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**Dynamics of Secondary Education  
and Emerging Concerns**

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# Dynamics of Secondary Education and Emerging Concerns

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## 1 Secondary Education Scenario

### *A Glimpse into history*

The demand of education has seen a steady rise over time. The matching of demand and supply, however, has not been a linear story. While the colonial state established zila schools at district headquarters as model schools that among other services ensured a steady supply of candidates for the colonial bureaucracy, the spread of education was primarily a community-driven affair in which local patrons played an important role. After the birth of Bangladesh, provision of basic education was enshrined as a constitutional responsibility. The assumption of this responsibility led to the nationalization of primary schools i.e. a state take-over of community-established schools, and a drive to ensure access to primary education for all children. For the secondary education sector, however, no such corresponding policy engagement was undertaken. The spread of secondary education thus continued to be a community-driven affair but with two contrasting engagement by the state – the assumption of an expanding regulatory jurisdiction and a more limited resource engagement in the way of partial subventions of teacher salaries (a system administratively referred to as MPO or monthly payment order). For the secondary education sector, the engagement by the state was thus a much more ad hoc process based on the patronage of different echelons of the state, at different times, towards particular areas where such schools are located. Notwithstanding this process of ad hoc nationalization, the GOB is now paying out a significant subvention towards meeting the salary and benefits for the teachers of non-government schools even though the system still remains largely in private management.”<sup>1</sup>

Historically, there have been four types of secondary schools in Bangladesh:

- i. *Government secondary school*: It is fully initiated, funded and managed by the government.
- ii. *Non-government secondary school*: These are initiated by the community or local patrons but have subsequently come under coverage of government subvention of teacher salaries (the MPO system). Those already under the MPO system are categorized registered non-government school and those waiting to come under the MPO system are categorized as non-registered, non-government schools.
- iii. *Private secondary school*: fully initiated, funded and managed by non-state actors.
- iv. *Missionary school*: A colonial legacy, these are schools established by religious missionaries mainly from the UK but also from other western countries.

Interestingly, the modern MPO system of state support for community-established schools had a predecessor in the colonial period grant-in-aid system though that system was limited in scope and quite rudimentary in nature.

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<sup>1</sup>Muzaffer Ahmed, *Essays on Education in Bangladesh*, (Ekushey and ActionAid 2003), page-48, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

## *Spread of Secondary Education*

Table 1 describes the spread of secondary education from pre-Independence time:

Table 1  
*Spread of Secondary Education in Bangladesh*

<i>Period</i>	<i>Type of School</i>		
	<i>Government</i>	<i>Non-Government</i>	<i>Other</i>
Pre-1947	129	1901	0
1947-71	122	5064	12
1972-1990	56	4371	41
1991-2000	0	5900	126
2001-2009	8	1173	152

Source: BANBEIS

Table 1 underscore the point made earlier that historically, non-state sector (i.e. the local community and or individuals) has borne the principle burden of the spread of secondary education. This was also true for primary education up to the time of independence in 1971. However, since independence, while the state has taken on the primary burden of spread of primary education, the historical trend of community playing the primary role has continued in the area of secondary education with the state playing an ad hoc supportive role through the system of salary subventions.

The spread of girl education has seen a quantum increase after the birth of Bangladesh. Up to independence in 1971, the percentage of secondary schools that were girl schools were around 10%. Table 2 describes the spread of girl education since independence. Within the first decade after independence the proportion of girl students in secondary schools had risen to 30%. It rose to 43% in the following decade and since 2002, the proportion of girl students have been outnumbering boy students.

Table 2  
*Spread of Girl Education at Secondary Level*

<i>Year</i>	<i>Junior Secondary School</i>		<i>Govt. Secondary School</i>		<i>Non-Govt. Secondary School</i>		<i>All Secondary School</i>	
	Total	Female	Total	Female	Total	Female	Total	Female
1982	271572	99909	105416	44457	2024062	611775	2129478	656232 (30.02)
1992	284806	121174	210673	90679	325263	1387352	3748042	1599209 (42.67)
2002	942869	568927	222740	104124	6960753	3649517	8126362	4322568 (53.2)
2008	495735	303637	209337	100392	6114676	495735	6819748	3661457 (53.68)

Source: BANBEIS

## 2 State of Secondary Education: A Reality Check<sup>2</sup>

### ***97% of secondary students are in non-government schools ....***

The spread of secondary education in Bangladesh has mostly been driven by community or non government efforts. Government's direct role in terms of the number of government high schools has been virtually stagnant since independence so that 97% of secondary students are covered by non-government schools. This limited role of government is in fact a continuation of the trend from colonial times when too secondary schools were set up at community behest and the state provided rudimentary support in the form of grant-in-aid much akin to the contemporary MPO system.

