

Anomalous education infrastructure

Poor planning exacting a heavy price

MOST of the colleges across the country are grappling with an acute shortage of admission seekers at the HSC level. Reports say only a handful of reputable colleges have found an adequate number of students, while the rest are still trying to rope in the remaining ones, going beyond normal practices in some cases.

The problem is yet another manifestation of the limitations and flaws of the education system as a whole. Obviously, colleges are an important part of the education infrastructure and if a huge number of seats in these institutions remain vacant, it is a sure sign of malfunctioning in the crucially important education sector. The investment made on setting up colleges has turned out to be counter-productive.

It has been argued that the low percentage of successful students in the last SSC examinations is the main reason behind the shortage of admission seekers at the HSC level. There is truth in the argument, but we believe some other points must also be considered. Poor planning has created a situation where the mushroom growth of colleges has badly disrupted the ideal student-college ratio. Lack of corrective steps on the part of the authorities concerned has aggravated the situation over the years.

The irony is that though too many colleges are chasing too few students, the admission seekers find very few colleges really suitable for pursuing education at the HSC level, far less a degree engagement. There are a few colleges worth the name, while a large number of them exist in name only. The 'sign-board colleges' have a hopeless record insofar as examination results are concerned and not many students are ready to take the risk of getting admitted to such institutions.

So there are colleges, but very few good ones. And it is precisely here that education planners should find vital clues as to why the so-called institutions are not finding admission seekers. The planners must set certain standards and make sure that they are complied with. The colleges or schools that have been set up to influence voters in a constituency, or to get upper hand in local politics are unlikely to serve any other purpose.

Most of the colleges do not have qualified teachers and other required facilities, including fully-stocked libraries, computers and laboratories. So, only a holistic approach towards streamlining education can solve the problems that have cropped up.

Cave darkness revisited

A new millennium taste of the primordial

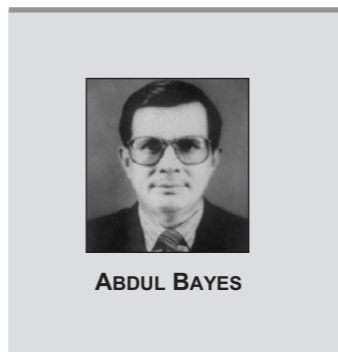
THE mismatch between what came upon Rome last Sunday and what had been ebulliently stated, but couldn't be pulled off, explained it all. On the cards was the White Night of round-the-clock cultural festivities -- an extravaganza of art events in the capital city. But all the buoyancy about the gala night illumined to whiteness was put as the event turned into a black night for millions following the worst power blackout in most of Italy since 1918.

The stupendous debacle of mechanised power in a way wrote an ode to the Stone Age! In that darkness of the pit, the hearts of the Italians must have beat in unison. Couldn't they have thought of making up for the missed White Night by a bonfire. But how could they have lighted it? Either by match stick or by a glint of stones. The latter is a fitting alternative, because the kind of darkness that engulfed Italian life was an imagery of our pre-historic ancestry. Then match stick was out of the question as the gun powder hadn't come about. In the environmentally dark but inwardly philosophical mood they could make the best use of their waiting time by singing carols to mankind's common past. That we were all at the same level of scientific emptiness in the hoary past and that despite the current stark contrasts between the North and the South in technological acquisitions there can be mechanical glitches to put us back on the same level have dawned on us afresh.

Speaking of the mundane, our power managers, like the self-styled governance buffs who never tire of citing crime figures of New York to justify their utterly failed rule of law, could have a vicarious thrill in the massive power breakdown in Italy and Geneva followed by that in New York, Ontario, London, Sweden and Denmark -- all in a matter of six weeks or so. Vicarious perhaps, but just. In fact, it would be an act of self-deceit if they indulged in that prevarication. For, if such modern, state-of-the-art power infrastructures in Europe and America can go kaput along their grid-lines with bowling effects what safeguard our dilapidated power network has to stick it out against accidents that are massive as well as beyond easy repair.

The moral of the latest series of electricity blackouts in Europe is: the unionist theory of power-sharing may not always work to precision. Dependence on imported power has its flip-side. The contracts may have to be rewritten.

