

## School textbooks

### Enforce the rules and ensure quality

It is worrying news that a lot of anomalies and irregularities have been found in distribution of school textbooks. The publishers of low quality books are reported to have developed a nexus with a section of school authorities, and students are being forced to read low quality supportive books and banned notebooks. Even books approved by the boards have been replaced by the ones published unofficially by others.

The influential publishers have established a sort of monopoly business, as they are working in collusion with sections of school authorities and organisations of teachers. The result is that the young learners have to study standard books and have to buy the books not included in the curriculum. That is a gross violation of the rules set by the education authorities.

Notebooks were banned in the 1980's, but these are available in great numbers as the rules framed by the government have no practical application. It seems profit making has become the sole objective of such publishers and they are resorting to all kinds of unfair activities to attain it. Obviously, there is nobody to consider the quality of a book when its publisher is engaged in the unfair business of selling low quality stuff.

The development is ominous for a host of reasons. It has a direct bearing on the much talked about standard of education. If students are made to study low quality books, how can we expect to raise the standard of education? Then it is totally unfair that guardians have to pay extra money for buying books that were not approved by the board authorities and that are by no means helpful to the students. As things stand now, the students and their guardians are victims of an illegal business run by influential publishers.

Education is one sector where the damage done by corruption will have a crippling effect on the nation as a whole. The government should immediately address the chaotic situation that has arisen over distribution and marketing of school books. Obviously, the authorities have to ensure compliance with the rules framed by them.

## Separating students by religion?

### This is against our Constitution

We feel concerned by a report of a Chittagong school holding classes under separate arrangements for the Muslims students and students belonging to other religions, ostensibly for imparting religious education. Although the discriminatory arrangement has since been discontinued, the logic offered by the headmistress for such an arrangement is flimsy and unacceptable.

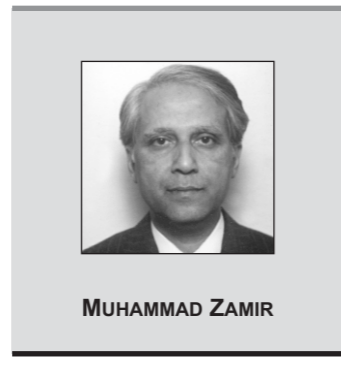
It is unfortunately reflective of the mindset of some narrow-focused persons in our society. It is dangerous not only because of its long-term ramifications, particularly in the present day context of Bangladesh, but also because it poses a threat to the very principle that worked as guiding force in our War of Liberation. This has also marred our longstanding secular traditions. There is no point in denying the fact that the entire nation is reeling under the burden of religious fanaticism and hence this has every potential of sending wrong signals to those who are active in perpetrating violence in the name of religion. As much as we are happy that the authority concerned has acted promptly, our question is, why and how could such a measure in an educational institution come to be put into practice in the first place?

This has been possible clearly due to negligence of the local education authorities coupled with lack of monitoring by the relevant Board of Education. It is our belief that the entire episode could very well be averted had the relevant authorities maintained their oversight. We suggest that the authority take a stock to determine whether such practice is prevalent in other schools and institutions as well.

It may be also helpful to find out whether the headmistress acted alone or she had the blessings of some persons directly or indirectly providing assurance of support.

Let us keep our education clean and above any religious or political bias. Already the state of our education is in a mess; let none take such actions that would add to the woes, and break the backbone of our education system. Good education is central to survival and progress of any nation.

# Bangla and February



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

SINCE 1952, more than fifty years ago, February has become part of the Bangalee psyche and its ethos. It has become a symbol for sacrifice, for resurgence, for vitality, for creativity and for intellectual independence. Over time, the people of Bangladesh, both within the country and abroad, have associated themselves in cultural activities to highlight the significance of this month.

As in the past, this February has also seen cultural festivals, which have touched and stimulated the various facets of our lives. There have been poetry sessions, painting exhibitions puppet-theatre, street theatre, special drama productions and workshops on Bengali literature. The focal point, as expected, will be the 21st February -- the 8th of Falgun. On that day, the nation will honour those who had laid down their lives during the historic language movement in 1952. This day will be observed with due solemnity. It will include the ritual of laying wreaths in the flower bedecked Central Shaheed Minar.

