IDS Working Paper 167

The politics of educational expansion in Bangladesh

Naomi Hossain, Ramya Subrahmanian and Naila Kabeer

October 2002

INSTITUTE OF DEVELOPMENT STUDIES
Brighton, Sussex BN1 9RE
ENGLAND

ISBN 1 85864 458 5

Summary

This paper offers an interpretation of why Bangladesh has so successfully expanded educational access. Part of the explanation of these successes lies in domestic politics: the argument here is that educational expansion in Bangladesh is most valuably understood as part of processes of nation- and state-building. Party political competition over the definition of national identity produced a kind of expansionary logic, as successive regimes sought to stamp their own brand of nationhood on a growing population. Competition over nationalist symbols is vital political capital in this context, as the main political parties are otherwise almost indistinguishable. The tiny educated elite also supports modern education for the masses, as a means of achieving (what they view as) desirable social transformations in the behaviour and attitudes of the poor. And efforts by the state to control the character and pace of educational development have also contributed to the expansion. Non-state educational provision has at times posed a threat to the state's control: constrained by donor support from clamping down on NGOs, and by popular sensibilities from directly confronting the religious establishment, the state adopted a range of strategies to influence them. Many of these strategies arguably led to further expansion of educational provision. The paper suggests, however, that the politically-driven nature of the expansion has also had its downsides: it shows how the causes of the persistent problems faced by the system (low quality, pockets of exclusion) are inseparable from the causes of successful expansion. Specifically, the paper argues that the same nation- and state-building imperatives which drove the expansion of access also help explain why the system faces persistent problems of poor teacher performance, curricula biases, overly-centralised control, and the effective exclusion of marginal groups.

Contents

Figures

Tables

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Wahiduddin Mahmud, Samer Al-Samarrai and participants at the Social Policy conference held at IDS in March 2002 for their very helpful comments on earlier drafts, though they bear no responsibility for limitations that remain. We owe Jeanne Grant thanks for invaluable editorial support, and Rahul Malhotra and Marie-Jo Cortijo for other assistance and advice.

1 Introduction

The expansion of educational access has been a public policy success story in Bangladesh. Since the mid-1990s there have been enough primary school places for the entire school-aged population, gender disparities at primary have been eliminated, and secondary enrolments have begun to rise. There remain problems of exclusion and poor quality, but the massive expansion of education is widely acknowledged as a major achievement. This achievement would be impressive in any extremely poor country with a large young population; they are even more impressive given that much of the credit is given to the Bangladeshi state, an organ not otherwise renowned for its effective provision of social services.

Why has Bangladesh made such impressive gains in education? This paper offers an explanation of this success, interpreting it as the outcome of strong political incentives and pressures to expand education provision. Drawing on the existing literature on education in Bangladesh, the paper identifies two main sets of incentives or pressures for the state to boost educational access, the first rooted in processes of national and social identity formation, and the second in state efforts to extend its influence and control.

Processes of national identity creation have played out in education policy through the compulsion of successive governments to imprint their own brands of nationalism on the population. Competition over national identity is highly significant in party politics, and the potential political uses of education have focused the attention of successive regimes on the provision of education and on aspects of the curriculum. A second, less partisan incentive has been the positive vision of how the masses may be transformed through education, a vision shared among the educated upper and middle classes from which politicians and bureaucrats are drawn. Elite aspirations to modernity and development have blended with the historically-rooted high cultural value they assign to a broad liberal education. This has translated into support for universal education, but with the emphasis on literacy and cultural knowledge, rather than on scientific, specialist and more functional forms of education.

Incentives to expand educational access have also derived from efforts by the state to extend its influence, authority and control. The weaknesses of the Bangladeshi state are widely acknowledged, but the expansion of education stands out as one of its successes.[1] Explanations for state success in this area lie of course in a complex, and often apparently contradictory, set of factors. On the one hand, the state's success in this area may be attributed to its structural advantages: this is a densely-populated country with an unusually ethnically and linguistically homogenous population, both factors which facilitate the public provision of education. On the other, the ways in which the state has gone about extending its influence through education policy have highlighted its weaknesses: state education policy often appears to have been reactive rather than proactive, becoming expansionary through its efforts to contain or influence non-state or non-mainstream institutional providers of education compared to whom the state has often appeared a weak actor. Despite its relative weakness, the overall tendency in state education policy has also been highly centralising, although extreme centralisation of education administration has at times been

[1] See World Bank (2002) for the most comprehensive analysis of the Bangladeshi state. For recent assessments of public sector performance which list education as one of the state's successes see World Bank (2002) and World Bank (1996).

double-edged for state efforts at control. For instance, the direct management of teachers from Dhaka has enabled the state to extend its reach directly into village life, but it has also created a powerful political constituency in the form of teachers' associations, which regularly resist unwelcome education reforms.

If political incentives and pressures have helped to drive the expansion of education, as is suggested here, they are also implicated in the development of the system as a whole, and therefore in the failures of the system. Problems of quality at the point of delivery, for example, are widely recognised to result from the weak motivation, supervision and disciplining of teachers. But as teachers are a powerful political constituency, state efforts to discipline teachers tend to be weak and compromised. Similarly, curriculum policies have also had particular inclinations as the content of education is highly politicised; as much an arena for party political competition as an investment in the abilities of future generations. When expansionary successes are lauded, therefore, it is necessary to consider that these successes may have been achieved at least partly through the establishment of institutions and practices which contribute to the serious systemic problems.

As an explanation of the expansion of education in Bangladesh, our account undoubtedly has some gaps and limitations. There are, for example, signs that increasing access to education has been highly politically popular, and a favoured strategy for gaining legitimacy or political support. The present paper can only touch on this important issue, however, partly because of space constraints, and partly because little can be gauged from the available literature on the significance of popular pressure in expanding provision. A second gap is that there is little discussion of the crucial issue of the role of aid and aid dependence in formulating social policy in Bangladesh. The interpretation offered here can therefore tell only part of the story, and this account is intended to complement rather than to replace other approaches to understanding the achievements of Bangladesh in educational provision. The emphasis on understanding the politics of the expansion of education in Bangladesh has, however, been rewarding; it may only be part of the story, but it is by no means a marginal part of it. The factors identified here as having driven the expansionary process – namely, the politics of national and social identity creation and state-building imperatives – are consistently useful in understanding why education provision has gone through periods of accelerated expansion, of stasis, and of decline. In addition, processes of nation-building and of state-formation have been identified as critical to understanding the expansion or reform of public education in other contexts.[2] While this approach cannot offer an interpretation of all aspects of educational expansion in Bangladesh, therefore, it does direct attention to the centrality of a particular mode of politics in building an education system. It is for this reason that we stress that the present analysis is intended to complement rather than to replace existing accounts.

The paper is organised as follows. Section two outlines the contemporary policy context and debates. Section three documents the key political and policy shifts in education provision over the last thirty years. Section four explores the ways in which the politics of identity have been played out on the terrain of

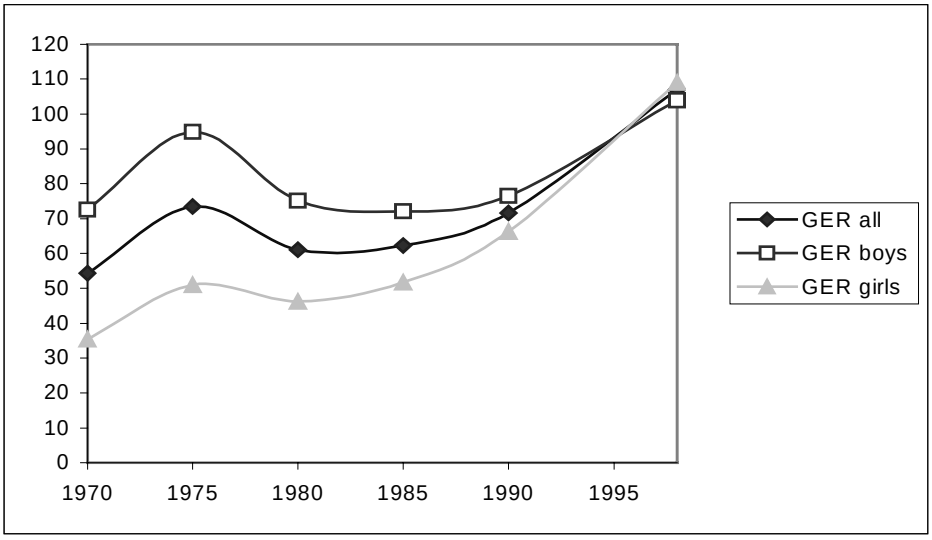
[2] See Green (2000 (1994)) for a summary description of historical accounts which use state-formation approaches. For a similar argument developed in relation to education, see Fine and Rose (2001).

public education policy, and section five discusses competition between state and non-state providers of education, arguing that the need for greater control and influence over society has galvanised state expansionary policies. The paper concludes with a brief discussion of how the political and institutional interests and arrangements established during expansion contribute to contemporary problems in the education system.

