HSC results expose long-hidden cracks in our education

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For two decades, Bangladesh lived under a comforting numerical, statistical, and sweetly deceptive illusion. Year after year, Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) results painted a glowing picture of academic progress. Pass rates soared above 80 percent, GPA-5s multiplied, and education officials celebrated success as if knowledge itself had bloomed in every classroom. Yet, beneath those glossy percentages lay an unspoken truth that has finally emerged in 2025. The latest HSC results, with a pass rate of 58.83 percent, the lowest in 21 years, have jolted the nation awake. More than half a million students failed. The numbers that once flattered now frighten, revealing a system that mistook certification for learning.

For years, a high pass rate had become a proxy for progress, while inflated marks and liberal "sympathy grading" turned mediocrity into merit. In 2005, the average pass rate stood at 59.16 percent. Within a year, it climbed past 60 percent, never to fall below that mark until now. In the years following the pandemic, it even touched a surreal 100 percent due to automatic promotions and relaxed evaluations. The country basked in statistical glory while its classrooms quietly crumbled. Teachers marked papers generously, grace marks were liberally distributed, and results became an instrument of political self-congratulation. In a society obsessed with numbers, no one dared to ask what those numbers truly meant.

This year's results puncture that illusion. Only 69,097 students achieved GPA-5s, compared to nearly 150,000 the previous year. In 202 educational institutions, not a single student passed. Board-wise, the Dhaka Board fared best with 64.62 percent, while Cumilla languished at the bottom with 48.86 percent. The failure rates in key subjects such as English and ICT dragged down the overall average, revealing deep-rooted weaknesses in core competencies that years of statistical inflation had concealed.

The immediate reaction has been one of disbelief. Parents are devastated, students are confused, and educational authorities are defensive. But the truth is simple: the results are not worse; they are merely real. The reasons behind this collapse are neither sudden nor mysterious. The foundation of Bangladesh's education system has long been fragile. The crisis begins at the primary level, where rote memorisation substitutes for comprehension, and teaching quality varies wildly. The weaknesses accumulate through secondary education, only to manifest catastrophically at the higher secondary level. For years, the system managed to hide these cracks with inflated grading, often to meet political expectations. Now, stripped of those cushions, the cracks have widened into chasms.

Repeated policy changes have not helped. Every new government, every new education minister, has wanted to "reform" education—often through abrupt curricular shifts, experimental grading methods, or politically motivated targets. Instead of stability, the system has endured constant tinkering. Teachers have been left confused, students disengaged, and parents cynical. The introduction of creative question systems, multiple-choice reforms, and shifting assessment patterns came without adequate teacher training or infrastructure. It created an education that was neither traditional nor innovative, merely inconsistent.

Equally damaging has been the social environment in which this system operates. In a culture that prizes certificates over competence, students are conditioned to chase grades, not understanding. Coaching centres, guidebooks, and "shortcut" learning have replaced critical thinking. The rise of AI-based summarisers and digital "*totka*" (shortcut) lessons has only worsened this trend. Students now often know the pattern of the exam paper better than the subject itself. The classroom has become secondary to the coaching centre, and the teacher's role has shrunk to that of an invigilator in a race for scores.

The role of teachers in this crisis cannot be ignored. Many institutions suffer from an acute shortage of skilled and motivated educators. Underpaid, undertrained, and overburdened, teachers often struggle to maintain standards.

FILE PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

The 2025 HSC results should not be seen as a catastrophe but as a mirror, marking the start of intellectual honesty in education.

The consequence is predictable: weak instruction breeds weaker comprehension, which in turn produces dismal outcomes. In rural areas, absenteeism, outdated methods, and inadequate monitoring compound the problem. When more than 200 institutions produce zero pass rates, it is not the fault of one examination but of a structure that has failed both its teachers and its students.

It would be easy to blame this year's stricter evaluation process or the discontinuation of grace marks for the sudden drop. But that argument ignores the deeper rot. A nation cannot inflate results indefinitely without eroding the very meaning of education. The 2025 results, therefore, should not be seen as a catastrophe but as a mirror. They reflect what has long been hidden: a generation that has been taught to pass exams, not to learn; to memorise answers, not to question ideas.

