

Address learning gaps at primary level

Without basic skills, students can't thrive in secondary education

The latest Unicef-backed study on the country's primary education system should serve as a wake-up call for everyone involved. According to the findings, an alarming 91 percent of Grade 5 students in mathematics and 65 percent in Bangla remain at the "novice" level, meaning they cannot answer even half of the questions appropriate for their grade. These are children entering secondary school without acquiring the most basic foundational skills expected at the primary level. Despite years of expanded enrolment and substantial public investment in education, such learning gaps are unacceptable, to say the least.

There is no doubt that, over the years, we have made commendable progress in bringing children into schools. But enrolment means little if students fail to acquire basic literacy and numeracy skills. A child who struggles to read fluently or do simple mathematics in Grade 6 is unlikely to cope with increasingly complex lessons in later years. This problem is, unfortunately, not new. National assessments have repeatedly shown weak learning outcomes at the primary level. A prolonged disruption caused by the Covid pandemic further widened the inequalities. The latest findings suggest that the system has failed to recover adequately from those setbacks. If a vast majority of primary students cannot read, write, or count at the expected level after completing five years of schooling, can the transition from primary to secondary education be considered meaningful academic progression?

For too long, our education system has remained overly dependent on rote learning, examination results, and certificate-oriented success, while classrooms remain ill-equipped to address differing learning needs. Teachers themselves frequently lack adequate training and support to identify struggling learners and provide remedial assistance. This situation must change. It is encouraging that the government and development partners have at least acknowledged the scale of the problem, which is the first step towards taking effective remedial measures. The Learning Enhancement Strategy piloted in secondary schools to identify and address learning gaps is also a welcome initiative. But far more needs to be done to rebuild foundational learning, including increasing the education budget and ensuring its effective utilisation.

Our education system must move away from rote learning and certificate-based success. Instead, schools should adopt participatory and creative teaching methods that help students develop real-life skills, values, and critical thinking abilities. Education policies should be based on research and the opinions of teachers, experts, parents, and other stakeholders. The government must work to reduce the gap in learning outcomes between rural and urban students. Student-centred teaching, practical teacher training, and curricula connected to real-life needs are all essential for improving learning outcomes. Good policies combined with proper implementation is what will ultimately make the difference. Unless these steps are taken urgently, our children will continue to move through the education system without gaining the basic skills they need.

A reform long overdue

Bringing urban primary healthcare under DGHS must lead to meaningful change

The government's decision to transfer urban primary healthcare services in 12 city corporations and 23 municipalities from the Local Government Division (LGD) to the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), along with its plan to establish 170 new urban health centres in Dhaka and Chattogram, marks a turning point for the country's health sector. For decades, urban primary healthcare has remained fragmented, poorly coordinated, and inadequately integrated into the broader public health system. If implemented properly, these initiatives could help address some of the structural weaknesses that have long plagued healthcare in urban areas.

As health experts have pointed out, inefficient governance has long been one of the biggest weaknesses of urban healthcare delivery. While the health ministry oversees primary healthcare nationwide, urban services have remained under the LGD since the launch of the Urban Primary Healthcare Services Delivery Project (UPHSDP) in 1998. This dual structure has often led to inadequate coordination, overlapping responsibilities, accountability gaps, and uneven service quality. As a result, urban primary healthcare services still remain inaccessible for many, particularly low-income populations who are often forced to rely on overcrowded secondary and tertiary hospitals even for basic treatment. The government's stated goal of reducing dependency on higher-level hospitals through stronger urban primary care is therefore very important. Its plan to establish at least one urban primary health and nutrition centre in every ward of Dhaka North, Dhaka South, and Chattogram city corporations could significantly improve access to healthcare for urban residents. Gradually, similar initiatives should be expanded to other urban areas as well.

Unfortunately, our health sector is already struggling with shortages of doctors, nurses, and technical staff, particularly at the primary care level. Without adequate staffing and operational preparedness, transferring the 192 facilities to the DGHS risks creating further disruption if not handled properly. The transition will require careful planning regarding manpower, financing, infrastructure maintenance, procurement systems, and service continuity.

The government must ensure that there is no disruption in services during the handover process. It must also ensure transparency, accountability, proper oversight, and efficient resource utilisation throughout the transition. Above all, the reforms must remain focused on the needs of urban residents who continue to face barriers to accessing affordable and quality primary healthcare. As the country's urban population is expected to exceed 10 crore by 2050, with Dhaka alone projected to reach nearly three crore residents by 2030, the government can no longer delay prioritising urban healthcare.

