

## The New Education Policy

The long-awaited new education policy to address many vital issues for narrowing down the gap between school and Madrassah education, plus ensuring the widespread application of Information Technology at all levels, is expected to see the light next month subject to the approval of parliament. The policy will also lay stress on developing moral values, patriotism, plus a similar curriculum to be followed in schools and Madrassahs. It will also focus on developing skills and capacity to respond to the need of the employment market. One of the central issues of the new policy is to have six common subjects - Bengali, English, Mathematics, Science, Environment and Bangladesh Studies. Besides these common subjects, Madrassahs will continue to teach other subjects. The draft report is to be circulated to educationists and experts before presenting to the government in its final form.

The draft policy is set to recommend education up to HSC as school education, while up to class eight will be primary education. It will also recommend that schools provide mid-day meals and entertainment to students to encourage them to continue the studies. The most important aspect of the new education policy is to narrow down the gap between school and Madrassah education and to ensure the widespread application of information technology at all levels.

Now that the Ministry of Education has taken up the task of formulating an education policy we hope something positive will come out of it but any policy must take into consideration the vision of the government for education. The greatest challenge will be how to bridge the gap between rich and poor. Imparting lessons in technology may be a start but as it can create socio-economic discrimination, a lot will depend on how it is handled. The reason the state provides education is so it can have a workforce that meets its needs. 68 lawmakers, ministers, former ministers, whip, parliament committee presidents and former advisers to the immediate past caretaker government have already expressed their opinion that there should be a uniform education policy for all, and that four per cent of the total Gross Domestic Product (GDP) should go for education.

If "Digital Bangladesh" is to become a reality, we shall need to introduce a science-based education comprised of innovations, inventions, connectivity, etc. as this will give children a means for solving problems by the application of scientific and technical knowledge. But as things stand, the foundation on which we hope to build a "Digital Bangladesh" is too weak and may present us with more challenges than solutions. Therefore any proposed changes to the education system should be subjected to close scrutiny and before going ahead with it we must ask the government to define what the education system is all about and provide us with an honest answer. If it is measured in terms of whether those emerging from the system can be counted on to provide the manpower the nation requires in an increasingly integrated world, as seems to be the hidden agenda, there will be a need to provide students with a needs-based technical or vocational education.

As six common subjects will be taught both at schools and Madrassahs this should help reduce the qualitative difference between students coming out from two different kinds of educational institutions. Students of Madrassahs are seen to be very weak in English and Bengali compared to other educational streams with the result they trail behind those with a school background. In other words students with a Madrassah education are too ill equipped to cope with the changing needs of a modern world. Hopefully the new education policy will remove this disparity and enable Madrassah students to meet the needs of a country hoping to enter the modern world at par with any other nation.

Lots of rich people and crummy state schools especially in the big city where well off people tend to live, has created an elite tier of private schools. Fees at private schools have more than doubled in real terms over the past 25 years and even in the recession, are proving to be surprisingly resilient. All sorts of theories exist to explain the success of these institutions but the main reason they thrive is because of their ability to get students into elite universities abroad. This is the main asset of the private schools. But maintaining a system of elite schools and universities to which the rich have privileged access is neither fair nor efficient. But any attempt to increase equality by getting rid of elitism sometimes achieves the opposite. When British governments in the 1960s and 70s abolished elite state grammar schools, it became harder still for poor, clever children to get into elite universities.

The vast number of Bangladeshi students struggle because they are overwhelmingly educated in poor government-run schools. Change them and you change the system. It is here that private elite schools can become a useful model for others because their success is not based on money but on organisation. Make head teachers at state schools as accountable to parents as their peers at private schools. Give them the same freedoms, notably to sack poor teachers and pay more to good ones, then the new education policy will have served its purpose. Reorganise the state schools and Madrassahs and you are halfway home.