

Why is our youth too scared to speak out?

Govt must protect their rights and invest in their prospects

How youths feel about their future can often be a litmus test for the overall health and development of a country. Are they hopeful about their prospects, or does the road ahead seem even bleaker than before? According to the recent Youth Matters Survey 2023, conducted by Bangladesh Youth Leadership Center (BYLC) in collaboration with Brac University's Centre for Peace and Justice (CPJ), the youths of Bangladesh are, unfortunately, leaning towards the latter.

Out of the 5,609 survey participants aged 16-35 years, 55.3 percent considered Bangladesh as not a peaceful country, 68.6 percent believed the current education system does not adequately equip them with the necessary skills to secure employment or establish businesses, and 61.8 percent attested to their physical and mental health being affected by price hikes. In terms of the issues affecting their lives, almost 89 percent of respondents identified corruption, alongside unemployment (67 percent), inflation (51 percent) and climate change (73 percent).

It is clear that today's youths are facing unique and unprecedented challenges in the era of the climate emergency, and due to recent global political and economic shifts. However, we must ask our administration: in this day and age, when Bangladesh has achieved so many of its development milestones, why are the country's youths still not being provided with the jobs, education, and economic stability they need?

What's even more disturbing is that 71.5 percent of respondents said they felt unsafe expressing their opinions on public platforms. Given the arbitrary use of draconian laws like the Digital Security Act—only this week, Jagannath University student Khadijatul Kubra was finally cleared for release on bail by the Supreme Court after being arrested in August last year—it is not difficult to understand why young people would feel they are unable to exercise their right to freedom of speech. How can the youth not feel disillusioned when something as simple as hosting an online webinar can land them in jail?

Despite these odds, the fact that almost 58 percent of youths do not wish to leave the country, that more than 70 percent want to cast their votes in elections, and that an overwhelming majority of respondents say they would not leave the country if the challenges they face were resolved, show that they believe in a better future. Time and again, we have seen the country's youth create, innovate and excel, making us proud on regional and international platforms. Clearly, they have not given up on their country. The question is, when will the country—or rather, the country's administration—prove that it has not given up on its youth, and commit to a future with quality education, economic and climate stability, democracy, and freedom of speech?

Yet another dengue record

Loss of 24 lives in a day is unacceptable

None of us had expected that dengue would claim the lives of 24 people in a single day—that, too, in winter, when infections decline. But Wednesday witnessed the highest number of deaths from the mosquito-borne disease in Bangladesh's history. Despite the authorities repeatedly pledging to take effective measures, every successive year brings with it new dengue records, proving their words hollow. We fear that if this inaction continues to reign, next year may be even worse.

On the same day, the country witnessed another unfortunate milestone—the dengue death toll crossing 1,500 this year. In just the first 15 days of this month, 172 dengue patients have died. If such a harrowing situation continues to prevail, which seems like it will, we will achieve yet another record—the caseload crossing the 300,000-mark.

Regarding the record deaths, experts have pointed to our neglected healthcare system for being one of the culprits. While dengue usually wreaks havoc in Dhaka, this year the disease has spread to all 64 districts of the country. In absence of proper treatment facilities in rural areas, a significant number of patients are being referred to Dhaka, overburdening the capital city's healthcare facilities, resulting in more deaths. Meanwhile, the health ministry is still failing to utilise its budget. In the first 10 months of FY2022-23, the ministry spent only 32.22 percent of its total Tk 12,189.77 crore allocation. It is utterly frustrating to see that the relevant government agency has the means to thwart this crisis, yet it has failed to do so.

While dengue is common in monsoon (June-September), its prevalence is now year-round thanks to the shifts in the weather patterns caused by climate change. Against this backdrop, experts have been vehemently calling for year-round measures, but the relevant authorities have shown little initiative to take on such plans. The announcement of a public health emergency was needed weeks ago, but the government categorically refused to pay heed to this call. By far, the perfect examples of incompetence are the two Dhaka city corporations. They spent Tk 1,080 crore in the last 11 years for mosquito control, and the situation, far from improving, has taken a nosedive.

