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Abnormal situation in educational institutions during Covid-19 pandemic

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The prime minister had a meeting with the secretaries of different ministries on 18 August and directed to open the educational institutions as soon as convenient atmosphere prevails. She also directed to bring the children below eighteen years of age under vaccination program.

Before this direction, the education minister, of course, told that the educational institutions would be opened soon and preparation was going on accordingly. However, reopening the educational institutions calls for a huge preparation that seems to experience lacking. Preparation needs to be taken on the basis of the location of schools, infra-structure, number of students and classroom.

The current rate of infection is below 20 percent, institutions to be opened only when this rate comes down to five percent or less as the experts opine. This rate was 30 percent several days back as well. It's a matter of thought whether we need to keep

educational institutions closed looking at this rate or think something more smartly. All the sectors of the society have been shown normal except educational institutions that deems mysterious to us. The government has announced that SSC examination will be held in November and HSC in December. If that is the plan, schools must be opened in September. But is it actually going to happen?

Many students have dropped out from education cycle because of poverty and closure of schools. 8 percent boy students and 3 percent girl students have got engaged in various professions to support their families as some surveys confirm. Similarly, the rate of child marriage has also increased. A great number of students have forgotten reading and writing for keeping away from the touch of education. Already a good number of students have been promoted to the next higher class with serious learning loss and with that loss they are passing days without advancing new learning that has thrown them into a very odd situation and have been growing as weak human resource in the society. Their physical and mental growth is getting hampered. The students who have already passed from higher educational institutions cannot enter into job market, a big number cannot complete education life. Many are getting frustrated seriously and adopting the path of crimes of various kinds.

It is for the 23rd time since March 2020 educational institutions have been declared closed and till September 11, total number of closing days will stand at 544 days and nobody knows how long it will continue. It seems that showing 'unusual situation only in educational institutions' has become a strange trend for some reasons unknown to us. What's the benefit of it? All the social and state-run institutions, gatherings, markets, transports pose to be quite normal. In this perspective, what is the necessity of showing schools, colleges and universities abnormal institutions? Bangladesh stands as a significant position among the fourteen countries in the world that have kept institutions closer for long at a stretch. Other countries did not keep their educational institutions closed at a stretch for so long period of time. The period from October 2020 to February 2021 witnessed less infection rate when we could have open the schools and colleges that we ignored.

One World Bank survey shows that 58 percent children of five years old used to gain the minimum level of reading before Corona appeared that has now increased to 76 percent. They used to start going to school at the age of four that is now going to happen at five or six years that means these children are going to see two years' learning loss at the beginning of their academic life. Interestingly, we don't find any report, survey, study or research from the state highlighting the education loss figure. On the other hand, any report or survey conducted individually or by any institutions is seen to be refuted by the government even though students have been away from the classes for seventeen months. Asian Development Bank has given a statistics on the loss of education that shows each student faces a loss of 180 dollar due to the closure of education institution.

The students of the affluent families and urban areas have strived to keep in touch with education by utilizing the digital devices that cost much, however, the students of poor families and slum areas have got further disconnected from this way witnessing a big gap they used to experience before Covid. The thing has happened similarly in the public and private universities. Public universities could not introduce digital device or distance mode of learning showing their unaffordability. Public university teachers have

shown their 'digital illiteracy situation' through this example. On the other hand, private universities started keeping the academic activities live using digital devices that the UGC obstructed which we think is a big blunder. The public universities could show 'digitally highly educated' situation if they could start disseminating classes through digital devices. As they could not do it, they plainly stopped it in private universities which does not make any sense.

At first we must perceive and then acknowledge the magnanimity of learning loss. Only then opinions can be invited from the people concerned. If we don't agree to the facts, how can we take decisions to minimize the loss? What about education research in our country? It is being conducted either by individually or any organization does it separately that it finds confined to the particular journal without coming to the people who need it. This is another problem as our research works, in most of the cases, fail to sensitize the policy makers. It's true that the state has taken some measures to minimize the loss of education that include Sangsard TV classes, radio class and assignments. Students have been cheating to submit their assignments and the DSHE has taken an initiative to form committees comprising of head teachers and principals to motivate students to develop their own assignments, whether they are copying and identify copying and keeping the records and entry. This seems to be a good step but difficult to implement. Again, Sangsard TV classes have created poor impression. One cause of it might be the cause of Bangladesh's occupying 135th position among 137 countries in using internet facilities as is expressed by another international organization. The Power and Participation Research Centre and BRAC Institute of Governance and Development conducted a survey that also shows poor situation. They have found that in the primary level only 19 percent children and in the secondary 25 percent accrued benefit from state run steps and the rest fall in the category of learning loss.

Our university life ran in the midst of Ershad regime when universities were closed from time to time either for nothing or for any negligible political reason. We used to arrange meeting, processions and discussions along with teachers but those could not reach the ears of the government. They used to give statement such a way 'many universities of African countries and Myanmar have been closed for two years or more, so what in Bangladesh'. It does not matter to the people who run the state whether universities remain closed or open. However, one thing we cannot afford to believe when the water of the flowing rivers gets hampered, the water must turn its course flooding the crop fields around. Of course, it does not matter to the policy makers either. Rather it gives them more benefit as they get opportunity to distribute some relief goods among a portion of the affected people in presence of huge media crowd. That brings more and more benefit for them. So, the meaning of not opening educational institutions must carry some special message to the authorities that we fail to understand.

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