

We need better education infrastructure to prevent primary dropouts



Dr Nawsheha Ahmed, a retired UN official, is an economist and urban planner. He is currently working as the team leader in a primary school infrastructure need assessment project for the Department of Primary Education, Dhaka. He can be reached at nawsheha@gmail.com.

NAWSHEHA AHMED

In Bangladesh, physical infrastructure is still a major challenge in ensuring a safe and child-friendly learning environment, as well as quality primary education in the country. Educational infrastructure includes school buildings, classrooms, teachers' rooms, furniture, water and sanitation facilities, playgrounds and boundary walls. According to the Annual Primary School Statistics (APSS) 2024, there were a total of 118,607 schools under which 65,567 (55.3 percent) were government primary schools, and the rest were kindergartens, NGO-run schools and religious schools, providing primary education in Bangladesh. There were 383,624 teachers in government primary schools in 2024, of whom 252,704 were female. Primary education in Bangladesh consists of six classes—pre-primary to grade 5—with a total enrolment of about two crore students in 2024 across Bangladesh.

According to the APSS 2024, 13,519 (20.4 percent) government primary schools in Bangladesh operate on a single-shift basis. This means that four out of every five schools (79.6 percent) continue to operate on a double-shift basis. Over the years, the student-teacher ratio has improved in government primary schools; it was 1:28 in 2023. However, classroom congestion (student classroom ratio among the division ranged from 28 to over 37), along with the high prevalence of double-shift schools, affects the academic performance, resulting in a high proportion of children dropping out.

The government is committed to converting all double-shift primary schools to single-shift schools. The objective is to improve quality, inclusivity and equity in primary education by increasing contact hours. In double-shift schools, learning time is short, creating inequality in the delivery of education. To address the weakness posed by the current double-shift system, the number of classrooms needs to be increased, as there is a huge shortage of classrooms. At the same time, the number of teachers in government primary schools must be increased.

In Bangladesh, between 30 and 32 lakh children are born every year. The net enrolment rate was 94.55 percent in 2024. The country is yet to achieve the 100 percent enrolment target. A total of 52,048 government primary schools are currently operating on a double-shift basis, and the number of classrooms must be increased to convert the remaining double-shift schools to single-shift schools, as per the standards set out in the Infrastructure Planning Guidelines adopted by the Directorate of Primary Education in 2018. The guidelines aim for a reasonable student-classroom ratio to prevent overcrowding.

Through the fourth Primary Education Development Programme (PEDP4), the government planned to build 50,500 classrooms, teachers' rooms and head teacher rooms, many of which are still under construction. The number of single-shift schools increased from 9,112 in 2017 to 13,519

in 2024. This is considered slow progress towards the targeted achievement of 100 percent single-shift schools in the country.

Over the past decade, Bangladesh has significantly reduced dropout rates in primary education, aligning with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4). The dropout rate is a crucial indicator of success in primary education. Although the dropout rate decreased significantly between 2010

percent in 2024—may have been caused by early entry into the labour market. In that case, child labour in the country is likely to rise. Compared to boys, girls' dropout rate rose marginally from 12.32 percent to 13.36 percent between 2023 and 2024. For both genders, classroom congestion and the prevalence of a high percentage of double-shift schools can also be contributing factors to the increased dropout. These factors



Classroom congestion, a contributing factor for increased dropout, can significantly limit quality contact hours, leading to low academic performance.

PHOTO: COURTESY

and 2024 from 39.8 percent to 16.25 percent, compared to last year (13.15 percent) the rate increased slightly. Boys have a higher dropout rate than girls across all grades. The increase in the dropout rate is alarming, meaning a significant portion of children are not completing the full primary education cycle. One reason for the high dropout rate cited in the APSS 2024 is rising living costs due to inflationary pressures, which leads to families prioritising short-term economic survival over continued schooling for their children. The sharp increase in the dropout rate among boys—from 14.12 percent in 2023 to 19.02

percent in 2024—may have been caused by early entry into the labour market. In that case, child labour in the country is likely to rise. Compared to boys, girls' dropout rate rose marginally from 12.32 percent to 13.36 percent between 2023 and 2024. For both genders, classroom congestion and the prevalence of a high percentage of double-shift schools can also be contributing factors to the increased dropout. These factors