Biotechnology for food security: Risks and rewards



ABDUL BAYES

In a recent seminar organised by the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) at the BRAC Centre, eminent economists and agricultural scientists dwelt, albeit indecisively, on the sensitive issue of biotechnology. The topic, admittedly, is of top most importance in the wake of ongoing realities related to rice production, particularly in developing countries like Bangladesh. Here the green revolution, allegedly, tends to gradually groan under a regime of declining yield rates, complex problem of insect and disease pressure and other problems. Thanks to the organisers, especially CPD and IRRRI/PETTRA, for floating a debate that warrants best available empirical evidence relevant for poor people in developing countries. Such debates should help identify the most appropriate ways that molecular biology-based research might contribute to achieving and sustaining food and nutrition security.

Safety and security

Two of the well-known researchers from the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) -- Drs Mahabub Hossain and Swapon Kumar Dutta -- set the tone round the table at the very outset. They made preliminary remarks on scientific evolution in molecular biology over the last two decades, genetic basis of living organism, and the ability to develop processes and products useful to food security, nutrition and human health. These

two speakers succinctly summarised the potentials and the problems of biotechnology. While the issue is being debated both in the developed and the developing world, according to them, the premises are quite different and hence a grandiose generalisation should be shelved. The developed ones stand against it in the face of an almost stagnant population growth for decades with a consequent crave for food safety, while developing countries' imperative is food security.

Vitamin A deficiency affects 400 million people worldwide, leaving them vulnerable to infections and blindness. Iron deficiency affects 3.7 billion people, particularly women, leading to higher maternal deaths and infant mortality. Developing micronutrient dense rices, with higher amounts of iron, zinc and vitamin A, can have a tremendous impact on the health of low-income people. Conventional breeding when combined with biotechnology can provide powerful tools to achieve this goal. Besides,

cerns

The Bangladesh perspectives on potentials and problems -- quite obviously -- were on board for threadbare discussions. Bangladesh is one of the most land scarce country in the world with cultivation frontier closed almost half a century ago. The green revolution that swept over the last decades helped a balance between growth rate of population and food. Most of the gains of green revolution came from improved rice and wheat varieties developed by the Bangladesh

one per cent per annum due to growing urbanisation, population pressure and leaving land for non-rice crops. In this scenario of an almost closed cultivation frontier, declining yield and increasing population Bangladesh -- a country that stands with higher population density than America when all people of the world are pushed into that country -- must strive for the alternatives, especially the opportunities created by the rice biotechnology.

It is also because 60 per cent of

example, it could be supported provided done by public sector and free for farmers, with health and environmental assessment before the release etc. And those who declined to support put forth various arguments like, the development of pests to destroy food sources, dependence of farmers on private companies, additional production of rice not needed and gene transformation is unethical etc.

Riding the risks

Given the growing constraints on future rice availability in Bangladesh and the devastatingly developed micronutrient deficiency among the poor households in rural areas, the rice biotechnology issue should be left neither to rhetoric nor to emotions. In the seminar mentioned before, sordidly, I sensed emotions engulfing economics, rhetoric ruling over realities on the ground in the case of a few. We think that the society needs to rise above all rhetoric and emotions and seriously start a systematic inquiry into the nexus soon. Dr Mhabub Hossain and others provided sufficient food for thought for a safe and secured world of food, particularly in the context of Bangladesh. We strongly feel, biotechnology could be the key to the upcoming crisis, but keeping in mind the questions. We have to seek answers to the questions raised rather than throwing away the question itself. Allow me to remind my readers that had we not hailed adoption of modern rice technology in the 1960s and 1970s, we would have, probably, experienced a worse food situation to turn into a beggar's bowl. Many of the forecasts at that time turned out to be futile. We can only hope that we shall be able to find a judicious path for our survival.

Abdul Bayes is Professor of Economics at Jahangirnagar University

BENEATH THE SURFACE

Given the growing constraints on future rice availability in Bangladesh and the devastatingly developed micronutrient deficiency among the poor households in rural areas, the rice biotechnology issue should be left neither to rhetoric nor to emotions...had we not hailed adoption of modern rice technology in the 1960s and 1970s, we would have, probably, experienced a worse food situation to turn into a beggar's bowl...We can only hope that we shall be able to find a judicious path for our survival.

For example, a *la* Mahabub and others, about 1.2 billion people mostly in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa live in a state of absolute poverty with an income of less than one US dollar a day. About 800 million people are food insecure and 160 million preschool children suffer from energy-protein malnutrition, which results in the deaths of over five million children under the age of five years. Thus the whole issue boils down to a debate between food safety and food security.

Problems and potentials

I assume that my readers are well informed of the potentials of biotechnology as these are by now articulated and known. Even then, to put it simply, biotechnology can bring forth a revolution not only in food production -- in a regime of declining land and rising population -- but also in the realm of nutrition for the poor. One example should suffice to sound the semantics.

rice hybrids have 15-20 per cent yield advantage over inbred rices. Their adoption by farmers is, however, constrained by the need to buy seed every season and sometimes at high seed cost. But government's commitments and gearing up national research institutions, should help stem the rot in the long run.