***Secondary education in Bangladesh is marked by a tiny but well-resourced and well-performing public sector and a very large non-government sector with variable performance.*** Part of the non-government schools enjoys support from the state in terms of partial teacher salary subventions (MPO) and some assistance in development expenditures.

### ***56% of secondary age children are not in school.....***

Out of a secondary education age group of 16.8 million (Population Census 2011), 7.465 million or 44.32% are in school while a staggering 9.379 million or 55.68% are not in school. These 9+ million who are not in school include both those who have discontinued after primary education and those who never enrolled in school.

### ***Costs of secondary education is a rising concern .....***

Monthly school fee constitutes only a small proportion of total costs of secondary education (this excludes English medium schools). Three major cost categories are i) admission, session and yearly/development fee, ii) academic participation fee, and iii) extra-curricular activities fee. A PPRC Study showed that as against an average monthly fee of Taka 117 for the 45 surveyed schools, average annual burden of other fees for a secondary student is Taka 2923. However, this average figure obscures significant variation amongst school locations and school types. Dhaka city-based schools have the highest annual average fee burden at Taka 6346 while the burden for other urban schools is nearly a third at Taka 1990. Rural schools have the smallest fee burden at Taka 1346. In terms of school types, government schools have the smallest average fee burden at Taka 1840. Registered non-government schools have by comparison the highest fee burden at Taka 3832.

### ***Fees, Results and School Choice are intrinsically linked ....***

Guardians tend to try and admit their students to those schools which yield good results. In that sense, the reputation for good results tends to be a dominating factor over other factors such as fee levels in influencing school choice. The stronger the reputation for good results associated with a school, more competitive becomes the school and in turn more willing is the guardian to pay extra cost if necessary to ensure their children's entry into such schools. In general, therefore, results, school choice and high fees have become intrinsically linked with one another. However, while this is broadly true for the non-government schools that cater for nearly 97% of secondary students, government schools are able to show better performance by being more adequately resourced directly by the state (Table 3).

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<sup>2</sup>PPRC, 2012, *Cost of Education: A Study of Secondary Schools*, PPRC/ActionAid, Dhaka

Table 3  
*School Performance in terms of SSC Results (2010-12)*

Category		% of SSC Candidates securing GPA 5		
		2010	2011	2012
School Types	Government	60.2	60.3	66.2
	Non-Govt MPO	45.8	47.9	53.4
	Non-Govt Non-MPO	2.1	2.8	2.8
School Locations	Dhaka City	60	65.3	72
	Other Urban	58	55	61
	Rural	5	6.3	5.3
<i>All</i>		<i>51.2</i>	<i>52.2</i>	<i>57.5</i>

Source: PPRC Survey of 45 Secondary Schools, 2011

In terms of school locations, Dhaka city schools show the best performance. In comparison, rural schools show dramatically poorer performance – only 5.3% GPA 5 results compared to 72% for Dhaka city schools. The two conclusions which emerge from this picture of school performance is that despite low fees, government schools are performing better due to adequate state support that ensures teacher quality and infrastructural facilities. However, the caveat here is that there has been little expansion in the number of government schools so that for the majority of guardians the choice is largely about which non-government school to choose. Here higher fees appear to be closely related to better results. Both of these conclusions are further borne out in Table 4 which describes the top 10 schools in terms of SSC results in 2012.