significantly limit quality contact hours, leading to low academic performance. The high proportion of double-shift schools reflects challenges that should be overcome by increasing the primary education budget to convert all double-shift schools to single-shift schools, ensuring sufficient classrooms, and recruitment of more teachers. In the current fiscal year's national budget (2025-2026), planned education sector outlays constitute 12.1 percent of the total budget (Tk 59,644 crore), of which primary education has been allocated Tk 35,403 crore. This is not adequate for building sufficient educational

infrastructure, including the construction of new classrooms, as well as the reconstruction, repair and maintenance of existing schools. This will impact the achievement of the desired academic outcome. The education sector budget received around 1.72 percent of GDP in 2025-26, which is much lower than 4-6 percent, recommended by the Education 2030 Framework for Action. It is a global document, adopted by UNESCO Member States in 2015, providing guidelines for the implementation of SDG 4. To achieve SDG 4 by 2030, the government must take all required measures to regain the progress made towards universal basic education, including raising the amount of educational stipend, involving students and parents in school planning and management, investing in all aspects of school infrastructure, prompt recruitment of teachers, and undertaking educational campaigns.

Particular attention must be given to primary school teachers' training to improve educational quality. The 67 primary training institutes (PTIs) and 505 upazila resource centres in the country play a vital role in enhancing primary school teachers' capacity, ensuring that new teachers are equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to effectively teach at the primary level. The PTIs are also involved in curriculum development, monitoring the quality of primary education, identifying areas for improvement and promoting the expansion of primary education access. However, many PTIs do not have enough training rooms and hostels. Some are housed in very old buildings that require reconstruction. The situation of upazila resource centres is similar, with many requiring additional training rooms and offices to run smoothly. Therefore, along with the primary schools, primary teachers' training centres and primary school education offices need proper infrastructure to work smoothly for the upliftment of primary education in Bangladesh.

Strategic autonomy has become a survival necessity for us



Alauddin Mohammad is joint member secretary of National Citizen Party (NCP) and executive director at Institute of Policy, Governance and Development (IPGAD).

ALAUDDIN MOHAMMAD

For Bangladesh, the phrase "strategic autonomy" is no longer an abstract policy slogan—it is becoming a survival necessity. The country's economic structure, geographic realities, and political constraints form a tight web of dependencies that limit its ability to make fully independent choices. A closer look at the numbers shows the risks are not theoretical. They are real, measurable, and growing.

From a strategic standpoint, Bangladesh's position is shaped by the intersecting interests of major powers. The United States views the Bay of Bengal as a strategic node in its Indo-Pacific agenda, seeking closer defence and maritime cooperation. India, as the immediate neighbour with 4,096 kilometres of shared border, holds both leverage and overlapping security concerns, while China's deepening economic and infrastructure footprint, particularly through ports and energy projects, adds another layer of complexity. Russia, though less directly present, engages through defence sales and political alignment, while the EU's concern lies mainly in trade security and maritime stability, given its heavy import dependence on Bangladeshi goods. Other regional actors, including Japan and Australia, are also increasing engagement, recognising Bangladesh's strategic maritime location. This convergence of competing interests creates opportunities but also vulnerabilities, making autonomy increasingly urgent.

Bangladesh's economic base is alarmingly narrow. On the Herfindahl-Hirschman Index, it scores 0.88—almost 10 times the developing country average of 0.09. The RMG industry accounts for 80 percent of exports, when experts suggest no single sector should exceed 20 to 30 percent. With knitwear and woven garments included, textiles alone bring in over 85 percent of earnings. Buyers are equally concentrated: the EU, US, and UK take 70 percent of exports, well above the safe threshold of 50 percent designated for any one market or region. Such heavy reliance means that a downturn or policy change in these regions could shake

the economy far more than it should. Imports also deepen dependency. In 2024, China supplied 28.5 percent of imports—almost double the 15 percent safety limit economists recommend. In 2023, the trade deficit reached \$20.42 billion, or 4.6 percent of GDP—four times the 1 percent sustainability benchmark. With India, the imbalance is stark, amounting to a \$9.22 billion annual deficit that carries political weight.