There is another point to ponder over. The big multinational companies -- the candidates for criticisms on this count -- have reportedly backtracked in recent years from rice biotechnology as they observed the dominance of small holders in Asia and the high transaction costs of enforcing intellectual property rights under weak judicial system. By and large, both in developed and developing Asia, the public sector needs to be the vanguard of rice biotechnology.

Bangladesh perspective: Complacency and con-

agricultural research institutions in collaboration with international research centres. Two-thirds of the cropped areas are now being covered by modern varieties and 55 per cent of the cultivated areas are now under irrigation facilities. In tandem, population growth rate also declined appreciably, say from 2.2 to 1.2 per cent per year in the 1990s.

While complacency could be in one corner, concerns loom large elsewhere. Every year, two million people are added to the existing stock putting a pressure on food supplies of 0.56 million tons a year, just to maintain the same level of per capita consumption. Despite the claim of self-sufficiency in food and the calm it confers upon, occasional imports invoke inquiry into the claims made so far. The easy options of realising increased rice production have already been exhausted and Bangladesh is poised to reel under a regime of losing cultivated areas at more than

the children under age five are underweight and more than half are stunted. More than 70 per cent of pregnant women suffer from Anemia due to iron deficiency. In rural areas, where three-fourths of the people live, malnutrition is acute due to lack of knowledge or financial capacity to buy a balanced diet. Since poor people consume nearly 150 to 170 kg of rice per year, incorporation of a small amount of iron and Vitamin A in rice could go a long way in meeting the deficiencies in these micronutrients

For and against

There are a lot of risks too. Concerns on food safety, ethical points and environmental implications and socio economic risks were also deliberated upon by the authors. Taking all the risks into consideration, the authors noted that samples drawn from a large section of the civil society and agricultural institutions seem to support biotechnology on certain conditions. For

The mountain that brought forth a mouse

SAGAR CHAUDHURY

Idon't know if there is an English equivalent to the Bangla proverb "porboter mushik probob", but all native Bangla speakers must be familiar with its purport. Well, that's what the frantic four-month search for Iraqi weapons of mass destruction or WMD has finally produced -- just a mouse, and a still-born one at that. The 1,400-strong team of scientists, weapons experts and support staff that made up the CIA-led Iraq Survey Group (ISG), has failed to discover even "minute amounts" of nuclear, chemical or biological weapons material, according to reports circulating in Washington and London. ISG will now instead focus on Saddam Hussein's capacity and intention to manufacture banned weapons. Only a few weeks ago, the British Prime Minister Tony Blair said he was confident that evidence of Iraqi WMD will be discovered, just as Hans Blix, the former leader of the UN Weapons Inspection Team, said that he believed that even if Saddam Hussein had possessed WMD at any time, he must have destroyed them several years ago.

How the negative ISG report will affect the US President is not immediately clear, but it will certainly further dent Mr Blair's credibility, and although the report is expected to include documentary evidence that the Saddam regime was capable of producing WMD and probably intended to do that if it could evade international scrutiny, it is believed to fall far short of proving that Iraq was the "imminent threat" that Mr Blair and Mr Bush both claimed it to be. Meanwhile, in London, the Hutton Enquiry into the apparent

suicide of the Ministry of Defence expert David Kelly close on, September 25, and various evidence heard by the Enquiry Commission have revealed several glaring anomalies. Statements made by the Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon, for example, are in direct contradiction with extracts from the personal diary of Alastair Campbell, until recently Tony Blair's personal advisor, on a number of points. Even the Foreign Secretary Jack Straw, once a staunch supporter in public of Mr Blair's

Australian investigators on the team. According to a US intelligence source, a draft of the ISG report has been sent to the White House, the Pentagon and Downing Street, and it could not come at any worse time for Mr Blair, just days before the Labour Party Conference where he will have to face up to many uncomfortable questions.

The end of an era
It is always sad to watch a piece of contemporary history come to an end, be it an institution or a period of time. It is even sadder for those who

and tabloid papers. This thronging narrow street in the heart of Britain's capital city, known a mere 100 years ago as the Street of Adventures, is now destined to live out its remaining years perhaps as a street of ghosts.

