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Youth culture and our future

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WHEN a few years ago I wrote about the importance of an English education in our lives, I ignorantly expressed my views from a narrow English medium mindset. Incidentally, after four years of an American education and once again returning home, I have started realising the importance of all three kinds of education in a Bangladeshi life -- Bengali medium, English medium, and the madrassah system.

Having gone to English medium schools most of my life, I was always conscious of the ever-present gap in peer association between the students from the three types of educational backgrounds and the supposed superiority of an English medium school education.

I cannot remember any extra-curricular events, national, religious or even political affairs that ever brought us in contact with our peers from Bengali medium schools and madrassahs during my school years.

I would swear that there was a distinction even in the minds of my family members who attended either Bengali schools or madrassahs. In their view, we were the all elitist, fast society children with no roots or pride in either our religion or our nation.

Looking back, I can only remember hearing about or seeing students from these other two educational backgrounds on television shows or reading about their events in newspapers. In contrast, I think I knew almost all of my peers giving O and A level examinations from the various English schools by either their names or their faces.

Now the question is whether the issue arises from a distinct lack of educated and qualified political leaders in whom we can put our trust to lead Bangladesh in to the future.

One of the reasons I say this is an unfamiliar concern is because I have recently started thinking about how this lack in leadership and our political fracas seems to be a direct result of a crisis that started right in our youth, a crisis that stems from a lack of a unified national education system.

In 1972, when Bangla became the official language of the newly independent nation of Bangladesh, it was also the official medium of instruction in all schools and colleges. At the same time small, informal, private schools came up, initially to preserve English at

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the school level and especially for the children of the diplomats.

The introduction of madrassahs came about even before the time of the British, in about 1197 when the first Muslim leader of Bengal, Ikhtiaruddin Muhammed bin Bakhtiar Khalji built a mosque and madrassah in his capital Gaur.

While the Bengali medium education came to be greatly influenced by the constant change in political leaderships and the history books reflecting the history of Bangladesh in perspective of whichever political leader took control at the moment, the madrassah education became immersed in only promoting religious education and leadership and leaders like our Prophet Muhammad's (SM) and his dictates. And at the other end of the spectra, we the children of English medium schools spent our time learning about the attributes of leaders like US president Abraham Lincoln.

With such a deep variation in the education and the influences in our lives from such a young age, it is of no surprise that the Bengali, English, and madrassah educated children have chosen such different paths to lead with absolutely no middle ground.

While the children of Bengali medium schools go on to become involved in the leading political parties while at college and universities and consider further careers in politics with minds already beseeched by the manipulated history learnt at childhood, we the children of English medium schools take on entirely different roles.

Many of us go away to Europe and America, seeking a unified education system and live styles which somehow seem more familiar to us than the one in which we were born. And it is thus not surprising that few of us rarely ever choose to come back to this nation, a nation whose reality we never really had a connection to begin with.

And on yet another partition are the children from the madrassahs, recently in the global limelight, intent on spreading their Islamic influences whether be it through political parties and welfare organizations or through more radical paths.

So here lies the crux of the matter: if we have nothing in common, not our live-styles, not an integrated education system, and not even a unified national identity, who can we turn to for future leadership? Who will give our children a better future and a national identity to be proud of?

I admit that I make a lot of generalisations in portraying the lives of children from English medium, Bengali medium, and madrassah education and the lives they choose to lead in the future.

There are numerous people of Bengali medium background choosing to live abroad, many of English medium who have returned to our country and many in madrassahs who run schools and businesses in Bangladesh or have chosen to live abroad also.

But I doubt anyone can refuse to admit to this enormous gap that exists between the

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educations of children from English and Bengali medium schools, and madrassahs, a distinction that is encouraged by our broken education system.

I do not think it is possible to ever achieve political peace and prosperity as a nation if we still have no common interests and goals. Can we ever encourage our children to respect each other and work towards becoming effective leaders when we do not even have a system in which they can consider themselves equal?

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