Financially, the weak spots are evident. Bangladesh attracts only about \$3 billion in FDI a year—0.4 percent of GDP, well below the 2.5 percent benchmark and just a fraction of Vietnam's \$39 billion. Remittances contribute \$33 billion,

based activities.

Maritime security is equally weak. With nearly all trade conducted by sea, the vulnerability is stark. Over a recent five-year period, 411 fishermen were killed and 1,000 were injured by maritime criminals. Defence spending is just 1.4 percent of GDP, well below the regional average of 2.5 percent, leaving significant gaps in deterrence and rapid response.

Looking across the indicators, Bangladesh scores only 2 out of 10 in economic diversification, when at least 7 is needed. Its top 20 products make up 80 percent of exports, compared to 37 to 59 percent for countries such as China, India, and Vietnam. Energy dependency is another glaring weakness—80 percent of energy is imported, with security metrics rating the country at 2 out of 10. Diplomatic flexibility stands at 5 out of 10, against a target of 8, while institutional capacity for independent decision-making is just 3 out of 10, where 7 is desired. Trade diversification scores 4 out of 10, but should be at 7. On average, Bangladesh records a strategic autonomy gap of only 3.7 out of 10.

The cost of dependence is already high. The trade deficit drains reserves, while heavy export concentration increases volatility during global downturns, especially given reliance on garments. Political leverage tilts away from Dhaka as water disputes undermine agriculture and energy imports limit industrial flexibility.

Credible analyses underline these risks. UNCTAD and the Harvard Growth Lab point to economic concentration. SIPRI highlights dependence on foreign defence supplies, the IEA and IIEFA stress imported energy reliance, while UN Comtrade and OEC reveal limited trade breadth. Studies from Springer and the Atlantic Council describe cautious multi-vector diplomacy that restricts policy manoeuvrability.

Regional examples show that alternatives exist. Vietnam once faced a similar over-reliance but broke out by diversifying exports and drawing in large volumes of FDI. Singapore, despite its small size and lack of resources, secured autonomy through trade diversification and strong diplomatic networks. South Korea transformed from an aid recipient into an industrial power

with independent decision-making capacity.

The broader picture for Bangladesh is troubling: notable economic fragility, significant geopolitical pressures, and a clear shortfall in strategic independence—hardly the profile of a nation fully steering its own course. Strategic autonomy, in this context, is not a lofty ideal but a necessity. It is about avoiding situations where

external forces—whether markets, neighbouring governments, or supply chain disruptions—can dictate national outcomes. It means loosening the chokehold of export and import concentration, strengthening institutions to make independent decisions, and ensuring defence and energy security.

The urgency lies in the compound nature of the risks. An economic shock

could coincide with a water dispute, or a maritime security crisis could erupt alongside an export downturn. For Bangladesh, the question is not whether to pursue strategic autonomy but how quickly it can achieve it. The data, in all its unforgiving precision, points to the same conclusion: dependence already comes at a high price, and the cost will only rise if the country delays transformation.