2 The contemporary policy context

The overwhelming policy priority in education throughout the brief history of Bangladesh has been to provide access for the majority. Primary enrolments started to accelerate in the mid-1980s (see Table 2.1), and by the mid 1990s, there was, in theory at least, a school place for every school-aged child (Table 2.2). One of the most remarkable achievements in recent years has been that at primary level at least, girls are at parity with boys in primary enrolment (Chowdhury *et al.* 2002; see Figure 2.1), although not in performance (CAMPE 1999). Gender equality is now beginning to make its way up the system, with secondary gross enrolment ratios (GERs) estimated to have risen faster for girls than for boys in the late 1990s, although enrolments of girls drop off sharply at higher secondary (from Masum 2001).

Figure 2.1 Gross enrolment ratios by sex at primary, 1970–98



Source: UNESCO Statistics, except 1998: Education Watch (CAMPE 1999)

The assorted policy initiatives designed to meet the government's Education for All (EFA) commitments in the first half of the 1990s were, for the first time in Bangladesh, undertaken with fully-coordinated donor support. The General Education Project (1991/92–97) enabled impressive gains to be made at primary and on mass literacy. Under its follow-up, the Primary Education Development Programme (PEDP), the high priority accorded to primary seems to have declined somewhat (see Table 2.3), and

although it may be too soon to comment, the PEDP process has already been criticised for poor donor coordination (see Sedere 2000); donor support for primary education has been less consistent over the second half of the 1990s (see Table 2.4).

Table 2.1 Numbers of schools and total enrolments, 1950–2000

Year	Primary [1]		Secondary	
	schools	students(000s)	schools	students(000s)
1950	26989	2531	3552	518
1955	26000	2604	3079	457
1960	26583	3180	3053	530
1965	27649	4044	3831	849
1970	29082	5040 [2]	5392	1460
1975	39914	8350	8327	1964
1980	42588	8027	8020	2405
1985	43588	10082	8649	2638
1990	45783	12345	9822	3525
1995	62617	17068	12553	5531
2000	76809 [3]	17668 [3]	13419 [4]	6289 [4]

Sources: BBS (1985; 1995; 1999); Government of Bangladesh (2001)

1 Excludes unregistered non-formal non-government schools

2 1971 figures

3 Government of Bangladesh (2001)

4 1998 figures

Table 2.2 Gross and net enrolment ratios by sex at primary

Year	GER			NER		
	all	boys	girls	all	boys	girls
1970	54	73	35	50	66	33
1975	73	95	51	..	..	..
1980	61	75	46	..	..	..
1985	62	72	52	56	65	47
1990	72	77	66	64	68	60
1998*	107	104	109	77	76	79

Source: UNESCO Statistics, except *Education Watch (CAMPE 1999)

Note: GER is the total enrolment of pupils regardless of age, expressed as a percentage of the official age-group population; NER is the total enrolment of pupils of the official school-age expressed as a percentage of the total population in that age-group.

With GERs comfortably reaching 100 by the late 1990s, concerns about access to education have increasingly focused on pockets of exclusion (Alam *et al.* 2001). Immense and costly efforts have been made to enable poor children to attend school. The massive Food-for-Education (FFE) programme, in which children from selected poor families receive 15–20 kg of wheat per month for regular school attendance, reached more than 2.2 million students by 1999 (CAMPE 1999). Around 27 per cent of all

primary schools are covered by FFE, which benefits about 12.5 per cent of primary school students (Chowdhury 2001: 24).[3]

Table 2.3 Public spending on primary in the 1990s

Year	Public expenditure on primary education (millions of taka)	Total public expenditure on education (millions of taka)	Public expenditure on primary education as % of total public expenditure on education	Public expenditure on primary as % of GDP
1990	6180	13288	47	0.8
1991	7324	14944	49	0.9
1992	10150	19089	53	1.1
1993	11579	22674	51	1.2
1994	14765	37608	39	1.4
1995	17238	35263	49	1.5
1996	17400	35226	49	1.3
1997	18041	38473	47	1.3
1998	18296	41788	44	1.2
1999	20161	47190	43	1.2*
2000	22175	51450	43	1.2*

Source: Government of Bangladesh (1999)

* using forecast GDP figures

Table 2.4 Expenditure on primary and mass education by the Government and from aid (millions taka)

Year	Government of Bangladesh	Foreign Aid*	Total
1990-1	5974	1397	7372
1991-2	7186	3134	10320
1992-3	8249	3401	11650
1993-4	11589	3375	14964
1994-5	14307	3281	17588
1995-6	14562	3156	17718
1996-7	15570	3073	18643
1997-8	17626	1687	19313
1998-9	19008	2763	21770

Source: Government of Bangladesh (1999)

* Excludes aid to education projects of NGOs, for which aggregate data are unavailable

However, less effort has seemed to be expended on behalf of geographically, ethnically and socially marginal groups such as *chor* inhabitants (fertile but precarious reclaimed lands around the big rivers, on which poor landless people tend to settle), Chittagong Hill Tract minorities and urban slum children.

[3] Problems have been identified with this programme (World Food Programme 1999), and the World Bank consistently describes it as "controversial". However, despite the ambivalence of donors, it seems to be politically popular, and the Government backs it fully (see World Bank 2000a; Government of Bangladesh 1999: 73; also Ravallion and Wodon 1999).

Research among Hill Tract ethnic minority groups found they lagged behind the Bengali-speaking majority (CAMPE 1999: 61), while primary net enrolment ratios (NERs) are the lowest among Dhaka slum children, at around 60 per cent, even lower than the lowest regional aggregate of 74 per cent for Chittagong (Masum 2001).

The effective exclusion of ethnically and socially marginal groups from educational access seems to energise the state less than the exclusion of the rural poor masses This may point to the political character of educational expansion: the use of the education system to produce a uniform nationalist political identity is unlikely to make the inclusion of ethnic minority children within the state education system a high priority (although see Alam *et al.* 2001: 10–11 for an opposite view). And the state has very little to gain from the establishment of permanent schools in communities which they prefer to view as temporary and illegal. Significantly, special education provision for urban working children has largely been under the 'Hard-To-Reach' programme,[4] which does not involve the establishment of permanent state schools. While it could be argued that urban slum children may benefit from less conventional modes of schooling, and permanent state schools with rigid hours and academic requirements may not be in their interests, it is quite clear that the lack of formal schooling has more to do with disinclination to promote schools in these areas than an effective concern with appropriate pedagogy and forms of schooling. The state has often demonstrated its commitment to discouraging slum (*bustee*) settlements through state policies of eviction, demolition and "resettlement". If state educational provision is one means of establishing a state presence in local communities, as is argued here, communities that it sees as undesirable and temporary will not be a high priority for state schooling.

Problems of quality are for many observers the most intractable set of problems in the education system. The landmark CAMPE study put quality issues firmly at the top of the policy agenda, finding that less than 30 per cent of all students aged 11–12 satisfied the minimum competencies in reading, writing, numeracy and life-skills, and that gender and urban-rural inequalities were reproduced in achievement outcomes (CAMPE 1999). Bangladesh is not alone in facing quality problems after a successful expansion, but the prognosis for tackling quality issues is not entirely promising. Corrales suggests that expansion may be more politically feasible than quality reforms: the costs of expansion are dispersed, while the benefits accrue to specific groups (schoolgoing children and their parents), whereas quality reforms usually entail diffuse and uncertain benefits, with the costs borne by well-organised groups such as teachers (Corrales 1999). In Bangladesh, low quality teaching, poor teaching-learning materials and learning outcomes are increasingly seen as the major constraints to improvements in education quality.

In brief, poor quality and persistent pockets of exclusion are the key contemporary problems in education in Bangladesh. There is a wide consensus among government, donors, and the NGO and academic observers on the causes of these failings, which are understood to include: (a) the centralised control and domination by the state of planning, policy formulation and management; (b) the lack of

[4] Through its Directorate of Non-Formal Education, the government coordinates packages of non-formal education which are contracted out to NGOs (see Miwa 2002 for an account of this programme).

commitment and ability among teachers; and (c) the "irrelevance" of the curriculum (for a range of examples see Jalaluddin and Chowdhury 1997; CAMPE 1999; Government of Bangladesh 1999, 2000; World Bank 2000a, 2000b).

It will be argued below that these failings are systemic and related, having evolved as part of the logic and process of educational expansion, rather than merely being unwelcome side-effects of otherwise good policies. The state's tendency to attempt to control the pace and character of educational expansion and the tendency for political actors to use the expanding education system as a vehicle to promote constructions of society and national identity have both contributed to these failings. The next section describes how these imperatives of state control and national identity construction have played out in the erratic evolution of education policy in Bangladesh over successive regimes.

