

We have a rich heritage of education. Our heritage in respect of modern education goes as far back as any of the developed countries. It is perhaps more than an irony that in spite of this rich heritage our literacy rate is staggeringly below 26 per cent. The Indian sub-continent, principally Bengal introduced modern education in the 30's of the last century. It was then as much tentative here as it was in Europe. But there were differences in their social contexts. In Europe, it followed the dissolution of feudalism and the end of Church authority. Developments in Europe have taken place as complementary to her education. In the sub-continent, modern education was introduced to strengthen the colonial domination. Western education was spread, when local crafts and skills were systematically destroyed and the region was reduced to grow only primary products and to depend on Western industrial products to meet consumers' needs. We were introduced to a liberal education to give our thought to freedom, democracy, rights and social responsibility, the philosophy of reason and scientific attitudes, when our action could be grossly manipulated and drastically controlled. Sciences were offered in theory and technology was carefully excluded to avoid industrialization in the colony.

The territory which now constitutes Bangladesh used to be one of the richest part of the sub-continent during the mercantile period, from 16th to the 19th century. Its richness was not founded upon any one specific natural resource. The wealth of Bangladesh proverbially lied in the skills of her people. Bengal was famous for its silk. Silk produced in Bengal used to be traded into China in the east and Europe to the West. The famous Indian 'banarasi' was woven with Bengal silk until 1947, when the trade died out following the partition of India. The particular alloy Kansha was produced in Bengal by mixing variable proportions of copper, brass (which is itself an alloy of copper and zinc) and tin. The mixture takes away the brownness of copper and the alloy gains rich golden colour. The goldsmith work of Bangladesh too has been famous in history. Although the country does not produce any gold, Bangalee jewellers were reputed for their highly skilled craftsmanship in producing intricate designs using very little quantity of the precious metal. Bangalee craftsmen had attained very high skills in the manufacture of shell 'jewellery', once the most popular wear among Hindu women. Bengal was also famous for ship-building as sea trade was one of the most important economic activity of the country. In ancient Bengal the particular wood used for sea-going vessels of the highest quality was known as Manpaban (implying extreme speed compared with the flight of the mind and with the wind). Nothing is known about this variety of wood any more.

In the medieval period there were fewer institutions of learning and most of those were of theological type. The skills were learned and advanced in direct engagement of teachers and students in the vocation—as from father to son, within a caste, or in a guild. Our historical 'golden Bengal' was founded on innovative genius and very high skills which the people had attained through their traditional learning. With industrial revolution in England, the British Government in India strongly suppressed all such local industries or crafts which could compete with factory products from England. It had many cotton fields burnt and the seeds of the particular variety of cotton for muslin destroyed. On the other side, as our people began to receive Western education (mostly limited to subjects of humanities) they were also acclimated to Western ways, particularly its material style of life and the use of foreign industrial products.

Modern education over the past two centuries has helped to bring about all sorts of revolution in Europe. In the context of the sub-continent, it has helped Great Britain to strengthen her colonial domination and the control of the economy. In turn, as it have indicated, we received some initial training of mental discipline and few memorized facts. It has helped to loosen the caste difference in the society by creating a new class of 'Bhadralok' who may work only as white colour and who must spilt on any work requiring specific skills. Further it has given us the foundation of our new society, and our civil servant, mercantile employees and lastly, also a military bureaucracy—successors to the client community which held the British Raj for a century and half in occupation of the country.

However, without industrialization and the development of skills and employments, the number of educated has grown at a faster pace than what the economy has been able to absorb. Therefore, in a sequence of two decades to a quarter century, our education has produced new unemployed leading to discontent and political awakening and, into demands for more rights and opportunities. From the turn of this century, there have been many political movements, the resolution of which inter alia have provided more white colour employment. Also, the educated surplus had engaged in establishing new schools as a means to popularize the political movement. Leaders like Fazlul Haq following the advice of famous Ali brothers (Moulana, Shaukat Ali and more illustrious, Mohammad Ali) started to establish schools and colleges to promote education and political consciousness among Muslim youths. In this manner, until the liberation of Bangladesh, over 55 percent of schools and colleges came to be established and maintained by private initiative. But the employment gap has continued, and now once again it is worst among the most educated.