If the government is truly interested in saving lives and preventing another catastrophe next year, it must take sound initiatives proposed by the experts. Our healthcare system has to be decentralised: rural and primary healthcare centres must be properly equipped to treat dengue patients, and resources have to be allocated at the municipality level. The union councils reportedly have no vector control capacity, which has to be ensured as the disease is now prevalent across the country. If these immediate needs alongside year-round dengue control measures are guaranteed, we hopefully won't lose so many lives next year.

EDITORIAL

The statistics that hide our poor education system



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

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Numbers are magical; they can evoke both shock and awe. Much like illusionists who mesmerise audiences by making objects vanish and reappear, those dealing with numbers can manipulate reality itself. However, the enchantment of statistics should not blind us to the sobering truth.

The Bangladesh Education Statistics 2022 asserts a commendable 74.66 percent literacy rate among those aged seven and above, with a slightly higher rate of 75.6 percent for the 15-and-above category (78.2 for males and 73.0 for females). A superficial glance at such figures might lead to self-congratulation, but a closer examination exposes a stark reality.

"Assessment by Citizens," a survey by the Wave Foundation, supported by Oxfam IBIS and Street Child UK, put a dent on the magical act of throwing more students in the educational cauldron, hoping that they will all transform into literary wizards. Conducted in 2022 across 88 villages in Khulna and Rajshahi, focusing on 1,533 children aged 5-16, the survey revealed that, shockingly, 16.78 percent of boys and 15.22 percent of girls in this age group could not read English, with a similar percentage unable to speak it. Moreover, 84.85 percent of boys and 82.86 percent of girls struggle to comprehend English texts. It also found that 10.28 percent boys and 8.71 percent girls could not read Bangla, and 14.19 percent boys and 13.06 percent girls couldn't identify single digits in mathematics.

The survey was carried out on marginalised children, 751 boys and 728 girls who attended school at one time or another, at their homes on the basis of the content of first- and second-grade books.

The findings show a predictable yet disheartening decline in education quality. The policymakers who appear in the message section of the Bangladesh Education Statistics 2022, however, pat themselves on the back for achieving high enrolment.

I look at the quality indicators



There is something seriously wrong with our education system, where we tend to prioritise consultant-driven pedagogy or contractor-driven infrastructural growth.

PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

for secondary, college and madrasa institutions between 2011 and 2022. The teacher-student ratio in secondary schools deteriorated, going from 1:30 in 2011 to 1:36 in 2022. The percentage of trained teachers in schools was 75.36 in 2011 and 67.91 in 2022. The same trend prevails in colleges, with the teacher-student ratio changing from 1:30 to 1:34. However, the situation is slightly better in madrasas.

The institutions, however, show significant growth in terms of electricity and internet connectivity, toilets, water, and solar panel facilities. In 2011, only 29.73 percent of schools had internet access, which rose to 83.12 in 2022. These establishments, it appears, are experiencing infrastructural growth. Yet, when you read that in FY2022-23, the government allocated only 1.83 percent of its GDP on education (far below the six percent mark prescribed by the UN), you realise that no real

trying to build a skyscraper with a foundation made of *hawaii mithai*. The candy floss castle might look impressive at first, but it's bound to collapse under the weight of reality. As we pursue the elusive goal of higher enrolment, we're inadvertently churning out a workforce that can fill out paperwork but struggles to comprehend the instructions.

The lack of quality education is affecting the very supply chain that should be producing the skilled workforce of tomorrow. This is one of the reasons why our wage earners are struggling abroad. Compared to other nationals, our workers are finding it difficult to adjust and move up the career ladder. They are stuck in the lowest rung because of their lack of basic education.

The meagre budgetary allocation shows that our policymakers still find it difficult to comprehend education as a significant investment in human

sooner our policymakers realise that, the better it is for the nation.

The heartbeat of quality education relies on good teachers—who inspire their students to be lifelong learners. Incentivising teachers is crucial to elevating the standard of education. Providing them with proper training, resources, and financial incentives will enhance their effectiveness. Creating a conducive environment for educators will not only improve the quality of teaching, but also contribute to retaining skilled professionals in the education sector.

There is something seriously wrong with our education system, where we tend to prioritise consultant-driven pedagogy or contractor-driven infrastructural growth. What is required is to make sure that the best educators choose teaching as their passion and profession and realise that education is a nation-building project, not a numbers game.