What this result exposes most painfully is the bankruptcy of the political narrative surrounding education. For years, governments have showcased rising pass rates as proof of national progress. Education became a performance metric in political speeches, not a genuine developmental priority. Budgets were announced with slogans, not strategies. Infrastructure projects were inaugurated, but pedagogy was neglected. When education is treated as propaganda, the outcome is inevitable: a nation that can produce certificates but not citizens.

There is also a moral dimension to this failure. When society measures a student's worth solely by grades, it perpetuates a toxic cycle of pressure and deception. Students learn that numbers matter more than knowledge, that success is statistical, not intellectual. Parents and institutions reinforce this illusion, until the system collapses under its own weight. The 2025 results are not the fall of education; they are its reckoning.

Yet, amid the despair, there lies a rare opportunity. This year's outcome can be the beginning of intellectual honesty in education. It invites policymakers to abandon the politics of pass rates and confront the reality of learning deficits. It challenges institutions to rebuild classroom integrity, not grade inflation. It compels teachers to reclaim their role as educators rather than result producers. And it urges parents to value curiosity over certificates.

To repair this system, Bangladesh must return to fundamentals. The obsession with examinations must give way to an emphasis on learning. Teacher training must become continuous and professional, not occasional and ceremonial. Curricula must foster analytical thinking instead of rote memorisation. Digital tools should enhance, not replace, understanding. Education policies must be evidence-based, stable, and shielded from political interference. Most importantly, society must redefine what it means to be "educated."

The HSC results of 2025, harsh as they appear, are not the end of the story. They are the beginning of truth-telling. For years, Bangladesh believed that it was doing well because the numbers said so. Now, the numbers say otherwise, and perhaps for the first time, they are telling the truth. The real challenge is whether the nation has the courage to listen.

Behind our RMG miracle lies exploited labour

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Bangladesh's RMG industry is often celebrated as a "miracle," a story of how a low-income country became one of the world's leading apparel exporters. The sector employs over four million workers—80-85 percent of them women. Yet beneath the statistics lies a harsher truth: this miracle rests on exploited labour, suppressed voices, and unpaid value. It is an incomplete miracle because it does not translate into dignity, security, or fairness for those who generate its profits.

The women who form the backbone of the industry carry a double burden. They endure long hours under unsafe conditions and return home to household responsibilities that society rarely shares. Many work six or even seven days a week, often for wages that barely meet subsistence. They have elevated the condition of their families and country, but the system has not lifted their lives. Instead, wage disparity and a persistently low wage share of value added keep them trapped in a cycle of adversity rather than prosperity.

Persistent labour unrest is the clearest symptom of neglect. Workers repeatedly take to the streets to demand higher wages, safer workplaces, and timely payment—often at significant risk, as protests are met with police crackdowns, intimidation, or dismissals. The grievances are familiar: delayed wages, unaffordable housing, lack of childcare, and denial of healthcare. Workplace hygiene remains dismal in too many factories: overcrowding, poor ventilation, unsafe wiring, and inadequate sanitation.

The Rana Plaza collapse in 2013 should have been a turning point, yet safety enforcement remains inconsistent. International buyers demand audits, but these are selectively applied and easily manipulated.

Bangladesh is not unique in facing such challenges, but comparisons show how far it lags. In Vietnam, wages are higher, working conditions better, and labour representation more structured. Trade unions, though restricted, negotiate with some leverage, and the state has invested in dispute resolution mechanisms that reduce violent clashes. Cambodia has made progress under international pressure: minimum wages have risen, and civil society plays a role in monitoring compliance, though constraints remain. India presents a mixed picture. Large export-oriented factories tied to global brands often maintain acceptable standards, but small units remain notorious for abuses. Enforcement varies widely by region. By most measures, Bangladesh trails its peers. Its exports surge, yet its workers remain precarious.