Mohammadpur and the reality of urban crimes in Dhaka



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

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There is something quite catchy and seductive in the way Mohammadpur is branded as the "City of God." The phrase is loaded with a Brazilian flavour, conjuring cinematic memories of gang fights in narrow alleys, muggers on motorcycles, the prevalence of narcotics among frightened residents, territorial youth gangs, occasional police raids, and political protection. Some national newspapers have used the phrase to reflect on extortion networks, murders, organised gangs, and the resurgence of Dhaka's underworld economies in recent months.

Without condoning the violence, it is perhaps possible to point out the exaggeration in labelling Mohammadpur as Dhaka's "City of God." A more apt label can be found in Arundhati Roy's maiden novel, *The God of Small Things*, where the caste system is unpacked to reveal the "small gods." Roy's novel pinpoints the intimate tyrannies, invisible humiliations, accumulated exclusions, and ordinary violences as sources for spectacular crimes. The spectacle witnessed in Mohammadpur is not unique. You find similar violence in other city areas on the outskirts, such as Jatrabari, Mirpur and Uttara. Applying the phrase "City of God" to Mohammadpur makes the area appear as a self-contained dystopia at the edge of an otherwise functioning city. The reality is, Mohammadpur is not outside Dhaka's moral order. It is no different from many other parts of the city. Mohammadpur poses as a true mirror where violence has replaced local governance. Thankfully, the city has not yet reached the nadir of becoming the Brazilian favela where state authority has collapsed to make room for gang sovereignty.

Dhaka's crisis consists of small things: local leaders patronising gangs, police conveniently overlooking crimes, landlords housing criminals, narcotics monitors tolerating political substance, students joining groups seeking protection, unemployed youth preferring territorial power to employment, media enjoying clickbait, and policymakers making promises without asking deeper questions. By

extension, they become the "small gods" of the city. They manifest petty sovereignties and quietly regulate urban survival. In Mohammadpur, we have a heavy density that makes the near-dystopian violence more visible. The crime in the area is real, but so is the theatre around it. Locating the city's crime in one area does not provide comfort; it only reflects an ostrich-like satisfaction in viewing the rest of the city as fine.

There are social media reels in which we have seen young muggers roaming the city terminals like sharks in shallow waters with their fins (read: machetes) exposed, snatching mobiles from

symbolic disorder for cities. CCTV monitors the heavily grilled houses in Mohammadpur. Yet, the urban density and the narrow lanes allow teen gangs with "funky" names to thrive. The neighbourhood possesses all the necessary elements to be a visually compelling candidate for the "City of God." However, the question persists as to why elite criminality is excluded from the purview of the omniscient being suggested by the metaphor. No upscale neighbourhood is permanently stigmatised because of loan default culture or financial fraud. The economic damage of these crimes may exceed the violence of street gangs many times over.

Street crimes bleed visibly, while elite crimes disperse to become invisible. The former produces spectacular headlines; the latter gets deposited in annual reports. As a daily traveller to Mohammadpur, I find the unequal moral geography of the area intriguing. There is no benefit in marginalising evil in the city's outskirts. This was the same logic through which asylums and brothels

the city gradually teaches its citizens to fear certain places while admiring others who may participate in quieter forms of violence: corruption, labour exploitation, institutional decay, environmental destruction, educational fraud, and exploitative capitalism. Mohammadpur becomes the city's visible sin so that the rest of Dhaka may continue imagining itself innocent.

For a second, think how such portrayal negatively affects the middle class residents. Thousands of students, teachers, drivers, office assistants, vendors, and service workers live in or move through Mohammadpur every day. The area is not external to the intellectual life of the educational institutions there; it sustains it materially. Yet, these institutions face reputational anxiety because of the security advisories, transport warnings, and enhanced surveillance. The time has come to use value-laden terms, such as "City of God," responsibly.

The most dangerous aspect of this metaphor is that it suggests inevitability. It tells us that this neighbourhood has become a natural disaster. But the fact remains: this condition is the result of structural failures contributed by unmanaged urbanisation, youth unemployment, narcotics economies, political patronage, weak local governance, informal settlement pressures, unequal policing, educational exclusion, and the collapse of public recreational and civic infrastructure.

Crime here is not simply moral failure. It is also institutional sediment. Instead of excusing violence, let us change the question. Let us problematise the question, "Why are these people criminal?", and ask, "What urban conditions repeatedly manufacture such ecosystems?"

Mohammadpur has earned its scary reputation by revealing too much of its darker side. But once you shed light on it, it reveals what happens when inequality becomes normal, institutions become selective, youth become excess, and urban belonging becomes disillusioning. Metaphors like the "City of God" can create a safe distance to allow viewers to imagine the location of violence elsewhere. But Mohammadpur is not outside Dhaka's order. It is one of the places where the "small gods" of Dhaka reside. They experience neglect, patronage, exclusion, fear, spectacle, and unequal morality on a daily basis. The ordinary lives of these "small gods" cannot conceal their extraordinary existence.



