

# Ambassador Harry Thomas and gas export

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As conscientious citizens of Bangladesh we have witnessed with interest the arrival of the eleventh U.S. Ambassador Mr. Harry K. Thomas through electronic and print media. His first message to the people of Bangladesh was, "the United States wants to see Bangladesh exporting its natural gas so that it can become a middle income country" (DS 18 August 2003). An immediate reaction in Dhaka was that whether Mr. Thomas represent the U.S. government or the U.S. oil company -- Unocal?

Only two days before, American Nobel Laureate Professor Joseph Stiglitz almost categorically negated the very concept of gas export. The rumour in Dhaka is that Prof. Stiglitz's down to earth observation has *unnerved* the policy planners in Bangladesh. Rational thinkers and the civil society genuinely felt that the country being the lowest per capita consumer severely lacked adequate reserves of energy resources for its own consumption, let alone having *exportable surplus*. The recently concluded National Gas Utilisation Committee in its final report (submitted on 27 August 2002) stated that the present reserve of gas would exhaust by 2020, if not earlier, and the country will have to import energy thereafter. Quoting Prof. Stiglitz (DS 16 August, 2003) it was reported that if Bangladesh decides to export gas now, it will have to import it 15 to 20 years later and ultimately be faced to pay *two-way transportation costs*. Prof. Stiglitz further stated that, "it is better for Bangladesh to keep its gas reserve for the future ..... Gas reserve is your *security* against any volatility of energy prices on the international market. One should be very careful about the pace of extraction". However, one reason for gas export may be to convert the resource into money, but money always do not contribute to desired development. Prof. Stiglitz said, citing the example of Nigeria (where in less than fifteen years the per capita income came down to almost one third even with huge oil export). "If Bangladesh exports even a portion of gas quickly, you will have to be dependent on import later", said the Nobel Laureate. Yet, it is amazing that Ambassador Thomas commenting on the remarks of American Noble Laureate economist said, "I don't know if he has any experience of natural gas engineering .... And with all respect for him, I disagree with him" (DS 18 August 2003).

Meanwhile, the media reported: "Gas Export meeting shelved indefinitely" (DS 17 August 2003). In fact, a high level meeting on the gas sector scheduled to take place at the Prime Minister's office on 17 August has been postponed indefinitely. "The meeting will be held some other time," Mr. AKM Musharraf Hossain, State Minister of Energy told BBC soon afterwards, though his voice was choked at times. He however claimed he discussed the gas export issue with senior ministers and none opposed the idea (whether any one at all supported was not disclosed for unknown reason). The staff correspondent of DS however reported that couple of policy markers and majority of the party leaders opposed the export. The report added, "We are aware that majority of the people oppose it. And if we take such a decision, we will unnecessarily jeopardise our popularity. We are in a better position by not exporting gas". It

now appears to us that the proverbial *Dilli ka laddu* coincides with the idea. If you eat the *laddu* you repent and if you don't you still repent. Mr. AKM Musharraf Hossain is perhaps trying to convince himself as well as others that, "eat the *laddu* and repent"! Whether he will get time to repent is indeed an issue of interest.

Incidentally, the state minister reiterated his earlier statement, "those who oppose gas export are in small number" (the daily Janakantha, 8 June, 2003). The question is: has there been a survey on the subject of gas export? Yes, a recent on-line survey indicated that

their own national interest, rather interest of their new found friend!

Though unconnected with the story, we recall with agony some high profile visits in the nineties. The first to try taking us out of our resolve was Mr. Dick Cheney, now Vice President of the U.S. Government. As a senior executive of the Oil Company Halliburton, he made visits to Bangladesh to prepare the ground for early export of gas. He also unduly influenced the government to allow Halliburton/Caim to start production at Sangu gas field (in the offshore Bangladesh) pending proper reserve estimate and certification as

couldn't hide the actual intent. We were shocked. Why would a Nobel Laureate be interested in gas export to India by Bangladesh? Because the oil lobby wanted him to do so, that's why. In this connection we also would like to remind our readers that we wrote an article in the Daily Star- *Natural Gas export: Cautious steps are necessary* (DS 5-6 November 2001) shortly after the government declared about the need for gas export in October 2001 (when coincidentally Unocal submitted its gas export proposal on 29 October, 2001). Then came Jeffrey Sachs, who claimed, "there is no sense in keeping energy under the ground for 20 years, let alone for 50 years". Use it and develop it, which sounded like an experienced well wisher! But really it was not so. These million dollar advice flowed into the minds of our politicians and bureaucrats -- all free of cost!