3 An overview of education policy in Bangladesh

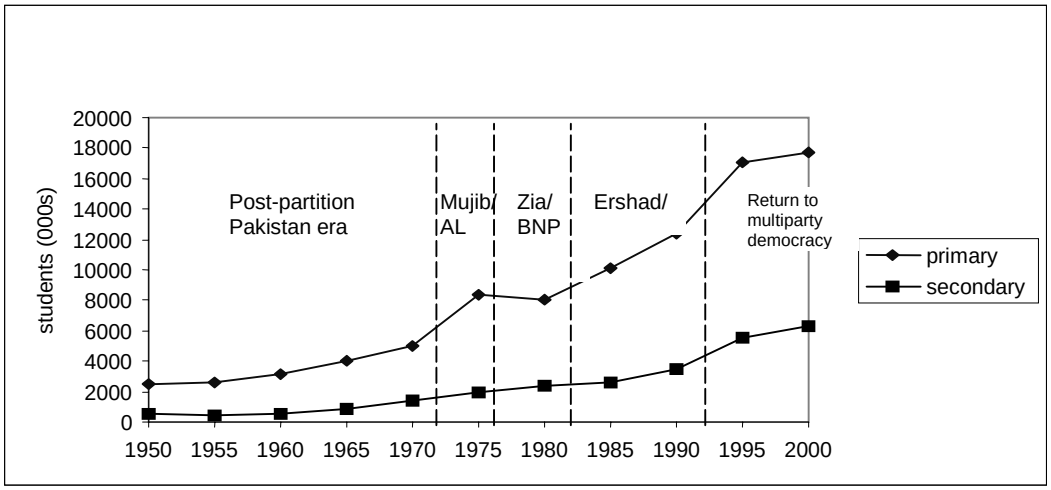
The character of the political regime has closely influenced the pace and character of educational expansion in Bangladesh. The rates of growth of primary and secondary enrolments have varied over time (see Figure 3.1). Total enrolments at both levels grew very slowly over the Pakistan era, but the immediate post-liberation era was a time of dramatic growth for primary, and modest growth for secondary. The period of military rule under Zia (1975–81) which followed saw secondary enrolments continue to rise, but primary fluctuated with an overall downward trend. Military rule under General Ershad (1982–91) was a decade of consistent rising enrolments at primary, and despite some fluctuations, secondary enrolments also rose slightly. The first half of the 1990s, the first decade of democracy, saw the most dramatic rises in both primary and secondary enrolments. By the mid 1990s, GERs at primary were well over 100, and the unenrolled school-aged population consisted mainly of those whose constraints to attendance were more complex and acute. As a result, total enrolments at primary have probably peaked, as the school-aged population has started to decline in size (World Bank 2000a). Below we begin to sketch the political and contextual factors which have contributed to educational policy outcomes in different periods.

3.1 The Pakistan era: 1947–70

Progress in education for the masses was slow and even stagnant through most of the Pakistan era (ADB 1986). There were shortages of qualified teachers after the exodus of educated Hindus following the Partition of India in 1947 (Murshid 1995); policies favoured quality over quantity in education provision; and spending on education was low in Pakistan as a whole and East Bengal in particular (ADB 1986). Educational provision remained in the elitist mould that had developed to provide the colonial system with a "babu" class of intermediaries. None of the four Five Year Plans (FYPs) over the period aimed to significantly expand educational provision for the masses, and on the eve of the war of independence, there was growing acceptance that the goal of Universal Primary Education (UPE) was receding ever further into the future, as the population grew and the declining quality of education ensured dropout rates remained high. Fifteen years of planned development had only seen primary schools increase in

number from 26,300 to 29,400, and total primary enrolment from 40 per cent to 55 per cent (Ahmad 1989: 78).

Figure 3.1 Total enrolments at primary and secondary by political regime, 1950–2000



Sources: BBS (1985, 1995, 1999); Government of Bangladesh (2001).
Note: "Primary" excludes unregistered non-formal non-government schools.

3.2 National independence and crisis: 1971–81

Despite high popular expectations of improvements in social welfare in the post-liberation era of the early 1970s, the first decade of independence saw limited progress on education. One observer noted that in this crisis-ridden period it was a struggle to simply manage the existing system, without developing it further (McLellan 1983, cited in ADB 1986: 50). Nevertheless, the first administration under Sheikh Mujib (1971–75) directed significant shifts in the ideological character of education. The constitution of the new nation stated its mandate to ensure mass-oriented, universal education, to be geared towards meeting the needs of society, including to 'create enthusiasm to establish the cherished socialistic society' (Prokaushali, cited in Gustavsson 1990: 19). The transmission of secular values was also a priority, and the report of the first national education commission accordingly recommended that *madrassah*s be integrated within the mainstream (Muhith 1999).

One significant and enduring policy of this era was the nationalisation of the 36,000 largely community-based primary schools in 1973–74, as a means of signalling attention to the needs of the masses and fulfilling the constitutional mandate. The First FYP (1973–78) accorded the education sector a slightly higher budgetary priority than had been the case under plans for East Pakistan (ADB 1986), but education planning did not otherwise favour the lower levels of the system much more than Pakistan-era plans. The First FYP envisaged expansion to be higher at the upper levels of the education system, and spending at lower levels showed no marked increases on that made under the Pakistan regime, in effect continuing the bias in favour of the tertiary sector (ADB 1986: 13).

One reason that primary or mass education was not a priority at this time may have been the need for educated administrative personnel, including teachers (Ahmad 1989). The exodus of educated Hindus,

decades of under-investment in education, and the mass slaughter of intellectuals by the Pakistan Army during the Liberation War had left the new country with a tiny educated middle class, with little experience of public administration (see Maniruzzaman 1980; Ghosh 1990; see also World Bank 1999a: 3–4).[5] There may have been, or have been perceived to be, a case for maintaining the focus on the upper education levels in a bid to replace departing bureaucrats.

A second reason that the education of the masses failed to become a high priority seemed to have been concerns about the implications of education policy for political stability. Student political groups had been a driving force behind the liberation movement (see Maniruzzaman 1975), and may have resisted dramatic reductions in public spending at the higher levels. There may also have been fears about the effects of mass literacy campaigns: the first half of the 1970s was extremely volatile, and the new nationalist government was undoubtedly unnerved by attempts at rural social mobilisation by disaffected liberation war veterans and militant leftist groups.[6] Apparently on the basis of interviews with IDA staff from that time, the World Bank sector review suggests that there was reluctance to implement mass education programmes immediately after independence because 'the government was ambivalent about expanding primary education in the 1970s; at a time of communist revolutions in Asia, some linked literacy with social upheaval' (World Bank 1999a: 12).

Even these modest expansionary ambitions envisaged by the initial FYP were abandoned under conditions of economic and political crisis in the mid-1970s (ADB 1986). Aid flows also declined, and education was not in any case the favoured donor sector over this period, and it was as late as 1980 that the first major primary education project got off the ground (World Bank 1999a: 12).

Under the military rule of General Zia, education fared even worse than in previous plans, with an initial allocation of a mere 3.5 per cent of total development spending (ADB 1986). The Zia regime marked a break with "socialism" and secularism, and rightward shift in economic policy orientation, possibly inspired by the fast-growing Asian "tiger" countries (Humphrey 1990: 47), as well as by practical concerns such as the need to win donor support (Kochanek 1993: 91). Education policy may have been similarly shaped by the inspiration of East Asia and the need to be more donor-friendly, as the Second FYP (1980–85) had a stronger focus on and a larger share allocated to primary than previously. Development allocations to education as a whole remained very low, however, at 3.9 per cent of total proposed spending (ADB 1986). Administrative innovations and decentralisation were proposed in a bid to achieve UPE and universal literacy, and to decrease rural-urban differences (Ahmad 1989; CAMPE 1999). Under Zia, education policy was also influenced by the closer embrace of Islamic identity, as seen in constitutional amendments against "secularism" in public life (initially promoted by the Mujib

---

5 The proportion of the population categorised as in "professional, technical" and "managerial and administrative" occupations grew from 0.76 per cent to 0.85 per cent between 1961 and 1974 (from Murshid 1995: Table 4.1, pp 236).

6 See Maniruzzaman (1980: 200–1) and Arens and Van Beurden (1980: part IV). Hartmann and Boyce (1983: 250-4) suggest that the lack of education among the masses was one reason for why urban middle class militants were unable to mobilise the rural poor. Education for the masses may therefore have been seen as having a radicalising effect.

government), and in legislation promoting Islamic research and Islamic forms of higher education (see Murshid 1995). Although no longer secular, the transmission of a vision of national identity remained a crucial component of education, however. Zia is quoted as having described the goals of education as being 'people-oriented and production oriented . . . [to] create a national feeling and a healthy personality' (Qadir and Kundu 1985: 11). The drive for UPE was to be the government priority, on the same "revolutionary" footing as food production and population control. However, other than some school building programmes, primary and mass educational objectives were by and large not met, following President Zia's assassination and General Ershad's assumption of power in 1982 (ADB 1986; Muhith 1999).

3.3 Military rule revisited: 1982–91

The emphasis on "Islamicising" education continued under Ershad, but the early 1980s also saw increasing NGO and donor involvement in education activities. Like Zia, Ershad looked to East Asia for economic development models, and again, it is possible that education policy was similarly inspired (see Humphrey 1990: 64). A number of education policy reviews date the beginning of progress in expansion of education to the Ershad regime. Until then, state policy on education had been characterised by a series of 'false starts', to a large extent the result of the inexperience of administrators in Bangladesh (ADB 1986). Despite – or perhaps because of – concerns about the illegitimacy of the military regime, efforts by the state to meet popular demand for primary schooling were stepped up, through the establishment of a Directorate of Primary Education (Alam *et al.* 2001). There was increasing emphasis on reducing gender disparities in enrolments at all levels from the Third Five Year Plan (1985–90), which once again emphasised the goal of UPE and mass literacy, setting targets of 70 per cent enrolment rates by 1990 and 90 per cent by 2000 (Gustavsson 1991). Despite this momentum, by the mid-1980s the system had overall expanded little since Independence and remained focused on the elitist tertiary sectors. There was limited evidence of the concrete actions that were needed to address the constraints it identified to further expansion within its own Plans (World Bank 1987).

