

HSC results

Nagging shortcomings have to be addressed

THOUGH the success rate in the last HSC examinations is the highest compared to that of the preceding two years, it still is a matter of great concern that an appalling 60 per cent could not cross the hurdle. This is an index of dwindling standards and other problems besetting the education sector. The basic inadequacies of the system have once more been exposed.

On the positive side, it has been claimed that cheating in examination halls has been contained and that might have had a bearing on the percentage of success at the tests.

But the factor that can be singled out as having caused a sizeable failure rate is the new syllabus for English and an acute shortage of qualified teachers for the subject. A huge number of students have flunked at the English exam which is but a reflection of poor standard of teaching.

There are more things to be worried about. No fewer than 95 colleges and madrassahs have drawn a blank in terms of pass rate. Less than 20 per cent examinees have passed from 588 institutions and less than 10 per cent from a sizeable number of colleges. All this points to the presence of some dregs at the bottom of the education hourglass.

Shortage of teachers and lack of a minimum classroom engagement are maladies that could be treated with drastic measures like closing down the institutions having a hopeless academic background. But in our context, it does not appear to be the best option as resource constraints plague the sector as a whole. The best way to handle the situation is to strengthen the existing infrastructure where it has weaknesses and make sure that the prescribed standards are met by the institutions without fail.

The talent pool has also apparently shrunken with only 20 GPA-5 achievers. But we believe it might well be the result of the high achievers being strained out through a process devoid of multiple-choice questions this time around. Another development is the small number of girls in the top bracket. This is a break with the consistent pattern of top grades they had accounted for in the past.

The results are, as always, an indication of how the education system has been running. However, we believe the fault-lines have been identified and the education ministry will do its utmost to set things right as a top priority matter.

An elephantine blunder

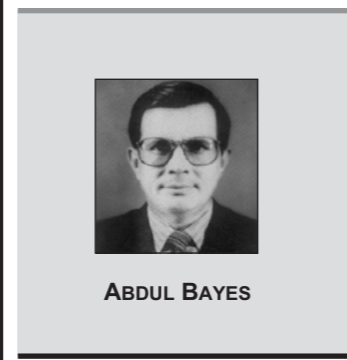
A costly lesson to heed

ONE BDR officer brutally killed an elephant at Pabalkhali sanctuary in Rangamati last month having been oblivious of the fact that it is one of the most precious endangered animals in the world. His submachine gun riddling the animal with more than 50 bullets to its death, the dastardly incident has shocked us and wildlife conservationists in an equal measure. We simply ask -- was there any need for such a cruel act? Reportedly, an elephant had killed a small girl the night before and the BDR officer entered 'the sanctuary without the permission of the forest officials' to apparently sort the problem out. As an officer of a disciplined force he ought to have been aware of the rules one has to follow in forest reserves.

It appears that in spite of government's conservation policies and the exhortations by wildlife activist groups, some people always sneak up with a 'shikari' mentality of misplaced bravado. The conservationist concerns are yet to permeate the habitats of endangered animals. When gatekeepers become poachers, what chance the wildlife has?

It appears the BDR officer just took it upon himself to kill the animal without even knowing whether it had been declared a rogue elephant as per rules. And, of course, by killing the animal so ruthlessly, he has mauled the very spirit of wildlife conservation which is gaining ground throughout the world. There must have been other ways to mitigate the risk to life, if any, caused by the elephant. The officer should have taken the matter to the forest department for 'neutralising' the risk by a safe alternative method. Making all these points brings us back to one composite core issue -- awareness about the status of endangered animals and their conservation must be promoted. We don't want to see photos of killed or captured animals anymore.

Trade policies in South Asia



ABDUL BAYES

THE Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS) and the World Bank (WB) jointly organised a seminar recently in the city. The subject was Trade Policies in South Asia (SA). Both BIDS and World Bank economists delved deep into the developments of trade policies and their implications over the years, especially on manufacturing and agriculture. Economists from WB side -- Garry Pursell, Tercan Bayson and Zaidi Sattar -- presented an overview of the trade policies in SA countries with focus on country and commodity specific issues. From BIDS side Asaduzzaman, Abdur Razzaque and their co authors came up with issues relevant to Bangladesh context. But both the sides missed to bring on board the burning one: bilateral free trade with India and its ramifications. Bangladesh could have immensely benefited from such deliberations since bilateral free trade with India has recently assumed both economic and political prominence. Is bilateral free trade with India frightening or fattening?

