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FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

HSC results should be an eye-opener

We can no longer ignore our educational crisis

This year's SSC and HSC results have indeed been a real "eye-opener," as the education adviser said. The average pass rate in this year's HSC and equivalent examinations stands at 58.83 percent, 18.95 percentage point lower than last year and the lowest in 21 years. The number of GPA-5 achievers also fell from 145,911 last year to 69,097 this time around. In July, we saw a similar plunge in the pass rate for this year's SSC and equivalent exams, which dropped to a 16-year low.

The results of both exams expose deep cracks in our education sector, built up over years, if not decades. Educationists believe that inflated results during the previous government's tenure had masked the real learning gaps that have become deeply entrenched over time. However, the neglect of our education system cannot be blamed on the previous government alone. It has, in fact, become far too systemic—a societal problem. At the root of this crisis lies the tendency to rely heavily on rote memorisation rather than analytical thinking, a problem that has plagued our education system for decades. The poor quality of schools, inadequate teacher pay as well as training, and other structural deficiencies have persisted for years, yet little has been done to address them, despite repeated warnings from educationists about the long-term consequences of neglect.

Sadly, millions of students continue to pass through this same system and they will inevitably suffer the consequences unless the underlying systemic issues are finally addressed. On top of these longstanding problems, many students have suffered from unaddressed learning losses caused by the Covid pandemic. Additionally, the July uprising—and the trauma it inflicted on students, much of which they continue to bear in the absence of proper counselling, ongoing instability, and a lack of a safe environment—was bound to affect them deeply.

Alongside these issues, there is also clear regional disparity. For example, places such as Cumilla, Jashore, Mymensingh, and Sylhet are lagging behind in terms of pass rates. Shockingly, there were even 43 colleges in the Rangpur division with a zero pass rate.

All of these factors must be studied carefully by policymakers and educationists. If young people hold the key to the future of our country, then we must equip them with the right tools—and education is among the most important of them. Government must invest in this sector improving the quality of education to meet global standards. Clearly, in this respect, there are shortages that must be addressed. It is high time that the government focused on what is one of the greatest crises facing our country today: the state of our education system.

Our children deserve clean air

Air pollution must be dealt with on an emergency basis

We are unnerved by a new report revealing the disproportionate effects of air pollution on children, especially in the least developed countries, including Bangladesh. Children under five die from air pollution-related causes nearly six times more often than adults. Meanwhile, children in LDCs face air pollution death rates 94 times higher than those in most-developed countries.

Bangladesh, with one of the worst air quality ratings worldwide, faces a dire situation. It ranked as the second-most polluted in 2024, while in 2021, air-pollution led to over 19,000 recorded deaths in children under five in the country. Besides, a decade-long study on children of this age group in Dhaka revealed that particulate matter (PM) 2.5 from brick kilns was the primary contributor to their respiratory issues. However, vehicular and industrial emissions, construction, and waste burning also produce PM 2.5. Furthermore, Bangladesh, with the lowest access to clean cooking technologies in Southeast Asia, has a high rate of household air pollution. This disproportionately affects pregnant women and infants. Mothers using high-polluting solid cooking fuels, such as coal, wood and dung, are 2.6 times more likely to have babies with low birth weight. Regardless of where the cooking takes place, the use of solid fuels was found to raise the likelihood of pregnancy complications by 36 percent. Moreover, children between the ages of 3-5 who are exposed to solid fuel pollution are 47 percent more likely to experience developmental delays compared to unexposed children.

A deeply ingrained reliance on polluting infrastructure and fossil fuels has created an environmental justice crisis, with children bearing the heaviest health burdens. Although authorities ordered a halt to brick-making operations, except clean ones, in Savar from September onwards, the country's spending on fossil fuels remains significantly higher than that on environmental pollution mitigation measures. This financial imbalance highlights how existing systems perpetuate a cycle of environmental harm. It is high time Bangladesh framed air pollution not just as an environmental issue, but as a critical public health and child rights crisis. The country must redirect its financial priorities from fossil fuels to clean air, accelerate the transition to clean cooking solutions, enforce strict regulations on industrial polluters, launch a public health campaign, and frame the issue as a matter of justice for the section of the population who were born in a polluted world.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

BBC established

On this day in 1922, the British Broadcasting Company, Ltd, was established, to be replaced by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in 1927.

When teachers are attacked and workers die, who takes responsibility?

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ANU MUHAMMAD

Two deeply disturbing incidents occurred last week. In one, teachers took to the streets with minor demands but were met with police violence instead of dialogue. The situation remains uncertain at the time of writing this column on Friday evening. The other incident is that of the fire in Mirpur's Rupnagar. Despite repeated warnings and recommendations for reform, safety measures in factories are still not ensured. Once again, we have witnessed a factory fire and casualties. Both incidents are linked to the state's responsibility, its outlook, how it views its people, and where its priorities lie.