The major administrative reform of the Ershad era flirted with the decentralisation of primary school management, but with little real devolution of authority (CAMPE 1999). If anything, the tendencies under Ershad were for further centralisation of education policy.[7] Secondary schools were "selectively" nationalised between 1985 and 1990 (Centre for Policy Dialogue 1995), and education policy was shaped by small circles of educationalists, officials and NGO and civil society representatives, hand-picked by the President himself. Once again in recognition of popular support for increased education provision, this

[7] Efforts to decentralise education policy and management in general have tended to be populist measures to decentralise political authority, without a corresponding devolution of administrative power. Bangladesh is by no means unique in its apparent inability to devolve authority and responsibility in the education system: many countries struggle to find a balance between standardisation and control on the one hand, and participation, equity and sensitivity to local context on the other (Lauglo 1995). Periodic devolution efforts have, by and large, either been reversed, rapidly superseded, or else have failed to proceed further than the legislation (see Hossain (1997) for an overview of education decentralisation efforts, and Crook and Manor (1998) for an account of decentralisation efforts in Bangladesh more generally).

time with the added impetus of having legalised political parties and been elected President in 1986, Ershad's elite committees drew up plans for UPE (Alam *et al.* 2001). The Fourth FYP (1990–95) focused firmly on primary education, introducing legislation to make attendance compulsory. This meant that by the 1990 Jomtien Conference, Bangladesh was well-placed to invest in meeting its EFA commitments (Sedere 2000).

3.4 Democracy and expansion: 1991 – the present

The period of the greatest progress in expanding educational access coincided with the first period of democratic multiparty politics. Under the umbrella General Education Project (1991/2–7), educational opportunities expanded massively (Sedere 2000). By 1997, more than 18 million children were enrolled in around 78,000 primary schools, GERs were over 100, NERs were about 85 per cent, and perhaps most remarkably, gender disparities in enrolment had been virtually eliminated at primary. One gap in the literature on education in Bangladesh is the silence on whether the political competition for electoral support helped sustain expansionary policies and higher spending. This points to the somewhat technocratic tendencies in the literature: democratic competition seems to be seen as something of a diversion from the real job of getting on with implementing policy, rather than a source of pressure on governments to provide education.[8]

Observers have, however, noted the importance of strong political commitment to the achievement of the EFA goals, particularly during the 1990s (see World Bank 2000b). Education has been increasingly high priority, with public spending on education increasing as a proportion of GDP from 0.9 per cent (1973–80) to 2.2 per cent (1997–98), and from about 9 per cent of total spending in the First FYP (1973–80) to nearly 16 per cent (1995–96) (World Bank 2000a).

An additional political pressure to perform on education may have come not from the electorate, but from the internationally-acclaimed successes of NGO interventions. By the early 1990s, the largest NGO education provider alone had over one million students enrolled in 35,000 non-formal primary schools, employing almost 33,000 teachers (BRAC 1996). In terms of coverage and presence in the rural areas in the early 1990s, then, BRAC was comparable to the state education system. There were points during the early 1990s when there were quite possibly, more NGO schools in villages than there were state schools. It seems highly improbable that the demonstration of such administrative and organisational capacity and coordination by non-state institutions, reaching into the very heart of Bangladeshi society, caused no concern among state actors in education and other parts of the administration. It may be productive to speculate about whether and to what extent mass NGO provision may have represented a threat to the state, or at least a source of competition over the authority to mould young minds. White has commented on the 'threat of a positive example' presented by NGO service provision to the state, suggesting that

[8] Alam *et al.* note that 'elections were fiercely contested between the two major political parties . . . *but* advances with regard to the delivery of primary education began' (2001: 6, emphasis added). This suggests the view that electoral competition is a potential hindrance to expanding primary education, rather than a spur to improved provision, as might equally plausibly be argued.

such a threat could produce healthy competition to provide more and better services (1999). But NGO schools have also been a negative threat to local powerholders, having been the target of attacks by local political and religious elites, on occasion because they have constituted competition for local *madrassahs* (see Holloway 1998), and at other times because of the political mobilisation potential of their teaching materials (see Hashemi 1995 and Hashemi and Hassan 1999 on the experience of Gono Shahajjo Shongstha). If NGO schools have been perceived as a threat, it is possible that this constituted an expansionary pressure similar to that identified as the result of corporate competition between state and non-state providers of education elsewhere (see Archer 1979 on England and France, and Samoff 1990 for a Tanzanian example of the expansionary consequences of competition).

An additional factor explaining the massive expansionary surge of the 1990s was that donors had begun to invest heavily in education, particularly primary education, after Jomtien. Although donors had come relatively late to the education sector in Bangladesh, here, as elsewhere, they proved increasingly willing to support government efforts after the Education For All conference, providing half of total financing for primary between 1990 and 1995 (see Sedere 2000 on Bangladesh, and Bennell and Furlong 1998 for a global overview of aid to education after Jomtien). Even in the 1990s, however, public financing for primary education consistently outstripped and increased faster than aid to state primary education, as donors appeared to favour NGO education provision (see Table 2.4).

Given that our explanation for the expansion of education rests on the argument that domestic political commitment to education has been high, it is significant that education has been one of few sectors in which donor influence has overall been relatively marginal (see Alam *et al.* 2001). Donors' perceptions of their influence on education policy in Bangladesh may have changed latterly, since they scaled up their activities in the 1990s. But on the whole, donors have tended to be modest about their role and to have attributed successes to the strength and steadiness of government commitment (see for example, ADB 1986 and World Bank 1999a, 2000b). It may be precisely because education has been so highly politicised in Bangladesh that donors have until recently steered clear. One World Bank sector review noted that in the early years, Bank staff were ambivalent about funding activities which they viewed as 'nation-building rather than skill-building' (1999a: 12).[9]

4 National identity and social transformation

External observers of education policy in Bangladesh have tended to be technocratic in their approach, treating education as ideally functional for development.[10] But pragmatic and technocratic views of education are not the only visions informing domestic education policy. As in many other new nations, the goals of education have tended to couple economic and developmental goals with a range of less

[9] Donors have had reservations about funding education in countries other than Bangladesh, again because education is partly about nation-building, or because some donors take a principled stance against funding an activity which they view as the responsibility of the state (see Bennell and Furlong 1998: 56).

[10] See, for example, comments on education in the influential Faaland and Parkinson study (1976: 159); also World Bank (1987, 1999b).

tangible objectives, including the need to transmit models of the political, social and cultural character of the national community, to justify social and economic inequality on grounds of equal educational opportunity, to achieve social and political integration, or to win elections.[11]

The articulation of political and nationalist goals in education policy can be seen in the first official National Education Policy document, produced by the Awami League administration (1996–2001) (Government of Bangladesh 2000, English version; see also Alam *et al.* 2001). The vision and values of national identity to be transmitted by education are clearly described: the objectives argue for education to instil specifically nationalist goals, including 'awareness in the learners to protect the independence, sovereignty and integrity of Bangladesh'. Other aims include inspiring a host of values – moral, humanitarian, religious, secular, social, democratic and so on. More practical objectives include making education 'pragmatic, productive and creative with a view to bringing about changes in the socio-economic conditions of the country', as well as transforming students into 'dutiful and responsible manpower with scientific outlook' and leadership qualities. Not until the final point are matters of national economic competitiveness in an increasingly knowledge-based economy raised: 'To create high level skill in different phases and fields of education to enable successful participation in the expanding process of globalisation' (point 15, pp 2).

These aims and objectives quite clearly embody two visions of the role of education in shaping the national community. One is the attempt to transmit a specific interpretation of national history and the content and values of national identity. The second vision is of the role of education in achieving a broad transformation of the individuals who constitute the national community. The economic development objectives of education are part – and only part – of the broader national transformation envisioned:

> The twin driving forces of the policy come across as fulfilling and reinforcing the national identity forged in 1971, and laying the groundwork for socio-economic development for the future. In these respects there is a strong resonance with the introductory paragraphs of almost every research report published within Bangladesh. Education is directed explicitly towards national identity building, and in particular the emotive rhetoric of the liberation struggle is evolved for the present generation into a call to convert Bangladesh's enormous human resources into economic and democratic assets. Understandably, this is in turn linked closely to linguistic identity, a powerful unifying factor in Bangladesh and one with its own history of martyrdom and political struggle.
>
> (Alam *et al.* 2001: 8)

4.1 Competition over national identity

Crucially, the vision of nationalist identity enshrined in education policy by the Awami League regime is a matter of party political competition, as is the reading of the liberation war history with which it is identified. As the party most closely associated with the leadership of the independence struggle, the

[11] See for example Court (1976) and Cooksey *et al.* (1994) on education policy in Kenya and Tanzania.

