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HIGHER EDUCATION REFORM IN BANGLADESH: AN ANALYSIS

Abstract: This article focuses on the gradual development and reform of the Higher Education (HE) system throughout the last 40 years or so in Bangladesh. To properly show the scenario of the educational development a discussion on various education commissions recommendations are given. The Quadrat-E-Khoda Commission (1974) basically highlights the colonial deprivation of two hundred years and some other problems in HE like the traditional memorizing system and lack of research and empirical studies. Secondly, Jatiya Shikhah Upadeshta Parishad (1979) found problems like HE having inadequate relation with the country and the state and lack of sufficient facilities in the newly established colleges. The other commissions focus on a quota problem, the teachers' fascination to private coaching, and lack of professional knowledge of teachers etc. The recommendations of these commissions include: closer relations of HE with the demands of the nation, expansion of practical education, introduction of new academic disciplines, introduction of four years' Bachelor of Honours and one year Masters, involvement of the private sector in HE, more funds and facilities for research, modernization of the syllabus and curriculum to meet international standards, etc. Our HE system came from the British and from time to time this is used politically. In the colonial days and also after independence the HE system was influenced by the ruling party. Finally, HE should function properly for sustainable development in the country and so reform is inevitable.

Introduction

Bangladesh is a new state with a long history. It has been described "as a country challenged by contradictions." The country is a natural bridge between South and South East Asia. Because of its location, it is treated as an intermediary in trade and commerce between the South Asian Sub-Continents and the Far East.¹ Education is an integral part for its development and existence in the arena of the international community. Due to the scarcity of resources it is extremely difficult to trace the starting point of the Higher Education (HE) system in Bangladesh. Available sources allow us to reconstruct a generalized idea about HE reforms in ancient and medieval periods. However, in the colonial period the picture became clear to enable us to trace the development of HE in a much more logical way.² HE in Bangladesh includes more than one hundred and fifty years of intellectual development. During British rule only a privileged group got access to education, which then gradually isolated themselves from the general masses of the country. Universal primary education has been a priority policy reform in the Bangladesh government since independence. So, article No 17 of the constitution supports free and compulsory education:

The state shall adopt effective measures for the purpose of (a) Establishing a uniform, mass-oriented and universal system of education and existing free and compulsory education to all children to such stage as may be determined by law; (b) Relating education to needs of society

and producing properly trained and motivated citizens to serve those needs; and (c) Removing illiteracy within such time as may be determined by law.³

The following briefly presents the development of Bangladesh HE reform through various commissions.

The Bangladesh Education Commission Report (1974): The Bangladesh Education Commission was formed by the leadership of Quadrat-E-Khuda, It traced out some limitations of HE, i.e., (a) HE had no relation with practical problems and full of colonial deprivation of two hundred years; *The 1st writer is the Deputy Registrar of Feni University and the 2nd writer is the Lecturer of English, Feni University.

(b) Traditional HE system was fully dependant on memorizing system and bore a defective examination system; (c) A few numbers of meritorious students enrolled in HE and a maximum was below the marks in quality; and (d) The defective extension of college affiliating system had no relations with the research and empirical studies.⁴ The commission gave special recommendation for the development of HE on the following grounds:⁵ (i) HE should be closely related with aspirations and economic activities of the nation; (ii) With the Library as the most effective unit for the development of HE, introduce Library Science as diploma and Honours education degree in colleges and universities; (iii) Update the syllabus and curriculum of the traditional subjects relating to science and arts faculties; (iv) HE must be opened for all classes of the society and the selection in this level would be restricted for meritorious students; (v) The degree colleges should start Honours Programmes with special priority; (vi) After completing Masters programme the tenure of the PhD would be three years for the advanced students; (vii) Science and technical education should be expanded and university should be developed self-sufficiently; (viii) The tutorial and internal examination system must be introduced in the HE as a substitute of the annual and external examination system; (ix) Research should be added in every branch of HE, i.e. Bachelors, Masters and PhD level. And colleges and universities there must be a laboratory for the extension of experimental knowledge; (x) Affiliating university must be established in all divisions for lessening the over burden of Dhaka, Rajshahi and Chittagong Universities. The affiliating university would be a full fledged university consisting of Vice Chancellor, Registrar, Syndicate, Senate, Academic Council, Selection Committees and Examination Committees; and (xi) Include the concept of university colleges in the HE system of Bangladesh and these colleges would be developed like the universities.

