

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

Will primary schools remain neglected?

Accelerate project to improve these institutions

Despite many calls to address the dismal quality of primary education in the country, we are disheartened to see that the sector remains a victim of neglect. As evidence, the state of progress of the Fourth Primary Education Development Programme (PEDP-4), a project to improve the conditions of primary schools, is quite fitting. Even after a two-year deadline extension, which ends in June 2025, two-thirds of the project's components were incomplete till May this year. Six years since its launch, the progress of physical work stood at 62 percent till September. Suffice to say, if we continue to fail our children in this manner, a whole generation will be deprived of fundamental resources that are crucial for their development.

Initiated in July 2018, the Tk 38,291-crore project aims to recruit 61,000 new teachers, train 1.4 lakh current teachers, build 50,000 classrooms, 10,500 rooms for headteachers, 58,000 WASH (water, sanitation and hygiene) blocks, and renovate 42,000 primary schools. Indeed, these are major bottlenecks that primary schools have been afflicted with. Classrooms continue to be overcrowded in hundreds of schools, and poor sanitation facilities is the norm, threatening the health and well-being of children. The PEDP-4 has been designed to resolve many of these issues, but the sheer mismanagement of the project is hindering the improvement process.

Officials have pointed to a number of factors for this delay: the political turmoil over the last few months, for which implementation was almost suspended; Covid, due to which less than 10 percent progress was made in 2020 and 2021; and currently, the need for opinions from the Planning Commission and Economic Relations Division regarding revisions to certain components of the project. All these issues may well be valid, but they can't justify why the authorities managed to only implement one-third of the components after so many years. This points to faults in the implementation process itself, which must be rectified.

According to the National Student Assessment, published in August 2023, 61 percent of third graders and 70 percent of fifth graders in the country don't have the maths proficiency appropriate for their grades; similarly concerning figures were reported for Bangla. This is the state of our primary education. While the previous government might have neglected this project, the chief adviser, while addressing the 79th session of the UN General Assembly, said the interim government is prioritising education and health sectors over grandiose infrastructure development, to ensure that the child of a farmer or worker can scale the highest in society. If the government truly wants to achieve this reality—which requires a long, arduous journey, as evidenced by the statistics—swift implementation of this project will be a massive step forward.

Make birth registration easy

Govt must raise awareness about the benefits of this service

It is quite concerning that, despite birth registration being mandatory in the country, the practice has not picked up pace as expected. According to a recent report in *Prothom Alo*, births of only 45 percent of children aged one year have been registered in the first eight months of this year. This means Bangladesh is still far behind in achieving the target of 100 percent birth registration by 2024, undertaken as part of the Asian and Pacific Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (CRVS) Decade. The vacuum that has been created in our city corporations following the political changeover in August has also played a role here. For example, the registration work in various ward councils under the Dhaka North City Corporation was reportedly on hold for over two months, until it resumed on October 9.

The complicated process of registering births and deaths deters people from availing the service on time. Lack of awareness is also an issue. According to the report, in the 12 city corporations across the country, only six percent of births have been registered within a year, while the rate of late registration is 60 percent. The situation is similar in the case of deaths too. In the above-mentioned period, 45 percent of the deaths have been registered; 21 percent of deaths have been registered within a year, while the rate of late registration is 79 percent.

Obtaining a birth registration certificate is essential for access to all the essential services that the government offers. It is also the legal proof of citizenship for a child. However, the registration process is quite cumbersome: bureaucratic and technical complexities, lacklustre service and many other irregularities cause parents to put off registering their children's birth until absolutely necessary, such as vaccination and school admission. This delay can only be avoided by making the registration process simple and user-friendly.

Therefore, the relevant authorities should consider putting more effort into making the registration of births and deaths easier and more accessible. To this end, a registrar can be appointed at every hospital across the country. An awareness campaign can also help people understand the importance of registering births and deaths on time. The government must put concerted efforts to raise the numbers of birth and death registration if it wants to meet the Sustainable Development Goal of 100 percent birth and 80 percent death registration by 2030.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

New World sighted



On this day in 1492, the New World was "discovered" when land (most likely San Salvador) was sighted in the Caribbean from the Pinta, one of the three ships that participated in Christopher Columbus's historic voyage.



VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

Protecting the gains of the 'second liberation'



Dr Ahmad Ahsan
is director at the Policy Research Institute of Bangladesh (PRI), a former World Bank economist, and a faculty member at Dhaka University. He can be reached at ahmad.ahsan@cga.columbia.edu. Views expressed in this article are the author's own.

AHMAD AHSAN

In my previous column, I mentioned that the "second liberation" of August 5 restored our citizenship, overthrew a violent authoritarian rule, and halted economic disaster. But clearly, the journey has only begun. The all-important task now is to sustain these gains.

The government has announced six commissions for critical reforms in that spirit. These commissions—looking into electoral, constitutional, anti-corruption, judiciary, administrative, and police reforms—are headed by some of the best people with long dedicated work in these areas. These are all areas where reforms chosen wisely and implemented effectively will put Bangladesh on a just, equitable development path.

In parallel, a high-powered white paper committee has been tasked to examine the experience of the previous government's rule to understand what went wrong with its economic management and identify the lessons for the future. While oligarchs and political cronies became wealthy, the economy plunged into a macroeconomic crisis, lost its competitive edge, reduced job growth, and became excessively concentrated regionally and in the hands of a few powerful people.