We would be doing injustice if we didn't mention about the role of the predecessors of Mr. Thomas. Ambassador Holzman and Ambassador Mary Ann Peters respectively almost dedicated themselves during 1996-2003 to influence two consecutive political governments of Bangladesh to export gas. People of Bangladesh didn't accept their arguments.

Given a priority to the domestic energy security to help reduce dependency on oil import, there is a need to enhance domestic gas use (currently gas use substitutes about 10 million tons of oil equivalent and saves around U.S \$ 2 billion annually), particularly emphasising on more power plants in the western zone of the country, which is energy hungry. The country's policy planners must also appreciate that without investments in gas infrastructure development and installation of power plants across the river Jamuna the rate of gas consumption would be slow for some years, yet as a part of the *safety net* approach gas must be *conserved* and *not wasted* by way of export, as advised by the so many 'well-wishers' of Bangladesh.

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almost 83 percent oppose export (Bhorer Kagaz, 20 August 2003). Nevertheless, the opinion of an economist like Prof. Stiglitz was an ultimate blow to the export proposition.

At this point we recall the story of proverbial goat particularly for the benefit of those who are not likely to know it. ever. A villager bought a black goat in the evening from a *hut* (village market) and was walking it home. On the way some crooks saw it and hatched a quick plan to get the goat. One by one they started walking beside the villager expressing shock that he should be taking a dog by a leash. When he heard the same expression of *shock and surprise* from the fourth man in quick succession the simple minded villager felt embarrassed and became doubtful about the creature. Eventually, he let it go. The four rogues had a feast that night having befooled the gullible man. But those who come from abroad are very important persons known for their ranks and many achievements in their respective areas. The strategy is also similar. They have one concerted plan to pursue Bangladesh to change her mind on gas export. It, in fact, is a modern version of the psychological assault resorted to in the story. In this case, it seems to us that those intelligent persons are not lying for

per international gas field practice. In the meantime the oil lobby in U.S. found a willing companion in Bill Clinton, then President of the United State. He came to Dhaka during his South Asian trip only for a day. But even within such a tight schedule, he exhorted Bangladesh government to be ready and willing to export gas. He argued that new energy technology would emerge within the next two decades making gas less attractive or make it just another among many alternative energy sources. His visit was preceded by his energy secretary Bill Richardson's several trips. In both the episodes one local senior bureaucrat played an unclear role and connived with the foreigners. Nonetheless, everybody witnessed with eyes open that Bangladesh was suddenly being courted with all ardour by the mightiest power in the world.

Soon, pressure on behalf of one American oil company (Unocal) also came through multinational institutions such as the World Bank (see DS August 2003). The oil lobby then found a new method. They started using heavy weight economists. Nobel Laureate Prof. Kenneth Arrow came to Dhaka representing an environmental outfit. His visit was surely more connected with gas export from Bangladesh than anything else. He

# Revamping our secondary education system

**ZIAUDDIN M. CHOUDHURY**

THE recent appalling news of a sixty-five per cent failure rate in the secondary school certificate exam becomes less shocking than the knowledge that more than half a million students all around the country will be languishing for the foreseeable future in their educational institutes, a large number of which are probably threadbare and dysfunctional. Given the new criteria for passing the SSC barrier, and a very reasonable assumption that no miraculous improvement will occur in the schools in the immediate future, I am pretty certain that at least three quarters of this half million will fail to cross the SSC hurdle next year also. But by then, their ranks are likely to be swollen by another half a million or so unfortunate youngsters who would have equally failed to meet the exam standards. By a linear extrapolation, one can imagine with horror what the likely number of SSC failed lots will be in three years time. I do not think that the schools will continue to carry this burden of unsuccessful tenth graders ad infinitum. Either they will shed them or the hapless youngsters will leave on their own to join the country's teeming multitude of half-educated youths. Where do we put the blame for this calamity?

Large-scale failure in SSC exams is not a new phenomenon in our country. If I remember, more than half of the examinees failed to cross the SSC barrier in previous years also, despite rampant growth in cheating that was on an accelerated path year to year. The low point in the SSC exam this year is largely attributed (I am told) to (a) new grading system, and (b) reforms in exams that cheating would not help to overcome. But accepting these as aggravating factors for non-performance would be like hiding our heads in the sand. The statistics of previous years speak for themselves. Our schools have continuously churned in massive numbers of ill-educated, thoroughly unprepared students at the SSC exam gates whose only hope to get through was illegitimate help and support of their coaches and mentors (including parents, in some cases) during the course of exams.

There was never any serious attempt at stemming this tide of ever growing failed SSC students, finding out the causes and redressing them. Our schools became one massive production industry of unemployable youths.

