

## Rural-urban divide in education

THE results of Junior School Certificate and Junior Dakhil Certificate, and primary and ibtedayi completion examinations, which were published on Thursday, point to a cruel fact—that the gap in the quality of education between urban and rural educational institutions remains significantly wide. According to a report front-paged in *New Age* on Friday, the number of rural educational institutions in the top 20 performers in terms of results in these examinations is abysmally low. Educationists blame poor performance of rural educational institutions in public examinations—the trend is similar in secondary school and higher secondary certificate examinations—on shortage of teachers, absence of proper infrastructure and, most importantly, lack of government support. The incumbent Awami League-led government has persisted with the claim that it was working to bridge the gap in education between rural and urban areas, just as its predecessors did earlier. The education minister actually says the results this year 'have shown that the overall education quality has improved.' However, such improvement, if there has been any, may very well be cosmetic rather than substantive, because the problem is systemic and boils down to the city-centric development policies pursued by the ruling quarters, regardless of whichever political party is in power, year after year. The education minister is absolutely right when he says 'the problem cannot be addressed overnight'. What the incumbents need to recognise though is that the problem is systemic and cannot be overcome with cosmetic measures; there needs to be a radical shift in the development paradigm now in place.

Ever since Bangladesh's emergence as an independent state, successive governments have persisted with development policies that are essentially city-centric and biased towards the haves. As such, while the country has had numeric growth in terms of gross domestic product year after year, its impact has not been pervasive. Simply put, development has followed where the haves of society are — i.e. urban areas — while the vast multitude has been left to wait for the trickle-down effect, which, needless to say, hardly ever came. Little wonder then that, while one good educational institution after another dot the city landscape, the ones in rural areas continue to be haunted the same problem — teacher shortage, poor infrastructure, etc. Worse even, there seems to be general acceptance of, if not resignation to, the reality that rural educational institutions are destined to deal with multifarious problems when their urban counterparts thrive. Such disparity, suffice it to say, is not exclusive to education; similar has been the situation in health care.

As indicated above, the urban-rural divide, be it in education or health care, is unlikely to go away if the ruling quarters continue with their distorted and discriminatory policies — both political and economic. The incumbents need to realise that they are ordained by the constitution to do their utmost for the welfare of the people — both urban and rural.