

Demographic Divided

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"A pnar ki kono savings acche?", I asked a slum dwelling beneficiary of a poverty alleviation project, to gather information for case studies that showcased the success of the intervention. One of the field officers who was accompanying me, quietly whispered to me that the Bangla word for savings was "shonchoy" and then turned to his colleague to explain, "Apa toh English medium". "Ah" he said and everyone around me in the tin shed home nodded in unison; my accent, clothes, my entire being making sudden sense to them. Embarrassingly, I had never come across the word "shonchoy" before. I had attended an English medium school and had the opportunity to go abroad to study.

My education had made it easier for me to keep up with the indie film watching, Derrida quoting, vegan burger eating hipsters at my liberal arts college, but when I had returned in 2011 and started working at an NGO, I was suddenly rendered unintelligent because I couldn't hold intellectual conversations in Bangla with my colleagues. I hadn't read the same books, watched the same films, or listened to the same music. During school, Bangla lessons had been confined to hourly classes, three days a week. We might have shared space in the same city, but we certainly didn't share the same experience of Bangladesh.

This division in our social fabric is made more present to me through my work at a leadership institute that brings together students from all three mediums of Bangladesh's education system. Students from Bangla and English medium schools, and Madrassas share a classroom, and have to work together in small groups on different activities. I notice the hesitation with which they approach each other, I've spotted sniggers and nudges at the affected accents and mispronunciations, I've watched them roll their eyes at each other when they exhibit their assumed stereotypical behavior. English medium students think those from Bangla medium schools are "khath", traditional and closed minded. Bangla medium students assume English medium kids to be westernized "farmer murgi", presumed to know little about Bangladesh and its culture. Madrassa students, possibly the most marginalised of the three, are perceived to be disconnected, overtly religious, and assumed to have no knowledge about anything outside Islam. Once when I was telling an acquaintance about my work and colleagues from Madrassa, she looked at me with shock and exclaimed, "They can do math?!". These reactions are natural when they have gone through most of their lives in separate silos, living parallel lives that rarely intersect. With little to no exposure to each other, they grow up with an assumed image of the "other" constructed from stereotypes, suspicion, and resentment.

Recent examples of campus violence and involvement in militancy have demonstrated that growing inequality and intolerance has led to an erosion of social cohesion in the country. It's easy to blame it on moral decay instigated by social media and grumble about "ajkalkar chhele meyera", but we also have to take a look at the kind of examples being set for the youth. Intrinsic to building peace, are upholding values of empathy and

compassion. But do we, as a nation, exemplify such values? Do we teach tolerance? Do we encourage empathy? Do we champion kindness? The duty of instilling morality is often relegated to parents and families. And while they do have a responsibility, education institutions also have a significant role to play in exemplifying such values in a structural manner. We have seen that just education does not ensure open mindedness or respect for diversity and therefore need to take active measures to strengthen social cohesion.

One possible way to do so is to restructure our current divided and divisive education system to create a more inclusive one where students from different backgrounds can learn in the same language, and access the same quality education. Criticism of our education system usually focuses on the lack of facilities and poor quality of education, but little attention is paid to the damage perpetuated by the partitioning of people from a young age. This division may not be the only source of inequality and conflict, but it's definitely a consequential factor. However, it is one that can be resolved over time. This of course cannot happen overnight and would require methodical planning, training, and adaptation. But if we want to build a pluralistic, tolerant, and peaceful society, we will never achieve it by preserving a system that divides children according to their socioeconomic backgrounds.

There is mounting evidence that inclusive institutions have positive impact on a country's growth and progress when marginalised groups gain better access to education, higher learning opportunities, and gainful employment. I have seen first hand from the interactions in our leadership classes, how exposure to people from diverse backgrounds can yield positive results. Though doubtful at first, students eventually shed their inhibitions and take the opportunity to learn about and from each other. They become more open to different opinions and become comfortable with having difficult conversations. To give an example, four of our students from both Bangla and Madrassa backgrounds are currently running Campaign Red, an initiative aimed at increasing girl's participation in schools by raising awareness on menstruation and menstrual hygiene among school going children in the remote area of Ukhia in Cox's Bazar. Additionally, diversity can also generate creativity. Another graduate, Imran Ahsan, originally a Madrassa student, worked with students of other mediums that he met at the program to develop an app

and online platform which promotes tolerance and empathy and combats online extremism. They recently won the Peer to Peer Global Digital Challenge at Facebook.

If such inclusive classrooms are conceptualised and constructed on an institutional level, students will be able to communicate with each other better, can compete on the same level, and have equal opportunities when entering the job market. Most importantly they will stop seeing each other as adversaries and foster greater trust. This is not to say that simply putting them all together in the same room will solve all our problems. Inclusive mechanisms also have to be coupled with structural changes in curriculum that promote critical thinking and ethical leadership.

This structural overhaul may seem daunting or disruptive, but unless we take risks and adapt to new ideas, we will stay trapped. Some concrete preliminary steps that can already be taken are:

Some concrete preliminary steps that can be taken include:

1. Research: collection of both quantitative and qualitative data on how the divided education system has affected the country.
2. Discourse: Have several conversations with principals, members of the education ministry, teachers, students, and all stakeholders on what a new system if education equity could look like
3. Collaborate: Jointly co-create a draft primary education curriculum that takes the best aspects of all three curricula and puts equal emphasis and both Bangla and English
4. Experiment: Run a pilot program at primary level schools and monitor students on their academic performance, creative and critical thinking, and their ability to work in diverse groups.

This idea might seem completely unrealistic and could be rejected as the machinations of a naive and idealistic mind. But idealism is always a good place to start. I have personally seen the obstacles created by division, and the benefits borne by inclusion. It's time we took a systematic approach at overhauling the structures we have created that harm us and start the process of building new ones that can ensure peace, justice, and prosperity. ■