An ironic by-product of our growth in literacy (which is mainly a result of higher primary school enrollment) is increase in large number of secondary schools, which continued to operate under a termite-infested system. The system taught less of concept and more of blind reading of text, encouraged cramming, and judged a student's academic performance on a sole yearly exam. Barring

demand of a rising population for more schools, and others fill in. Quality is sacrificed for quantity. Schools have mushroomed with threadbare structure, little or no equipment, and-- most lamentably -- have been resourced with instructors supplied by the same dysfunctional education system. Government has aided the status quo unwittingly by continuing with the politically popular subsidy of the failed school system, and further deterioration of the standards by succumbing to political pressure of accreditation of new schools regardless of quality. Since success of a school depended on the number of students qualifying in

pare their students for their next ordeal. I hope the ministry has a plan in parallel to train the teachers not only in the new exam and grading system, but also in bringing about a total change in our century-old, hidebound teaching technique, and in school syllabus.

An equally important step in reforming the school system is incentives for the schools to improve teacher's quality and overall environment for education, in addition to higher success rate in exams. Assuming that government subventions to private schools will continue in the foreseeable future, I would suggest that an incentive be built in the system. The system of subsidy should encourage the schools to vie among themselves for these funds, in stead of qualifying for them automatically either due to political pressure or as gratuity. A point system could be developed based on four criteria: (a) the school's success rate in last SSC; (b) trained teachers as a percent of total teachers in the school; (c) availability of library/laboratory facilities in the schools; and (d) teacher/student ratio (higher the better). There would be a minimum threshold (of points) to qualify for government grants; and the amount of grant would be based on the total points scored by a school on the above criteria.

Critics charge that failure of the regular educational system (that is formal, secular education) in Pakistan led to the growth and resurgence of alternative education, which had some disturbing effect on recent political history of that country. We have no reason to believe that our secular education system cannot be salvaged, at least as yet. But we have to be mindful that unless the reforms, some of which are already underway, are implemented in great speed, we may have to witness unleashing of a youth force misguided by designs of elements that may want to foist "alternative systems" in the country.

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**Since success of a school depended on the number of students qualifying in SSC exam, and the major motivation of the students was acquisition of the SSC certificate, the goal of the teachers and the taught naturally was sorting out the easy way to achieve these. The exam system, the syllabus, and teaching technique colluded together all these years to perpetuate production of a thoroughly unusable human resource in most of our secondary schools.**

government operated institutions, and a handful of private schools fueled by astronomical tuition fees, teaching faculties that have neither training nor motivation to educate their charge has run majority of the secondary schools. [Government schools account for less than 3% of all secondary school teachers, and less than 5% of all students.] And on top, politicisation of the teachers in the name of unions, and their affiliations to local political overlords have guaranteed that the schools continue to be in the iron grip of non-performing, ill-educated teachers.

Government regulation of this vast number of privately operated schools has been perfunctory at best, perhaps of necessity. Supervision of some thirteen thousand schools spread over the nooks and crannies of the country is not an easy task. It is particularly difficult when the government cannot meet

SSC exam, and the major motivation of the students was acquisition of the SSC certificate, the goal of the teachers and the taught naturally was sorting out the easy way to achieve these. The exam system, the syllabus, and teaching technique colluded together all these years to perpetuate production of a thoroughly unusable human resource in most of our secondary schools.

I congratulate the education ministry in trying to rein in the festering decay of the education system with the introduction of exam reforms and grading system. Better late than never. But the reforms also bring in the proverbial "chicken or egg" question. The new grading and exam system requires that the schools adequately prepare to face the altered rule of the game. It requires that some 150 thousand school teachers be trained to pre-

# Private university education

## Thoughts on how it should be

**ZIAUR RAHMAN**

WITH around 45 private universities in Bangladesh having more than 12,000 students enrolled, we envision to emerge as a country capable of developing into a human resource rich prosperous one in the coming years. Such lofty goals can only be achieved with careful strategising, planning, implementing and undertaking continuous improvement initiatives. Private university education has moved beyond the embryonic stage and some of these universities are expanding through internal departmental and outreach programmes, such as local and foreign affiliations and exchange of knowledge/research/faculty. Among these silver linings, we also have some grave issues that need to be given due attention for the welfare of our students and country. In this article, I have attempted to discuss some of these issues and also offer some suggestions. We ought to self-evaluate ourselves, not diverge from the noble objective of nurturing superior academic environment and ensure that profit taking behaviour is minimally exercised at the university level. Unlike corporations, universities are non-profit organisations as mandated by government charter. In addition, university, irrespective of it being in the private domain, is viewed as a 'public good' for its moral persuasion.