The adventure began in the year 1500 when London's very first printing press was built next to St. Bride's Church in Fleet Street, around which, as written in the records of the church, "a heavy concentration of ecclesiastics who had a monopoly of literacy" had

they are now housed in three small rooms in St Bride's Institute. The days of hot-shot press conferences and lavish cocktail parties are long gone, today's Press Club does not even have a private bar of its own.

People who have had close association with Fleet Street in one way or the other, fondly remember it in its heydays. As one of them, an octogenarian gentleman who spent his entire working life in the Street of Adventures, recalls: "It smelt of power, and the competition to get stories, which were breaking all the

LONDON LETTER

The results of the latest Guardian/ICM poll indicate that in the face of the Hutton Enquiry, the failure to find Iraqi WMD and the ongoing crisis in Baghdad and other parts of Iraq, Mr Blair's personal rating with the electorate has taken a nosedive, with 61 per cent of voters now thinking that the war was unjustified and that the country was deceived over that question. Now in the wake of the negative findings of the Iraq Survey Group, the damage to Mr Blair's standing will be especially severe

stand on war against Iraq, has now said that in private he had always tried to persuade the Prime Minister to re-think. And the results of the latest Guardian/ICM poll indicate that in the face of the Hutton Enquiry, the failure to find Iraqi WMD and the ongoing crisis in Baghdad and other parts of Iraq, Mr Blair's personal rating with the electorate has taken a nosedive, with 61 per cent of voters now thinking that the war was unjustified and that the country was deceived over that question. Now in the wake of the negative findings of the Iraq Survey Group, the damage to Mr Blair's standing will be especially severe as he was personally instrumental in placing British and

have been witness to the steady and irrevocable decline, the days of glory and power slowly giving way before the remorseless march of modernism. Fleet Street in Central London, once the home for most of the British national Press, and a real centre of power second only to Downing Street, is soon to become no more than a mere entry in the pages of street directories and telephone books. Five hundred years of history are thus coming to an inglorious end as Reuters, the most famous and the only national English language news agency still left in Fleet Street, prepares to sell up and move to Canary Wharf in East London's Docklands area, in the wake of the major broadsheets

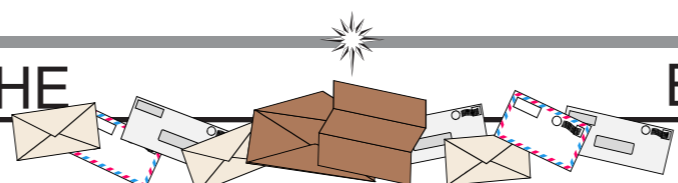
grown up. And the exodus began in the early 1960's with the departure of the London offices of the newspaper the Manchester Guardian, although it is only during the past twenty years or so that the inexorable demands of economics have been speeding up the process. At one time, nearly every national newspaper as well as many provincial papers had offices clustered within a radius of less than a mile and all of them except for just two -- a publishing house and the French news agency AFP -- have left. The offices of the once legendary London Press Club are still located in Fleet Street, although instead of the entire storey in a tower block they once occupied,

time. It was a wonderful place to be in, a fun place..... It is most sad to walk up Fleet Street now. It really is a ghost town."

Speaking of the passing of an era, British journalism lost one of its brightest luminaries on 22nd September. Hugo Young, senior political commentator for The Guardian for nearly twenty years ever since he left the post of Deputy Editor of the Sunday Times, succumbed to cancer barely a week after writing the last of his twice-weekly columns. Since 1989, he had also been the Chairman of the non-profit organisation Scott Trust which owns The Guardian, the Sunday broadsheet The Observer and other sister journals and played a key role in guiding the papers

through many important developments. Hugo Young was also a broadcaster and the author of at least two standard works. One of Us, a biography of Margaret Thatcher, and This Blessed Plot, a chronicle of Britain's love-hate relationship with the European Union. Although he was one of the sharpest critics of the British Prime Minister's decision to join the US President in going to war against Iraq, he remained on good terms with Mr Blair despite their differences, just as he was respected by Mrs Thatcher even after being highly critical of her in the book he wrote about her. A number of prominent voices from British and European public life including, among others, the Prime Minister Tony Blair, the Chancellor Gordon Brown, the former Foreign Secretary and Leader of Commons Robin Cook, the Liberal Democrats leader Charles Kennedy, the BBC Director General Greg Dyke, the President of the European Commission Romano Prodi, European Commissioner and former Tory Party Chairman Chris Patten, as well as many of his colleagues and close associates paid glowing tributes to Hugo Young, all praising his liberal objectivity, integrity and rigorous detachment, describing him as "a great spokesman for the decent, humane and just instincts of the British people." As a regular reader of The Guardian, I always pursued Mr Young's political columns with avid interest and, indeed, I must confess that his views and comments significantly influenced at least some of my own thinking. His demise in the prime of his life -- he was only 64 -- leaves a vacuum in British journalism that will be hard to fill.