However, the importance of the seminar to me was immense given the fact that attempts at opening up economies began over two decades back and there was hardly any realistic assessments of policies so far. Admittedly, in most of the presentations that I had the privilege to participate before, emotions outplayed economics in some cases and economics outplayed

environment and ethics, in others. The seminar papers that I am referring to in this column could thus claim a departure from traditional tone of discourse as more empirical evidences were substituted for hard-boiled theoretical and emotional juxtaposition. Allow me to submit few of the observations given the space constraint.

The overview starts with a premise and a prescription pertaining to trade, growth and poverty. "In South Asia, during the 1990s, as India and Bangladesh

For the South Asia region as a whole, the period 1985-2000 witnessed a significant win over a situation of 'low level equilibrium trap'. For Bangladesh, the growth rates of late 1990s seem to have shown that openness did not hurt growth rates. However, one needs to note that openness is a necessary, not a sufficient condition for rapid growth. The complimentary policies -- well known to policy makers and politicians -- failed to live up to expectations and hence bedevilled the breakthroughs that

reforms remained mere rhetoric without ownership worth the salt.

One important lesson that the overview paper seems to suggest is exchange rate liberalisation. Relatively flexible exchange rate policies followed by India, Pakistan and Bangladesh should continue. The other important observation is that Customs Duty (CD) rates alone give a misleading impression of actual protection rates for domestic industries. This is particularly pertinent for Bangladesh where a faster reduction in CD rates has

Bangladesh employs two additional protective taxes for selected products. "After allowing for these, it is evident that tariffs are still very high in India and Bangladesh: in fact, compared with average tariffs in 105 developing countries on all products, agricultural products and manufactured products, India currently ranks second, third and second and Bangladesh ranks seventh, eighth and eighth. Pakistan and Sri Lanka (excepting agriculture) continue to remain as low tariff country."

pressure to pursue such policy. Quite surprisingly, India seems to have emerged as one of the most active users of AD in the world. The ad valorem equivalents of AD duties vary from about 10 per cent to 80 per cent but most are in the range of 20 to 50 per cent implying that total import duties on imports from foreign firm are subject to the AD duties mostly in a range of 60 to 100 per cent. While AD duties are compatible with WTO rules and serve as 'safety valve', the pervasive use of the 'safety valve' might jeopardise the security of the firms in the international market. One important lesson to be derived from this is that antidumping begets antidumping. By protecting domestic industries through dumping duties is to allow them operate on high inefficiency and high price regime so that whenever such commodities are set to be sold, it must be at lower price than the domestic market. And this means the commodity has invited antidumping duties. An industry that enjoys very high level of protection must export at prices lower than that in domestic market and invite antidumping from competing countries. The vicious circle is very difficult to break.

By and large, the pace of liberalisation in South Asia paid dividends. But the benefits could be increased substantially if (and only if) complimentary policies could come by. There is no doubt that liberalisation of the economy is very much prone to political resistance and one of the ways to reduce the resistance is to raise the share of gains through prudent persuasion of complimentary policies rather than rallying round the rhetoric or putting hands off. After all, good governance is the key to success, be it trade liberalisation or anything else.

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BENEATH THE SURFACE

By and large, the pace of liberalisation in South Asia paid dividends. But the benefits could be increased substantially if (and only if) complimentary policies could come by. There is no doubt that liberalisation of the economy is very much prone to political resistance and one of the ways to reduce the resistance is to raise the share of gains through prudent persuasion of complimentary policies rather than rallying round the rhetoric or putting hands off.

followed Sri Lanka into the ranks of countries known as rapid globalisers, strong growth tallied with sharp drops in poverty incidence -- from 51 per cent in 1977-78 to 27 per cent in 1999-2000 in India and from 45 per cent in 1991 to 34 per cent in 2000 in Bangladesh". Supported by both general and regional evidence, "the premise of the study is that the poor of South Asia would be among the significant beneficiaries of wider, faster, more determined trade liberalisation than policy makers so far pursued." To drive home their point, the authors also drew upon the seminal submission by Art Kraay and David Dollar. It has been observed that a third of the developing countries termed as "rapid globalisers" did extremely well in terms of income growth and poverty reduction over the past two decades. "These countries, which include Bangladesh, India and Sri Lanka in South Asia, have also experienced large increase in trade and significant reductions in tariff and non-tariff barriers."