'In Mohammadpur, we have a heavy density that makes the near-dystopian violence more visible.'

FILE PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

bus passengers, mugging rickshaw riders and pedestrians, or nicking car parts in plain sight. These are sources of the same fear experienced by Mohammadpur residents. It will be wrong to assume that they enjoy living under the threats of mugging, drugs, gang recruitment, nighttime insecurity, and the erosion of ordinary civic trust. A series of police operations in response to the crime scene has brought Mohammadpur in the limelight. But we also need to be careful in projecting the neighbourhood as a narratively useful trope.

Mohammadpur has been useful in offering visual crime for television, viral geography for social media, and

were once parcelled out of the city core, as philosopher Michel Foucault has shown.

The challenge is to understand why the crimes of the poor and lower middle class occupy more public space. What programmes have we implemented to rehabilitate these disillusioned youths? Have there been any community-level interventions or integrated crime-fighting efforts? Neighbourhoods like Mohammadpur become morally contaminated through their repeated visibility. Class aesthetics often shield larger crimes. The elites continue to commit crimes inside systems and present them in abstract terms. Thus,

How policy gaps exclude the visually impaired from work

A first-hand experience



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Views expressed in this article are the author's own.

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Despite the existence of laws and policies, due to a lack of implementation, bureaucratic complexities, and structural limitations, visually impaired individuals are still unable to enter the mainstream workforce. I am a visually impaired person. From the very beginning of my life, I have had to move forward by struggling against adversity. Entering the education system and surviving within it—everything was a continuous battle. Despite the lack of a suitable environment, necessary resources, and trained teachers, I eventually completed my higher education from the Department of Sociology at the University of Dhaka.

However, the real crisis in this story begins after academic life ends and the reality of employment strikes. Even after a visually impaired person overcomes obstacles and becomes educated, the uncertainty standing before them is not merely a personal failure; rather, it is a reflection of the structural failure of the state. Bangladesh's enactment of the Rights and Protection of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2013 is undoubtedly a positive initiative. This law mentions education, employment, accessibility, and equal rights. But the reality is that

the law is largely directive. Although responsibilities are defined, there is no clear mention of punishment or accountability for failure. As a result, the law often remains confined to paper. This weakness is most evident in the field of employment.

Although quotas for persons with disabilities in government jobs exist, their effective implementation is extremely limited. Many institutions fail to fulfil this quota on various pretexts, and no accountability is ensured. In this context, the recently introduced Policy on Scribe Services for Public and Class Examinations, by the Ministry of Public Administration, has sparked new controversy. Although it intends to assist, in reality, it risks becoming a tool that limits the independence of visually impaired individuals. Making a visually impaired candidate dependent on a scribe during job examinations means placing them under additional administrative control. This restricts their personal strength. In many cases, the process is conducted in a way that is neither transparent, reliable, nor respectful to the candidates. As a result, instead of providing support, it creates a bureaucratic complexity where visually impaired individuals

become more dependent on the system than on their own abilities. In a sense, it risks confining them with control rather than empowering them.

On the other hand, the job market is currently facing a severe crisis. This crisis is challenging for general candidates, but it is even more difficult for visually impaired individuals. While general candidates compete for limited

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opportunities, visually impaired individuals fall behind from the very beginning due to structural barriers. In other words, the existing job crisis has created a double deprivation for visually impaired individuals.

First, it is essential to amend the existing law. Punitive provisions must be added to the Rights and Protection of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2013, to ensure accountability and that effective measures are taken against institutions that fail to fulfil their responsibilities. Second, to ensure employment for visually impaired individuals, realistic job opportunities must be created through executive

orders and special measures. A quota-based system alone is insufficient, as the structure of competitive examinations is often unsuitable for visually impaired individuals. In many countries around the world, special recruitment policies are followed for visually impaired individuals, where the recruitment process, work environments, and training methods are designed in accordance with their abilities. The government can create suitable positions for visually impaired individuals in various ministries, departments, and autonomous institutions, such as telephone operators, information service assistants, Braille transcribers, and digital content reviewers, etc., where their skills can be effectively utilised.

Not only recruitment but also making the work environment inclusive is an important responsibility of the state.

Third, the current scribe policy must be reconsidered so that it functions as a genuine means of assistance rather than control. The candidate's independence, choice, and dignity must be given the highest priority. Fourth, the recruitment process must be made technology driven and inclusive, so that visually impaired individuals can directly demonstrate their abilities.

My experience is not an exception; it reflects a broader reality. Now the question is for you: are we willing to accept a society where a person falls behind not because of their disability, but because of the system's inability? Or do we want to build a state where ability is judged, not limitation? The choice is ours; will we remain silent spectators or become agents of change?