Jatiya Shikkah Upadeshta Parishad (1979): The commission was formed in 1979 by the leadership of MA Baten, later named as *Ontorbartikalın Shikhaniti*. It had given special priority to the HE system and traced various drawbacks, i.e.,⁶ (a) HE had no relation with society and state, (b) Establishment of new colleges without sufficient facilities and (c) Teachers had no relation to the research work. Moreover, it had delivered some recommendations for the development of HE as given in the followings:⁷ (i) HE related colleges would be determined by the district education authority as per population, geographical condition and the salary structure of non-government colleges would be similar to the government colleges; (ii) Upgrading the education from the lower levels and creating proper environment in the HE institutes by providing sufficient equipments, removing teacher-student conflicts and other problems; (iii) New academic discipline would be initiated in the HE institutes regarding the geographical and natural position i.e. Hydrology, Oceanography, Anthropology, Disaster Management and others; (iv) Update the courses and curriculums of HE relating to the changing situation; (v) Unified education facility in the colleges and universities for the same standard students and introducing academic calendar for classes; (vi) Bengali would be the medium of instruction for the HE and English would be compulsory in Bachelor of Honours and Pass courses for the proper development of students; (vii) Part time HE system would be provided for the professional classes of the society; (viii) Arrange well equipped libraries for all educational institutes with laboratories and other necessary equipments; and (ix) Empirical studies should be arranged in agriculture and industry as the unit of economic development.

Jatiya Shikkah Nity Pranayan Committee (1997): Jatiya Shikkah Nity Pranayan Committee was headed by Prof Shamsul Hoq in 1997 and it is called as Shamsul Hoq Commission. The commission had given the following recommendations;⁸ (a) Fixing qualification on merit and avoiding of quota; (b) For

maintaining standards in HE, priority would be given to select the teachers on the basis of merit and research in promotion; (c) Introducing unified four years' Bachelor of Honours and one year Masters courses in the universities and three years' bachelor degree courses in the colleges but the advanced colleges can continue for four years' Bachelor of Honours courses and one year Masters courses. The tenure of Masters courses for Bachelor degree holders would be two years and these courses and curriculum would be controlled by National University; (d) Initiating research facilities in the bachelor degree colleges as well as the universities; (e) The courses and curriculum of HE should be modern and global oriented with English as the second language after Bengali; (f) Admission fee and salary of the students should be standard for ensuring quality education and it may be managed from the government grants, tuition fees, bank loan and personal credits; (g) NU would be treated as the central university of the country in the context of its various assignment to the nation; and (h) Special emphasis would be given to the establishment of library and research institutions in each university or institute.

MA Bari Commission - 2002: The commission was formed by the chairmanship of Prof. Dr MA Bari (Bari Commission). The commission made specific observations on the HE system of Bangladesh. It formed various sub-committees and the most important one was college education sub committee. The then VC of the NU was the chairman of this sub committee and it traced out the following Problems of college oriented HE in Bangladesh:⁹

(a) Problems in Class Presentation: There is shortage of teachers in most of the colleges; some teachers had the option of private or coaching classes for additional earnings. The college authority lessened the class tenure from 50 to 40 minutes; **(b) Irregularities in the Examinations:** The college examinations were hampered by the direct involvement of college teachers in various job tests during the year. Various processions of students delayed the examination schedule, and irregularities were found in various colleges assessment tests and course examinations; **(c) Lack of Academic Calendar:** A maximum of colleges were unclear about academic discipline and the calendar of the NU; **(d) Shortage of Teachers and Students Ratio:** There was a shortage of students in all HE levels, i.e. Degree, Honours and Masters level and the low ratio of teachers and students prevailed in maximum affiliated colleges, where standard ratio was 1:15 but in the NU affiliating colleges it was 1:30; **(e) Weak Administrative Structure in Colleges:** Weaker administrative and financial structure in the colleges hampered accountability; **(f) Lack of Professional Knowledge of Teachers:** There was limited scope for developing the professional knowledge of the college teachers; **(g) Problems in Inspection:** i.e. qualification of teachers of colleges, books in libraries, equipments in laboratory, financial solvency; **(h) Multi Dimensional Problems in NU and Colleges:** Multi dimensional problems prevailed in the NU and affiliating colleges on the issue of governing body, inspection, course and curriculum, question moderation and result publications; **(i) Irregularities in Teachers' Recruitment of Non Government Colleges:** The donation and political linkage system also hampered the selection process of non government colleges' teachers; **(j) Political Influence in the Campus:** The political influence in the college campuses hampered the class system, tender process, admission procedure and all other academic activities; and **(k) Unfair Means in Examination and Violence in the Campus:** In the examination system the practice of unfair means and the political violence also hampered the normal academic activities of the colleges.

