

Restructuring Educational System

— Shamsuddin Ahmed

THE education policy announced by the Government last year, is a policy designed to correct some of the built-in defects of the educational system inherited from our colonial masters—a system that has absolutely failed to meet the growing demands of a twentieth-century society like ours. It behoves us, therefore, to identify the defects the present policy envisages to correct in order that the present Government policy on education may be examined from a historical perspective.

A large number of factors and a good variety of reasons have combined to make our entire academic sector a disquieting scene. With most of our students resorting to unfair means in the examinations with a large percentage of our boys and girls failing in public examinations, with 80% of our graduate and post-graduate young men and women suffering from a sense of frustration due to unemployment and under-employment, with our esteemed teachers failing to tap our natural resources and harness them to the well-being and raising of the living standards of our people, our entire academic sector speaks a melancholy rot—a colossal wastage of the human and material resources of our poor people. This stupendous wastage pains us all and teachers, students, politicians, administrators and social thinkers in Bangladesh are continually asking themselves how to stop this rot. Commission after commission has been appointed. Committee after Committee has addressed itself to finding out the remedies. Report on education is piling upon report on education. But no breakthrough has yet been possible. A peculiar kind of stagnancy has befallen us. We have fallen into a morass from which no sign of deliverance is in sight. In response to public demands and with a view to meeting the challenges of our times whenever during the last three decades a report on reshaping and restructuring our education system has been made we have either shelved it or nullified it by criticism without even

caring to go through its contents. How can this attitude be explained? To find an answer to this question one thing must be remembered.

The educational system of a society does not exist in a vacuum. It relates to the basic structure of a society, its philosophy of life and on life, its ideals and its needs and its requirements, its goals and its objectives. Education is but a superstructure upon the basic moral, religious and economic foundation of a society.

Now a policy is not an end in itself. It is but a means towards an end. What are the ends of the new education policy? The answer to this question will certainly remain vague unless we address ourselves to another vital question: What are the ends of the New Bangla we contemplate building? What are the ingredients with which we want to build it? Who would be architects of this New Bangla? It will be a Bangla to be built by the people of Bangladesh with ingredients drawn from the soil of Bangladesh and from nowhere else. (The implications are far-reaching, indeed. It will be a Bangla where no man will exploit his compatriots. It will be a Bangla where everyone will be given an opportunity to develop the best that is in himself where everyone will get an opportunity to contribute, according to the genius, to national well-being, where everyone will get his rightful place, where jobs will seek people where our boys and girls, on completion of their formal education enjoy the fruits of their labour according to their contribution, where poverty will be banished where our expenditure on education will be an investment in human resources, where every little expenditure will multiply resources.)

The new education policy must, therefore be studied in the context of the New Bangla we have in mind. If the concept of the New Bangla be erroneous, the new education policy must be erroneous, too. It is important that there should be a national consensus

on vital national issues. I see no reason why we should not be in agreement with the broad concept of the New Bangla.

We have now reached a stage when we can discuss our new education policy and dwell upon our role as teachers in implementing it.

It is a four-tier system comprising primary, preparatory secondary and higher education.

PRIMARY EDUCATION

Primary education has been designed to inculcate in our children ethical and aesthetic values of life, to familiarize them with our local economy environment and production processes to familiarize them with our identity as a nation and to prepare them for living in a modern technological world. Speaking generally, this design leaves no room for criticism.

The inclusion of Arabic as a compulsory subject from class I and the introduction of English from class II has however, sparked off a debate here and there and the dissenters deserve our congratulations.

It has been argued that the teaching of two foreign languages like Arabic and English at the primary stage will lay a heavy psychological stress upon our tender children, stifle their normal mental growth and make the school an unpleasant place for them to visit. It is impossible within the compass of this short dissertation to examine these grave charges. I shall, however, content myself with saying that the background of our people being what it is 99% of our babies are born into families having a smattering of knowledge in Arabic. Has anyone ever heard of a Muslim family in Bangladesh where words like Allah, Rasul, Munajat etc., are not uttered daily. Even the very common words like abba, amma, kalam have their origins in Arabic. If the syllabus in Arabic is short, if the lessons are graded and pleasantly illustrated by exhilarating pictures, there is no reason why our children

should not enjoy reading them and why Arabic should prove to be anathema to our fellow guardians of students. Let us not forget that there are other considerations, too.

With the teaching of Arabic as a foreign language from class I the question of the introduction of English, another foreign language, from class II needs rethinking. In view of the fact that by 1987 when 50% of our people would attain literacy under the new programme and when half of our people would have a smattering of knowledge in English, I would recommend that the language be introduced from class III during the period preceding 1987.

PREPARATORY EDUCATION

The curriculum of the preparatory education has been so designed as to foster civic virtues in our children and to familiarize them with different trades and production processes of the local economy. The dropouts of this tier will be catered through a large number of vocational and trade schools.

This design, I believe consistent with the basic philosophy of the new society we dream.

The design for higher education has sparked off criticism mainly from our college and university students who found in it a device for curtailing education. The apprehension is based upon the fact that only the outstanding students will be allowed to go in for under-graduate, graduate post-graduate and [doctoral] studies at the universities and other seats of higher education.

Now higher education is by its very nature to be highly selective. All men are equal, no doubt. But is it not also a fact that some men are, at least in respect of calibre, more equal than most men? In this age of the aristocracy of knowledge higher education must be limited to those having the aristocracy of talent of a superior order. Higher education is not a chattel like cars to be bought by the richer (Continue on page 6)

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sections of our community. What we must, however guard against is that no poor but really talented student is deprived of the benefits of higher education because of the poverty of his pecuniary circumstances. Such deprivation would be a tremendous national loss. We must make the genius of our talented and outstanding boys and girls available to the service of our people. Plato, in his celebrated work "The Republic" which has been called a work more on education than on politics, emphasised this point centuries ago.

Despite dissenting voices being heard here and there must say in all fairness that the framers of the new education policy have been badly pragmatic in their approach to solving a very challenging problem that has hitherto defied all attempts at reshaping and restructuring our education system and I think we can commend it to our people.

I must, however remind my fellow brethren-in-profession of their functions as teachers. Bertrand Russell has called them guardians of civilisation. They must never be propagandists. I have never known of a system that is absolutely free from defects. The best system often yields the worst results when implemented by people without vision, without a sense of historical perspective. No system of education, let me emphasize is better than its teachers. Do we have teachers equipped and trained enough to implement the new programme? Could we attract the best of our talents to the teaching profession?

A few words on the role of teachers in conducting public examinations. Examinations have now a-days become a dreaded affair. With a large number of our Government officials and law and order agency personnel being posted in and around our examination centres and kept on the alert the nation seems to be at war with its boys and girls.

There is a section of the intelligentsia in this country who would lay all the blame at the door of our students. Let it be understood that our students are not entirely to blame. Blame, if any must be, apportioned among all those connected with the education of our children. It is not nice to quarrel with children. It is not noble to rebuke them.

The defects of the existing examination system are due mainly to the defects inherent in the education system itself to the failure of the teachers and the planners of our syllabus to keep abreast of developments in educational experiments and also to the failure if not the ignorance, of the framers of questions in the light of modern techniques being employed in advanced countries.

The observations I have made above merit another dissertation.

[Mr. Shamsuddin Ahmed, writer of this article is the Vice-Principal, Chaumuhani College, Noakhali.]