Awami League has established and constantly seeks to reaffirm its claims to guardianship of the national liberation movement. From its prominent uses of the symbols of the liberation war, it seems clear that the Awami League believes this guardianship to be a political asset, giving it stronger claims to legitimate rule and closer connections to the founding myths of the nation. As a vehicle for transmitting such claims, education policy is thus thrust into the arena of political competition.

The then-Awami League leader and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina indicated a preoccupation with versions of national history in the curriculum:

> We are carrying the burden of an unethical education policy handed down from the past. The present curriculum is a burning example of this. The distorted history in the curriculum of the past 21 years has crippled the new generation . . . save the nation from losing its sense of values by taking necessary steps as soon as possible to abandon such unpatriotic and unethical ingredients from the curriculum.
>
> (Speech delivered to conference on Universal Primary Education in Bangladesh in 1996, from Jalaluddin and Chowdhury 1997: 23)

That the content of the national history curriculum is an arena for party political conflict was highlighted again on the return of the BNP to power in October 2001. Wholesale changes to education policy appear to have been introduced in record time by the new government, as a mere six months into the first term of the new government, the now-opposition Awami League, complained of a 'deliberate distortion of history' in the revised curriculum (see opinion piece by S.A.M.S. Kibria, *Daily Star*, 29 March 2002).

The stated aims of creating awareness about national sovereignty and the liberation war and of instilling patriotism in students may or may not have direct implications for the curriculum or other aspects of education. But they strongly suggest that national education policy is perceived as an important site for competition with a government's major opponents on the definition of national identity. Competition over the nationalist political slant of the curriculum may seem trivial to development practitioners concerned with improving education quality for human development outcomes. But it is vital to party political competition in a polity in which the major parties are all but indistinguishable on ideological or programmatic grounds (see Centre for Policy Dialogue 1997: 100). The ability to transmit and define the model of national identity favoured by the different parties is evidently one reason why control of education policy is important.

In addition to keeping alive the memory of the liberation movement, however, the Awami League's educational objectives include instilling both religious and secular values. This contortionist position reflects the familiar dilemmas of a party which officially rejected religion as the basis of nationhood in an overwhelmingly Muslim and moderately religious society. It is not the first time competition over the religious content of national identity has been played out in the arena of education policy. In her historical account of the tensions between secularism and faith in Bengali Muslim identity, Murshid explicitly links shifts in official education policy with shifts in official definitions of national identity. The original label of

"Bangalee", with its connotations of Bengali cultural identity, was abandoned in favour of "Bangladeshi", with the stress on national political identity, as part of the same shift towards emphasising Islam within the constitution and educational system, during the Zia regime (1995: 369).

More practical political concerns may be behind the Awami League's ambivalence over religious values in education. Organised Islam in Bangladesh has rarely been allied politically to the Awami League, which gives the party incentives to attempt to control the network of Islam-based educational institutions. Perhaps because of the risk of confirming their critics' claims that secularism is anti-Islamic, the Awami League government has moved carefully on *madrassahs,* stressing the need for their "modernisation", "integration", and for a more science-based curriculum (see Government of Bangladesh 1999, 2000: 19). The state funds a large proportion of Muslim religious schools, either directly as state-run institutions, or through the payment of some salary costs of private recognised institutions. It is worth noting that the process of "recognising" non-state schools eligible for support in theory involves close scrutiny of their curriculum and performance; that is, permits some surveillance by the state.

4.2 Transforming society

The second goal of education is non-partisan but nonetheless political, in that it seeks to shape the masses in particular ways:

> One of the striking aspects of this approach is the dominance of the national community's destiny rather than, say, liberation of the individual's potential to participate fully in society within a poverty-alleviation frame of reference, or a human rights-based approach. This is again reflected in the tone and focus of the research leading up to publication of the policy, and the impact continues to be felt in the period from 2000 on. In the context of mass education one repeatedly hears the evocative phrase 'to emancipate the country from the curse of illiteracy', rather than statements couched in terms of emancipation of the individual, or a move from the deficit model towards an empowering vision of the role of education.
>
> (Alam *et al.* 2001: 8)

The need for education to create "dutiful and responsible manpower with scientific outlook" is a nod to the requirements of labour-intensive manufacturing export industry, but it is also a familiar concern of political elites with modernity and mechanisms for control and discipline of the population.[12] The transformation of individuals through education in some broader national interest is familiar in the Bangladesh context from the widely shared assumption that support for female education has derived from the faith in the fertility-reducing effects of schooling (see also World Bank 1999a). It may be

[12] Notions of education as part of the capitalist disciplinary apparatus originated with neo-Marxist works on education by authors such as Michael Katz and Gintis and Bowles. These tended to treat educational expansion as the state-sponsored response to the labour needs of industrialisation. As grand explanatory frameworks, these theoretical positions no longer carry much authority, and have been abandoned or adapted by their original authors (see Curtis 2000 (1984) and Green 2000 (1994)).

believed that the experience of schooling – regular daily attendance in a rule-bound formal institution – as opposed to the intellectual learning implied by "education", is itself a disciplining experience; at the very least, children imbibe the modern practices of time-keeping, obedience and respect for authority. The belief that schooling transforms people regardless of their academic achievement seems to have some appeal in Bangladesh: a World Bank study cites "anecdotal evidence" for Bangladesh which shows that schooling has an impact on people's attitudes and behaviour, independently of their literacy and numeracy achievements (2000a: 49).

In Bangladesh, however, the dominant elite vision of an educated society seems to be less focused on discipline and control, although changing attitudes and behaviour is certainly one goal. As against the stress placed on increasing scientific and technical education by, for example, the World Bank (2000a), humanistic and cultural learning outcomes are highly valued. The vision of the society to be produced through the transforming effects of education is of one which has attained an all-round "awareness", a fully-rounded cultural literate, rather than one with specialised competence in technical fields.[13]

This emphasis on culture and humanistic education has been repeatedly deplored as, among other things, evidence of the much-cited Bengali antipathy to manual work and of the bias against technical or scientific specialisation (see Alam 1994; Gustavsson 1990). However, a rather simpler explanation of the apparent bias in favour of broad liberal arts education, is that the higher cost of science education has permitted more and better provision of arts education (Murshid 1995: 259). The contemporary preference for humanistic education may also derive in part from the educational experiences and preferences of Bengali Muslims historically. Until the early twentieth century, Bengali Muslims displayed strong preferences for education in religion and the Urdu and Persian literary traditions. The inhibitions of religion, the lower "aptitude" of Muslims for modern forms of learning or language skills and their increasing impoverishment have been offered as explanations for the relative delay in their introduction to modern education (see Ahmed 1981: chapter V). However, colonial educational policies played some role in curbing the educational achievements of Bengali Muslims. Muslims were not to be given the same education as their Hindu counterparts, whose earlier start in secular education had given them dangerous nationalist ideas:

> The new class of "interpreters" to be sought among Muslims had to be a weaker group in relation to Hindus if it was to be placated and protected while it acted as a provocative counter-foil to the *bhadralok*.[14] The British were thus reluctant to raise the standard of education in Muslim institutions. Besides providing political gains, the strategy would keep expenses low and give Muslims just enough to keep them from being disgruntled and dangerous to British rule. The emergent Muslim

[13] It is fitting that claims to the importance of universal education in Bangladesh so often refer to Bengali cultural and literary sources, usually Tagore, on this subject (see CAMPE 2002; Ahmed 1998; Rahman 1993).

[14] Literally, respectable people or gentlefolk; usually applied to educated upper and middle class Hindu Bengalis in the late colonial period.

> intelligentsia, particularly those from Islamic institutions, was largely weak and dependent, with a continuing need for protection and patronage.
>
> (Murshid 1995: 75)

The contemporary Bangladeshi political elite may be less unanimous than their historical counterparts on the value of religious education, but there remains a generally positive attitude to the liberal humanistic tradition of education. This seems to be linked to the dominant perception among the educated classes that the lack of "awareness" among the rest of the population is a major cause of poverty and under-development. "Awareness" or "consciousness" (*chetona* or *shocheton*) seems to symbolise a kind of modernity in attitudes and behaviour, as against anachronistic and harmful traditionalism and superstition. Lack of "awareness" thus impinges on the ability of the poor to control their fertility, to invest, take risks or to plan for their futures. Education is widely seen as the solution to such problematic attitudes, involving a thorough transformation of attitudes and thinking among the masses (see Hossain 1999; see also Ahmed 1981: 29 for a nineteenth century Bengali Muslim variant on this notion).

5 State efforts to expand, influence and control

5.1 State policy on diversity within education: non-state and non-mainstream institutions

The controlling tendency discussed earlier has also been erratic with respect to state policy on non-state and non-mainstream schools. Although private or community, NGO and non-mainstream religious schools have at times been encouraged and supported by the state, at other times state policy has attempted to control them, as a means of controlling the nature and pace of the development of the education system. The chief source of tension within state attempts to control educational development has been that the goal of central control has at key moments conflicted with the overall goal of expanding access. Lacking the resources and capacity to provide enough school places for all, the state has periodically encouraged non-state actors to enter the sector. Perhaps because the successful expansion of access has weakened the reliance of state policymakers on non-state education providers, the late 1990s saw state policy shift towards greater control over the direction and pace of educational development. State policy has been to argue a constitutional case for a "uniform", integrated and universal system of education, in sharp contrast to the positive valuation of diversity by the research community, civil society and NGO groups (see Government of Bangladesh 1999, 2000; Alam *et al.* 2001).

