

## **7. THE STATE OF EDUCATION IN BANGLADESH: A GLIMPSE**

Ruhul Kuddus, Ph.D.\* and Roushan Saleha, M.Ed.\*\*

Literacy rate in Bangladesh has improved from a dismal 16.8% in 1970 to 32.4% in 1994. The population of Bangladesh increased from 74m in 1970 to about 115m today. Thus the illiterate population today (about 76m) is larger than the total population of 1970's. The illiterate female population is also proportionately large (42m). A nation with two-third of its population illiterate can not expect rapid growth and a healthy democratic government. We attempted to examine the causes for the extremely slow progress in mass literacy in Bangladesh. We also investigated the state of higher education and the involvement of the private sector in education. Our investigation is far from complete and this is a preliminary abstract of our finding.

The country has neglected the elementary education and has overdeveloped the higher education since the British era. Such process deprives the mass but serves the powerful middle and upper classes. As in the British era, government officers rather than elected local representatives govern the schools system. The teaching staff in the public sector is treated as government servant and can be transferred instantly. It prevents the development of an identity of individual institutions and causes chronic instability. In rural Bangladesh, a typical elementary school is at best, a small tin-shade with a few equipments to educate children with no sports and recreational facility. In contrast, colleges and universities often have well designed buildings. The student-teacher ratio is 63 in elementary schools while it is 38 in colleges and 17 in the universities. The per student expenditure in the elementary school is mere 567 takas while it is a staggering 22,958 takas for universities.

The general scheme of education as shown in figure 1A has remained unchanged for over five decades with minimal changes in the basic curricula. General education which was meant to train clerks and public servants still dominates the profile. There is no well-defined kindergarten class and so the baby-class to grade class transition is comparable to the survival of a few tadpoles

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\* Dr. Ruhul Kuddus, Research Associate, Department of Molecular Genetics and Biochemistry, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA, is the Vice President of BDI.

\*\* Roushan Saleha is Deputy Director of Public Instruction (retired), Government of the Peoples Republic of Bangladesh.

after millions of them hatch in the roadside pool. The participation in the elementary schools is only 75% and is on the decline (it was 94% in 1991). Secondary schools are also part of general education with a few vocational and trade schools. Secondary level technical schools if effective, could have had a large impact on the nation with a huge surplus manpower which could be exported to earn foreign currency. Higher secondary level technical education has also had low impact so far. While technical education is rudimentary at the secondary levels, it is well- developed at the college levels. Technical education such as medicine and engineering (as well as university education) is almost totally subsidized. As a result, there is intense competition at these levels. The pyramid of student population at different levels is shown in figure 1B. The pyramid is too wide at the base; so fierce competition is expected at the upper levels. The extreme narrowness of the tip of the pyramid is explained by the high unemployment rate, lack of new job creation, lack of adequate resources and allegedly, the deliberate attempt of the government to limit the sharp increase of unemployment for people with higher education. Students from rural areas and poor families fail to compete for higher education for many reasons. Need-based financial help is insufficient and there is no education loan. While books, food and supplies are the major cost for schooling, most poor students can not afford these and the only schools that offer such help to the students are the Madrashas. There are 6179 Madrashas with 1731,000 students. But such schools train clerics for whom employment opportunity is extremely limited and the graduates largely remain ignorant in technical and general know-how. General education at college level is deficient as the students are trained in extremely limited areas. Although two-year college education is called 'graduate' education in Bangladesh, there is no real graduate education in the country as the nation lacks research universities. The master's degrees offered in the country are mere extension of the college degrees and there is no organized doctoral level program.

Students are promoted by the number of years of schooling and no one can accelerate by taking extra training. The chronic social upheaval disrupts the promotion cycle and as a result a number of graduating classes clogs the pipeline. The other reason of such logjam is the involvement of the student in the national politics. The students are evaluated on a national/regional basis despite the huge inequalities among the schools, especially rural and urban schools. In addition, evaluation is entirely based on information repertoire rather than the scholastic aptitude of the students. Finally, the answers to the test questions are descriptive and can not be judged uniformly. Despite all these serious shortfalls, students are ranked nationally in first, second, etc. positions. Although such ranking is often fixed, students are hugely rewarded for good ranks. Individual institutions and teachers have little role in graduating students. Age bias is overly strong in the country and fresh graduates are preferred for higher (technical) education (and for public service jobs) which prevents more mature students from getting training in these demanding areas.

The government's revenue and development expenditure in the education sector has gradually increased to 19,000m takas in 1993-94, which is more than the allocations in defense or other sectors. While the poor nation is putting a huge portion of its resources to educate its people rather than modernizing its infrastructure preferentially, the output thus far is not laudable. The government's attempts to reform education system through several commissions such as the Qudrat-E-Khuda commission, the Majid Khan Commission, etc., have failed presumably because of the existing bureaucratic structure, the teachers' union, the student activism, the lack of strong government and more importantly, the lack of motivation of the nation for change. Ironically, (in contrast to the British era), the participation of the private sector has badly shrunk and most private institutions have made a forced entry into the government sector and the rest have turned to semi-government and become overly dependent on the government. The growing upper income class is expending large sums of money to purchase (foreign) education for their dependents but has invested very little in the education sector. In general, the common people as well as the rich are either indifferent or wrathful to the student communities which often is a cause of everyday social disturbance. There are a few profit-oriented private KG-elementary schools, technical colleges and universities, but the student volume in such institutes is negligible and the growth of a real private education industry is extremely slow.