Most of us refer to Twenty-first February as 'Amor Ekushey.' For us it has become a signpost in our history and in the establishing of our identity. We might have differences of opinion on many matters of politics, but we all agree that the language movement and the sacri-

fices of the students eventually led not only to the constitutional recognition of Bangla as the state language in Pakistan but also became the spring-board for the subsequent struggle and movement that resulted in an independent Bangladesh.

International recognition of what happened on 21 February has been translated into that day being accorded the status of International Mother Language Day in 1999. It is now celebrated as a cultural event

meeting ground of the country's eminent authors and intellectuals.

This year has not been an exception. Over 300 publishing houses have taken part in the Fair through 461 stalls set up for this purpose within the Bangla Academy compound. Nearly 470 new titles have appeared during the Fair. Different socio-cultural organisations have also joined the festivity with their separate programmes hosted not only in the Bangla Academy but also at the Shiplakala Academy,

houses indicated that eminent writers like Mohammad Zafar Iqbal, Humayun Ahmed, Ali Imam and Shahabuddin Nagori had contributed in this regard and that their efforts had been welcomed. They also hoped that next year there would be wider participation in this niche by other eminent writers.

I was also informed during my discussions in various stalls that there had been a steady increase in the number of new young writers and their works in this current Mela.

doing so, despite the many constraints of living abroad, will help to broaden the popularity base for Bangla works abroad. This will give an additional meaning to 21st February and it being termed the International Mother Language Day. I believe that our Diplomatic Missions abroad have a duty in this regard. They should be asked to assist such efforts on the part of our expatriate citizens.

I shall now refer to some disquieting factors, I believe that they

quality and the ambience of the Mela.

I will now discuss another subject that continues to worry many of us.

This relates to the establishment of the International Mother Language Institute. In the recent past we have seen the reluctance of the Ministry of Education in this regard. The Minister for Education has even suggested that enough progress has not been achieved in this direction because of resource constraints. I beg to differ. I think that political bias has been the main cause for such indifference.

The Institute, it must be understood, is a symbol. This institution will help in continued research in the language. It could also assist in the imparting of training in Bangla both to Bangladeshi teachers and foreigners.

We have to find necessary funding and resume work in the construction of the Institute which has remained suspended since October 2003. We should also find the necessary manpower for completing this project, which should include the setting up of a language laboratory and a proper all weather archive and library so that parchments and manuscripts can be stored. UN Secretary General Kofi Annan laid the foundation stone of this Institute in 2000. I am sure that, with political will, resources for this project can be raised with UN assistance. This Institute can be an example of our commitment towards furthering non-religious educational values, widening the international aspect of our culture and also be an effective tool to counter the spectre of extremism.

Muhammad Zamir is a former Secretary and Ambassador who can be reached at mzamir@dhaka.net

## POST BREAKFAST

International recognition of what happened on 21 February has been translated into that day being accorded the status of International Mother Language Day. Over the years I have watched February unfold its plumage. For many others and me, it is now an institution. It stands for understanding, for music, for new publications and for the emergence of authors and poets. It also stands for the Bangla Academy and the annual Ekushey Book Fair.

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This Fair has now become for all of us something to look forward to with eager anticipation. We commemorate the historic movement through the positive and constructive step of sharing knowledge. We buy books, published earlier and also those published recently to coincide with the *Boi Mela*. A visit to the Bangla Academy during this time has become almost compulsive for anyone desiring to discover himself and his heritage.

The Fair assumes greater significance because it also becomes the

Charukala Institute, National Press Club and several other venues.

I have been to the *Boi Mela* more than once and left the premises encouraged and optimistic about our future. I have noticed many positive elements and also some negative aspects. Fortunately, the good factors have definitely been more. This is despite the growing politicisation of the event and the Academy itself.

I shall, for the benefit of my readers, first touch on the positive developments.