At the heart of the problem lies wage disparity. Economists track this through the wage share of value added—the portion of output that accrues to workers as pay after materials and overhead. In Marxian terms, the surplus value generated by workers far exceeds their wages. Surplus value is the portion of labour left unpaid after costs—wages, materials, and overheads—are deducted. It accrues to factory owners, global brands, and the economy, but not to workers themselves. Rough estimates illustrate the scale: in Bangladesh, workers' minimum wage is set at $110-115 (Tk 12,500) monthly, they generate about $500 in output, and receive a worker's share of approximately 27 percent.

In Vietnam, wages are $250-280 against an output of $600-650, where workers' share approximates to 42 percent. Cambodian workers earn $200-205, generate about $500, and receive a worker's share of approximately 42 percent. In India, wages are $150-180 against an output of $450-500, yielding a workers' share of approximately 35 percent. Bangladesh thus shows one of the widest gaps in surplus value share, even though worker productivity here ranks among the most efficient in the region. The disparity reflects deliberate wage suppression, weak labour rights, and the leverage of global brands that pit countries against each other in a race to the bottom.

Competitiveness is often hailed as an achievement, but it is really a hidden subsidy borne by workers. Export growth is trumpeted, foreign reserves are bolstered, and policymakers hail the sector as the nation's engine of development. Yet the workers who make it possible remain on the margins.

Unlike Vietnam or Cambodia, Bangladesh has not institutionalised meaningful welfare protections. Social security, health insurance, and childcare are minimal or absent. Most factories provide little beyond the legal minimum wage. Welfare programmes are donor-driven, temporary NGO projects, or disaster relief—not systemic rights. Vietnam has gradually integrated workers into social insurance programmes. Cambodia has added allowances for housing and transport. India's larger factories often provide health clinics and maternity benefits. These measures are uneven and imperfect, but they recognise that workers deserve more than survival.

Global brands sourcing from Bangladesh cannot claim innocence. Their relentless push for lower prices drives factory owners to suppress wages and compromise safety. Corporate audits and "social responsibility" pledges are often more public relations than real commitments. Civil society has been crucial in amplifying worker voices. NGOs, journalists, and labour activists have kept the issue alive, forcing occasional reforms. International solidarity campaigns have pressured brands to respond. But these gains remain piecemeal and fragile.

The government must ensure that policy reforms realign incentives so that export success is not built on the backs of exploited labour. This requires raising wages to living standards, protecting freedom of association, and investing in welfare infrastructure. The state's role cannot be that of an enabler of cheap labour.

The story of Bangladesh's garment industry cannot be told only through export earnings, GDP growth, or foreign reserves. It must also be judged by the welfare of its workers. If the foundation is bones broken by labour and hearts broken by neglect, then the miracle is less triumph than mirage. Unless wages and benefits rise to living-wage levels, the garment miracle will remain a story of profits built on adversity rather than shared progress. The question workers ask, "Are we not part of this success?" will decide whether Bangladesh's development is remembered as an inclusive achievement or a collective betrayal.

International benchmarks prove that progress is possible. Vietnam and Cambodia show that wages can rise, welfare programmes can expand, and disputes can be resolved without violence. Bangladesh must catch up urgently. In this information age, the disparity implied by the wage share of value added, where workers' share is only about 27 percent in Bangladesh, is staggering and unsustainable.

The interim government has streamlined airport facilities for expatriates and the diaspora whose remittances sustain domestic household consumption and foreign reserves. Meanwhile, workers in export processing zones (EPZs) enjoy a labour regime that is virtually strike- and lockout-proof. By contrast, the RMG sector remains plagued by low wages, long hours, unsafe and unhygienic conditions, and recurrent unrest. At the core of this neglect lies a gendered reality: 80-85 percent of RMG workers are women. They are the indispensable backbone of the industry, yet remain its most disposable asset—underpaid, under-unionised, and too often silenced by threats from rich and politically powerful factory owners. Bangladesh can continue expanding RMG exports while leaving its workers behind, or it can make necessary reforms so that growth translates into dignity.