Both NGO and religious educational institutions have been targets of state efforts at control. There are evidently political pressures for governments to show willing to control NGO activities,[15] and both main political parties made the unlikely claim that they would nationalise NGO schools in their 2001

[15] This has been true across the range of NGO activities, particularly in the early 1990s, when NGOs were accused of "anti-Islamic" activities and NGO schools were attacked physically and in the media (see Rashiduzzaman 1994; Hashemi and Hassan 1999).

election manifestos. Actual efforts at oversight of NGOs include the establishment of the Directorate of Non-Formal Education (DNFE) in 1996, which supervises and supports non-formal education activities (the sub-sector with most NGO involvement), as well as other modes of "partnership" between NGOs and the state in the education sector. A recent review found that about four out of five NGOs involved in education in Bangladesh were implementing programmes for the DNFE (World Bank 2000b), indicating that the DNFE has certainly resulted in a closer state-NGO relationship in the education sector (see Miwa 2002).

Recent tactics with respect to *madrassahs* have been less overtly about control, perhaps because of greater sensitivities around appearing "anti-Islamic". Although the vast majority of *madrassah* institutions are under private management, most formal religious schools receive state support, and at secondary equivalent are regulated and certified by the state *Madrassah* Board (Alam 1992). Little information is publicly available about the character and performance of religious-based schooling in Bangladesh (see CAMPE 1999).[16] But all the indications are that *madrassah* numbers and enrolments have grown significantly since the mid-1970s, with estimates of enrolment at 0.8 million for primary and 0.9 million for secondary equivalent by the late 1990s (see World Bank 2000b). Official statistics claimed 16,200 primary equivalent *madrassah* schools and 5,000 secondary equivalent in the mid-1990s (cited in Centre for Policy Dialogue 1995), although there is also evidence that many of these exist only on paper (ibid. 409).

Different regimes have taken opposed positions on Islamic religious-based education, reflecting their different slants towards national identity and their political constituencies and alliances. The more secular Awami League has tended to take the more integrationist and controlling position on *madrassahs*, particularly in its liberation incarnation (see Muhith 1999). But starting with the Zia regime in the mid 1970s, education policy increasingly moved away from this secular orientation, and encouraged the establishment of formal *madrassah* schools. For the more recent Awami League regime this was a source of concern, as they have rarely formed stable political alliances with religious parties, unlike the main opposition parties. Although popular political sensibilities are believed to favour a strong Islamic content in education, there are limits to this preference, particularly when religious content is perceived to impose on the highly sensitive issue of the Bengali language (see Gustavsson 1991: 21 on protests against "Islamicising" education policies under Ershad). Reports in the media frequently feed the popular belief that *madrassah* schools are sites of Islamic political mobilisation, and that there is, therefore, a justification for state attempts to control them.[17]

State policy on approved private institutions tells a somewhat less convincing story about the state's controlling tendency. The public financing of registered or approved private or non-state institutions

---

16 The limited available documentation is also highly contradictory. World Bank (2000a) finds high unit costs for government *madrassahs*, which tallies with CAMPE's claims of high government spending on *madrassah*s (1999). Alam (1992), by contrast, claims that *madrassahs* have lower unit costs than general secondary, and that this was to be expected. Estimates of the numbers of *madrassah* institutions and enrolment rates also vary widely.

17 In January 1999, *madrassahs* were blamed for producing the fundamentalist group who allegedly attacked the poet Shamsur Rahman with an axe. The favoured conspiracy theory was that this bizarre incident was manufactured by the ruling Awami League party, to justify (among other actions) closer scrutiny of the *Madrassah* Board.

appears to be another area in which the state seeks to control. Current practice and policy suggest, however, that the state is more inclined to claim authority over private institutions than it is willing – or, more likely, able – to attempt to exercise effective control over them. One reason the state fails to actually control private institutions it supports and nominally approves is that it lacks the capacity to do so: in this case, at least, it seems as though the appearance of authority is better than nothing. The large subsidy to private education also appears to be a source of political capital, a way of signalling the high priority of education.

Almost 10 per cent of revenue spending on primary and 79 per cent of revenue spending on secondary is currently composed of contributions to non-state school teachers' salaries (World Bank 2000a). 25 per cent or 20,000 of all private primary institutions and the vast majority of the roughly 17,000 private secondary institutions are registered with the government (World Bank 2000b). It is also worth noting that the proportion of non-state school teachers' salaries being paid by the state has been repeatedly revised upwards, from half in 1986 (ADB 1986), to 70 per cent in the early 1990s (Alam 1992; 1994), and between 80 and 90 per cent, plus allowances, by the end of the century (Masum 2001; World Bank 2000b).

However, although there are procedures and regulations to be followed in return for the subsidy, there is no evidence that the state has attempted nor had much success in exerting control over the activities and administration of these private schools. Processes of approval and registration seem to have become no more strict about quality or performance despite the increasing subsidy: with 14 years separating them, the World Bank sector review of 2000 mirrored the 1986 ADB sector study in stressing the weakness of links between procedures of approval and quality indicators. Instead, the conditions of support are adherence to formal rules and procedures (see ADB 1986), including the use of government-approved curriculum (Masum 2001).

The subsidy to private institutions has tended to pass without much comment, on the grounds that it has permitted wider access at lower cost, and is therefore seen as a combination of contracting out and cost-sharing. But it is also recognised that subsidies to private schools are not an especially equitable or effective means of contracting out, as they tend to be set up in more affluent areas and are of lower quality (World Bank 2000b: 63–71). What does seem clear is that there is some political capital to be gained by increasing state contributions to private school teachers' salaries. The election manifestos of both major parties for 2001 claimed policies of increasing the state contribution to non-state teachers' salaries to 100 per cent. It is significant that this increase was not justified in terms of increasing access, but as a means of illustrating the high priority each party accorded education. Notably, each chose to illustrate this high priority in the primary sub-sector by claims that they would nationalise all non-state primary schools. In the education sector, at least, it seems that governments believe it is necessary to prove their commitment through greater intervention and efforts to control.

5.2 The political significance of teachers

At the point of delivery, problems of quality come to a head around the performance of teachers within schools. The main explanations of poor teacher performance have changed very little over time: poor teacher performance is due to poor supervision and training, and to weak motivation,[18] in turn attributed to the overly-centralised character of education management and administration, and to the absence of incentives for improved performance. In addition, too little has generally been spent on developing and supplying teaching-learning materials, such that the focus has until recently been on the rote-learning of untested text-based materials, often in short or irregular supply.[19] Low spending on teaching-learning materials may be linked to the fact that these items are funded not, as might be expected, out of the relatively stable revenue budget, but out of the volatile development budget.[20]

One factor which cannot be separated from the persistence of poor teacher performance is their political significance. The overly centralised character of administration and management is evidently an important explanation of the weakness of supervision and disciplining of teachers, but that teachers have successfully resisted efforts by a military regime to decentralise such responsibilities suggests that centralised management suits their interests (Sobhan 1998). In any case, it is by no means clear that more localised control of schools would, under current conditions, be antagonistic to teachers' interests, or facilitate closer supervision. Research indicates that local elites, officials and communities view education provision as fully the responsibility of the state (see Centre for Policy Dialogue 1997; Gustavsson 1991, 1990). As such, teachers view themselves and may be viewed by the community as civil servants, entitled to monthly salaries in return for nominal attendance (Qadir 1986, cited in Gustavsson 1991). Teachers also seem to prefer and to personally benefit from postings to their "home" villages, a preference which has in the past been catered to, and which is likely to make local community-level supervision even more difficult (see Gustavsson 1990: 93). It is accepted that teachers tend to be well-respected and influential, often members of the local elite and among the best-educated in the community; as a result they may be no more effectively disciplined by school management committees than they are by district school supervisors, particularly if management committees were to be representatively composed of poor, less educated parents. But this situation may change, with changes in the social dynamics within communities. Rising education levels across society may mean teachers lose their virtual monopoly on educated status: this may well improve the prospects of local management through school management committees and parent-teacher associations. The CAMPE study, for example, found that participation in school meetings increased with parents' education levels (CAMPE 1999: 55–58).