This year, it was evident that, on a comparative basis there were more publications for children. Several publishers informed me that the number of titles suitable for children had increased. This was an interesting development. Normally, publishers have tended to devote more time and energy for books that would have appeal for the mature audience. Some of the publishing

It was also pointed out that these authors were mostly from Sylhet, Bogra, Pabna, Mymensingh and Chittagong. This has been a good development. This shows decentralisation and also recognition of authors from outside Dhaka. This is a healthy trend and will, in the long run, make Bengali literature stronger. It will provide depth.

Another important element was mentioned by most of the participants. They generally agreed that the security situation within the Fair and also in the neighbourhood had been satisfactory. Consequently, there had been more visitors who had come to the experience with their families. One hopes that this is maintained on future occasions.

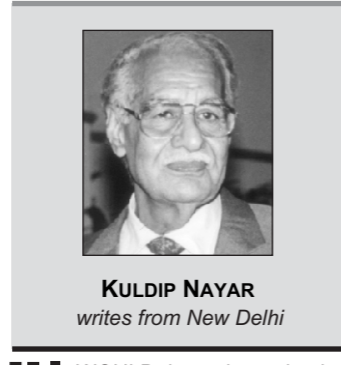
Lastly, there has been an increase in the number of new authors from among the expatriate Bangladeshis. Some of them are publishing their works for the first time. The very fact that they are

impacted on the quality of the Bangla Academy Book Fair.

These detracting elements included over-politicisation of the arrangements. It was expected that the Prime Minister would inaugurate the event. The organisers however should have ensured that authors and poets of all political beliefs and all life members of the Academy were invited to attend the inaugural ceremony. This was not done. A poet is a poet. A litterateur will be read and appreciated long after the political sycophants have gone. It must be remembered by the responsible authorities that the Bangla Academy is a national institution that deserves a more enlightened management.

It was also most disconcerting to note that the important locations within the Fair ground had been set aside for various wings of the ruling BNP. I felt that this was totally unnecessary and had affected the

# I'd have been a communist: Vajpayee

KULDEEP NAYAR  
writes from New Delhi

“I WOULD have been in the Communist Party if there had been no partition,” says Atal Behari Vajpayee, former Prime Minister, who led the BJP coalition for six years at the Centre. “I was a member of the Students’ Federation which had leftist leanings. The communists’ support to the demand for partition disillusioned me and I parted company with them.”

Vajpayee believes that the Congress and the BJP would have come together if Mahatma Gandhi had not been assassinated. He thinks that it would have been “best for the country,” to sort out certain basic problems. “The Congress is so hostile to us these days that it believes we are out to destroy the country.” When the NDA was in power, Vajpayee says, they had good relations with the Congress. It opposed them but considered them *desh bakh*t (patriots). “If I were to compare them with us, we were more circumspect and responsive in our attitude towards them than they are towards us.”

Vajpayee does not blame Prime

Minister Manmohan Singh but puts the onus on Congress president Sonia Gandhi, without naming her. He praises the PM but wonders how much power he has. Vajpayee is unhappy to find “all types of people becoming ministers.” To his particular dislike are those who were associated with the emergency and its excesses.

Vajpayee thinks that at one time the Congress looked like having a mid-term poll. It felt it could do better and improve its strength in parlia-

ment. But the reverses in state elections, particularly Bihar, made the party change its mind. “Now I do not know,” he says. However, he has no faith in the emergence of the third front. Even if it does, he has poor opinion about some of those heading regional parties. About his own party, he says that “young lack in idealism and are in a hurry to get positions.” But then he adds: “Come to think of it, this is true of nearly all political parties. The youth is not willing to wait. Nor does it want to go through the fire of idealism.”

My purpose of meeting Vajpayee

was to assess the person who represented an era which came to an end with his retirement from active politics. I found him still in harness, although he acts more like a fatherly figure. He postponed the meeting with me twice because the BJP leadership met at his home -- once to discuss the state-funding in elections and the second time to formulate views on Iran. On Iran, Vajpayee is not categorical. He welcomes good relations with the

US but avoids any direct comments on Iran. In reply to my query whether the Government of India is pursuing the right policy, Vajpayee replies: “The government does not know what to do. It is confused.” Elucidating his remarks, he says that there are three parties involved in processing a concerted response: Sonia Gandhi, Manmohan Singh and the Left. They have different points of view. Power does not lie with one of them. Who will prevail when and where is not clear.