The first move was taken to bring over a hundred thousand teachers and their institutions under government payroll and maintenance after the country's independence. This was initiated without a clear policy on education and before the national commission on education (Kaderiat-Khoda Commission) had submitted its recommendations. The decision was ad-hoc, and nationalization of teachers' salary and their institution above the level of primary education occurred as response to local pressure and the government's disposition to directly purchase political support. In this manner, at the end of 1982 the government provided salary support to a total 305,000 teachers in the country. The following year, the allocation for education was doubled. But most of the increase was consumed in providing higher, 70 percent salary support for non-government schools including madrasah teachers. For many institutions the government assistance is the sole support for their survival.

On the other hand the nation carries the burden of nearly 75 percent illiteracy. When the majority population of a country is illiterate then it can be said to be living in a 'verbal' culture meaning everything is in saying i.e. an act is presumed done as soon as the wish for it has been uttered. The leaders talk and build caste for the people in the heaven. We make beggars ride horses. When the spell of promises wears there is the inevitable violence.

Education is expected to develop the ability for reasoning and provide skills for employment. These two conditions together give the quality of life. Therefore, any society which has attained even the basic literacy rate of higher than 50 percent vintilation a different sensitivity. Within the sub-continent one can sense this difference in travelling from Uttar Pradesh to Hariana or from Orissa to Tamilnadu or Kerala.

Our colonial background which has separated education from providing professional skills to employment or to diversify education in the light of employment situation together with our own failings or lack of policy, has made education a further victim of all other process and drifts of the society. For instance, as delinked to employment, education itself has become the purpose and the end of employment. The government is constantly under pressure to increase the pay-roll strength of teachers. A sizeable section of the students who had the tradition of indoctrinated nationalism and acted as the moral force against all autocrats and oligarchs now acts as lackey, henchman and have earned for them a new name 'MASTAN' (K.M. Sobhan in 'Courtier', February, 1989). Between these two major constituents of education there have been critical decline in both the quality and curriculum for education. Most attempts of reforms have been reduced to further abuse like the course system in the universities or the recent decentralization of primary education (the appointment of primary school teachers depends more on flourishing bribery than on their merit).

As the education has slowly grown in number of institutions, teachers and students, for the majority it has also become dysfunctional. Accordingly to one estimate in 1983, 45 percent of young people with 12 years' education was unemployed. One reads incidents of villagers attacking universities, and students coaching villagers and occasionally intimidating them for money to spend for pleasure.

Many urban parents have sponsored or supported private coaching/tutorial of overseas curriculum to prepare their children to study abroad. Of course, only the very rich or families with very high motivation on education and initiative can afford it. But in another sense they are the trend setters in the society. One has to be most cautious about the trend and liberalization. First, because the government, so far, has failed to offer a need-based education or even to contain its rapid degeneration. Second, should the elites find their needs entirely met from private source, that would cause further deterioration of the national system and the prospect of a literate society in Bangladesh. It is one thing to have plural system of education and it is another to have an education to be serving the elites and another that is just self-serving. After the liberation, there was great optimism about a future against a devastating economic background. There was great pressure to reach out and promote state's concern on key issues like the primary education. It was an elected political government which hurriedly nationalized primary education without requiring it to be a public responsibility, obligatory enrolment, and before decisions were taken on educational policy and the curricula. Everything about primary education was made official and national on 'as is' basis. As a result thousands of 'schools' and four/five times the number as teacher were brought under government responsibility which had not existed before. Hundreds of 'teachers' came into official pay-roll who were not even literate.

According to official statistics in 1971 there were 27,731 primary schools in the country of which 26558 were government and barely over a thousand, private. In 1973 there were 28,106 schools recorded as government and another 8431 shown as private. All of the latter were nationalized in 1974, bringing the number to over 36 thousand primary schools under the government. The number of teachers under government pay-roll increased from under one hundred thousand to one hundred and forty seven thousand. Neither of these figures in anyway reflected in the percentage growth of literacy or school enrolment between 1973 and 1981. Moreover, the successive governments have since learned about the political value of primary school teachers as the rural literates. On the other hand, most of the middle-class and educated urbanite know little about this extensive network of official i.e. free) primary education in the country. Normally they do not send their children to those schools. They are not aware of the curricula unless someone attempt to raise some dust through columns of printed media. Only a small percentage of rural primary graduates ever make into secondary and higher education unless they are children of urban middle class parents who had been sent out to cover the post-primary schoolships which are awarded regionally. This spells an apprehension which I have mentioned earlier.

The country is facing serious socio-economic and political problems. The problem of education is a part of this over-all perspective. At the same time, it is also a determinate of the others. If the government is not firm about education in the national context and initiate major changes to make it need-based, diversified to provide skills for employment as well as, develop new skills through education to employment, we could risk the growth of invidious two nations from once a homogeneous society.

A challenge to need-based education

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