never have my heart/soul” – it’s difficult not to cringe at the gendered language used in what may be one of the most popular storylines that regularly make an appearance in Bangla films. Dhallywood is hardly famous for its feminist commentary – too many of its productions centre on the heroine’s “honour,” to be saved by the male hero, and the “shame” that the villain of the story is trying to bring upon her – and the fact that attempted rape scenes are normalised enough to become pop culture references in Bangladesh definitely says something about us as a society.

This dialogue, however, recently created a social media storm by cropping up in a more unusual place: a question paper for Bangladesh Studies in the University of Barishal, where students were asked to examine it in the “light of British hegemony in the Indian subcontinent.” The first part of the question also asked students to examine the concept of

British Empire and the freedom of thought and revolutionary ideologies during the colonial era, could lead to a creative and critical discussion of the concept of hegemony.

While I’m not a fan of this specific quote, and I would have preferred if the question somehow allowed the student to deconstruct the toxic masculine standards behind it as well, I do appreciate the critical thinking it encourages. It is no secret that the academic culture in Bangladesh is suffering. We have seen cases of academics engaging in plagiarism in some of the most reputed universities in the country. We all know the school system is still heavily reliant on rote memorisation, and commercial guidebooks and notebooks that help students memorise their curriculum and sit for their exams have only muddled the waters further. In such an environment, any question that makes students think out of the box should be welcomed. And who knows, perhaps the discussion of British hegemony has even inspired some

In recent times, wielding a pen (or its modern equivalent) has had consequences for many – from writers and journalists to academics and even teenage social media users, mostly under the auspices of the Digital Security Act (DSA). Over the years, we have seen quite a few examples of academics being vilified, investigated, suspended and even forced to leave for saying the “wrong” thing. Avoidance of “sensitive” topics – basically self-censorship – is now a common denominator of academic and media circles. In line with the textbooks, this policing of thought has not only come from the state, but from educational institutions and from the media itself. Remember the embarrassing brinjal episode, when journalists on a local television network publicly lambasted a researcher for daring to suggest their beloved vegetable may contain certain carcinogenic elements?

Of course, it’s possible that we have all unnecessarily inflated and given traction to what is, at the end of the day, quite an inconsequential story (myself included!). But this whole “vulgar vs critical” question papers saga also gives us a rather fascinating look into how we view the acceptability of certain words and ideas. Would some people have thought this question to be more acceptable if it were issued by a department of media studies? Why are words that are widely acceptable in popular media suddenly unacceptable when



ILLUSTRATION: REHNUMA PROSHOON

the politics of majoritarianism and the “divide and rule” policy of the British Raj.

Much of the attention that this question received was limited to ridicule, and quite a bit of it was outrage or disappointment at the state of education in the country, with many asking why such a “vulgar” statement should make it into higher education question papers. Different media outlets sniffed out the opportunity for clickbait and immediately named and shamed the associate professor responsible for setting the question, and also reached out to other members of the university administration for their opinions. Another, smaller group of netizens – mostly university students, graduates and educators – voiced their support, arguing that the parallels that could be drawn between the heroine’s *deho*, *mon* and *chinta*, and the plunder of resources by the

students to venture into discussing patriarchal structures or gendered discourse as well.

The criticism of this particular question may seem like harmless jibing at first, but when we regard it in the current context of academic freedom (or lack thereof), there are more sinister undertones here. It is impossible to ignore the irony of a question on hegemony triggering debate on what should or should not be said in our academic institutions. From what I understand, when political theorists talk about hegemony, they mean the power exercised by the ruling class to dominate, not through coercion, but by consent – by convincing the dominated that everything is being done in their best interests. And this consent is manufactured through different structures, including educational institutions and the media.

they reach more high-brow avenues like higher education institutions? Would others be less interested in defending it if they did not feel a more general threat to academic freedom and critical thought? Is it possible to defend an academic’s right to set interesting questions while also expressing discomfort at the rather uncritical phrasing of said questions?

Perhaps the issue here isn’t really what should or should not be said in question papers, but that we have failed to realise that we might be doing someone else’s dirty work for them by policing each other’s words. If one day our secular writers can disappear from the pages of our textbooks and Facebook statuses can land us in jail, and the next day academics no longer have the right to conduct research or set questions as they see fit, where do we go from here?

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

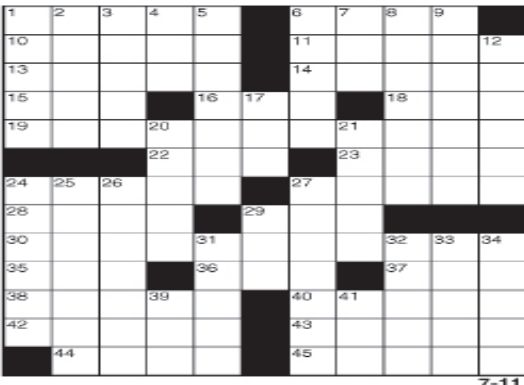
- 1 Felt concern
- 6 Title paper
- 10 Find darling
- 11 “The King”
- 13 Prepare for another war
- 14 Owen of “Inside Man”
- 15 Ancient
- 16 Lupino of film
- 18 Ho of Hawaii
- 19 Popular reads
- 22 Game official
- 23 In the past
- 24 Joke teller
- 27 Memory units
- 28 Leave out
- 29 Caribbean, for one
- 30 Spots for bottles
- 35 Conclude

- 36 Skirt edge
- 37 Trip around the track
- 38 TV’s O’Donnell
- 40 Skate-boarding jump
- 42 Soft leather
- 43 Racket
- 44 Halt
- 45 Muscularly fit

DOWN

- 1 Chocolate imitation
- 2 “Skyfall” singer
- 3 Map lines
- 4 Mess up
- 5 Moderately sweet
- 6 Car sticker
- 7 Building wing
- 8 Plain to see

- 9 Marital split
- 12 Hearing and smell, for two
- 17 Rock’s—Leppard
- 20 Hackneyed
- 21 Faithful
- 24 Cringes in fear
- 25 Foreboding
- 26 Way of thinking
- 27 Triple Crown leg
- 29 Take in
- 31 Canary sound
- 32 Bold poker bet
- 33 Job reward
- 34 Velocity
- 39 Altar words
- 41 Old card game



YESTERDAY’S ANSWERS



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