While education reform in Bangladesh is a crying need today, we are not yet in a position to make firm recommendations for the reform. We think that the original recommendations of the Qudrat-E-Khuda Commission would have been beneficial for the nation. We offer the following tentative recommendations which we will explain in our upcoming article.

1. Create local independent school (districts) and college systems,
2. Dismantle the school boards and university systems,
3. Create a strong and effective curriculum authority,
4. Create national 'aptitude' testing authority,
5. Replace batch system by course system at all levels,
6. Maximum attention on elementary education,
7. End age bias for mature students in any program,
8. Reduce subsidy on technical education,
9. Establish research universities/graduate programs,
10. More technical education than general education,
11. Prevent students from national politics,
12. Encourage private education industry,
13. Incorporate technical education in the Madrashes.

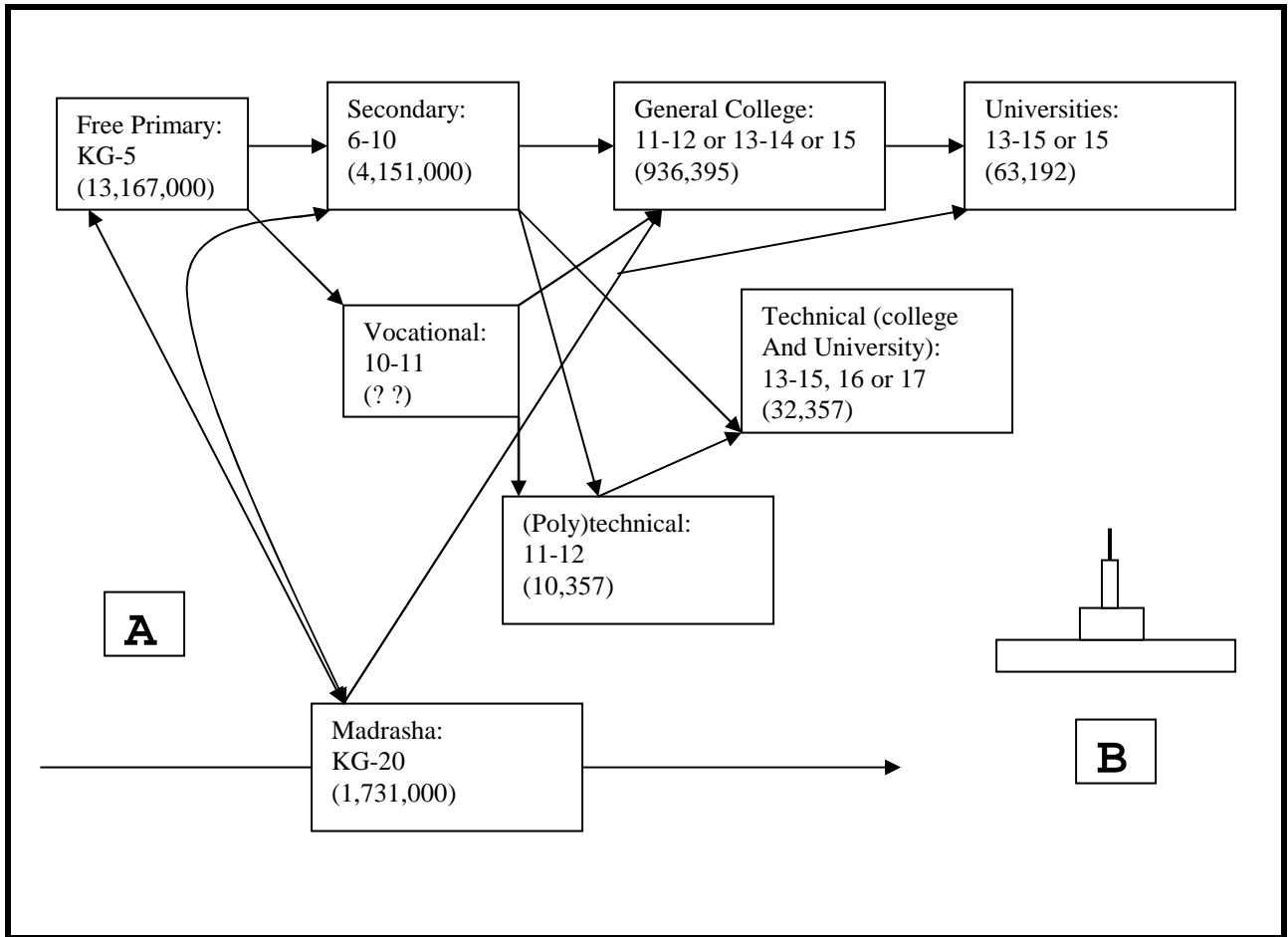


Figure 1: Education profile of Bangladesh. A. The profile and the flow. The level of education in the batch system and the number of students in each stage in 1993-94 is shown. B. The pyramid of student population (excluding Madrasa students). Base=primary, step 2=secondary and vocational, step 3=general colleges and polytechnic institutes, step 4=technical colleges and universities. Data from the Statistical Pocket Book Bangladesh 1994.