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR



Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

Grameen Phone

At first I thought that Grameen Phone believes in open market and competition, but I was perhaps wrong. For it seems now to me that Grameen Phone is also one of those companies who believe in monopoly.

There is no doubt that GP has brought a revolutionary change in the telecommunication sector in Bangladesh. We must also thank GP for their high quality network and good customer care.

We are indebted to GP for their extreme hard work which has made it possible for a lower middle class family to afford a cell phone. But charging 7 taka per minute in a pre-paid account is highly expensive. We can understand that GP had to make the charge so high for the sake of the expansion of their net-

work quickly. But now their network is already well spread throughout the country. Understandably, GP will decrease its pre-paid charge. We hope the decision would be carried out soon.

Another thing is very mysterious to everybody. Whenever we are trying to reach a GP from Aktel or City Cell it takes a long time for unknown reasons. I think GP should unfold this mystery and let the consumers know the reasons behind it.

At last we would like to say that we would always like GP to act as a good leader in bringing new dimensions to provide more and more improved services at a much reasonable rate.

Md Ashiqul Haque
West Hajipara Road, Dhaka

Corruption

I was taken aback while reading stories about the millionaire metre reader of Titas, who amassed the fortune in collusion with many others.

Believe me, I did not know that syndicated corrupt metre readers and officials are in my backyard too, who are involved in 'collection' of hefty amounts in underhand deals on account of gas, electricity and water from innumerable consumers like us. And now that innumerable housing complexes have sprung up in the city, these 'sore of society' must have found it more convenient to rob a big chunk of money in one go quietly on a regular basis.

I live in a housing complex built by a leading developer and got to know only the other day through an AGM that I have also been a contributor to this act of robbery, as managers of

the society have been paying an extra amount every month to all these service providers beyond my knowledge.

Naturally when I got to know of it, I vehemently objected to such undue and unlawful transaction and asked for its stoppage forthwith. I do not know if any 'power' could save this nation from this ruin; but we poor public could unite and rise up, better late than never, and resist these criminals and stop cooperating in their heinous activities. Let all citizenry wake up and stand united to wipe out the criminals from the society once for all and save this nation.

A F Rahman
Dhaka

Weekly holidays

I partially agree with the views in

Rubab Abdullah's letter regarding weekly holidays published in The Daily Star on 24 September. As pointed out by her, the western countries and the developing countries can afford two days weekly holidays. But, a nation like ours that is bested with so many problems, cannot afford such luxury.

However, in terms of trade and finance, we should come out of the present weekly holiday structure -- Thursday half, and Friday full. Instead, we should have Saturday half and Sunday full. This would bring us in line with most of the world's weekly holiday structure, and would facilitate better trade and banking. If Pakistan being an Islamic country can come out of the Friday holiday bindings, why cant we?

Shahed Jamil

Mashreq Bank, Sena Kalyan
Bhaban, Dhaka

A bad practice

Few days ago, I saw a very disturbing picture in The Daily Star -- two young men were vandalising a patrol pump. They were doing so in the name of protesting their fellow student's accidental death.

I don't know how long we have to witness such senseless destructions. We are destroying our own properties with our own hands! Whenever any protest takes place, it definitely ends up with random destruction of public and state property. We have to shun such self-destructive activities and choose some peaceful method for protests.

Mohammed Sohela Hara
Dilu Road, Moghbazar

Smoking: Trend beckons

Though these days people of all class are well aware of the bad effect of smoking, the number of smokers is increasing radically. This implies that one is going to smoke knowing about its dreadful effects. That is definitely a very bad sign for us. I have observed some new smokers and how they start smoking.

A huge number of students get addicted under peer pressure. In fact a student without determination can't do much when the friends constantly pressurise him and talk about how good it feels while smoking. Even senior students offer cigarettes in various occasions to the juniors, just like tea. Some have

such a belief that students of Engineering and Medical have to smoke to keep their brain fresh. This trend beckons the freshers of varsities to pick up such a bad habit. So how can we expect a smoking free nation, while the future nation builders are becoming chain smokers?

The government is going to pass a bill banning smoking in public places. Though this is a positive decision, it won't be easy to make people obey this law. But it is good that, it will at least create a pressure on the smokers, which afterwards will help them to quit smoking.

Rifat
Department of Electrical and Electronic Engineering, RUET