

Education System: Some Thoughts

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POVERTY in Bangladesh is hard to imagine and harder to define. These days poverty is defined with reference to a poverty line. It represents a minimum income to secure basic physical needs for continued survival. People below this line are malnourished to the point where their ability to work hard is reduced, the physical and mental development of their children is impaired and their resistance to infectious diseases is low. Out of 90 million people of Bangladesh, 52.3 million are below internationally accepted poverty line.

Education melts away poverty. It is a dynamic organism which grows around the needs and demands of the society to which it belongs. Confucius was right when he said "a man who studies for four years without aiming at a job is either an angel or a fool." No doubt, ennobling of the mind and his socialisation is goal of any education. But one must survive before one is ennobled or socialised.

Two basic wealths of any nation are its land and people. Soil bears the bounties of biological, mineral and other resources. Man exploits them to satisfy his bare necessities and also to procure extravagant amenities. Man is the active factor in development and others are passive ones. The reason is that man is the fountain of creativity. By educating the latent potentials of people education can facilitate the march from poverty to affluence. Human beings accumulate capital, exploit natural resources, build social, economic and political organisations and carry forward national development. China, which by incredibly hard work, has developed both her land and people within one generation, is an instance to the point. The world does not owe us a living. One should wrest a living from the earth, and education, to begin with, must lend itself towards this end.

Bangladesh is bogged down in a mire of food problem and malnutrition. But its education system does not quite lend itself to eradication of poverty. What is worse, it is complained, it helps to perpetuate poverty. The allegation is not entirely unfounded. It is because the system is more a conserving institution than a growing organism which an education system should be. Tradition is its bed-rock; and a system which is by large built around hallowed tradition cannot be innovative. As the system is not based on causal curiosity, it does not act as a self-correcting device for the society and does not quite challenge the orthodoxies of the society. No wonder, the system helps to make peace with poverty. By paraphrasing T.S. Elliot one may say that too little education at the ele-

mentary, and irrelevant education at the higher level, has sharpened the edge of poverty instead of healing it. Obviously, in a country with low physical resource endowment, like Bangladesh, where basic problems are bulging population, chronic unemployment, endemic poverty and malnutrition—all interconnected—the production function of education should be the first among the priorities. But the education system hardly shows awareness of these problems; and the result is that the educated in Bangladesh regard their education as a badge that relieves them of any obligation to soil their hand with manual work. Poverty is a virus. But no ripples have appeared in the education system so far.

Future of Bangladesh, on the other hand, particularly hinges on education. The country is starved of land. The pressure on land is acutely reflected in the doubling of the man-land-ratio over a short period of twenty years. For example, the man-land-ratio (i.e. the number of persons per acre of land) increased from 1.5 to 3 in 1975. So development of this country with unlimited labour supply squeezed in limited area, mobilising the masses and unleashing of their latent potentials is essentially an educational process. If Bangladesh is unable to develop the skills and knowledge of its people and utilise them effectively for economic development, she can not develop anything else. No doubt, demographic tidal bore, shrinking resources, absence of know-how and explosion of mass consciousness make development a difficult task. But the people won't listen. They are anxious to escape from the rigour of poverty and land into plenty in their own life time. The wretched of Bangladesh now know that they need no longer to live in ill health, hunger and deprivation, and education can bail them out. The landless and marginal farmers see before their very eyes that the education system is a huge sieve through which the young people pass to the cities. They are defiant. Poverty originates in the rural areas and urban poverty is a reflected pain. But schooling in Bangladesh is an escape route mostly for the children of urban and rural elite. This is so because the rural poor children are lost to get books, first to drop out from school because they need to work, first to be pushed out because they fall asleep in classes, as a result of malnourishments, first to fail in their English tests because upper income children had better opportunities at home. The hope brought to village parents by the construction of the primary school soon fades. Out of every 100 students enrolled in class I 75 fall by the wayside before

completing the cycle. This is particularly true for girls who are virtually prisoners in their own home. A recent survey shows that 60% of the rural people cannot afford to bear educational expenses even though the primary education is free. They are caught in poverty trap. As a result the rural urban gap and gap in educational facilities between sexes are widening. The few who can complete primary cycle fall out at the secondary stage because of steeply rising cost of secondary education which is not free. Government secondary schools where tuition fees are nominal are all in the urban areas. The rural children are doubly disadvantaged. First, they pay higher tuition fees in non-govt. schools. Secondly, they are deprived of quality education which a government institution is supposed to give and for which they equally foot the bill. No wonder, fewer poor rural students complete secondary education cycle. The children of average merit of the affluent families, however, can continue to study through more years of education.

HIGHER EDUCATION

Higher education system of Bangladesh with modifications here and there is a direct transplant of the system in developed countries. It does not reflect local ingenuity. By and large the institutions of higher education live on imported knowledge. Although Bangladesh has ceased to be a colony in the political sense, intellectually it is still very much so. It is particularly true for higher education. Ideas from developed countries are no doubt useful. But, clearly, the country's development cannot be based on imported ideas. The result is that excellence of a university continues to be measured in terms of international academic standards rather than contribution to national development. It separates him from his family and village, (though he will, with intense feeling and loyalty, return regularly to his home and accept what are often crushing family responsibilities). It obliges him to live in a western way whether he likes it or not. It stretches his nerves between two separate worlds, two systems of ethics and two horizons of thoughts. In his hands he holds the terrifying instruments of western civilization, the philosophy of many, mathematics and chemistry and atomic destruction. Thus the gap between him and his people is very great—the universities and their graduates are isolated from the life of the common people. Sir Eric Asby's reference to this shattering influence of western education on the people is a serious matter worthy of attention in Bangladesh. Coordinated efforts and vision of the

thinkers and authors are needed to produce ideas relevant to our experience and aspirations that will dovetail with our development. The closer the adaptation of our thinking to the need of the country, the more effectively will they serve as instrument of development.

But over 60% of the students in the institutions of higher education in Bangladesh are in Arts and Social Sciences. It seems, institutions of higher education which are highly subsidised by the Government is ineffectual an absorber of last resort for a great number of educated unemployed. Moreover, since people cannot remain students until they retire, these educated unemployed will one day emerge from the world of tight labour markets. The results will be more disastrous because they are both highly educated and highly vocal. Bangladesh universities, it seems, are unaffected by the wind of change. In a way a modern university is a lofty trade school. But the institutions of higher education are still turning out increasing numbers of general arts, unemployable graduates and proliferating lawyers to oppose each other. Our professional universities are turning out engineers and architects who mostly design luxury houses, parks and stadium. On the other hand many universities in the third world have already included agricultural components in their Biological Sciences and emphasise intensive village studies for their Social Science graduate students.

So Bangladesh is confronted with two basic alternatives in their policy approaches to planning education. They can continue as it is, and expand formal system quantitatively with minor modifications of curricula, teaching methods, and examinations, while retaining the existing structures and educational costing policies. Or, there can be an attempt to reform the overall educational system by modifying both the conditions of demand for and the supply of educational opportunities and by restructuring the system in accordance with real resource and needs of the nation. The first alternative can only complicate the problems of unemployment, poverty, inequality, rural stagnation, and international intellectual dominance. The way out of the impasse is to look upon education as a trade school which will walk on two legs—formal and non-formal education. By paraphrasing Jonathan Swift, the English satirist one can say a person who teaches to make two ears of corn or two blades of grass grow upon the ground where only one grew before would do more essential service to his country than the whole race of educational planners put together.