Mohammad Moniruzzaman Mia Commission - 2003: This commission was formed by the guidance of educationist Professor Mohammad Moniruzzaman Mia on January 2003. The commission submitted its report to the government on March 2004. In order to improve the quality of HE it recommended the following:¹⁰ **(a)** Increasing access to HE in the rural areas through establishment of new colleges/institutes with government financing in the underserved areas; **(b)** A national policy for utilization of human resources needs to be formulated so that no educated unemployment was generated; **(c)** Introducing a uniform examination and evaluation system through grading at all stages of education, and special emphasis on HE for measuring students' attainment whether the poor performing students are progressing to attain a certain level of competence; **(d)** Establishment of applied and professional universities like Agriculture, Technology and Medicine. Government funding should be discouraged as contradictory to the concept of university on one hand and expensive on the other; **(e)** HE in private sector could be encouraged, but institutional mechanisms should be established to maintain quality of private sector

education; (f) Establishing impartial administration following the 1973 University Autonomy Act; (g) For facilitating the public university research with international standard, center of excellence would be established in some areas of education; (h) For expanding an effective HE system, a national policy on language needs to be formulated; (i) in the global age of 21st century, with an emphasis on knowledge of modern science and technology, a national policy on science should be formulated and implemented at the earliest possible time; and (j) Establishment of a permanent education commission in the country, which should identify problems in the education sector and recommend solutions through continuous research.

Kabir Chowdhury Commission - 2009: After the election of December 29, 2008, the Awami League led a great alliance government and came into power with a three-fourths majority. For proper development of education, a committee was formed by the chairmanship of Professor Kabir Chowdhury and co-chaired by eminent economist Dr Khaliqazzaman Ahamed on May 2009. The committee submitted its report to the government on November 2009. After various analyses with different groups of intellectuals, it finalized the drafts on education policy. And on December 08, 2010 it was passed in the Nine Jatiya Sangsad as education policy 2010. The main criteria of this policy regarding the techniques of HE include:

(a) After completing the various levels of pre-HE successfully, the candidates would get a chance for HE according to merit and aptitude; (b) Special residence facility and stipend facility would be provided for the children of freedom fighters and tribal/aborigine people; (c) For maintaining quality only dignified colleges and universities would be fixed for providing HE and the minimum qualification would not be relaxed for quota; (d) Providing various actions for developing the quality of HE; (e) Four years' Bachelor of Honours degree would be treated as the finishing point of HE and the qualification for getting job, but in the teaching profession post graduation was the minimum qualification. Gradually the three years' degree colleges would be turned into four years' honours colleges; (f) Masters and M.Phil/PhD degrees would be treated as professional degrees; Postgraduate degrees would be provided only for the interested candidates of teaching professions. For extending research activities each department of every university should include Masters and M.Phil/PhD programmes; (g) In the degree courses of every college and university three credits of 100 marks in English would be compulsory for each student; (h) In the research activities students and teachers would participate actively. Priority would be given to the meritorious students of every university and arrangement of fellowships like Bangabandhu would also be introduced. The degree colleges would also provide enough facilities for expanding research programmes; (i) The syllabus and courses of HE would be modern and equivalent to international levels. Extension of Bengali in HE and the valuable books written in English version in every discipline must be translated into Bengali. But in HE, English would continue apart from Bengali; (j) Developing HE with the international level, sufficient investment would be provided. For this, government donations, salary of the students and more grants from the private sector would also be encouraged; (k) Special stipends would be provided for the meritorious students based on the financial condition of the guardians. Moreover, a soft loan system would be arranged for the meritorious and poor students. (l) Technical Institute or Special University would be established, for developing jute, textile and leather sectors; (m) Libraries of each university and colleges would be well equipped and connected with network technology for the readers of the twenty-first century, gradually updating the books and journals of each library as a digital editions; (n) Providing sufficient training for the teachers, and ensuring the co-existence of teachers of colleges and universities. Moreover, the universities would arrange various subject-specific training during vacations; (o) Each university and college would be guided by the academic calendar, where there would be a schedule for starting classes and examinations. This calendar would be followed strictly and (p) The HE system of private universities especially for courses and curriculum, level of educations, and qualifications of teachers would be same as of the public universities. These private universities would be also open for all classes of the society. They would not be used in any commercial purposes and may not be contradictory to the spirit of the Liberation War, national culture and heritage.

Conclusion

Educational reform in Bangladesh includes more than forty two years' of development processes that evolved in colonial days and bore the mark of alien origins for a century or more. In this long path the various cultural elements of internal and external factors influenced this development process. Basically the HE system in this area was not so much result oriented; it started merely to help the British Administration. But after the departure of the colonial authority, various commissions were formed and many recommendations were made for development. These recommendations became mere directions and were not implemented properly. Hence, Bangladesh has no specific Education Policy. However, each and every government formed Education Commissions but the next governments failed to implement these policies due to political conflicts or misunderstandings. For the sustainable development of Bangladesh there is no alternative but to implement HE policy properly and by virtue of these factors Bangladesh could easily acquire the targets of the MDG and the vision of 21st century. For the proper development of Bangladesh, government should be conscious to never treat the organs of HE as political weapons. Otherwise Bangladesh could be hampered in the global context. Finally, the proper implementation of HE policy and reform is needed for sufficient and sustainable development.

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