PROJECT SYNDICATE

India, Gaza, and the drift from non-alignment



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India's tortuous stance on the ongoing Israel-Hamas conflict in Gaza offers a fascinating illustration of the recent evolution of the country's foreign policy.

For decades after independence, India's approach to the world was shaped by its historical experience of colonialism. Having spent 200 years with a foreign country speaking for them on the world stage, Indians were unwilling to sacrifice any decision-making power in the name of either side in the Cold War. "Strategic autonomy" became an obsession, leading to the birth of "non-alignment," or equidistance between the superpowers.

The position was more complicated than it sounds. As a leading voice for decolonisation, India took a moralistic stance against imperialism and apartheid that often came across as being anti-Western, even as the country's steadfast adherence to democratic processes and respect for diversity at home endeared it to Western liberals.

When it comes to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, India has walked a similar tightrope. In 1947, India voted against the United Nations partition of the former British Mandate of Palestine into Jewish and Arab states.

It knew the pain of partition firsthand: the British created Pakistan as a state for Indian Muslims. Rather than back another externally imposed division, India championed the vision of a single secular state for both Jews and Arabs in Palestine—a state that would have much in common with the one it had established for itself.

While India recognised Israel, it kept relations at the consular level for more than four decades, naming an ambassador only in 1992. In the meantime, India became the first non-Arab country to recognise the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) as the sole and legitimate representative of the Palestinian people (in 1974), and the first to extend formal recognition of Palestinian statehood (in 1988).

But the rise of Pakistan-enabled Islamic militancy bolstered Indian interest in warmer relations with Israel—a country that also confronted Islamist extremists. Security and intelligence cooperation soon began to grow, and political and diplomatic relations gradually deepened.

Nonetheless, successive Indian governments, conscious of the sympathies of India's substantial Muslim population, upheld support for the PLO. When PLO Chair and

Palestinian National Authority President Yasser Arafat sought a peaceful end to the conflict, India became a votary of the two-state solution. Today, India is one of only a handful of countries to maintain ambassadors in both Tel Aviv and Ramallah.

But India's relations with Israel have lately been intensifying. Israel has become a vital source of defence equipment, a partner in intelligence cooperation, and reportedly a provider of surveillance software that Prime Minister Narendra Modi's increasingly autocratic government allegedly uses against its domestic opponents and critics.

It is perhaps not surprising, then, that when Hamas carried out its brutal attack on Israel on October 7—killing roughly 1,200 and abducting some 200 more—Modi was swift to respond, tweeting that India stood in "solidarity with Israel in this difficult hour." But as the death toll in Gaza rose, and accounts of the destruction of neighbourhoods, hospitals and places of worship proliferated, India began to rethink its stance. After several days, the foreign ministry issued a statement calling for the "resumption of direct negotiations toward establishing a sovereign, independent, and viable state of Palestine, living within secure and recognized borders, side by side at peace with Israel."

According to one of Modi's tweets, he has now "reiterated India's long-standing principled position on the Israel-Palestine issue." And yet, when the UN General Assembly voted overwhelmingly to call for an "immediate, durable, and sustainable

humanitarian truce," India abstained, on the grounds that the resolution had failed to condemn the terror attacks of October 7. Several other countries also criticised the resolution's failure to condemn terrorism, but still voted for it. India's stance was thus more pro-Israel than that of France, which unlike India, is a historical ally of Israel, though it has since voted for a UN resolution condemning Israel's continued settlement activity.

At this point, one could argue that under Modi, India's stance on Israel has become unrecognisable. But Indian foreign policy has also changed in other, more subtle ways. In the Sino-American rivalry, for example, India has shown a greater affinity for the United States, whose strategic concerns about China's intentions India largely shares. Thus, India seized the opportunity presented by the Abraham Accords—which normalised relations between Israel and some of its Arab neighbours—to join the "T2U2" quadrilateral dialogue with Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and the US. The India-Middle East-Europe Corridor, running through Saudi Arabia and the Israeli port of Haifa, announced at the recent G20 summit in New Delhi, is arguably intended to counter China's Belt and Road Initiative.

Though that scheme now lies in ruins, along with much of Gaza, the logic behind it has not changed. With Russia a decreasingly useful geopolitical partner for India, and with neighbouring China nibbling away at the countries' disputed frontier, it should come as no surprise that Indian foreign policy is undergoing fundamental changes.