

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

What was the point of EC’s dialogue?

Political parties must step up to resolve the ongoing stalemate

We are hardly surprised that there was no meaningful outcome of the dialogue arranged by the Election Commission (EC) with all the registered political parties in the country on Saturday. Almost a third of the parties invited, including the BNP, did not even attend the talks, which were arranged reportedly to apprise them of its preparations to hold the upcoming 12th parliamentary election. The commission decided to hold the dialogue at a time when the ongoing political crisis had taken a turn for the worse, and there were expectations that it would play a constructive role in addressing the key concerns raised by the major political parties. However, in the absence of any real attempt to tackle the root causes of the current political impasse, such a dialogue was bound to fail.

The EC scheduled the dialogue only three days after the BNP’s botched rally, which descended into chaos and violence following clashes between the party members and police. Since the October 28 mayhem, law enforcement agencies have arrested at least 7,835 BNP leaders and activists around the country till November 4, including at least seven of its top leaders, according to a *Prothom Alo* report. Other leaders are in hiding to escape arrest. In this situation, did the EC really expect someone from the BNP to show up at the dialogue?

Besides BNP, 16 other parties boycotted the dialogue, seeing it as a futile exercise. Bangladesh Jasod released a statement explaining that it boycotted the dialogue as it would have no influence on ensuring a conducive environment for a free and fair election. Even a former election commissioner told this daily that the EC held the talks “just to show that they have called everybody once again and that they did not get support [from all political parties].” When a country is engulfed in such turmoil, these kinds of formulaic dialogues do little to boost the political parties’ confidence. The EC should have anticipated that.

What we really need right now is some meaningful actions from the major political parties to resolve the ongoing political stalemate. The election is less than three months away, and the two main political camps, Awami League and BNP, are showing no sign of compromise. If this continues, we are afraid the spate of political violence will continue till the election, and the situation will get even worse. Unfortunately, as the crackdown on opposition leaders intensifies across the country, the hope of a constructive dialogue between the parties now seems to be a far-off dream, thanks in part to the EC, which has thus far failed to create a level playing field and inspire confidence in its ability to steer the country through a free and fair election.

Trust deficit hampering South Asian integration

Leaders must work together to ensure greater cohesion

At the recent South Asia Economic Summit, speakers agreed on the importance of greater regional connectivity to boost trade and integration within South Asia. According to data, despite there being a steady growth in regional trade over the past two decades, the change is still extremely limited when compared to the region’s levels of bilateral trade with mostly Western countries.

Given that Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan are expected to graduate from the group of least developed countries in the next few years—which will affect their current status in terms of access to international markets—we wholeheartedly agree with the need for deeper integration becoming a crucial part of the region’s long-term plans. However, it has also become apparent that there are a number of obstacles standing in the way.

Speakers at the summit identified weak infrastructure, restrictive tariffs and duties, import restraints, customs delays and requirements, and rigid bureaucracies as some of the barriers that have limited South Asian countries from building economic corridors and accessing the untapped potential of its markets. However, a lack of political consensus amongst the leaders of South Asian countries was considered the major reason for most attempts at integration falling through the cracks so far, despite there already being a number of existing initiatives set up for this purpose.

The shock of the pandemic and the Ukraine war, whose economic impacts have reverberated across South Asia as well, have shown us that it is bad policy to put one’s eggs in one basket. Clearly, there is a need for expanding into multilateral trade opportunities instead of becoming dependent on bilateral trade with select major players. It is also important to remember that South Asia is facing a collective fight against climate change that is affecting the region’s food and energy security—creating a situation that will only grow worse if effective regional policies are not put into place.

We can no longer allow a trust deficit to stand in the way of integration, which will allow our countries to benefit from trade and light climate change. We urge South Asian leaders to set aside their political differences and work together to fulfil their responsibility to the people in the region.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Curb rising price of essentials

In recent months, the prices of essential food items have increased significantly. This is particularly challenging for low-income households. Many people in Bangladesh cannot afford to eat a balanced diet, leading to an increase in malnutrition rates. The government needs to take steps to make food more affordable. One way to do this is to reduce import duties and taxes on food items, and another way is to increase the supply of food by supporting local farmers and investing in agricultural infrastructure. I urge the media to raise awareness about this issue and advocate for policies that would make food more affordable.

