

A New Education Policy And Digital Bangladesh

The education ministry is reported to be preparing a new education policy within the next three months. This may be good or bad depending on your point of view because to date there have been at least six education commissions supposedly for the purpose of reforming education or bringing it in line with national aspirations. The new policy will aim at improving the present state of education at all levels, giving special emphasis to setting up institutions for providing vocational education at upazila level. This may sound good, at least in theory, but by initiating yet another policy, is the education minister living up to his own criticism of the culture of frequent policy shifts?

There are already quite a collection of reports such as the Qudrat-e-Khuda Education Commission of 1974 and Shamsul Haque Education Committee of 1997 that have never seen the light of day or, if they have, only in reference. In fact until now no government has tried to implement any of them yet the common perception among experts is that, had these recommendations been implemented, most of the what ails education would not have occurred. When we consider there have been at least six of these reports, is it any wonder that despite the vow of successive governments to provide every citizen with an education, the system has remained in limbo? Even after so many years of independence, children living on chars and in isolated or remote communities, are deprived of a legitimate means of seeking social upper mobility. In fact, successive governments have ignored their responsibility for bringing about the genuine emancipation of the people.

Poverty is often used as an excuse but it cannot be blamed for a person's inability to seek an education. In fact, it is the other way round, because it is the lack of an effective and meaningful access to education that causes poverty. That being so it is expected that the new government should concentrate on delivering education to the people. Now that the Ministry of Education has taken up the issue of formulating an education policy for the country, we may perhaps hope that something positive will come out of it. But any discussion on education must take into consideration the vision the government has for education.

Our greatest challenge is how to bridge the gap between ourselves and the developed countries. Technology can help but this too must be tackled with kid gloves as it can create socio-economic discrimination. However if education is the social justice issue of our times as it is said to be, it is also the most important long-term issue we have. After all the reason the state provides education to its people is to have a workforce that can meet its needs. As we recall it was for this reason that 68 lawmakers, including ministers, former ministers, whip, parliament committee presidents and former adviser of the caretaker government, took part in a three-day seminar on the issues of standard education, constitutional reforms on rights of education and a proper budget for education. Their considered opinion was 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.

Unfortunately nothing came of it and though the present government came to power with a dream of establishing "digital Bangladesh" by 2021, basically a science-based education comprised of innovations, inventions, connectivity, etc., if successful this will give people the means for solving their innumerable problems by the application of scientific and technical knowledge. But unless we are very careful, a "digital Bangladesh" could just as easily turn into a "discriminatory Bangladesh" if access to this type of education is not shared equally by the different segments of society. As things stand now, the foundation on which we hope to build a "digital Bangladesh" is too weak. Moreover when we know that the poverty rate for families headed by dropouts is more than twice that of families headed by high school graduates, this should be revealing enough for policy makers.

Any proposed changes to the education system should be subjected to close scrutiny as most of what has been done before has been inefficient, ineffective, needlessly expensive, and educationally irrational. Before going ahead with a new system we must first 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, there will be a need to provide students with a needs-based technical or vocational education. We must also be alive to the fact that we live in an era when a college education is a prerequisite for maintaining a middle-class lifestyle. In addition we must remember that a sudden change in the system will be inordinately expensive and wasteful. Money wasted is money that is not available for the things that need to be done.

Any decision that affects the nation's education must therefore, not be shrouded in secrecy. Developing skills and potential for our own benefit and others is an economic necessity therefore a good start will be to review the Bangladesh Education Act of 1973 and update it through discussions with the stakeholders. Minor changes to earlier documents prepared by the Awami League can also contribute to the formulation of a new educational policy but it must be prepared in such a way that citizens of all classes are able to acquire the education they need in a modern world.