one would have expected from openness of the economy. There is another problem with policy makers that I noticed. Those who went for liberalisation of the economy while in power, turned out to be staunch critics while in opposition and vice versa. Thus on many occasions

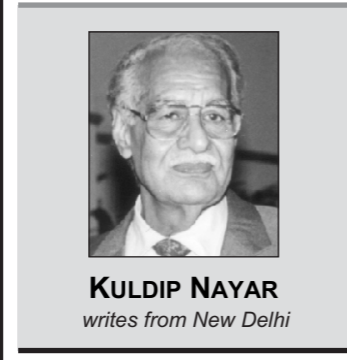
been correlated with a faster liberalisation. India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal apply other protective taxes on top of CD. India in particular and others also tend to use specific tariffs which can correspond to a very high ad valorem equivalent rates and

As tariffs came down in South Asia, the contribution of protective duties also went down. By 2001, all governments were much less dependent on tariffs than they had been 10 years back. Mentionably, introduction of trade neutral taxes and their extension, and improvements in collection efficiency helped. China is cited as a unique example where import duties are currently less than 3 per cent of total imports and only 3-4 per cent of government revenue. This compares with about 18 per cent of total imports and about 10 per cent of total central and state taxes in India in 2000/2001. In Bangladesh, protective import taxes constitute about 28 per cent of total tax revenue.

Antidumping Duties (AD) emerged as an important issue in the seminar. Quite obviously and in the face of growing antidumping duties imposed by India, the deliberation on dumping drew much of the attention. Antidumping duties are not used in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal despite domestic



The anti-ism phase is over



KULDIP NAYAR

writes from New Delhi

IF politics could be compartmentalised, India would be the laboratory to know how. The last two decades probably provide the answer. The first phase, beginning in the last eighties, was that of anti-Congress-ism. The mere sentiment against the party brought many political groups together. Partly it was a hangover of the anger during the emergency (1975-77) and partly a reaction to the inept leadership of Rajiv Gandhi which turned even some of his best supporters against him.

The Bhartiya Janata Party, with an eye on the future, supported V P Singh to coalesce a non-Congress majority. This was India's first coalition at the centre. The BJP's primary motive was to keep the Congress out of power and make inroads into the polity while basking in the sunshine of reflected glory. The BJP made no demands and got no favours. "If VP Singh had not brought in Mandal, we would not have picked up *kamandal* (a vessel that the Sadhus carry)," said Atal Behari Vajpayee at that time.

Contradictions within V P Singh's own government brought him down. The BJP came into the picture when he implemented the Mandal

Commission's recommendations to give the backward classes reservations in government jobs. That was the time when L K Advani led the *rath yatra* which polarised the society in northern India.

The second phase started when the anti-BJP sentiment took over the political scene. This was after the demolition of the Babri masjid. The Congress took the place of the BJP as the propeller of governments and supported a combination of parties

come to power. Then party president Sitaram Kesri and its patron Sonia Gandhi brought down Deve Gowda first and then Gujral. In the process, the party not only lessened its credibility but also gave the BJP a clear road to move ahead.

By this time the anti-Congressism and the anti-BJPism had exhausted their possibilities in Indian politics. The coalition party remained important. But there was a

convictions, if any, were only skin-deep. And as the days went by, they became firm apologists for the Sangh parivar. Paswan was always in two minds. He was not fully reconciled to his association with the BJP. The party too was not happy with him because he did not have among the dalits as large a base as Mayawati of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) had. Paswan's exit from the government helped the BJP to join hands with Mayawati.

Vajpayee government, benefited the most. But it also learnt the lesson that the centre could always use its clout because of the control it enjoyed over financial institutions, the Reserve Bank and income tax and excise departments.

The Congress too learnt its lesson: It changed its position to go it alone. Had Sonia Gandhi realised this earlier, she would have probably secured the magic figure of 272 in the 543-member Lok

seats in the Lok Sabha polls next year. Any one with a tally of 40 can be a king maker, if not the king. Both the BJP and the Congress would cross out each other. The dark horse might well be a regional party. Which will be the single-largest party in the hung parliament is difficult to say. The result of the two by-elections to the Lok Sabha is not much of a pointer. It only re-emphasises the point that the Congress, which has lost both the seats, is ridden with dissensions. This is nothing new. Bit what it emphasises is that Sonia Gandhi is not yet powerful enough to enforce discipline in the party ranks.