But he avows faith in the foreign policy that Jawaharlal Nehru had

formulated. His faith is basically in non-alignment. He claims himself to be a Nehruvite. I recall after he was sworn in as foreign minister in the Janata government in 1977, he told me how he felt privileged to sit in the chair that Nehru had occupied once. He still has his picture at his residence.

On Pakistan, Vajpayee is not happy with what New Delhi is doing. He favours progress but doesn't suggest anything concrete. Yet he has no doubt that there would have

Christianity because, as RSS chief Sudharshan, says, “we cannot throw them into the sea,” a phrase used by some Arab countries for the Jews in Israel.

I found Vajpayee as reticent as he had always been when it came to the criticism of the RSS. Vajpayee is not happy over Sudharshan's remark. But he seldom minces words when it comes to the RSS chief. Vajpayee does not want to be drawn into -- anti or pro -- issue. But he does not deny the stress and

strained between the BJP and the RSS. “Not much,” he says. He recalls a long discussion on Hindutva once. What it meant and why it could not be *Bhartiya*? “They have no answer. Some of them are frozen in old concepts, conveying little,” he says.

When it came to the demolition of the Babri masjid, Vajpayee says that the whole thing happened so quickly and so suddenly. “I did not know anything about it. If they had a prior plan, they did not tell me,” says Vajpayee. “Morarji (Desai) was right that the crowd should not have been allowed to assemble. He makes it clear that people wanted the temple to come up but did not want the masjid to go down.”

Kuldeep Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.

## BETWEEN THE LINES

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been “an advance” if he had been the Prime Minister. When I drew his attention to President General Pervez Musharraf's contention that he had intervened to include Kashmir in the joint statement at Lahore, Vajpayee says, “we wanted to keep Kashmir separate.”

My whole exercise for an hour was to find out where Vajpayee stood. Was he a liberal, the impression he tried to create despite being a *swayam sevak* of the RSS -- an extremist Hindu organization which has now given the call of “Indianising” Muslims and

strain between the BJP and the RSS. “Not much,” he says. He recalls a long discussion on Hindutva once. What it meant and why it could not be *Bhartiya*? “They have no answer. Some of them are frozen in old concepts, conveying little,” he says.

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# 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.

## Fazlul Quader Chowdhury

My attention has been drawn to a news report, ‘Feuding SQ Chy family members in legal maze’, in the issue of The Daily Star of Tuesday, 14 February 2006. I would like to point out some inaccuracies as well as inadequate information in the reference to the late Fazlul Quader Chowdhury in the report.

Fazlul Quader Chowdhury was Speaker of the Pakistan National Assembly and not the East Pakistan Provincial Assembly. Furthermore, he was president of the Pakistan Muslim League (Convention) and indeed assumed that position after the resignation of Field Marshal Mohammad Ayub Khan from the presidency of Pakistan and his subsequent retirement from politics in 1969.

As to the point about Chowdhury being acting president of Pakistan for a few days, I think the report is

rather vague. The fact is that every time President Ayub Khan traveled outside the country on official visits, Fazlul Quader Chowdhury, in his capacity as Speaker of the national assembly, constitutionally took over as acting president of Pakistan. He did not occupy that position for a few days but every time the president went abroad.

I do hope matters now stand clarified.

Syed Badrul Ahsan  
Leytonstone, London

## Remembering Dr. Shamsuddin Ahmed

Liberation has its own labour. Ours was for nine months. Death and destruction of lives littered the land. None was immune. But, none, perhaps, was pained more than those who lost their dearest ones. Any day it is befitting to remember those who were fallen and to

recount the pain of those who have lost their dearest ones!

So, I remember Dr. Shamsuddin Ahmed, a professor of surgery at Sylhet Medical College (SMC), who in fact could have lived by commission of a little timidity. But he chose not to. He was a physician in the truest sense. Now, he lies in peace in the southeast corner of the old SMC compound...