The economist in me hopes that the committee will highlight the critical importance of providing far more autonomy, authority and resources for critical financial management, evaluation, data collection and research institutions, such as the CAG, IMED, BBS and BIDS, so that the integrity of data and research is uncompromised, and that they are made available timely.

Even more profoundly, I hope they will point out that providing high-quality public services, support for small and medium businesses, and generally a good investment climate and good governance in our towns and villages will be impossible under an excessively centralised political economy. In sum, achieving the SDGs will require decentralising and devolving political, administrative and economic powers to urban and rural local governments. Only that can truly unleash our people's creative spirits and entrepreneurial energies.

The interim government has done well by tying the work of these groups to a tight frame of delivering their reports within three months. It is an ambitious target, and there will be a need to consult. However, a short period will require these groups to focus on the core issues and write crisply. Then we can have national conversations around their reports.

There are, however, four areas of profound challenges that require a more proactive approach. Unless these are met, the gains of the second liberation are in danger of being lost in economic instability and social unrest.

That is not speculative thinking. Economic and job growth and poverty reduction will slow without a quick return to stability. Bangladesh took nearly 20 years after independence to regain the per capita incomes of 1970, mainly due to political instability. Economic growth took off only by restoring democratic constitutional rule and legitimate elected governments that could back and sustain Saifur Rahman's vigorous fiscal and trade reforms.

Sustaining the gains of August 5 requires not letting the economy falter. Yes, we have inherited a 'mess,' an endangered economy. Proper steps are being taken in fiscal, financial, education and other matters. But the voice of the private sector, which employs most of our workers, earns our foreign exchange and produces most of our output, must be in the cabinet. Let a labour leader be also included to get the voice of the workers. But the economy's day-to-day concerns must be heard from those directly involved.

So, what is to be done now?

First, sustaining the gains of August 5 requires not letting the economy falter. Yes, we have inherited a "mess," an endangered economy. Proper steps are being taken in fiscal, financial, education and other matters. But the voice of the private sector, which employs most of our workers, earns our foreign exchange and produces most of our output, must be in the cabinet. Let a labour leader be also included to get the voice of the workers. But the economy's day-to-day concerns must be heard from those directly involved. Yes, this enlarges the size of the cabinet. But to protect the gains of the second liberation and the success of the interim government, the economy—jobs and welfare of the people—deserves the highest consideration.

Second, we need a more forceful approach to restoring law and order. Yes, Bangladesh is undoubtedly in a unique post-uprising aftermath where the police, the primary weapon of suppression under the past regime, lack confidence and morale and are mostly unseen. Yes, it is also true that the law and order situation could be far worse, given the circumstances. Yet, these are inadequate arguments that undermine the interim government. If entrepreneurs and workers perceive

a lack of understanding and lose confidence and security, economic activity will decline as factories close down, exports fall and jobs are lost. Social unrest will follow.

For starters, we need undivided attention. The current arrangement under which one adviser has both home and agriculture portfolios is extraordinary and needs change. The coordination between the justice and home ministries needs improvement. The filing of dubious cases indiscriminately to imprison members and fellow travellers of the past regime diminishes this government's credibility. We are not talking about forgiving leaders of the past autocratic government and party. They must bear responsibility for their decisions and actions that caused widespread mayhem. However, murder cases have been filed against ordinary people where the accused are known to have been far away from the crime scenes.

Let me give a specific example. The former planning minister, Prof MA Mannan, is an upright man. He tried to speak the truth in office, sometimes subtly, to point out wrongs and

is required for much-needed constitutional reforms. There is broad agreement about the critical parameters of the new political order we seek. These include providing much stronger checks and balances to power and enshrining civil and human rights with the full force of the constitution. Other ideas floating around are proportional representation, bicameral houses, with proportional representation in at least one of them; term limits for heads of government; freeing parliamentarians from the yoke of Article 70 in the case of non-budget and no-confidence motions; strong parliamentary committees and oversight especially in the area of financial management; and a political parties act that set up transparent and democratic codes of conduct.

It is worth highlighting that the need to move ahead with decentralisation and devolution in the country is missing here. Bangladesh is one of the most centralised countries in the world, where local governments control less than 10 percent of public expenditures compared to more than 20 percent share of local government in other lower-middle-income countries. Our cities and towns are in a mess because our mayors lack budget and authority. And yes, they also lacked accountability to the people under the last regime.

Fourth, that brings us to the crucial matter of process here. Should we rewrite a new constitution or make amendments to the old one? Writing a new constitution will, rightly, invite considerable controversy over issues that may be peripheral to the urgent, forward-looking tasks at hand. There will be the question of validity. A few pointed amendments that can implement reforms and then be put to a referendum may be a more manageable path.

Let us be blunt here: a new constitution that risks removing the separation between the state and religion and between the state and ethnicity could potentially create second-class citizens in Bangladesh. That will be tragically contrary to the spirit of the Liberation War, where hundreds of thousands of martyrs gave their lives for freedom and equality. The spirit of an inclusive, equal society is also at the heart of the anti-discrimination movement of the students and people who brought in the second liberation. A new constitution that does not recognise these truths will lead the country to backwardness and regress.

We cannot afford to lose our rich syncretic history and culture that made this land generously welcome migrants and visitors. If our people are to prosper, we need the embrace of the world: we need massive amounts of foreign investment for jobs, global market access, and the technology it will provide. We need other countries to embrace our workers by providing them with jobs abroad. We need a constitution and a country that unites its people in a liberal, open and equal society that the world will embrace.