The BJP too is not devoid of dissensions. All have witnessed the shadow boxing between Deputy Prime Minister L K Advani and Human Resource Development Minister Murli Manohar Joshi over the Babri masjid demolition case at Rae Bareilly. But the BJP has an arbiter in the RSS, if not in Vajpayee. Once the Sangh makes up its mind clear, the matter is over.

The assembly elections in November in five states -- Chattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Mizoram and Delhi -- may be a litmus test. The Congress rules in all the five states. The loss in any two major states can be a setback for the party. Still much will depend on the permutations and combinations before and after the general election. Who will join whom? One thing is sure: the phases of anti-BJPism and anti-Congressism are over. It is going to be the survival of the fittest, not of the idealist

Kuldip Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.

BETWEEN THE LINES

The assembly elections in November in five states -- Chattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Mizoram and Delhi -- may be a litmus test. The Congress rules in all the five states. The loss in any two major states can be a setback for the party. Still much will depend on the permutations and combinations before and after the general election. Who will join whom? One thing is sure: the phases of anti-BJPism and anti-Congressism are over. It is going to be the survival of the fittest, not of the idealist

which had the anti-BJP bias as the only common factor. The Congress first made Chandra Shekhar as Prime Minister. Subsequently, Deve Gowda and Inder Gujral were catapulted to the same position. This was the time when a third front of sorts came into being.

Both phases, the first and the second, set a pattern where the major parties -- the BJP and the Congress -- would not join the government but give support from outside so that they could pull the rug from under the feet of the government in the *gaddi* at any time they considered politically appropriate. Sensing such a scenario, Gujral at least tried to induct the Congress into his cabinet but did not succeed. The Congress was itself plagued by the ambition to

crisscrossing of political parties. This was when the third phase, the current one, began. The BJP put together a coalition of 24 parties to constitute the National Democratic Alliance. Vajpayee had the knack of keeping the herd together. But he was also helped by the greed of all those bits of parties which, at one time, wore secularism on their sleeve. The *kursi* provided the glue to the communalists and the secularists or whatever their real credentials were.

Among them were the groups led by George Fernandes and Nitish Kumar, Ram Vilas Paswan and Sharad Yadav. They were the remnants of the Janata Party which had formed the government after the emergency. By joining the BJP-led alliance, they proved that their

It is another story that the BJP damaged its image still further during her short stint as the UP chief minister. The third phase also brought to the fore the politicians' love for power, a trait which they had been able to hide behind slogans and shibboleths. They proved that they would do anything to stay in power.

The BJP enjoyed the spectacle and gave them unimportant portfolios. But it is as oblivious of moral side of politics as most other parties are. All the three phases showed how quickly the small parties would cave in. It was also so easy to purchase them. Most regional parties stood their ground. The Telugu Desam Party, which extended support to the

Sabha. She got the opportunity when then President K R Narayanan asked her to prove her claim of having a majority.

Mulayam Singh Yadav of the Samajwadi Party was willing to support her provided she appointed ministers from his party. By insisting on having a purely Congress government she lost the chance. Technically, Mulayam Singh was right but he unwittingly extended the life of the BJP government and gave it more time to saffronise the polity.

The fourth phase is already unfolding itself. All parties, big or small, are gearing up for capturing maximum seats. They have taken it for granted that the next government would be a coalition. Still the race is to capture the maximum

Suicide bombings: Mindless martyrs

SHAHED AMANULLAH and NAEEM MOHAIEEMEN

WHEN talking about modern terrorism, the frequently evoked image is that of the fanatical Muslim suicide bomber. However, in the context of modern warfare, these attacks are not exclusive to a Muslim heritage. In the 1980s, the Tamil Tigers inflicted many suicide attacks in their fight for an independent Sri Lankan state (including the assassination of Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi). In more recent times, however, suicide bombers have invoked "Islam" in attacks against civilians. Although this recent spate of killings is the work of Islamic fundamentalists, there is nothing truly "Islamic" about such attacks against civilians. It is imperative that Muslims speak out forcefully against this new

cancer in society. The ideological vacuum left by the eclipse of leftist guerrilla movements has been instrumental in the rise of these suicide bombings. From the 1960s to the mid 1980s, angry, alienated youth often turned to leftist guerrilla movements. Bangladesh's Sharbahara, Peru's Shining Path, Pakistan's MQM, India's Naxalites, and America's Weather Underground all practised armed insurrection aimed at destabilising the state. While some of these groups maintained their identity as popular resistance movements fighting repressive states, others mutated to indiscriminate terrorism. "The figure of the guerrilla has lost its former romantic halo," wrote Mario Vargas Llosa in *The Death of Che*. "Now, behind the beard and hair blowing in the wind of that prototype, we can glimpse the fanatical and

cowardly silhouette of the terrorist waiting in the shadows to blow up cars and kill innocent people."