Our students at the private universities mostly represent the upper echelon of the society. Their domains are in areas where they are able to influence the opinion leaders of the society and, at times, directly shape their mindsets. In addition to these students, a small segment of students come from the middleclass background; they take upon themselves significant financial hardship to continue their private university education.

Society and its well-being depends on economic welfare of its citizens and of which students are a large majority. Intellectual development of the society also depends on how aptly we formulate and impart education to our citizens. With a vision to create a prosperous Bangladesh our students' intellectual capital needs to be augmented by advocating growth through expanding the frontiers of knowledge and societal opinion shaping.

The society at present has a narrow focus on education. Its role in education, personal life, professional development and intellectual nurturing of our minds has been more or less confined to classroom teaching, some interactive learning and sparsely used instructional training methodology. This approach has been inconsistent and the resultant effort has not made any real breakthrough in our current reality of academic standards; it has neither given any hope for the advancement of the academic standards at the tertiary level

educational institutions.

The private university system in Bangladesh so far has been operating as an extension of education methodology followed by colleges in Bangladesh where classroom teaching is the main focus of learning. This methodology can work at the college level, but by the standards of university education and what ought to be the onus of university education, it is beyond comprehension that universities in Bangladesh do not have an iota of research funding, let alone research facility, infrastructure, labs or even the systems to look for research grants. The envisaged growth can only be achieved through the findings of 'new knowledge through research' and that is the fundamental difference between a college and a university. This notion perhaps has not permeated into the psyche of our university sponsors and administrators and sadly the faculty are more keen on teaching than researching.

It is true that undertaking research tantamounts to single-minded dedication that may turn out

for its students.

Historically, private education system has really been coined by the industrial West, allowing for their rich people's sons and daughters an alternative to public education. Internationally private education is highly sought after as indeed the quality of education rendered is unquestionable. However, it is distastefully true that private education standards at the university level in Bangladesh is much below even in comparison to education offered by most public universities, although the cost of private university education is exponential to public university education. These anomalies are what I request the policy makers, educationist and social reformists to debate and rectify. Let us embolden our nation's centers of excellence by truly committing to quality education.

In the tertiary level, commonly termed as the university education, one ought to focus on the following areas: a) Basic Skill Set Development, b) Subject Matter Expertise, c) Interpersonal Skills, d) Learn Research Methodology. Culmina-

getting short-changed for their learning is not application oriented.

The private universities chart their growth plan focusing mainly on tuition fees collected from the students. However, universities in other countries and even in our neighbouring countries, strategise on collecting a large pool of research and development funds from corporations, donor organisations, charitable organizations, trade bodies, philanthropists, entrepreneurs, trusts and government grants. A strong emphasis on public-private partnership helps to build the infrastructure and research facility of a university. These essentially vital support help the students and faculty to engage in not only scholarly research, but also allow them to participate in learning industrial applications. Advancement of new knowledge can only be harnessed if this culture of resource pooling from multiple sources is cultivated, and only then the private universities will begin to look like 'true centers of advanced education.' The government may also allow tax deduction provisions for funds donated to the private or public universities.

Governance of the private university system is also suspect and I feel that university administrative policies, departmental policies and most aspects of university affairs should be under the jurisdiction and guidance of individuals coming mainly from academia, industry, and social bodies. In line with the public university system, the private university system itself to re-invent itself by positioning itself as front-runner in every possible domain of knowledge. The common practice in Bangladesh has been to set up various departments and run programmes under these departments. I propose that some universities may create some centres of excellence...

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to be a thankless job when no system of incentives or accolades are there at institutions of higher learning. However, universities across the globe achieve fame and recognition when they show that their faculty and scholars have engaged in scholarly research and that their institutions have become 'hot-bed of new found knowledge and innovation.'

Our current state of university education is a reflection of the sad economic position of the country. We grew up with such lofty statements as 'education is the backbone of a nation,' and 'one ought to travel to China for education, if need be.' These have merely remained hollow without creating much impact on our education system. Our limited progress in the areas of academia does not bode well amongst the competitive polity of nations. Due to lack of definitive improvement in comparison to other nations, we may fall deep into the dungeons of the digital divide, precariously aggravating economic downfall of our nation. In this connection let us admit to ourselves that private education system, if it indeed wants to gain acceptance in the eyes of the general public, should ensure better academic standards, facility and infrastructure

tion of all of these skills in a student actually develops his/her total human resource capacity. Human resource in the 21st century is viewed as source of intelligence, creativity, knowledge having the ability to work under time-bound deadlines and collaborative environment. However, have these paradigm shifts affected the cultural orientation of the people at the helm of affairs?