Governments may have been willing to grant teachers leeway in some respects, but in others, direct state control has periodically been reasserted. Corruption in teacher recruitment at divisional and sub-

---

18 See Gustavsson (1990: 83–91) for a critical summary of the available research on teachers.

19 A new competency-based curriculum was developed and introduced during the mid- to late-1990s (Alam *et al.* 2001).

20 See Government of Bangladesh (1999: 61–2); also Mahmud (2002) on the tendency for recurrent items to be resourced out of development spending in Bangladesh.

divisional levels has, for example, justified the re-centralisation of these procedures in the past (Gustavsson 1991: 65; 1990: 86). It is worth considering the scale of the task involved in centrally administering teachers: Muhith noted in 1999 that 249,000 teachers were being recruited, trained, disciplined and compensated directly from Dhaka, and that this was an 'administrative nightmare' (1999: 139). At one point in the 1980s, it was estimated that 12,000 Ministry officers had direct access to the Director-General of the Primary and Mass Education Department (ADB 1986). The burdens on central ministry bureaucrats of exercising such direct control may be immense, but the benefits for state-building of maintaining a "village-level bureaucracy" directly controlled from the centre may outweigh these. As one seasoned observer notes, primary school teachers paid out of national budgets 'are not accountable to any local representative bodies [and] constitute in effect a multitude of centrally supervised permanent functionaries of the government' (Mahmud 2002: 22). Equally, however, disciplining this group is difficult because 'being under a centralised administrative structure [teachers] constitute a powerful and influential constituency, which no government would like to antagonise' (ibid: 23).

Teachers have indeed historically been treated gingerly; a constituency it is important to both control and placate. President Ershad was also the president of one of the main teaching unions (Gustavsson 1990), which may explain why teachers enjoyed impressive salary increases, averaging 50 per cent in 1985 (World Bank 1987: 186; Gustavsson 1991: 85). But a preference for placating teachers was by no means a peculiarity of the Ershad regime: teachers enjoyed four salary increases between 1992 and 1998, growing in nominal terms by nine per cent each year during the period (World Bank 2000a: 65). Of course, as the World Bank Education sector review is careful to point out, there is nothing wrong per se with compensating teachers well for their work. And given that motivation is seen as such a major problem of teachers, raising their salaries has the potential to boost quality outcomes. However, observers have also noted that teachers are comparatively well compensated, at least in rural areas (Muhith 1999); that teachers generally report satisfaction with their compensation packages (Gustavsson 1990: 83); and that there is no evidence that pay increases result in better performance, whereas teachers in non-governmental schools, who are paid far less appear to be far more motivated (World Bank 2000a). It seems, in short, that union strength and political clout at the highest levels are the best explanations for the comparatively good salaries of teachers (Centre for Policy Dialogue 1997; Gustavsson 1990), as well as their freedom to enjoy other illicit perks such as examination fees (Qadir 1986, cited in Gustavsson 1991) or to offer private tuition services.[21] The relative strength of teacher unions may decline, however, as there are signs that the market for teaching jobs may be tightening, and applicants for teaching positions are increasingly well-qualified (Government of Bangladesh 1999: 68).[22]

---

[21] It is estimated that one-third of all private spending on education goes on private tuition – on average three times the amount spent on official tuition fees. All children lose to some extent, as teachers may "hold back" classroom performance in order to boost demand for their private services, but the main losers are the children of the poor. (The main winners are teachers). Although teachers' salaries of all state and registered private schools are paid for in whole or part by the state, there have been no policy efforts to regulate private tuition services.

[22] One reason for this may be that unemployment rates for university graduates increased dramatically over the 1990s, particularly in rural areas (see World Bank 1999b).

Teachers' salaries are also better insulated against the whims of public financing than other recurrent educational inputs. At primary, recent estimates suggest 99 per cent of revenue spending goes on teachers' and administrative salaries and allowances (Government of Bangladesh 1999). By contrast, teacher training, and the design and production of teaching-learning materials are funded from the development budget. There is nothing unusual about the fact that teachers' salaries and subventions absorb most revenue spending. But other crucial recurrent educational inputs fail to secure funding from the predictable, incrementally-increased revenue budget, and are therefore subject to the vagaries and general volatility of aid financing that characterises the development budget. This could suggest that these inputs enjoy less political protection and priority than the sensitive matter of teachers' salaries. While this pattern of budgeting may be merely the irrational result of bureaucratic incrementalist tendencies (see World Bank 2000a for such a view), it is clearly a pattern of budgeting that has to date suited the key actors.

6 Conclusions

This paper has argued that the successes of educational expansion in Bangladesh are most helpfully seen as part of processes of nation- and state-building. Party political competition over the definition of national identity seems to have achieved a kind of expansionary logic of its own, as successive regimes sought to stamp their own brand of nationhood on a growing population. What may seem trivial competition over nationalist symbols and myths is vital political capital in this context, because the main competitors are almost indistinguishable on programmatic and other ideological grounds. The tiny educated elite also appears to believe strongly in modern education for the masses, as a means of achieving what they see as the necessary social transformation in the behaviour and attitudes of the poor masses. Efforts by the state to control and direct the character and pace of educational development also appear to have helped drive the expansionary process: the burgeoning non-state and non-mainstream educational sub-sectors have undoubtedly at times been perceived as threatening the control of the state or of the political leadership. Constrained by donor support from clamping down on NGOs, and by popular sensibilities from directly confronting the religious establishment, the state has adopted a range of indirect strategies to rein them in, most of which have had expansionary consequences. It has wielded its constitutional mandate to provide uniform universal education as a justification for the central direction of policy; this has encouraged it to buy itself (the semblance, at least of) authority through its subsidy to private schools. The state has also become "partnered" with NGOs, through contracting out arrangements in the non-formal sub-sector which widen access, in particular to the hardcore excluded group of urban working children. More difficult to prove is the suggestion made tentatively here that the rapid growth of a network of NGO non-formal schools may have has constituted a spur to the expansion of the state system.

The characterisation of the Bangladeshi state as a weak state within a strong society may be accurate in general (see White 1999), but in education policy, the state has evidently flexed its muscle – puny and under-developed though it is, relative to the society it seeks to shape. As this paper has attempted to

illustrate, the efforts of the state to expand the national education system have had considerable success, but the process of expansion has fluctuated and the results in quality terms have been unimpressive. Yet the state has always picked itself up and started again, with the goal of universal access always in sight. The expansion of primary education, and increasingly of secondary, are both recognised to owe a great deal to the interventions of the state – even where these interventions have only been to allow or encourage non-state actors to fill the gap. These interventions do not seem to have always been made with particular types or levels of educational outcomes in mind. Mere expansion was very often enough.

Rapid expansion of the education system has, however, come at a cost. The problems currently identified as the major failings of education policy and practice are the consequences of the same processes and motivations of state and nation-building which produced the successful expansion. Problems of quality, including the objectives and content of the curriculum, the tendency to try to control policy and to manage school systems from the centre, and the apparent inability to control teachers are all to some degree institutionalised by the same processes which drove the rapid expansion. Similarly, the remaining pockets of exclusion from education reflect the highly political character of education provision. While the political nature of education provision means the pressure is still on the state to ensure that poverty is no obstacle to school attendance, the provision of education to ethnically and geographically marginal groups may be less politically attractive as well as less administratively feasible.

There are some early signs that educational expansion may itself prove to be part of the solution to problems of quality. There is some slight evidence that higher education levels among parents improves accountability within schools: as the population as a whole becomes more educated, local management of schools should be strengthened, and with it the authority and autonomy of teachers should decline. In addition, the increasing numbers of unemployed graduates indicates increasing competition for teaching positions. Teachers are increasingly well-qualified, but it is also possible that competition may entail that teachers' organisations become less overbearing in defence of their own interests. Attempts to tackle problems of quality and exclusion may prove to be more intractable than expanding the system, however, and may also prove to be the greater test of the political will to educate the nation. If the past is any basis on which to speculate, the "threat of the positive example", from NGOs or other providers of education, may well provide the strongest spur to the quality reforms now so urgently required if Bangladesh is to educate all its children.

References

Ahmad, M., 1989, 'An overview of education sector in Bangladesh', *Bangladesh Journal of Political Economy,* Vol 9 No 3: 73–94

Ahmed, N., 1998, 'Investing in girls' education for human development in Bangladesh', *Bangladesh Journal of Political Economy* XIV: 105–16

Ahmed, R., 1981, *The Bengal Muslims, 1871–1906: a quest for identity*, Delhi: Oxford University Press

Alam, M., 1994, 'Performance of secondary education sub-sector in Bangladesh, 1981–1990: an evaluation', *The Bangladesh Development Studies*, Vol XXII No 1: 105–16

—— 1992, *Secondary and Higher Secondary Education in Bangladesh: its growth and state expenditures: a time-series analysis of 1981–90*, Bergen: Chr Michelsen Institute, Development Research and Action Programme

Alam, M., Ross, J. and Unterhalter, E., 2001, 'A fragile dialogue? Research and primary education policy formation in Bangladesh, 1972–2001', paper delivered at Oxford Conference on Knowledge, Values and Policy, Oxford, September 2001

Archer, M., 1979, 'Introduction: theorizing about the Expansion of Educational Systems' in M. Archer (ed.), *The Sociology of Educational Expansion: take-off, growth and inflation in educational systems*, London/ Beverly Hills, CA: Sage

Arens, J., and Van Beurden, J., 1980, *Jhagrapur: poor peasants and women in a village in Bangladesh*, New Delhi: Orient Longman

Asian Development Bank (ADB), 1986, *Bangladesh: sector study on education*, Manila: Education Division, Infrastructure Department, Asian Development Bank

Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 1999, 1995 and 1985, *Annual Yearbook of Statistics,* Dhaka: BBS

Barkan, J.D. (ed.), 1994, *Beyond Capitalism vs. Socialism in Kenya and Tanzania*, Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers

Bennell, P. and Furlong, D., 1998, 'Has Jomtien made any difference?: Trends in donor funding for education and basic education since the late 1980s', *World Development,* Vol 26 No 1: 45–59

BRAC, 1996, *Annual Report 1996*, Dhaka: BRAC Prokashona

CAMPE (Campaign for Popular Education), 2002, *A Question of Quality: state of primary education in Bangladesh*, Vol 1, Dhaka: CAMPE/University Press Limited

—— 1999, *Hope Not Complacency: state of primary education in Bangladesh 1999*, Dhaka: CAMPE/University Press Limited

Centre for Policy Dialogue, 1997, *Growth or Stagnation? A Review of Bangladesh's Development 1996*, Dhaka: University Press Limited

—— 1995, *Experiments with Economic Reform: a review of Bangladesh development 1995*, Dhaka: University Press Limited

Chowdhury, A.M.R., Nath, S.R. and Choudhury, R.K., 2002, 'Enrolment at primary level: gender difference disappears in Bangladesh', *International Journal of Educational Development,* Vol 22: 191–203

Chowdhury, O.H., 2001, 'A Review of the Fiscal Sector' in A. Abdullah (ed.), *Bangladesh Economy 2000: selected issues*, Dhaka: Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies

Cooksey, B., Court, D. and Makau, B., 1994, 'Education for Self-Reliance and Harambee' in J.D. Barkan (ed.), *Beyond Capitalism vs. Socialism in Kenya and Tanzania*, Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers

Corrales, J., 1999, 'The politics of education reform: bolstering the supply and demand; overcoming institutional blocks', *The Education Reform and Management Series,* Vol II No 1, Washington, D.C.: World Bank

Court, D., 1976, 'The educational system as a response to inequality in Tanzania and Kenya', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol 14 No 4: 661–90

Crook, R. and Manor, J., 1998, *Democracy and Decentralisation in South Asia and West Africa: participation, accountability and performance*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Curtis, B., 2000 (1984), 'Capitalist Development and Educational Reform: comparative material from England, Ireland and Upper Canada to 1850', reprinted in R. Lowe (ed.), *History of Education: Major Themes, Volume II: education in its social context*, London and New York: Routledge

Edwards, M. and Hulme, D. (eds), 1995, *Non-governmental Organisations – Performance and Accountability: beyond the magic bullet*, London: Earthscan

Faaland, J. and Parkinson, J.R., 1976, *Bangladesh: the test case for development*, London: C. Hurst and Co. Ltd

Fine, B. and Rose, R., 2001, 'Education and the Post-Washington Consensus', in B. Fine, C. Lapavitsas and J. Pincus (eds), *Development Policy in the 21st Century: beyond the post-Washington Consensus*, London: Routledge

Ghosh, S., 1990, *The Awami League: 1949–1971*, Dhaka: Academic Publishers

Government of Bangladesh, 2001, *Primary Education Statistics in Bangladesh (as on June 2000)*, Dhaka: Directorate of Primary Education, Primary and Mass Education Division

—— 2000, *National Education Policy*, Dhaka: Ministry of Education (English version)

—— 1999, *Education for All: The Year 2000 Assessment: Bangladesh Country Report*, Dhaka: Primary and Mass Education Division, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh

Green, A., 2000 (1994), 'Education and State Formation Revisited', reprinted in R. Lowe (ed.), *History of Education: Major Themes, Volume II: education in its social context*, London and New York: Routledge

Gustavsson, S., 1991, 'Primary education in Bangladesh: review, analysis and recommendations', *SIDA Education Division Documents* 52, Stockholm: SIDA

—— 1990, *Primary Education in Bangladesh: for whom?,* Dhaka: University Press Limited

Hartmann, B. and Boyce, J., 1983, *A Quiet Violence*, Dhaka: University Press Limited

Hashemi, S., 1995, 'NGO Accountability in Bangladesh: beneficiaries, donors and the state' in M. Edwards and D. Hulme (eds), *Non-governmental Organisations – Performance and Accountability: beyond the magic bullet*, London: Earthscan: 103–10

Hashemi, S. and Hassan, M., 1999, 'Building NGO Legitimacy in Bangladesh: the contested domain' in D. Lewis (ed.), *International Perspectives on Voluntary Action: reshaping the third sector,* London: Earthscan: 124–31

Holloway, R., 1998, *Supporting Citizens' Initiatives? Bangladesh's NGOs and society*, London: Intermediate Technology Publications Limited

Hossain, M.H., 1997, 'Decentralisation of Educational Management and Planning of Primary Education in Bangladesh' in A.K. Jalaluddin and A.M.R. Chowdhury (eds), *Getting Started: universalising quality primary education in Bangladesh,* Dhaka: University Press Limited

Hossain, N., 1999, 'How do Bangladeshi elites understand poverty?', *IDS Working Paper* 83, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies

Humphrey, C., 1990, *Privatization in Bangladesh: economic transition in a poor country*, Boulder: Westview Press

Jalaluddin, A.K. and Chowdhury, A.M.R. (eds), 1997, *Getting Started: universalising quality primary education in Bangladesh*, Dhaka: University Press Limited

Kibria, S.A.M.S., 2002, 'Deliberate distortion of history: time to take a stand against falsehood and deception', *Daily Star*, 29 March 2002

Kochanek, S.A., 1993, *Patron-Client Politics and Business in Bangladesh*, Dhaka: University Press Limited

Lauglo, J., 1995, 'Forms of decentralisation and their implications for education', *Comparative Education*, Vol 31 No 1: 5–29

Lewis, D. (ed.), 1999, *International Perspectives on Voluntary Action: reshaping the third sector,* London: Earthscan

Lowe, R., (ed.), 2000, *History of Education: Major Themes, Volume II: education in its social context*, London and New York: Routledge

Mahmud, W., 2002, 'National budgets, social spending and public choice: the case of Bangladesh', *IDS Working Paper* 162, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies

Maniruzzaman, T., 1980, *The Bangladesh Revolution and its Aftermath*, Dhaka: University Press Limited

—— 1975, *Radical Politics and the Emergence of Bangladesh*, Dhaka: Bangladesh Books International Limited/World University Press

Masum, M., 2001, 'Education sector in Bangladesh: a review', background paper prepared under the Centre for Policy Dialogue Pre-Election Policy Brief Task Force on Education, Dhaka: Centre for Policy Dialogue

Miwa, K., 2002, 'Operationalizing children's rights to education: a case of government-NGO partnership in Bangladesh', mimeo, Dhaka

Muhith, A.M.A., 1999, *Bangladesh in the Twenty-First Century: towards an industrial society*, Dhaka: University Press Limited

Murshid, T.M., 1995, *The Sacred and the Secular: Bengal Muslim discourses, 1871–1977*, Calcutta: Oxford University Press

Qadir, S.A. and Kundu, S.K., 1985, 'Introducing universal primary education in Bangladesh', mimeo, Dhaka: Human Resources Division, Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies

Rahman, A., 1993, 'Contributions of education in economic development: lessons for Bangladesh from other Asian countries', *Grassroots,* October/December: 5–25

Rashiduzzaman, M., 1994, 'The liberals and the religious right in Bangladesh', *Asian Survey,* Vol 34 No 11: 974–90

Ravallion, M. and Wodon, Q., 1999, 'Does child labor displace schooling? Evidence on behavioral responses to an enrolment subsidy', *World Bank Policy Research Working Paper* 2116, Washington, D.C.: World Bank

Samoff, J., 1990, 'The politics of privatization in Tanzania', *International Journal of Educational Development,* Vol 10 No 1: 1–15

Sedere, U., 2000, 'Rethinking educational aid: sector support approach to financing basic education: Lessons from Bangladesh', *Prospects,* Vol XXX No 4: 451–60

Sobhan, R., 1998, 'How bad governance impedes poverty alleviation in Bangladesh', *OECD Development Centre Technical Papers* 143, Paris: OECD

White, S., 1999, 'NGOs, civil society, and the state in Bangladesh: the politics of representing the poor', *Development and Change,* Vol 30: 307–26

World Bank, 2002, *Taming Leviathan: reforming governance in Bangladesh: an institutional review*, World Bank, Dhaka: World Bank

—— 2000a, *Bangladesh Education Sector Review (Vol I)*, Dhaka: World Bank/University Press Limited

—— 2000b, *Bangladesh Education Sector Review (Vol II)*, Dhaka: World Bank/University Press Limited

—— 1999a, *Education in Bangladesh: a country sector review*, Washington, D.C.: World Bank

—— 1999b, *Bangladesh: from counting the poor to making the poor count*, Washington, D.C.: World Bank

—— 1996, *Government That Works*, Dhaka: University Press Limited

—— 1987, *Bangladesh: promoting higher growth and human development*, Washington, D.C.: World Bank

World Food Programme, 1999, *Building Futures, Enhancing Lives: Bangladesh Annual Report 1999*, Geneva: World Food Programme