Ashikur Rahman Ashik, Noakhali

NEW SCHOOL CURRICULUM

A great opportunity or a looming disaster?



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MANZOOR AHMED

A new school curriculum is being introduced in phases, and the initial experience has left many students, teachers and parents confused and apprehensive. So, the question is, will the new curriculum be a new opportunity for much needed improvement in teaching and learning, or is this an ill-planned and failed reform?

The new curriculum and accompanying textbooks are being followed in Class 1 and 2 as well as Class 6 and 7, and will be introduced in phases from pre-primary to Class 12 by 2027. The ambitious aim is to equip the new generation with relevant skills and competencies for the 21st century, weaning them away from memorising guidebooks and relying on private tutors and coaching centres to pass tests without real learning.

The change foreseen in pedagogy—premised on a social constructivist theory of learning and teaching characterised as “experiential learning”—is expected to bring about a major change in student assessment. Presumably, it will be without numerical scores and grades; students’ report cards would have geometric figures—triangles, squares and circles—denoting different descriptions of students’ abilities and performance.

A circular of National Curriculum and Textbook Board posted (NCTB) on its website titled “Do not be confused by false propaganda about the new curriculum,” says the curriculum is aimed at producing “smart citizens” for Smart Bangladesh, to be realised by 2041. The draft of the curriculum, it says, was prepared based on six studies, review of curricula of other countries and exchange of views with over 800 “stakeholders.” The new system, it affirmed, would lead to “students studying more than before, actively engaged in learning, doing and presenting group work, acquiring not just knowledge, but also skills.” There will be half-yearly and annual examinations, but “without the fear about it.” Still, there will be pass and fail in examinations, the circular assures, but also report cards with a 7-point scale. And there will be no need for private tutoring, coaching centres, and guidebooks and notebooks.

Outcomes somewhat similar to the above were also promised when national public exams were introduced at the end of Class 5 and 8 in 2009 and 2010, and when “creative questions” began to be used in all public exams. We have seen over the past decade that experiments with too many public exams and creative questions failed. These have now been abandoned and are to be replaced by the new curricular experiment.

It appears that a few “experts” have succeeded in using their ill-digested knowledge of learning theory and practice to persuade decision-makers to begin an experiment with children as guinea pigs. Singapore and Finland, boasting the highest performing schools in the world with highly paid professionals as teachers, who enjoy great autonomy in how they conduct their classes, may come close to the ideal pedagogy our experts seem to have in mind. Even these countries have not given up grading and sorting students by performance. Our education minister has been badly advised and a heavy price is likely to be paid by our children—with their education put in jeopardy.



PHOTO: HASIBUR RAHMAN BILU

We have serious structural problems about how curriculum development and implementation is handled.

Why did the earlier experiments fail and had to be abandoned? It was not because the intent of the authorities, the objectives of the initiatives or the theoretical justification for the public examinations and the creative questions (structured questions based on Bloom’s taxonomy of knowledge used in many countries) were wrong.

The past experiments did not work because the basic conditions for implementing the changes were not present in our school system. Most critically, the teachers were not prepared and did not have the skills and necessary motivation. They could not be trained to do their part and were not given the support and supervision needed. They were not motivated because of the adverse working conditions and lack of incentives to perform. Too meagre

time allowed for in-person training and orientation of classroom teachers was reduced from weeks to days, and even this could not be implemented for all teachers. The rollout of a major educational reform has all the hallmarks of how this should not be done.

Not that the authorities have not been warned of the dangers. Education watch reports for the recent three years and public discussions have urged prioritising recovering from the learning losses due to the Covid closure of schools and other preexisting problems aggravated further by the pandemic. They recommended holding off a major reform. Decision-makers have not listened to such advice.