Table 4  
Top Ten Schools in SSC Results, 2012

Location	Name of School	% of SSC Candidates securing GPA 5	Annual School Total Fees (Tk.)
Rangpur	RangpurGovtZila School	90.1	2,852
Dhaka City	ShamsulHaque Khan School & College	89.4	22,408
Dhaka City	Udayan High School	89.3	11,750
Dhaka City	Ideal School & College	85.7	10,325
Dhaka City	Govt Laboratory High School	83.2	2,795
Dhaka City	Motijheel Govt. Boys' High School	82.3	3,045
Rangpur	Rangpur Govt. Girls High School	79.2	1,619
Dhaka City	Viqarunnesa Noon School & College	79.0	9,450
Khulna	GovtKormanon Girls High School	76.5	1,390
Rajshahi	Govt. P.N. Girls High School	74.1	1,646

Source: PPRC Survey of 45 Secondary Schools, 2011

Six of the top ten performing schools in SSC 2012 were government schools. Total annual average fee for these top government schools was Taka 2,224. The remaining four top performing schools were registered non-government schools all of them in Dhaka city. These top non-government schools are also on the list of top fee-charging schools (Table 9) with an annual consolidated fee of Taka 13,483. Clearly, good results are either linked to well-resourced government schools whose number have however virtually stagnated since independence and which therefore can accommodate only a tiny fraction (3%) of the intending student population. Or they are linked to well-resourced non-government schools which ensure their finances through high fees.

For the non-government schools, high fees per se are thus closely linked to good results which are ensured through appropriate levels of expenditures on teaching staff, infrastructural facilities and extra efforts such as intensive coaching prior to examinations. From the standpoint of the popular concern with 'excessive fees', the issue to explore is whether within this valid logic of high

fees/good results, some schools are charging irrational levels without commensurate school performance. An additional issue to explore is whether some of the fee items merit rationalization.

***While MPO system is important for school finances of non-government schools, it covers only a part of school finances.*** School finances of non-government schools show that government MPO support covers only 52% of teacher salaries and 25% of development expenditures. Well-resourced non-government schools that ensure good results have thus become intrinsically linked to high annual fees.

***High fees and good results are intrinsically linked but there are opportunities for cost rationalization.***

While high fees on account of ensuring good results has a clear logic, there are considerable opportunities for rationalization on specific fee items particularly those related to admission and academic participation.

***Quality of school governance is an area of concern.*** The two major concerns here are continued presence of ill-educated SMC chairs in a sizeable segment of rural schools and ruling party influence on SMCs.

***There has been a steady erosion in the autonomy of schools*** to decide on many aspects of school functioning. This applies both to government and non-government schools that draw MPO support from government.

### **3 Policy Implications**

Compared to primary education, policy pre-occupation has been much less pronounced on secondary education. In part this has been so because the burden of secondary education in Bangladesh has been primarily on the non-government sector. Though the state provides partial finance for the sector, non-government schools have had to rely on high annual fees to bring their finances up to the resource levels enjoyed by the well-performing but tiny public sector schools. Good results and high fees have become intrinsically linked for the non-government schools with the consequence that poorer students are increasingly distant from good results. Increasing disparity between the performance of urban and rural schools is a manifestation of this trend. The main opportunity open to poorer students to fare well is admission into the very limited number of public sector schools.

A more robust policy engagement with secondary education has become a need of the hour. An awareness of four outcomes needs to drive this engagement: a high drop-out rate, increasing disparity in performance between urban and rural schools and between poor and the non-poor, high costs of education, and finally poor standards of school autonomy and school governance.

Four policy agenda are suggested:

- i. An emotive pre-occupation with ‘excessive fees’ is unlikely to yield fruitful policy solutions. Given that non-government schools can access only partial financial support from the state and have to raise adequate resources to ensure capacity and facilities for good results, a certain logic of high fees has become a ground reality. The more meaningful policy task here is to ensure rationalization amongst the various categories of fees, in particular those related to admission and academic participation. A more disciplined and transparent school budgeting where requirements are projected efficiently

and the task of raising the required budget beyond the support from the state is pursued accordingly can be a key agenda to be promoted.

- ii. Current policy thinking that sees state support to secondary education only through the prism of the MPO system requires a major review. A discrete increase in the number of government high schools has arguably become a policy necessity in particular to address the disparity issue. The education discourse currently obscures this agenda but a review of the evidence clearly argues for this to be a key priority.
- iii. A supplementary agenda to address the disparity issue is to strengthen the secondary stipends program both in its geographic targeting as well as in coverage of new population segments such as low-income urban settlements.
- iv. Perhaps the least focused policy agenda on secondary education is the issue of decentralization and strengthening of school autonomy. In practice the reverse process has been in operation namely an increasing process of centralization whereby bureaucratic oversight by the ministry has overtaken many of the basic school-level decisions while core central functions such as school inspections have been rendered virtually obsolete. A wide-ranging consultative process to map out an effective decentralization agenda is an immediate and highly meaningful policy priority.

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