Let us first talk about the teachers. Their demands are very minor and basic. These include increases in house rent allowance, medical allowance, and festival bonuses. There are people who argue that an interim government cannot fulfil such demands. However, they fail to notice that the interim government has no problem allocating much bigger amounts for importing LNG and other products from the United States at prices higher than the international market, or allocating Tk 20,000 crore to merge discredited banks, or setting aside a big amount for bureaucrats. The government is also ignoring its interim status when pursuing long-term contract in favour of foreign business. For example, it is bringing in foreign companies to manage ports without accountability or legal procedure, imposing illogical tariffs to make the economy weaker. It is also planning to buy defence equipment. One wonders why the government's budget crunch theory does not apply to those cases or why no one asks how an interim government can take such decisions.

School and college teachers, especially those from MPO-listed or private schools, have been one of the most deprived sections of the people in Bangladesh. They repeatedly take to the streets to demand their mere survival salary. Their strikes, protests, or sit-ins on roads have been going on for years. Even during the previous government's tenure, teachers were lying on the streets and fasting for months on the roads, braving police attacks. False promises and the same "there's no money" argument were given by the previous government, too. Unfortunately, the same attitude of government continues to this day.

When this government presented last year's budget, many hoped that the long-standing neglect of the education sector, reflected in the current state of the MPO-listed teachers, would be addressed. If Bangladesh had spent anything close to international standards on education, teachers wouldn't be in

On October 12, in front of the Jatiya Press Club, police used water cannons and sound grenades to disperse MPO-listed teachers, who were demanding an increase in their house rent allowance. FILE PHOTO: **AMRAN HOSSAIN**

such distress. So, we expected that a change would begin to take place in the last budget, that the education sector would receive priority. Instead, we saw that in the 2025-26 budget, allocation increased for government administration—spending went up for purchases, extra posts, foreign tours, etc. But for education and healthcare, which are essential for the people, the proportion of expenditure remained the same as under the previous government. Even a small increase in these sectors would have made it possible to meet the minor demands of the teachers.

What's worse is; over the years, different governments in Bangladesh have gradually pushed education towards commercialisation and privatisation. As a result, the sector is now in disarray, marked by discrimination and dysfunction. There are many streams of education: various kinds of madrasas, several types of schools, and different categories within private schools. Quality education requires extremely high spending in this highly commercialised education system, and discrimination begins from the primary level. The demand for a unified non-discriminatory education system that enhances people's potential has existed for a long time, but still remains unmet. If the state truly prioritised education, it would have allocated at least six percent of GDP, which is the international standard. But education allocation remains one of the lowest in Bangladesh: less than two percent.

Therefore, the current allocation in Bangladesh must triple; only then a widespread network of schools can be created across the country. With such a network under state responsibility, a common foundation for education can be established. The coaching centres, private schools, and the vast system of private tuition will no longer be necessary. Those involved in these areas can, instead of their current informal work, teach within the formal education system, carrying the badge of a dignified profession, while improving their expertise. Besides, the students, the children of Bangladesh, can develop their leadership within a unified structure. It will end the discrimination that only those with money can develop leadership while those without cannot.

If education were given this importance, teachers would also have received their due respect. How can a country progress when neither education nor teachers are valued? How can it stand on a strong national foundation? We see the consequence of this neglect when teachers repeatedly have to take to the streets, and former students attack or beat them. The students of other teachers sit in the secretariat, indifferent, allowing these attacks to continue. We should never have had to witness such a situation.

As for the issue of labourers, this too is the responsibility of the state. Factories must ensure safety, with secure entry and exit and a safe working environment. This demand has been raised for a long time. For the lack of a minimum safety and monitoring system, we have witnessed tragedies like Rana Plaza and Tazreen. After those incidents, there was international attention and much agitation at home. But necessary steps to strengthen labour inspection, transparency, and monitoring are still missing! The whole monitoring system remains neglected, inefficient, and corrupt.

As a result, there are only about few hundred labour inspectors for the vast number of factories across Bangladesh. Inspections are practically non-existent. This means violations remain completely unaddressed. Factories are built without licenses, security, or safety systems. The recent incident in Mirpur began at an unapproved chemical factory. In recent years we also saw repeated terrible fires in Old Dhaka, in Rupganj's Hashem Food and Beverage factory, and in Bailey Road. We witness these devastating incidents again and again and each time, the government forms an investigation committee, but the recommendations that follow are never implemented.