We have serious structural problems with how curriculum development and implementation is handled. Such an

Stephen Heyneman, professor emeritus at Vanderbilt University in the US, who is knowledgeable about Bangladesh, wrote in a recent personal communication to this writer that the source of the problem rests in the inability to understand the exigencies of the classroom—the lack of materials, the illness of students, the idiosyncrasies of electricity supply, the wide variation in student abilities and interest, etc. So the standard curricula are first vilified, then discarded and replaced with an ideal “modern curricula” that is difficult to implement.

The ambitions of the new curriculum are commendable, but aiming too high too fast without creating the essential conditions for success is extracting a high price by endangering our children’s future.

How academics can help combat air pollution

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MD FIROZ KHAN and SABIKUNNES A SAYMA

Can we think of a realm where seven million lives tragically come to an end each year, victims of an unnoticeable adversary hidden in every breath we take? It does not only happen in science fiction; now, it is a grim reality. These millions are facing the health risks induced by air pollution, and this demands our prompt attention. In the persistent fight against the dangers of contaminants in the air, it is evident that apathy is not a viable alternative. Recent research by the Clean Air Fund reveals that global development funding for air quality accounted for only 0.7 percent of total international development funding from 2015 to 2021.

Although Bangladesh receives substantial funding to combat air pollution, it continues to struggle with this invisible threat. Local and international institutions have issued reports highlighting the devastating effects of climate change and air

pollution on the country’s citizens. Bangladesh often ranks as the fifth-most air-polluted nation globally; Dhaka reached the top among the global megacities. The surge or mismanagement in the transportation industry is directly linked to escalating pollution levels, with both light and heavy vehicles spewing exhaust fumes and soot particles.

Sadly, more than 90 percent of children and more than half of the world’s population breathe toxic air, as stated by UN agencies. This highlights the significance of our development partners emphasising the health and safety of Bangladesh’s citizens, particularly the country’s children, the most vulnerable group. While we have made substantial progress in education, capacity buildup, and the development of infrastructure and road networks, we now need help fighting indoor and outdoor air pollution. Indoor air is relatively heavier and dirtier compared

to outdoor reported by numerous research in the literature. To prevent repeating past errors, for example, the arsenic problem in Bangladesh during the 1990s, we must employ a science-based advantageous approach for a long-term mitigation goal.

But should academics lead the way in this endeavour?

The key is to bridge the gap between intent and action, which is essential here in order to solve the problem. Our complex problems necessitate scientific or nature-based sustainable solutions, which essentially signifies that academia and industry must work together by bringing together their respective talents and resources. Many problems arise from air pollution, but academics have the expertise to develop solutions. They work with experts in environmental science, people’s health, green energy, and policy to ensure our strategies are thorough, supported by evidence, and prepared to handle even the most challenging issues. Effective environmental policy relies on the research, analysis, and critical thinking provided by academic institutions in an ever-changing environmental setting. Industry collaboration, which uses research to boost long-term viability and create greener technology, supports these initiatives and promotes them to the root in the community.

Making the institutes a centre for generating ideas or prototype technology is a timely move. This convergence may stimulate new approaches to reducing air pollution in Bangladesh. Innovative and sustainable solutions for controlling air pollution may be developed with help from many fields of study and professionals. Knowledge, study, and competence in the relevant subject are required to understand the fundamental causes, which is necessary to develop comprehensive and successful solutions. If we all work together, we can cut pollution levels dramatically by eliminating the root causes of it. If governments, communities, stakeholders, and specialists work together to reduce air pollution, it may also instil in people a lifelong respect for the natural world in any country. Together, we can solve the problem and improve Earth’s health and sustainability for future generations.

It is time for Bangladesh to address the damage that air pollution has caused. By reevaluating funding priorities and emphasising scientific research-based solutions, we can pave the way for clearer air, improved lives, and a sustainable future for the next generations. To restore and regenerate Bangladesh, science is our guiding light.