As the 1980s proceeded, leaders of guerrilla movements were jailed or killed, and, in some cases, laid down arms and entered politics. But the genie of violence against civilians refused to return to the bottle. When secular forces failed to provide a viable movement, fiery and semi-fascist religious movements gained strength. In fact, there are parallels between today's Islamic fundamentalists and the European fascists of the 1930s-- especially in the emphasis on soul-searching, tradition, and religion. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was one of the earliest sparks in this powder keg. Because their enemy was Communist, the mujaheddin fighters could not turn to leftist ideology. The power-base for the Taliban, aided by the always-savvy

CIA, was created. From this core radiated deadly new mutations, eventually infecting conflicts in Palestine, Indonesia, Chechnya, and elsewhere.

Fanatical bombers talk about "Islam", but in fact Islam condemns these acts of violence. The Prophet Muhammad (sm) gave Muslim armies clear instructions not to attack civilians -- women, children, the elderly, and religious people engaged in worship (2:194). The Qur'an does not recognize "collateral damage" as legitimate even during war. Some have tried to arbitrarily label Israeli civilians as "combatants" to circumvent Islamic injunctions -- a logic that has no precedent in Islamic history. This same argument, allowed to grow unchecked, has now been extended to Shias in Najaf, Muslim bystanders in Bombay, and Moroccan civilians in their homes.

Theological arguments aside, suicide bombings are a disaster for the Muslim world on many other levels. These bombings bring illusions of empowerment and success, but ultimately produce neither. Instead, they strengthen rightist, anti-democratic forces in the Muslim and Western worlds. The only democracy these attacks bring is the "democratization" of a weapon of murder. One misguided person can be judge, jury, and executioner. For the silent majority of Muslims who turn a blind eye to the moral ramifications of these killings, the murder of Shias in Najaf and UN staff in Baghdad will come as a rude awakening. If suicide bombings are accepted as a tool of liberation, these indiscriminate killings will only grow in scope and murderousness.

Tactically, suicide bombings have been a failure. The random

murder of noncombatants has pushed populations to more conservative positions. Post 9/11 America has taken a gigantic shift to the right, with a clampdown on civil liberties and military adventures in Iraq and Afghanistan. In Israel, suicide blasts are largely responsible for the rise of Ariel Sharon's "bone breaking" method of conflict resolution. Potential Palestinian allies among the progressive segments of Israeli society have been weakened, or worse, shifted to the right -- allowing such formerly unthinkable projects as the "separation wall" to proceed in a desperate attempt to prevent terrorism. The moral high ground occupied by the Palestinian cause is fast eroding, with attention to terrorism obfuscating the pursuit of a just solution. Professor Edward Said highlighted this in the

Egyptian daily Al-Ahram (June 2002):

"Arafat never really reined in Hamas and Islamic Jihad, which suited Israel perfectly. It would have a ready-made excuse to use the so-called martyr's (mindless) suicide bombings to further diminish and punish the whole people."

The Muslim world is in a state of distress, stagnation and paranoia. Much work is needed to promote justice, freedom, and economic prosperity in these societies. Today, too much of our energy is spent searching for the "enemy." Stereotypes of "Jewish cabals" or "Crusaders" are endless, but no one talks about the enemy within the lack of open societies and self-reform in the Muslim world. Civilized nations require a respect for diversity, conflict resolution, and the sanctity of life. Suicide bombings

cannot play a part in the liberation or improvement of the Muslim world. The psyche that accepts this as a legitimate tactic will prevent the emergence of a free and prosperous Muslim society in the future. Yes, Muslims are the new scapegoats in many regional conflicts, and action must be taken to bring justice in these cases. But unless the methods used to bring about this change are just, Muslims will continue to be stuck at the bottom of the global ladder.

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