There had been expectations for change. The Labour Reform Commission had prepared a report containing several proposals. Implementing them would at least ensure that factories are regularised and compliance is digitised. There should also be accountability. Anyone operating outside the rules should face appropriate action. It was expected that this government would at least take these basic steps. Yet, in both the teachers' protest and the fire incident case, we see a striking lack of sensitivity and responsibility towards people's interests. This attitude which existed even during the previous government, continues. Even hostility in response to public demands has changed little, which unfortunately leads to these painful and unacceptable incidents.

When waste meets AI, resources are better managed

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Views expressed in this article are the authors' own.

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Artificial Intelligence, often linked to self-driving cars, robots or ChatGPT, is redefining how the world collects, sorts, and reuses waste. Several countries are using AI to process waste, reflecting their priorities, level of governance and innovation.

In Barcelona, Spain, for example, smart bins equipped with sensors monitor fill levels in real-time, allowing waste collection trucks to optimise their routes and collect bins only when necessary. This system has reduced waste collection costs and CO2 emissions by limiting unnecessary garbage truck trips. Seoul, South Korea's capital, has implemented a "pay-as-you-throw" system, supported by AI-driven data, where households pay for waste by weight. This has significantly reduced waste and boosted recycling rates. India's Chennai has piloted Airbin, where bins use sensors and Internet of Things (IoT)—a network of physical objects that uses technology to connect and exchange data over the internet—to send real-time alerts to municipal authorities when they are full. Ireland has over 3,000 solar-powered smart compactors that hold five times more than traditional bins, cut trips, and keep streets cleaner. Each of these examples shows that AI does not replace human effort; it multiplies it.

AI in waste management usually begins with the basics: sensors in bins to track filling levels. The next stage is prediction which means systems learning to forecast when and where waste will be produced. The most advanced stage is sorting, where robots and machines identify materials, turning garbage into valuable resources. This step-by-step journey is important. Few countries leap straight to robots. Most begin with data- knowing how much waste is produced, when, and where. From there, smarter collection routes are planned. Then, recycling and resource recovery improve.

Although, AI-based systems can work anywhere, adaptation matters. In areas without steady electricity and internet connectivity, bins can run on solar panels. Where internet is weak, SMS alerts work. Replication also depends on local government institutions (LGIs) as they are central to waste management. In developing countries, LGIs often face limited budgets, insufficient staff, and inadequate infrastructure. AI can help them overcome these challenges by improving efficiency and reducing costs. Smart bins with sensors can monitor waste levels in real time, so trucks collect only when necessary, saving fuel, labour, and cutting emissions. Prediction systems can forecast waste surges after festivals, public gatherings, or harvests, allowing LGIs to plan resources ahead. AI-assisted sorting, combined with manual labour, can improve recycling accuracy for plastics, metals, and paper, even in low-resource settings.

Globally, "3R" principles—reduce, reuse, recycle—are now being mainstreamed. Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) laws hold companies accountable for packaging. Circular economy strategies aim to keep resources in use. AI helps enforce these laws by giving clear data on who is polluting. Besides, AI integration aligns with private sector's sustainability goals. In Asia Pacific, Microsoft partnered with groups like Sustainable Coastlines to use AI for categorising and tracking litter on beaches. In Hong Kong, Microsoft supported "Clearbot Neo", an AI-enabled robotic boat that recognises and logs types of trash collected from waterways using cameras and AI systems. Thus, companies can provide funding, technology, or logistics support to gain ESG recognition, brand value, and compliance with sustainability commitments. AI-driven waste management systems give them measurable impact reports—a key incentive for investment. Local governments in developing countries can use such partnerships to scale solutions while reducing costs.

Bangladesh, too, can experiment with AI-waste management as it has the institutional framework to experiment with AI-based waste management: the National 3R Strategy for Waste Management, Solid Waste Management Rules 2021, e-governance initiatives and the upcoming Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) guideline. However, the enforcement requires strong push. Many LGIs lack equipment, trained staff, and even reliable electricity and internet connectivity. The challenge, of course, is cost. Sensors, software, and training require money. But under EPR, companies responsible for packaging waste can be required to fund smart collection pilots. LGIs can save fuel costs by using data-driven routes, freeing resources to reinvest in technology. And where gaps remain, public-private partnerships with recycling industries and development partners can close the loop.

Bangladesh already has laws that governs how data is collected and used. Linking these frameworks with waste collection and processing laws will ensure that waste data is treated responsibly, while also giving LGIs digital dashboards to enforce 3R and EPR obligations. To make this real, Bangladesh needs to pilot the concept, beginning with markets of a city corporation, where organic waste is overwhelming. A rural pilot could cluster 5-10 villages under one upazila, using solar bins with SMS alerts. And a producer-funded pilot, targeting plastic packaging, could show how EPR can finance AI tools.

Bangladesh can leverage AI not just to manage waste but to operationalise its legal frameworks effectively. The world is already moving; the question is whether we will align technology, law, and governance to catch up or remain buried under our own garbage.