বাংলাদেশ পর্যটন করপোরেশন	
ডিউটি ফ্রি অপারেশন	
পর্যটন ভবন, আগারগাঁও, ঢাকা-১২০৭।	
www.parjatan.gov.bd	
তারিখ: ০৩/০৯/২০২৫ খ্রি।	
নথি নং-৩০,৩২,০০০০,০৮২,০৭,০২৯,২০১৮	
সিএভএফ প্রতিঠান মনোনয়নের লক্ষ্যে দরপত্র বিজ্ঞপ্তি	
২০২৫-২০২৬, ২০২৬-২০২৭ ও ২০২৭-২০২৮ অর্থবছরের জন্য ০২টি সিএভএফ প্রতিঠান মনোনয়নের লক্ষ্যে দরপত্র বিজ্ঞপ্তি	
১ মুক্তাগালয়	বেসামুরিক বিমান পরিবহন ও পর্যটন মন্ত্রণালয়
২ সমষ্টি	বাংলাদেশ পর্যটন করপোরেশন
৩ আহরণকারী ইউনিটের নাম	ডিউটি ফ্রি অপারেশনস
৪ তহবিলের ও ব্যয়ের উৎস	বাংলাদেশ পর্যটন করপোরেশন এর নিয়ন্ত্রণ তহবিল
৫ আহরণকারী ইউনিটের জেলা	ঢাকা
৬ যে কাজের জন্য দরপত্র আহরণ করা হলো	বাংলাদেশ পর্যটন করপোরেশন এর আমদানিত্ব ব্যবেক্ষণ প্রযোজন কর্তৃত শাহজালাল আন্তর্জাতিক বিমানবন্দর, ঢাকা হতে ছাড়করণ।
৭ ক্রম পদ্ধতি	উচ্চুক্ত দরপত্র পদ্ধতি
৮ দরপত্র বিক্রয়ের শেষ তারিখ ও সময়	২১/০৯/২০২৫ খ্রি। বেলা ২০:০০ টা। যদি দরপত্র গ্রহণের দিন কোনূপস সরকারি ছুটি ঘোষিত হয়ে, সে ক্ষেত্রে পদ্ধতি দরপত্র দাতাদের সম্মত সময়ে দরপত্র গ্রহণ করা হবে। অসম্পূর্ণ বা প্রতিপূর্ণ দরপত্র সরাসরি বালিঙ বালে গল হবে।
৯ দরপত্র খোলার তারিখ, সময় ও স্থান	২২/০৯/২০২৫ খ্রি। বেলা ০৪:০০ টা। মহাব্যবস্থাপক, ডিউটি ফ্রি অপারেশনস, পর্যটন ভবন, আগারগাঁও, ঢাকা-১২০৭ এর অফিস কক্ষে দরপত্র দাতাদের সম্মত সময়ে দরপত্র গ্রহণ করা হবে।
১০ দরপত্র খোলার তারিখ, সময় ও স্থান	২২/০৯/২০২৫ খ্রি। বেলা ০৪:০০ টা। মহাব্যবস্থাপক, ডিউটি ফ্রি অপারেশনস, পর্যটন ভবন, আগারগাঁও, ঢাকা-১২০৭ এর অফিস কক্ষে দরপত্র দাতাদের সম্মত সময়ে দরপত্র গ্রহণ করা হবে।
১১ দরপত্র বিক্রয়কারী কর্মকর্তার নাম ও ঠিকানা	ক. ব্যবস্থাপক, হিসেব (ভারতে), হোটেল অবকাশ, ৮৩-৮৪, মহাখালী, ঢাকা-১২১৩ খ. উপব্যবস্থাপক, ডিউটি ফ্রি অপারেশনস, পর্যটন ভবন, আগারগাঁও, ঢাকা-১২০৭
১২ দরপত্র গ্রহণকারী কর্মকর্তার পদবি ও ঠিকানা	ক. ব্যবস্থাপক, হিসেব (ভারতে), হোটেল অবকাশ, ৮৩-৮৪, মহাখালী, ঢাকা-১২১৩ খ. ব্যবস্থাপক, হোটেল অবকাশ, ৮৩-৮৪, মহাখালী, ঢাকা-১২১৩ এর অফিসে সংরক্ষিত দরপত্র বাজ্রা খ. ব্যবস্থাপক, হোটেল অবকাশ, ৮৩-৮৪, মহাখালী, ঢাকা-১২১৩ এর অফিসে সংরক্ষিত দরপত্র বাজ্রা
১৩ দরদাতার যোগ্যতা	১. দরপত্রের সংগে বিদ্যুৎপরিষেবা দাখিল করতে হবে; ক. হালনগাম সিএভএফ লাইসেন্স; গ. হালনগাম আয়োজিত স্টার্টআপকেট; চ. প্রতিটি নেরে স্টার্টআপকেট নেটওর্কে সংযোগ স্থাপন করতে হবে। ২. বডেক ও চুক্কিপ্রদর্শন করতে হবে। ৩. প্রতিটি নেটওর্কে স্টার্টআপকেট নেটওর্কে সংযোগ স্থাপন করতে হবে। ৪. বিগত ০৩ (তিনি) অর্থবছরে ০৩ (তিনি) কোটি টাকার দৰ্শনওয়ালা কালো তালিকাভুক্ত প্রতিটিন দরপত্রে অর্থহত্যা করতে পারেন।
১৪ দরপত্রের মূল্য	৫,০০০.০০ (পাঁ হাজার) ট