We as a nation tend to follow others than create our own structures. Unfortunately, the speed at which we tend to play the role of a copy-cat is dismal; therefore, the changes that we see in our systems of operation and university education, have been tested and discarded by other advanced nations. No wonder why, we are not being able to produce quality graduates. Education should be fluid and changes within the system and curriculum need to be kept contemporary and in line with what is happening in, say, the industry; it should not be confined to such theory that industry has no functional currency. Dhaka and academics should go hand-in-hand for students to relate theory with the real world. However, due to minimal industry involvement in running programs at the private university level, our graduates are

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# Earthquake and Dhaka city

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RECENT earthquake in Chittagong has created a panic in the minds of the inhabitants of Dhaka City also, especially those who are living in high rise buildings. Many of them have had no scope to know the quality of construction of the buildings or their properly regulated design. Construction materials and their quality are also a major unknown factor. Many of the people may feel as being hostage to the developers or the owners of the buildings.

To ascertain whether a building is safe or not in case of an earthquake is not an easy job. Even for a very big expert it is difficult to say by mere looking at a building whether it is safe or not. It is more difficult to say so in case of a concrete framed building for that we need proper examination and testing. Mere opinion is not valid in applied science, test and experiments must support it. Of course detail information of previous earthquake if preserved in archives are always very helpful.

We can of course specify a building as unsafe by sheer looking at it if it is of brickwalls with a reinforced concrete slab roof only, when (1) it is more than two storied; (2) it has different plans in covered floors; (3) it has cantilevers, arches or domes; (4) it has no tie above the lintel level or beneath the roof; (5) it has very big windows or openings. This building has more chance of

**Follow the building codes carefully; they help to avoid any disaster. International codes are based on many years' of laboratory tests and experiments and the process is continuous. Therefore do not underestimate them. Do not make frequently holes on the brick walls as hammer blows will make the mortar crack and with a tremor the plaster will fall and the wall will collapse. Take good care of the buildings, as buildings both of brick and concrete need regular repair and maintenance.**

collapsing in an earthquake jolt.

If we look at the old buildings constructed during British period, we will notice that most of the large buildings are two storied, symmetrical i.e. same plan in ground floor and 1<sup>st</sup> floor, thick walls (wall thickness as much as 2 to 3 ft) on wide foundations using lime mortars in all bonding layers. Some of these buildings lasted for many years and even great earthquake of 1897 and 1935 didn't destroy them. Later with advanced building knowledge, we started making three to four storied buildings with 10 inch wall in cement mortar and concrete slab roofs, often unsymmetrical in the top level plan with wall to wall wide open windows.

In the USA, frequent earthquake happens in California, same as Japan. There is the 'Standard for Structural Design of Masonry Construction' and 'Japan Architec-

tural Standard Specifications (JASS)'. They specify that: (1) brick Buildings should not exceed 9 m. in height; (2) they should not have window opening exceeding 33 per cent of the wall area; (3) there should be tie at the plinth level, lintel level and under the roof slab; (4) there should be no cantilever or protruding windows or veranda; (5) domes and arches are more liable to collapse.

In order to avoid torsion, the upper level should be a symmetrical plan. Ordinary first class bricks are quite strong. They can easily withstand the compressive load of a five storied building but they can't withstand any tremor or shake up. Brickwalls lack ductility (quality to regain the former shape after the load removed) like reinforced concrete or steel. Unfortunately the cement mortar fails first and the crack pattern passes through the

mortar totally separating the two parts of the brickworks. In the 1897 earthquake, the 33m high Shree Chaitanya Bijoy Stamba (Minar) of Joyprhat collapsed. The nine Ratnas (Minars) of the Great Kanta Temple of Dinajpur Maharaja shared the same fate but his palace made of small bricks in thick lime mortar was intact.

If one wants to live in safety please do follow the above rules. Make a two-storied house and if more stories are required then go for an RCC framed building designed and built as per codes. Walls of the ground floor should be made 15 inch thick. It will not only help in case of earthquake but it will also keep the floor cool. Follow the building codes carefully; they help to avoid any disaster. International codes are based on many years' of laboratory tests and experiments and the process is continuous. Therefore do not underestimate them. Do not make frequently holes on the brick walls as hammer blows will make the mortar crack and with a tremor the plaster will fall and the wall will collapse. Take good care of the buildings, as buildings both of brick and concrete need regular repair and maintenance.

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