When I entered the SMC, he was no longer there. In the air, however, was an ever-nascent stalwart presence of “HIS”, for I lived, for five years, in a students’ hostel named after none other than Dr. Shamsuddin Ahmed.

In pre-partition India he was the president of Assam Muslim Students Federation. While in Calcutta Medical College, he was a reversed student leader. As a young doctor, he was the general secretary of East Pakistan Medical Association. He was the founder of Pakistan Ambulance Core. In 1964 he founded the Jalalabad Blind Welfare Association. His other accomplishment was to help organ-

ise Sylhet Tuberculosis Prevention Association. A man of great accomplishment.

In March, with the beginning of the non-cooperation movement, most of his fellow physicians had a lighter schedule. But Dr. Shamsuddin became even busier. Along with the students and nurses he organised first aid squads. “It is not the time only for sloganeering and procession. You should get ready for extensive bloodletting. Soon you have to form emergency medical squads...” he advised his beloved students.

He was murdered by the hordes of Tikka Khan. I wish the nation remained faithful to the selfless memory of Dr. Shamsuddin and the many martyrs of his stature.

Mohammad Zaman  
North Carolina

## Cartoon controversy

In the letter in the net edition of DS dt 11th Feb, Mr Mamoon has mentioned that certain personalities should not be ridiculed and should

be kept out of controversy. I quote his exact wordings:

‘All the prophets Christ, Moses, Abraham, and great men like Gautam Buddha, Ram and Krishna should not be subjected to profanation.’

Here he has made a fine distinction between prophet and great men. I do not know on what basis it is done. Christ, Moses and Abraham were also born and existed as men in their times. That their believers consider them as prophets is also known.

Much in the same way we Hindus consider Rama and Krishna as ‘avatars’ of the supreme lord (Brahma), that is they are supreme lord in human form, come with a specific purpose to fight evil. Buddhists also revere Buddha as supreme sacred.

NS Parameswaran  
On e-mail

Phulbari coal mining

## land

We are in a country that is often called by some as the ‘Queenland of Minerals’. All of the citizens, who are knowledgeable, know why and who call it so.

Last year we were in the crisis on Tengratila gas field explosion.

As part of similar negligence, we have suffered for the last 249 years. Firstly, it came from the British, after 1947, from the Pakistanis. But after having Liberation, too we are put to suffering by the clever communities of foreign mineral companies and their local kith and keens. Following the path of naked policies, they always make us fool. But if we are such beings, then why there was movements in 1952, 1971, 1990? Do we need another movement to be clever ourselves?

Why shall we allow them to make our next generations disabled by destroying environment causing pollution like in Tengratila?

We should say ‘no’ for another Tengratila -- the Phulbari Coal

Mining Land at Dinajpur.

The students of Dhaka University protest against such destruction. They are trying to uphold the principle of humanity.

SM Shaikat  
University of London, U.K

## Cash for rice

Imrul Hasan's write up and photograph (DS: 12 Feb) depicts a new type of rice trade or, to be more specific, retail sales of rice -- not known to most of us except the residents of the locality; that too maybe not all. This adhoc and spontaneous development of a new mode of retailing rice is an interesting piece of news for us. For the beggars it is an opportunity to diversify their food intake and meet the need of other essentials which is quite realistic. For the buyers it is another option open to them where quality and price are lower than the normal rice being sold in the market. Maybe they can

separate the various types of rice from the mixed lots available, or sacrifice this in lieu of a favourable price advantage not available elsewhere. Definitely it is value for money, as otherwise the trade would not have flourished for thirty years!

Thankfully this small segment of the informal rice market is free of intervention from the toll-collectors or the police who usually derive revenue from all roadside vendors! Hopefully this interesting story in the news media will not create an inducement to prospective toll-collectors or our guardians (?) of law! This apprehension is based on the recollection that ‘robbing beggars’ had sometime come in the news in the past.

SA Mansoor  
Gulshan, Dhaka